

Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic humanities

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Openings :

From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities

by

James Winston Morris

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

CONNECTING THE QUR'AN AND THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES

Verily We have opened up for you an opening making clear. . .
(Qur'an 48:1)

(God said) “For Me, the most blessed of My friends is the person of faith who is unburdened (by cares or possessions), who takes pleasure in prayer, who carries out well his devotion to his Lord and eagerly serves Him in secret. He is concealed among the people; no one points him out. His sustenance is barely sufficient, and he is content with that.... His death comes quickly, there are few mourners, and his estate is small.”¹

The English word “opening”, like the multi-faceted Qur’anic expression it translates here, goes to the very heart of our subject, in several senses. For the Arabic verbal noun *fath* refers at once to an act—and in the Qur’an, above all to the inherently mysterious, specifically *divine* action—of opening, beginning, inspiring, introducing, disclosing, inspiring, or of suddenly and unexpectedly (as a divine grace) bestowing triumph, release, or success. Hence in the technical vocabulary of later Islamic spirituality, the same expression normally refers more particularly to the dramatically sudden granting, through grace, of a revealing spiritual insight or inspiration.

As such, this familiar, yet always mysterious process of spiritual “opening”—including its essential human preparations, as well as its eventual consequences, obligations and further responsibilities—is at the heart of that most universal human challenge: how do we discover, and then put into practice, the indispensable *living connections* between the revealed, historically transmitted forms of religious words, symbols and practices, on the one hand, and their actually intended spiritual realities and further creative, practical consequences? At first, of course, we naturally tend to discover

¹ This famous “divine saying” (*ḥadīth qudsī*) is included, with minor variations, in the major hadith collections of Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, and Ibn Hanbal. See the full text and explanatory notes in W.A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 120-121.

the actual existential *reality* of such “openings”—as opposed to our own culture’s particular inherited models and examples, religious and otherwise—in the context of life’s unavoidably dramatic trials and learning experiences, whether they take the intrinsically memorable form of suffering, or appear as what the Qur’an calls the “beautiful tests” of unexpectedly positive, welcome, apparently fortunate new circumstances and opportunities. But the dramatic impact of those initial illuminations soon gives way, upon reflection, to a growing recognition of the everyday, indeed constant presence of the deeper processes of spiritual intelligence, and to an ongoing awareness of the constantly unsettling contrast between the largely reflexive parameters of our ordinary life and the presentiment of those deeper spiritual possibilities (and responsibilities) that are awakened and illumined by each successive experience of true openings.²

Now while each chapter of this book is devoted to various dimensions of that challenge within historically different Islamic contexts, past and present, one cannot approach this problem very adequately without recognizing the full universality of the recurrent dilemmas involved, for example as they are so beautifully and memorably dramatized in Plato’s dialogues.³ And as we find throughout Plato (or equivalent seminal figures in every spiritual tradition), any real appreciation of the practical spiritual centrality of these “openings”—as of the deeper realms of being, reality and value they gradually reveal and imply—is inseparable from a growing self-conscious awareness of that surrounding social complex of problematically conventional, shifting, taken-for-granted norms, limits and assumptions that intrinsically deny the very possibility of any such opening. That is, the very rarity and unmistakable otherness of experiences of genuine spiritual openings inevitably highlights their contrast to each culture’s ambient, opposing claims to ground our human reality instead entirely in the ostensibly more real and powerful claims of strictly social, historical, biological, political, or other equally reductionist prevailing schemas for understanding and interpreting the “true” meanings and

² Ref. to *The Reflective Heart...*

³ or in any of the other early and middle dialogues.... Explain classroom experience of practical usefulness of Plato in overcoming cultural stereotypes, assumptions and blinders (positive and negative) in dealing with more familiar religions and cultures...

interpretations of our inherited religious symbols, teachings and other traditions.⁴ In the Islamic context, the most dramatic and central illustration of this challenge is provided by that wide-ranging complex of demanding spiritual virtues which constitute the very core of the Qur’anic teaching (enumerated in Chapter Eight below) about the central spiritual nature and metaphysical destiny of the fully realized human being (*insān*).

[when any Muslim looks for illustrations of these virtues, first turns to Prophet....ADD explanation of centrality--but immensity and lack of good translations--of HADITH as central, constantly influential foundational examples of Islamic humanities. Would require many books to do justice... Here, just appendix of a few of most influential... Contemporary need to see creative expansion and communication of meanings of hadith, as with Qur'an. Principles illustrated in this book primarily in reference to Qur'an all fully transferable to hadith, with added deeper problematics of historical contexts, audiences, assumptions...]

* *

As our subtitle indicates, the particular focus of this book is on the ongoing centrality of these “openings” at the very heart of the Islamic tradition, in each spiritually grounded movement from the foundational words and teachings of the Qur’an to their necessarily creative, living expression in the infinitely varied forms of the Islamic humanities. We employ that last, inclusive expression throughout this work in its broadest possible sense (corresponding to the full spiritual dimensions of the untranslatable Arabic “*adab*”), to refer to the whole socially embedded, historically changing creative matrix of locally adapted cultural forms—institutions, epics, myths and folktales, rituals, poetry, music, codes of right behavior and implicit values and expectations—through which the effective transmission of spiritual teaching actually takes place within each particular Muslim family and wider social and cultural settings.⁵ Hence the book as a whole begins with some particularly appropriate and influential

⁴ Often dramatised in Qur’an (as in Sura of Joseph, Chapter Seven below) in terms already familiar to readers with an awareness of Biblical examples, without any further knowledge of Islamic culture and the Islamic humanities.

⁵ Fuller description in Chapter Nine below...; hadith as foremost illustration...

earlier historical illustrations of that process (in Parts I and II), and then moves on in the concluding section to explore some contemporary dimensions of that same perspective.

In Islamic contexts, as in every religious tradition, there are two equally fundamental aspects to the recurrent challenges surrounding the reality and larger process of spiritual “opening”. First, there is the necessarily individual process of spiritual discovery or seeking leading up to each such opening, with all the related subtle practical dimensions of preparation, discipline, pedagogy, and guidance. And secondly, after the moment of opening itself, there are the manifold challenges of actual effective expression of that insight, an ongoing, highly demanding creative (and critical) effort which always includes finding the difficult practical balance between the spiritual demands of each particular opening, and the necessary ongoing reliance of everyone—individually, and even more so collectively—on a particular complex of socially and historically established conventions and norms. Both of those inseparable dimensions of the process of opening are beautifully summed up in a single multivalent expression adapted in later Islamic spirituality and philosophy: *tahqīq*, or “realization”—an English expression that fortuitously captures both these inseparable aspects of this reality.⁶

Now specialized scholars in religious studies familiar with the classical written expressions of these perspectives and with the underlying spiritual and intellectual processes and methods of realization, whether in Islamic or other religious and cultural contexts, often tend to use a particular technical language of “esotericism” to refer both to those processes themselves and to their wider literary, ritual, and other cultural expressions and contexts. In that language, the “esoteric” or “inner” dimension refers to the deeper reality and wisdom perceived and realized as the result of the particular openings in question, while the corresponding “exoteric” plane refers to those problematic cultural forms and conventional dimensions of belief and praxis which may ultimately point to that underlying esoteric reality, but which are necessarily and indeed unavoidably interpreted in quite different, often conflicting ways by all those without access to the distinctive illuminating openings and requisite preparedness involved in that realization.⁷ However, years of teaching experience have repeatedly

⁶ See especially the discussions in Chapters 1, 4, 8, 14 and all of Part III below.

⁷ (For wider and more detailed illustrations of classical Muslim exponents of these perspectives, see... IA, Farabi, Sadra, and Ja ‘far b. Mansur..)

suggested that today both this technical academic vocabulary—and more importantly, the underlying spiritual, intellectual and cultural realities it refers to—tend to be unfamiliar and highly prone to misunderstanding among contemporary audiences, even in university settings. Indeed the dramatic wider public unfamiliarity today with those longstanding key cultural and spiritual presuppositions of Islamic civilization, and the resulting widespread alienation from some of the most central elements of the earlier religious tradition (whether in the Muslim world or elsewhere), together form an essential backdrop for the now so publicly visible and pressing dilemmas of religious understanding and renewal evoked in the different chapters of Part III below.

For that basic pedagogical reason, since this book is meant to be accessible to a wide introductory audience with no previous specialized background in Islamic thought and spirituality (including the Qur'an itself), the order of presentation adopted here is based on a gradual, inductive initiation into those foundational perspectives, by providing an immediate acquaintance with certain shorter, carefully selected and translated primary sources. Each of these key translations and background studies in Parts I and II (and the related selections of Qur'an and hadith) below has been developed and tested over several decades in the process of addressing a wide spectrum of international audiences, both academic and non-academic, Muslim and non-Muslim, reflecting a broad range of very different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Part I therefore begins directly with two of the most straightforward summary statements of the issues, challenges, and practical dilemmas involved in the process of realization, presented by two of the most popular and lastingly influential classical exponents of that perspective in Islamic civilization. We have then provided in Chapter Three a remarkably accessible and far-reaching summary of the complex of standard Islamic spiritual practices, virtues and forms of *adab* shared by most of our authors and their audiences over the past millenium. And Part I concludes with a brief evocation of a few guiding themes and key creative figures in the philosophical and artistic development of the Islamic humanities.

Part II then begins with a brief evocation of some of the challenges in approaching the Qur'an in translation, including an explanatory translation of one particularly influential Sura (Joseph) designed to highlight many of the recurrent, yet unfamiliar, key structural elements of the Qur'an that are most influential in later expressions of the Islamic humanities. The remaining chapters of Part II provide a series of more detailed explorations and illustrations of the relationship between Qur'an and its ongoing, manifold creative expressions in some of the classical artistic masterpieces of the Islamic humanities,

across different social and cultural settings. Each successive chapter here builds on the discussions and insights developed in the immediately preceding studies, while also taking up certain basic problems of translation and necessary cultural background that constantly arise in the initial process of introducing these traditions to “Western” audiences—a rubric which today actually extends to those many Muslims worldwide who are now primarily acculturated and educated in recently instituted new educational (and wider socio-cultural) systems dramatically removed from earlier traditional cultural forms and pedagogical assumptions that were once prevalent only a few generations ago. Taken together, and with further reference to recent translations of the now widely available classical expressions of the Islamic humanities (including poetry, music and visual arts and architecture) that they discuss, these chapters are meant to convey the intrinsic necessity and pervasive presence of those processes of creativity, diversity, transformation that are familiar to more specialized students of every area and period of Islamic religion, history and culture.

In contrast, the five chapters of Part III (“Looking Forward: Prospects and Challenges”), are more obviously practical, in that they are intended to point out in appropriate detail the practical applicability of the perspectives introduced in Parts I and II to a variety of urgent contemporary public political, religious and educational issues, moving from the most universal challenge of inter- (and intra-) religious understanding to more narrowly focused problems. While readers primarily interested in those contemporary political and cultural issues can certainly jump ahead to these concluding studies, the interpretive perspectives developed in that final section are themselves essentially based on the underlying paradigms of spiritual and historical creativity and transformation developed in Parts I and II; so those concluding arguments will therefore appear both clearer and more persuasive if the earlier foundational chapters are assimilated first.

The studies in Part III are directed simultaneously toward two different audiences, typically motivated by rather different practical interests. To begin with, for students and teachers in religious studies, and indeed for anyone personally interested in the challenges and possibilities of inter-religious understanding, these chapters are designed to highlight the remarkably appropriate and wide-ranging relevance of the interpretive perspectives developed by earlier, foundational Muslim thinkers as effective tools for properly conceiving and eventually resolving persistent contemporary conflicts revolving around religious and other cultural differences. This present-day relevance should in no way be surprising, since the foremost earlier Muslim exponents of these irenic perspectives originally

developed their ideas in direct response to an immense range of hotly contested, often openly warring, primarily intra-religious sectarian political and theological disputes.⁸ Secondly, for a range of Muslim audiences under the influence of today's widespread, distinctively modern reductionist and exclusivist political ideologies, these same chapters can serve as a healthy reminder of radically different, pointedly universalistic forms of Islamic thought which have for centuries offered a central place to the spiritual necessity (and corresponding worldly realities) of diversity, creativity, tolerance, openness, and constantly innovative responses to the recurrent tests and challenges encountered by every individual and larger human community.

* * *

Finally, the well-known divine saying placed at the beginning of this Introduction is intended as a necessary reminder of the absolutely indispensable role, in all the actual processes of spiritual “opening” and realization, of those mysterious creative and transforming figures whom the Qur'an, and subsequent Islamic tradition call the true “Friends of God” (*awliyā' Allāh*, sing. *walī*).⁹ Beginning with

⁸ Ref. to historical contexts of both Ali and Gh. behind writings in Part I, and foundational role of key figures discussed in CHAPTER Four...

⁹ *awliyā' ī* (singular *walī*): i.e., those who are “close to” God, probably alluding to the famous Qur'ānic verses 10:62-64: *...the friends of God, they have no fear and they do not grieve...theirs is the Good News in this lower life and in the next (life)...that is the Tremendous Attainment.* The same Arabic term—which also carries significant connotations of “protector”, “guardian” and even “governor”—also appears as one of the more frequent Names of God (at 2:257; 3:68; 45:19; etc.). In most branches of Shiite thought it is one of the many Qur'anic terms taken as references to the spiritual function of the Imams, while in later Sufi thought—most elaborately in the works of Ibn 'Arabī and his successors—the term is usually understood to refer to the particular spiritual state of proximity to God (*walāya*) shared in differing degrees by the divine Messengers, prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints, besides the different spiritual functions that distinguish each of those members of the spiritual hierarchy. See the more complete discussion in M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabī*, especially chapter 1.

ADD on practical rituals of prayer, ziyāra, etc.—Chapter NINE below...

ADD on hadith of Mi'raj and ch. 367, etc./Tirmidhi... ADD J. Renard book and sourcebook...

In the influential poetic classics of the later Islamic humanities, this complex of Arabic terms is conveyed above all by the recurrent, intentionally ambiguous references to the “Beloved” or “Friend” (Persian *Yār* or *Dūst*, and their equivalents in Turkish, Urdu, Malay, etc.). There this relationship of

the repeated scriptural and hadith indications—including many prophets and divine messengers already familiar in earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, and pointed allusions to far more, together with the formative historical centrality of comparable spiritual figures among the Companions and earliest generations of the Muslim community—every subsequent Islamic theological, interpretive and sectarian tradition has developed its own, often quite elaborate theories and conceptions (and corresponding widespread rituals and devotional practices) relating to the ongoing spiritual, mediating and guiding functions of these divine “Friends” and closely related guiding figures in the spiritual hierarchy, on both the earthly and higher metaphysical levels.¹⁰ Yet while each of the classical Islamic writers evoked in Parts I and II had a great deal to say on this subject (and indeed some of them have themselves been widely considered among the divine “Friends” even in their own time), this book is in no way devoted to those complex theories of *walāya* and competing institutions of spiritual guidance, which are typically as unfamiliar to many contemporary Muslims (qua theories, at least) as they are to non-Muslim students of Islam.

Instead we have concluded this introduction by highlighted the centrality of this living, concretely human dimension of these divine “Friends” for two very simple, directly observable reasons. First, because the more one studies the historical origins and spread and eventual acceptance of the most prevalent and lasting forms of Islamic ritual, devotional and spiritual life—or when one looks for the actual creators of many of the anonymous masterpieces of the Islamic humanities (especially in music and visual arts)—the more one discovers that the original creators and pioneering vehicles of those transformations, in almost every region and cultural domain, remain resolutely anonymous and hidden from the historical chronicles of the great and powerful, just as with the archetypal “Friend of God” so aptly described in the famous divine saying (*hadīth qudsī*) of our epigraph. (The same historical observation, of course, seems to apply at least equally to other religious traditions as well.) Secondly,

walāya/wilāya becomes the central metaphor for the divine-human relationship and the theophanic nature of all nature and experience.

The intimately related theme of the spiritual virtues of poverty and humility stressed in this same divine saying is likewise reflected in many other hadith, which together help explain the frequency of terms like *faqīr* and *darvīsh* (Arabic and Persian for “poor person”, “beggar”, etc.) used to refer to these Friends and their spiritual followers in later Islamic mysticism.

¹⁰ Historical theories of *walāya*, Chodk., Renard, 7, etc...

just as each individual's actual experienced *reality* of spiritual “opening” is always unmistakably different from whatever locally prevalent cultural ideas and beliefs about that process that person may have previously shared and assimilated: so likewise every perceptive and reflective observer, at some point in life, eventually encounters one or more of those rare individuals in whom the processes of spiritual realization and opening have advanced far beyond the norm. And in most cases, one discovers that those unforgettable individuals are typified by just that sort of extraordinary modesty and lack of pretension so beautifully described in our opening divine saying.¹¹ For the lasting effects and memory of their transforming presence, however brief, is a lifelong, living reminder of what is otherwise at best only vaguely symbolized, in the classical readings below, by the transforming encounters of the ‘Azíz (Potiphar), Zulaykha and the fellow-prisoners with Joseph, of Kumayl with Ali, or of Rumi with Shams.

In fact, the closer our study of Islam—indeed, one suspects, of any other religious tradition as well—approaches the actual phenomenological realities of spiritual life and experience, both individual and collective, the more central we find the role of the Friends of God: not just as abstract models and exemplars, but often as the simultaneous “objects” and invisible actors within every dimension of devotional life and ritual. This is most visible, of course, in the case of the multiple roles and presence of the Prophet Muhammad; but it everywhere extends to a whole wider constellation of other spiritual personalities, from the sacred figures of pre-Islamic (or non-Abrahamic) traditions, through key Companions and other saintly personages, on down to much more recent (and thus less well-known) characters. And the transforming process of spiritual “opening” and realization is rarely separable from such often outwardly invisible or unsuspected personal connections. Indeed this phenomenological constant mirrors the celebrated advice of one of the greatest creators of the Islamic humanities—whose poetic masterwork so closely mirrors the central teachings of the Qur’an that it has often been termed a “Persian Qur’an”—in the famous concluding line of the opening poem of his *Dīvān*:

*If you are seeking the Presence (of the Beloved), don’t be absent from Him/Her, Hāfiz:*¹²

¹¹ Cf. popular saying, often transmitted as another divine saying: “My Friends are beneath My domes (of the heavens).” (allusion to domes of tomb-shrines and rituals of *ziyāra*...)

¹² “Presence” (*huzūr*) here as equivalent of “opening” above... Explain key meanings of this *takhallus* (recurrent reminder for reader, as well as poet) in chapter 13...: role of realized human being

Whenever you find the one you love, forget this world and let it go!

(*insān*) as “Guardian (of the mysteries of the Spirit)”, in list of Qur’anic spiritual virtues in Chapter 8 below.

PART I:

“SEEKING GOD’S FACE”: DISCOVERING THE DANCE OF *WALĀYA* AND *WILĀYA*



“Seeking God’s Face”: Discovering the Dance of *Walāya* and *Wilāya*¹³

And God's is the place-of-shining-forth and the place-of-darkening: so wherever you-all turn around, then there is the Face of God.

(Qur'an 2:115)

... For God will bring a people whom He loves and they love Him.... [of the “Friends of God,” *awliyā Allāh*] (5:54)

God is the *Walī* of those who have faith: He brings them forth from the shadows to the Light.... (2:257)¹⁴

In the Islamic humanities, too, pictures may be worth thousands of words. Certainly this is true of the monumental calligraphic composition that immediately greets each pilgrim on as they first enter the shrine of Mevlana Rumi:¹⁵ for that apparently simple image provides nothing less than a sort of mandala, a comprehensive, multi-dimensional reminder of the essentials of the human condition in this world and beyond—and, once we begin to actively contemplate its lessons and meanings, a powerfully dynamic instrument for spiritual reflection and recollection (*dhikr Allāh*).

To begin with the bold, black, most immediately visible foreground of this image, what must immediately strike every visitor is the stylized image of an obviously symbolic face, an image that for most visitors would immediately evoke the repeated Qur’anic image of the “Face of God” (*wajh Allāh*), as the manifest, knowable dimensions of the divine throughout all creation, and the Qur’anic emphasis on our responsibility for “seeking” that Face.¹⁶ Indeed that profound inner seeking and longing could well be taken for granted on the part of each new visitor who had already journeyed so long and far for

¹³ The complete original essay in English, with full footnotes is available for free download at http://dcollections.bc.edu/james_morris.

¹⁴ The three key Qur’anic verses here highlight three equally essential aspects of the expressions of the *w-l-y* Arabic root and the divine Name of *al-Walī* discussed throughout this essay: the human action or response (“turning around”); the active human embodiments (in this world and beyond) of that divine quality; and the divine Name itself.

¹⁵ The divine Names here are given without the Arabic definite article, as they would be recited in Persian. This particular style of “mirrored” (*ma’kūsa*) calligraphy—so memorably illustrated throughout the great mosque of Bursa—suggests a likely date from the later 18th century. By that time, the artist(s) could presuppose a widespread popular familiarity with the usage of this universal imagery of divine “Names” within the context of the later theological and philosophical schools of Akbari thought that by then were widely associated with institutional Sufism and with the learned interpreters of the poetry of Rumi.

¹⁶ See the passages at 2:272; 30:38; 92:20; 6:52; 18:28 and the full explanation of the interrelated meanings of this Arabic root in the Qur’an in Chapter 2 (“Listening: Contemplation and the Purified Heart”) of *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Meccan Illuminations’* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2005).

this closer visit with the spirit of Rumi and his close family and Mevlevi successors, whose memorials are aligned just below and beyond this calligraphy.

At the next level, for those visitors with even a little Arabic, Persian or Ottoman Turkish, this mysteriously open Face dissolves into a mirrored set of two intertwined prayers to God, in the familiar form of litanies of *dhikr* and supplication, calling upon Him through two divine Names included in all the traditional hadith enumerations of the “Most Beautiful Names”: “*O Wālī*” (God as the One Who intimately governs, manages, and directs every aspect of creation) and “*O Walī*”—that is, God as the intimate divine Friend, Guide, Helper, Support. In the Persian mystical poetry of Rumi and the litanies and songs of the Sufi tariqas, in Turkish and many other Islamic languages, this second divine Name is translated above all as *Dūst* or *Yār*, the divine Beloved in all of His/Her infinite (and infinitely precious) particular manifestations.

In the Persian calligraphy here, these two complementary—yet often apparently opposed—divine Names are distinguished only by the central vertical letter *alif* (ا) of *Wālī*, which is here dramatically intertwined with the letter *lam* (ل) shared by both Names. The *alif* traditionally reflects the creative Act and intrinsic connection with all levels of creation; while in contrast to that verticality, the form of the letter *lam*, by itself, clearly suggests the beginning of the cosmic process of “Return” to God that is the inherent purpose of the human condition. Indeed from the earliest Islamic times the distinctive calligraphic “embrace” of those two letters (the *lam-alif*) has symbolized the all-encompassing Love-relationship linking the divine and each human soul. Finally, the ligature of the *lam* and concluding letter *yā’* of both these Names here reads literally “for Me” (*lī*)—a powerful reminder of the ultimate Source and aim of that Love.

Visibly “behind” and above these two highlighted Names in the foreground, in reddish-brown pigment, is a supplication (likewise mirrored on right and left) to another, even more familiar divine Name: *yā Ākhir* (O the Ultimate, Omega, the Aim and Goal of all),¹⁷ the Name that here appears “above and beyond” all else. Yet it is still partially intertwined with the two black Names in the foreground. In that open background plane, as it were in the cosmic distance, *yā Ākhir* is surmounted by an immense Crown and surrounded by interlaced images of the leaves, flowers and fruits traditionally associated in the Qur’an and hadith with Paradise, closeness to God, and the divine Reality as the creative “Source-of-all-Life” (*al-Hayy*).

Thus the overlaying of these two planes of differing colors, imagery and calligraphy immediately places each viewer within a liminal boundary of mystery suggesting the repeated Qur’anic insistence on the ways that every divine “Sign” (*āya*) in this world and in our souls points back to its Source and meaning in the infinite, “invisible” Beyond—and on the ways that the “Friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*, a Qur’anic term that includes all the divine prophets and messengers) stand present on just the “other side” of that plane of the visible: immediately witnessing us in this world, while remaining mysterious and hidden to our everyday, mundane self.

So now we are ready to explore the central mystery of this painting: the transforming ways that the *Alif* of the divine Presence and unconditional creative Love forms the Axis and essential Connection—a sort of spiritual “revolving doorway”—around which these two ever-present Names and

¹⁷ See the famous evocation of this divine Name at Qur’an 57:3.

realities (*Wālī* and *Walī*) are always pivoting, in every stage of each soul's "turning return" (*tawba*) to God.

I. THE DIVINE NAME/REALITY *AL-WALĪ*, THE *AWLIYĀ*' *ALLĀH*, AND THE LOVE-RELATIONSHIP OF *WALĀYA*

Constantly referring back to this emblematic calligraphy from Rumi's shrine, the following brief exploration of the divine-human relationship traditionally termed "*Walāya*" is divided into the following six sections. (I) First, this preliminary introduction to the key terms *walāya* and the corresponding divine Name *al-Walī*. (II) A short list of a few of the most obvious gateways or divine Signs through which we begin to become more aware of the actual reality of this relationship. (III) A short indication of the lifelong processes of "realization" (*tahqīq*) by which each person gradually begins to follow up on those initial discoveries. (IV) A simple "spiritual phenomenology" evoking some of the recurrent ways that this relationship—which ultimately encompasses every dimension of our experience—gradually becomes deepened and more consciously interactive in our spiritual life. (V) A few indications of the far-reaching practical and political implications and primordial human responsibilities inherent in this unfolding process of discovery.

Finally (VI), we conclude with the ultimate inseparability of these two Names in the actual dynamic processes through which our awakening to God's Friendship and *walāya*, together with His mediating "Friends" (the *awliyā*'), is ultimately driven and conditioned by the divine power and influence of His providential activity of Governance (*wilāya*). For the divine Name *al-Wālī* (with its substantive *masdar* form *wilāya* or *vilāyat*) means to govern, rule, manage, administer, and so on: that meaning is reflected in its familiar everyday use, in a number of Islamic languages, to refer to the public forms of governance, as well as in various elaborate religious accounts of the "celestial hierarchies" of the angels and certain *awliyā*'.¹⁸ Hence also the widespread traditional belief in the hidden spiritual governance of the "patron saints" of particular cities and regions, as well as the centuries-old respectful practice across the Islamic world of appending an epithet of divine "rulership" to the names of so many of these venerated figures among the Friends: e.g., Eyup "Sultan", Nur 'Ali "Shah", Shah Ni'matullah "Vali," and so on.

However, the divine Name and field of discovery that we begin with here is that of *al-Walī*, together with its substantive *masdar* form *walāya/valāyat*. This divine Name—and its essentially "verbal" reality as an action or ongoing process and relationship—reflects an immense complex of closely associated meanings: including, *to be close* or *next to*; *to be friends with*; and by extension, *to aid*, *assist*, *help*, *protect*, *support*. So when this meaning of the divine Name *al-Walī* is related back simply to the vast range of Qur'anic verses and hadith dealing with this *proximity* of the divine Reality and its relation to all of creation and to human beings more particularly, and when we add to this all those further verses and hadith relating to the practical realization and actualization of that divine-human relationship of *Walāya*: then it is no exaggeration to say that *all* of the Qur'anic and Prophetic teaching can be understood as centering around this Reality of divine "Friendship"/*Walāya* in its endless ramifications.

¹⁸ See especially the detailed discussion of both of these terms and their meanings, drawn from throughout Ibn 'Arabi's *Futūhāt*, in Michel Chodkiewicz' classic *The Seal of the Saints*.

II. DISCOVERING THE GATEWAYS OF *WALĀYA*: PERSPECTIVES AND PROSPECTS

We can begin to fill out the bare symbols of this calligraphy by pointing to eight universal doorways or omnipresent aspects of *walāya* that are particularly present and effective in almost everyone's experience. Here and in each of the following sections, I must ask our readers, as I briefly mention each of these different dimensions of *walāya*, first of all to actively bring to mind at least a few concrete illustrations of situations in which they themselves have recently encountered these dimensions of *walāya*. And then, with regard to those examples, to think of what they have discovered as effective means, tools or useful instruments in revealing and opening up the deeper relational connection—what the Qur'an calls the individualized divine Calling and Response¹⁹—that is the inherently dynamic heart of *walāya*. Although we cannot dwell on such individual “case studies” or learning situations in this short essay, it should quickly become clear that these relationships are extremely concrete and particular, and that they constitute the very tissue of our everyday inter- (and *intra*-) personal relations: for example, our relations to our memorable dreams; to our prayers and mysterious experiences of inspiration/*ilhām* (in all their unforgettable and indispensable forms); to our spouses or partners; in reading to or discussing events with our children or grandchildren; in dealing with the pressing needs and solicitations of family, colleagues, or co-workers; and so on. The inherent creative challenges and demands of this relationship of *walāya*—and the absolute practical necessity of intimately knowing the specific preparedness, resources and limitations of our “audience” and interlocutors or spiritual companions—are even clearer when we move from those everyday personal domains of *walāya* to the particular specialized fields of our professional responsibilities as parents, artists, students, teachers, performers, writers, caretakers, healers, and so on.

And for readers familiar with Rumi's poetry, it will quickly become obvious that this brief evocation of these familiar gateways to discovering *walāya* happen to correspond to any listing of his favorite poetic subjects.

— The first of these gateways to the relationship of *walāya* is the ever-present theophanies of the world of **Nature**: the entrancing call of sacred places; the inner correspondences (and ongoing lessons) between the human soul and so many other creatures; the natural symbolism of the elements, winds, fragrances, trees, heavens, colors, seasons, and animals; or the unavoidable ethical challenges of our profound inner and outward dependence upon those creatures, elements, and the wider natural environment; and so on.

— The second of those windows onto *walāya* is the transforming, humbling, awe-inspiring spiritual power of **Beauty** in all of its infinite forms and expressions. (“He is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty,” in the words of the famous hadith.)

— The third of these omnipresent portals is the poignant grace of our individualized “**Tests**” and **Crises** (*ibtilā'* or *imtihān*)—whether that spiritually educational face of *walāya* appears initially in the

¹⁹ *And whenever My servants ask you about Me, surely I am Near: I respond to the call of the one who is calling, whenever he calls upon Me. So may they respond to Me and may they have faith in Me, so that they might be guided rightly!* (2:186). See the discussion of this central theme in the Qur'an and hadith in our recent study *Divine Calling and Human Response: Scripture and Realization in The Meccan Illuminations*, in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society [JMIAS]*, vol. 53 (2013), pp. 1-24; and vol. 54, pp. 1-12.

forms of unwanted suffering and difficulty, or of potentially dangerous and revelatory apparent “good fortune” (*balā’ hasan*, in the words of the Qur’an, 8:17). As life constantly reminds us, suffering, failure, mortality, and all the other unforgettable reminders of our intrinsic human limitations are indispensable preconditions for our discovering and actualizing the central divine quality of Compassion or absolute Lovingmercy (*rahma*) and for actively bringing into existence all that is beautiful and good (*ihsān*)—as indeed for realizing each of the other “Most Beautiful” divine Names and Attributes.²⁰

— A fourth portal into *walāya* is faithful **Devotion** and selfless **Service** (*‘ibāda, khidma*), in all their forms and expressions, beginning with their foundational practical, disciplining role as the essential basis for contemplation, illumination, and eventual creative actualization. Here it is interesting to note that if people are not given these fundamental forms of ritual and devotion by their culture and religious tradition, they of necessity create and re-discover novel expressions of those realities. We have only to think of the rigorous devotion and submission needed for the mastery of any sport, art, science, profession, or any other discipline in every area of life: disciplines that always seem so unimaginably daunting to anyone not called to that particular expression of *walāya*.

— A fifth and historically central gateway to *walāya* is each soul’s discovery or awakening to the active presence (whether in this world, or more often beyond) of the **Friends of God**,²¹ the ever-living instruments of God’s Lovingmercy, and of their guiding influences of Grace (*karāmāt*). In the end, the spiritual autobiography of each human soul is woven through with the threads of their visible and invisible influences (*āthār*). And this is also a domain in which the coloring of languages, expectations, and other conditioning cultural and historical factors is initially so obvious, requiring much further individual reflection (*tafakkur*), inspired insight (*basīra*), and active interaction (*murāqaba*) that are needed to develop that spiritual discernment and attentive focus (*tawajjuh*) which are essential to a deepening awareness of the divine Friendship in all its forms.

— A sixth, and perhaps the most obvious and unavoidable of the theophanies of *walāya* lies in all the individual **Ethical Challenges** of everyday life—in the revelatory *tension* (sometimes subtle, sometimes blatantly unavoidable) between momentary, apparent benefits and habitual or socially reinforced patterns, on the one hand, and the mysteriously illuminated, necessarily inner awareness of what is *actually* right and appropriate in a given situation. No one can avoid this gateway to contemplative awareness and wisdom, and these recurrent dramatic situations are what keep each person spiritually awake and growing.

— A seventh domain where we are obliged to discover and turn to *walāya* is the intrinsic spiritual necessity of **Active Creativity and Renewal**. Just as happens outwardly with physical buildings, homes, monuments, and human bodies: entropy, neglect, and ruin (the poets’ *kharābāt*) are also the natural course of this inner world unless they are countered by all the onerous adult demands and focused human responsibilities of “spiritual maintenance.” No one is allowed for very long the self-deceptive delusions of *taqlīd*, of being only a passive spiritual consumer. In this vivifying

²⁰ See the discussion of related Qur’anic and hadith passages in *Opening the Heart: Ibn ‘Arabi on Suffering, Compassion and Atonement*, JMIAS vol. 51 (2012), pp. 27-56.

²¹ I.e., the *awliyā’ Allāh*, *qawm*, *rāhimūn*, and *‘ibād al-Rahmān*—always including *all* the prophets and Messengers—as they are described in key passages of the Qur’an and hadith.

relationship of *walāya*, each soul knows what is alive and real and authentic, and what is not—or else we are painfully and memorably taught to discern and rediscover that essential difference.

— Finally, nothing more powerfully and comprehensively reveals the full dimensions of *walāya* than the discovery and unfolding of each person’s particular **mystery of Destiny** (*sirr al-qadar*), which is of course the central framework of the Qur’anic account of our spiritual origin and return (*ma’ād*). This is the uniquely individualized drama of the revelatory interplay between the elements of our own existential choices (decisions, motivations, missions, etc.) and the wider context of divinely bestowed “givens” and “accidents.” Only through that serendipitous drama can we gradually discover over time all the underlying meanings and unsuspected blessings of each of those apparently random situations and events.²² And that uniquely individual “Rising”²³ leads providentially to an ever-deepening awareness of the particular divine role, purpose, meanings and implications of what at first so often appear as arbitrary choices and chance accidents. This final, most inclusive and inescapable dimension of *walāya* is also a powerful reminder of the key spiritual function of literature, poetry, theater, and cinema as essential spiritual tools for awakening and communicating our deeper understanding of these wider, slowly unfolding aspects of *walāya* (the cosmic “shadow-theater” and love story) that only reveal themselves over the longer course of a lifetime, or beyond.

Again, the next practical step in evoking these facets of divine Friendship/*walāya* is to explore how uniquely and differently they arise in the context of each person’s life, and the ways that each individual’s unique spiritual preparedness and receptivity interact with those experiences to determine whether those theophanies will lead to deepening growth and transformation, or may remain for the moment only a fallow potential.

III: EXPLORING *WALĀYA*: MAKING SENSE OF THE INVISIBLE

Before turning to those means through which we can start to deepen and fully recognize the soul’s relationship of *walāya*, we should at least mention the four successive dimensions--or rather intertwined stages (*mi’rāj*)--of the ascending process of exploration and realization that are normally engendered by our initial moments of awakening to that divine presence and nascent relationship. In other words, these are four basic tools of discovery and discernment that are elicited by the initial encounters and discoveries of *walāya* briefly suggested in the preceding section.²⁴

²² I.e., of this particular personality, character, and spiritual potential (*isti’dād*); this culture and history; this particular set of gifts and obstacles and handicaps; this particular family and friends and colleagues; this particular historical moment, and so on.

²³ That is, the “lesser Resurrection (*al-qiyāmat al-sughrā*), in the language of the later Sufis and Islamic philosophers.

²⁴ For a fuller treatment of the practical dimensions of spiritual intelligence highlighted here, see *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Meccan Illuminations’* (Fons Vitae, 2005); or more succinctly, *Ostad Elahi On Spirituality in Everyday Life* (Kuala Lumpur, 2011).

(1) Each of the potential discoveries suggested here depends above all on active inner **ATTENTION** (*tawajjuh*), as we gradually develop an appreciation of the slowly and intermittently awakening spiritual senses. Indeed when that inner attention develops to a certain degree of awareness, it becomes unclear whether or not there is anything in life that is *not* in reality a “spiritual experience.”

(2) **REFLECTION** (the Qur’anic *fikr*, *tafakkur*) and **DISCERNMENT**: Building on the accumulation of comparable experiences, certain external criteria, and above all the crucial guidance of experienced spiritual teachers, these are of course the next tools of exploration needed to distinguish the supportive and illuminating realities of *walāya* from the painfully familiar “educational” forms of misunderstanding, self-delusion, and misconstrual built into each person’s path of spiritual maturation.

(3) **ILLUMINATION** (*ilhām*), or the eventual **ASSIMILATED UNDERSTANDING** (*‘aql*, *ta’aqul*) of the intended meanings and directions flowing from each recognized encounter with *walāya*, is a gift and grace that can sometimes arrive inseparably from the actual concrete experiences of divine Friendship evoked in the following section. But more often that understanding can take years to discover, unfold, and work out in light of the slow accumulation of practice and experience.

(4) With time, every initial intimation of *walāya*--like those briefly suggested here in sections II and IV--eventually takes its place in the wider context of appropriate, individually responsive **ACTION** and **VERIFICATION** (*tahqīq*), as our attentive practice, reflection, understanding and illumination lead on to the challenge of new Signs and indications “*on the horizons and within their souls*” (41:53).

IV. INTIMATIONS OF *WALĀYA*: RECOGNIZING AND DEEPENING THE “GIFTS OF GRACE” (*karāmāt*)

To put it most simply, discovering *walāya* means a transformative recognition of the “Invisible” (to others) divine Presence of *al-Walī*, of the divine “Friend,” in any of Its concretely experienced qualities, effects and activities, through the distinctive qualities and particulars of each of those manifestations. In this section, we have tried to suggest some of those particular instants of discovery (*tajalliyyāt*, the momentary theophanic “unveilings” of the divine Beloved) that tend to have an inherently *inter-personal* form, and which can therefore readily provide the initial promptings or occasions for discovering and connecting with one of the instruments of that Love, the *awliyā’ Allāh*. Even within this small subset of theophanic events, it is already notable that the locale and circumstances of such discoveries are in no way limited to any particular sort of outward venue. For the moment of discovery in question is equally real and potentially transformative, whether that encounter first happens through a particular personality, pilgrimage, holy places, devotions, dreams, visions, inspirations, readings--or in the even subtler echoes, intuitions, premonitions, or “sympathetic vibrations” (*wāridāt*) that we may unexpectedly encounter at any time.

The following list of relevant qualities or particular results of our encounters with the divine Beloved/Friend is meant simply to suggest the particular illustrative experiences that readers necessarily have to recall for themselves. Of course certain items in this list may well suggest a particular memorable event, or even a longer-term, more consciously interactive and ongoing relationship with one or more of the divine “Friends” (*awliyā’*). For such personal stories—whether we happen to frame them as love-stories or as mysteries—are in fact all that can ever really be shared and

potentially communicated,²⁵ since nothing at all about *walāya* can somehow be proven or demonstrated to those who have not yet discovered and awakened to the first signs of that Relationship, who have not already encountered the deepening process of spiritual realization (*tahqīq*).

— The relationship of *walāya* that is discovered is always **personal and individual**, though it and its initial occasions may well be shared in various ways. (We will return in the following section to some of the recurrent difficulties of communication that this sharing normally entails.)

— What is discovered through each encounter with *walāya* is an **ongoing inner process**. That complex reality is beautifully conveyed in the Arabic language of the Qur'an, and yet very difficult to conceive or convey in the subject/object, linear temporal frameworks of Indo-European languages. For the reality of this relationship one encounters with the divine Friend has no “end” (or temporal “beginning”), and it cannot be controlled or defined (at least from the earthly human side).

— What one encounters of *walāya* is characterized by its **openness and availability**—not by any sort of “jealousy” or “spiritual territoriality.” What pilgrims everywhere discover and encounter, for example (in the many forms of *ziyāra* or visiting holy places and persons of all kinds), is rarely delimited or restricted by their particular religion, upbringing, culture, or momentary system of conscious beliefs.

— **Mystery** and **wonder** are always inherent in the reality and experience of *walāya*, since clarification or illumination in one area most often only opens up new mysteries and deeper unknowns: i.e., what has been called the distinctive subjective element of *hayra*, “spiritual bewilderment” or awe and amazement).

— **Engagement** (that is both **mutual** and enduring): we already know from the beginning, long before we can verify this knowing over long periods of time, that the aim and fulfillment of *walāya* lies beyond our earthly time, however we may seek to imagine or situate that inchoate “beyond.”

— **Commitment**: once this relation of Friendship is discovered, one is never truly alone, never abandoned—nor able to abandon.

— **Intention**: one might say that the unfolding power (and concomitant challenges) of focused spiritual intention (*himma*) flow inevitably from our initial attitude and ongoing efforts of spiritual “attentiveness” (*tawajjuh*) already highlighted in the preceding section.

— **Direction** and resulting **clarity of purpose**. What one often immediately discovers together with *walāya* is a memorable recognition of the Qur'anic “Face/direction of God,”²⁶ immediately distinguishing the inner “lights” of true illumination (the Qur'anic *mashriq*) from those dimensions of

²⁵ “*Life is But a Dream*”: *Creation as Divine Cinema and the Shadow-Theater of Existence...*, pp. 10-48 in *El Azufre Rojo: Revista de Estudios sobre Ibn 'Arabi*, vol. 2 (2015).

²⁶ *Wajh al-Haqq*: see our opening Qur'anic epigraph 2:115. “Direction” is another closely related meaning of the Qur'anic *w-j-h* root: i.e., to “face” or direct oneself toward the theophanic Source or Friend. (See the more complete discussion in Chapter 3 of *The Reflective Heart...*, “The Face of God and Human Faces: the Qur'anic Sources.”)

our life that were previously unrecognized as expressions of “darkening,” “shadows” (*zulumāt*), and “veils.”

— **Co-operation**: that is, an interactive harmony beyond either personal control or external compulsion (*jabr* or *ikrāh*). As Ibn ‘Arabi has memorably expressed this experience and insight, the seeker transitions through the ongoing realization of our soul’s *walāya* from “journeying” (with difficult effort and struggle) to “being carried” along the unfolding flow of one’s uniquely individual spiritual path.²⁷

— An outwardly inexplicable, inner awareness of **protection** and **safety**: i.e., of re-assurance, inherent trust, confidence, and mysterious sustaining (*īmān*, *sabr*, *tawakkul*, *itmi’nān*, and so on.).

— **Motivation** and **spiritual energy**: one of the most familiar mysteries of this discovery of the connection and relationship of *walāya* (since it is often so literally invisible to others) is this miraculously increased inner energy and clarity of perspective, making possible the overcoming or endurance of previously daunting obstacles.

— **Devotion** and **longing**: distinctively, in the case of a genuinely transforming encounter with *walāya*, that devotion and longing only *increases* or mysteriously persists despite long periods of apparent “absence” or “separation.” Nor is it ever fully satiated by any kind of fulfillment.²⁸

— **Gratitude**: distinctively never-ending and not decreasing; instead only growing and deepening with each encounter with the *Walī*/Friend.

— **Profound Respect** (*ihtirām*): discovering an inherent (“cause-less”) valuing of the other and simultaneous *being-valued*, without any specific outward or visible “cause” or occasion. (There seems to be no adequate word for this simple spiritual reality in English)

— Awakened **absolute, conditionless love** (*rahma*: not the same as the more particular devotion and longing just cited): not tied exclusively to any particular object or circumstances, with the distinctive quality of being a true and sufficient *end-in-itself*.

— **Perseverance** (*sabr*) and **insistence**: the unexpected and inexplicable, mysteriously “gifted” power to continue searching, discovering, and questioning the deeper meanings of this Relationship, under even the most discouraging challenges and circumstances.

²⁷ See the translated passages in Chapter 1 (“Journeying: From Wandering to Repose”) in *The Reflective Heart...* (full reference in n. 11 above).

²⁸ See the beautiful evocation of these distinctive qualities of true *walāya* in the famous epigrammatic “litmus-tests” of spiritual realization constituting Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Kitāb al-Nasīha*, partially translated in *Introducing Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Book of Spiritual Advice,”* pp. 1-18 in JMIAS, vol. XXVIII (2000); a complete translation is included in our forthcoming volume, *Approaching Ibn ‘Arabi: Foundations, Contexts, Interpretations*.

V. SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: COMMUNICATING AND SHARING THE RELATIONSHIP OF *WALĀYA*

Each of the following practical consequences would normally require at least a few pages of basic elaboration, and could be readily expanded into its own essay. But these implications are really only significant when backed up by the kinds of concrete experiences and deepening personal discoveries of *walāya* alluded to in the preceding sections. Once a person's realization of this Relationship reaches a certain critical mass, the practical consequences of each of these points necessarily begin to shape how we learn to communicate appropriately in this domain, always depending on our particular audiences and interlocutors:

- This relationship (of *walāya*) is ultimately far “bigger” and *more inclusive* than whatever we may think of as its “partners” or participants, including all historical traditions and cultures.
- *Walāya* is a *process*, not an “object.” What is “known” through *walāya* and a genuine *walī* is embedded in a specific, uniquely *personal existential context*—a Relationship that is always unfolding and deepening—and which therefore is not fully perceptible or adequately describable as any sort of outward, externally shared object or “thing.”
- *Maʿrifa*, spiritual “knowing awareness” or immediate recognition of the divine *Walī* in any of His infinite manifestations, or the peculiar kind of immediately inspired, necessarily personal awakening that underlies our focused awareness of *walāya*, is always *particular* (i.e., not an abstraction or concept, and not successfully communicable as such).
- The realities of *walāya*, from the simplest momentary perceptions on to ever deeper realms, are *universally present and potentially accessible*. The problems involved in discovering and recognizing those Presences have to do with ensuring one's attention, discernment, and the removal of inner obstacles (“veils” of all kinds), not with anything that can be otherwise taught or inculcated in any other, more convenient way.
- The distinctive nature of this relationship and encounter (of *walāya*) means that *genuine communication about each instant or case of realization can only take the form of a personal “story”*—albeit in any of the many spiritually suitable “languages” mentioned in the next paragraph. It is surely no accident that the most effectively accessible and enduring forms of communication about the “Friends of God” (*awliyāʾ*) in each major religious tradition—and certainly in the foundational scriptures of each of the Abrahamic traditions—are so often in the form of such personal stories.
- Adequately describing or sharing our discoveries of *walāya* (and encounters with each *walī*) also requires a form of appropriate language capable of conveying *the plenitude of the experienced Instant or Moment* (a non-linear, mysteriously expanded “vertical time”) and a momentary *higher communion of shared being and understanding* (i.e., something far beyond the implicit subject/object, temporally restricted expectations built into Indo-European languages and grammars). Here we have only to recall the multiple, inexhaustible meanings that Rumi's relationship with “Shams” continually takes on throughout each genre and stage of his immense work. This means that the appropriate creative language for conveying the familiar epiphanies and theophanies of *walāya* suggested in the preceding sections

normally include one or more of the following: music, poetry, rituals, dance, visual arts, cinema, and other appropriate forms of witnessing.

- From this perspective, the classical masterpieces of the poetry of *walāya* in Islam (Hafiz, Rumi, Yunus Emre, and their peers in each Islamicate language and culture) are only “didactic” for readers and critics who have no clear conception of what those masters are actually attempting to communicate and awaken. In terms of this subject of *walāya* and the *awliyā*’, what those incomparable works provide for each attentive reader/listener, over the necessary period of time and experience, is an appropriate “*observational tool*” for discovering, evaluating and sharing all the indicative practical dimensions of the unfolding relationship of *walāya* and its “mystery love-story” of realization (*tahqīq*) that were briefly outlined in the preceding sections.

At the same time, we must observe that there are also certain important social (and ultimately, political) conditions for discovering and then effectively communicating these facets of *walāya*, which reflect the essential inseparability of our most basic spiritual responsibilities and their corresponding, pre-requisite freedoms. We may conclude this section with those essential, primordially human freedoms because their compelling existential and spiritual necessity in each case comes ultimately not from any outward (historical, cultural or political) sources, but *from the intrinsic spiritual demands of our actual human reality as the locus of these theophanies*, as the personal manifestation of each of these integral dimensions of our unique active relationship of intimate friendship with the Beloved.

- The first of these preconditions is **the freedom and responsibility to learn**, which in the spiritual domain is inseparably connected to the profoundly individualized, and absolutely unavoidable, educational role of our illusions, mistakes, negligence and their painfully memorable, ultimately transforming consequences. Consequently, this fundamental freedom also implies the constant **responsibility of forgiveness**, both of one’s self and of others.

- Next is **the freedom and responsibility to respond appropriately to each divine “Calling.”** This is the freedom and responsibility for those acts of spiritual creativity and innovation (*bid’a hasana*) which are indispensable for all the manifestations of *ihsān*²⁹—and which together entail the inevitable growing diversity and particularization of outcomes and methods arising from each particular situation and experience of *walāya*.³⁰ (It would revealing to contrast this indispensable spiritual freedom with the Qur’an’s repeated denunciations of all forms of querulous “disputation,” *mujādala* or *jidāl*.)

- Finally, as already noted, there is our **freedom and responsibility to share and**

²⁹ I.e., for recognizing and actualizing all that is beautiful and good, or “worshipping and serving God as though you see Him,” as the culminating aim of all Religion (*dīn*) is described in the famous words of the canonical “hadith of Gabriel.” (The injunction to undertake “beautiful/good innovation” is from a famous hadith.)

³⁰ Alluding to the famous Qur’anic verse 30:22. “*And among His Signs is the creating of the heavens and the earth and the difference of your languages and your colors: surely in that are Signs for those who truly know.*”

communicate the unveiled divine “Treasure,”³¹ of what each person may discover of this relationship of *walāya*: *And as for your Lord’s blessings, recount them!* (93:11). The practical implications of this simple, unrestricted commandment are far-reaching.

VI: FROM LEARNING TO TRUE SERVICE (*‘IBĀDA*): DISCOVERING THE DANCE OF *WALĀYA* AND *WILĀYA*

The preceding sections have mainly focused on the distinctive features and qualities of the relationship of *walāya* (i.e., our gradual discovery of God as *Walī*, the intimate Friend and Beloved)—and not so directly on the correspondingly indispensable role of *wilāya*, of God as *Wālī*, as Ruler and Governor—because those clearly beneficent aspects of God as Friend, Guardian, Guide, Beloved and so on are normally perceived more positively. And also because at the early conscious stages of that Relationship we inevitably experience the first memorable occasions of that love-story as near-miraculous events and happenings. But that is certainly *not* how these two complementary divine Qualities are presented in this extraordinary calligraphic monument that greets each visitor to Rumi’s shrine. For there the vertical letter *alif* (ا or Alpha), universally symbolizing the divine Creative Act and inner link of Creator and all creation, is inextricably intertwined in an embrace with the letter *lam* (ل)³² shared by both of these divine Names—suggesting and even highlighting the ultimate inseparability of these paired divine Names in each person’s ongoing process of spiritual discovery, growth and maturation.

So if we return to examine more closely the different phenomenological manifestations of *walāya* introduced in the preceding sections, it quickly becomes apparent—at least as an abstract, logical observation and conclusion—that none of these individual facets of divine Friendship/*walāya* becomes visible to us without a complex, far-reaching and all-encompassing framework of divine activity, governance, direction, determination (*taqdīr*) and all the other manifestations of God as *al-Wālī*, as the “Manager” present and operative in every dimension of being from the most metaphysical to the most intimately personal. Indeed it is fair to say, in line with our opening epigraph from the Qur’an (2:115), that for the most part we normally seek and discover some longed-for manifestation of the “Face” of God precisely as the eventual result of our “turning around,”³³ away from any of the multitudinous “dark,” troubling, or disagreeable aspects of life. So from that perspective, the *alif* of our calligraphy is like the spiritual pivot of a kind of constantly revolving door, where our initial encounters with the dark, fearful and uncontrollable aspects of life keep us constantly in prayerful search and longing for the illuminating solace of the divine Friend/*walāya*. In short, our motivations, our capacities, our perceptions and interpretations, even the deeper determination of when and how our prayers and pleading are outwardly “answered”: all of these inwardly visible aspects of *walāya* are also ultimately

³¹ Alluding to the famous Divine Saying (*hadith qudsī*): “I was a hidden Treasure, and I *loved* to be known: hence I created the world/people (*al-khalq*) so that I might be known.”

³² Visibly symbolizing the (still incomplete) prolongation of that creative Act in the partial “return” of the earthly human being to the divine Source.

³³ *Wallā*, from same Arabic root as both these divine Names. That meaning immediately suggests the related root and concept of *tawba*, of our “repentance” (“turning” toward God, away from sin) and the divine response of God as “the ever-Turning” (*al-Tawwāb*) in forgiveness and right guidance.

expressions of and responses to the preceding forces and surrounding, preparatory context of divine *wilāya*.

Indeed this frequent unconscious opposition, in our naïve initial approach to life, between our perception of divine Friendship/*walāya* (as something intrinsically “positive” and longed for) and our suspicion of *wilāya* (as an often apparently impersonal or even negative ruling power) is quite typical of the sort of deep-rooted, instinctive human dualism which we normally apply, quite unreflectively, in the course of life to so many of the necessary polarities and contrasts between the contrasting divine Names and qualities: for example, to God as *Muhyī* (“Giver of Life”) and *Mumīt* (“Giver of Death”); as *Hādī* (“Guide”) and *Mudill* (“Who leads astray”); as *Zāhir* (“Outward”) and *Bātin* (“Inner”); and so on. Of course none of these divine attributes can exist and become humanly known and fully appreciated without the lastingly experienced contrast with each other. Yet taken by themselves, we know that such abstract philosophical reflections and familiar theological cautions have little deeper effect in actually transforming and overcoming that underlying, natural human dualism.

Instead, this powerful calligraphic greeting forcefully reminds us that in practice it is only through our close attention to life’s actual realities and contexts—i.e., to all the unfolding personalized lessons and tests bestowed by that divine Beloved (to borrow Rumi’s favorite image for that “Face” in this painting)—that we can gradually learn something of the deeper Reality and Source underlying our unforgettable moments of awakening to the divine Friend. Or in other words, only through those providential dramas can we eventually discover that the divine “Governor” (*al-Wālī*) really *is* the All-Compassionate Beloved (*al-Walī*, *Yār* and *Dūst*). Secondly, this painting boldly emphasizes (like so many of Rumi’s poems, long and short) that it is only in a state of profound humility, vulnerability, and often desperate longing and entreaty (*niyāz*)—symbolized in this calligraphy by the poignant, prayerful “O...” (*yā*) always addressing this intertwined pair of divine Names—that we can even notice and truly appreciate the Beloved’s eventual response. Finally, the fact that this initial passionate supplication extends all the way up to the “Ultimate Reality” (*yā Ākhir*)—woven in tiny, less visible red tendrils at the top of the painting, at once above, behind, and through the monumental black Names in the foreground, and thus equally present in the foreground plane of this lower world, as in its infinitely expanding background: this placement powerfully highlights the necessary vastness of the divine perspectives of time and possibility that are slowly revealed through our transforming encounters with both of these Names.

One of the defining qualities of any great work of spiritual art (as of *walāya* more generally!) is that its meanings and immediate import shift with each renewed encounter, with each transforming “*visit to the graves*” (Sura 102). Thus this mandala, at each encounter, actively mirrors back each viewer’s deepening and necessarily unique personal experiences of the divine “Governor” (*Wālī*) and the loving divine Beloved (*Walī*). So with time, we pilgrim-visitors gradually find ourselves more and more often passing beyond the bold surface plane to the expansive space of those boundless spiritual realms (the *barzakh*) “behind” the visible plane of the Face and Names. And through our repeated visits to that rediscovered presence of the divine Beloved/Friend, we may discover some of the following transforming Signs:

- Painful difficulty (*‘usr*) becomes ease (*yusr*). “Surely **with** the hardship”—not after it—“is ease; surely *with* the hardship is ease.” (94:5-6)

- Our childish impression of divine “necessity” and determination as being opposed to our limited individual “freedom” (*jabr* and *qadr*) gradually becomes transformed into an actively partnered, spontaneous “dance” of *taslīm* and *rizā*, of inner surrender and contented peace.
- Our initial dualistic juxtaposition of rare moments of miraculous “grace” to a supposed “ordinary,” vacant world of routine (or even darker “evil,” oppression, tragedy, and the like) is transmuted into our transforming “finding-awareness” of the *whole* of Being (*wujūd*) as blessing (*baraka*).
- The initial stages of calling upon God or others, and then waiting for some eventual wished-for response,³⁴ begin to give way to the deeper practice of listening, witnessing, and responding selflessly in that “spontaneously beautiful creative service” (*ihsān*) which is the true act of worship (*‘ibāda*) and culmination of faith, as described by the Prophet in the famous hadith of Gabriel.³⁵
- Our naïve contrast of singularly memorable, intermittent spiritually “meaningful” moments to the futilely repetitive, horizontal landscape of linear and impersonal time (*zamān*) gradually dissolves into the experienced timeless “Instant” (*waqt*, in the language of the Sufis) of the personal Love-relationship of *walāya*.
- The familiar painful juxtaposition of unexpected moments of grace experienced as effortless, unexpected “music,” interrupting a backdrop of more persistent situations of cacophony or random “noise,” is gradually effaced—someplace behind and beyond the Face of this painting—in our dawning awareness of the invisible rhythm, the intertwined co-operation, of this deeper cosmic Dance of *wilāya* and *walāya*. As in the famous concluding lines of Yeats’ late poem, *Among School Children*, that so closely echo the familiar Qur’anic likeness (14:24) of “...a good Tree whose roots are firm and its branches in heaven”:

...O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

And here Rumi’s visitor moves on....

³⁴ See the detailed scriptural references in the study cited at n. 6 above.

³⁵ There the Prophet, in response to Gabriel’s question about this culminating aim of all Religion (*dīn*), explains *ihsān* as “... to worship/serve God as though you see Him; and even if you don’t see Him, He surely sees you.” Or in another, more revealing translation of the same Arabic concluding words: “... and *if you are not, then you do see him...*”

³⁹ A well-known saying commonly attributed to Imam 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib, quoted here as it is cited by al-Ghazālī at the beginning of his famous spiritual autobiography, the *Munqidh min al-Dalāl*.

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PART II:

APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

[Qur'anic epigraph...? striving...?]

[Arabic calligraphy: *ādāb al-tahqīq*]

Chapter One

SURRENDER AND REALISATION: IMAM ALI ON THE CONDITIONS FOR TRUE RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

Do not seek to know the Truth (*al-Haqq*) according to other people. Rather first come to know the Truth—and only then will you recognize Its people.³⁹

One of the most striking characteristics about those surviving oral traditions that have come down to us from the earliest periods of each of the world-religions—as with the Gospels, the earliest Buddhist teachings, or the Prophetic hadith—is the distinctive directness, simplicity, and extreme concision of those original oral teachings. It is as though everything else that follows is only a kind of endlessly extended commentary on those few simple words. Certainly this is true of many of the surviving sayings attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 40/660)—including the short, but highly memorable passage that is the subject of this study, which has inspired repeated commentaries and elaborate theological and even dramatic interpretations down through the centuries.⁴⁰

The wider significance of this particular passage is that it illustrates so perfectly Ali’s emblematic role as the fountainhead of virtually all the esoteric traditions of Islamic spirituality, both among the many branches of Shiite Islam (which revere him as their first Imam) and throughout the even more numerous Sufi paths, where his name is almost always included as the initial transmitter of the Prophetic *baraka* in each order’s chain of transmission. That central initiatic role is beautifully

³⁹ A well-known saying commonly attributed to Imam ‘Alī Ibn Abī Tālib, quoted here as it is cited by al-Ghazālī at the beginning of his famous spiritual autobiography, the *Munqidh min al-Dalāl*.

⁴⁰ Many of these same points were later developed by the famous religious author Ghazālī (Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī) in the influential closing section of his *Mīzān al-‘Amal* (‘The Scale of [Right] Action’), translated in the following chapter here. Already a century before the actual collection of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, this same story of Ali and Kumayl provided the architectonic framework for a highly creative dramatic reworking of these spiritual lessons in Ja‘far ibn Mansūr’s *Kitāb al-‘Alim wa’l-ghulām* (see our translation and Arabic edition, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2001).

summarized in the famous Prophetic saying: ‘I am the City of (divine) knowing, and Ali is its doorway.’ And perhaps the most important literary vehicle in the wider transmission of Ali’s teachings, since it has been equally revered by both Sunni and Shiite audiences down to our own time, is the *Nahj al-Balāgha* (‘Pathway of Eloquence’), a wide-ranging collection of various sermons, letters, and wise sayings attributed to Ali, that was assembled several centuries later by the famous scholar and poet al-Sharíf al-Rādí (d. 406/1016).⁴¹

*

The famous saying of Ali placed as the epigraph for this study, with which al-Ghazālí begins his own spiritual autobiography, highlights the indispensable—if somewhat paradoxical—starting point for any well-grounded discussion of religious and spiritual understanding. For all problems of inter-religious understanding—and perhaps even more important, of that initial ‘*intra-religious*’ understanding on which all further dialogue depends—necessarily come back to this fundamental question: What *is* the ultimate divine Reality (*al-Haqq*), and how we can come to know and properly conform to what It requires of us (‘the Right’, which in Arabic is also an inseparable dimension of the divine *Haqq*)? Almost all the extensive sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* are devoted to one or another of the equally essential dimensions of this question—to that ongoing interaction between our purified actions and intentions (‘*amal*’), and our maturing spiritual understanding (‘*ilm*’), which together constitute each person’s uniquely individual, spiralling process of spiritual realization (*tahqíq*).

Now one of the most important keys to approaching this primordial question in the *Nahj al-Balāgha* is the famous passage (translated in full in the Appendix at the end of this study) describing Ali’s intimate advice to one of his closest companions and disciples, Kumayl ibn Ziyād al-Nakhā’ī.⁴² The difficulty and intrinsic dangers of that unique lesson are emphasized already in its dramatic setting.

⁴¹ To give some idea of the ongoing popular importance and relative familiarity of that text even today, I have seen beautifully calligraphed Arabic proverbs and epigrams drawn from the *Nahj al-Balāgha* on the walls of homes in every part of the Muslim world, framed for sale in suqs and bazaars, and even being sold as postcards. Even more tellingly, the owners (or sellers) of that calligraphy would often explain that this or that saying was simply ‘a hadith’.

⁴² Saying number 147 in the final section of short maxims, corresponding to pages 600-601 in the complete English translation by Sayed Ali Reza (*Peak of Eloquence*, NY, 1978). (Details on the Arabic text in the Appendix below.)

Kumayl, who recounts the story, stresses the great pains Ali takes to assure his privacy and solitude, leading his disciple out to the cemetery beyond the city wall of Kufa: that is, to the symbolic home of those who—like those rare true Knowers of God described in the rest of Ali’s saying—are spiritually already at once ‘alone with God’ and ‘dead to this world.’ In addition, the wider historical setting at that particular moment in time—so full of religious intrigues, claims, betrayals, and prolonged bloody civil wars among the triumphant Arabs—only highlights the profound wealth of concrete earthly experience which underlies the Imam’s conclusions and intimate teachings summarized in this saying.

No other text of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* is so pointedly set in the same kind of strictest privacy and intimacy. As a result, this famous testament to Kumayl constitutes the indispensable link between the more public, relatively exoteric teachings of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* and the wealth of more intimate, often esoteric spiritual teachings of Ali that were eventually preserved—at first orally, and eventually often in writing—in both Shiite and Sufi Islamic traditions.

The contents of Ali’s lesson to Kumayl are all presented as a clarification of his opening statement that:

There are three sorts of people (with regard to Religion, *al-Dīn*). A divinely inspired Knower (*‘ālim rabbānī*); the person who is seeking (that true spiritual) Knowing (*muta‘allim*) along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of (divine) Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid support.

In the remainder of his lesson, Imam Ali goes on to explain some of the basic conditions for these three radically different levels of (and potentials for) true religious understanding. Each of his points here—as throughout the *Nahj al-Balāgha*—is of course profoundly rooted in the central teachings of the Qur’an. However here we can only summarize his most essential observations in the simplest possible terms.

First, and most importantly, it is human *Hearts* (the Qur’anic *qalb al-insān*) that are the locus of true spiritual ‘Knowing’ (*‘ilm*) and of our awareness of God and Truth: that is, it is not simply our mind or intellect or passion. Hence the decisive practical importance, throughout the *Nahj al-Balāgha*, of Ali’s constant stress on the purification of our hearts, through inner surrender to the divine Will (*taslīm*), as the underlying *spiritual* purpose of the many divine commandments. Divine, inspired ‘Knowing,’

however it is outwardly acquired, can only be perceived as such by the Heart that has been ‘polished,’ emptied of this world’s distractions and attachments, and thereby opened up to the full significance and reality of the divine Word—and to the further rights and obligations (another dimension of the Arabic *al-Haqq*) flowing from that opening.

Second, the practically indispensable key to this human potential for religious Knowing is the real existence and efforts of a limited number of divinely guided individuals—again, not of particular books, rituals, doctrines or worldly institutions, none of which are even mentioned in this intimate, highly personal lesson. Ali refers here to those very special human doorways to true religious understanding by several profoundly significant Qur’anic expressions: the ‘divine Knowers’; the ‘Friends of God’ (*awliyā’ Allāh*); God’s ‘Proofs’ or ‘Clear Signs’ on Earth (*hujja, bayyina*); God’s ‘True Servants’ (*‘ibād Allāh*); and finally as God’s true earthly ‘stand-ins’ or ‘Stewards’ (*khalīfat Allāh*).

The Imam tells us several other very important things in his description of these true ‘Friends of God:’

- They are *always* present on earth, ‘whether openly or in secret.’⁴³
- They are directly inspired by the divine ‘Spirit of Certainty’ (*rūh al-yaqīn*).
- Therefore they pre-eminently possess true spiritual Insight (*haqīqat al-basīra*) into the deeper spiritual realities underlying earthly events and experiences, into the actual meanings of the infinite divine ‘Signs’ constituting our existence.
- Their spiritual task and mission on earth is to pass on this divine Knowing to those properly qualified souls who are truly ready for and receptive to their divinely inspired teachings.

⁴³ It is perhaps important to note that this last qualification (*sirr^{an}*, ‘secretly’) can be understood to refer not simply to the outward modesty and relative social and historical ‘invisibility’ of the vast majority of the true ‘Friends of God’—a point also strongly emphasised in the famous Prophetic hadith about the qualities of the *walī*—but also to their ongoing *spiritual* presence, actions and effects, even more visible and widespread long after their bodily sojourn on earth, which is of course central to the manifest spiritual role of the prophets and ‘Friends’ (*awliyā’ Allāh*) throughout every authentic religious tradition.

In contrast to these particular points of Alī's teaching here, it is surely essential to recall all those manifold dimensions of what we ordinarily, unthinkingly call or presume to be 'religion' which in fact are *not* central to the particular divine mission of these inspired individuals as it is described in this lesson.

Third, Ali describes the divine 'Knowing' that can be conveyed uniquely by these specially missioned individuals as having the following qualities:

- It is the '*Dīn* (true Religion/true Justice) by which God is truly worshipped and served.'
- It is the indispensable key to realising what the Qur'an constantly describes as our ultimate human purpose: i.e., to transforming the mortal biped or 'human-animal' (*bashar*) into the theomorphic, truly human being (*insān*), who alone can freely follow and truly obey God (the inner state of *itā'a*), eventually becoming a pure manifestation of the divine Will.
- Their divinely inspired Knowing is the true 'Judge' or Criterion for rightly perceiving and employing all the illusory possessions (*māl*) of this world .

Fourth, the 'true Seekers' (*muta'allimūn*) of that divine Knowing have at least the following basic pre-requisites, each of which distinguishes them from the large majority of ordinary souls (*al-nās*). One might therefore say that each of these following five points mentioned by Ali here is in itself an essential pre-condition for acquiring true religious understanding:

- Those true religious Seekers have a rare natural spiritual capacity to recognize, absorb, and actualize the inspired teachings of the Friends of God.
- They know that they need the indispensable guidance of God's Friends (the *awliyā'*), and therefore actively seek it out. That is to say, they actually realize that they are spiritually 'ignorant' and needy.
- They are willing and able to submit to the guidance of those divine Knowers and Bearers of Truth, especially with regard to acknowledging the true, ultimate aims of this inspired spiritual Knowing. In other words, they have the

indispensable humility to recognize their inner ignorance and to overcome the central spiritual obstacle of pride.

- They have the practical insight and active spiritual perspicacity (*basīra*) to ‘see though’ the ongoing divine ‘private lessons’, the most essential divine ‘Signs’ (*āyāt*) of each soul’s life. (This particular point is one that Ali especially stresses throughout all the sermons and teachings of the *Nahj al-Balāgha*.)
- They are not secretly governed by their desires for power and domination, qualities which Ali stresses (along with pride) as the particular psychic passions most likely to trip up the otherwise apt potential spiritual seekers of this group.

Finally, the rest of humanity are clearly—indeed even vehemently—said to lack, for the time being, the above-mentioned prerequisites for realized spiritual learning and illumination, because of the current domination of their hearts by their psychic passions of the *nafs*: for power, pleasure, possessions, and the attractions ‘this lower world’ (*al-dunyā*) in general. In this particular context, Ali does not openly clarify whether or not ‘purification’ of our hearts from such worldly passions is in itself the only obstacle to deeper spiritual and religious realization, or whether some individuals are simply born with dramatically greater, relatively unique spiritual capacities and potential. However, his recurrent and insistent practical stress on the ethically purifying dimensions of Islamic ritual and devotional practice throughout much of the rest of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* is a strong indication that revealed prescriptions for religious teaching and practice can and should be understood as well as an indispensable preparatory discipline that can be used to move at least some individuals toward the receptive inner state of these true ‘seekers.’

Now the practical consequences of all of Ali’s observations briefly enumerated here are quite visible in the particular structure and emphases of almost all his longer sermons and discourses throughout the *Nahj al-Balāgha*. To put it in the simplest possible form, each longer text in that work typically stresses the dual religious dimensions of both *taslīm* (‘surrender’) and *tahqīq* (‘realization’).⁴⁴ That is, almost all of Imam Ali’s teachings are directed at the same time toward both (1) the essential

⁴⁴ See the more adequate discussion of this key polyvalent term in our Introduction to *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype, 2004).

purification of our own will—i.e., the discovery and gradual distillation of the true human/divine *irāda* from the endless promptings of our domineering ego-self or *nafs*—through true inner conformity and surrender (*taslīm*) to the authentic divine commandments; and (2) the subsequent stage of more active ‘realization’ (*tahqīq*) of the divinely inspired teachings that can only come about when an individual has developed enough humility and inner awareness of their spiritual ignorance to recognize their unavoidable need for a divine Guide and Knower, along with the many other essential qualities of the ‘seeker on the path of salvation’ that have just been summarized above. From this perspective, all of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* constitutes an extended, lifelong example of the sort of essential spiritual teaching and guidance (*ta’līm*) alluded to here in Ali’s private advice to his close disciple.

In conclusion, we cannot help but notice that Ali’s remarks to Kumayl ibn Ziyād here provide a radical contrast to many prevailing modern-day assumptions about ‘religious understanding’ and religious teaching, whether our focus happens to be on ‘inter-’ or ‘intra-’religious concerns. Here I can mention only a few of the most salient points of contrast between popular contemporary conceptions of inter-religious understanding and Ali’s own teachings on this subject, without entering into a more detailed discussion of the deeper philosophic underpinnings and presuppositions on either side.

To begin with, the primary focus of most modern attempts at inter-religious understanding is either intellectual and theological, where formal doctrines and religious symbols are concerned; or else on ‘social ethics,’ where certain historically accumulated external practical precepts and rituals of two religious traditions are being compared. In either case, the particular comparison (or ‘understanding’) of the religious traditions concerned is typically carried out in an external, reductive social, historical or political way that supposedly reveals the ‘real,’ common meanings and functions of the religious phenomena in question. In this widespread approach, the aims of those particular practical or theological dimensions of a given religion are usually reduced, explicitly or implicitly, to a given, presumably familiar and universally accessible set of *historical, this-worldly* (*dunyawī*) social, political, or even psychic ends.

What is key in each such case, of course, is the reductive, socio-political emphasis and assumptions shared by virtually all such modern approaches. Now no rational observer would deny that every historical religion does indeed ‘function’ in such ways in this world—in ways that are in fact so poignantly illustrated by the endless ‘religious’ polemics, strife, and open civil warfare of early Islamic

history during Ali's own lifetime, seminal events that are recorded in such thorough detail throughout the *Nahj al-Balāgha*. But modern writers unfortunately too often tend to ignore the equally obvious limits of such reductive forms of interpretation and understanding: what is it, one might ask all the same, that also differentiates, for example, a genuine Sufi *tarīqa* from a social club, real spiritual guidance from psychotherapy, or transformative spiritual music (*dhikr* and *samā'* in their primordial sense) from any other concert performance?

In dramatic contrast to such popular contemporary approaches to 'religious understanding', Ali's remarks in this passage focus on radically different, spiritually distinctive and difficultly attainable—but nonetheless fundamental—aspects of religious life and understanding, whatever the particular historical traditions in question:

First, for Ali, true inter-religious understanding—at any of the three levels he distinguishes here—is always *between individuals*, growing out of each soul's individual encounter with the 'other' and their common spiritual reality and relationship with *al-Haqq* (God, Reality, and Truth). From this perspective, therefore, true religious understanding is always the ultimate fruit of a sort of '*tri-ologue*'—not a worldly dialogue—in which both the human parties, the Knower and the properly prepared disciple, share and gradually discover their common divine Ground of reality and true being.

Secondly, the possibilities of religious understanding (again whether inter- or intra-religious) are essentially limited above all by the intrinsic barrier of the specific spiritual capacities, shortcomings and level of realization of each individual. As in the familiar imagery of so many hadith and later Islamic writings, souls here are indeed revealed as *mirrors*, who can only see in the 'other'—whether that be a religious phenomenon or anything else—their own reflection. Therefore the basharic 'rabble' of whom Ali speaks so painfully here—whatever their particular religion or historical situation—are necessarily and unavoidably in the position so aptly described in Rumi's famous tale of the blind men and the elephant.

Thirdly, for Ali, even the first beginnings of our approach to a true, immediate awareness of God and the divine Religion (*dīn*) are necessarily grounded above all in humility, in an awareness of one's own essential spiritual ignorance and limitations—and therefore not in the acquisition of some further external form of knowledge, ritual, or belief. In other words, the greatest, primordial obstacle to any serious religious understanding—as Socrates and so many other inspired teachers have repeatedly

reminded us down through the ages—is our own ‘compound ignorance’ (*jahl murakkab*), our own illusion that we truly ‘know’ so much that we in fact only believe or imagine.

Finally, if Ali teaches us—as this story itself so dramatically illustrates—that the keys to the deepest and most profound forms of religious understanding are to be found in seeking out God’s true ‘Knowers’ and Guides and our own intimate spiritual relation to them, then the corresponding area of human religious life and experience most likely to lead to genuine inter-religious understanding is that of our particular individual devotional life and prayer, of each soul’s unique, ongoing inner relationship with its Guide and source of Light, in what has traditionally been termed ‘practical spirituality’ (*‘irfān-i ‘amalī*). Not surprisingly, this domain of our personal spiritual experience and practice, where God is so obviously and unavoidably the ultimate ‘Actor’ and Creator, in reality exhibits an extraordinary phenomenological similarity across all external historical and credal boundaries and socio-political divisions....

These brief reflections on some of the central teachings of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* cannot help but remind us of one of the most remarkable Qur’anic verses on the subject of humankind’s recurrent religious *misunderstandings* and their ultimate resolution in and by the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*). Not surprisingly, this verse also serves well as a remarkable symbolic allusion to the strife-torn historical events and conflicts among the early Muslims, those critical, paradigmatic ‘tests’ (*fitan*) that are so vividly illustrated and evoked throughout the remainder of the *Nahj al-Balāgha*—and which continue to recur, with such poignancy, in our own and every age.

The verse in question (*al-Baqara*, 2:213) begins with the reminder that ‘*all people were one religious community*,’ but then:

God sent prophets bearing good news and warning, and He revealed through them the Scripture with Truth (Haqq), so that He might judge among the people concerning that about which they differed. And only those differed concerning It to whom (the Scripture) was brought, after the Clear Proofs came to them, out of strife and rebellion among themselves. But then God guided those who had faith to the Truth about which they had differed, through His permission. For God guides whoever He wishes to a Straight Path!

Appendix: Ali's Speech to Kumayl ibn Ziyād al-Nakhā'ī⁴⁵

Kumayl ibn Ziyād said: The Commander of the Faithful—Peace be upon him!—took my hand and brought me out to the cemetery (beyond the city walls). So when he had entered the desert he let out a great sigh, and then he said:

O Kumayl ibn Ziyād, these Hearts are containers: the best of them is the one that holds the most. So remember well what I am going to say to you!

The people are (divided into) three groups: a lordly (divinely inspired) Knower⁴⁶; one seeking Knowing along the path of salvation; and the riffraff and rabble, the followers of every screaming voice, those who bend with every wind, who have not sought to be illuminated by the Light of Knowing and who have not had recourse to a solid Support.

O Kumayl, Knowing is better than possessions: Knowing protects you, but you must guard possessions. Possessions are diminished as they're spent, but Knowing multiplies (or 'purifies') as it is shared. But whoever makes the possessions disappear as they do!

⁴⁵ This particular well-known passage from *Nahj al-Balāgha*, the famous later compilation (by al-Sharīf al-Rādī, 359/970-406/1016) of the many letters, teachings, sermons and proverbs attributed to Alī ibn Abī Tālib, is also included in almost identical form in a number of earlier extant Shiite works, in both the Imami and the Ismaili traditions. The text translated here is from a popular Beirut edition of *Nahj al-Balāgha* (Dār al-Andalus, 1980), pp. 593-595, numbered 147 in the long later section of 'Wise Sayings' (*hikam*). The setting of this particular lesson is apparently outside the new Arab settlement of Kufa (on the edge of the desert in southern Iraq), during one of the drawn-out, bloody civil wars that divided the nascent Muslim community throughout the period of Ali's Imamate.

⁴⁶ *ʿAlim rabbānī*: 'Knower' here is used in the strong and inclusive Qur'anic sense, to refer to profound, God-given spiritual Knowing (*ʿilm*). The qualifier recalls the Qur'anic term *rabbānīyūn* and apparently is related both to the Arabic root referring to God as 'Lord' (*rabb*, hence 'divine' or 'god-like'), and to another Arabic root referring to spiritual *teaching* and education in the very broadest sense (*r-b-y*). The latter meaning is emphasized at Qur'ān 3:79, which probably underlies the special usage here: ...*Be rabbānīyūn through your teaching the Book and through your studying (It)*.

O Kumayl ibn Ziyād, the awareness/recognition (*ma'rifa*) of Knowing is a Religion (*dīn*) by which (God) is worshipped and served: through it the truly human being (*insān*) acquires willing obedience (to God) during their life (here), and a beautiful, wonderful state after their passing away. For Knowing is the Judge, and possessions are what is adjudged!

O Kumayl, those who accumulate possessions have perished, even while they are still alive. But the Knowers endure for all eternity: their particular-instances⁴⁷ are lost, but their likenesses are found in the Hearts. O what Knowledge abounding there is *right here!*—and he pointed with his hand to his breast⁴⁸—if only I could reach those who are its (rightful) bearers.

True, I've reached a quick-learner who couldn't be trusted with It, who would seek to use the instrument of Religion for this world—who would try to use God's blessings to dominate His (true) servants and His proofs to overcome His Friends.⁴⁹ Or someone submissive to the bearers of the divine Truth (*al-Haqq*), but without any true Insight (*basīra*) into Its twists and curves, whose Heart is consumed by doubt at the first onset of some difficulty. But alas, neither this one nor that (can truly bear the Truth)! Or someone greedy for pleasures, easily led by their passions? Or someone engrossed in acquiring and accumulating (worldly possessions)? Those two are not among the guardians⁵⁰ of Religion in any respect—the closest semblance to that sort are the grazing cattle! Thus Knowing dies with the death of those who bear it.

⁴⁷ *A'yān* (pl. of *'ayn*): that is, their individual, temporal earthly manifestation, as opposed to their 'images' or 'likenesses' (*amthāl*, or 'symbols') in the Hearts of other human individuals after them. Here we can see how Alī's perspective parallels—and at the same time embodies—the Qur'anic understanding of the relationship between the archetypal divine 'Names' (which ultimately constitute this Knowing) and their infinitely re-created individual manifestations.

⁴⁸ Here, as in the Qur'an, the term 'breast' or 'chest' (*sadr*) is virtually synonymous with the 'Heart' (*qalb*) as the locus of *all* true perception, selfhood, etc.

⁴⁹ *Awliyā' Allāh*: see the Qur'anic use of this key term (10:62).

⁵⁰ Or 'shepherds', 'pastors': *ru'āt*.

Yet indeed, O my God, the world is never without one upholding the Evidence⁵¹ for God, either outwardly and known to all, or secretly and in obscurity,⁵² so that God's Evidences and His illuminating-manifestations may not come to nought. But how many are these, and where are they!?

By God, these (true Knowers) are the fewest in number, but the greatest of all in their rank with God! Through them God preserves His Evidences and His Illuminating-manifestations, so that these (Knowers) may entrust them to their (true) peers and sow them in the Hearts of those like them. Through (those Knowers) Knowing penetrates to the inner reality of true Insight (*haqīqat al-basīra*). They are in touch with the Spirit of Certainty (*rūh al-yaqīn*). They make clear what the lovers of comfort had obscured. They are at home with what distresses the ignorant. And their bodies keep company with this world, while their spirits are connected to the Loftiest Station.

Those are the ones who are (truly) *God's Stewards*⁵³ on the earth, who are calling (the people) to *His* Religion. Oh, how I long to see them! Go on now, Kumayl, if you want.

⁵¹ Or 'Proof' (*al-Hujja*)—but in the sense of the indisputable living human *Manifestation*, not any sort of logical or rhetorical 'argument'; this is another central Qur'anic concept (4:165, 6:149) frequently alluded to in other teachings of Imam Ali in the *Nahj al-Balāgha*. The Qur'anic expression *bayyināt* ('Illuminating-manifestations') used several times in the immediately following passage seems to refer to the same key spiritual figures in this context.

⁵² Literally, '*in fear*' (used in the Qur'an, for example, of the young Moses fleeing Egypt for Midian) and '*submerged*' (by the power of earthly tyranny).

⁵³ This famous Qur'anic phrase (*khalīfat Allāh*) is variously applied to prophets (Adam, at 2:30; David, at 38:27) and to 'you-all' (= all of humanity), at 6:165, 10:14 and 73; 35:39; 27:62; etc. Within a short time after the death of the Prophet—and certainly by the time of this story—it had taken on a highly charged and disputed political significance in the long and violent decades of protracted civil wars over the worldly leadership of the nascent Arab-Muslim political community.

Chapter Two

BASIC DIMENSIONS OF ISLAMIC ESOTERICISM:

AL-GHAZĀLĪ'S EXPLANATION

Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is surely among the two or three most influential writers in the long history of Islamic religious thought. His distinctive influence, however, was manifested not through extraordinary spiritual gifts and experiences, poetic powers, or organizational abilities, but rather through his conscious, lifelong effort to integrate *all* the sciences and forms of learning of his day, both traditional and scientific, within a perspective dominated and unified by the spiritual insights, understanding and practices of Islamic spirituality—an effort which he understood and forcefully presented as merely restoring and continuing the essential thrust of the Prophet's own mission.

As is usually the case, al-Ghazālī's observations and formulations regarding the range of human perspectives, capacities and possibilities of religious understanding—and thus of appropriate communication and of possible 'dialogue' and mutual understanding—have deep roots in earlier Islamic tradition, including the Qur'an, the hadith, and the spiritual teachings and example of the righteous caliphs, Imams and outstanding Companions. In this particular case, his remarks about the three possible dimensions of religious realisation and understanding, in the following selection from his *Mizān al-'Amal* are clearly related to the preceding famous passage from the *Nahj al-Balâgha*.

The secret of al-Ghazālī's vast influence, unparalleled in its geographic and historical extent (down to our own time) and in the range of sciences it affected, has to do with his extraordinary abilities as a teacher and preacher able to reach all levels of readers; with his intellectual capacity to synthesize clearly and cogently the most complex disciplines and bodies of learning; and with his conscious focus on the powerful institutional bearers and arbiters of Islamic religious learning (the '*ulamā*'), as well as on those more exclusively devoted to spiritual practice and Sufism. The full range of his pedagogical concerns is clearly brought out in the passage translated here, even if it would require another book to illustrate the practical application of these summary remarks throughout al-Ghazālī's own writings, especially with regard to his differentiated understanding of the Qur'an and hadith.

The particular section in question is the final chapter of a book entitled *Mizān al-'Amal* ('The Scale of [Right] Action'), a popular work devoted to the many-faceted interplay of religious practice

(*amal*) and understanding (*ilm*) along the path of spiritual realization, with the constant aim of awakening and intensifying each reader's potential calling to a deeper spiritual and intellectual understanding of Islam. In the immediately preceding chapter of this book, al-Ghazālī summarizes the broader contexts of spiritual practice, alluding to the higher stages of the spiritual Path (including the various 'angelic' spiritual conditions)—a topic that leads him to stress the pervasive, implicit anthropomorphism in the popular understanding of the relations between God and human beings. The essential difficulties this perennial human situation creates for any accurate and effective discussion of spiritual realities and of the many distinctive personal ways or approaches (*madhhab*) to actually realizing those spiritual stations form the point of departure for al-Ghazālī's concluding comments that are translated here.

In this concluding section, al-Ghazālī directly and dramatically highlights all the far-reaching problems and unavoidable limiting conditions of religious communication, dialogue and understanding which are explored throughout the remainder of this book, and especially in the essays included in the final, prospective section below ('Looking Forward'). In the popular mind, this notion of *madhhab* or literally 'way of going' was, and today often still is, ordinarily understood as a particular school or body of formalised opinion, belief, or practice (theological, juridical, political, and so on): that is, what we today tend to call, in everyday, unreflective language, 'a religion.' Since al-Ghazālī's explanation here is devoted precisely to the manifold meanings underlying this single complex expression (*madhhab*)—and by implication, to the ultimate, focal meaning of this 'way' which he insists that his readers must set out to discover for themselves—we have kept the original Arabic term *madhhab* throughout.

[TRANSLATION]:

Explanation of the Meaning of *Madhhab* and of People's Differences Concerning It

Perhaps you will object: 'What you say in this book is divided into what agrees with the *madhhab* of the Sufis and what agrees with the *madhhab* of the Asharites and some of the dialectical theologians. But what a person says can only be understood according to one *madhhab*, so which of these is the true one? For if they were all true, how could we conceive of that?! So now if some of it is true, which one is it?'

One must reply by saying that even if you knew the truth about the *madhhab* (in this matter) it would not be of any use to you at all, because people fall into two groups concerning it.

One group says that ‘*madhhab*’ is a name covering three levels (of meaning): (a) The first level is what people cling to and take sides with in boasting and disputations; (b) the next level is what is used to lead (the student or disciple) in situations of teaching and guidance; (c) and the third level is what the individual himself believes, based on what they have discovered from the things they have personally investigated.

So in this respect every fully accomplished person (*mukammal*) has **three** *madhhabs*:

[The second major group, the vast majority of people who think that *madhhab* can have *only one* true meaning, are dealt with later in this chapter.]

As for *madhhab* in the first sense, that is the way of one’s forefathers and ancestors, the *madhhab* of one’s teacher and of the people of the town where one grows up. This differs according to towns and countries, and according to the teachers concerned. Thus someone who is born in an Asharite or Mutazilite or Shafi‘i or Hanafi town has the passionate clinging to that *madhhab* implanted in their soul from childhood, along with opposition to any other one and disparagement of any *madhhab* but their own. So people say that ‘His *madhhab* is Asharite’—or Mutazilite, Shafi‘i, or Hanafi—and the meaning of this is that he is passionately attached to it, i.e., that he supports the group of those parading this cause by assisting them, just as the members of a tribe support one another.

Now the source of this passionate attachment is the eagerness of some group to seek power and domination by getting the masses to follow them. And the factors motivating the masses can only be aroused (for this purpose) by something that will bring them together and convince them to rally around a common cause. So the *madhhabs* were set up to divide all the religions, and people were divided into sects.⁵⁴ The motivating factors of envy and competitive struggle were brought into play, their

⁵⁴ Here al-Ghazālī draws a distinction, based on Qur’anic conceptions, between the true universal divine ‘religions’ (*adyān*, pl. of *dīn*) and the many human ‘sects’ (*firaq*) into which religions tend to degenerate. This passage is thus a clear allusion to the famous hadith concerning the ultimate division of Islam—as of each preceding revealed religion—into 72 (or some other symbolic number of) erring sects, as well as to the many Qur’anic references to the ultimate unity of *Dīn al-Haqq* (‘the True Religion’).

passionate clinging (to one sect or another) was strengthened, and thus their mutual assistance in domination became well established.

Indeed in certain countries, when the *madhhabs* were reunited so that the power-seekers couldn't use them to attract a following, they set up certain matters (as arbitrary points of contention) and caused people to imagine that it was necessary to dispute concerning them and to be passionately attached to them, such as 'knowledge of X' or 'knowledge of Y'. So one group would say 'The truth is X', and some others would say 'No, it's Y!'.⁵⁵ Thus the aim of the leaders to seek the following of the masses was well arranged by that amount of disagreement: the masses thought that this was something important, while the leaders who set things up this way realized their own goal in doing so.

The second (meaning of) *madhhab* is what is appropriate, in (moral or spiritual) guidance and teaching, to whoever comes seeking to learn or to be guided.⁵⁶ Now this cannot be specified in only one way, but rather it differs according to the pupil, so that each pupil must be confronted with what their understanding can handle. Thus if one should happen to have a pupil who is a Turk or Indian or a stupid, dull-witted person,⁵⁷ knowing that if one were to mention to such a person that God's Essence—may He be exalted!—is not in any place, and that He is neither within the (physical) world nor outside it, neither part of it nor separate from it, then it would not be long before that person would deny the very existence of God—may He be exalted (above that)!—and refuse to believe in Him. In that case

⁵⁵Here 'X' and 'Y' are used to translate al-Ghazālī's 'red' and 'black': it should not be difficult, within the history of any religion, to fill in the blanks here with appropriate examples of bloody political and social struggles over what in retrospect (or at a suitable distance) appear as completely insignificant differences of religious symbolism.

⁵⁶The word *mustarshid*, which we have generally translated as 'pupil', literally refers to any person seeking moral and spiritual right guidance (*irshād*), and al-Ghazālī's advice here must be understood in that very broad educational context.

⁵⁷Here (with the reference to 'Turks', etc.), Ghazālī is not indulging in some idiosyncratic racial slurs, but simply employing commonplace rhetorical expressions frequently used in medieval Arabic literature to refer to stereotypically 'rustic' and relatively uncivilized personality types. However, his casual assertion earlier in this same work that such groups are by nature 'closest to the brute animals' does point out what are—at least from the modern viewpoint—some of the possible historical limitations of his assumptions concerning such 'natural' hierarchies.

one must confirm in such a person (the belief) that God—may He be exalted!—is *on the Throne* (7:54, etc.) and that He is pleased with and rejoices in the obedience of His creatures, so that He rewards them and causes them to enter Paradise by way of compensation and recompense for that.⁵⁸ But if (this seeker) has the capacity so that one can mention to that person what is the *clear Truth* (24:25; 27:29), then one should reveal it to them. So *madhhab* in this sense changes and varies: with each person it is according to the capacity of their understanding.⁵⁹

The third (meaning of) *madhhab* is what a person believes in their innermost self,⁶⁰ between themselves and God, such that no one other than God—may He be exalted!—is aware of it. One does not mention this except to a person who is like oneself in their awareness of what one has become aware of, or else to a person who has reached a stage where they are capable of becoming aware of it and of understanding it. But this (requires) that the disciple be naturally intelligent, that the inherited belief they grew up with and became attached to not be deeply rooted in their soul, and that their heart not be so deeply impregnated with this belief that it cannot be erased from it.

⁵⁸These remarks refer back to the discussion of the two broad types of natural anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) in the immediately preceding chapter of the *Mizān al-ʿAmal*. Al-Ghazālī's treatment of Islamic eschatology in different works offers a particularly vivid illustration of his application of this principle. In his *K. al-Durrat al-Fākhira* (transl. J. Smith, *The Precious Pearl...*, Missoula, Montana, 1979), we are given a purely exoteric, literalist account of the events of the Last Day, based on the Qur'an and numerous hadith, while in his famous *Ihya' ʿUlum al-Din* ('Revival of the Religious Sciences')—now available in a superbly annotated translation by T. Winter, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 19xx), al-Ghazālī alludes far more openly to his understanding of those scriptural symbols in light of the spiritual experiences and illuminations of the Sufī path. Those three works correspond perfectly, in this domain of eschatology, to the three fundamental levels of religious understanding and intention outlined in this passage.

⁵⁹In conformity with the famous Prophetic exhortation included in a well-known hadith that al-Ghazālī has frequently cited earlier throughout this same *Mizān al-ʿAmal*: 'Speak to the (common) people according to their capacity of understanding': *tukallimū al-nās 'alā qadr 'uqūlihīm*.

⁶⁰The word translated here as 'in their innermost self (*sirr^{an}*) may also mean 'secretly'—but the subsequent explanation makes it clear that the meaning or realization in question here is something that is essentially 'secret' and hidden by its own intrinsic nature, and not simply a particular opinion intentionally hidden or concealed from others.

(Otherwise, the naturally inapt pupil) is like paper that has been written on and which the ink has penetrated so that it can only be removed by burning the paper and destroying it. The constitution of such a person has been corrupted, and one must despair of setting it right. For everything that is mentioned to them that is different from what they have heard (in their youth) does not persuade them. Indeed such a person tries vigorously *not* to be convinced by what is mentioned to them, and they seek to push it away. So even if such a person strained their attention and tried their very utmost to understand, they would only doubt their own understanding. How could it be otherwise, since their (unconscious) aim is to push it away and to not understand it? Thus the path to follow with such a person is not to say anything with them and to leave them with the belief they have—for this will not be the first *blind man* to perish in his delusion (cf. 10:43, etc.).⁶¹

So now this (three-fold understanding of religion) is the way of one group of people (i.e., of the spiritually ‘fully accomplished ones’).

As for the second group, who are far more numerous, they say that the (true) *madhhab* is only one: it is what they believe, and that is what (should be) proclaimed in teaching and guidance with every single human being, however different their condition may be. This is what (such a person) is passionately attached to, whether it be the Asharite *madhhab*, or the Mutazilite or Karramite one, or any other *madhhab*.

Now the first group (i.e., the ‘fully accomplished ones’) are in accord with these people to the extent that when they are asked about (their) *madhhab*, whether it is one or three, (they hold that) it is not permissible to mention that it is three, but rather it must be said that it is one.

So this should do away with your worrying about the question about *madhhab*, if you are reasonable: for everyone is in accord as far as proclaiming that the (true) *madhhab* is one. Moreover, they are also agreed in being passionately attached to the *madhhab* of their father, their teacher, or the people of their town. So if someone should happen to mention their *madhhab*, what use is that to you?

⁶¹The last part of this sentence is a paraphrase of or allusion to a number of Qur’anic verses (e.g., 10:43; 17:72; 27:81; etc.) which stress the pointlessness of attempting to guide or convince the spiritually “blind”, and indicate that the Prophet (and by implication, his successors as guides) are not responsible for this state of blindness.

For the *madhhab* of someone else is also different from this person's, and none of them has a miracle which would give their side precedence.⁶²

So put aside being concerned with *madhhabs*, and seek the truth by way of inquiry and reflection,⁶³ so that you may become the master of (your own) *madhhab*—and so that you do not become like the image of a blind man heedlessly accepting a leader to guide you to a Way, while all around you there are a thousand other leaders like your own, all calling out to you that (your own leader) has destroyed you and made you go astray from *the right path*!⁶⁴ And in the final outcome of your affair you will come to know the sinfulness of your leader.

For there is no way out except by relying on yourself:⁶⁵

Take what you see, and forget whatever you heard/

When the sun has risen, why do you need Venus?!⁶⁶

⁶²This last phrase is an ironic allusion by al-Ghazālī to the popular kalam argument that the truth of a prophet is determined by his probative miracles—an argument which al-Ghazālī elsewhere attacks on a number of grounds.

⁶³'Inquiry and reflection' here translate the key term *al-nazar*. Ghazālī here seems to be using it in a broader (and at the same time intrinsically personalized or individual) sense drawn from the Quranic uses of the term, where, in dozens of verses, it conveys a combination of 'looking' (the root meaning) and pondering or reflecting on God's Signs and active Presence in all their manifestations.

⁶⁴This paragraph contains a number of Quranic allusions (5:77, etc.) and paraphrases, including the recurrent Qur'anic image of the 'blind man' and the reference to the 'final outcome of the matter' which 'surely will be known'—i.e., in the afterlife. The word *qā'id* used here ordinarily refers to a purely political, worldly leader. It is not one of the usual terms for an accomplished spiritual guide or master (a type al-Ghazālī certainly does not wish to criticize), motivated by something radically different from the usual worldly desire for domination and control.

⁶⁵'Relying on yourself' here is a sort of paraphrase of the Arabic *istiqlāl*, 'independence (of spirit)', in view of al-Ghazālī's emphasis, in earlier chapters of this book, on the importance of every qualified individual's becoming a *mujtahid*—i.e., an independent seeker of the ultimate and real religious truth. From that context it is clear that al-Ghazālī is referring here to the opposite of the attitude of *taqlīd* (translated as 'heedless acceptance' in the preceding paragraph)—a distinction characterized by the development of the seeker's own *nazar*, the ability and willingness to 'look' for the Truth and truly 'inquire' for oneself.

Even if the only effect of these words were to make you doubt your inherited belief so that you devoted yourself to seeking, that would be benefit enough for you, since doubts are what leads to the Real.⁶⁷ For the person who does not doubt does not look; and one who does not look does not see; and one who does not truly see remains in blindness and delusion—may God preserve us from that!⁶⁸

⁶⁶‘Venus’ here refers to the *planet*, as it was used to navigate by night. The preceding Arabic verses are from the contemporary poet al-Taghrā’ī (d. 1120).

⁶⁷The ‘Real’ here (*al-Haqq*), as in most Sufi writings (following the Qur’an), could also be translated as ‘God’ or ‘Ultimate Truth’.

⁶⁸The basic terms of this progression—‘blindness’ and ‘delusion’ (*dalāl*); ‘looking’ or inquiring (*nazar*); and ‘true seeing’ (*basar*)—are all key Quranic expressions normally understood by Sufi writers in the distinctly spiritual sense al-Ghazālī has given them here.

Chapter Three

THE FOUNDATION OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: IBN ‘ARABÍ’S
*BOOK OF THE QUINTESSENCE, CONCERNING WHAT IS INDISPENSABLE FOR THE
 SPIRITUAL SEEKER*⁶⁹

Subject Outline of *The Book of the Quintessence Concerning What Is Indispensable For the Spiritual Seeker*⁷⁰

1. God's Unicity and Transcendence
2. Faith in the messengers, companions, ‘people of this Path’ (Friends of God), and serving the poor
3. Silence, focus on *dhikr*/remembrance of God, and good deeds
4. Right companion on the spiritual Path
5. Sincere intention (*Sidq*) in seeking the right guide
6. Right livelihood
7. Eating little
8. Filling the day with prayer
9. Sleep, eat, and dress only as really needed

⁶⁹ *Murīd* has been translated here in its broad sense of anyone who is ‘seeking’ God, but it is important to keep in mind as well its more technical, ‘sociological’ sense (in Ibn ‘Arabí’s time) of the person who is at a relatively early stage of spiritual ‘journeying’, normally under the close supervision of a spiritual guide (*shaykh*). Ibn ‘Arabí writes in very different ways for different readers, and the language and presuppositions of this work make it clear that he is writing neither for intellectuals nor for more ‘advanced’ companions. It is important to keep these broad qualifications in mind when considering a number of the points mentioned below. [These cautions will be considerably expanded in the Introduction to the forthcoming book which includes this translation.]

⁷⁰ Printed text ([Cairo?], 1967, Mu°ammad ‘Alí Sabīh and Sons), kindly provided by Michel Chodkiewicz. This ‘Table of Contents’ and corresponding numbered subdivisions in the translation are entirely the translator’s additions, for ease of reference. For ease of reading, this translation omits the honorific Arabic phrases normally following each mention of God, the Prophet, the Companions, etc.

10. How to read the Qur'an
11. Keeping track of one's animal self (*muhāsaba*) and shame before God
12. Staying Conscious: being aware of demands of the 'Instant' and eliminating inner distractions
13. Purity (*tahāra*)
14. Striving for good moral character traits
15. Right attitude toward spiritual 'opponents'
16. Right Behavior (*adab*) toward animals, dependents and children
17. Avoiding the powerful and worldly, while practicing *insān* and *Sabr*
18. Being present with God at every instant
19. Generosity (and avoiding stinginess) [Incomplete]
20. Controlling anger and learning how to (not) react to 'negative' encounters
21. Practicing *ihsān*
22. Constantly practicing *Dhikr*/remembrance of God and asking His forgiveness
23. Repentance and untying the 'knots' of persistence (in opposition to God) [Incomplete]
24. *Taqwā*: Awareness of God and its practical consequences
25. Avoiding self-deception/Iblīs [Incomplete]
26. Practicing spiritual conscientiousness (*wara'*)
27. Practicing 'non-attachment' to this lower world (*zuhd*)

The Book of the Quintessence Concerning What Is Indispensable For the Spiritual Seeker

In the Name of God the All-Compassionate the All-Merciful

Praise be to God, Sustainer of the Worlds! And may God bless our master Muhammad and all his Family and Companions!

You asked, O seeker, about the quintessence of what the seeker must do, so I have answered you in these pages. And God is the One Who brings fulfillment, there is no *rabb*⁷¹ but He!

Know, O seeker—may God bring you and us to the fulfillment of freely obeying Him, and may He cause us and you to know what pleases Him!—that (our) closeness to God is only known through His informing us of that⁷². Now He has already done that—all thanks and praise be to God!—through His sending the Messengers and sending down the Scriptures and making clear the Paths leading to the eternal happiness. So once we have faith and hold (all that) to be true, there only remains putting into practice in their proper place those (prescribed) actions set down by the revelation in which we have faith and which have become established in the souls of those who have faith.⁷³

[1.] Next it is incumbent on you, o seeker, to realize the Unicity (*taw'īd*) of your Creator and His Transcendence and what is befitting of Him—may He be glorified and exalted!

As for realizing His Unicity, if there were a second god alongside God it would be impossible for any action to occur from those two gods, because of the difference between their acts of Will, both in being and actual determination. So the order (of all being) would be destroyed, as in His saying: *If there*

⁷¹ *Rabb*: the 'personal (individual) God' and the Sustainer and spiritual 'Teacher' of each soul.

⁷² Alluding, for example to many Qur'anic verses such as '**He is with you-all wherever you-all are,**' or '**We are closer to him than his jugular vein,**' etc.—and also possibly to more direct and individualized forms of God's 'causing us to know' (see following note)

⁷³ In the original Arabic (as in the English), this sentence includes a very complex—and no doubt intentional—set of spiritual preconditions: they emphasize *three times* the necessity of one's first having certainty (*īmān*, in the Qur'anic sense Ibn 'Arabī almost always intends) that the actions in question are indeed those given as part of the eternal, ongoing process of divine 'revelation' (*shar'*, again in the special sense that term usually has in Ibn 'Arabī).

were among them (the heavens and earth) gods other than God, both of them would have been destroyed' (21:22). And don't argue, o my brother, with anyone who associates (other creatures with God), nor do you need to establish any proof of (the divine) Oneness and Unicity. For the associator has already joined you in affirming the existence of the Truly Real, while he is the one who goes beyond you in adding an 'associate (god)': so he is the one who needs to give a proof for what he has added. This is enough for you concerning the realization of (His) Unicity, since time is scarce and the connection (you have with God) is sound—while there is really nothing underlying (the claims of) the (associator) who disagrees with you, thank God.

As for realizing His transcendence (of any likeness to creation), which is urgent for you because of the literalist (*zāhhirī*) anthropomorphists and 'corporealists' in this age, just hold to His saying: *There is no thing like Him/like His Likeness* (42:11), and that is sufficient for you: whatever description (of God) contradicts this verse is to be rejected, and do not add to or go beyond this 'homeland'. This is why it has come down in the tradition (of the Prophet, his saying): *God was, and there was no thing with Him*'—may God be far exalted above what the wrongdoers/darkeners say! So every (scriptural) verse or hadith which makes us imagine a likening (of God to the creatures), whether that expression has come in the language of the Arabs, or in the language of anyone else upon whom God has sent down some revelation or information, you must simply have faith in it to the extent of what *God* has taught and sent down through that—but not like those falsely imagine something (about God) and then ascribe their 'knowledge' of that (imagination) to God. Nothing is beyond *There is no thing like Him/His Likeness*, and there is no one can better affirm His Transcendence, since He Himself has already affirmed His own Transcendence, and that is the most fitting expression of His Transcendence!

[2.] Then after that, o seeker, you should have faith in the Messengers—God's blessings be upon them—and in what they have brought and what they have informed us about Him: that He is far greater and more exalted than anything you have either known or been unaware of!

Next, you should love absolutely *all* the Companions, may God be pleased with them. There is no way at all that they could be charged with any offense or criticized, and no one of them should be raised in excellence above the others, except as his Lord has established that excellence in His Noble Book or through the words of His Prophet—may God's blessings and peace be with him. And you should respect and esteem whoever God and His Messenger have respected and esteemed.

Next, you should accept and acknowledge the people of this Path, with regard to all the stories⁷⁴ that are recounted about them, and also with regard to everything you *see* from them which the (ordinary) mind and (worldly) knowledge cannot encompass.

In general, you should hold a good opinion of everyone, and your heart should be at peace with them. You should pray specially, in secret, to/for the people of faith.⁷⁵ And you should serve the poor, recognizing their excellence and nobility in that they are content with letting you serve them, and in their bearing patiently with their burdens, troubles and difficulties.⁷⁶

[3.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is keeping silent (*samt*), except for ‘mentioning’ God (*dhikr Allāh*), reciting the Noble Qur’an, guiding in the right way someone who has gone astray, exhorting to do what is right and forbidding what is wrong, reconciling those who have broken up, and strongly encouraging acts of voluntary charity—indeed every form of good.

[4.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is searching for someone who is in harmony with your essential nature, in accord with what you are aiming for and the way leading there. For so much comes to the person of faith from his brother.⁷⁷ And watch out for the company of the person who is fundamentally opposed (to your quest).⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Of their spiritual qualities and accomplishments, the *karāmāt*: a good illustration of what Ibn ‘Arabī has in mind can be found in his *Sufis of Andalusia* (tr. R. Austin)—and to a far greater extent throughout the *Futūhāt*.

⁷⁵ As indicated in n. 4 above, in Ibn ‘Arabī ordinarily uses the expression *mu‘minūn* in its specifically Qur’anic sense, to refer to the elite group of the prophets, saints and spiritually accomplished souls of the ‘Friends of God’, the *awliyā*. Thus the *du‘ā* prayers mentioned here are probably referring to *asking for their help and intercession*, not simply to blessings on them.

⁷⁶ The special place of caring for ‘the poor’ here—and Ibn ‘Arabī seems to refer to those who are literally *fuqarā*—is no doubt connected with one of his favorite ‘divine sayings’ (*ḥadīth qudsī*), the one which begins: ‘*I was sick, but you didn’t visit Me (...feed Me; ... give Me to drink...)*’

⁷⁷ Alluding to the famous hadith: ‘the person of faith is the mirror of the person of faith[or ‘God’: *al-mu>min*].’ To avoid cumbersome and inaccurate English paraphrasing, we have kept in this translation the literal gender references of the original Arabic, which should of course always be understood in their intended universal sense.

⁷⁸ See further elaboration of this point at section 15 below.

[5.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is an actively guiding spiritual master (*shaykh murshid*). (With regard to finding such a guide), pure inner sincerity of intention (*sidq*) is the essential watchword of the spiritual seeker, because if the seeker is truly sincere with God, He will turn every (outward) ‘devil’ for that person into an angel rightly guiding them to the Good, and He will inspire in that (sincere seeker the awareness of) what is good. For inner sincerity is the Greatest Elixir ⁷⁹ (the ‘perfect cure’), which can only be applied to the heart of our essential being (*qalb al-‘ayn*).

[6.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is seeking out the (spiritually licit) source of support ⁸⁰, since the very foundation of this Path is the licit livelihood. The supporting Pillar of this Path rests on that foundation (of right livelihood): do not be a burden to anyone, and do not accept (inappropriately) from anyone. Always earn your own living and be spiritually conscientious ⁸¹ about what you acquire, and about what you say, look at, listen to—indeed in all of your actions. Do not be excessive in your clothing or housing, or in what you eat, for what is spiritually appropriate (*halāl*) is very little, without allowing for any excess. Know that once human beings have planted (animal) desires in their carnal selves (*nafs*), it is very hard to uproot them after that. There is no need for wealth and abundance in any of this.

[7.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is eating little. For hunger brings about an increase in (spiritual) energy for obeying God, while it takes away (spiritual) laziness.

⁷⁹ I.e., the ‘perfect (spiritual) Cure’ or the ‘Philosopher’s Stone’ that turns the lead of experience into the gold of spiritual wisdom.

⁸⁰ *Luqma*: literally, sustaining ‘morsel’ of food, identical to ‘our daily bread’ in the Lord’s Prayer; ‘licit’ refers to the notion of what is spiritually ‘permissible’ (*halāl*). Of course translating *luqma* as ‘livelihood’ or ‘source of support’ also falsifies Ibn ‘Arabī’s original emphasis on what God provides us at every instant, and it is essential not to ‘objectify’ the English concepts here: what is spiritually ‘licit’ and appropriate one day (for one person, etc.) may *not* be so on another occasion....

⁸¹ The root is *wara’*, explained further at section 26 below.

[8.]⁸² You should properly cultivate and make fruitful⁸³ the moments of the night and the day:

As for those hours to which the revelation (*sharʿ*) has called you, for standing before your Sustainer/Teacher,⁸⁴ those are the five moments (of ritual prayer) that are obligatory for you. As for the rest of the moments lying between those (five obligatory prayers), if you have a trade, then strive to work in that time (enough to earn your living) for several days, like the son of (the Abbasid caliph) Harún al-Rashíd—God's Mercy upon him! And do not leave your place of prayer after the pre-dawn prayer until the sun actually rises, nor between the afternoon prayer and sunset, (filling that special period) with remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and humility and submission.⁸⁵ Nor should you let pass the period between the noon and afternoon (prayers) and between the evening and final night (prayers) without standing in prayer for twenty (extra) prostrations. Remember to keep the four (supplementary cycles of) prostrations at the beginning of the day, before noon, and before the afternoon (prayer).

⁸² Although we have divided up this and the following two sections (8-10) in our translation, in the original Arabic they are all presented as a single section on ‘filling’ the day with religious devotions, much like Christian monastic ‘rules’.

⁸³ *Taʿmír* is an interesting expression here: the underlying verb means to ‘fill with life’ (give long life), build or construct, repair and restore, and to fill up something (so that it will work properly). All those meanings are relevant to Ibn ʿArabí’s intention here, where ‘time’ is considered as a sort of field (or ‘building site’) that must thoughtfully used for the best possible purposes. ‘Moment’ (*waqt*) here refers to the Ibn ʿArabí’s characteristic understanding of each instant as a distinct ‘creation’ and (potentially realized) connection between each soul and its Source.

⁸⁴ For *rabb*, see n. 3 above; ‘before’ in English is not nearly as immediate as the literal Arabic (Qurʾanic) expression: ‘between the two Hands...’.

⁸⁵ The Islamic prayer-terminology here—and our very recent collective exclusion from the ongoing rhythms of the wider natural world—may obscure Ibn ʿArabí’s actual point concerning the special spiritual intensity and sensitivity of the two periods of twilight surrounding the sunset and sunrise. A single day’s observation of what happens around us at those time, at least in a rural area or other natural setting, will suffice to illustrate what he is indicating here.

And make your concluding night prayer (*witr*) another thirteen prostrations, nor should you finish those until you are overcome (by sleep).⁸⁶

[9.] And you shouldn't eat except when you really need to, nor should you wear anything but what you need to protect you from the heat and cold, or to cover your nakedness and avoid any discomfort that would keep you from worshipping your Sustainer/Teacher.

[10.] And if you are among those who are literate, then impose on yourself reading a section (*wird*) of the Qur'an from the written text. (While you are) in your place of retreat, pick up the Qur'anic text, placing your left hand under the book, while your right hand follows the letters as you are looking at them, raising your voice enough so you hear yourself while you are reciting the Qur'an.

Ask and inquire (of God), with regard to each Sura, what it is you ought to ask about regarding that. Try to figure out for every verse its special relevance and lesson for you.⁸⁷ Meditate and put into practice, for each verse, what is its relevance and connection (to your situation), and what those qualities and attributes⁸⁸ are indicating (that you should now learn or do). Reflect on those qualities and attributes you have and on those which you are missing. Then give Him thanks for those which you have and those which you haven't (yet) attained! And when you read a description of (the contrasting

⁸⁶ The supplementary prayers Ibn 'Arabí refers to here are established practices which Islamic tradition attests to as part of the Prophet's own practices (*sunna*), followed by many of his close followers, though they were not imposed as obligations on the wider community. The references to particular numbers or cycles of prostration (*rak'a*) are a familiar shorthand expression in such a context, and should not be taken as 'quantitative' or formal in their intention. Such personal prayers can be extended indefinitely in length, depending on the passages of the Qur'an recited and the actual internal content of the prayer, and that 'extension' through the waking day is of course Ibn 'Arabí's intention here.

⁸⁷ Its *i'tibār*: i.e., the essential personal 'lesson' (for you at that particular occasion), and the connection between that verse and your own situation at that instant.

⁸⁸ The word *sifāt* ('qualities') here can refer specifically to the divine Attributes (and clearly, in this context, to the 'positive' attributes of 'the Most Beautiful Names') or—since they are the archetypes of all existence—to the broader range of characters, situations and exhortations mentioned in the Qur'an which are their dramatic 'exemplifications'.

attributes of) the hypocrites and those who ungratefully reject (God), then reflect as to whether there is not also something of those attributes in you.

[11.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you should observe and take account of your animal self (*muhāsabat al-nafs*) and pay close attention to your inner thoughts and impulses (*khawātir*) at every moment. Then you will feel a shame in your heart that comes directly from God.⁸⁹ For if you are ashamed before God, then He will prevent your heart from experiencing any thought or impulse that is contrary to the revelation (*sharʿ*) or keep you from carrying out an action that is not pleasing to the Real (*al-Haqq*). Indeed we once had a master who would record his actions (during the day) in a notebook, and then when night came he would set them out before him and take an account⁹⁰ of his animal self according to what was noted there. And I added to my master's practice by recording my inner thoughts and impulses as well.

[12.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to constantly be aware of (the correspondence between your) inner thoughts and impulses and the (spiritual demands of) every moment. That is, you should reflect on the moment you are in and consider what it is that the revelation (*sharʿ*) has said to you that you should do, and then you should do that. So if you are in the moment of a prescribed duty, then you should carry that out—or else regret (your having missed) it and then hurry to make it up. But if you are a time that is ‘open’,⁹¹ then busy yourself with performing all the different kinds of good which the Real has assigned to you. But if you start to do a prescribed⁹² action that bestows closeness (to God), don't tell yourself that you will be alive after that to do another action. Instead, make that your last action in this world, the one in which you will encounter your

⁸⁹ I.e., as opposed to all the other (often conflicting and confusing) social, familial and other sources of such feelings.

⁹⁰ The (originally Qurʿanic) language here refers to taking note of one's good and bad actions (or inclinations, as Ibn ʿArabí pointedly adds) and responding accordingly.

⁹¹ *Mubāh*: in the technical terminology of *fiqh*, this refers to all actions which are simply religiously ‘permissible’; Ibn ʿArabí's own understanding of that term is infinitely more extensive. See the additional explanations in the article cited in n. 1 above.

⁹² Or ‘revealed’: *mashrūʿ* (see the opening passage from the *Futūḥāt* on this key concept).

Sustainer/Teacher. For if you do that, you will be released (or ‘finished’: *khalast*), and with that release comes (God's) acceptance.

[13.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you should always sit down in a state of Purity. So whenever you become impure, purify yourself;⁹³ and once you have completed your ablutions, pray two (cycles of) prostrations—unless it is one of those three disapproved moments when you are forbidden to do the ritual prayer: at sunrise until exactly at noon, except on Fridays, and after the evening prayer until sundown.

[14.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is striving for the noble virtues of character⁹⁴ and actually carrying them out in the specific situations calling for them—and likewise avoiding all the bad traits of character. For know that whoever abandons a noble virtue of character (already) possesses a vice of character through abandoning (that corresponding virtue). And know that the virtues of character are of different kinds, just as there are different sorts of creatures. So it is indispensable for you to know which virtuous trait you should employ (in each specific situation), and which virtue(s) extend to most of the other kinds, in order to bring relief (*rāha*) to the creatures and keep harm away from them.⁹⁵ But (all this must also be only) for the Contentment of God!

So know that the (human) creatures are (God's) servants, constrained and compelled in their actions and their destinies by the hand of the what/Who moves them. So the Prophet brought us all relief in respect to this condition, when he said: ‘*I have been sent to complete the noble virtues of character.*’ For in every situation about which the revelation has said that if you want, you can carry it out, and if you want, you can leave it alone (not do it), choose *not* to do it. Or if (the revelation) has said to you that if you want, you can exact a compensating (punishment, fine, etc.), and if you want, you

⁹³ The terms used here, in the technical terminology of *fiqh*, are those referring to the ‘lesser’ impurities and the corresponding partial ablutions (*wudū*).

⁹⁴ *Makārim al-akhlāq*: the expression is a pointed reminder of the famous hadith Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to cite here, in which the Prophet explained: ‘I have been sent to help perfect the *makārim al-akhlāq*.’

⁹⁵ Note the numerous illustrations of this difficulty for the specific ‘social’ virtues which Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to discuss here—and the extreme relevance for each of them of his final point here about the essential role of our *intention* (being for *God's* sake).

can pardon (the offense), then prefer the side of pardon and forgiveness, and your *reward is with God* (42:40). And beware of seeking revenge for yourself⁹⁶ against whoever has done evil to you, for God has called all of that ‘*evil*’,⁹⁷ even including the evil done by the person exacting their revenge.

But in every situation where the revelation has told you to be angry, then if you fail to be angry, that is not a praiseworthy character trait, because anger for God’s sake is among the noble virtues of character, for God.⁹⁸ So blessed are those who proceed in that way and keep company with (those divine principles), for they hear God saying:⁹⁹ ‘*Certainly you have an extraordinary character!*’ (68:4)

[15.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is to stay away from those who are *opponents* (of God)¹⁰⁰ and those who are not of your (spiritual) kind—but without your believing them to be evil, or even ever having such a thought occur to you! Instead, (what is truly essential is) having your intention (*nīya*) on keeping company with the Truly Real and His people, and preferring Him to them (i.e., His opponents).

⁹⁶ Or: for your animal, carnal self (*nafs*, in either case).

⁹⁷ Referring, among others, to 17:38: ‘*All of that is evil and detestable with your Lord.*’ Even closer to the discussion of the specific topic of revenge (*qisās*) here is the explicit saying at 42:40: ‘*The recompense of an evil (deed) is an evil like it. But whoever pardons and improves/corrects, their reward is incumbent on God. Verily He does not love the wrongdoers!*’

⁹⁸ One of the classic illustrations of this quality is of course the cleansing of the Temple.

⁹⁹ This famous verse from an early Sura (68:4) clearly refers directly to the Prophet. From Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, since that ‘nature’ is the very source of all revelation (the ‘Muhammadan Reality’), everyone who attains that state of spiritual perfection has likewise become or realized that same state of being.

¹⁰⁰ Literally ‘opposites,’ *addād*: the stress of this rare Qur’anic term (only used at 19:82) is on an absolute opposition of ends, not on outward relations or emotional states of mind (for which there are many more common Arabic expressions). Its distinctive spiritual meaning is becomes clear in that context (19:82-83), speaking of those who ungratefully and angrily attack God (*kufr*): *And they have chosen gods other than God so that those (gods) might be a support for them. But no, they will surely deny their worship of them and they will be absolute opponents to them!* The ‘kinds’ in question here become clear in that context.

[16.] Likewise¹⁰¹ you should treat these animals with tender sympathy and compassion (*rahma*) for them, because they are among those whom God has caused to be of service (or ‘subjugated’: *taskhīr*) to you. So don't impose on them (work) that is beyond their capacity,¹⁰² and do not heedlessly ride (or ‘load’) those of them you ride/load.

And act likewise with regard to whatever slaves your right hand possesses, because they are your brothers and God has only given you possession of their bodies so that He can see how you treat them.¹⁰³ For *you* are *His* servant, so whatever way you love for Him to act toward you, then you should act precisely like that with your own male and female servants. Indeed God is requiting you (accordingly). And whatever evil and ugly deeds you would love to have Him avert from you, then act precisely that same way with regard to them. For all (of those creatures) are *God's* family, and you are (a member) of that Family.

If you have a child, then teach them the Qur'an—but not for any purpose in this lower world! And oblige them to observe the appropriate behavior of the revealed Path (*ādāb al-sharī'a*) and the virtuous character traits of true Religion (*dīn*). Induce them to kindness and empathy, and non-attachment (to this world: *zuhd*, section 27 below) from infancy onward, so that they become habituated to those qualities. Don't encourage desires and cravings in their heart, but rather diminish the attractions of the life of this lower world. And (impress upon them) the lack of any share in the next life that is the ultimate outcome for the person who possesses this lower world, and the endless Bounty and Grace in the next life that is the outcome for the person who abandons (attachment to this lower world). But don't do any of that out of stinginess with your money or property!

¹⁰¹ In the original text, the rest of this section (‘16’ here) clearly belongs with the preceding point as part of a long series of illustrations of ethical/spiritual ‘testing’ situations in which people commonly find themselves.

¹⁰² In addition to reflecting the gist of a number of well-known hadith, Ibn ‘Arabī’s language here explicitly echoes the repeated Qur’anic insistence (e.g., at 2:286) that God does not do this to human beings.

¹⁰³ Here Ibn ‘Arabī simply echoes and applies a constant Qur’anic teaching about the nature of the essential human situation as God’s ‘stewards’ or ‘stand-ins’ (*khalīfa*) on earth: ‘...*He will place you-all as His khulafā’ on earth so that He will see how you-all act.*’

[17.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is that you shouldn't even come near the gates of the powers-that-be (*al-sultān*), nor should you keep company with those who are competing for this lower world, since they will take your heart from God. But if something should oblige you to keep their company, then behave toward them with frank good counsel (*nasīha*), and don't try to fool them (by pretending to agree with them). For (in reality) you are interacting with the Real, and whatever you do, they will be made to be of service to you through (their impact on) your wider spiritual situation. Therefore always keep your intention directed toward God (asking that) *He* deliver you from the situation you are in, through the means that are best for you with regard to your true Religion (*dīn*).

[18.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is always to be present with God, in all of your actions and all your states of rest.

[19.] Among what is indispensable for the seeker is always to be giving, whether you have much or little, whether you are in straightened circumstances or at ease. For that is a sign of your heart's solid confidence in what is with God.

[...]

[20.] You must restrain your anger. For that is a sign of the openness of your heart (*sadr*). Now when you restrain your anger, you please the All-Compassionate (*al-Rahmān*). And (at the same time) you outrage the devil,¹⁰⁴ since you have tamed your animal self and subdued it, so that the devil cannot conquer it. You have also brought delight to the heart of the person from whom you have restrained your anger, by not requiting them in kind for their (offending) action. And that can be a cause of their returning to what the Real (*al-Haqq*) and His just action, and for their recognizing their own unjust and offensive treatment of you. Indeed they may even regret and repent for what happened because of their misconduct.

So you must know the right ways to receive (offense and hostility), and strive to take on that character trait. Then the greatest result and the highest merit, if you restrain your anger against the person who has given rise to that anger, is that God will reward you for your (good) action. And what result is more perfect than your pardoning your brother and bearing with his harming you, while

¹⁰⁴ An allusion to a hadith Ibn 'Arabī often mentions: '*anger is the touch of Satan* (on the heart).'

restraining your anger? And what the Real wants you to do toward (another) servant, He also wants to do precisely that toward you! So struggle and strive (*ijtihād*) to take on these qualities (of Mercifulness and Compassion), since they give rise to love and affection in people's hearts. Thus the Prophet already ordered us to practice mutual affection and to love one another. And this (restraining one's anger) is one of the highest causes that lead to mutual love.

[21.] You must practice *ihsān* (doing what is good and beautiful), for that is a sign of your shame (or 'conscience', *hayā*) before God, and of the glorification of God in the heart of the person who is *muhsin*. For Gabriel said:¹⁰⁵ 'What is *ihsan*?' And the Prophet—may God's blessings and peace be upon him—replied: '*It is that you should worship/serve God as though you see Him. For even if you don't see Him, He sees you!*' And the Prophet said (in another hadith): '*Shame/conscience is part of true faith, and it is entirely Good.*' So ultimately it is impossible for the person of true faith to do harm (*sharr*).

[22.] You must practice *dhikr* (remembering God) and asking His Forgiveness. For (asking His forgiveness) after you've sinned effaces and removes the sin, while doing so after you've been willingly obedient and have done good (*ihsān*) brings '*light upon light*' and joy upon joy. As for *dhikr*, that unifies the (scattered) heart and purifies your inner thoughts and intentions. But if you should tire (of performing *dhikr*), then turn to reciting the book of God, reciting it deliberately and reflectively, glorifying and exalting God. (Recite the Qur'an) while asking and imploring (God), if it is a verse of imploring; or with awe and humility, if it is a verse (suggesting) fear and a threat and a warning and lesson. As for the Qur'an, the one who recites it never tires of it, because of the (constantly changing) diversity of meanings within it.

[23.] You must strive to loosen the knot of persistence and stubborn insistence¹⁰⁶ in your heart.
[...]

¹⁰⁵ In the celebrated hadith about the three dimensions of true Religion (*dīn*), where *ihsān* follows true faith (*īmān*) and the basic ritual actions (*islām*) of Religion.

¹⁰⁶ On sinning: *isrār*.

[24.] You must remain cautiously conscious of God (*taqwā*), both with regard to your inner life and outwardly. For the meaning of *taqwā* is to take precautions to avoid His punishment. So the person who is afraid of His punishment will hasten to do what pleases God. As God says: *And God warns you all to be cautious regarding Himself* (3:27). And He said: *And know that God knows what is in all your souls, so be cautious regarding Him* (2:235). Thus (the word) *taqwā* is derived from *wiqāya* ('taking protection'). So be cautiously aware of God regarding God's actions, as (the Prophet, in praying) said: '*I take refuge with You from You!*' Therefore whatever it is that you fear and dread, avoid the way leading to that. For sinful-disobedience (*ma'sīya*) is the way leading to misery and distress, while willing obedience (*tā'a*) is the way leading to (eternal) happiness.

[25.] You must avoid spiritual self-deception (*ightirār*), which is when your animal self deludes you concerning God's graciousness and forbearance, while you continue to persist in your sinful-disobedience. So Iblīs deludes you by saying to you: 'If it weren't for your sinning and your opposition (to God), how could His Grace and Compassion and Forgiveness even appear?' Now that is the ultimate form of (spiritual) ignorance in whoever says such a thing. [...]

[26.] You must practice spiritual conscientiousness (*wara'*), which is an intuitive avoiding (of something wrong, illicit, etc.) that comes to you in your heart (*sadr*). The Prophet said: '*Abandon what disturbs you for what does not disturb you.*' So even if you are in need of that (which disturbs you) and you can't find anything to replace it, then leave that (need) to God: He will provide you in exchange with what is better than that. So don't be hasty¹⁰⁷ (in rushing to do what you feel isn't right). For this conscientiousness (*wara'*) is the very foundation of true Religion (*asās al-dīn*). So as you begin to apply it in practice, your actions will become purified, your conditions (inner and outer) will become successful, your speaking will become perfected, blessings of divine grace (*karamāt*) will rush toward you, and you will be protected and preserved by a divine protection in everything you do, without a doubt. By God, by God, o my brother—(Practice) conscientiousness, conscientiousness!

[27.] And you must practice non-attachment (*zuhd*) regarding this lower world and reducing your desire for it—indeed removing that love for it from your heart completely. But if you can't help

¹⁰⁷ Alluding to the famous Arabic proverb (or hadith): 'hastiness (*al-'ajala*) comes from the devil.'

seeking (something from it), then restrict yourself to seeking from it your sustenance (acquired) in the (properly licit) way.

Nor should you compete with any of those who are devoted to it, for (this lower world) is spoiled *merchandise* (4:94, etc.) that does not remain. The person desiring this lower world will never attain their goal, since God only gives each person what He has apportioned to them. So the person desiring this lower world will be continually saddened by it, and disgusting in God's sight. Indeed the likeness of the person seeking it is like the person who drinks sea water: the more they drink, the more thirsty they become! It should suffice you to take note of the Prophet's likening (this lower world) to a dead corpse and a dunghill: only dogs gather around those two things.

God said (in a 'divine saying'): *'O child of Adam, if you are content with what I have apportioned to you, then your heart and your body will be at peace; your daily bread will come to you and you will be worthy of (God's) praise. But if you are not content with what I have apportioned to you, your heart and body will both be wearied as you chase after (this world) like wild beasts racing in the desert. By My Glory and Majesty, you will only attain from it what I have assigned to you, and you will deserve blame!'*

For God said (2:195): *'Spend in the path of God, and do not throw yourselves into ruin with your own hands'*— which is their turning back to their possessions by worrying about them—'But do good/beauty, for surely God loves those who are doing what is good-and-beautiful' (*al-muhsinūn*) !

And Praise be to God, Sustainer of the Worlds!

And God's blessings and peace be upon our master Muhammad and on His Family and Companions!

Chapter Four

IMAGING ISLAM: INTELLECT AND IMAGINATION IN
ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY, POETRY, AND PAINTING*O my God, cause us to see things as they really are!*

— Prayer of Muhammad

This essay briefly introduces the approaches of four classical Muslim philosopher-theologians to the understanding of Islam — or rather, since their subject is the universal human reality of *dīn*,¹⁰⁸ of religion in the widest possible sense — to the subsequent artistic integration of their perspectives in two later paragons of Islamic mystical poetry (Hafiz) and painting (Sultan Muhammad). The essay format allows only a brief vignette for each of these fascinatingly complex thinkers and artists. But at least these glimpses should be sufficient to highlight the profound gulf that separates all the Islamic humanities and pre-modern Islamic thought in general from the very recent hybrids of materialism, historicism, and nationalism that characterize this past century’s newly-forged Islamist political ideologies.

The prophetic saying quoted in our epigraph, one of the most famous prayers recorded in the collections of hadith, already sums up our subject here. For the two inseparable dimensions of this saying beautifully summarize two equally indispensable practical dimensions of any approach to religious understanding and appropriate practice. The first task — and a far harder one than we might at first imagine — is our ongoing effort simply to see as much as possible of the relevant “things,” to come to actually perceive and properly appreciate all the related phenomena, all the infinite divine “Signs on the horizons and the souls” (41:53), to use the familiar Qur’anic language. For there is simply no apparent end to this first, primordial human responsibility. Its fundamental importance is likewise emphasized in another equally famous hadith, in the Prophet’s repeated prayer: “O my Lord, increase me in knowing!” Secondly — and more obviously requiring an element of higher illumination, along

¹⁰⁸ *Dīn* refers to the essential metaphysical relationship between the divine Source and all creatures. It is the primary subject of the Qur’an and — from that Qur’anic perspective — of each of the cycles of prophetic revelation.

with all the powers of our human intelligence and imagination — there is the subsequent task of coming to see those endless particular phenomena of religious life and traditions “as they really are”: i.e., of recognizing and realizing the deeper reality, the all-inclusive logos that they manifest.

The very fact that this central teaching takes the form of a prayer reminds us of two additional, indispensable conditions both for our own religious understanding, and for any further mutual comprehension and communication, which necessarily depends on that initial foundation of real and comprehensively informed awareness. First, the formulation of this saying carefully and explicitly reminds us that “we” — in the sense of all human beings, at all our stages of realization — are equally and interactively involved in this imperative, this inherent human responsibility, so that whatever we genuinely discover about the religious life of others necessarily deepens and enriches our own humanity.¹⁰⁹ And secondly, the fact that this saying is a prayer clearly implies that any deeper understanding in this domain — as with all our acts of divine service, all our infinitely varied *‘ibādāt* — necessarily depends both on our own ongoing practical and intellectual efforts and on the mysterious gifts of grace: in other words, that the distinctively human vocation of transforming spiritual realization, in all its forms and expressions, always remains dependent on the individual mystery of inner surrender and illumination (*taslīm* or *islām*).

I GHAZALI ON THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

The first classical Muslim thinker introduced here is also the historical personality whose name is most likely to be widely familiar to Muslims today. The influential figure of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) led an immensely active, intellectually prolific and socially engaged life as a religious scholar, teacher, political spokesman, and spiritual guide — a life whose stages are memorably summarized in his famous late autobiography, “The Deliverer From Error” (*al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*), which has been widely translated into many modern languages. Not coincidentally, that part of the Islamic world in which Ghazali grew up was ravaged, both during and just before his lifetime, by a host of bloodily destructive

¹⁰⁹ Muhammad was not ordinarily given to using the merely honorific first-person plural. Throughout the Qur’an and hadith — just as with the radically different meanings of the Arabic plural and singular “you” — the inclusive plural here clearly points to the much wider “We,” the full pleroma of divine Names that find their uniquely comprehensive, integrated manifestation in the fully human reality (*insān*, not the mortal-animal *bashar*) of the Adamic state.

civil wars, religious revolutions, barbarian invasions, and bloody occupations. Almost all of those devastatingly violent regional and internecine urban conflicts — which did eventually destroy his once-flourishing native metropolis of Nishapur (near modern Mashhad in western Iran), long before the Mongol invasions — were framed in sectarian Islamic terms. Against that poignant historical backdrop, his deepest reflections on the multiple dimensions of religion and their interactions are summarized, in compressed and allusive form, in the remarkable conclusion of his famous ethical treatise, “The Scale of Right Action”.¹¹⁰ There he begins by explaining that the key Arabic term *madhhab*,¹¹¹ or “way of proceeding (toward God)” — which closely approximates to the ways people today popularly speak of “religions” in the plural, in most political and journalistic contexts — potentially has three different levels of meaning:

The first level is what people cling to and take sides with in boasting and disputations... the way of one’s forefathers and ancestors, the (religion) of one’s teacher and of the people of the town where one grows up. This differs according to towns and countries, and according to the teachers concerned.

Now the great majority of humankind, Ghazali insists, by nature (due to their limited capacities and worldly preoccupations) can only acknowledge that there is this one true way, the expression of their own familiar local “beliefs”:¹¹²

These people, who are far more numerous, say that the (true way) is only one: it is what they believe. And that (belief) is what (should be) proclaimed in teaching and guidance with every single human being, however different their condition may be. This is what (the great majority) are passionately attached to, whether it be (this) belief or any other...

¹¹⁰ *Mīzān al-‘amal*: see the full annotated translation of this concluding chapter in our forthcoming volume *Openings*. [REWORD for book]

¹¹¹ While the warring “schools” (*madhāhib*) that Ghazali is referring to reflect familiar historical categories from the fields of *fiqh*, kalam theology, and other politically powerful competing sects at that time, recent historians of that period and region have carefully pointed out the ways that such terms actually functioned primarily as identifying labels for a wide variety of local and regional political factions, tribal confederations, etc. which successively invaded, dominated, and eventually largely destroyed that great metropolis of medieval Iran (one of the largest cities in the world at that time).

¹¹² *I’tiqād*: a familiar Arabic term which, quite tellingly, is entirely absent from the Qur’an.

But Ghazali immediately goes on to explain that the deeper reality of the human situation — of *dīn* as the ultimate inner connection of every soul with its divine Source and Ground — is perceived quite differently by those fully accomplished (*mukammal*) human beings who can actually begin to “see things as they really are.” Even though such rare insightful, capable and appropriately motivated individuals are obliged to agree outwardly with the prevailing unexamined beliefs of the local majority whenever they express themselves in public, they always realize that in fact there are also two more essential levels of religion as well, each one equally fundamental and indispensable in its proper sphere of application:

The second... is what is appropriate, in (moral, intellectual, spiritual) guidance and teaching, to whoever comes seeking to learn or to be guided. Now this cannot be specified in only one way, but rather it differs according to the student, so that each student must be confronted with what their understanding can handle...

The third... is what a person holds to in their innermost self, between themselves and God, such that no one other than God is aware of it. One does not mention that except to someone who is like oneself in his awareness of what one has become cognizant of, or else to a person who has reached a stage where they are capable of (readily) becoming aware of it and of understanding it.

Now the limited focus of this essay does not allow us to elaborate on Ghazali’s own fascinating practical insights into spiritual pedagogy and religious politics which he developed on the basis of this three-level conception of religion, in an immensely prolific and influential body of writings which are still widely read, studied and imitated everywhere in the Muslim world today — providing foundational texts in fields as diverse as philosophy, spiritual thought and practice, kalam theology, and *fiqh*. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to point out that the distinctive threefold conception he outlines in this concluding passage of his *Mīzān* means that human beings’ perceptions of religions, in all their outwardly endless diversity and changing forms, can be compared to a kind of multi-sided pyramid. From that perspective, the perceptions of the mass of people living at each of the many local bases of that single pyramid, who remain primarily at that limited socio-political level of belief, necessarily lead them to perceive all other religions (i.e., beyond their own local group’s beliefs) as simply a multiplicity of conflicting — and self-evidently false or incomplete — belief-systems; the exclusive truth of their own unexamined beliefs is an axiomatic function of whatever particular social group they happen to have grown up with and adhere to.

In contrast, those who find themselves at Ghazali's second level — referring to the many individuals who are “seeking right guidance” and thereby advancing up one or another of the many paths of realization forming the multiple sides of that pyramid, as far as their particular abilities and predispositions allow — evidently have in common at least the three distinguishing features he mentions later in this concluding passage: the initial doubt which liberated them from their initial restricted beliefs; their dawning intuition of a higher, inclusive Truth/Reality; and the growing spiritual and intellectual love which flows from that still inchoate intuition. Finally, Ghazali's hypothetical third, unitary level — which he says can only be shared indirectly and allusively by the rare masters of each path — is that of spiritual perfection, of actual realization (*tahqīq*) of the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*).

Of course there is nothing radically new about Ghazali's theological and philosophic understanding outlined in this famous passage of his *Mīzān*. At its dramatic conclusion, for example, he pointedly alludes to central imagery of the Qur'an and hadith when he describes the experience of those inhabiting each of these three levels of spiritual realization in terms drawn from the classical scriptural symbolism of the (spiritually) “blind”; of those traveling by the scattered, reflected lights of “the stars and the moon”; and of those actually seeing by the fully illuminating Light of the divine Sun. Here this far-reaching traditional Qur'anic symbolism is particularly significant in that it highlights the intrinsic, absolutely natural and unavoidable, multiplicity of the sides of this pyramid of realization: the many different pathways leading toward the one Apex, with their necessarily shifting historical forms and their varying degrees of emphasis on contrasting spiritual methods emphasizing the relative roles of intellect, will (discipline), imagination, or love and devotion. Others may be reminded of the close correspondence between Ghazali's perspectives here and the prevalent conception in later Islamic civilization of the four spiritual stages or dimensions of Religion (*dīn*) as *sharī'at*, *tarīqat*, *ma'rifat* and *haqīqat*.¹¹³

Perhaps the most important practical implication of Ghazali's perspective, however, is that both sides of our opening hadith — i.e., what is actually perceived (indeed, what is even perceivable!) as “religion,” and therefore what kind and degree of understanding is actually possible — will always be

¹¹³ This later classical mnemonic formulation refers roughly to the four stages of widely shared ritual and social forms, practical spiritual “pathways,” the unfolding of individual spiritual “knowing,” and the full attainment of spiritual “truth/reality.”

viewed entirely differently from each of these three basic levels of realization. More troublingly, someone who perceives the realities of religion to be merely socially reinforced beliefs can *only* perceive any account or reference to either of Ghazali's two higher levels as simply another, alternative set of misguided beliefs. And individuals who are following one of the many pathways up the sides of this imagined pyramid may indeed see more clearly the limited nature and functions of the socially grounded beliefs they have now left behind, but they are still likely to perceive at first the other alternative routes to the Apex — if they even happen to see them at all — as both different and inferior to their own chosen path. However, the perspectives of each climber regarding almost everyone else should also become increasingly transformed as they finally approach their common destination, a process which eventually and unavoidably brings each of them (in so many different ways) much closer together — just as in the archetypal case of Muhammad's own spiritual Ascension (*mi'rāj*) through each of the spiritual worlds and its associated prophetic spirits. The ongoing dramatic interplay of each of those successive stages and possibilities is beautifully illuminated in Hafiz's multi-faceted ghazal (short love poem) and its extraordinary visual elaboration in Sultan Muhammad's painting discussed at the end of this essay.

All of this, as Ghazali points out here — and as he went on to apply in his own massive, lastingly effective and still highly accessible body of writing, in every sphere of Islamic thought — raises awesome challenges of communication, pedagogy, and guidance, wherever we may be situated in that ongoing collective process of human transformation and spiritual growth. No wonder, then, that one of his favorite and frequently repeated hadith was the famous “speak to the people according to their (differing) capacities of understanding.”

In the next stages of this essay, we briefly introduce three other classical Muslim thinkers — perhaps the most accomplished scientist, philosopher, and mystical thinker of the entire civilization — whose pioneering perspectives on the study of religion were primarily focused, in turn, on each of Ghazali's three ascending levels. Eventually, though, when pushed far enough, each of their distinctive approaches necessarily leads us towards a more comprehensive vision of the whole — toward that multi-dimensional, harmonic perspective so memorably captured in the strikingly compressed poetic and visual expression of these teachings by Hafiz and his artist counterpart.

II BIRUNI AND THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

The remarkable polymath Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048) is best known today as one of the most extraordinary scientific and mathematical geniuses of all time, someone whose rigorous observations and critical insights in so many different scientific fields were often centuries ahead of his time. In reality, his pioneering contributions to the phenomenological and historical study of religion were no less original, although the far-sighted significance and originality of his carefully accurate, critical, and comprehensive methodological approach to the understanding and communication of the historical, intellectual, and anthropological dimensions of religion have not yet been widely recognized and appreciated. It is one of the curious mysteries of modern scholarship and academic publicity that the later Maghrebi philosopher-historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) has been so widely acclaimed as the father of the modern social sciences, when in fact several of Biruni's books come even closer to exemplifying the critical norms and self-consciously descriptive and analytical approaches of most modern social scientists and historians.

To put it simply — and in every science, the most fundamental laws and principles often do seem very simple once someone has perceived and proven them — Biruni was, in his classic study of India¹¹⁴ and in his equally pioneering earlier work of universal religious history (*al-Athār al-Bāqiyya*), one of the first writers we know of to systematically pose the now-obvious question of just what different peoples, in all their diversity and social realities, actually believed and practiced in the different dimensions of their religious and social life. More specifically, and just as important from a methodological standpoint, Biruni did not concern himself with imposing familiar theological categories and judgments on his subjects, whether in the questions he asked or in the presentation of his research. Thus he did not accept that only some areas of life and thought (as defined by his own faith) are “religious,” while others are not; nor did he limit himself to earlier learned books and their presumptively normative accounts, to the exclusion of actually listening to informants from the various groups he was studying. Instead, he drew on representatives from all available strata of the peoples he encountered, from the full spectrum of castes and specialists accessible to him, ranging from astronomers and Brahmins to yogis and traders. In contrast to virtually all earlier writings available in

¹¹⁴ The title of Biruni's immense study of the religions of northwest India, *Tahqīq mā li-l-Hind...* ("The Verification of What is in India..") is especially significant, in that the key word *tahqīq* fairly applies to his rigorously empirical scientific method that he developed in so many different fields of knowledge.

his day, he explicitly and quite self-consciously tried to give an accurate and comprehensive picture of his subject, instead of simply entertaining his readers and patrons with details of what was curious, titillating, or shocking. In other words, we could say without exaggeration that he was probably Islamic civilization's first cultural anthropologist — except that the scope of his research interests and analyses, especially in his broader historical and textual concerns, repeatedly goes considerably beyond what that discipline normally tackles today. In all of these respects, of course, Biruni seems to have been inspired by the classical scientific procedures followed (at least nominally) in each of Aristotle's works: i.e., he begins by carefully seeking out all the relevant phenomena; then canvassing and critiquing all the available theoretical and explanatory hypotheses; and finally by proposing or suggesting his own alternative, more comprehensive interpretive perspectives.¹¹⁵

In this brief vignette, we can only highlight two or three of the most fundamental contributions of Biruni's careful phenomenological approach to our contemporary global interest in inter-religious understanding. First, even a minimal attempt at a carefully descriptive account of the most basic dimensions of actual religious life (whatever the particular historical setting and tradition in question) immediately highlights the extraordinarily rich diversity and multiplicity of the religious realities that actually exist. Indeed this radical diversity can be observed whatever the particular domain in question, from popular social matters like actual social norms, beliefs, patterns of behavior, and devotional lives and practices, on to more intellectual and theoretical concerns such as different individuals' actual understandings of cosmology, metaphysics, history, or spirituality. Hence devoting attention to this inherently curious and intentionally comprehensive approach to gathering and analyzing the actual phenomena of religious life — as opposed to this or that presumptively normative theological account — repeatedly “causes us to see” and discover a whole range of “things” that we might otherwise never have noticed. This is particularly evident, of course, when we apply Biruni's perspectives to our own apparently familiar religious surroundings. For any practicing anthropologist or psychologist quickly becomes aware how much of our immensely rich practical knowledge of our own religious life-spheres

¹¹⁵ It is worth noting that in fact Biruni's conception of his scientific and advisory relation to his conquering Ghaznavid patrons also seems to have closely mirrored the idealized conception of the relations between Alexander the Great and Aristotle that was prevalent throughout classical Islamic (and later Hellenistic) cultures.

typically remains simply implicit — i.e., quite operative but usually still unconscious — until we begin to question and analyze those elements that only reach our consciousness when they are revealed *through their contrasts* with the mirrors of unfamiliar cultures and very different personalities.

Secondly, Biruni's intensely critical mind seems to have quickly discovered that there are no simple, reductive, top-down explanations for this radical observed diversity in all these various domains of human life. In particular, the intensely diverse intellectual and religious milieu of his own central Asian homeland — the cosmopolitan crossroads of all the global trade-routes and cultural exchanges of that age — was a constant reminder that the longstanding, irreducible diversities of perspective and understanding that he constantly encountered in his own and other religious settings were not simply explainable by the assumed effects of this or that official theology or dominant teaching group. Of course Biruni, even in his earlier works, was careful to point out the universal sociological and political tendencies of religiously and intellectually dominant social groups (the self-styled “elites” whom he found in every religion and culture he studied) to attempt to control, dominate and manipulate their less educated local populace. But such recurrent attempts are necessarily restricted in their effectiveness — as Ghazali pointedly suggests in the passages we were just discussing — by the equally observable reality, at each level, of a wide-ranging natural diversity of spiritual capacities, perspectives and beliefs. That deeper human diversity tends to become more immediately obvious, of course, whenever we encounter concretely other religions and unfamiliar social groups. But it is also a recurrent human reality — as ideologues of every age have always tended to carefully forget — that the Qur'an itself repeatedly points to as a central, quite intentional result of divine Providence.

Paradoxically, this omnipresent religious diversity, rooted in the inherent natural differences of every sort of human capacity and personality, seems to be particularly difficult to discern whenever people (perhaps especially intellectuals from local elites) are thinking and speaking about their own particular traditions. Against that backdrop of presumed theological uniformity, particularly intense amid the heated Muslim theological and sectarian disputes of Biruni's own day, his consciously inclusive phenomenological approach to other, unfamiliar religious traditions dramatically highlighted — for readers from his own religio-cultural milieu — the extremely partial, unstable, and shifting nature of those locally operative, taken-for-granted “beliefs” comprising Ghazali's first level of religion. At the same time, he pointedly revealed how little the controversial theological labels and presumptions of his

own culture had to do with the vastly more complex realities — and the more deeply observable regularities — of actual religious, social, and cultural life.¹¹⁶

Finally, the larger social patterns, similarities, and eventual laws that do emerge, upon deeper reflection, from Biruni's carefully phenomenological approach to each religious tradition, in a particular social and historical context, are in fact empirical regularities that seem to apply to human beings more widely, whatever their particular religion or culture. Thus Biruni was able to translate astronomical and cosmological texts from Sanskrit (or Greek) into Arabic, for example, because he was convinced from their study that astronomers (or astrologers) in every culture and historical setting had been generally talking about the same things. Similarly, he was able to translate — or rather, to interpret — the classical *Yogasutras* and their centuries-old traditions of oral commentary into the Arabic of his day because he spontaneously recognized that the more recently emerging Sufi movements of his own religion and cultural context were already talking about very similar spiritual realities and practices.

III FARABI AND THE ONGOING CHALLENGES OF GUIDANCE AND INSTRUCTION¹¹⁷

Few Muslim thinkers, in any field, have been more lastingly influential and original than the great philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950), whose pioneering insights into the meanings, forms and historical transformation of religions were practically applied and developed, in more specifically Islamic settings, by a long line of famous Muslim philosophers and reformers from Avicenna, through Tusi and Ibn Khaldun, on down to influential figures like Fazlur Rahman and Khomeini in our own time — not to mention Farabi's far-reaching indirect influences on an even more impressive list of philosophers and theologians in later Christian, Jewish, and even Marxist settings. If Farabi is mentioned in this essay, it is precisely because most of his writings (unlike those of his later Muslim and non-Muslim interpreters)

¹¹⁶ Long before Swift, or Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, there was a wide-ranging tradition, persisting in many genres of Islamic literature and philosophy, to use critical discussions and problematic accounts of remote others — whether purportedly historical or openly imaginary, like our science fiction — as subtle polemic vehicles for communicating social, religious, and intellectual criticism of features of the writer's (and his audience's) own familiar world. Such implications are visible everywhere in Biruni's *India*.

¹¹⁷ See the longer introductory presentation of this practical and highly contemporary dimension of Farabi's religious thinking in the opening chapter of our *Orientations*.

normally take up the fundamental questions of the meanings, roles, and understanding of religion in an *explicitly* multi-cultural, comparative perspective, taking into account ample historical evidence from many earlier and contemporary religious and philosophical traditions.¹¹⁸

The special connection of Farabi with Ghazali's second level of religion — i.e., with the multiple pathways of instruction and realization — has to do with his constant close attention to the fundamental ongoing human differences of receptivity, motivation, capacity, and other resources (including the lasting effects of religious belief on political and social organization) that all affect the actually available possibilities and outcomes of each attempt at religious and spiritual pedagogy and reform. Many modern interpreters have exclusively emphasized the undeniable political emphases, interests and aims of Farabi and his influential Muslim (and other) successors. But that political emphasis is only accurate, and really useful, when we realize that, just as with Plato's *Republic*, Farabi's constantly clear-sighted focus on recognizing the multiple competing aims of human beings — and then on bringing about the constellation of available means necessary to accomplish the highest human aims — in fact helps to illuminate the manifold roles of a given religion in every area of our life, beginning with the proper ordering of our own soul. No other Islamic philosopher makes philosophy and the quest for understanding so clearly and unambiguously a prologue to action — but to *right* and lastingly effective action.

In other words, Farabi's probingly analytical political perspective is particularly relevant to anyone approaching religious understanding in terms of Ghazali's second level: whether as a "climber" and seeker, or as a teacher and guide. That is to say, he teaches us, when we are talking and thinking about religion — any religion — to approach it in terms of its actual operative meanings in specific, concrete situations and contexts: not in abstract conceptual and theological terms but in terms of its real and potential meanings and functions in the conflicted, problematic situation at hand. And to do so at every level, from the psychological and individual on up through much wider social, historical, and political contexts. For more limited spirits, of course — as Ghazali has already suggested — a first superficial encounter with that characteristic Farabian approach can readily lead to a familiar

¹¹⁸ Fortunately, the most important of Farabi's writings on the interrelations of religions and philosophy have recently become available in reliable English translations and scholarly interpretations. See the relevant English bibliography of key works at the end of *Orientations*.

sophomoric sort of debunking or simpleminded political reductionism, in which religions are only seen and understood as socio-political ideologies: an attitude most familiar in the popular pseudo-Marxism (including its highly publicized Wahhabi and Salafi hybrid variants) affected by journalists and public commentators almost everywhere in the world these days.

Yet Farabi's own intentions are radically different, and in truth almost impossible for anyone to ignore. For what he seeks to do is to remind each of his readers of our own individually unavoidable responsibility both for choosing our ultimate ends, and then for realistically carrying those ends into action — and of the truly infinite distance in this regard between pious *words*, on the one hand, and actual choices and genuinely effective actions, on the other. Even a glimpse of religious history, in Islam or any other tradition, should suggest how constantly we all need such effective “hypocrisy-detectors,” and how unfortunately rare and profoundly challenging are those moments and exemplars of genuine human choosing, who are the ultimate aim of this philosopher's enduring writings.

IV IBN ‘ARABI AND THE “VIEW FROM ABOVE”

Ibn ‘Arabi, unlike Biruni and Farabi, is not just a noteworthy pioneer and historical exemplar when it comes to articulating the roles of imagination and intellect in religious understanding. Since his death in 1240, his writings — along with more accessible local adaptations by a long line of both learned and popular interpreters, poets, teachers, and translators — have constantly been the primary reference and inspiration for Muslims from virtually every cultural background, path, and school who have struggled to understand and come to terms with the extraordinary multiplicity of practical religious approaches and competing theological interpretations that so typified the classical forms of Islamic civilization almost everywhere well into the nineteenth century.¹¹⁹ Indeed it would be misleading to refer simply to Ibn ‘Arabi in this context without constantly keeping in mind that all of his thought and writing is so profoundly rooted in both the letter and the deepest spirit of the Qur’an and the authentic hadith, that any reference to him should also be taken as a kind of shorthand allusion to the profound treatment of the historical multiplicity of “religions” and the Unicity of the one perennial *Dīn* that is woven throughout those scriptures.

¹¹⁹ For an overview of this *process and its far-ranging dimensions*, see “*Except His Face...*”; “Ibn ‘Arabī in the ‘Far West’”; and “*Ibn Arabī and His Interpreters*.”

What might seem ironic or puzzling, though, is the remarkable way that contemporary students of other, *non*-Muslim religious traditions have increasingly turned to Ibn ‘Arabi — or to other interpreters of that “greatest teacher” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) recently writing and translating into European languages — in order to comprehend as well the ongoing interplay between diversity and creativity (at Ghazali’s initial level of historical forms and expressions) and deeper unities (at the level of ultimate ends and the wider processes of spiritual realization) both within and between those other, non-Islamic religious traditions. The steadily increasing volume of translations and studies of his extremely demanding symbolic writings, in so many languages, together with the sudden proliferation of international conferences and symposia devoted to his ideas and teachings, are solid and visible evidence of the widespread contemporary appeal of his distinctively ecumenical and irenic approach to religious understanding among both scholarly students of religion and wider popular audiences alike.¹²⁰

But what is the deeper basis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s centuries-long interest in earlier Muslim civilization for so many disparate modern thinkers seriously wrestling with the deepest issues of religious diversity and mutual understanding? Why is it that, to take one recent telling example, one of the famous scholarly authorities on Catholic spirituality can stand up (at a scholarly conference devoted to a famous medieval Spanish Jewish thinker) and remark that “If Ibn ‘Arabi didn’t exist, we would have to invent him”— i.e., in order to carry on adequately that kind of essential inter-religious dialogue? Anyone who has studied even a little of Ibn ‘Arabi will realize how impossible it is to answer such questions in the space of a few paragraphs. So within this introductory essay, a few very brief allusions will have to suffice.

To begin with, if we return to Ghazali’s own extremely allusive remarks about the third and highest — and ultimately unitary — level of religious insight, or to the apex of our own corresponding image of the multi-faceted pyramid of pathways of realization, it must be obvious (as Ghazali pointedly implies) that if there existed any surely effective way of guiding everyone to that kind of all-encompassing insight and realized vision of the divine Truth (*al-Haqq*), we would all have heard of it already. So if we do observe that Ibn ‘Arabi — like Hafiz, his poetic peer and master-translator whom

¹²⁰ See the extensive bibliographic references, focusing on English-language translations and studies, included at the end of *Orientalisms* (as well the short study devoted to Ibn ‘Arabi in chapter two of that work).

we shall encounter in just a moment — is somehow an extraordinarily effective communicator in at least suggesting some real sense of what that culminating level of religious insight is or implies, then what grounds could be offered for such an assertion, beyond the long-accumulating historical evidence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s singularly persuasive effectiveness in this regard?

The inner secret of this historical effectiveness and success, I would suggest, is that Ibn ‘Arabi — who frequently describes himself above all as a pure “translator” (*tarjumān*) unveiling the inner connections between the infinite divine “Signs” (including all of creation and experience), their illuminating “Books” (including all the prophets and saints, as well as their scriptures), and their One universal Source — constantly and quite intentionally collapses what Ghazali had earlier conceptually described as three distinct levels of religion. In other words, Ibn ‘Arabi characteristically uses all his extraordinary rhetorical skills (together with the underlying metaphysical symbolism of the Qur’an and hadith) in order to remind each of his students that the Reality that they imagine they are still seeking is *already*, immediately, constantly, infinitely *present* in each divine ‘Breath’, in each momentary turning and reawakening of the heart. The image of the actual effects of his uniquely allusive and transforming form of writing that immediately comes to mind — as the different levels of the imagined conceptual pyramid Ghazali outlined earlier suddenly collapse into that single living Point — is one of a sort of mysterious experiential implosion, of an otherwise inexplicable experience of spiritual “fusion.” And fusion may indeed be the most appropriate image for that paradoxical reality and presence of the Spirit within each human being and at each instant of the ever-renewed creation, which alone reveals — at each instant it is revealed — the Source and Goal of the infinitely renewed revelation. This suggestion would also help to explain the extraordinary appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi, for centuries throughout Islamic civilization and today increasingly all over the world, to artists, poets, musicians, healers, and creators — to all those who are likewise striving to draw us back from our received ideas, habits, customs, and general “heedlessness” (the Qur’anic *ghafla*) to that unmistakable reality of illuminated spiritual Knowing (*ma‘rifa*) which is Ibn ‘Arabi’s unique subject and aim.

To put all this in other, more familiar terms, the immense phenomenological project of Biruni with which we began this ascent, wherever it starts, eventually leads us, when we pursue those outwardly so varied phenomenal appearances of religious life and thought deeply enough, toward the one place in which all such meanings are mirrored and originate: that invisible human-divine reality the Qur’an calls the ‘Heart’ (*al-qalb*), the only possible — and universally present — Apex of al-Ghazali’s

pyramid of religious understanding. There Biruni and Ibn ‘Arabi ultimately meet. In ontological and philosophical terms, that meeting place, the unique locus of all human experience and manifestation, is the central subject of all of Ibn ‘Arabi’s voluminous writings: the world of the “creative Imagination,” both the cosmic shadow-Play and its endlessly renewed reflections in each human heart.¹²¹ Since one cannot even pretend to outline Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics and its scriptural symbolism within the bounds of this essay, we must turn instead to its marvelous — and far more readily accessible — recapitulation and summation in one of the incomparable ghazals of Hafiz of Shiraz (d. 1390), and to its even more unforgettable creative reflection in a masterpiece of illumination by the great Safavid painter, Sultan Muhammad (d. mid-1500’s).

V HAFIZ’S GHAZALS AND SULTAN MUHAMMAD’S “ALLEGORY OF DRUNKENNESS”

Because the art and effectiveness of Hafiz’s ghazals, in a way very similar to Ibn ‘Arabi’s prose, depends upon each reader’s — or *listener’s*, since his lyrics were originally composed to be played and sung — intimate familiarity with an immense body of metaphysical symbolism and interpretive assumptions shared with and presupposed by its original audiences, we shall begin here instead with the famous miniature painting of one of his last ghazals by the Safavid master Sultan Muhammad, from a royal collection of Hafiz’s poems now in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 1).¹²² It is no exaggeration to say that this remarkably powerful and complex painting — like the poems of Hafiz but far more immediately accessible to uninitiated modern viewers — provides us with an extraordinarily condensed representation of the entire Qur’anic world-view, in both the architectonics of its metaphysics and the inner dynamics of its depiction of the corresponding human levels of love, testing, suffering, illumination, and spiritual growth. Even without consulting the poem that it so carefully illuminates — roughly translated at the end of this essay — the first-time viewer can already almost immediately grasp the essential outlines of this Qur’anic spiritual universe, so closely paralleling Ghazali’s opening discussion (and Ibn ‘Arabi’s integration) of the three key dimensions of spiritual realization.

¹²¹ See the more detailed treatment of this dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, largely through translations from his “Meccan Illuminations,” in *The Reflective Heart*.

¹²² Details of Met location, thanks, permission...

The single poetic line inscribed at the top of the painting — the fifth and central, transitional line of Hafiz’s ghazal¹²³ — clearly sets out the explicitly ontological character of the whole cosmic scene before us, beginning with the angels and perfected human spirits (the *muqarrabūn*, “those drawn near to God”) at the top of the painting, and of the universe: “The Angel of divine Love¹²⁴ grasped the pitcher of Life/ Delight, from its depths poured Rose-water over the faces of the houris and spirits.” Thus the subject of this painting is immediately signaled to be all the creative manifestations of the divine creative Love (*rahma*) and the full spectrum of human responses and expressions of love and desire — and their indispensable educational consequences — through which human souls are gradually perfected in love and realized awareness of all the divine Names or attributes, eventually returning as polished mirrors of that divine Source. That universal process of divine manifestation and the “Return” cycle of its uniquely human realization and perfection is beautifully summarized (especially for modern viewers encountering this tradition for the first time) in the famous Divine Saying that is so profoundly elaborated in Hafiz’s poem: “I was a hidden Treasure,¹²⁵ and I *loved* to be known: hence I created creation/ human beings (*al-khalq*), so that I might be known.”

Given those familiar cultural clues, it was immediately obvious to this painting’s original noble viewers that the next lower level of this beautiful cosmic palace (and “tavern”!) represents the immense realm of the divine Imagination (*khiyāl*) or “intermediate world” (*barzakh*), which is above all the realm of all those realized souls and divine Knowers and Friends (*awliyā*) represented here by the central

¹²³ In the original manuscript collection of Hafiz’s poems, the four preceding initial lines of the ghazal, translated at the end of this essay below, are given immediately opposite the painting, at the bottom of the facing page (omitted in this reproduction).

¹²⁴ *Rahmat*: the all-encompassing creative divine maternal Love that gives rise to the created universe at every instant — and the central divine Attribute which is invoked at the beginning of every Sura of the Qur’an (and, almost universally in Islamic devotional practice, before undertaking any significant action).

¹²⁵ See the corresponding allusion to this central hadith in line 9 of the poem — the “Treasure House” being the human spirit’s initial, unknowing proximity to God at its emergence, in the “last night” of its primordial Covenant (Quran...), prior to its descent into the world and body — the perpetually ruined “Wine-House” where it can begin the essential earthly process of loving, choosing, experiencing, and the growing knowing of the divine Names that can only be realized through those tests.

depiction of the reclining Hafiz, contemplating or reading and inwardly envisaging that open “Book” which is here, again according to the cultural conventions of this age, at once equally the “Qur’an” (both as the revealed divine “Recitation” and the cosmic musical archetype of all Creation), its manifestations throughout all of creation and humanity (all the other tippling couples and revelers of the painting), and the illuminating powers of all that poetry-music, painting, and the other ritual forms and practices that help to reveal to us the deeper divine meanings of that Book of all being. Here it helps particularly to know that the closing pen-name and verbal imperative “Hafiz,” in each of these poems, refers forcefully to a whole spectrum of central human spiritual responsibilities and choices that are dramatically depicted everywhere throughout this painting.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ To begin with, the divine Name or distinctive quality of being suggested by the Arabic active present participle *hāfīz* immediately and directly evokes in each reader a complex semantic family of both divine and human realities and responsibilities, the consciousness of which immediately heightens each reader’s awareness both of our relative realization of that particular divine Name and of our many failures to do justice to its demands. At a second and deeper stage of reflection and attention, just as we find with almost every line of Hafiz’s poems, we realize that that same divine Name is also an even more compelling verbal *imperative*, demanding that we do realize and put into action — “assiduously, constantly, and perseveringly” (to quote Lane), as the Arabic intensive third form imperative implies — all the implications of our true human spiritual reality and ultimate destiny as someone who is indeed “*Hāfīz*”. The significance of this Name/imperative reflects the multiple meanings of that key Arabic root (*h-f-z*), which occurs a total of forty-four times in the Qur’an: fifteen times in relation to God (and three more regarding His angels or spiritual intermediaries); six times in relation to the Prophet; with the remaining twenty verses referring to corresponding human qualities and responsibilities (or the lack thereof). As with each of the other divine Names and qualities, the dramatic interplay of these two equally essential metaphysical perspectives — the divine Reality and its ongoing human manifestations and discoveries — lies at the heart of all the love-imagery of Hafiz and the wider poetic tradition culminating in his work, in its pervasive symbolic framework of the ongoing mutual courtship of the human soul and its Beloved. The range of meanings of this *h-f-z* root in the Qur’an are very wide indeed: (a) to maintain, sustain, uphold; and (b) to protect, guard, preserve — the two meanings most obviously involved in the verses referring to God’s creative and sustaining activities. But also, and even more obviously relating to our corresponding *human* demands and responsibilities: (c) to watch out, take care, bear in mind; (d) to be heedful, mindful, attentive; and finally (e) to follow, observe, comply with (an oath, covenant, divine command, etc.). By the time we have reached the end of each of Hafiz’s poems, he suggests, reminds — and then often insists, in the immediate, personal first-person imperative — that we reflect on our actual realization of each of these fundamentally human responsibilities.

[insert Met reproduction (full page if possible)]

Figure 1.

From this perspective, this central Hafiz-figure represents all those rare but essential realized human beings — the true spiritual Knowers (*‘urafā’*) and “Friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*), the fundamental spiritual intermediaries, in both this world and beyond (including the spirits of the Prophets which animate each of the heavenly spheres)—of whom the Qur’an repeatedly says that “*He loves them, and they love Him*” and “*there is no fear for them, nor do they ever despair.*” These accomplished human spirits, whose illuminated Hearts *are* the real “world-seeing Cup” reflecting the Wine of creative Love in all its manifestations, can be seen at the center left of the painting¹²⁷ — still at this cosmic intermediate, “balcony” stage of being — both “raising” all the outwardly mundane experiences and attachments of this world to their real, transmuted state as divine “Signs” and presences,¹²⁸ and at the same time “lowering” the transmuted Wine of their essential spiritual guidance, love, inspiration, and wisdom back into the wider human community, throughout history. Thus the painter leaves it carefully indeterminate whether that transmuted Wine depicted being raised by the long turban-band at the left — with one pitcher of that elixir already being carried off into the wider world beyond the margin — is being raised or lowered. For *both* functions of the realized Friends/*awliyā’* are equally omnipresent and indispensable, on every plane of manifest being.

What is decisive in this image, though, is that this spiritually central transformation of our experience and scattered practical loves into true inner knowing (the “exaltation” aspect), along with the inspiration and illumination and awakened love that flows from its “lowering” revelation to the historical, social world, are only visible and recognized here by those particular already intoxicated lovers/seekers who are *already* inwardly standing outside in the promised “Gardens.” Those more attentive readers and viewers familiar with the art and intentions of Hafiz and his painter are like the totally intoxicated dervishes and musicians already outside the walled-in, familiar building of

¹²⁷ Just beyond the intimate “bridal-chamber” of spiritual seclusion and initiation (see translation below), with its mysterious solitary couple in the room next to the poet-visionary, just inside the balcony.

¹²⁸ Readers will find more familiar explanations of Hafiz’s (and his painter’s) perspectives here in such memorable places as Yeats’s *The Circus Animals’ Desertion* and throughout all of Rilke’s quintessentially Hafizian elegies and his own accounts of the poetic process.

unenlightened worldly tippling, of constant “buying and selling,”¹²⁹ that defines the status of all those who imagine that their bodily, social existence (the visibly “constructed” world of their beliefs) is the whole of being — those characters who are no longer consuming or needing the outward, visible wine because they are already participating in the all-encompassing vision of those spirits at the top of the painting, even if their bodies are still visible on this lower plane.

With this basic metaphysical architectonic in mind — which, again, is constantly present throughout the Qur’an and every one of Hafiz’s incomparable ghazals, and most fully articulated in the immensely influential volumes of Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Illuminations” — the viewer/listener can then begin to enter into the marvelously complex human *dynamics* of the painting and poem, so powerfully revealed here in the intense energy and individuality of each of Sultan Muhammad’s characters. (With any reproduction of this painting, a magnifying glass is absolutely essential to begin to perceive the defining characteristics, loves, attachments, and intoxications — the endless manifold “wines” of our earthly lives and pairings — that are brought to life in each of these figures.) This demanding but intensely consuming process of beginning to make the essential existential connections between each of the figures of this painting (and of Hafiz’s underlying lyrics) and their corresponding concrete figurations in the realms of our own experience can of course only take place within each viewer/reader’s own active and thoughtful imagination. That is precisely the ongoing spiritual process that is so dramatically represented here by the love-struck, grey-bearded figure of the reclining poet, whose illuminated “Book” of the heart is all the Wine he needs — and for whom the totality of the rest of this painting only represents what is already fully present and transfigured in his own imagination.

One of the most pervasive features of the spiritual dynamics of this painting — making it a far more complex Islamic equivalent of Plato’s *Symposium* — is its focus on the frequently paired figures of a couple of transfixed lovers/drinkers, where one is pouring or offering the wine (or more accurately and problematically, the divine “Rose-water” of Love from this poem’s central verses) to the other partner. Here — as in so many of his uniquely dramatic miniatures — Sultan Muhammad offers a brilliant contemplative depiction of all the endlessly rich and familiar forms of human relationship and interaction that make it possible for us to learn, and then to gradually begin to manifest, the “Most

¹²⁹ A familiar allusion to the Qur’an’s constant cautionary reminder that we are all too often “selling short” our souls for the transient, ephemeral attachments of this lowest material realm.

Beautiful Names” of divine Beauty, Mercy and Compassion that typify the realized human being (*insān*), as well as those illusory fantasies of worldly power, control, security, and momentary pleasure to which human beings (in their unenlightened, semi-animal state as *bashar*) are initially so often attached.

A final key element of ambiguity and insight, which each reader must provide in the long process of actively contemplating and interpreting this painting, is suggested more clearly by the accompanying poem’s pointedly ambiguous words about “sleeping” and “waking” Fortune (*bakht* and *dawlat*: terms evoking each soul’s particular destiny and divine Providence). In ordinary usage, as Hafiz ironically reminds his readers, these phrases refer to manifest or non-existent, unrealized “good fortune” in their usual worldly sense of money, status, power, possessions, security, and so on. Yet those same key spiritual terms, as the Qur’an constantly reminds us, ultimately must refer to our uniquely individual inner states of knowing and realization, where the actual realities of our spiritual state are usually only revealed to us in the “dream-like” intermediate, contemplative world of the *barzakh* and “divine Imagination” (*khiyāl*) — here again symbolized by the central figure of the reclining poet, in whose spirit and “wine-cup” of the Heart this entire cosmic play is present and integrated at all its perpetually ongoing stages.

The essential secret of all those provocative loves and intoxications, of course, is fully revealed and highlighted in the final three verses of the underlying ghazal, translated below: in reality, each human soul can only fulfill its destiny through leaving behind all the unappreciated “Treasure-house” of its source-world of pure but innocent spirit and actively, consciously entering — lovingly enticed and fascinatedly entranced by the endlessly intoxicating manifestations (“curls,” “radiant cheeks,” and “thousand Graces”) of the divine Beloved/Mother (the root of *rahma* is the cosmic Womb) — into the spiritually richer crucible of all the outwardly transient ruins and stumblingly painful discoveries of the embodied human state, with its unique divine “Trust” of free choice and responsibility.

With that shared symbolic framework clearly in mind — as it was so immediately and richly present for each of Hafiz’s original readers and of this painting’s original viewers — we can now begin to appreciate just how this painting is meant to offer up the dramatic visual equivalent of Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctively all-encompassing “fusion” of every stage of Ghazali’s initial conceptual “stages” of religious life and realization. Outwardly, *all* of Sultan Muhammad’s highly individualized characters

and couples here — like each of the speakers in Plato’s *Symposium* — appear almost equally intoxicated, possessed, and out of control: almost all sport the “loosened turbans” (emblematic of grace and the intoxication of true love) mentioned in line two of Hafiz’s poem. The painter has clearly set up his painting so that — just as everywhere we turn throughout this world — his figures will immediately and spontaneously bring up to consciousness each viewer’s own varied critical judgments as to what is “real” or “bad” or “worthy” or “spiritual” intoxication, among all these apparent forms of earthly attachment, delusion, and already incipient suffering (the “hangovers” of earthly existence being one of the stock symbols of this same poetic/Qur’anic tradition). At that point, each viewer/reader is again and again faced with a very simple yet decisive choice: either we can become “critics” — the hypocritical plaintiff or judgmental critic (*muddā’ī*), being a central figure in Hafiz’s spiritual dramaturgy — who retreat into the familiarly comforting categories and judgments of our self and society, culture, and ego; or else, actively entering the “picture” of this divine Imagination/Shadow-play ourselves, we can begin to seek out, discover, and contemplate the deeper divine Wisdom and all-transforming Love, which reveals Her radiant cheeks, curls, and all the rest only in the process of actively and fully participating in this (ultimately inescapable) drama of “unveiling” of the divine Bride (the preceding line four of Hafiz’s poem), in that hesitant yet unavoidable marriage of intellect and imagination which is the uniquely human responsibility and “hidden Treasure” of each soul.

Either way, Sultan Muhammad’s painting, like each ghazal of Hafiz, is meant to be animated, to become a mirroring movie whose focal dramas, meanings, and eventual revelations all take place within each reader/viewer’s actively participating imagination and reflection — a film whose story and import necessarily appear differently each time we return to its contemplation. Both works offer a marvelous gateway into the extraordinary, and today so often neglected, transformation of imagination and intellect within the universe of the classical Islamic humanities.

VI HAFIZ’S WORDS FOR SULTAN MUHAMMAD’S MUSIC

We must conclude with a very approximate literal translation of the lyric ghazal underlying this miniature, which Sultan Muhammad’s painting interrupts precisely and dramatically in the exact *middle* of the poem, in this original manuscript collection of Hafiz’s verses. An adequate commentary and explanation of these verses, which would require a much longer essay than this one, must be reserved for another occasion. This initial translation should be sufficient, though, for readers to begin to explore

the endlessly fascinating interactions between Hafiz's symbolic verses and Sultan Muhammad's equally spirited imaginative re-creation of the poet's intentions in this masterly "illustration."

The doorway of the palace of the Magians¹³⁰ was swept and watered,
the Pir¹³¹ was seated, having greeted with peace both old and young;

The cup-pourers had all tightened their belts for serving Him,
but from the loosening of turbans¹³² an umbrella¹³³ was set up against the clouds;

The shimmering of the Cup and goblet veiled the light of the Moon,
the [radiant] cheeks of the young Magians had cut off the way of the sun!

The bride Fortune, in that [hidden] bridal chamber, with thousands of hidden graces,
curled her tresses and poured rose-water over the petals of the Rose.

The Angel of divine Love¹³⁴ grasped the pitcher of delight,
from its dregs poured rose-water over the faces of houris and fairies;

¹³⁰ The Magian fire-temple, like the Christian monastery, being a common image in Hafiz for the joyful Sufi reunion for the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), whose musicians (including in this case three wild "qalandar" dervishes) are memorably depicted in the garden at the bottom of this painting.

¹³¹ The old Sufi master and sage, who addresses Hafiz in lines 7-10; in this poem his disciples are depicted as his servants, young children, and charming and beautiful Moon-faced "mirrors" (the *shāhidān*, below) or youthful human manifestations of the divine Beauty and spiritual light (*nūr*, of the spiritual Moon). Here he can perhaps be seen initially as the prominent, white-haired figure (*pīr*, like the Arabic *shaykh*, means "old man" as well as "master") on the porch of the "Tavern" at the lower right of the painting.

¹³² Or "abandoning of heads"; in either case, this is a positive idiomatic Persian expression for ecstatic drunkenness and high spirits.

¹³³ Or "parasol" (one of the standard images of royal status) — only here blocking any clouds of ill fortune or spiritual obscurity rather than the sun.

¹³⁴ *Rahmat*: see note 17 above.

From the fervor and drunken uproar of the sweetly-mannered Beauties,¹³⁵

the sugar was broken, the jasmine spilled, the rebab was playing!

I greeted [the Pir] and with a smiling face he replied:

“O dreg-drainer, indigent, wine-smitten one,

Who would do this that you have done, out of feebleness of intention and judgment —

to leave the Treasure-house, and pitch your tent in these Tavern-ruins?!

I’m afraid that they’ll not let you be united with awakened [Good] Fortune,

because you, you fell asleep in the arms of sleeping Fortune!

Come to the Wine-house, Hafiz/ remember!, so I can present to you

a thousand ranks of those whose prayers have been answered.” [...] ¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Literally *shāhidān*, “witnesses” or manifestations of the divine Beauty (a technical Sufi term); the ecstatic contemplation of such beautiful adolescent faces was one (highly controversial and frequently disputed) aspect of some medieval spiritual orders. For Hafiz (and Ibn ‘Arabi), of course, the entire created world — and each human being contemplating that endless spectacle — *are nothing but* witnessed and witnessing of the manifested divine Beauty.

¹³⁶ To avoid complicated and tangential explanations, two panegyric lines to Hafiz’s patron have been omitted at this point in the translation (in Qazvini edition), or immediately preceding this final line (in the recent Khanlari edition).

PART II.

FROM THE QUR'AN TO THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES:

Chapter Five

ENCOUNTERING THE QUR'AN:
CONTEXTS AND APPROACHES

It is a truism that virtually nothing one may encounter in the great high-cultural achievements of Islamic civilization, or within the hundreds of distinctive localized Muslim cultures, can be fully understood without a profound knowledge of the Qur'an and the multitude of ways it has historically been understood and interpreted. Indeed most of the Islamic humanities, in all their endlessly creative and evolving manifestations, can be understood to a great extent as efforts to communicate effectively, to translate into realized human form, the teachings and unique forms of the Arabic Qur'an. Against that vast historical panorama, the purpose of this brief essay is much more modest: to prepare interested lay readers, with access only to a single reliable English version of the Qur'an and a few essential reference works, to begin to explore and appreciate those dimensions of the Arabic Qur'an which have so constantly shaped and colored the manifold forms of Islamic cultures and civilization.

In short, the Arabic Qur'an is different in a number of fundamental ways from everything that English readers normally associate with reading "a book." And equally importantly, the Arabic Qur'an continues to be actually present, to function in the lives of the vast majority of Muslims in specific concrete ways quite different from those that readers tend to associate with their usual approaches to the translated English Bible.¹³⁷ For that reason, we begin here by briefly outlining some of the most important contexts in which the Arabic Qur'an is still constantly present in the lives and experience of Muslims everywhere, in ways that are normally private and familial (hence socially invisible) for Muslims in Western cultures, but which are even more public and pervasive in all parts of the world with even a significant historical minority of Muslims. Then we move on, in Part II, to a variety of suggestions for ways that students can begin to move from a reliable English translation of the Qur'an toward a deeper appreciation of those complex meanings actually conveyed by the original Arabic.

¹³⁷ See our discussion of the recurrent misunderstandings arising from English translators' common use of familiar Biblical terms, in "Qur'an Translation and the Challenge of Communication: Toward a 'Literal' (Study) Version of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 2:2 (2000): 53-68. That essay provides a helpful supplement to the cautions and suggestions in Part II below.

Part I: The Presence of the Qur'an

The very root meaning of the word Qur'an, as it has historically been understood, is that of "recitation," and the weight of historical evidence likewise suggests that the oral recitation of the original revelations of the Qur'an, from the very beginning, formed an essential part of the fundamental liturgical acts of personal and communal prayer. This was certainly its primary context of use and transmission prior to the subsequent efforts of recording, collection, codification, and the even longer evolution of the current forms of Arabic orthography. Hence the recited, *aural* presence of the Qur'an—whether within the ritual prayer or in a host of other contexts outlined below—has remained throughout the centuries the primary way in which Muslims have initially encountered it, whether or not they can actually understand and interpret the uniquely challenging Arabic of the Qur'an. This is of course true above all among those *non*-Arabic speaking Muslims who have formed the great majority of Muslims throughout the world since at least the 6th/12th century.¹³⁸ Because this aural, musical dimension of the Qur'an as recitation is so primordial, and since recordings of excellent Qur'an reciters are now readily available in all digital media and over the Internet, no one who can access good-quality recitations today should begin to read an English translation of the Qur'an without first listening at length to a range of different reciters and forms of recitation.¹³⁹ As repeatedly witnessed with students of many ages and cultural backgrounds, the immediate power and effectiveness of the properly recited Qur'an is palpable to anyone—often to the point of spontaneous tears, as the Qur'an itself notes (at 5:83).¹⁴⁰ And for the beginning student otherwise limited to an English translation, the awakened awareness of this immediately accessible, hauntingly memorable dimension of the Qur'an is a potent antidote against the

¹³⁸ However, the unique language of the Arabic Qur'an is also distinctly different from most common dialects of spoken Arabic as well; indeed some of its unusual words and expressions were apparently mysterious even for its original audiences.

¹³⁹ Some helpful current websites, most including a range of translations and translated shorter commentaries as well as audio and video material, include www.quranonline.net, www.reciter.org, www.altafsir.com, and www.islamicity.com.

¹⁴⁰ In this study we follow the standard abridged scholarly citation system of giving first the number of the Sura, then the number of the verse or *āya*: thus (1:3) = *al-Fātiha*, verse 3. Traditional Muslim sources usually give instead the standard Arabic names associated with the Suras.

repeated obstacles and misunderstandings necessarily faced by anyone who then goes on to explore those versions of the Qur'an that are so far available in English.

Hearing the Qur'an:

Traditionally, a small but symbolically key portion of the Qur'an (the *bismillah*, or the *Fātiha*)¹⁴¹ is the first thing spoken into the ear of a newborn Muslim baby, and the last thing heard by someone dying—and that audible presence of the spoken or recited Qur'an carries on through the whole life-cycle of ritual, liturgical occasions outlined in more detail below. However, the highly public nature of many of those liturgical occasions in predominantly Muslim cultures means that the recited Qur'an tends to become a virtually omnipresent public background even for everyday, non-liturgical life—and this is true to an almost equal extent in most non-Arabic Muslim areas of the world, from West Africa to Indonesia or the Hui Muslim neighborhoods of China's cities. Indeed the historically very recent mass availability of electronic and digital media has meant that recorded forms of the recited Qur'an are now almost universally accessible and audible anywhere one moves in the Islamic world: from walking through public markets, the taxi driver's cassette or CD-player, various portable media players, dedicated television channels (now on satellite and cable outlets in the West), and on to the selections of Qur'an recitation normally available on the airlines of every Muslim country. Thus in very recent years, the audible presence of the Arabic Qur'an has everywhere suddenly expanded even beyond its traditional liturgical contexts and uses outlined below.

At a closely derived level, the centrality of the actual sounds and rhythms of the Qur'an is directly mirrored in those diverse local forms of music, poetry and rhythmic recitation—usually collectively included under the central Qur'anic rubric of *dhikr*, the infinitely varied prayerful “recollection, remembrance and repetition” of the divine Reality—which are almost everywhere among the pre-eminent forms of the local Islamic humanities, both in popular and more learned, elite contexts.¹⁴² Whether in Arabic or in any other classical Islamic language, the richly innovative forms of

¹⁴¹ The “*bismillah*” refers to the longer Arabic phrase (translatable as “*In the Name of God the All-Loving, the All-Compassionate*”) that opens virtually all of the Suras of the Qur'an.

¹⁴² See our accessible introductory study “Remembrance and Repetition: The Spiritual Foundations of Islamic Aesthetics,” *Sufi Magazine*, 47 (2000): 15-20, which will appear in expanded form in *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

spiritual music and poetry are inseparable from the constant archetypal inspirations—both symbolic or more concretely poetic and rhythmic—of the aural Qur'an, often in ways that are so self-evident that they remain virtually unconscious within the cultures concerned.

Seeing the Qur'an—the Sacred Presence of the Arabic Script:

Throughout history, the assimilation of Islam within a new cultural or linguistic context has been rapidly marked by the practice of writing the local language—whether universally, or simply by local Muslims—in the sacred Arabic script of the Qur'an, which provides a kind of consonantal shorthand that has been readily adapted for more than thirty different languages in the past. One wider sociological basis of this recurrent phenomenon seems to have been the common insistence of Muslim parents almost everywhere on creating locally adapted primary Qur'an schools (*maktab*) or tutoring facilities for very young children (primary age or even younger) that could provide a basic initiation into the recitation of at least the minimal number of Qur'anic verses needed to perform the ritual prayers, along with some basic skills in writing out and recognizing the sacred Arabic text. All this basic initiation normally occurred at an age prior to what were, until very recently, the time-consuming and expensive, typically quite rare processes of formal instruction and full literacy in both classical Arabic and written forms of the local vernacular languages.¹⁴³ Thus in many areas outside the Arabic world, the very recent introduction of alternative (Romanized or Cyrillic) alphabets by colonial or modern “reformist” powers, or even the outright suppression of all formal Islamic education under most Communist regimes, has often gone hand-in-hand with the widespread elimination of this once widespread proto-literacy in at least the basic elements of the sacred Qur'anic alphabet.

Despite these recent negative developments, the visual presence of the Arabic sacred alphabet and its immediate religious associations has remained extremely important everywhere Muslims live. Some of its most familiar public manifestations, of course, are in architectural settings—given that monumental public buildings (just as in the West) were primarily religious foundations until very recent

¹⁴³ For centuries, of course, a similarly wide-ranging cultural role was played, prior to Vatican II, by the need to teach at least a basic set of Latin prayers, for liturgical purposes, in Catholic schools worldwide, coupled with the much wider uses of Latin at higher levels of education, again across many cultural and linguistic divides. Until very recently, the learned written forms of many major Islamic languages (Persian, Turkish, Malay, etc.) likewise presupposed a significant knowledge of the classical Arabic of the Qur'an.

times. Thus mosques, schools, tombs, shrines, hospitals, kitchens for the poor, and places of pilgrimage—whether ancient or modern—tend to be filled with calligraphy and tiled versions of the divine Names, invocations, and passages of the Qur'an. Yet the same visual and symbolic imagery is reflected, even in tribal and other domestic contexts, in the recurrent imagery of prayer-rugs and other carpets and textile arts. At a deeper and often more religiously significant level, the related visual and symbolic (including literary) iconography of all the traditional Islamic humanities are thoroughly pervaded by the calligraphic and other Qur'anic symbolism.

Of course all Western artistic and literary traditions have been just as pervasively shaped by equally wide-ranging Biblical influences. But the Qur'anic equivalents of those symbolic processes, and their complex historical pathways of creativity and transformation, are normally entirely invisible to non-Muslim (and unfortunately, even to many Western-educated Muslim) viewers. To take only one of the most omnipresent examples, the basic colors of the four Qur'anic elements, which are inseparable from their distinctive eschatological and metaphysical symbolic associations in the Qur'an, richly determine the implicit color-schemes of religious structures, paintings, calligraphy and the other visual arts throughout most of the Islamic world. Hence the relative rarity of red (symbolizing the infernal "Fire"), and the corresponding powerful insistence on the blue of the spiritual heavens, or the even more pervasive presence of green, immediately associated with the "water" of Life/Spirit/Prophethood and the complex spiritual symbolism of vegetation and the eschatological Gardens and streams that runs throughout the Qur'an. Likewise, no Muslim familiar with the Qur'an can encounter the prayer-niche or the lamps of any mosque without experiencing the immediate inner resonance of cosmic associations with the entire elaborate metaphysical imagery of the famous Light-verses of the Qur'an (24:35-40)

Another, already quasi-liturgical illustration is the centrality of Arabic calligraphy, across all Muslim cultures, as both the most revered form of the visual arts and potentially an elaborately demanding spiritual discipline beginning in childhood and unfolding throughout life. And that original sacred role of Qur'anic calligraphy is also reflected in the similarly central artistic and cultural role of all the manifold "arts of the book": from gilding, paper-making, marbling, and leather-working to the actual masterpieces of Islamicate poetry and miniature painting that those associated arts help to communicate and illuminate. Much the same is true, on an even wider scale, of the role of Arabic script in those textile arts which have often been economically central to pre-modern cultures and economies, or in the related arts of jewelry, metalworking, and glass.

In addition to the public centrality of the Arabic script wherever it still conveys the official national languages, the script of the Qur'an remains an almost omnipresent socio-religious marker of one's religious identity in private and familial contexts, beginning with the prominent display in most Muslim homes of at least some framed calligraphy of the Qur'an, divine Names, prayers, or other distinctive related religious icons (images of the Kaaba in Mecca, etc.), along with the special reverence accorded to any familial copy of the Arabic Qur'an. On an even more private and intimate level, Muslims in many parts of the world today wear amulets in precious metal engraved with short lines or verses of the Qur'an (especially the *bismillah*, the *Fātiha*, or the famous "Throne-verse"), seal-rings engraved with shorter Qur'anic phrases or the Arabic names of key sacred figures, or carry prayer-beads often embossed with Arabic divine Names or similar Qur'anic expressions used in litanies.

Experiencing the Qur'an—Ritual and Liturgical Contexts:

The liturgical presence of the original Arabic Qur'an, which combines its near-universal aural and visual presence with active recitation in various forms of prayer or divine remembrance, is central to the three basic ritual cycles shared by virtually all forms of Islam, as well as to many other integral aspects of everyday life. These ritual contexts include the life-cycle from birth to death; the daily individual cycle of the various forms of prayer (necessarily involving recitation of the Qur'anic Arabic); and the annual more public cycle of particular holy days and months, which has more significant local and sectarian variations. In all of these situations, prior to the very recent availability of printed Qur'anic texts¹⁴⁴ and the even more recent invention of sound-recording, there was a virtually universal need—already emphasized in the earliest hadith and historical accounts of Islamic tradition—for highly trained, spiritually effective local reciters of the Qur'an, as well as for widespread memorization of the actual text, given the intrinsic pre-modern rarity of full hand-calligraphed texts. Thus one finds, throughout the Muslim world, elaborate traditional systems for training in rote memorization, as well as

¹⁴⁴ At least partly because the traditional reverence for the calligraphed Qur'anic text, as well as related technical challenges (still evident today in the persistent difficulties involved in providing fully accurate computerised versions of Qur'anic calligraphy), printed or lithographed books—in general, and not simply of the Qur'an—only became widely accepted in most regions of the Islamic world in the course of the 19th century, and in some areas even more recently.

even more complex training institutions and rules governing the moving formal recitation of the Qur'an.¹⁴⁵

In more traditional and longstanding Muslim cultures, however, the presence of the Arabic Qur'an is perhaps most immediately visible not in what we usually think of as formally "religious" rituals, but in a host of smaller customary actions that are normally so omnipresent as to be virtually automatic and unconscious within the particular cultures in question. These include the everyday usage of the cautionary phrase "if God wills" (*in shā' Allāh*, based on a Qur'anic injunction) after any reference to future actions or eventualities; the even more widespread recitation, silently or audibly, of the *bismillah* (the formula "In the Name of God, the All-Loving, the All-Compassionate" which opens almost all the chapters of the Qur'an) or of the entire opening *Fātiha* (1: 1-7) before eating or before initiating virtually any everyday action; the recitation of the *Fātiha* or other prayer-formulae when passing by places of burial; the automatic recitation of standard Qur'anically-based blessings after any mention of Muhammad or other prophets and holy figures; or the extremely widespread use of prayer-beads for recitation of Qur'anic formulae of the divine Names and related invocations. One could also include in this category the rules for the special treatment accorded to the written Arabic text (*mushaf*) of the Qur'an, both in public places and within the home, where it is normally accorded a special place of high dignity, often with a distinctive reading-stand, and never to be touched or opened without special ablutions, intentions, and purification, as in the preparations for the ritual prayer itself.

In terms of the major life-cycle rituals shared across most Muslim cultures and sects, the recitation of the Arabic Qur'an—usually in elaborate public, communal forms in more traditional cultures, and often in more private or familial forms in Western settings—is often central to the rituals associated with the cycle leading from birth through namegiving, circumcision, the individual practice of ritual prayer (*salāt*), betrothal and marriage, and grave illness, on to death (with special prayers particularly associated with funeral rituals). Since the performance of the daily cycle of a minimum of five complex ritual prayers (*salāt*)—and often a considerably larger number in more pious or strictly observant settings—presupposes the memorization and faultless recitation of at least several shorter

¹⁴⁵ See Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1985), and William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).

Suras of the Qur'an, as well as related ritual formulae of blessings, thanks and petitionary prayer (*du'ā*) also in Qur'anic Arabic, the point when a child is considered sufficiently responsible to begin performing those daily prayers is an age at which virtually every Muslim, of whatever language or culture, must necessarily memorize a number of Qur'anic and related Arabic passages.

Although the individual recitation of this initial Qur'anic repertoire might take on a somewhat routine character within the repeated daily performance of the ritual prayers, the communal performance of the ritual prayer, whether most commonly at the Friday noon prayer or in other group settings, immediately provides other occasions when the prayer-leader will often bring in other, less familiar sections of the Qur'an. The gradual result of this constantly expanding, lifelong inner process of familiarization and deeper recollection of the Qur'an is that each person is increasingly led and prepared in this way to spontaneously discover—often in the very process of praying itself—the essential spiritual connections between the decisive spiritual tests and experiences arising in their own life and the corresponding spiritual lessons and insights conveyed by the appropriate verses of the Qur'an. Tellingly, both the individual verses of the recited/written Qur'an, and the infinite phenomena of our experience and all creation, are equally described in the Qur'an itself by the same recurrent Arabic term: *āyāt*, or “divine Signs.” And in many traditional Muslim settings, as one can readily see when visiting mosques anywhere in the world, the completion of the initial prescribed prayer is itself often the prelude to an even longer individual or group process, whether silently or audibly, of the recitation (*dhikr*) of more traditional Arabic litanies (drawn both from the Qur'an and the Prophetic sayings) of prayer and recollection.

While Muslim communities and cultures normally have a number of important holy days and related ritual practices in which Qur'anic recitation and prayer usually play an important role, the role of the Qur'an is particularly heightened and central during the fasting month of Ramadan, which is closely associated in many Prophetic sayings with the actual revelation of the Qur'an itself. Thus during the evenings of Ramadan (*tarāwīh* prayers)—as on other holy days and special spiritual gatherings—public observances of the collective recitation of portions of the Qur'an and related Arabic prayers (*du'ā*), or of recitation and communal responses, again become part of memorable collective and emotionally moving rituals. At the same time, Muslims are enjoined to make a special individual effort to read through the Qur'an—traditionally in the original Arabic, though very recently in translated versions—during that

particular month of collective fasting, which is normally devoted to heightened contemplation and withdrawal from the routines and distractions of normal daily life.

Cultural and Intellectual Dimensions—the Qur'an in the Religious Sciences and in the Islamic Humanities:

For considerably more than a millenium, whenever Muslims have sought to understand the meanings and teachings of the Qur'an, they have not turned to translations, but to the study of the Arabic Qur'an itself. And that demanding intellectual study of the Qur'an, whatever its original guiding motivations (legal, theological, spiritual, political, and so on) has always been heavily "mediated". That is to say, such Qur'anic study has normally been deeply embedded within a complex historical web of traditional interpretive perspectives. And those interpretive assumptions are profoundly interrelated, even though particular traditions may articulate radically differing alternative conclusions and notions of scriptural authority. There are two equally essential, and often complementary, dimensions to that ongoing mediating process: the immense complex of the traditional Arabic religious sciences (available only to a small group of learned specialists or *'ulamā'*), and the even more omnipresent influence of locally adapted popular forms of the Islamic humanities. Yet neither of these massively complex factors determining and coloring traditional Muslim understandings of the Qur'an (whether in the Arabic, or more rarely in translation) is normally accessible to non-specialist Western students approaching the Qur'an through a simple English translation. Even more importantly, as the preceding contextual observations have already highlighted, the essential parameters of these complex Islamic contextual traditions in no way correspond to the assumptions Western-educated readers today normally have about the nature and expected uses of the Bible, or indeed of books and scriptures more broadly.

To begin with, what we would normally think of as the serious intellectual study of the actual meanings of the Qur'an—as opposed to the manifold ritual contexts summarized above—presupposes, even for native Arabic speakers, years of intensely dedicated assimilation of the uniquely complex Arabic language and symbolic vocabulary of the Qur'an, a demanding process of internalization and familiarization which is actually quite different from (and indeed often incompatible with) any sort of purely rote memorization. As a result, that kind of adequate scholarly preparation for understanding the Qur'an has for centuries been the preserve, in most traditional contexts, of a relatively small (usually

urban, male, and rarely young) learned elite.¹⁴⁶ Even more importantly, that basic initiation into the intellectual study of the meanings and depths of the Qur'an has normally been inseparable from the even more demanding mastery of a wide spectrum of intimately related preparatory and interpretive religious sciences, which usually require many years of assiduous preparation. These essential contextual disciplines would include, at a minimum, the study of Qur'anic grammar and syntax; Arabic lexicography and philology; Qur'anic rhetoric (*balāgha*); the collections of the traditions of the Prophet (*hadīth*); studies of early Islamic sacred and prophetic history (*sīra*, *qisas al-anbiyā'*, etc.); other related literatures assumed to reflect the decisive historical contexts of many Qur'anic revelations (*asbāb al-nuzūl*, *tafsīr*, etc.); and a basic grasp of the key interpretive disciplines of dialectical theology (*kalām*) and the principles of jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*). Even today, most reliable scholarly writing about the Qur'an and its interpretation, even in Western languages, necessarily presupposes at least a rudimentary knowledge of the structures, procedures, and sources of this immense historically accumulated body of related Arabic disciplines.

As a result of those historical factors, traditional Muslim cultures—and their scholastic representatives even today—have usually left little religiously significant space for independent, direct vernacular *translations* of the Arabic Qur'an. As any student of Islam quickly discovers, the locally decisive forms of each Muslim's distinctive religious beliefs and normative practice have almost unimaginably complex and diverse historical roots and sources; and those locally operative religious realities can almost never be understood or explained as being directly “dictated” by this or that particular verse or passage readily discernible in a translated Qur'an. Instead, the particular, locally prevalent forms of Islam in any traditional Muslim setting normally reflect those pertinent Islamic humanities which so richly illuminate and elaborate, in a locally meaningful language and cultural

¹⁴⁶ Of course much the same could be said of the fully literate scriptural specialists and authorities in most world-religious traditions, prior to the radically new historical developments connected with the Reformation, mass literacy, and the spread of printing and popularly affordable vernacular books (including Bible translations)—developments which only superficially touched much of the Islamic world until very recently. The very recent popularization in many Muslim countries of the internet and mass digital media is already bringing about at least equally dramatic and unforeseeable transformations in the traditional structures of religious education and interpretive authority summarized here.

forms, the central ethical and spiritual teachings of the Qur'an.¹⁴⁷ However, when we look more closely at the historical origins of these Islamic humanities, their most influential creators were often highly learned scholars and artists who were themselves seeking to communicate the essential teachings of the traditional religious sciences (with their scholastic Arabic approaches to the study of the Qur'an and hadith) more directly and effectively to much wider Muslim audiences obliged to live and practice in very different linguistic and cultural settings. Indeed this constantly renewed creative process of *interpretive communication* of the Qur'an is particularly well illustrated by the relationship between the Qur'an itself and the thousands of Prophetic teachings recorded in the collections of hadith. For many of those hadith, including the most influential among them, often take the form of the Prophet's particular interpretation or concrete application of abstract, symbolic Qur'anic principles in a more accessible language and through stories and imagery directly meaningful to his many different questioners and audiences.

Thus the traditional complex of Arabic religious sciences that are normally used to study and interpret the Qur'an, by their very nature, are destined to remain the closed and specialized domain of a relative handful of intellectual specialists—even if those disciplines could be adequately translated into other languages. But the Islamic humanities provide other, often strikingly effective tools for penetrating and grasping the meanings of the Qur'an; and their spiritual, moral and cultural effectiveness have been demonstrated over many centuries, indeed often through several further creative passages from one Islamicate language or culture into another. So Western students wishing to grasp and penetrate the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the Arabic Qur'an are well advised to begin their study with those time-proven masterpieces of cross-cultural translation and communication that are exemplified by readily available English versions of Rumi's *Masnavi*, 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, and a rapidly increasing body of equally accessible forms of the Islamic humanities, including spiritual music and traditional visual arts. As we shall see, those effective creative means for expressing and

¹⁴⁷ See the outlines of this recurrent historical process in our study "Situating Islamic 'Mysticism': Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality," *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R. Herrera (New York/Berlin: Peter Lang, 1993): 293-334. Also included in our forthcoming *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

communicating the meanings of the Qur'an have also been constantly shaped by many of those unique qualities of the language and symbolism of the Qur'an which are briefly introduced in Part II.

Part II: Studying the Qur'an in English

Students approaching the Qur'an in English now have available literally dozens of translations, with several new versions and related introductory studies continuing to appear each year.¹⁴⁸ Those recent repeated efforts of translation usually reflect a contrasting set of motives, including perennial dissatisfactions with earlier versions. Thus some are openly seeking to render more adequately the undeniably powerful beauty of the original Arabic, its unique magic of sound, imagery and poetic rhythm.¹⁴⁹ Others are seeking to better communicate some of what they consider its theological dimensions of meaning or right belief, whether emphasizing particular types of interpretation (sectarian, scientific, apologetic), or simply trying to incorporate for first-time readers more of the complex dimensions of historical and contextual scholarship we have just discussed.¹⁵⁰ Still others, like many contemporary Bible translators, strive to communicate something of the Qur'an in more popularly accessible, "easy-reading" narrative prose.

In contrast, the suggestions, cautions, and interpretive guidelines suggested here relate to another, quite different and specifically pedagogical motive: *How can students limited to English begin*

¹⁴⁸ Two of the most comprehensive introductions to the study of the Qur'an in translation, designed for university-level students, are Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).

¹⁴⁹ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999) provides a particularly effective and accessible example of what can be accomplished in this regard. The volume includes annotated and carefully crafted translations of many of the shorter Meccan Suras that are the primary interest here in Part II, as well as a very useful CD of examples of Qur'anic recitation.

¹⁵⁰ Perhaps the most helpful Qur'an translation of this type (providing very extensive notes dealing with related historical contexts, hadith, and other traditional contextual material) is still that of Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003). The recently established *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* now provides an extremely helpful venue for keeping track of many new translations and scholarly publications in this immense field.

to discover the meanings actually inherent in the underlying Arabic Qur'an? This kind of informed contextual understanding is indispensable for grasping the underlying connections between the unique structures of the Arabic Qur'an, on the one hand, and their subsequent interpretive unfolding throughout those two foundational dimensions of classical Islamic civilization we have just discussed: i.e., the multiple learned disciplines of the traditional Arabic religious sciences; and their even more influential creative manifestations through the Islamic humanities. This particular educational motive likewise reflects the pedagogically obstinate reality that the Arabic Qur'an itself is anything but easy reading. Instead, at least as much as any other classical text or scripture a student is ever likely to encounter, the actual Qur'an is very challenging to understand—although the effort required to appreciate it is also infinitely revealing and rewarding, if its intrinsic difficulties and resulting interpretive potentials are openly recognized and clearly acknowledged from the outset.

For this particular pedagogical purpose—i.e., of accurately conveying to English readers the distinctive structures and interpretive challenges and potential of the Arabic Qur'an, without being hobbled by the assumptions of later traditional forms of contextualisation and interpretation—there is so far no substitute for the widely available version of A. J. Arberry (*The Qur'an Interpreted*), despite the particular misunderstandings often generated by its frequent recourse to quasi-Biblical English vocabulary. For this particular study purpose, Hanna Kassis' *Concordance of the Qur'an*,¹⁵¹ which relates every word of Arberry's English back directly to its underlying triliteral Arabic roots and thematic interconnections, provides an indispensable tool for opening up those unifying semantic dimensions of the Arabic roots of the Qur'an which underpin its distinctive language, symbolism, and distinctive literary structures discussed below. Thus the careful use of this concordance enables any student using Arberry to quickly locate all the widely scattered passages involving a particular Qur'anic root (or set of roots), that in turn express and develop a single pervasive symbolic theme. And just as with music, this underlying thematic-symbolic structure, initially invisible or only dimly discernable in any English translation, is the most basic key to discovering the multifaceted meanings and intentions of the Qur'an. Finally, the new multi-volume *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (supplemented where necessary

¹⁵¹ Hanna Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1984). Under each Arabic root, Kassis also mentions the different English equivalents used by a range of other popular English Qur'an translations, in addition to Arberry.

by the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*) provides timely explanations of the multitude of unexplained references, contexts and literary forms, in short entries which tend to be readily understandable by non-specialists, yet historically representative and well-documented.¹⁵²

Since the problems encountered when students first approach the Qur'an in English constantly differ according to the individual in question and the particular passages and problems each student may encounter, it is difficult—perhaps even counter-productive—to construct a single logical order of exposition that would integrate all those different cautions and positive allusions that may be helpful for each reader. For that reason, the following pointers, both positive and negative, have been divided into three larger sections, beginning with (A) a series of truly fundamental considerations that apply to almost every beginning reader of an English Qur'an. They are followed by (B) some basic interpretive principles (drawn from the Qur'an itself, together with a wide range of classical Muslim interpreters) that tend to be overlooked by student readers. To conclude, we have briefly mentioned (C) a helpful list of some basic unifying themes, all central to the Qur'an and its eventual ramifications throughout Islamic civilization, which again often escape beginning readers of English translations. Within each of these three sections, however, the positive suggestions and cautions alike are briefly summarized in separate paragraphs, without implying any order of relative importance.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that a few of the following suggestions relate to readers who are trying to understand the Qur'an *as a whole*, which requires very demanding study and much time for beginning readers. Many other points deal with fundamental themes and literary features which can already be grasped through close study and meditation on a few carefully chosen Suras, as many students are already trained to do in the careful analysis of poetry, in particular. That kind of close, repeated reading and empathetic, comparative study of shorter passages is often more effective and rewarding, especially for readers with only limited time to devote to this study.¹⁵³

A. Basic Cautions and Considerations:

¹⁵² *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Damen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2005).

¹⁵³ Camille Helminski's *The Light of Dawn: Daily Readings From the Holy Qur'an* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998) provides a beautiful, poetically rendered illustration of the usefulness of this particular approach, which at the same time more closely reflects the actual contemplative uses of the Qur'an within Islamic prayer and spirituality.

- **Historical Contexts:** Perhaps the most basic consideration that any beginning reader of the Qur'an must keep in mind is the very different situation of the Prophet Muhammad and his handful of often persecuted followers during the initial, Meccan period of his teaching, in contrast with the later, much more publicly social and political situation when he was leading the nascent Muslim community based in the oasis city of Yathrib, later known as *al-Madīna* ("The City [of the Prophet]").¹⁵⁴ While traditional Muslim scholarship and modern philologists differ in many ways about where to situate chronologically particular Suras and verses, what is most important for any reader approaching the Qur'an for the first time is to begin by focusing on those Suras—primarily located in the *last* half of English translations—which are normally accepted to be Meccan. This is because they do not pose the immensely complex issues of "historical" (or legendary) and interpretive contextualisation and assumptions which are constantly raised by the various theological, social, legal, tribal, and military contexts that readers must somehow supply for so many later, Medinan Suras.

During the initial Meccan period, Muhammad's role, as reflected in the Meccan Suras, was that of a preacher and "warner" leading a threatened and initially quite small group of highly devoted monotheist worshippers in a hostile pagan city. In that early context, the revealed teachings of the Qur'an focus on a recurrent set of metaphysical and spiritual concerns. These include the awareness of the reality and attributes of the One God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; and of humankind's spiritual origin and ultimate destiny and Judgment, as well as our shared ethical and spiritual responsibilities in that vast metaphysical framework. Those same metaphysical and spiritual concerns continue to pervade the later, Medinan sections of the Qur'an. However in that later period, many verses of the Qur'an also often refer to the Prophet's increasing role in leading and shaping an increasingly distinct socio-religious community which was constantly engaged in a long military and

¹⁵⁴ The most accessible popular introduction to the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community is Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (London: Inner Traditions, 1987), which is particularly helpful in introducing the relevant images of the Prophet in later Islamic traditions of piety and spirituality. Robinson's *Discovering the Qur'an* (n. 12 above) provides an extensive Bibliography of the wider scholarly literature, and a balanced discussion of more recent historical and philological approaches. A wide spectrum of traditional Muslim commentary literature is summarized (so far for Suras 1-3) in Mahmoud Ayyoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: SUNY, 1984 and 1992).

political struggle for its survival. These Medinan Suras therefore reflect those challenging circumstances and the motivations of very different groups of supporters (and enemies), while that nascent Muslim community gradually becomes increasingly differentiated from surrounding religious groups and cultural norms in both its prescribed practices and its distinctive ethical and spiritual norms.

The essential problem for readers approaching an English Qur'an—and one equally shared by those who can read the original Arabic—is that we have no other contemporary historical sources concerning the actual events and contexts that are alluded to and presupposed throughout these later Medinan Suras. Instead, the traditional contextual materials presented by those scholarly Arabic disciplines that were elaborated in following centuries frequently reflect later theological, sectarian, and political concerns and assumptions. Such later issues include, for example, the bloody intra-Muslim civil wars (*fitan*) and sectarian divisions which marked many decades following the Prophet's death; or the elaboration of various theological and especially juridical schools of interpretation, including the complex challenges involved in relating the Qur'an itself to the vast body of hadith, portraying the Prophet's teaching and example, that accumulated at this time.

The essential pedagogical problem posed by these Medinan verses and their hypothetical historical contexts is twofold. First, there is no way to reliably summarize all those problematic historical contexts and their operative assumptions in any kind of quick and value-neutral way. Even a brief glance at the relevant scholarly literatures makes clear how much each alternative interpretation often remains essentially hypothetical, dependent on selective readings of historically later evidence. Secondly, and more importantly, Qur'an translations or commentaries which supply some simplified, highly selective version of the supposed events in question almost inevitably turn readers working in English toward approaching these Medinan Suras as being somehow like familiar “historical” or “legal” books of the Bible. Unfortunately, that sort of imposed approach keeps students from tackling what in fact remains central for most later strands of Muslim Qur'an interpretation. Rather than focusing on those Medinan events simply as remote “sacred history” or legal precedents, later interpreters often highlight instead the ways in which those exemplary conflicts, and the challenging ethical and spiritual issues they raise, actually illuminate the main body of the Qur'an's ethical, practical and metaphysical teachings. To take one key example, the many Medinan verses referring to the “hypocrites” (*munāfiqūn*) are understood to reflect spiritual states and perennial dilemmas all human beings encounter in the course of discovering and deepening our faith. For all these reasons, beginning students

are well advised to first develop their familiarity and understanding of the Meccan Suras (at the end of English translations), before moving on to tackle the more problematic Medinan contexts only under the sort of well-informed and appropriately balanced tutorial guidance which is not yet really available in English books.

- ***Order and Structure:*** Moving on to the very basic issue of overall form and structure, any beginning reader of an English Qur'an needs to take into account all the manifold ways in which the Arabic Qur'an is quite different from what we ordinarily think of as a "book." To begin with, as already noted, the initial revelations were first *recited* and (according to traditional accounts) then recorded in the initially scattered form in which they were revealed. So the particular current arrangement and order of Suras and their constitutive verses (*āyāt*)—which is certainly absolutely important for understanding the ways later Muslims have come to read and interpret the Qur'an—is generally acknowledged, even by most Muslim authorities, to have been codified and imposed at a historically later stage. This later codification process is also reflected in the now traditional identification (included in most Arabic printed texts and many translated versions) of certain Suras, as well as sometimes of particular verses within Suras, as being either Meccan or Medinan.

The traditional order of the codified Suras—with the exception of *al-Fātiha*, the short "opening" Sura whose central liturgical roles in Islam have already been discussed—is arranged primarily by their relative length. Thus study and memorization of the Qur'an normally begins—at what English readers understandably, but rather misleadingly, tend to assume is the "end" of their translation—with the shortest Suras, and then moves toward the longest ones.¹⁵⁵ While there is therefore no pretense of a strictly chronological organization, still the longest Suras as a whole are almost entirely from the later, Medinan period; thus readers in English can safely begin, as already suggested, with the many shorter Suras that are almost entirely from the *earlier*, Meccan period.

Readers in English need to keep in mind that neither the Sura numbers nor the apparent "titles" provided in translations (actually simple mnemonic words that were used at a very early stage to identify a particular familiar group of verses) should be considered as somehow forming part of the actual

¹⁵⁵ Books written in Arabic (and other languages using Arabic script) of course normally begin from the right-hand side of the opened book—which English readers naturally assume to be the book's end.

revealed Qur’anic text. Likewise, the actual Arabic is entirely devoid of *any* of the familiar markers (and apparent structures) of punctuation, paragraphs, and capitalization that translators so helpfully—and often misleadingly—tend to supply in English. In a number of well-known cases, for example, the identical Qur’anic text can be read and understood in very different ways depending on where the reader chooses to stop (or to continue) in construing a sentence. Even more importantly, the Arabic of the Qur’an repeatedly involves—as a distinctive and fundamental structural feature—highly indeterminate pronoun references, such that each alternative reading yields a range of different, yet often remarkably revealing and complementary, sets of meanings. The fact that this highly distinctive Qur’anic feature is almost never reflected in English translations¹⁵⁶ is particularly unfortunate, since that characteristic recurrence of pronoun indeterminacy—and the multiple alternative meanings to which it gives rise—is one of the distinctive features of Qur’anic rhetoric that is later marvelously carried over into the mystical poetic traditions of the Islamic humanities in other languages.

The importance for a beginning reader of each of these recurrent features of indeterminacy, ambiguity and multiple meanings, when they are eliminated or simply ignored by the translator, is that such translations silently take away from the English reader that constantly ongoing challenge of discerning and comparing multiple perspectives and interpretations which is in fact so central to the actual discovery and deciphering of the Arabic Qur’an. To put this more plainly, the result for the reader using a translation is roughly comparable to the difference between reading Plato or *Finnegan’s Wake* in the original, and perusing a “Cliffs Notes” handbook version.

- ***The “Literal” is the Symbolic:*** Virtually nothing in the Arabic Qur’an has a somehow “literal” or straightforward prosaic meaning. The problematic and explicitly symbolic nature of the key expressions of the Qur’an is constantly highlighted and developed throughout Suras from all periods, perhaps most dramatically in the often completely mystifying language of the earliest short eschatological Suras (again, found at the end of English translations). In the Arabic, this uniquely mysterious, open-ended quality of the entire Qur’anic language is particularly visible when we compare the Qur’an with the Arabic of the hadith, which contain and elaborate virtually all the symbols and familiar vocabulary of the Qur’an. Yet the hadith are normally in a far more readily accessible, often

¹⁵⁶ Apart from the standard—but often problematic—use of capitalization to indicate apparently “divine” pronominal references.

prosaic, Arabic whose formal rhetorical and structural qualities are completely different from the distinctive rhetoric of the Qur'an.

Thus the first-time reader of an English Qur'an needs to pay the closest attention to those many passages of the Qur'an that repeatedly refer to its central assumption of multiple levels of understanding, and to the corresponding necessity of appropriate rhetoric and symbols designed to communicate very differently to different spiritual and intellectual types of human beings, each with their distinctive receptivities and stages of discernment. The Qur'an itself repeatedly suggests to its readers, often in dramatically highlighted terms, just how it is intended to be understood on many levels (e.g., in the particularly famous and controversial passage at 3:7)—and how much of its language will still defy the understanding of all but the most inspired readers.

In short, this means that within the Qur'an it is precisely the "literal" reading that is overtly and quite intentionally symbolic. This constant reiteration of the profoundly symbolic nature of the Qur'an itself—as indeed of every dimension of creation—means that every reader of the Qur'an (as much in the original Arabic as with any translation) is constantly summoned to acknowledge his or her own undeniable ignorance with regard to some of its most central expressions and symbols. But that acknowledgment of ignorance is inseparable from the reader's simultaneous recognition of the *essential mystery* of those passages. And that acknowledgement of ignorance is what immediately forces one to begin to search for the appropriate practical, intellectual and spiritual keys (a few of which are discussed below) that might help to unveil those mysteries. The unavoidable spiritual ignorance and mystery in question here have nothing to do with the reader simply being a "beginner" or somehow lacking certain sources of helpful information. Instead, as is attested by centuries of interpreters from the most diverse perspectives and traditions, this troubling experience of simultaneous ignorance and mystery only tends to increase in step with one's learning and familiarity with the Arabic Qur'an. This is a point at which Arberry's faithful literalness particularly well serves his English readers.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ See also our experimental development of a variety of intentionally more literal and visually revealing translation devices in "Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities," Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift issue of *Journal of Turkish Studies* 18 (1994): 201-224; to be included in *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

• ***Awareness and Experience:*** Some of the most influential commentators on the Qur'an have often focused on its characteristic insistence, from first to last, on the ongoing interplay of inner "knowing" (*ilm*: a term better translated in this context as "spiritual awareness"; always equivalent here to *īmān* or true faith) and spiritually appropriate action (*amal*).¹⁵⁸ In other words, the central metaphysical teachings of the Qur'an are expressed and revealed in such a way that an honestly engaged reader cannot ever withdraw into an abstract, purely intellectual, theoretical and theological approach to them. Instead, the serious reader is constantly obliged to make the essential existential connection between its pointedly symbolic teachings and those corresponding dimensions of action and experience which reveal both the extent and the limitations of our spiritual awareness, as they gradually open up a deeper, individually grounded appreciation of the actual realities underlying those symbols. This ascending spiral of realization is inseparable from the quintessential role of imagination, or what we might more broadly call "spiritual intuition," in perceiving and penetrating the meanings of the Qur'an.

Again, this basic hermeneutic principle of *active participation*—at once intellectual, imaginative and spiritual—is equally applicable to *any* translation of the Qur'an. In practice, it means that each reader is obliged to imaginatively "perform" the Qur'an—discovering or rediscovering the actual human experiences to which each key symbolic expression refers—just as actively as one would "read" a theatrical work or decipher a great poem.¹⁵⁹ Any other kind of less active and engaged reading tends to render the text flat and meaningless, or to turn it into a purely conceptual enterprise—a theoretical approach which the distinctive rhetoric and symbolism of the Qur'an itself renders almost impossible. As with virtually all the other interpretive points mentioned here, the actual potential to appreciate and apply this principle has nothing at all to do with any reader's external cultural or religious background. Indeed most of the points mentioned here in Part II are often somewhat easier for novice, non-Muslim readers to put into action, since their active questioning and inquiry may be less restricted by the pious cultural preconceptions normally associated with any sacred text.

¹⁵⁸ See the translation (by M. Abul Quasem) of al-Ghazali's still remarkably useful *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, which is built around this distinction, in *The Jewels of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, 1983).

¹⁵⁹ See particularly the introduction to our study "Dramatising the Sura of Joseph...", n. 21 above.

- ***The Musical Unity of the Qur'an:*** One of the most distinctive rhetorical and structural features of the actual Arabic Qur'an—often only feebly suggested in any Indo-European translation—is its distinctive unity of meaning and expression, which is particularly manifested in the distinctive “ideographic,” semantically unifying function of its tri-literal Arabic consonantal roots. Like classical Chinese characters, each of those Qur'anic roots typically expresses a rich range of related meanings which, like harmonic correspondences in a musical composition, are all resonantly present at each repetition of a particular Arabic root. Equally importantly, all those grammatical functions usually expressed in English by many quite different words that we recognize as distinct prepositions, verbs, subjects, objects, participles, adverbs, conjunctions and so on—each normally suggesting separate elements of meaning and allusion—are instead expressed in the Qur'an by different grammatical forms of the *same* underlying Arabic verbal root. Moreover, each appearance of that same verbal root, whatever the grammatical and other contexts, immediately brings to the practiced reader's or reciter's mind all of the other appearances and contexts of that same root (*and* its contraries), which together form a kind of holographic semantic whole. At another level, these Arabic roots of the Qur'an simultaneously constitute intimately related or “cross-referential” *families of meaning* which likewise intersect and resonate in the same way: e.g., the interrelated Arabic roots for guidance, for consciousness, for the soul/self, and so on, including the key thematic unities outlined in the final section below. Here again, Kassis' Concordance is an indispensable tool for discovering these unifying Arabic roots and semantic families beneath the far greater number of disparate words that must inevitably be used in any English translation.

Indeed here is simply no way that Indo-European languages in general can even begin to approach or express (except in rare forms of poetry) this fundamental unifying feature of the Qur'anic language, which we can only imagine by analogy to the familiar procedures and effects of musical composition—effects which, in the case of the Qur'an, are surely equally moving, yet equally impossible to reduce into any satisfactory form of simple prosaic expression. The actual result, however, can be put quite simply: this holographic unity means that any particular passage within the Qur'an is implicitly and subliminally related, by a rich web of associated meanings and resonances, with virtually every other point within that text. In reality, there are a host of other more distinctive, complex and equally Arabic-bound rhythmic, rhyming, and stylistic features, many quite unique to the inimitable rhetoric of the Qur'an, which only further accentuate and intensify this musical and semantic unity. One

of the most striking and pervasive of these features, just as in the Hebrew Bible, is of course the additional fact that each Arabic letter of the Qur'an is also originally a specific number.¹⁶⁰ This completely pervasive added dimension of total interconnection—like the streaming green digital sequences that perfectly mirror “reality” in *The Matrix*—makes possible truly infinite permutations of word/number correspondences and potential meaning which further accentuate both the interconnections and depths of meaning that spontaneously arise for readers familiar with the algebraic equivalents of the Arabic text.

- ***The “Verbal” Universe of the Creative Divine Act:*** An almost equally fundamental and untranslatable feature of the Arabic of the Qur'an, which is inevitably invisible in English prose translations, is the essentially active, verbal nature of the Qur'anic language. The basic meanings and grammatical root form of each of the tri-literal Arabic roots just mentioned normally reflect an underlying active verbal meaning. So an emphatic immediate sense of that ongoing active quality is implicitly retained in those many derived forms (verbal nouns, participles, and so on) which must be translated quite separately in English as more abstract nouns, adjectives, gerunds, adverbs and so on. In radical opposition to this *verbal*, active immediacy conveyed by the Arabic roots throughout the Qur'an, the basic underlying structure of English and other Indo-European languages—which we naturally tend to take for granted—assumes a kind of stable, *object-based* world comprised of subject-agents, their temporal acts, and further separate objects of those actions, which are successively situated on an extended plane of constant spatial and temporal relations. So within that assumed linguistic/metaphysical framework, we simply assume that it is those subjects and objects (the “nouns”) that are themselves real, and that they are all simply “parts” of one objective spatio-temporal continuum of past, present and future.

In the language of the Qur'an, however, *what is real is Presence*: the vertical “Now” of the actual (hence timeless) divine Act, including all Its immediately unfolding manifestations. This fundamental metaphysical perception—which is constantly articulated in the Qur'an as an immediate

¹⁶⁰ Our decimal “Arabic numbers” came to the Arab world from India, and hence they are designated as “Indian” numbers in Arabic, where the earlier complex system of Arabic letters and their numerical equivalents gave rise to an immense esoteric discipline of the “science of letters” (*ilm al-hurūf*) rooted in the sacred Qur'anic alphabet.

presence and reality, not as some argument or theory—means that within the Qur'an all possible voices, perspectives and relations (i.e., all the multiplicity and assumed spatio-temporal “extension” imagined to comprise our everyday experience) are *simultaneously expressed and perceived as a single all-encompassing divine Voice and Act*. That omnipresent Reality is therefore constantly “enacted” in those consistently verbal, inherently active and instantaneous grammatical expressions that are built in to the distinctive rhetoric and language of the Qur'an. This quality is especially present in the dramatic process of recitation and prayer, which itself becomes a kind of individual “re-ascending creation.”

Equally important to this intrinsically unifying force of the dramatically unforgettable language involved is the fact that Arabic verbs have (in their most common forms) only two possible “tenses.” Either a *present and continuing* time; or else a grammatically “past” form which in the Qur'an commonly serves to highlight the *time-less presence* of those divine Acts—what we call “the world” and all creation—that by their transcendent origin are always at once determined and yet constantly repeated in the One Present and Its “ever-renewed Creation” (10:4,34, etc.). Thus nothing could more invisibly betray the decisive individual spiritual conditions so powerfully evoked by the hundreds of eschatological passages in the Qur'an than the way English translators place those intensely *present* metaphysical realities into some vague, hypothetical “future.”¹⁶¹

While the grammatical explanation of these essential Qur'anic structures is almost inevitably mystifying to readers only accustomed to English, we are all very familiar with another contemporary artistic medium which constantly works with this same essential “presential” quality expressing our lived psychological experience of constantly shifting, yet co-existing perspectives and times. The standard cinematic clues and conventions for expressing sudden internal and external shifts of time and perspective, transforming instantly (and normally without the slightest confusion on the part of the audience) between different “points” within a single time-space Whole, are something even small children immediately recognize today. One effective way to very palpably reproduce the distinctive effects and experience of these interrelated “verbal” qualities and time and perspective shifts of the actual Qur'an is simply to sit through a film like *Jacob's Ladder* (itself an extraordinary evocation of

¹⁶¹ Qur'anic Arabic instead uses a very specific, highly visible particle to indicate those rare cases where a verse is referring quite specifically to a definitely future event or contingency; those definitely future occasions are almost never indicated as such in English translations.

Sufi poetics and realized eschatology) for the two successive viewings that are necessary to perceive the instantaneous and transforming Whole that film is so beautifully intended to convey.

- **The “Three Books”—the Qur’an as Logos:** Finally, what is so crucially important about these fundamental formal features of the Arabic Qur’an has nothing to do with these characteristic linguistic or literary dimensions as such. What matters is that each of these distinctive rhetorical elements is designed to help readers to understand and grasp more immediately the constant insistence, throughout the Qur’an itself, on its original, actual Reality as the *Logos*, the creative divine Word. Some of the many symbolic expressions for that noetic Reality scattered throughout the Qur’an are “the Book” (*al-Kitāb*), “Wisdom” (*Hikma*), “the Mother of the Book” (*Umm al-kitāb*), “the Criterion” (*al-Furqān*), “the Reminder” (*al-Dhikrā*), and so on. In other words, as the masters of the Islamic humanities have so frequently pointed out, the Qur’an presents itself above all as a spiritual mirror whose verses are intended to reflect and reveal the endless divine “*Signs on the horizons and in their own souls*” (41:53). This constantly self-proclaimed total comprehensiveness of the Qur’an’s own verses/Signs is the metaphysical presupposition of its holographic “rhetoric of allusion” that continues to disclose new meanings in every new circumstance and situation. Or as later interpreters summarized it, this earthly revealed “Book” reveals the correspondences—and deeper interconnections—between the two cosmic “Books” of the Spirit/soul and of the Creation which It both mirrors and informs.

However, these grand self-descriptions are never presented in the Qur’an as something to be intellectualized or mentally “believed”—for *īmān*, true faith, is a spiritual reality and essential connection of a totally different order. Instead, the reader/reciter only gradually discovers that essential Reality of the Qur’an precisely through recognizing the multitude of indispensable existential correspondences so tellingly connecting each of the Qur’an’s emblematic stories, parables, “likenesses,” scriptural episodes, recollections and symbols with their uniquely individual and personal manifestations. Here again, it is the fruit of focused practice and right action (*‘amal*) that opens the way to each revelatory incident of true understanding (*‘ilm*)—and to that heightened discernment and insight which then informs the following stage of realization.

B. Basic Interpretive Principles:

- **Trusting One’s Intuitions:** The original language of the Qur’an makes exquisite sense, especially as an extraordinarily comprehensive and revealing “phenomenology of the Spirit”—a

characterization that is amply illustrated, not by vague theological claims, but by its extraordinarily revelatory re-creations in the masterpieces of the Islamic humanities, whether literary, visual, musical or societal. However, this very uniqueness and specificity of the Qur'an's spiritual vocabulary means that the English equivalents adopted in most translations of the Qur'an simply do not make much sense in many places. Certainly this common impression is due in part to the readily understandable lack of English equivalent terms, concepts and symbols, along with the other distinctive Arabic rhetorical and linguistic dimensions alluded to above. But perhaps equally importantly, this initial opacity of English translations often reflects peculiar (and Qur'anically inappropriate) cultural associations surrounding the unfortunate use of English Biblical language. The immediate practical upshot of this observation is very simple: wherever one finds that something in a translated version of the Qur'an doesn't make sense—especially when that passage appears to blatantly contradict the most basic spiritual and ethical common sense—one can be almost certain that the underlying difficulty is actually due to some inadequacy of translation. In most cases, such common misunderstandings can then be cleared up, using the Kassis *Concordance*, by referring back to the underlying Arabic root and the other contexts in which that term is used (along with the English synonyms and different translators' usages Kassis also cites for each root).

- ***Discovering the Spiritual Virtues:*** One particularly central domain in the Qur'an that defies adequate translation in any language is that of the spiritual virtues, especially since they constitute the humanly decisive, most practical core of the Qur'an. It is rather revealing in this respect that Muslims throughout history have tended to take over into their own vernacular languages so many of the key Qur'an terms for the spiritual virtues. The deeper problem here, though, is not primarily one of translation, but rather the basic fact that human beings (and the cultures they constitute) naturally tend to reduce the unique reality and inspired spiritual realization underlying each actualized spiritual virtue—which can only be known “for real” in those particular situations where it becomes manifest—to more familiar external social, ethical and political norms.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Toshihiko Izutsu's *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: McGill U. Press, 1966) still remains probably the best introduction to this central and recurrent problem in the Qur'an, focusing on the complex Qur'anic (and early Islamic) spiritual transformation of earlier Arab ethical

Thus it is not particularly important, for example, whether one happens to employ the Qur’anic *sabr* or English words like “patience” and “perseverance”: such words alone will never by themselves convey the unique spiritual state of “striving to grasp the *particular individual divine purpose* underlying otherwise unbearable suffering” that we must constantly rediscover whenever we are sent one of those individually unique divine tests which bring that particular spiritual virtue into play. *Sabr* is not about one’s suffering or patience as such, but about the active inner search and eventual discovery of the transforming spiritual meaning of *this* particular personal test. But translators, understandably, cannot use such lengthy paraphrases for each key technical term in their Qur’an.

The same thing is of course true for each of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur’an, and for the problematic images there of those prophetic or other scriptural exemplars (e.g., Jacob, in the case of *sabr*) who are equally subject to the familiar processes of cultural routinisation and misunderstanding. Here again, the Islamic humanities have often come into being precisely because of the recurrent spiritual necessity for finding freshly appropriate and spiritually effective means for communicating the actual realities expressed by those Qur’anic images and symbols. For whenever someone encounters a living *walī Allāh* (the “Friends of God” and spiritual intermediaries who figure so centrally in the Qur’an and throughout later Islamic spirituality), neither that reality nor its effects are subject to uncertainty or confusion.

- ***Who Speaks the Qur’an?***: One foundational interpretive principle present throughout the Qur’an—and normally invisible in most Western translations—is the awareness that God (or the ultimate Reality, *al-Haqq*) is the ultimate Speaker and Subject behind that mysterious play of constantly shifting voices (whether I, We, unnamed Narrator, Muhammad, other prophets, individual actors, etc.), and the resulting interpenetrating metaphysical perspectives, which is one of the most distinctive rhetorical and structural features of the Qur’an. In the end, all possible perspectives are dramatically included within the Real. Thus that same revealing Qur’anic interplay of shifting—but ultimately Unitary—perspectives and points of view is beautifully expressed in many of the most extraordinary masterpieces of Islamic painting, as it is throughout the incomparable lyric ghazals of Hafez or the

norms and values. See also our chapter on “The Mysteries of Ihsān: Natural Contemplation and the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur’an,” in the forthcoming *Openings* volume.

puzzling stories of ‘Attar and Rumi.¹⁶³ But so far, translators have not only failed to highlight that fundamental structural dimension of the Qur’an, but instead have too often attempted to gloss over the troubling omnipresence of those constant and quite intentionally mysterious perspective shifts, so mysteriously enacted by those recurring divine/human/Prophetic voices.

For any remotely literal translation of the Qur’an that adequately reflects those distinctive perspective shifts and their accompanying pronoun indeterminacies—i.e., *who* is it that is really speaking at each instant, and *to whom?*—immediately jars the ear of the English reader with what at first appear to be constant, grammatically bizarre, and even outright paradoxical ambiguities, sudden unexplained jumps, and vaguely undefined subjects and objects. Again and again, a single Qur’anic verse or phrase (as at 17:1, 2:285-286, and many others), literally translated, reads like a kind of powerfully paradoxical literary “Moebius strip,” in which the initial Voice and its apparent addressee(s) are mysteriously supplanted, entirely turned around, or even directly contradicted by the end of that same passage. Here again, the English reader must pay especially close attention, as in deciphering a particularly challenging poem (e.g., Pound’s *Cantos*), in order to remark and then reflect upon that characteristically cinematic, but constantly meaningful, fluidity of the actual Qur’anic text.

- ***Who Receives the Qur’anic Speech?:*** This equally fundamental interpretive principle is already suggested by the points we have just discussed concerning the characteristic shifting Voices and perspectives of the Qur’an. But existentially and spiritually it is even more decisive. Although in several obvious senses the Prophet Muhammad is certainly the destined “receiver” of the entire Qur’an, the crucial mystery for all other readers or participants in the Qur’an is their own individual relationship, precisely *as Spirit*, to that recurrent singular Prophetic “You.” The constant mysterious interplay between that primordial singular You and the far less mysterious, usually undeniably earthly, plural “you-all” (the Qur’anic equivalent of e.e.cummings’ “most people”), which runs through every Sura and indeed virtually every verse of the Qur’an, is the omnipresent Qur’anic representation of the act of transubstantiation.

¹⁶³ See the particular visual forms of mise-en-page used to make visible these constant perspective shifts in our translation and study of the Sura of Joseph (n. 21 above).

In other words, the constant mystery of that uniquely singular Prophetic “You” is the constantly repeated invitation for each individual reader/reciter/listener to re-discover, indeed quite literally to “remember” (the central Qur’anic theme of *dhikr*), our true self as Spirit. And each momentary glimpse of that present Reality—of what it means to *be* Spirit—is itself a renewed revelation. Somehow that recurrent, potentially transforming divine Summons tends to become lost in most English translations of the Qur’an, even those that do attempt to more clearly distinguish between these two radically different forms of “you.”

Similarly recurrent and decisive problems—and extraordinarily open-ended metaphysical and spiritual perspectives—are of course raised by each of the other distinctive divine (or at least higher) Voices, such as the enigmatic “We” that returns everywhere, but always in sudden, unexplained dramatic contrast to the otherwise nameless Narrator, the rare divine “I”, and the many other archetypal speakers. From earliest times, of course, cautious theological interpreters—just as in the case of similar challenges in the Hebrew Bible—have naturally attempted to eliminate such potentially troubling textual dilemmas: explaining the recurrent “We,” for example, as the distinctly plural divine Voice of the totality of the knowable divine Names and Attributes. But such facile verbal solutions were by no means universally accepted, and this is only one of many striking cases where a reader’s relatively unmediated initial encounter with a bare English translation may actually provoke serious, more open-ended spiritual and metaphysical reflections, at passages which are quickly glossed over in more traditional contexts.

- ***Scattering, Singularity and Repetition:*** One of the most fundamental interpretive principles in approaching the Qur’an involves the interplay between its characteristic *scattering* and dispersal of even the most fundamental teachings—especially metaphysical and cosmological or eschatological ones—and the revelatory contrast and interplay between *repeated* injunctions and *singular* (one-time, or relatively rare) symbols and expressions. Fortunately, this is one basic hermeneutical principle which continues to apply very well to English translations. To explain this principle very briefly, the Qur’an as a whole is marked by a truly extraordinary, elaborately detailed symbolic coherence, particularly in the details of its eschatological teaching (integrating literally hundreds of scattered verses), or in the close congruence between its depiction of the ontological stages of cosmology (the manifestation of the divine Spirit) and the corresponding ascending stages of the human soul’s purification and spiritual return to its Source. In general, even the earliest Suras of the Qur’an tend to involve the very visible and

unmistakable repetition (or what at first seems to be repetition) of many different themes and images, particularly practical ethical teachings understandable by and applicable to everyone: e.g., warnings of the Judgment, reminders of the rewards of the righteous, and so on.

However, more careful and probing readers of the Qur'an will quickly begin to pick out a variety of rarer, often strange and initially puzzling images and symbols—such as the different cosmic “Trees” mentioned in the Qur'an, or the seven parallel names assigned to corresponding Gardens and Fires—which initially might appear completely opaque and mystifying. To a great extent, the resulting effort to begin to piece together and eventually make sense of those scattered solitary expressions and teachings is driven by each reader's wide-ranging sense of “cognitive dissonance.” Simply put, this means that attentive readers will find it very revealing to focus on apparent contradictions, inconsistencies (whether ethical, metaphysical, spiritual or simply logical), or open-ended mysteries: when one reads the Qur'an seriously, this unavoidable task amounts to resolving an immense symbolic and metaphysical puzzle.

Of course many of those initially puzzling metaphysical and eschatological puzzles are not only resolved but eventually simply taken for granted in later systems of Islamic thought. But those pre-packaged intellectual and formal “resolutions” are not at all the same as the far more demanding—and rewarding—spiritual tasks involved in moving through those particular textual mysteries as they interact with the intimately personal challenges that are raised for each reader by his or her own spiritually active tests and dilemmas: e.g., the recurrent issues of theodicy, of apparently undeserved suffering, of the mystery of apparently arbitrary destinies and earthly conditions, and so on. Real study of the Qur'an is profoundly “interactive” in just that sense—and it is intrinsically a lifelong process. In the end, the lasting effects of actively exploring and working through the larger Qur'anic perspectives on such concrete, existentially unavoidable spiritual questions are radically different from simply agreeing with this or that intellectual “resolution” drawn from later interpretive traditions.

- ***Qur'anic Imagery and the Hierarchy of the Senses:*** One extremely revealing interpretive perspective when approaching the Qur'an, which I gradually discovered through its dramatic later mirroring in the imagery of the classical Islamic arts and poetry, has to do with paying careful attention to the hierarchy of the senses—i.e., of their spiritual and symbolic correlates—that is so richly developed throughout the Qur'an. In that regard, it is relatively easy to note the distinctive imagery of taste, touch and smell, deeply rooted in our base “corporeal” imagination, which is so elaborately

unfolded, often in a precise parallelism, throughout the Qur’anic descriptions of the eschatological “Gardens” and “Fires.”

But eventually one discovers that the deeper and more pervasive symbolic structures of the Qur’an—especially as they suggest the principal ineffability of the Divine—revolve around imagery (often only implicit, as in allusions to the recurrent symbols of the four elements, their colors, and their effects) of *Light* and *Sound*, or in equally visual metaphors of proximity and distance from God. To adequately develop the central Qur’anic dimensions of sound and rhythm, of course, we would immediately have to return to the specificities of the Arabic Qur’an itself. What is in question here, of course, is not just peculiar literary features and rhetorical unities, but rather the deeper question of the way spiritually different audiences and readers are so pointedly understood—and encouraged—to approach, practice and integrate the realities of the Qur’an in very different ways that uniquely correspond to their different “spiritual sensibilities,” aptitudes and receptivities at each level of realization. And as always in the Qur’an, the loftiest symbols are also the most outwardly invisible.

- ***The Primacy of the “Invisible”***: Perhaps the most pervasive and unavoidable interpretive principle that one encounters in approaching the Qur’an, even in English translation, is its constant insistence on the primacy of the “invisible”—and on the corresponding nature of the visible, manifest world as *theophany*, as the peculiarly human shadow-theater for our task of realizing and enacting the divine Names. In a nutshell, that simple principle is the spiritual key to all the Islamic arts—where the dominant forms are of course spiritual music and poetry, which come closest to mirroring the rhythms and translucent immateriality of the recited Qur’an itself—and to the traditional forms of *adab*, the unique spiritual expression and realization of individuality in similarly powerful, but self-effacing artistic and social forms. Nothing in the Qur’an could, or should, be more obvious and omnipresent than the centrality of the spiritual world (both the “hereafter,” *al-ākhirah*, and the “Unseen,” *al-ghayb*), and of those initially invisible actors—jinn, prophets, angels, messengers, Friend of God, even the spiritual “birds” and other symbolic animals—who people, animate, and perhaps even direct this world’s visible stage. But the conditions and unconscious assumptions of contemporary life often lead the Qur’an’s more hasty readers, like the prisoners in Plato’s *Republic*, to simply pass by all the challenges of understanding, interpretation and realization repeatedly posed by that central Qur’anic insistence.

- ***The Challenges of Historical Contextualization:*** Finally, readers of Arberry who do venture—despite our earlier warnings—into the challenges of the Medinan suras without any of the problematic tools of contextualization discussed above will eventually note, to begin with, the relative rarity and indeterminacy of specific socio-legal “prescriptions.” Already this observation should appear somewhat surprising in relation both to the complex later interpretive uses made of so many of those Medinan passages, and to the common assumption that those Medinan sections of the Qur’an are somehow meant to constitute or suggest a “book of laws” comparable to familiar Biblical texts. What readers of those Medinan Suras need to do in each such case, before turning to later traditional Muslim interpretations, is to note very precisely in all such cases the recurrent need that arises for both proper *contextualization* (i.e., in terms of the “original” historical context, and of the wider [divine?] intentions or principles presumably underlying that supposed situation) and necessary *specification* (i.e., whether such prescriptive passages should be taken in relatively narrow or broad, individual or universal, temporally or situationally restricted, or other types and degrees of possible interpretation). Behind this pointed contextual questioning, of course, the inquiring reader also encounters the recurrently decisive problems of authority, power and legitimacy inextricably linked with any wider claims in that regard. This essential and far-reaching caution applies to absolutely all such apparently prescriptive Medinan passages in the Qur’an.

Such carefully conscious and comprehensive intellectual questioning, in each such case, should serve two equally indispensable purposes. First, even before referring to later Islamic interpretive disciplines and their claims, the bare translated text forces its reader to consider the full range of ways in which those particular historical situations and challenges can be understood “internally,” by themselves, in terms of the particular spiritual virtues that are illustrated and called for in such archetypal human situations. That is certainly how those archetypal Qur’anic passages and events, whether in the Prophet’s own time or with earlier prophets, are often understood and presented in the later Islamic humanities. And even if readers eventually refer to the later traditional Islamic sciences—or to more skeptical modern historians—to illuminate these unavoidable questions of legal, cultural and theological contextualisation and specification, they will not lose sight of the often visibly arbitrary nature of particular earlier interpretations, in those many cases where even a minimum of moral and historical imagination might suggest a spectrum of radically different understandings and applications of this or that passage in question. One has only to think of the still-heated contemporary controversies

surrounding the many Qur’anic passages relating to the spiritual challenges of *jihād* (“struggling in the way of God”) to see the perennially problematic nature of what is so often at stake throughout such Medinan contexts.

C. Basic Unifying Themes:

One of the most satisfying and effective approaches to appreciating the depth and unity of the Englished Qur’an, especially for many readers who are not otherwise accustomed to many of the distinctive metaphysical, theological and rhetorical dimensions elaborated in the preceding sections, is simply to begin by noting down and paying special attention to certain unifying themes and families of symbols which are found almost everywhere in both the Meccan and Medinan Suras. Once one has carefully noted the recurrence of these distinctive sets of images and symbols, it is only a short step to beginning to ask the obvious follow-up questions about what those recurrent themes are really meant to signify.

- ***Images of Nature:*** One of the most striking and obvious features of the Qur’an, even in translation, is its powerful appeal to symbolism drawn directly from the soul’s experience of the natural world. This pervasive and unambiguously central role of Nature in the Qur’an—virtually neglected in many intellectualized forms of theological and philosophical interpretation, both past and present—suggests a host of more universal, directly meaningful interpretive perspectives which are indeed more richly developed in the later masterpieces of the Islamic humanities. In particular, readers focusing on this dimension of the Qur’an should keep in mind the very concrete, immediate sensory impact of all the families of nature-imagery in the Qur’an *as they were actually present* in the radically challenging desert world of the Prophet’s original listeners (a dramatically fragile life-world that is consciously mirrored in the memorable setting of the *Dune* novels and films). Often today we can only approach those original Qur’anic human conditions, and the innate spiritual receptivities they still naturally engender, while camping or hiking in the remote wilderness, or otherwise encountering relatively distant and pristine areas of the natural world. As one discovers then, such potent natural symbols, in the Qur’an and elsewhere, are most effective and unforgettable when they cannot possibly be mistaken for mere abstractions.
- ***“The Origin and the Return”—The Cosmic Map:*** Attentive students of the Qur’an, from the earliest days, have noticed that it develops a coherent symbolic “map” of the metaphysical dimensions

of creation, and a corresponding elaborate spiritual guidebook to the soul's purification and realization of its spiritual Source. Thus the books of hundreds of later influential Muslim interpreters present this all-encompassing metaphysical dimension of the Qur'an in terms of "The Origin and the Return," carefully elaborating the ways this symbolic ontology and cosmology—further elaborated in a multitude of Prophetic hadith—parallel the Qur'an's even more complex map of eschatology and spiritual psychology.¹⁶⁴ While beginning readers may find the deciphering of that vast Qur'anic world-view an impossibly daunting task, its essentials are nonetheless absolutely indispensable for grasping the scriptural origins and allusive depths of many of the later classics of the Islamic humanities, in both the Sufi and philosophico-theological traditions.

- ***The Divine Names:*** Much of the Qur'an reads, for beginning readers, as a strange sort of catalogue or inexplicable lists of different divine Names, which students often tend simply to ignore. Yet those manifold Names, reflecting their visible centrality in the Qur'an, became a central topic and inspiration in later traditions of Islamic theology and practical spirituality alike. Without entering into those later interpretive systems, it helps to understand that the very purpose of human earthly existence is portrayed in the Qur'an as the gradual discovery and manifestation of the full range of those divine qualities symbolized by the Names.¹⁶⁵ That earthly School, with its constant human confrontation with those contrary qualities and choices that can only be fully manifested and encountered in the earthly state, culminates in the active individual realization of "*the Most Beautiful Names*" (7:180, etc.).

In later theological terms, this unifying Qur'anic insight was expressed in the conception of the created world and the soul alike as theophanic manifestations of those contrasting divine qualities. From that perspective, then, these initially mysterious lists of Names and Attributes can be read not simply as

¹⁶⁴ For a representative, readily accessible anthology of many traditional Muslim writers on this wide-ranging Qur'anic theme, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

¹⁶⁵ This essential hermeneutical principle and human spiritual potential is traditionally explained in terms of the many Qur'anic accounts of the divine creation of Adam (2:30-31; 7:11-27; 15:26-33; 17:61-65; 18:50; 22:115-123), all emphasizing his divinely inspired "*knowledge of the (divine) Names*." In each re-telling, the angels eventually bow down before Adam (at God's request), in recognition of Adam's theophanic reflection of the divine Spirit, while Iblis/Satan proudly refuses to bow down before such a "creature of clay."

general reminders of the ultimate aim and parameters of this earthly School. At the same time, they also convey highly specific allusions—as a sort of immediate “spiritual commentary,” like the knowing comments of the chorus in Greek tragedies—on the particular lessons and insights that arise in those specific Qur’anic contexts and teachings where particular Names are cited.

- ***Light and Speech (Writing, Music)*:** Two closely related families of imagery in the Qur’an have to do with the symbolism of creation (the entire manifest universe) as a theophany of “*Light*” (Sura 24), encompassing all the complex allusions to the heavenly luminaries and the complex alternations of “Day” and “Night”; and of creation as a theophany of the divine *Speech* and *Writing* (“Words,” “Book,” “Pen,” “Tablet,” etc.). Again these symbolic figures are elaborately developed in many forms of later Islamic thought, but it is often illuminating to encounter them directly in their originally mysterious Qur’anic contexts, where their later metaphysical importance is not always so manifest. In particular, it is important to note that in all these Qur’anic contexts the imagery of “Night,” far from being negative, often refers directly to the divine depths of the “invisible” spiritual realms of creation and cosmogony; while “Day” correspondingly alludes to the corresponding domains of manifestation and human spiritual realization. Again, only rarely do such recurrent symbols have anything at all to do with our everyday measures of earthly, solar time.

- ***Stories, Parables, Allusions*:** Interpreters of the Qur’an have often tended to separate out such different literary forms as Qur’anic “stories” (such as the Sura of Joseph, described as “*the most beautiful of stories*”), brief allusions to earlier sacred figures and events, and parables or “likenesses” (*amthāl*). And each of these Qur’anic forms inspired immense traditions of spiritual writing and teaching in later Islamic tradition. It is particularly revealing, especially given the frequent parallels with Biblical and other spiritual literatures,¹⁶⁶ to examine more closely each of the explicitly *divine* parables detailed in the Qur’an—together with the Qur’an’s own interpretive comments pointedly

¹⁶⁶ For an excellent, wide-ranging introduction (with very helpful Bibliography) to the historically quite complex questions surrounding apparently Biblical figures and stories in the Qur’an, see Brannon Wheeler, *Prophets in the Qur’an: An Introduction to the Qur’an and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002). Wheeler Thackston’s translation of al-Kisā’ī’s *Tales of the Prophets* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997) provides a representative illustration of these types of popular stories and legends, often only loosely related to Biblical materials, which often inform traditional Muslim readings of the Qur’an.

highlighting the decisive contrast between those divine, spiritually valid parables and all the unconscious, implicit (and ultimately illusory) “likenesses” made up by most people. Those passages are a particularly helpful and illuminating example of the many ways the Qur’an itself repeatedly suggests the proper ways to interpret and understand some of its different kinds of teaching.

- ***Spiritual Virtues and Prophetic Exemplars:*** One of the central interpretive challenges in the Qur’an, as in parallel Biblical passages, is to discover the intended inner connections between the spiritual virtues and their “dramatization” and illustration in the Qur’an’s stories and often very abbreviated allusions to different spiritual exemplars and intermediaries (often earlier prophets, but also contemporary groups of both outstanding and “hypocritical” Muslims, as well as other legendary figures).¹⁶⁷ This recurrent challenge, which is richly amplified by later ancillary accounts in the hadith, Sīra (life of the Prophet and history of the early Muslim community), and “tales of the prophets” literatures, is particularly revealing when one is limited to dealing, in translation, simply with the Qur’anic accounts themselves, since the effortless reliance on such traditional external accounts often eliminates other interpretive options and more independent insights. In this as in so many other cases, the ready accessibility of later forms of ready-made interpretation inevitably tends to provide a dangerous “crutch” that forecloses those inherent demands of active, imaginative and spontaneous interpretation that can actually be encouraged by enforced reliance on an unadorned English translation.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE QUR’AN AS MIRROR AND PRISM

O Beloved, through Love we are conjoined with You:

Wherever You put Your foot, we're the ground for You!

In this school/path of Loving, how can it be

That we see the world through You— and yet, we don't see You?

(Rumi, quatrain)¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ For the underlying prophetic stories in question, see the references cited at n. 26 above.

¹⁶⁸ *Kulliyāt-i Shams-i Tabrīz*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran, 1341 h.s.): 64 (no. 11 of the *Rubā’iyyāt*).

One of the key teachings of the Qur'an, indeed of the Islamic tradition more generally, is the primacy of intention. All the pointers and observations mentioned above may help to suggest unsuspected dimensions of the Qur'an, or to remove certain obstacles that sometimes stand in the way of more fully appreciating it, especially in translation. But these suggestions are no substitute for the intention and receptivity each reader alone can provide. Some of the greatest spiritual teachers in this tradition have summed up their advice for anyone encountering the Qur'an in a single simple phrase: *You should seek to understand each verse as though it were being revealed directly to you.*

Or as others have even more simply put it, the Qur'an (even in translation) is a mirror for each soul. We discover there what we bring to it, in proportion to the effort we actually devote to penetrating its mysteries. And we may hear its revelations to the degree that we truly listen. Yet as the Qur'an so often reminds us, the true mirror here remains the theophanic Heart. While the true Qur'an is like a prism, a refracting lens, set between the divine creative Light and its endless momentary reflections in every shifting facet of creation.

Our ordinary vision, as Rumi's poem reminds us, remains fascinated—and too often clouded—by the world's shimmering shadow-play of veils and colors. The Qur'an, which more than twenty times is pointedly described as “*the Reminder*” (6:68, etc.), offers a potent response to the dilemma with which that great poet leaves us. Through its revealing lens, we can gradually come to discern the One luminous, invisible Source of those endlessly shifting reflections, discovering—and then mirroring back in our own newly illumined responses—those “Most-beautiful Names” that are so uniquely manifested in each theophanic event:

We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their own souls, until it shines forth to them that He is the truly Real... (41:53).

Chapter Six

TRANSLATING THE QUR'AN AND THE CHALLENGE
OF COMMUNICATION

The translation problems I would like to raise here—along with a few suggestions concerning some very tentative and partial “solutions”—are ones that I have encountered repeatedly over the past 20 years in trying to teach hundreds of English-speaking undergraduates, from a wide international range of religious and cultural backgrounds, about the Qur'an and its central role as a model and inspiration for the classic expressions of the Islamic humanities, especially in later Islamic poetry, music, philosophy and the visual arts. I have frequently discussed these issues with colleagues teaching similar courses in Islamic and religious studies, who constantly face precisely the same set of problems. So there is nothing mysterious about these translation problems themselves. What is more mysterious is the apparent lack of active, practical concern for actually doing something about them.

To put it as simply as possible, the concern I would like to focus on here is not primarily with learned issues of text and detailed understanding of the Arabic Qur'an itself. Rather, it is with the other side of the communication equation: the *audience*, and its understanding (or unfortunately, more often its profound misunderstanding) of the English version. The underlying problem—which is a pitfall familiar enough to all of us who spend much of our time “translating” from one religion, culture, or language to another—is that the published translators of the Qur'an, without exception, seem to have been so concerned with efforts and interpretations of earlier translators and commentators that they seem to have ignored the actual effect of their versions on their audiences. The result failure in communication, which teachers in Islamic Studies have to deal with anew each semester, is the basic observation that that (a) many of the most fundamental dimensions of the Qur'an are simply not getting across to their audiences; and (b) what is coming across, especially through the use of familiar (but overcharged and grossly misleading) Biblical English expressions, completely falsifies and distorts the most essential Qur'anic ideas and expressions. We shall offer sufficient illustrations of both these points below.

To forestall any possible misunderstanding, I would readily agree that it is almost certainly *not* possible to create a more effective and accurate translation of the Qur'an that is smooth “prose” and

“easy reading” for a “popular audience.” However, one may legitimately ask whether the new circumstances and technological options of publishing and pedagogy have not opened up the opportunity for a wide range of more inventive, experimental and self-consciously challenging, “difficult” efforts of translation designed for more rigorous and careful study by serious students and English-speaking Muslims who are not be able to devote years of apprenticeship in mastering the Arabic Qur’an.

I. DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION:

Whether as a teacher or a student of the “English Qur’an,” there are many potential, equally legitimate dimensions of Qur’anic communication which have been largely neglected in the existing efforts of translation. I would like to mention several of those dimensions briefly (without pretending to be exhaustive), because distinguishing those different aspects highlights both the severe challenges and the limitations—but also the possibilities—of new efforts of “translation” focused on each of those respective dimensions. Simply listing them also serves to highlight the inevitable incompatibility of certain of those aims, and the resulting necessity for very *different* efforts, experiments and forms of expertise and collaboration.

One absolutely essential dimension of the Qur’an can be summarized globally as its “*music*,” sound and rhythm. As a teacher, I am surprised each year by the extraordinary, lasting spiritual impact, on so many sensitive souls, of excellent recitations of the Qur’an; I have repeatedly seen lifelong vocations apparently awakened simply by the effects of listening to a few verses in recitation. This is also an area in which technology—in the form of readily available CD-ROM’s combining recitation simultaneously with screens of the Arabic text and several translations—has opened up remarkable pedagogical possibilities which one could not even have imagined a decade ago. More importantly, this is an area where one can only hope that the Qur’an will eventually attract the type of truly inspired poetical translators who have been drawn to other masterpieces of world literature. But precisely in such cases, it is most unlikely that the inspired poetic translator who truly succeeds in capturing those deeper musical dimensions of the Qur’an will also be equally successful in communicating other dimensions of meaning. (One need only think of the instructive example of Coleman Barks’ transforming—but far from “literal”—versions of Rumi to grasp both the possibilities and the dilemmas that are connected with this dimension of Qur’anic communication.)

A second dimension of the Qur'an that would once have seemed almost hopelessly "lost in translation" is that of the combined impact of the actual Arabic script and its underlying "mathematical"/symbolic (*jafr*) equivalents, an area where the wider artistic, cultural and interpretive influences and possibilities of the Qur'an have so deeply marked very different Islamic cultures. While this is an area one might consider particularly resistant to any form of translation, it is also a dimension that has an immediate impact and attraction on certain artistically sensitive students, and a field in which new possibilities in the area of computer graphics and design may eventually transform our notions of what constitutes a "translation" of sacred scripture.

A third fundamental area of Qur'anic understanding still essentially cut off from the English-speaking audience is the vast complex of later Islamic fields of learning—*asbab al-nuzul* ("occasions of revelation"), *tafsir*, hadith, "tales of the prophets," rhetoric and certain fields of *fiqh*—which have of course provided one key matrix for learned interpretation and understanding in the past. Rather than surreptitiously importing small fragments of those vast literatures into the actual Qur'an translations and footnotes, what one would like to see—again as teachers of Islamic Studies—is a kind of scrupulously layered, "hyper-text" version of the Qur'an in which students had immediate access to reliable, self-contained translations, along with all necessary explanations, of those key ancillary works as they might bear on a particular verse, passage or Sura of the Qur'an. While the existing state of English (or other western language) efforts in these fields might lead one to despair of ever realizing such an adequate reference apparatus, one may note that such reference tools do largely exist in cognate areas of classical and Christian and Jewish scholarship, and that the technological means to combine them with the Qur'an already do exist, as one can see in the development of increasingly complex CD-ROM's combining such *Arabic* reference tools in both Sunni and Shiite contexts in the past few years.

Finally, the fourth dimension of Qur'anic translation, on which I would like to focus on today, has to do with the communication of as much as possible of the internal "*meaning*" of the Qur'an—or, to be more precise, of those particularly *textual*, verbal aspects of meaning which have not already been mentioned—as it has been read and studied for over a millenium. This aspect of Qur'anic communication is important not simply because it is indispensable, in an academic context, for understanding the integral relations between the Qur'an and the classical Islamic humanities it so frequently inspired, but also because there is an increasingly important proportion of Muslim intellectuals the world over (and of non-Muslim intellectuals trying sincerely to understand the

foundations of Islam) who are necessarily limited, for all practical purposes, to non-Arabic forms of the Qur'an: the era of the traditional *maktab*, in which virtually every Muslim's first experience of reading (or recitation) and writing—whatever their mother tongue—was intrinsically bound up with the Qur'an is clearly past and not likely to return.

Here again, before entering into detailed areas and examples of concern, I would like to point out the ways in which the particular approach or intention I am outlining actually mirrors the most “traditional” developments in earlier Islamic cultures. Specifically, I have been struck by the ways in which my own gradual, ad hoc efforts to help my students avoid misunderstandings and grasp essential meanings through translations of the Qur'an often come to mirror one essential development in the “Islamicization” of each non-Arabic speaking Muslim community in the past: that is to say, the gradual “anglicization” of the essential Qur'anic and Islamic religious vocabulary, in the same way that key Arabic terms gradually became part of the native languages of Muslims in many parts of the world. In fact, I have been struck by the ways in which so many key Qur'anic (or derivative Islamic) expressions—*iman*, *sabr*, *taqwa*, *tawhid*, *wali*, *kufir* and so on—are very quickly adopted and understood by my students, after only a cursory introductory acquaintance with such terms, precisely because they provide a needed and effective expression for living, essential spiritual realities which actually have no accurate English equivalent. Those striking classroom experiences would suggest that we may actually be witnessing only the first small steps toward a real “Islamicization” of the English language, beginning of course in Muslim (and scholarly) circles, but one which will quickly carry over in unforeseeable ways into the larger emerging world culture.

II. SPECIFIC AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION IN A LITERAL STUDY VERSION OF THE QUR'AN:

In what follows I shall simply try to list, in a very approximate order of importance, some of the most important considerations that I have encountered in trying to communicate essential Qur'anic meanings to my students in the past two decades. In each case, I have tried to be very brief and simply allude to complex problems which could of course be the subject of entire monographs in many cases. I shall be even briefer in alluding to possible solutions or approaches to those dilemmas. Hopefully this audience of specialists in the matter will readily grasp the larger parameters of each of these particular issues without detailed elaboration.

A. *The Qur'an as a Whole:*

One of the most difficult challenges, when one is trying to teach the Qur'an as it has actually been read and lived by Muslims for over a millenium, is to counter two fundamental obstacles or unconscious assumptions shared—before teaching begins—by virtually all English-language readers (whether Muslim or not): (1) the notion of a “book” as inevitably a progressive narrative proceeding from a beginning to middle to end (something naively self-evident to most first-time readers of Qur'anic translations); and (2) a complex of various “historicist” assumptions shared by many readers (and translators) who naturally approach the Qur'an with habits of thought and interpretation drawn from the entrenched modern sciences of Biblical philology and interpretation. This latter historicism—which makes it absolutely impossible to understand the Qur'an as it has inspired the creation of the Islamic humanities—is only further compounded by presentations which imply or openly present as somehow “authoritative” much later Muslim schemas of interpretation (in *tafsir*, *fiqh*, etc.) which relied on their own distinctive historicist assumptions.¹⁶⁹

With serious students in religious studies, of course, one can consciously frame comparisons—instead of unconsciously using the English Bible—with more pedagogically useful scriptures such as the *I Ching* (where the challenges of translating and interpreting ancient Chinese and Qur'anic Arabic so closely overlap), and Buddhist and Hindu texts (or certain classics of pre-modern Christian and Jewish mysticism) whose essentially metaphysical perspectives and emphases are far more intrinsically suited as paradigms for approaching the Qur'an.¹⁷⁰ To take another relevant example, in my own Islamic teaching, with a generation of younger students whose intellectual/aesthetic formation is now profoundly audio-visual instead of textual, I have found certain films—themselves reflecting in all their dimensions the structures, teachings, and assumptions of Qur'anic expression—to be indispensable tools in awakening those students to the universal spiritual dimensions of both Qur'an and Sira.

¹⁶⁹ Here I should stress that both those forms of historicist scholarship have often provided indispensable tools and discoveries to translators, and that in any case they have their own justifications and independent scholarly interest. But as indicated in section I above, the important thing is to be aware—given a particular goal in translation—of the ways in which such tools can further that purpose or can instead become obstacles to that particular type of communication.

¹⁷⁰ For students with a serious literary background, of course, Pound's *Cantos* are a particularly helpful startingpoint—and (along with much other modern poetry) a useful mine of suggestions for ways of experimentally translating the Qur'an which have not yet found their way into print.

But the translator (and teacher) cannot rely on the availability of such individualized pedagogical aids and relatively specialized background to “de-construct” all the reading habits and even more profound Biblical associations of vocabulary and meaning which virtually any English-speaking reader will bring to their translations. The Qur’an, as it has been read, studied and lived for centuries, is a *wholistic*, indeed essentially “holographic”, experience—one which is far more easily comparable with the tools and possibilities of the modern cinema than with our familiar, book-based literature—and the translator striving to create a useful study Qur’an must constantly strive to capture this particular distinctive *Qur’an-experience* in which every relevant part of the “text” resonates with every other—not only the overtly repetitive leitmotifs and themes, but also the deeper consonantal root structures and inimitable rhythms; in which the reader/reciter/interpreter have deeply present in their actual experience of a given verse a host of essential associations and comparisons which must be somehow conveyed in “translation.” It is no accident that most of the points mentioned separately below are basically discrete aspects of this central problem of conveying essential unities of the Qur’an which tend to disintegrate (or entirely disappear) in the process of naive English reading and translation.

B. *Avoiding “False Friends”—and Discovering Effective Equivalent Expressions:*

By far the most pervasive problem in teaching and translating the Qur’an is surely the question of equivalent key terms, one which English translators have traditionally approached by seeking apparent Biblical “equivalents” which may once (very long ago) have communicated something of cognate Hebrew or Greek expressions, but which—as any Islamic Studies teacher quickly discovers—have taken on vast burdens of implicit meanings (e.g., with “sin,” “belief,” “faith” [as opposed to reason or knowing], “polytheism,” “slave,” etc.) that immediately render the available English Qur’ans utterly meaningless, incoherent and thoroughly self-contradictory—not to mention, appallingly offensive in multiple places—to anyone without serious acquaintance with the underlying Arabic. Teachers who encounter hundreds of undergraduates (or church study groups, etc.) know how absolutely impossible it is to effectively de-construct the immediate, unconscious associations of such familiar English expressions.

The most surprising fact here, as I have already suggested, is that the Qur’anic Arabic itself actually expresses, for the most part, universal spiritual realities which are intimately familiar, for the most part, even to the most convinced “atheist” among my students. The essential expressions of the Qur’an really reflect—again, for the most part—essential categories of spiritual experience, and one has

only to remind students—which is what all the Islamic humanities were brought into being in order to accomplish—of their actual corollaries in our own experience. Once students begin to grasp what the underlying Arabic is actually talking about, they can for the most part readily re-translate the translation into terms that make sense and, perhaps more importantly, readily detect those places where the English is clearly conveying a false, misleading or incoherent impression of the Arabic. Practically speaking, I have found that a few weeks’ intensive work explaining key Arabic expressions, combined with practical exploratory exercises built around H. Kassis’s invaluable English-Arabic concordance of the Qur’an enables motivated and diligent students to begin to get beneath the existing translations to often astonishing discoveries and insights. But I can see no reason why translators should not begin to employ much more daringly and comprehensively either some appropriately anglicized form of the underlying Arabic or an intentionally cumbersome, thought-provoking English neologism which would force the reader to return to the actual Arabic meaning—in either case, with an initial explanatory footnote and comprehensive summary glossary (keyed to the longer initial explanations of each key term). The goal, in either case, is a kind of subtle apprenticeship in the essential Arabic concepts and vocabulary of the Qur’an, wherever no adequate English equivalent exists.

One further essential test for “false friends” or misleading “cognate” expressions that seems to be systematically ignored by all Qur’an translators is the fundamental necessity of conveying to the English reader the whole “semantic field” (to borrow T. Izutsu’s indispensable expression) that connects together the underlying Arabic roots of the Qur’an in semantic families by way of opposition, contrast or complementarity (which may be binary, ternary or even more complex in underlying structure). Since quite naturally English language—and more particularly the English Biblical language—does not at all reflect these essential linguistic/conceptual “constellations” of meaning, this is one of the strongest arguments (among others detailed below) for moving over as quickly to possible to an “anglicization” of the underlying Qur’anic Arabic terminology in any serious study translation.

C. Conveying and Re-creating Arabic Root Structures:

An essential corollary of the larger issue of the distinctive *unities* of the Qur’an is the necessity of making some effort in translation to communicate the underlying Arabic root-structures, in as many of their grammatical expressions as possible (a challenge we will return to in other guises below). Since the technical vocabulary of the Qur’an is for the most part both so distinctively unique (in comparison, for example, to the “ordinary” Arabic usages of the hadith and early poetry) and relatively

limited, any effort which is made to convey to the English reader this essential unifying dimension should quickly bear enormous fruits. This is true not only because of the verbal/conceptual unities that reappear, but also because the underlying Arabic roots are typically so polysemous, conveying (like the Chinese of the I Ching or classical Sanskrit) a multitude of complexly related meanings which the English reader must be carefully and explicitly informed about at each appearance: one striking example would be the terms *sidq*, *siddiq*, etc. In each of these cases, the serious translator who wants to convey this essential Qur'anic dimension is eventually faced with three choices: an appropriately modified form of the original Arabic (explained in detail at its first appearance); a long hyphenated English neologism (combining each relevant meaning of the Arabic root); or a single English code-equivalent suitably signed (by italics, boldface, quotes, etc.) so that the reader immediately understands the underlying Arabic as explained fully at the first appearance of that code-equivalent. All three of these choices are cumbersome, but my own translating and teaching experience suggests that the most economical—and ultimately beneficial—approach may be to stick closely to the original Arabic term itself, especially as that can help in eventually carrying over those expressions into the wider English language.

D. *Communicating the Actively “Verbal” and Trans-Temporal Emphases of Qur’anic Arabic:*

In all my years of teaching the Qur'an, I have found nothing that can more immediately and dramatically transform students' appreciation of all translations than suggesting that they immediately transform all the translator's “future” tense expressions into the *present* (“imperfect”) tense and substitute an implicit gerundive or participial ending (which is of course usually an outward “barbarism” or neologism in English) for the translator's apparent “nouns.” I must immediately admit that I was driven to this suggestion not by the underlying grammatical considerations which do not have to be explained to this scholarly audience, but rather by the gradual discovery that none of the classics of the Islamic humanities that I was translating and interpreting (including the constant embedded Qur'anic allusions throughout those literatures) made any sense otherwise.

In the case of translating Qur'anic time-schemes, it is quite possible—and dramatically more meaningful—to try to convey in English many of the nuances of the *trans-temporal* (or “eternally present”) divine “Voices” [see point II-E below] and the “events” they are describing: this immediately opens up for English readers the essential connections between Qur'anic discourse and similarly metaphysical expressions and perspectives—corresponding to immediately present dimensions of each person's soul—that are usually more familiar to them in the multi-temporal, oracular languages of

English poetry and (especially today) cinema. (Incidentally, translating Qur’anic time accurately only highlights and deepens the shock-effect of those times where the Qur’an actually does address the explicitly “future” (*sawfa...*, etc.) fate of what is usually, in that case, the reader’s very own soul (the *personal* “you” of section II-F below).

The impact of avoiding Indo-European nominal, conceptual, hypostasizing expressions in favor of the immediate, verbal impact of virtually all the Qur’anic Arabic is a much greater translating challenge, but one with an even more far-ranging impact on the English reader’s grasp of Qur’anic discourse and meaning. Qur’anic language doesn’t “communicate” some abstract, conceptual reality of tawhid, it actually *is* tawhid, down to its most intricate grammatical details. The translator is challenged in each verse to convey something of the active, verbal immediacy of each grammatical component in ways that may well do violence to “normal” English—but which when used consistently should have a profoundly transforming effect on the committed, serious reader. To take just one particularly recurrent example, students’ perceptions of the Qur’an are typically completely transformed once they realize that the companion expressions *mu’min*, *muslim*, *mushrik*, *munafiq* and *kafir* are not referring to hypostasized, changeless individuals or historically limited social groups, but to a recurrent series experiential *states* that each human being passes through (often daily!) and already knows from their own most intimate and undeniable experience in the face of earthly life’s recurrent trials.

E. Communicating the Qur’anic Voices and Shifting Perspectives:

Nothing can be more distinctive and central to the Qur’anic discourse¹⁷¹—and more pervasive in its influence on subsequent Islamic humanities, whether in poetry, music or the visual arts—than its pervasive interplay (often within the same verse), of multiple “divine” perspectives, voiced in the mysterious tongues of virtually every dimension of creation. Students with an affinity for poetry, cinema, or metaphysics are simply in awe when the Qur’an is presented in such a way that this fundamental feature of all Qur’anic language and meaning is brought out for them—something that can be done very simply and consistently, in any language, through a consistent typographic *mise-en-page* visually distinguishing the role of each voice, as well as those marvelously indeterminate or problematic passages which were of course the immediate inspiration for the equally incomparable masterworks of

¹⁷¹ Unless it is the recurrent litanies of the “*Names*”: see section II-H below.

later Islamic mystical poetry, music/*dhikr* and miniature painting. Here again, the distinctive structures of the Qur'an—with regard to both time-schemes and voice-perspectives—are strikingly mirrored in the technical means of modern cinema (as well as the more primordial musical usages of rhythm, repetition and leitmotifs). Once students are accustomed to translations in which the voice-perspectives are clearly revealed, they find it actually physically painful to have to decipher those essential structures underneath the “narrative prose” of most existing translations, as though one were being forced to wear out-of-focus lenses.

F. *The Qur'anic “You” and other Expressions of Emphasis and Tone:*

Nothing could be more simple yet more essential and fruitfully problematic than the Qur'anic “you,” yet even the most experimental English translations have only begun to dance around this central issue. To put it as simply as possible, in the Arabic Qur'an, one is almost physically struck by any use of the imperative or the singular “you”: what is almost always at question here is the fundamental spiritual question of the underlying connection between the Prophet as “addressee” (which is itself rarely in doubt) and the more problematic further relation of that particular divine address to the individual reader—a mysterious relation which is nonetheless unavoidable if the Qur'an is to unfold its riches to each reader down through time. That “personal you”, however, could not be more strongly differentiated in the Arabic from the broader, collective forms of address (including plural imperatives), and English translators have to find some way to convey those fundamental distinctions of meaning.

Although the “you-question” has particularly important metaphysical and spiritual implications, one can look on it grammatically as a subset of the larger distinctive forms of emphasis—especially distinctive verbal forms and highly significant matters of word-order—which are again such pervasive and characteristic features of Qur'anic language and meaning. The importance of what I am driving at here can readily be appreciated by all those who frequently have to move back and forth between English (or at least American?!) or German, on the one hand, and French: it is readily apparent, where intense emotions are being expressed, that those Germanic languages rely on intonation to convey 90% or more of essential meanings which have to be expressed in one's choice of words in French (or perhaps in body-language in yet other cultures). Forms of emphasis—especially word-order—are as fundamental to one's grasp of meaning and nuance in Qur'anic Arabic as intonation is in everyday English; they are one of those distinctive features that make virtually any phrase of Qur'anic Arabic quite different from ordinary Arabic prose or poetry alike. Often, as when one is forced to actually act

out a play, one finds that one's "reading" of a given Qur'anic passage will differ completely depending on the meaning one gives to such forms of emphasis; if there are equally persuasive possibilities, one can always translate one while explaining the other(s) in footnotes. And in any case, we now have a rich repertoire of readily available typographical tools—italics, boldface, small capitals, capitalization, mise-en-page, and different fonts, among others—which conscientious translators can begin to use consistently to translate those essential, and unifying, dimensions of Qur'anic discourse.

G. *Pronominal Reference and Gender:*

Two other, equally distinctive feature of Qur'anic language—and it is important to stress how distinctively Qur'anic these particular usages are, beyond what is "given" by Arabic grammar—are the frequently pregnant ambiguities of pronominal reference, which constantly gives rise to multiple (and usually equally interesting) possible meanings and the pervasive characteristic of what my colleague Michael Sells (an accomplished poet and translator) has referred to as "gender balance," which involves both questions of meaning and of the more poetic and musical dimensions of the Qur'an. In any case, this does present devilish problems in a non-gendered language like English: sometimes it works (and helps wake up the reader) to translate "she" for a feminine pronoun or form, but often that is impossible or pointlessly confusing.

The case of ambiguous pronominal references—like the related recurrent problem of textual ambiguities as to the reading of phrases and "punctuation"—should not necessarily present problems of English translation. One should be able to translate the different possibilities either within the body of the translation or in a footnote. But it is astonishing, given the frequency and characteristic nature of these issues (which are indeed characteristic of Qur'anic language, and can't be resolved "textually"), how virtually none of that complexity and ambiguity—which is so evident, to begin with, in how one chooses to read the very opening of al-Baqara—is actually apparent in the existing English translations. One dramatic illustration of the impact of taking such questions seriously is when the divine Name "Huwa"—as the referent for the repeated litanies of more particular divine Names or Attributes—is simply left in its original Arabic: not only does that eliminate inappropriate questions of gender identity, but it recaptures for the English reader something of the unavoidable mystery and profundity of this indecipherable reference to this ultimate Source, the underlying Reality, of all the knowable Names and attributes. That recurrent Qur'anic expression is the metaphysical *opposite* of any English pronoun.

H. *The Challenge of the Divine Names:*

In conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate, in discussing issues of Qur'an translation, to raise a particularly intractable and yet central question, one that also underlines the basic truth that scriptural "translation" is a matter of a much larger complex of contextual "*presentation*" (be it typographical, media-determined, dramatic, interpretive, etc.) beyond the obvious questions of literal choices of wording. As we noted above (II-E), the multiplicity of voices are "there" in existing translations, but essentially invisible to all but the most determined and inquisitive of readers. Something of the same sort is true with the treatment of the divine Names in existing Qur'an translations: even serious readers seem to gloss over them or read past them, as though they were simply (at best) a kind of musical background. Yet we are all aware—as students of Islamic cultures and civilization—of the absolutely fundamental role this dimension of the Qur'an has played for centuries in areas of life as diverse as ritual, prayer, music and *dhikr*, calligraphy, meditation, philosophy and theology, and so on.

Even without regard to those vast traditions, even by any purely quantitative standard, the "Names" are surely a central focus of Qur'anic teaching and expression. One can only wonder if there must not be some much more effective way to begin to bring out their role and importance within each passage of the Qur'an, so that English readers are drawn to the mysteries and realities they represent, rather than simply speeding past them, as is usually the case? In this, as with the other problems enumerated here, we hope that these brief allusions will encourage other scholars as well to undertake the creative, energetic, and necessarily experimental efforts that are so obviously needed to help open up more of the dimensions of the Qur'an to readers in English and other non-Islamic languages.

Chapter Seven

DRAMATIZING THE SURA OF JOSEPH:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES

“Surely We are recounting to you the most good-and-beautiful of tales...” (Qur’an 12:3)

Certainly no other scholar of her generation has done more than Annemarie Schimmel to illuminate the key role of the Islamic humanities over the centuries in communicating and bringing alive for Muslims the inner meaning of the Qur’an and hadith in so many diverse languages and cultural settings. Long before a concern with “popular,” oral and vernacular religious cultures (including the lives of Muslim women) had become so fashionable in religious and historical studies, Professor Schimmel’s articles and books were illuminating the ongoing *creative* expressions and transformations of Islamic perspectives in both written and oral literatures, as well as the visual arts, in ways that have only recently begun to make their way into wider scholarly and popular understandings of the religion of Islam. And even a superficial examination of those writings will suggest how widely and profoundly the Islamic humanities, in the most diverse cultural settings, have been influenced by figures and themes drawn from the Qur’anic story of Joseph and related Islamic tradition.

However, anyone writing or teaching about the Islamic humanities, in virtually any area or cultural setting, quickly encounters a fundamental pedagogical obstacle. Put simply, the problem is that the musical, artistic, ritual, philosophic or poetic expressions of the Islamic humanities, especially from Persianate and other Indo-European cultures, are typically far more immediately accessible to contemporary Western students (of any age or scholarly discipline) than their original Islamic “sources” and inspirations in the Qur’an and hadith (and related Arabic religious sciences). At best, the available secondary and historical studies of the Islamic humanities typically tend to suggest some of the isolated symbols, images and motifs that are carried over from those religious sources, while only rarely communicating something of their more profound links with the broader, perennial spiritual, ethical, metaphysical and theological themes and concerns that are in fact central to the Qur’an and the relevant

hadith literature. The first, unavoidable pedagogical challenge is therefore how to communicate to contemporary students, without any familiarity with a traditional Islamic culture, the essential inner connections between the foundational Qur'anic perspectives and their subsequent expressions in the Islamic humanities: this can only be done (just as in the direct study of those later Islamic artists, musicians and poets) by awakening the students' awareness of the *immediate* manifestations of those Qur'anic perspectives in all the relevant areas of their own lives and culture.

The collective dramatization of key episodes from the Qur'anic story of Joseph, along with intensive discussion of what students come to learn from that dramatization, is one effective pedagogical tool for awakening in contemporary students that indispensable personal realization of the perennial manifestations of key Qur'anic themes and concepts. For the Sura of Joseph, while relatively short, illustrates virtually all the fundamental features of the Qur'anic discourse and outlook which have remained central throughout centuries of later elaboration in the Islamic humanities. Here we can only mention a few of the most important of those points:

1. Dramatizing this Sura, with its focus on the interplay between the spiritual life and its outer ethical and political occasions and manifestations, beautifully illustrates the repeated fundamental Qur'anic assertions about the divine "Book" and the *archetypal*, constantly repeated nature and spiritual purpose of the "tests" and "likenesses" and "stories" mirroring and constituting our human existence—claims that are reasserted, in the strongest possible terms, in the opening and closing frame-verses of this chapter of the Qur'an.
2. The *structure of discourse* in this Sura clearly and repeatedly brings out the defining features of Qur'anic discourse—and its corresponding metaphysical claims or assumptions—as dramatically typified by the constantly fluid, often indeterminate *shifts in perspective* (alike of time, tense, "identity" and relationship), both "within" the overarching divine Voices and "between" those mysterious Speaker(s) and the more visible actors in the recurring human drama. Students attempting to act out that drama quickly come to see how, in terms of today's humanities, perhaps only "cinematic" (or possibly musical) means would be adequate to convey this constant simultaneity—and resulting ambiguity—of the different levels of divine and human

perspective which is such a central feature of Qur'anic discourse and its claims about the nature of being.¹⁷² Above all, anyone attempting to act out this story is obliged to engage the *primordial* mystery of the identity and reality of the intimate, singular “you” throughout the Sura—i.e., the ultimate “addressee” of this divine Speech—at a level which immediately goes beyond the safe distance of a purely conceptual or analytical inquiry. That engagement, in turn, necessarily leads to the sort of ongoing reflection on the interplay between the divine “Names” (or rather, their underlying Realities) and their manifestations in the world and our experience—i.e., the Qur'anic “Signs” of God—which is indispensable for beginning any serious approach to the Qur'an and its subsequent re-creations in the Islamic humanities.

3. Most importantly, the Sura of Joseph not only introduces virtually all of the *spiritual virtues* mentioned in the Qur'an (at first as rather unfamiliar Arabic concepts or symbols), but it actually illustrates the inevitably personal and *dramatic process of individual discovery*, of “initiation” and spiritual pedagogy, through which each human being gradually discovers the reality and existence of those virtues (or one's intimate relationship to the Divine) through their contrast with the received structure of humanly conventional (social, ethical and political) “virtues” that each of us ordinarily—or at least initially—takes to be most real. As with any play, the demands of dramatization¹⁷³ oblige each participant (a) to rediscover for each character the

¹⁷²Of course, in the classical Islamic humanities themselves, there are also any number of remarkable artistic illustrations of this typically Qur'anic perspective to be found among the surviving examples of miniature painting from the later Eastern Islamic world, while the masterpieces of classical “mystical” poetry, in whatever Islamic language, provide the perfect exemplification of this fundamental feature of Qur'anic discourse.

¹⁷³Requirements which are of course no different from that active and engaged *reading* of Scripture that eventually gave rise to the different expressions of the Islamic humanities. However, such fully “participatory” reading is not only an increasingly rare skill among contemporary students, but would of course be an enormous challenge (given present translations of the Qur'an) for even the most committed and diligent student working solely in English, without a profound knowledge of Arabic and related Islamic tradition.

corresponding situations, motives and inspirations (or sometimes the lack thereof) within their own world and experience; and (b) to recognize clearly and to reflect upon the decisive unexplained “leaps” within the Qur’anic narrative, those moments which almost always presuppose a critical spiritual transformation or “intervention” of divine Grace (e.g., in order to bring about true Forgiveness, the actual realization of the all-encompassing creative divine Love, *rahma*).

At the very least, then, acting out key sections of the Sura will almost inevitably bring to light, for any serious participant, the decisive, troubling contrast (at key moments in our own lives, or in more public events) between our outwardly inexplicable knowledge of proper conduct and the visible demands of socially and culturally supported norms and expectations; the actual dependence of those memorable moments of ethical (or spiritual, artistic, etc.) realization on some “external” Grace or illuminating power; and the strange “untranslatability” of the inner reality of those situations into everyday language and categories of explanation. At best, further reflection on those experiences triggered by the process of dramatization, and an expanding consciousness of the inner “hypocrisy” (to use the Qur’anic expression) underlying so much of each person’s conduct in the world, may lead more reflective students toward a deeper awareness of the links between such inner states and the more visible manifestations of human evil and self-destructiveness in the world. The same process of reflection, if it is sustained long enough, will eventually lead to a growing appreciation of the inner *unity* of the spiritual virtues (as different manifestations of the divine Presence in what we perceive as outwardly different situations), and ultimately toward a heightened awareness of the wider metaphysical, eschatological and soteriological perspectives within which the Qur’an itself presents these recurrent human dilemmas.

For initial study purposes, students may find helpful the outline provided in the Appendix (immediately following the translation) of the main “spiritual categories” or key Qur’anic virtues (and their contraries) illustrated in the course of this drama—keeping in mind that the most illuminating episodes are usually those *ironic* ones revealing the radical contrast between the actual reality of those spiritual virtues and the unconsciously “hypocritical” versions assumed by the unenlightened actors. The most important of those spiritual virtues, as well as many of the other key themes in the Sura, are at least briefly explained and introduced in a footnote to the verse where they first arise.

THE TRANSLATION:

The distinctive features of any version of the Qur'an (surely a more accurate term than "translation", given the challenges involved) are necessarily dictated by the audience(s) and pedagogical purposes involved. The one offered here is necessarily a compromise between the two conflicting demands of a minimal degree of English readability required by students (and sometimes teachers) without any acquaintance with the Arabic text and related Islamic background, and the ideal of a kind of "literalness" that would actually begin to convey something of the full strangeness and incomparability of the form, structure and contents of the original. Without attempting to explain or justify each choice, a few basic points—especially features that are not found in most published versions of the Qur'an—should be kept in mind in reading or acting out this chapter.

First, the strange *mise-en-page* necessary to convey something of the constant shifts and ambiguities of perspective and identity throughout this drama is by no means limited to this Sura: in fact it constitutes the most fundamental and inimitable feature of Qur'anic discourse, and one that has continued to inspire many of the most memorable creations of the Islamic humanities, in music and the visual arts as well as through the written and spoken word.

Secondly, the footnotes are limited to information that will help provide first-time readers with some sense of the *internal* Qur'anic context and of the essential inner "connections" with more general Qur'anic themes and concepts or symbols that would usually be obvious to later Muslim readers—i.e., the creators of the Islamic humanities—reading this Sura from the vantage point of a thorough acquaintance with the entire Qur'an.¹⁷⁴ To keep such notes to a minimum, those key themes and concepts have usually been discussed only at their first appearance, while the most important or untranslatable of those key terms have been presented in small-capitals throughout the translation, to remind readers of their "technical" nature and of the more adequate explanation of the underlying Arabic at the initial note. In general, the translation has been kept as "literal" and non-explanatory as possible, although that often sounds clumsy or unnatural in English, since so much of the essential

¹⁷⁴This means that for the particular purposes of *this* study, it is possible to leave out a wide range of obvious historical and philological questions that would naturally interest those studying this chapter from other perspectives.

indeterminacy¹⁷⁵ and multivalent meaning of the text—features which have inspired so many different and creative interpretations by later Muslim authors—are necessarily lost in a more “explanatory” translation. This is especially important for bringing out the avowedly central¹⁷⁶ symbolic and archetypal eschatological and metaphysical dimensions of the discussion, which are inevitably diminished if the Sura is viewed simply as another retelling of a supposedly more familiar Biblical narrative.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE:

The concluding verse of the Sura stresses that the underlying lesson of this chapter, for the truly qualified and attentive readers or listeners, is to be found in “*their* stories”—that is to say, in the actions, motives and transformations of *all* of the characters. And later creators of the classical Islamic humanities often found their inspiration through focusing in on the spiritual meaning and perception of those same stories from the perspective of characters (especially Jacob and “Zulaykha”) who are not likely to be at the forefront of interest for those discovering this text for the first time. (On the other hand, the dramatization of this story is likely to bring out the greater familiarity and immediacy of certain actors, like Joseph’s brothers or Zulaykha’s ‘friends’, whose roles were often considered obvious by the traditional commentators.)

However, the Sura as a whole, viewed from the externally central standpoint of the story of *Joseph* (and his family), has a remarkably classical, almost mathematical harmony and symmetry, as indicated in the following summary outline. Apart from the framing verses outlining the universal significance of the “story” and its ongoing recurrence in the world, the first half recounts Joseph’s own trials and ascension, using the wider eschatological and metaphysical symbolism and perspectives of the Qur’an, as an archetypal “likeness” for the process of the gradual spiritual perfection and realization of the prophets and saints (and at least potentially, of each human soul). The second half then portrays the

¹⁷⁵ E.g., the lack of identification (or the highly symbolic names) of so many of the speakers, the uncertainty about the time or “location” of key events, and the sudden, unexplained shifts in subject, location, and narrative perspective (or divine “commentary”).

¹⁷⁶ Any dramatization or discussion of this Sura (focused on its meaning within Islamic culture) must surely begin with the remarkably wide-ranging claims of its importance and ramifications in the opening and closing verses.

soteriological role and far-reaching activities and perspectives of the prophets and saints (and of divine Providence more generally) as they “return” to share their transformed realization of the nature of things with the rest of humanity, according to the very different aptitudes and situation of each soul. In both parts, of course, the intermittent chorus of divine Voices (the mysterious “We” and other narrators) and the usually unspeaking presence of Jacob provide constant spoken and silent “commentaries” on the inner meaning and personal relevance of this divine Comedy from even broader perspectives.

Structure of the Drama

PROLOGUE: verses 1-3

PART I: *Joseph’s Tests* (verses 4-57)

4-6: Beginning: Joseph’s Vision and Jacob’s response.

7-18: Joseph and his brothers’ “scheming”; Jacob’s reaction.

19-34: Joseph in Potiphar’s house (Zulaykha and the scheming women; Joseph’s first test).

35-49: Joseph in Prison and his “Two Companions” (Joseph’s final test: the transcendence of duality through the realization of divine Unicity).

CLIMAX (50-57): The eschatological perspective realized: reversal of fortunes, revelation of hidden sins and scheming, ultimate reward and eschatological balance; Joseph as true Viceroy (*khalīfa*) of “the King”.

PART II: *The Brothers’ Tests and the Passion of Jacob* (verses 58-101)

58-69: First test/round-trip and revelation to Benjamin.

70-92: Second test/round-trip and forgiveness of brothers.

93-101: Final journey and reconciliation: the truth of Joseph’s vision, and Jacob’s Insight restored.

CONCLUDING DIVINE COMMENTARY (verses 102-111)

The “Actors”:

As we have already noted, the most fundamental ambiguity in regard to this Sura (and much of the rest of the Qur’an as well) has to do not with the actors, but the intended “audience”: who is the

“*you*” (in the singular) that is the primary object of the eternal (or extra-temporal) divine Address? At times, of course, that figure seems to be Joseph himself, or sometimes Muhammad, but the Sura (and the Qur’an) loses much of its dramatic power if its reader (or listener) refuses to acknowledge that often some part or dimension of *each* of us is being addressed—a dimension which, as other passages of the Qur’an more strongly and openly suggest, may somehow connect us with each of the prophets, and beyond them, with those mysterious and recurrent divine “Names” which for later Muslim interpreters became the keys to their many interpretations of this sacred “Recitation.”

A second fundamental point to keep in mind is the frequent ambiguity (or deeper meaning) of each of the identifications of the characters in this story—both essential features that powerfully highlight the archetypal, recurrent nature of the drama recounted here. In the list of actors below we have sometimes added (in parentheses) the traditional names or identifications of certain actors, but the special significance of certain names actually used in the Qur’anic account (especially of the two Rulers who precede and elevate Joseph) is explained in the footnotes where those titles first appear. Finally, serious students of this text should always keep in mind the *silent*, unspeaking witnesses and actors—and not only such central silent presences as Satan and Jacob. As in the history around us (and even more obviously in sacred history), the measure of the spiritual significance and experience of each character may have little enough to do with their spoken words or the public visibility of their role. Here, for example, Joseph’s *mother* only appears silently at the very end (v. 100)—but elevated, together with Jacob, to the vice-regal *Throne*.

The Characters:

First NARRATOR; divine “WE”; INTERNAL Narrator¹⁷⁷; JOSEPH; “HIS BROTHER” (Benjamin); “HIS FATHER” (Jacob); the SHAYTĀN; his (other) BROTHERS; WATER-BEARER (and the caravan); the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE (*al-’Azīz*: later Joseph’s own title; Potiphar); his WIFE (Zulaykha); WITNESS from their household; WOMEN of the city; TWO FELLOW-PRISONERS; THE KING; DIGNITARIES of the royal court; royal MESSENGER; Joseph’s MANSERVANTS; a HERALD; a bearer of GOOD NEWS; his MOTHER (silently).

¹⁷⁷Who may of course be identical with the divine “We” (or some part of that Voice), or with the first Narrator.

THE SURA OF JOSEPH

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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In the name of God, THE ALL-LOVING¹⁷⁸, THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE.

[1] *Alif Lām Rā*:¹⁷⁹ Those are the SIGNS of the BOOK¹⁸⁰
making-clear.

Indeed We have sent It down, as a RECITATION¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸*al-Rahmān*: This divine Name, which appears together with its related intensive form *al-Rahīm* at the beginning of all but one of the chapters of the Qur’an, is distinguished both by its frequency and by its special closeness to the all-encompassing divine Name “God” (*Allāh*) (e.g., at 17:110). While its Arabic root includes derived meanings of “mercy” and “compassion”, its much wider meaning in the Qur’anic context—where, evoking its original etymological reference to the *womb*, it conveys the all-encompassing “Maternal” creativity and caring of the Creator for all creatures—can only be approximated in English by the closely related religious dimensions of divine “Love.” How that Love can in fact be the most profound and essential divine Attribute, despite the recurrent human experiences apparently suggesting otherwise, is precisely the central theme and argument of this Sura.

¹⁷⁹The numerical equivalents of these three separate Arabic letters—which were also used as numbers, and have often been seen as keys to the meanings of the similar mysterious figures at the beginning of many Suras—are 1, 30, and 200.

¹⁸⁰The Qur’anic contexts of this recurrent expression (appearing some 230 times) make it clear that the reference here is to the divine “archetype” or eternal Reality expressed in all of Creation as well as in all the prophetic “revelations”—which in the Qur’an clearly include the spiritual Realities or “persons” of the all the prophets, as well as the particular oral or written messages some of them have set forth.

The central Qur’anic expression *āya* (occurring almost 400 times, and often translated in other contexts as “miracle” or even “verse” of the Qur’an itself) refers—as at verse 105 below—to the inner reality of *all* phenomena and experience (see v. 41:53) as “signs” or symbols pointing human beings toward an awareness of their divine Ground and Source (and toward the specific divine “Names” manifested in each of those particular Signs). Again the drama of this Sura turns almost entirely on the contrasting states of the actors’ relative awareness or unconsciousness of the constant presence and meaning of those divine SIGNS.

¹⁸¹*Qur’ān* (usually associated with an Arabic root referring to “recitation” or “reading”) is only one of a considerable number of different terms used in the Qur’an itself to refer to various aspects of

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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(*Qur’ān*) in Arabic,
so that you-all might understand.

We, We are recounting to you the most good-and-
beautiful of tales through what We have
inspired to you, this RECITATION—even though
before It you were among the heedless-ones.

When Joseph said to his father:

“O my dear-father,¹⁸² I indeed, I have seen eleven
planets and the sun and the moon: I saw them to *me*
bowing down!”

[5] He said:

“O my dear-son, do *not* recount your vision to your brothers,
for they are devising a scheme against you. The Shaytān is
indeed for INSĀN¹⁸³ an enemy making-clear!”

the revelation to Muhammad. As throughout the Qur’an, the Voice of the mysterious divine “We” that enters the Sura here stands outside or beyond the passage of earthly time in such a way that it is often difficult or even impossible to be sure just who the “you” being addressed actually is.

¹⁸²Here, as throughout the Sura, the special relations between Joseph and Jacob are marked by the distinctive use of an intimate, familiar form of address that stands in marked contrast to the formal language used by the other brothers—and which also gradually turns out to mirror the *personal* relationship of each of those characters with that particular aspect of God referred to as their own “RABB” (see n. 14 below).

¹⁸³Throughout the Qur’an this key term refers to the “theomorphic,” spiritual reality of every human being—“pre-existing” (in the Qur’anic account) the created, part-animal mortal form of “clay” referred to as *bashar* (n. 30 below)—or that manifestation of the uncreated divine “Spirit of God” (*rūh Allāh*, at verse 87 below) whose mysterious inner relationship with God is precisely what this Sura is intended to illuminate.

The contrast between divine and “Satanic” (or ordinary human) “scheming” and “contriving” (*kayd*, *makar*) is of course a central theme throughout this chapter, which gradually reveals how the

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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[Jacob to Joseph?—or “We”/Narrator¹⁸⁴ (to whom)?]

And that is how your RABB¹⁸⁵ picks you out, and causes you to KNOW¹⁸⁶ through FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING of what-comes-to-be,¹⁸⁷ and fulfills His blessing upon you and upon the **Frame**

convoluted workings of Iblīs/Satan themselves eventually turn out to be an “illuminating” an essential part of the much larger divine “scheming” to bring about the spiritual education and maturity of human beings.

¹⁸⁴As often in this Sura (and throughout the Qur’an) this verse begins seemingly as though Jacob were addressing Joseph, but by the end (and certainly by the following verse) it is not at all clear which Voice is speaking—and above all, who is being addressed.

¹⁸⁵This key term is used more than a thousand times in the Qur’an—usually as an emotionally charged form of address or reference evoking our “personal,” most powerfully real and intimate existential relationship to some aspect of the divine (and far less commonly our relation to an earthly “master”). The Arabic root is powerfully associated—especially in this religious context—with the meaning of a *parent* lovingly and devotedly “raising” or “*taking care of*” and educating a dependent child. As with much of the Qur’anic vocabulary drawn from contexts of responsibility and hierarchical relationship, it is devoid of the strong and predominantly negative (or else vaguely Christological) associations of any of the usual English equivalents such as “Lord”. One of the central themes of this Sura is the dramatic, often highly ironic ways the actors gradually discover the actual intimate reality of their own RABB.

¹⁸⁶“KNOWING” in this special sense of divinely inspired spiritual awareness (*ʿIlm*) is one of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur’an (appearing almost 900 times), and also provides a clear illustration of the “pedagogical” relationship between the divine “Names” and their human manifestations. As illustrated throughout this Sura, the term typically refers to *direct* (non-conceptual) human awareness of God and the spiritual world, of the inner nature of things and the ultimate realities underlying the phenomenal and historical world. As mentioned repeatedly in this Sura (especially by Jacob), this rare knowing is *given by God*, and its human locus is the *Heart* (*qalb*, *lubb*, etc.). The Qur’anic term is also intimately connected with the central symbolic families, especially prominent in this Sura, of images of *Sight* and *Light*. Its key contraries, ironically illustrated throughout this drama, include “ignorance” or “foolishness” (*jahl*), “heedlessness” (*ghafla*), and ungratefully “rejecting” or “covering up” God’s SIGNS (*kufṛ*), etc.

¹⁸⁷*Ta’wīl al-ahādīth*: The first term of this key phrase refers to “taking (things) back to the First”, to their ultimate Source, while the second refers to whatever “comes to be”—certainly *not* particularly to “dreams” (cf. same terms at verses 21, 44-45, and 100-101). This recurrent contrast (cf. verses 21, 45, and 100-101) between true spiritual “vision” or insight and the “dreamlike” illusion of what most people

NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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people of Jacob, as He fulfilled His blessing upon your two fathers before, Abraham and Isaac. Indeed your RABB is ALL-KNOWING ALL-WISE!

[Narrator?/”We”?]: So in Joseph and his brothers there was surely a SIGN for those who-question-and-inquire.

When they said:

“Now Joseph and his brother are more dearly beloved by our father than us, though we are a tightknit bunch: Certainly our father is clearly gone astray!”

[Who? The Shaytān? One of the brothers?]:

“*Kill* Joseph! Or toss him out on some earth, (so that) your father’s regard may be left for you-all alone. And after that you-all can be a group DOING-WHAT-IS-RIGHT¹⁸⁸!”

[10] One of them, speaking, said:

“Don’t kill Joseph, but throw him in the hidden-depth of the well, (so that) some caravan may pick him up, if you-all are indeed doing (what you propose).”

ordinarily take to be most “real” is perhaps the most obvious unifying theme and lesson of the entire Sura.

¹⁸⁸ Whether the speaker here is meant to be “Satan” directly, or one of the brothers speaking for him, this passage powerfully introduces the Sura’s fundamental and constantly ironic contrast between conventionally and socially sanctioned “virtues” and the infinitely rarer spiritual virtues exemplified by Jacob and (eventually) Joseph. The key Arabic root *s-l-h* ordinarily refers to whatever is “right” in the sense of “fitting” or “appropriate” or “healthy” in a given situation, but the Qur’anic usage consistently joins and precedes references to the “right things” (*al-sālihāt*) with the essential *pre-condition* of “having FAITH” (*īmān*: see following note). The difficulty and rarity of that precondition is amply illustrated in the rest of this chapter.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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They said:

“O our father, why do you not have

FAITH¹⁸⁹ in us regarding Joseph, though surely we are sincerely meaning him well!? Send him with us tomorrow, (so that) he may run around and play. Certainly we *are* protecting him!”

He said:

“As for me, it does make me sad for you-all to take him with you. And I am afraid that the wolf may eat him up while you-all are heedless in regard to him!”

They said:

“If the wolf were to eat him up, while we’re such a tightknit-bunch, then *we* would be the ones suffering loss!”

[15] Then when they took him with them and agreed together that they would put him in the hidden-depth of the well, We inspired in him:
 “Surely you will inform them of this affair of theirs, while they are (still) unaware!”

¹⁸⁹This Sura is full of ironic plays on a single Arabic root (‘-*m-n*) that refers to the experience of trust, confidence, safety and assurance, and which always evokes in this Qur’anic context the key spiritual virtue of *īmān* (occurring almost 900 times in the Qur’an). *Imān* is the condition of faith, inner peace and absolute assurance, implicit confidence and total trust, granted by God (and intimately connected with the Qur’anic symbolism of Light and Knowledge). Its most frequently mentioned “contents” or perceptions include the reality and presence of God, the angels, and *all* the divine “Books” and Messengers. The term and its root are completely unrelated to any conceptual notion of “belief” (as it is often fatally mistranslated in English), and its nearest Qur’ānic equivalents are rather absolute *certainty* (*yaqīn*) of the Truth or divinely inspired “KNOWING” (*‘ilm*: n. 15 above).

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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And they came to their father in the night [or: ‘*night-blind*’,
‘*dim-sighted*’], crying.

They said:

“O our father, we, we went off trying to get ahead
of one another, and we left Joseph back with our
possessions. So the wolf ate him up!”

“But you *don’t* have FAITH in us, even if we
were SPEAKING-TRUTHFULLY!”¹⁹⁰

And they came with lying blood upon his shirt. He said:

“No, on the contrary: your souls¹⁹¹ (your NAFS)
have seduced you into some affair!”

“So SABR¹⁹² is beautiful. And it is

¹⁹⁰ *Sidq* (and related epithets such as *al-Sādiqūn*, or *al-Siddīq* later applied to Joseph, together appearing more than 150 times in the Qur’an) is one of the most untranslatable of the spiritual virtues mentioned there: it means *recognizing* and *acknowledging* the truth of what is actually True or Real—and ultimately therefore discerning the divine Presence and intentions behind the superficial appearance of things. That realization is made possible by the rare state of inner sincerity, purity, total confidence and trust (in God), and one very outward expression of that spiritual state is the more mundane sense of “sincere truth-telling” that is assumed by the brothers (and our usual translation of that root) here.

¹⁹¹ Much like the English expression “the self”, the Arabic term *nafs* has a wide range of possible meanings in the Qur’an, from a simple reflexive pronoun (“oneself”) to much deeper psychological and even metaphysical or theological dimensions (especially as “soul”, connected with its Arabic root reference to “breath” or “spirit”). In this translation we have noted some of the more problematic occurrences, where the meaning could be understood in rather different ways: this passage and v. 53 below became the locus classicus for later Islamic references to the psycho-spiritual aspect of the *nafs* as the “carnal soul” manifesting the reprehensible qualities of the human-animal (*bashar*, rather than *insān*).

¹⁹² *Sabr*, which is exemplified in the Qur’an (and thus in Islamic culture) at least as much by the figure of Jacob as by Job, refers here to the *inner* spiritual state of someone who faithfully perseveres in allegiance and devotion to the divine Truth *because they are aware* of the real nature and ultimate aim

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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God (alone) Whose Help must be sought against what
you-all describe!”

And a caravan came along. So they sent their water-man,
and he let down his vessel. He said:

“O what GOOD NEWS! This is a young man!”¹⁹³

And they kept him hidden, as trading-goods,

But God is ALL-KNOWING of what they are doing.

[20] And they sold him for a cheap price, a number of
dirhams—for they were among those considering him
of little value.

And the one from Egypt who bought him said to his wife:

“Honor his dwellingplace. Perhaps he may be useful to us
and we may adopt him as a son.”

or true context of their present difficult circumstances. The degree to which the Sura of Joseph is at least equally a drama about *Jacob*—as emphasized in many later versions of this tale in the Islamic humanities—only becomes clear after repeated reading and meditation, as the full reality and implications of Jacob’s SABR becomes apparent. Such reflection will also highlight the distance between this remarkably all-encompassing spiritual (or prophetic) virtue and what is typically suggested by such English equivalents as “patience”.

¹⁹³The term *ghulām* would ordinarily refer simply to a “boy” or “young man” (as the water-drawer clearly understands it here). In the Qur’an, however, it almost always refers (9 of 11 times) to the very special spiritual state of a young *future prophet*, visible only to those family members, like Jacob here, who are specially inspired by God (Abraham, Mary, Zachariah). The near-synonym *fatā* is used much more frequently here to refer to a young male servant or slave.

The water-drawer’s reference to his caravan’s serendipitous “good-news” (*bushrā*) contains a similarly pointed irony: in the Qur’an that same Arabic root is used consistently (several dozen times) and much more specifically to refer to the *divine* “good news” brought by the prophets and Messengers—typically in forms and circumstances that might are not judged to be “good” by very many of those around them.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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And that is how We established a place for Joseph
upon the earth, and so that We might cause him
to KNOW through FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING
of what-comes-to-be.

[Frame Narrator/or still “WE”?]

And God is prevailing in his affair—but most of the
people do *not* know!

And then when he reached his mature-strength We
brought him WISE-JUDGMENT¹⁹⁴ and (divine)
KNOWING: That is how We reward the
MUHSINŪN.¹⁹⁵

And the (woman) in whose house he was tried to
entice him away from himself. She locked the doors
and said:
“Come here!”

¹⁹⁴Divinely inspired “Wisdom” (*Hikma*) or the inspired Right-Judgment and spiritual Authority (*Hukm*) concerning particular circumstances that flows from such inspired Knowing are mentioned as human spiritual virtues almost a hundred times in the Qur’an (along with almost a hundred references to God as the ultimate *Hakīm*). The same Arabic root (*h-k-m*) also often refers to a number of related notions concerning power, mastery, firmness, and authority or rulership which ordinarily belong to rather different semantic fields in English. We have therefore tried to signal each appearance of this particularly untranslatable root in the course of the translation.

¹⁹⁵*Ihsān*, perhaps the most untranslatable of all the spiritual virtues mentioned in the Qur’an, appears almost 200 times, and clearly refers to one of the highest spiritual states, typifying the greatest prophets. Literally “*doing/making-what-is-good-and-beautiful*”, its Qur’anic usage stresses the even deeper inspired awareness necessary to *know* what is truly good-and-beautiful in any particular situation. In a very famous canonical hadith, in which it appears as the summa of the spiritual virtues comprising True Religion (*al-Dīn*), the Prophet defines *ihsān* for the angel Gabriel as “worshipping/serving God as though you see Him; and even if you didn’t see Him, He sees you”—or, in an equally possible translation: “...and if *you* are not, *then you do see Him*.”

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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He said:

“May God protect (me)! He is my RABB, Who has made good-and-beautiful my dwellingplace. He does not cause the wrongdoers to truly-flourish!”

Now she was longing for him, and he was longing for her, were it not that he saw the Proof of his RABB.

That is how (it was), so that We might keep away from him evil and indecency. He is indeed among OUR WHOLLY-DEVOTED SERVANTS.¹⁹⁶

[25] So they each tried to reach the door first and she ripped his shirt in back, and at the door they met her master.

She said:

“What is the recompense for someone who intended evil for your family, if not that he be imprisoned or (receive) a painful torment!?”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶The virtue of *ikhhlās* refers to absolute inner purity of intention, doing whatever one does *entirely for God’s sake*, in a state of pure inner “surrender” (*islām/taslīm*) and complete satisfaction (*ridā*) with the divine Will. In the Qur’an it is often connected specifically with the spiritual state of the prophets and saints, while the phrase “(God’s/Our) *wholly-devoted servants*” is specifically applied (at 15:40 and 38:83) to those specially privileged souls whose unique inner purity saves them from suffering the (divinely authorized) tests and delusions of Iblis/Satan.

¹⁹⁷The concluding Arabic phrase here (‘*adhāb alīm*’) is used some seventy times in the Qur’an to refer to the sufferings or punishments of Gehenna and the “Fire”; the particular Arabic root referring to “prison” here (*s-j-n*) is also used to refer to a fearful level of Gehenna in several key eschatological passages. Thus Zulaykha’s “threat” here has direct and powerful eschatological resonances that openly set the stage for a more symbolic, metaphysical “reading” of this drama and Joseph’s predicament already at this early stage of his story.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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He (Joseph) said:

“*She* tried to entice me away from myself!”

And a witness from her people testified:

“If his shirt is ripped in front, then she spoke truthfully and he is among the liars. But if his shirt is ripped in back, then she has lied and he is among THOSE SPEAKING-TRUTHFULLY.”

So when he (her husband) saw his shirt was ripped in back, he said:

“This is from *your* (fem. *plural*) scheming, for your scheming is indeed tremendous!”

“O Joseph, turn away from this!”

[to his wife:] “And you, seek forgiveness for your offense: surely you were among the erring ones!”¹⁹⁸“

[30] And some women in the city said:

“The wife of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE¹⁹⁹ is trying to

¹⁹⁸The husband here uses one of the milder terms for “sin” or transgression in the Qur’an: the root *kh-t-*’ refers primarily to an (unintentional or one-time) “mistake” or “error”, not to more deeply rooted and perversely evil acts of will. The husband’s remarkably calm (and dramatically somewhat incongruous) emphasis on *forgiveness* here underlines both the truly divine nature and source of that virtue and the ways in which each of the “ruling” figures in the Sura—Jacob, the husband here, the King, and finally Joseph—appears above all as a more or less open and expressly “super-human” embodiment of that particularly divine Attribute (see **n. 7** above on *rahma*).

¹⁹⁹*al-‘Azīz*: this is one of the more common of the divine Names in the Qur’an, appearing more than a hundred times, so that no reader/listener familiar with the Qur’an could possibly miss the metaphysical resonances of that title here. (Note the very similar case of *al-Malik*, “The King”, below).

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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entice her young servant away from himself. He’s made her
fall madly in love. Indeed we see she’s clearly gone
astray!”

So when she heard about those women’s sly-devising²⁰⁰ she
sent to them and prepared for them a cushion, and she
brought a knife to every one of them and said (to
Joseph):

“Come out before them!”

And when the women saw him they glorified him and they all
cut their hands (in astonishment), and they said:

“God preserve (us)! This is no ordinary-mortal²⁰¹—this
can only be a majestic angel!”

She said:

“So there for you-all is the one because of whom
you were reproaching me! I *did* try to entice him away
from himself, only he resisted.”

Even more pointedly, Joseph turns out to have this *same* semi-regal title when he is later addressed by his brothers.

²⁰⁰The Qur’an has some thirty striking references to the contrast between the “scheming” (*makar*: cf. the related concept of *kayd* at n. 12 above) characteristic of so much human (and Satanic) activity and the paradoxically providential spiritual results of that deluded activity from the wider divine perspective of the “Best of Schemers” (*khayr al-mākirīn*, at 3:54 and 8:30)—a contrast that is of course one of the central dramatic themes of this particular Sura.

²⁰¹*Bashar* (in the standard Qur’anic contrast with *insān* explained in n. 12 above): as so often in this Sura, the actors here ironically speak the truth for totally wrong reasons, without being aware of those divine or prophetic qualities (beyond his incomparable physical beauty) which make Joseph’s being truly “angelic”. It should be noted that all the actors in this Sura (i.e., Egyptians and Jacob’s family alike) are portrayed as sharing the *same religious vocabulary*, differing only in their relative awareness of the realities to which those familiar words actually refer.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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[to herself?] “But if he doesn’t do what I order
him to, he will most certainly be imprisoned,
and then he will surely be among the lowly
ones!”

He said:

“My RABB! Prison is more lovable to me than what
they (*masc. pl.*) are calling me to—and if You do not
turn their (*fem. pl.*) scheming away from me I will give
in to them (*fem. pl.*) and become one of the ignorant-
and-foolish ones!”

So his RABB did respond to him and turned their scheming
away from him. Surely He is the ALWAYS-LISTENING,
the ALL-KNOWING.

[35] Next,²⁰² it appeared (right) to them (*masc. pl.*), after
they had seen the SIGNS, to imprison him until a
certain time.

And two young servants entered the prison with him. One of
the two said:

“I am seeing myself squeezing out wine.”

²⁰²*Thumma*: a distinctive conjunction clearly marking a substantial break in the story. The Qur’anic account itself offers no explanation here of these “Signs” or of this mysterious (masculine) “they” and the actual motives for Joseph’s imprisonment, beyond the subsequent revelation (at v. 52) of the apparent role of Zulaykha and her friends in it. The vagueness of this situation and the description here only heighten and accentuate the impression of apparently arbitrary or unjust and undeserved suffering that is clearly intended to evoke analogous experiences and impressions within each reader’s/listener’s own life.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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And the other one said:

“I am seeing myself carrying above my head a loaf
of bread from which the birds are eating.”

[Both of them:]

“Inform us both about the INNER-MEANING (*ta’wīl*)
of it. For we *see* you among the MUHSINŪN.”

He said:

“There does not come to you two any nourishment
that is bestowed as your SUSTENANCE,²⁰³ but that I
have already told both of you the INNER-MEANING of it,
before it comes to you both. That, for you both, is
among what my RABB has caused me to KNOW. I have
indeed forsaken the MILLA²⁰⁴ of a group who do not

²⁰³“Sustenance” here can only suggest a few dimensions of the recurrent Qur’anic term *rizq* (and related forms), which almost always refers to the universal *divine* activities of creating and bestowing all the forms of God’s “Grace” and “Bounty,” including much more than food and extending ultimately to the very existence of all creatures and forms of manifestation. The unusually complicated Arabic syntax throughout this entire episode with the “two prisoners” strongly emphasizes the metaphysical and theological dimensions of this situation—almost to the point of an explicit allegory for the “dualism” and inherently prison-like suffering inseparable from all human existence so long as our perceptions of being are limited to the “this world” (*dunyā*) of matter, space and time, without any deep awareness of the “other”, spiritual world (*al-ākhirā*). This likely reading of the passage is even more strongly emphasized by the otherwise virtually inexplicable “switch” to the theological arguments at the end of this verse and throughout the following verses, which would otherwise have little obvious connection either to the two prisoners’ visions or to their respective fates.

²⁰⁴This mysterious Qur’anic expression—which later became perhaps the most common Islamic expression for different “religions” in the exoteric sociological and historical sense—is usually used in the Qur’an specifically in connection with the particular monotheistic religious “way” or path of *Abraham* (or his descendants), sometimes, as here, in contrast with opposing religious perspectives or ways of life.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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have FAITH in God and who reject²⁰⁵ THE-OTHER-WORLD!”

[aside?] “And I have followed the MILLA of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob: it was not for us to associate *any* thing with God. That was through God’s favor for us and for (all) the people—and yet most of the people are not giving-thanks!”

“O two companions [or ‘*masters*’] of the Prison:²⁰⁶ Are disparate-separate lords [pl. of RABB] better—or God THE-ONE, THE-OVERPOWERING?!”

[40] [WE? Narrator? Joseph? Or even Muhammad?²⁰⁷:]

²⁰⁵ Or “over over” or “are ungrateful for”: the key Qur’anic root *k-f-r* appears very frequently as the active contrary both of the central spiritual virtues of faith and mindfulness and of gratitude or thankfulness to God, spiritual states which—as this verse and the entire passage strongly emphasize—are sincerely inconceivable from the limited standpoint of the “prison” of “this world” (*al-dunya*), without the inner awareness of its Source and continuation in the “other world” (*al-akhira*) that Joseph gradually discovers through his imprisonment.

²⁰⁶ Given the constant stress on *duality* (and contrasting insistence on divine *Unity*) throughout Joseph’s strange speech here, the metaphysical and eschatological dimensions of this passage are further heightened by the fact that the particular Arabic term for “prison” used here (*al-sijn*, one of several possible Arabic expressions) strongly evokes “The Prison” (*al-Sijjīn*) described elsewhere in the Qur’ān as one of the lowest “levels” of Gehenna.

Those considerations suggest that a literal translation of Joseph’s strange epithet for his companions—i.e., as the “two *masters*” of the prison, those who “control” or *possess* it; or as its “two *owners*” and rightful inhabitants—may more adequately describe the state of all those who are inherently confined to this world by their dualistic (material and time-bound) perception of things.

²⁰⁷ In this verse the “addressees” are in the indefinite *plural* rather than the explicitly *dual* form used repeatedly in the preceding verses, so that it is not at all clear who is speaking to whom, or in what situation and time-frame.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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“What you-all are worshipping/serving besides Him are nothing but names that you-all have named, you and your fathers! God has not sent down for them any authority. Certainly the DECISIVE-JUDGMENT²⁰⁸ is *only* for God! He commanded that you-all not worship/serve any but Him alone: That is THE UPRIGHT RELIGION²⁰⁹—and yet most of the people do *not* know!”

“O two companions of the Prison: As for one of you, he is pouring wine for his lord²¹⁰ to drink. And as for the other one, he is crucified, so that the birds are eating from his head. The matter has (already) been decreed which you are seeking to have me explain.”

²⁰⁸ *al-Hukm*: see n. 27 above (where this quality is divinely bestowed on Joseph) concerning the manifold meanings of this Arabic root. Here the sense of (ontological) *rulership* and governing authority predominates (as with the closely related Arabic term *sultān* in the preceding sentence).

²⁰⁹ *al-dīn al-qayyim*: this expression (also occurring at 9:36, 30:30 and 30:43) is part of a complex of related Qur’anic phrases powerfully affirming the unchanging unity of all realized “Religion” (*al-dīn*) as the proper relation between God and the human soul, the spiritual state of true “worship-and-divine-service” (*‘ibāda*) exemplified by the prophets and saints.

²¹⁰ For those (including virtually all later Muslim interpreters) approaching this passage from within the perspective of the Qur’an itself, the image of “pouring wine” would naturally and very powerfully evoke the *eschatological* symbolism of the “banquets” (fountains, cupbearers, etc.) in the Garden (of Paradise) and the closely related symbolism of the divine “Court” (“Throne”, “dignitaries”, etc.) which is continued in the immediately following verses here. Similarly the complex symbolism of the “birds” mentioned in the Qur’an is often related (at least by later readers and commentators) specifically to the spiritual states of souls or other spiritual beings.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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And he said to the one of the two whom he suspected was
being saved:²¹¹

“Mention/remember me in the presence of your lord
(*rabb*)!”

Then the Shaytān made him forget
mentioning/remembering his RABB,²¹² so he lingered
in the Prison several years.

And THE KING²¹³ said:

“Surely I am seeing seven fat cows that seven thin
ones are eating, and seven green ears (of grain), and
other dry ones. O you dignitaries²¹⁴, explain to me

²¹¹The Arabic term here is used repeatedly (and almost exclusively) throughout the Qur’an to refer to *God’s* “saving” the prophets, righteous, etc. in an *explicitly* spiritual or eschatological sense. Likewise, Joseph’s parting words here clearly evoke the imagery of the *intercession* (*shafāʿa*) of the prophets and Messengers in the divine “Court”—usually within eschatological settings—alluded to in the Qur’an and described in greater detail in many well-known hadith.

²¹²This literal translation strongly suggests—within the *Qur’anic* context, where “remembrance” or mindfulness of God (*dhikr Allah*) is mentioned almost three hundred times as a fundamental spiritual virtue—that it was *Joseph* who forgot to “remember” his Lord and *therefore* remained in the “Prison” of duality. Only by stretching the Arabic (and following the Biblical and legendary accounts, as is often the case in the later commentary literature) can one read this passage as somehow referring exclusively to the former prisoner.

²¹³In order to grasp the deeper meanings of the story it is absolutely essential to keep in mind that throughout the Qur’an *al-Malik*, “The King” or “Possessor” of all creation, is one of the most frequent of the *divine* Names. (Cf. the similar case of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE, *al-‘Azīz*, as the epithet of Joseph’s earlier owner and Joseph’s own title after his elevation by the King.) Of course no mention is made at all here of “Pharaoh” (*fir‘awn*), the usual (and uniformly pejorative) title for the paramount Egyptian ruler in the rest of the stories of the Qur’an.

²¹⁴*al-mala’*: the term describing the assembled officials or nobles of a Court, which is also

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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about my vision, if you are (capable of) interpreting²¹⁵ the
vision!”

They said:

“Mixed-up dreams²¹⁶! And *we* are not, with regard
to FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING of dreams, among
those who know.”

[45] And he said, the one of the two (prisoners) who was
saved and (only now) remembered after some time:

“I (intend to) inform you of its INNER-MEANING, so
send me out.”

[Then at the Prison he said:]

“Joseph, O you TRUTHFULLY-SPEAKING-ONE (*al-*
siddīq): Explain to us regarding seven fat cows that
seven thin ones are eating, and seven green ears and
other dry ones, so that I might return to the people, so
that perhaps they might know!”

frequently used in the Qur’an (and hadith) to refer to the highest angels or archangels around the divine “Throne”.

²¹⁵The King uses an entirely different and more common expression (*‘ibāra*) than the strange and metaphysically evocative term *ta’wil* (“INNER MEANING”) consistently used by Jacob, Joseph and the two prisoners (see n. 16 above), although he does at least refer to his experience as a “vision” (*ru’ya*) rather than as a “dream” (see following note). The root of *‘ibāra* refers to the “crossing over” from a particular significant form or experience to the meaning or lesson it contains, and is therefore used more broadly for any sort of “interpretation”.

²¹⁶This is the only reference to “dreams” in the entire Sura, all the other characters at least being aware that they are dealing with spiritual “vision” (*ru’ya*) in a far more profound sense. The contrast here dramatically highlights the constant theme of Reality and illusion—and of the rare spiritual “insight” (*basīra*: notes 69 and 81 below) and inspired wisdom needed to “see through” the “veils” of those immediate appearances—which provides the most basic thematic unity of this entire Sura.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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He said:

“You-all plant for seven years, tirelessly. But of what you-all have harvested, leave it on the ear except for a very little, from which you eat.”

“Then there come after that seven hard ones eating up what you-all have prepared for them, except for a very little from what you-all are preserving.”

“Then there comes after that a year in which the people are abundantly helped out,²¹⁷ and in it they are pressing (much oil).”

[50] And the KING said:

“Bring him to me!”

Then when the messenger²¹⁸ came to him, he said:

“Return to *your* lord (*rabb*) and ask him: ‘What was the problem with those women who cut their hands?’”

[To himself?:]

“Certainly *my* Lord/RABB is WELL-
KNOWING about their schemes!”

He (the King) said (to those women):

“What was going on with you-all when you tried to entice Joseph away from himself?!”

²¹⁷The Arabic root here refers literally to abundant rains, but is consistently used elsewhere in the Qur’an to refer more broadly to God’s “Grace”—especially as it appears in response to human prayers and entreaties—in all of its forms. (Cf. the related notion of divine “Sustenance,” *rizq*, at n. 32 above.)

²¹⁸*al-rasūl*: This is exactly the same term used hundreds of times in the Qur’an to refer to the “Messengers” of the divine King, the prophets and angels (and often to refer specifically to Muhammad).

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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They said:

“God forbid—We didn’t know any wrong of him!”

The wife of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE said:

“Now the Truth²¹⁹ has become clear: I did try to entice him away from himself, and surely he is among the TRUTHFULLY-SPEAKING-ONES!”

[Joseph—apparently to himself:]

“That is so that he²²⁰ might know that I did not betray him regarding the UNSEEN, and that God does not guide the scheming of those who betray.”

“And I am not absolving my NAFS:²²¹

²¹⁹ *al-Haqq*: We have capitalized the translation here because the identical expression is also one of the highest or most comprehensive divine Names (“The Truly Real”) throughout the Qur’an, and later Muslim interpreters sometimes took Zulaykha’s exclamation here to refer to much more than the mere public disclosure of her treachery—i.e., as the sign of a dramatic spiritual process of maturation and growth, culminating in her recognition of the true reality of Joseph’s nature and of her own love, comparable to the suffering and inner transformation later undergone by Joseph’s brothers.

²²⁰ The reference here is rather unclear, and may be to Zulaykha’s husband, the King, or perhaps even to God (there are problems with all three interpretations). In favor of the latter possibility is the fact that in the Qur’an the recurrent expression for “the unseen (spiritual) world” (*al-ghayb*) has to do with realities far broader (and quite different from) mere worldly “secrecy” and discretion. One of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur’an—most strikingly manifested by the figure of *Jacob* in this Sura—is that of being a “Guardian of the UNSEEN” (*Hafiz al-ghayb*): i.e., respectfully and appropriately responding to one’s awareness of the spiritual world and the hidden reality of things at each moment, always observing the right behavior (*adab*) in one’s relations with God and with each creature in a way that is appropriate to that soul’s particular spiritual needs and capacity, while retaining the divine quality of “concealing” (*al-Sattār*) most of his spiritual knowledge.

²²¹ Or “self”, “soul”, etc.: see the discussion of this highly problematic term in the note to n. 20

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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Surely the NAFS is commanding (us) to do
wrong, except to the extent that my RABB
has MERCY. Indeed *my* RABB is MOST-
FORGIVING, MOST-LOVING-AND-
MERCIFUL!”

And the KING said:

“Bring him to Me, so that I may have him WHOLLY
DEVOTED to Myself!”

Then once He had spoken with him, He said:

“Today you are in Our presence, well-settled and
well-trusted!”²²²

[55] He (Joseph) said:

“Place me over the TREASURIES OF THE EARTH.
Indeed I am WELL-PROTECTING, WELL-KNOWING!”²²³

above.

²²²The diction of this entire verse (12:54), especially at the end, is powerfully reminiscent of the many Qur’anic scenes depicting the fate of the blessed standing before the divine “King” at the “Last Day”. This eschatological resonance is so strong and so literal that it could not possibly escape any reader in the Arabic. Moreover, *both* the epithets bestowed on Joseph here (*amīn*, *makīn*) frequently appear elsewhere in the Qur’an applied to Muhammad as divine Messenger (especially in Sura 26).

²²³ These last words (*hafīz*, *‘alīm*) both appear frequently as *divine* Names throughout the Qur’an—thereby signaling Joseph’s “investiture” here with the full Prophetic attributes; they also characterize the broader cosmological functions associated with the specific heavenly station of this prophet mentioned in the hadith of the Mi’rāj. Likewise, the word “treasuries” (*khazā’in*) always refers elsewhere in the Qur’an to *God’s* Treasuries: e.g., at 6:50, 11:31; 15:21; 17:100; 38:9; 52:37; and 63:7 (“*God’s are the Treasuries of the heavens and of the earth...*”).

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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And that is how We established Joseph on the earth,
settling down upon it wherever he wishes. We
bestow Our LOVINGMERCY on whomever We
wish. And We do not neglect the reward of the
MUHSINŪN!²²⁴

[Frame Narrator?/or still “We”?]:

And surely the reward of THE OTHER-WORLD is best,
for those who had FAITH and were MINDFUL (of
God)²²⁵!

And Joseph’s brothers came. Then they entered before him
and he knew them, while they were denying²²⁶ him.

And when he had provided them with their supplies he said:

²²⁴The middle of this verse (56) marks the *exact midpoint* of the Sura.

²²⁵The spiritual virtue of *taqwā* could perhaps be best translated as “*active* God-awareness”: it is the consciousness and awareness of God’s Presence, an inner *mindfulness* of the divine at every instant, combined with an eager, attentive orientation to *do* and accomplish in actual practice what that spiritual awareness demands. The Qur’ān repeatedly mentions this (more than two hundred times) as one of very highest spiritual states, most fully exemplified in the prophets and special “friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*).

²²⁶The underlying (and untranslatable) Arabic roots used here convey much more strongly the intended broader reference to spiritual “blindness” and the contrasting recognition of theophany (the divine “Signs”). The term translated here as “denying” (*munkir*) actually refers to the state of someone’s (inwardly or outwardly) *pretending* not to know or recognize something that they really do know: cf. the closely related key Qur’anic concept of *k-f-r*, to “cover up” or ungratefully refuse the ultimate Reality of the soul’s relation to God (see note to v. 37 above). Confirming the same metaphysical point, “knew” here translates the root *ʿ-r-f*, referring specifically to the familiar experience of our “*recognition*” of a *person* we actually already know.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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“Bring me from your father a (certain) brother of yours.

Don’t you-all see that I fill up the measure and I am
the best of those-who-give-hospitality?!”

[60] “But if you *don’t* bring him to me, then there is no
measure for you with me—and you may not come near
me!”²²⁷

They said:

“We *will* try to entice²²⁸ his father from (holding on
to) him: Certainly we are doing (that)!”

And he said to his young servants:

“Put their trading-goods back in their saddlepacks,
so that they may recognize them when they have gone
back to their family—that perhaps they may return.”

So when they returned to their father they said:

“O our father,²²⁹ the measure (of grain requested)
was forbidden to us. So send our brother with us that

²²⁷ Here, in the larger Qur’anic context, the Arabic expression evokes much more strongly than any possible English translation the many Qur’anic references to the central notion of each soul’s relative “proximity” (*qurba*) to *God*, which is often discussed in terms of imagery (such as the divine “Throne,” courtiers, etc.) drawn from court protocol and etiquette.

²²⁸ The brothers here use precisely the same (pejorative) term that was earlier used to describe the “scheming” of Zulaykha and her friends to get Joseph to go against his own better inclinations. The irony in the brothers’ response is that they are of course *already* deeply implicated in the process of repeating with Benjamin what they had earlier done with Joseph.

²²⁹ Here, as throughout the rest of the Sura, the brothers continue to use the same formal and “objective” form of addressing their father, as opposed to the intimate and personal, diminutive form always used in the exchanges between Joseph and Jacob (verses 4-5 and 100). Exactly the same contrast is mirrored in the ways Joseph and Jacob (as opposed to the other characters) address God and especially their personal RABB (see notes 11 and 14 above). Ironically, the brothers’ words at the end of this verse literally reproduce their earlier assurances to Jacob regarding *Joseph* in v. 12.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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we may be given the measure. Surely we *are*
protecting him!”

He said:

“Can I have faith in you regarding him—except as I
had faith in you regarding his brother before!?”

[To himself?:]

“For God is BEST-IN-PROTECTING, and He is the
MOST LOVING OF THOSE SHOWING LOVINGMERCY
(*arham al-rāhimīn*)!”

[65] But when they opened their possessions they found
their trading-goods returned to them. They said:

“O our father, what (more) do we desire? These are
our own trading-goods returned to us! And we will
provide for our family and protect our brother and
increase (our provisions) by the measure of a camel-
load. That is an easy measure!”

He said:

“I *will never* send him with you-all until you give
me a pledge from God that you will most surely bring
him back to me, unless you are surrounded!”

So when they had given him their pledge he said:

“GOD is TRUSTEE (*wakīl*) for what we are saying!”

And he said:

“O my sons, don’t go in through a single gate, but
enter through separate gates! And I cannot help you,
in place of God, with regard to any thing. The

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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DECISIVE-JUDGMENT (*al-hukm*) is only for God: in Him
have I trusted, and on Him should rely all-those-who-
trust (*al-mutawakkilūn*)!”²³⁰

And when they entered in the way their father had
commanded them, that was not of any help to them, in
place of God, with regard to any thing—except as a
need in Jacob’s NAFS which he satisfied.

And surely he is a possessor of (divine) KNOWING
through what We have made him KNOW—and
yet most of the people do *not* know!

And when they entered before Joseph, he made his brother
his (special) guest.²³¹ He said:
“Indeed I myself *am* your own brother! So do not
be upset about what they have been doing.”

[70] Then when he had provided them with their supplies,
he put the drinkingcup in his brother’s saddlebag.

Next a herald called out:

“O you of the caravan, indeed you-all are surely
thieves!”

²³⁰*Tawakkul*, repeatedly encouraged in the Qur’an, is the spiritual station of total trust and confidence in God, the inner attitude of sincerely “handing things over” totally to Him, as a departing traveler or pilgrim would entrust their family and affairs to a trusted servant or steward (*wakīl*).

²³¹The Arabic verb used here and at verse 99 (with the ordinary sense of giving lodging or refuge) also has strong eschatological overtones in the Qur’anic context, since its locative form (*al-ma’wā*) is repeatedly used in vivid eschatological passages to refer to the “ultimate abode” of both the blessed and those subject to torment, whether in the “Gardens” or the “Fire”.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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They said, as they came (back) close to them:

“What is it you are missing!?”

They said:

“We are missing the King’s chalice!

“For whoever brings it there is a camel’s load (in reward), and I am responsible for it,” [added Joseph].

They said:

“By God, you-all surely know we didn’t come to do harm in the earth and we haven’t been thieves!”

They said:

“Then what are the amends for it, if you-all *have* been lying?”

[75] They said:

“The amends for it are the person in whose saddlebag it is found—let him be the compensation for it: that is how *we* repay the wrongdoers!”

So he began with their sacks before his brother’s sack, and then he brought it out of his brother’s sack.

That is how We contrived for Joseph: he would not have taken his brother according to the religion²³² of the King, except that God wishes.

²³²*Dīn* here could also mean “law,” “custom”, “judgment”, and the like—keeping in mind what has already been said about the likely meaning of “The King” at v. 43 above.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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We raise up by degrees whomever We wish, and
 above every possessor of knowledge is ONE
 ALL-KNOWING!²³³

They said:

“If he is stealing, then a brother of his had stolen
 before!..”

But Joseph kept it secret within himself and did not reveal it
 to them. He said (to himself):

“You *yourselves* are in a far worse situation, and
 God is MORE KNOWING about what you
 describe!”

They said:

“O DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE,²³⁴ he has a father, an
 extremely old man,²³⁵ so take one of us instead of him.
 Certainly we *see* you are among the MUHSINÜN!”

He said:

“God forbid that we should take anyone except the

²³³ Commentators disagree whether this famous last phrase refers *only* to God (as it is translated here), or also—if one understands the last phrase as “*someone more* knowing”—to the existence of much wider earthly and/or spiritual hierarchies of religious or other knowledge. However, in the Qur’an itself these frequently mentioned “degrees” or “ranks” (*darajāt*, appearing some fourteen times) most often seem to refer specifically to *spiritual* qualities, functions or rewards in the *other* world (e.g., “*with their Lord*”, at 8:4).

²³⁴ *al-‘Azīz*: Joseph is addressed here with the same title (*and* divine Name) as the Egyptian official who earlier bought him and raised him until his imprisonment.

²³⁵ Or “a great shaykh”: *shaykh kabīr*.

Frame NARRATOR Divine “WE” ACTORS INNER “ASIDES”

person with whom we found our things! Otherwise we would surely be wrongdoers!”

[80] So then when they had despaired of (persuading) him, they got away to talk in secret. The oldest of them said:

“Don’t you-all know that your father took a pledge from you with God, and before how you were so remiss with regard to Joseph?! So I will never leave (this) earth until my father gives me permission or God judges for me, for He is the BEST OF THOSE-WHO-JUDGE!”

“You-all return to your father and say:

‘O our father, your son has certainly stolen. And we have only given witness to what we have come to know: we were not protecting the UNSEEN!’”

“And ask the village where we were and the caravan in which we came back: indeed we are surely SPEAKING-TRUTHFULLY!”²³⁶

He (Jacob) said:

“No, on the contrary: your carnal souls [your ‘NAFS’] have seduced you into some affair!

²³⁶This passage is an excellent illustration of the sort of “cinematic” leaps through time and space that are fairly typical of Qur’anic narrative: it is not at all clear whether this verse is simply continuation of the brother’s advice in the preceding verse, or whether the scene has already shifted to the brothers’ return to Jacob and their embarrassed explanations.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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So SABR is beautiful.²³⁷ Perhaps God may bring them
to me all together. For He is THE ALL-KNOWING, THE
ALL-WISE.”

And he turned away from them and said:

“O my grief for Joseph!”

And his eyes had become white (blind) from sorrow, for he
was restraining himself.

[85] They said:

“By God, you won’t stop remembering Joseph until
you waste away, or join those who pass away!”

He said (to himself?):

“I *only* complain to God of my grief and my
sorrow. And I KNOW from God what you-all
do not know.”

“O my sons, *go* and try to find out²³⁸ about Joseph and his
brother. And do not despair of THE SPIRIT OF GOD!
No one despairs of THE SPIRIT OF GOD, but the group
who reject (God).”

So when they entered before him, they said:

²³⁷Note that Jacob’s answer up to this point is *literally identical* with his much earlier response to the brothers in verse 18, after they had left Joseph in the well.

²³⁸The verb here, from the root meaning “to have sympathy, feel, sense”, also conveys such meanings as: to sense, feel deeply, experience, perceive, etc. A more literal translation, which also suggests much more of the spiritual depth of what Jacob is urging on the brothers, might be: “*try to feel for yourselves...*”

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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“O DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE, we and our family have been beset
by hardship, and we have brought unworthy goods! So
fill up the measure for us, and be charitable²³⁹ with us:
surely God rewards those who are charitable!”

He said:

“Did you-all know what you did with Joseph and
his brother, when you were foolish-and-ignorant?”

[90] They said:

“Is it really *you* who are Joseph?!”

He said:

“I *am* Joseph, and this is my brother. God has been
generous with us.”

[Narrator?/“We”?/Joseph to himself?]

“For whoever is MINDFUL (of God) and shows
SABR, surely God does not neglect the reward of
the MUHSINŪN.”

They said:

“By God, God *has* preferred you over us, though we
were certainly erring ones.”

²³⁹There is an important and untranslatable ironic play on words here: we have translated literally—as the brothers surely intend it—the everyday meaning of the fifth derived verbal form of the key Arabic root *s-d-q* (discussed in the n. 19 above). However, that same verbal form also carries the deeper meaning of “*reciprocally* or *intensively* practicing or carrying out the spiritual virtue of truthfully speaking and acting (*sidq*)”—and the brothers are of course still entirely unaware of how profoundly and sincerely Joseph is actually carrying out what for them is simply a standard pious formula used by beggars!

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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He said:

“No blame for you today! God forgives you—and
He is the MOST LOVING OF THOSE SHOWING
LOVINGMERCY.”

“Go all of you, with this shirt of mine, then place it on my
father’s face, that he may come SEEING.²⁴⁰ And come
to me with your family, all together!”

And when the caravan started out, their father said:

“Surely I do *feel* the smell²⁴¹ of Joseph—even if
you think I’m losing my mind!”

[95] They said:

“By God, certainly you are in your old error!”

Then when the bearer of good news arrived, he placed it [the
shirt] on his face, so that he was returned to BEING-
SEEING.

He said:

“Didn’t I tell you that I KNOW from God what you-
all do not know?”

²⁴⁰ *Basīr*: in the Qur’ān this term (also an important and repeated divine Name) and related forms are clearly used more than a hundred times to refer specifically to *spiritual* “vision,” insight and discernment, often explicitly described as a divinely given grace or inspiration. The “restoration” of Jacob’s (physical?) vision here of course recalls the constantly dramatized contrast throughout this Sura between real divine “vision”, *ru’ya*, and empty or illusory dreams, *ahlām*.

²⁴¹ *Rīh*: a term closely related in meaning and its verbal root to the divine “Spirit” or “Breath” (*Rūh Allāh*) of verse 87 and many other key Qur’ānic passages.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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They said:

“O our father, ask for our sins to be forgiven for us—indeed we were erring ones!”

He said:

“I *will* ask my RABB to forgive you. Certainly He is THE MOST-FORGIVING, THE MOST-MERCIFUL!”²⁴²

Then when they entered before Joseph, he received both his parents²⁴³ as his (special) guests, and he said:

“Enter Egypt, if God wishes, in security!”²⁴⁴

[100] And he raised up both his parents upon the Throne, and they (the brothers) fell down bowing before him.²⁴⁵ And he said:

“O my dear father, this *is* the INNER-MEANING of my vision from before! My RABB *did* make it real-and-true. And He was good to me when He pulled me out

²⁴² Literally echoing Joseph’s exact words at the similarly climactic moment of verse 53.

²⁴³ The dual form here and in the following verse is not further explained: presumably many Qur’anic auditors (with no knowledge of the Biblical details of Rachel’s death, the names and mothers of Joseph’s brothers, etc.) assumed a reference to Joseph’s biological parents. However, within the Sura itself it is important to note that the very same dual form appears only one other time, at the very beginning (v. 6), in reference to *Abraham* and *Isaac*.

²⁴⁴ Or “with FAITH”: see n. 8 above.

²⁴⁵ This last phrase (applied here to the brothers, *not* to the “two parents”) is used repeatedly in the Qur’ān specifically to describe the actions or inner state of those who directly witness and recognize theophanies (manifestations of God), whether in the case of Moses at Sinai (7:143) or of those who truly hear verses of the Qur’ān (17:107; 19:58; 25:73; 32:15)

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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of the Prison and He brought you-all in from the
 desert, after the Shaytān had incited conflict between
 me and my brothers. Surely my RABB is MOST-
 GRACIOUS (*latīf*) to whatever He wills! Indeed He *is*
 THE ALL-KNOWING, THE ALL-WISE!^{246,,}

“O my RABB, You have brought to me some
 (worldly) dominion and You have caused me to
 KNOW through FINDING-THE INNER-MEANING of
 what-comes-to-be!

O CREATOR²⁴⁷ of the heavens and the earth! You
 are my PROTECTING-FRIEND (*walī*) in this
 world and the other-world. Come to receive
 me surrendered (to You),²⁴⁸ and include me
 with THOSE WHO-DO-WHAT-IS-RIGHT!”

That was from the disclosures of the UNSEEN We
 inspire in you.²⁴⁹ You were not present with

²⁴⁶Here in conclusion Joseph echoes literally, but now based on his own personal experience, the similar affirmations of the divine Teacher/Narrator at verse 6 and of his own prophet-father at v. 83.

²⁴⁷*Fātir* (literally, “Splitter”), one of the more unusual Qur’anic terms (appearing in five other Suras) for “Creator”—perhaps focusing on the aspect of giving the creatures their “primordial nature” (*fitra*).

²⁴⁸Forms of the verb *tawaffā* are usually used in the Qur’an to refer very specifically to the divine or angelic “reception” of each soul *at the moment of death*. The expression *muslim* and closely related terms (*taslīm/islām*) are most commonly used in the Qur’an—as in this passage—to refer to one of the highest spiritual states or virtues most fully exemplified in the prophets: “The *peace* that passeth understanding” (*salām*) and the inner union of the divine and human will that leads to that peace, true spiritual “*surrender*”.

²⁴⁹This and the following verses would appear to be directed to Muhammad, shifting back from

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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them when they agreed together about their
affair,²⁵⁰ while they were slyly devising.

And most of the people, even though you greatly
desire (it), do not have FAITH.

Nor do you ask of them any reward for it. It is only
a REMINDER (*dhikr*) to the worlds!

[105] And how many a SIGN there is in the heavens
and the earth which they pass on by, turning
away!

And most of them have no FAITH in God, except
while they are associating (other appearances
with the One).

So do they feel safe²⁵¹ from their being
overwhelmed by a dark shroud of punishment
from God, or from the HOUR suddenly
overcoming them while they are not even
aware?!

Say: “*This* is my Path: I am calling/praying to God

Joseph. Of course in all such Qur’anic cases the relation of this often mysterious supra-temporal “you” to each listener/reader remains to be discovered.

²⁵⁰The language here is identical with the description of Joseph’s brothers’ plotting or scheming at verse 15 above.

²⁵¹Playing with the same Arabic root as the word for “faith” (*īmān*: n. 18 above).

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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upon CLEAR INSIGHT,²⁵² myself and whoever followed me. And Praise be to God! I am not among those-who-associate (others with the One).”

And We did not send (any as Messenger) before you except for some men whom We inspire among the people of the towns.

Have they not traveled through the earth, that they might observe how the ultimate end of those before them has been?! Indeed the Abode of the-other-world is best, for THOSE-WHO-ARE-MINDFUL! So then do you-all *still* not understand?!

[110] Until, when the Messengers despaired and supposed that they had been rejected, there came to them Our TRIUMPHANT-SUPPORT²⁵³ and whoever We wish was saved. Nor can Our Affliction be kept from those-who-do-harm.

²⁵²This Qur’ānic expression (‘*alā basīra*’) usually applied to the special divine guidance of the prophets and saints is closely related to the term for Jacob’s restored “vision” or spiritual insight (*basīr*: see related note at v. 96 above).

²⁵³In the Qur’an, the term *nasr* (and related verbal forms) is typically used (especially where the prophets and their supporters are concerned) to refer to all the forms of *divine* or spiritual support and assistance. In consequence, the meaning of “victory” or “triumph” also conveyed by the same Arabic root must often be understood in such contexts in a more strictly spiritual (and not necessarily outwardly visible or historical) sense.

Frame NARRATOR	Divine “WE”	ACTORS	INNER “ASIDES”
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Surely in the tales about them there was a deep-
 lesson for THOSE WHO have HEARTS!²⁵⁴

It was not a made-up story, but a confirmation of what
 was (already) before him²⁵⁵ and a proper-
 distinguishing (*tafsīl*) of every thing, and RIGHT-
 GUIDANCE and LOVINGMERCY to a people who have
 FAITH.

²⁵⁴The expression *ūlū al-albāb* occurs some sixteen times in the Qur’an, always in reference to that spiritual elite who are actually ready to realize the spiritual virtues, who alone are truly capable of recognizing the divine “Signs” and thereby “remembering” and returning to God (13:19, 39:9, etc.).

²⁵⁵Again, especially given the extraordinary scope of the meaning and importance attributed to these “stories”, the person actually intended here (as well as their relation to the narrator) is not at all clear: it might be Joseph, or Muhammad (now considered from “outside”), or each reader/listener—although there are problems with each of those possible identifications.

Appendix: The Spiritual Categories Involved in The Divine “Lessons”

those who-question-and-inquire (verse 7)	the heedless-ones (verses 3, 13)
doing-what-is-right & appropriate (9, 101)	those gone astray (8, 30, 95)
sincerely meaning-well (11, 46)	
guarding & protecting (12, 55, 63, 64, 65, 81)	those suffering loss (14)
	the unaware (15, 107)
	“night-blind”/dimsighted (16)
those speaking-truthfully (17, 26, 27, 46, 51, 82)	
those who have faith (17, 57, 64, 111)	
“Beautiful SABR” (18, 83)	
	“most of the people” (<i>Negatively</i> : 21, 38, 40, 68)
	[and “the people” (neutral or positive: 38, 46, 49)]
	the not-knowing (21, 40, 44, 51, 68, 80, 81, 86, 97)
the MUHSINŪN (22, 36, 56, 78, 90, 100)	
	the wrongdoers (23, 75, 79)
Those who truly-flourish (23)	
(God’s) wholly-devoted servants (24, 54)	
	the liars (26, 74)
	the scheming ones (28, 50, 52, 102)
[God’s “scheming”: 76]	
forgiving/seeking forgiveness (29, 92, 97, 98)	
	the erring ones (29, 91, 97)
the lowly ones (32)	
	the ignorant-and-foolish ones (33,89)
	not having faith (37, 103, 106)
	rejecting (God/next-world) (37, 87)
	not giving thanks (38)

Remembering (God:*dhikr*) (42, 45)

forgetting (42)

those who betray (52)

KNOWING (“from God”) (6, 21, 22, 37, 55, 68, 76, 83, 96, 100)

those who are MINDFUL (of God) (57, 90, 109)

those who deny/don’t recognize (58, 87)

those who give hospitality (59,)

those-who-trust (in God) (66, 67)

those who pass away (85)

those who despair (87, 110)

those who are charitable (88)

those who are SEEING (93, 96, 108)

those having (divine) SECURITY (99, 107)

surrendered (to God) (101)

those turning away/passing by (105)

those “associating” (others w. God) (106, 108)

calling/praying (God) (108)

praising (God) (108)

observing/reflecting (on SIGNS) (109)

those who don’t understand (109)

those who do harm (110)

those who have (purified) HEARTS (111)

Chapter Eight

THE MYSTERIES OF *IHSĀN*: NATURAL CONTEMPLATION AND THE SPIRITUAL VIRTUES
IN THE QUR'AN

INTRODUCTION

The famous “hadith of Gabriel,” in which a mysterious stranger questions the Prophet about the three dimensions of Religion (*dīn*), culminates in the famous response describing *ihṣān*—what in ordinary Arabic would be loosely understood as “the perception and consequent active realization of what is good and beautiful”—in terms as mysterious and problematic as they are evocative and far-reaching: “*To worship/serve God as though you see Him; and if you don't see Him, surely He sees you.*”²⁵⁶ What I would like to speak about today is the problematic, but indispensable, dimension of “natural contemplation”—literally, our “*seeing*” of God—which seems to be an indispensable element of this and all the other spiritual virtues in the Qur’an. On the one hand, at a more spiritually elementary level, this response suggests the primordial importance of *taqwā*, of the sort of attentive cautiousness to every spiritual aspect of our situation in life, that comes from the heightened awareness of God’s omnipresent and concerned Regard, and the resulting openness to the divine gifts of grace, of true faith and inspired knowing (*īmān* and *‘ilm*) which eventually make the divine Presence more directly “visible” in our lives. On the other hand—as the hadith so brilliantly dramatizes in the Prophet’s unique awareness that this mysterious stranger is in fact the archangel Gabriel, the very “Trusted Spirit” of God—the full realization of this culmination of *Dīn* is a spiritual state fully realized and exemplified only in the divine messengers, prophets and “Friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*).

Now this same paradoxical distance between the very limited intuitions and insights that we ordinary human beings can normally draw upon in this domain, on the one hand, and what is fully exemplified and realized only by the prophets and messengers, on the other, can be seen whenever we

²⁵⁶ An Arabic phrase which can also be read quite literally and grammatically, as pointed out by Ibn ‘Arabi and other Muslim mystics, as “To worship God as though you see Him; **and if you are not, then you do see Him**; and surely He sees you.” See the full translation and additional notes on this hadith (recorded in slightly different versions, from Abū Hurayra and ‘Umar, by both Bukhārī and Muslim) in Appendix I below.

examine more closely any of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur'an.²⁵⁷ Indeed, as the Qur'an itself constantly reiterates—and as each of us learns again and again in the course of life—it is only through the ongoing, intrinsically individual and highly personal experience of life's "tests" and "trials" (the Qur'anic concepts of *balā'*, *imtihān*, etc.) that we slowly and partially become aware of the actual realities underlying these central Qur'anic concepts, so that we slowly discover what Mevlana Rumi calls our "God-seeing eye" (the Qur'anic *basīra* or *cheshm-e Haqq-bīn*). And it is an integral part of that fundamental Qur'anic notion of earthly life as testing and trials that we only become aware of those spiritual virtues, in the course of life, through our concomitant experience of their "contraries," or at least of their previous absence or lack from our life—a process that is inevitably one of re-discovering the unconscious "hypocrisy" and pretension (in the Qur'anic sense of that unconscious *kufṛ*, *jahl*, and spiritual "blindness") that underlies our assumed, taken-for-granted social and personal understandings of what those terms actually mean.

As a teacher of Islamic studies constantly testing the efficacy of pedagogical tools and methods in this area, I am always looking for new ways to communicate some real sense of these spiritual virtues which are the central building blocks of the Qur'anic worldview. In doing so, I repeatedly rediscover in the classroom or traveling for lectures and workshops, with students from the most diverse backgrounds, two very basic realities which I would like to explore very briefly today. First, that the most effective means for awakening students—whatever their age and religious beliefs or cultural background—to the deeper meanings of *ihsān* (and *īmān*, *ilm*, *taqwā*, and all the other spiritual virtues in the Qur'an) is to appeal directly to their experiences of what one could call "natural contemplation," to their own unforgettable moments of directly "witnessing" the divine Presence. Here it is a striking confirmation of the essentially double sense of *ihsān*—knowing and doing what is both good *and beautiful*—that those students' primordial experiences of "seeing" and recognizing the divine Names or Attributes are most often in what we would ordinarily call "aesthetic" contexts, independent of their ethical beliefs and cultural conditioning: for example, in their awe-inspiring experiences of Nature, of the beauties (and truths) of music and the other arts, and in their experiences of the spontaneous beauties and perfections of perfect "performances," be they artistic, academic, athletic or in all the other domains of life. To be

²⁵⁷ See Appendix II ("Enumerating the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur'an") for a basic overview and brief (English) paraphrase of 28 of the most commonly cited spiritual virtues in the Qur'an.

more specific, for example, the “classics” and world-masterpieces of the Islamic humanities—the great works of mystical poetry, storytelling, devotional music, fine arts and architecture—communicate in ways that are immediately, wordlessly effective, and yet could not really be duplicated or described in thousands of more prosaic words.

The second, contrasting basic reality is that those same students—whatever their religious and cultural background—have the hardest time grasping precisely the universal, phenomenological dimensions of the more “ethical” and socially embedded side of the Qur’anic spiritual virtues. (Incidentally, if those students come from Western cultural backgrounds, they find it equally—or even more—difficult to apprehend the same spiritual virtues expressed in Biblical language or terminology.) This should not be that surprising. In part, it is because each person’s actual experience and discovery of the spiritual virtues necessarily takes place in what are, for them, challengingly new and quite particular, individual circumstances. Evoking, probing and coming to understand the spiritual patterns and laws underlying and expressed in those particulars is almost never an easy or painless process. But another, recurrent obstacle in coming to understand the spiritual virtues is that they are profoundly masked and covered over, in any culture, by a pre-existing set of largely implicit, social and/or political “virtues” which stand in the way of our natural spiritual contemplation. In fact, as the hadith of Gabriel stresses, our witnessing of the spiritual virtues is always “invisible” and incommunicable to those around us, precisely in the most profound moments of theophany. So it is precisely in the contrast with the more familiar, apparently quite “visible” political and ethical virtues that we can see those fundamental features—each of them constantly reiterated throughout the Qur’an—which distinguish our ongoing discovery of each of the spiritual virtues. Today I would simply like to highlight and mention briefly some of those essential contrasts. If the necessarily summary nature of my remarks becomes too concise, you have only to think back to the way each of the points we are about to summarize is constantly illustrated and reiterated in the approach adopted throughout Ghazali’s *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, that classic of Islamic spiritual pedagogy which is no doubt familiar to most of those attending this conference.

I. THE SPIRITUAL VIRTUES AND SOCIAL OR POLITICAL “ETHICS”

It is probably safe to say that the vast majority of those writing and speaking *publicly* about ethics in Islam these days—like their equivalent figures in other contemporary religious traditions—tend

to focus primarily on the social or political, visibly (or ostensibly) “*utilitarian*” dimensions of that subject. In other words, their operating assumption—and ultimate ground of argument—is that the ethical injunctions and concerns symbolically expressed in the Qur’an can somehow be satisfactorily explained and justified in terms of their visible consequences in particular socio-political contexts. Here we would simply like to recall a few important ways in which the Qur’anic perspective on the spiritual virtues radically and systematically opposes that widespread, familiar and eminently understandable point of view.

- To begin with, the essential site or *locus* of spiritual virtue in the Qur’an is always the *individual soul (nafs)* or “conscience,” a reality which is intimately, reflexively familiar to each of us, but equally “invisible” (and quite troubling) to the lenses of a purely social or political perspective. Nothing is more evocative of this fundamental difference, for example, than the recurrent specific Qur’anic expression for the doing of what we loosely and perhaps unthinkingly call “wrong” or “evil,” *man zalama nafsahu*, “darkening one’s own soul.”
- The determining aim, focus or *goal* of the spiritual virtues is always fundamentally *God*—only in consequence and indirectly other souls—and certainly not any visible worldly aim. Hence, for example, the constant emphasis on *intentions* as the *spiritually* determining quality of our inward and outward actions—summed up in Bukhari’s famous opening hadith, *innamā al-a‘māl ‘alā al-niyāt* (“actions are only [judged] according to one’s intentions”), and the recurrent role of such fundamental, constantly repeated Qur’anic qualifiers as *fī sabīl Allāh*, *li-wajh Allāh*, and so on (i.e., “for the sake of God”) whenever the role of ritual practices and other ethical actions are being discussed. Even more telling is the way that continual Qur’anic references to “right actions” of any sort (the *sālihāt*, in the broadest sense) are almost always conjoined with—and preceded by—the absolutely essential inner spiritual pre-requisite of true faith (*īmān*).
- As we are all aware, virtually no Qur’anic theme is more common or more central, from the earliest Suras onward, than the constantly reiterated assertion that the “results” of our spiritual virtues are visible and concretized above all in the “other world,” *al-ākhirah*, not here in the life of this world. It is hard to think of any other scripture, in any religious tradition, that even comes close to the fundamental centrality of the Qur’anic assertions in this regard.

- Another key difference between our ordinary social or political virtues and the spiritual ones emphasized in the Qur'an is its insistence that the "*frequency*" of operation and realization of the spiritual virtues (e.g., of *dhikr Allāh*, of our "remembering" and being aware of God) should be literally *all the time*, at every instant of soul-time, even while we are sleeping, lying down, working, and so on. (This point is also closely connected to the realization that the "different" spiritual virtues discussed in the Qur'an, when we examine them more closely in our own lives, tend to become something more like different "expressions" or perspectives or accounts of what is essentially a single or more **unitary** underlying condition of the soul: thus, for example, a relatively more rarely mentioned spiritual virtue—say, *sabr*—can actually be viewed as the specific expression of faith/*īmān* in a particular context of trials and tests.)
- The spiritual virtues, as described in the Qur'an, are most often emphasized to be *intangible spiritual "gifts"* (from God)—that is to say, inner spiritual "states" or stations (*īmān*, *ilm*, *taqwā*, etc.) which necessarily find their expression in action, *but which can never be approached or acquired simply by some outward imitation of those same actions*. Some of the most dramatically powerful passages in the Qur'an—e.g., the familiar encounters of Moses and Pharaoh, the Prophet and the "hypocrites" of Medina, Joseph and his brothers (and the other Egyptians), or al-Khādir and the younger Moses—are highly effective examples of both of these points. Again, the Qur'an itself surely stands out among the revealed scriptures in the single-mindedness of its stress on the paramount *divine* role in each human soul's relative realization (or lack thereof) of each of the spiritual virtues, or our individual apprehension of the divine Names.
- Another implication of the Qur'anic emphasis on the nature of the spiritual virtues as divinely inspired "gifts" or acts of grace (*rizq*, *ni'ma*, *baraka*, etc.), is that *spontaneity* and *creativity* and *specific appropriateness*—varying in each situation—are of the very essence of the spiritual virtues. Ironically—given the historical uses to which the hadith have often been put—this is often also quite visible in the Prophet's very different responses to apparently similar questions or situations, according to the spiritual demands of the questioner, the particular situation and context, etc., in ways which the reader of hadith is often left to puzzle out on one's own. This essential dimension of the Qur'anic discussion of

the spiritual virtues is dramatically opposed to the common assumptions of notions of social and political ethics as being based ultimately on logically or conceptually “universal” principles and sets of rules. That basic contrast is also quite evident already in the early Islamic theologico-juridical discussions between the proponents of *ra’y* (informed or even inspired “personal judgment”) and *qiyās* (a principle-based, “logical” derivation of ethical and political judgments).

- No serious reader of the Qur’an can escape the central Qur’anic assertion that Religion (*Dīn*) and the spiritual virtues that flow from it are *intrinsically universal*, definitional of true theomorphic human being (*insān*, as opposed to *bashar*), and therefore accessible to and operative in the lives of *all* human beings in *all* cultures and historical settings. Their awakening or discovery of those spiritual states, according to the Qur’an, is taking place at every moment of every life, both in this world and in the worlds beyond. However one tries to understand or perceive that principal assertion of universality, it is difficult to reconcile with any attempt to reduce those spiritual virtues to particular historical, social or political instances, rules, or claims. That assumption of metaphysical universality is an ongoing challenge implying a kind of “permanent revolution” in each person’s innermost consciousness (the Qur’anic sense of *taqallub/inqilāb*).
- Finally, as we have already suggested in our opening remarks, the Qur’an repeatedly stresses—for example, in its accounts of the lives and missions of each of the prophets—that human beings typically discover or awaken to the spiritual virtues precisely in those “*tests*” which often involve conflict with or *opposition* to particular socially and politically accepted “virtues.” This is a crucial point which most people—whatever their culture and society—have usually had ample occasion to verify in their personal experience, beginning at a fairly young age.

II. CONCLUSIONS: COMMUNICATING THE SPIRITUAL VIRTUES IN THE MODERN WORLD

Since we began our remarks with an allusion to the perennial challenges of spiritual pedagogy, a few brief conclusions may be in order. As for the practical implications of this Qur’anic account of the spiritual virtues, they would surely include:

1. A heightened appreciation, as we have already mentioned, of the practical efficacy of essentially “*aesthetic*” forms—music, visual arts, poetry, stories, and active rituals—in actually communicating and awakening our intrinsic awareness of the spiritual virtues. Historically speaking, an awareness of the problematic centrality of the spiritual virtues in the Qur’an helps us to recognize and properly appreciate the historical centrality of each society’s locally evolved versions of the “*Islamic humanities*”—of *adab* in the most profound sense of that multivalent term—in actually adapting and embodying Qur’anic teachings within its own *local* and distinctively particular cultural and historical contexts. That recognition can be a helpful and sometimes essential safeguard today against the multitude of powerful political, economic and social pressures for uniformity and “homogenization” of culture and ethics in all modern societies and nation-states, whatever their particular religious and cultural background.

2. An active understanding of all the distinctive features of spiritual virtues which we have just enumerated helps to highlight the much greater efficacy of forms of spiritual teaching and pedagogy focusing on *individual awareness*, as realized in the omnipresent lessons of everyday life and spiritual duties. To put it another way, the Prophet’s extraordinary definition of *ihsān* in the “hadith of Gabriel” clearly brings out the radically universal nature—indeed the constant necessity—of individual acts of “*natural contemplation*” in each actualized instance of a spiritual virtue. As the hadith indicates, spiritual virtue in fact *is* contemplation-in-action. (Again, this is often concretely illustrated in the actual *individualized* focus of the Prophet’s responses in many hadith, as opposed to later socio-political uses of those traditions in elaborating the broad systems of *fiqh*, etc.)

Needless to say, that sort of highly individualized spiritual pedagogy is rarely the focus of “religious education,” in the usual formal and public senses of that term, in modern societies in any part of the world. Looking at spiritual learning from that perspective again highlights what were often remarkably effective and locally adapted forms of spiritual pedagogy that existed in pre-modern societies (in Islam and elsewhere). (This is not at all meant, incidentally, as a plea for some idealized “return to tradition,” but instead as an acceptance of the primordial need for effective processes of *radical pedagogical creativity and experimentation* which are only too rare throughout the world today.)

3. Any serious exploration of the spiritual virtues in the Qur’an quickly leads us, as a practical conclusion, to acknowledging a far-reaching *tolerance of the inevitable radical diversity* of spiritual

lives and to recognizing the necessity for their *intrinsically free, unfettered expression*. It should not be necessary to underline in any detail the radical contrast between those two fundamental practical conclusions and the implicit fantasies and unexamined assumptions of uniformity and power-based, manipulative regulation which are typically embedded in most discussions of political and social virtues, whatever the society, religion and social system in question.

4. Recognizing the essential contrasts between the spiritual virtues, as outlined above, and the more familiar forms of social and political virtues does not at all mean that human beings, in society, can do without the necessary strictures and foundations of social and political conventions and the “ethics” which those particular conventions and acts of consensus require. There is nothing at all in the Qur’an to suggest that human beings in this world can or ever will escape the essential conflicts and tensions between the respective demands of those very different dimensions of reality. What the recognition of those contrasts does allow for is a certain profound *detachment and perspective* with regard to the inevitable, but passing, political and social disputes, clearly recognizing the lack of ultimacy in what are necessarily conventional and transient worldly arrangements. Practically speaking, the political expression of that spiritual detachment and discernment is often an easier acceptance of the constant worldly necessity of compromise, tolerance and co-existence (rather than their violent and destructive contraries).

5. Finally, actually realizing the spiritual virtues—as the Prophet’s definition of *ihsān* suggests—means realizing and recognizing that divine Intention and Aim which actually unifies and connects human beings across all historical, religious and cultural boundaries and barriers. Following that definition, the actual momentary recognition of the divine Presence, as the foundation and prerequisite of each act of spiritual realization, entails a natural “universality” which is neither conceptual nor hypothetical—a reality which we can typically recognize immediately in the aesthetic sphere, but which we have great difficulty in grasping whenever we are in fact operating out of something other than a purified, truly transcendent intention. Only in *ihsān* does the aim of “worship” truly become perfect “service,” as so beautifully indicated in the two inseparable meanings of that equally untranslatable and irreplaceable Qur’anic term, *‘ibāda*.

APPENDIX I: The “Hadith of Gabriel”²⁵⁸

The Prophet came out for the people (to meet him) one day, and a man came up to him who said: “What is faith (*īmān*)?” He replied: “Faith (means) that you have faith in God, His angels, His Books, in (your) meeting Him, in His messengers, and that you have faith in the Resurrection.”²⁵⁹

Then he asked: “What is *islām*”²⁶⁰? He answered: “*Islām* is that you worship God and don't associate (anything) with Him, that you perform the prayer (*s alāt*), give in charity²⁶¹, and fast during the month of Ramadan²⁶².”

Then he asked: “What is *ih s ān*”²⁶³ He replied: “To worship God as though you see Him; and if you don't see Him, surely He sees you.” [...]

²⁵⁸ Reported by Abū Hurayra, from *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, Book II (Faith), no. 37.

²⁵⁹ All of these points are frequently included in Qur’anic enumerations of the “objects” of faith (e.g., at 2:285), although the Qur’an even more frequently mentions simply “Faith in God and the Last Day (resurrection)” (2:8, etc.).

²⁶⁰ Here, as in some of the later passages in the Quran and in a number of hadith, the root *islām* has taken on a specific association with certain ritual *practices* typifying Muhammad's nascent religious community. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the primary Quranic sense (closer to the Arabic root) refers to the highest spiritual condition of total “surrender” to God's will, in which meaning it is often applied to pre-”Islamic” prophets, messengers and people of exemplary faith.

²⁶¹ *Zakāt*: the meaning of this Arabic root—originally referring to “*purification*” (of the soul)—in the Qur'an itself remains closely linked to acts of charity in general: cf. 2:177, 261, 267; 9:60. In the hadith and later forms of Islamic law (*fiqh*), it came to be viewed as a form of annually *prescribed* charitable giving, as opposed to other more voluntary forms of charity (*sadaqa*). See the translations of relevant hadith in M.M. Ali, *A Manual of Hadith*, 208-221.

²⁶² This version in Bukhārī (unlike the more commonly cited version of this hadith in Muslim's *Sahīh*) does *not* mention the Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) specifically. Muslim's version, reported by ‘Umar instead of Abū Hurayra, also discusses *islām* before *īmān*, adds faith in “the decreeing of good and evil alike”, and includes more description of the “mysterious stranger”: each of those additions is a likely indicator of a later literary (and theological) reworking of the considerably simpler version recorded by Bukhārī.

Then he went off, and (the Prophet) said: “bring him back.” But they couldn't see anything. Then he said: “This is Gabriel, who came to teach the people their Religion (*dīn*).”

APPENDIX II: Enumerating the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur'an

The Qur'an is focused above all on the relation between each human soul and its Ground (and Destination), constantly moving back and forth between the divine point of view (cosmology, cosmogony, divine Attributes, meta-history, eschatology) and the range of possible *human responses* within that soul/Source relation. Naturally enough, no “ordinary language” (including pre-Islamic Arabic) was ever intended to convey these universal states of souls, and the Qur'anic terminology for those spiritual states was for the most part radically new to Muhammad's first listeners. The completely different semantic fields and associations of most English “equivalents” means that this central and fundamental dimension of the Qur'anic teaching is not simply lost in translation, but often utterly misrepresented.

The following list of some of the key spiritual virtues in the Qur'an (along with their *approximate* frequency) is intended to give a better idea both of the *centrality* of this dimension of the Qur'an and the relative *simplicity and interrelatedness* of the spiritual states to which these unfamiliar terms actually refer.

To begin with, a number of important qualifications are in order:

1. A full explanation of the *semantic field* of each of these terms would need to include both (a) their Qur'anic “opposites” and contrary qualities or attitudes; (b) the potentially related existing ethical or other terms that *aren't* used (e.g., the Arabic

²⁶³ Literally (although the definition given here is far more appropriate to its particular *Qur'anic* usage): “*to do what is both good and beautiful or noble*.” The reference in the hadith is certainly to the Qur'anic usage of the term, where “those who do *ih̥sān*” are referred to frequently (25 times) with the highest praise, promised the highest paradise, associated with the prophets and messengers, connected with the central spiritual virtues, etc. Even more strikingly, the Quran insists that “**Verily God is with those who act in awareness of Him and the *muhsinūn***” (16:128; again at 29:69); “**Do *ih̥sān*, verily God loves [intensive] the *muhsinūn***” (2:195; the restriction of God's profoundest Love (*hubb*) to them is repeated similarly at 3:134, 3:148, 5:13, 5:93;); and “**God's Loving Mercy (*rahma*) is near to the *muhsinūn***” (7:56).

terms for “belief”, which are actually completely nonexistent in the Qur’an); and (c) the relevant English equivalents of both 'a' and 'b'.

2. The listing below does *not* include the “human complements” of a number of divine Names that have obvious potential ethical and spiritual counterparts on the human level, where the Qur’an itself stresses the *divine* Attribute and does not explicitly focus on the corresponding human spiritual virtue. A few typical examples would be God's Compassion (*Rahīm*), Sustaining (*Razzāq*), Hearing (*Samīʿ*), and so on through many of the “Most Beautiful Names”.

3. The listing below does *not* include those spiritual virtues that the Qur’an usually associates more specifically with the prophets and messengers, such as “warning,” interceding, conveying “good news”, being divinely “chosen and purified” (*istafā*), etc.

4. The focus in this listing on *frequency* of mention in the Qur’an means that we have *not* included certain key spiritual concepts or realities mentioned very rarely (for example, the *sakīna*, etc.); that should not necessarily be taken as an index of the importance of such less-mentioned terms.

5. We have not included Qur’anic terms usually related to the specific acts of worship (*salāt*, *rakʿa*, *sawm*, *zakāt*, etc.), even though the Qur’anic usage of those Arabic roots often refers at least as much to broader, universal spiritual virtues as it does to the historically specific “Islamic” rituals with which they later became associated.

6. The initial “word counts” given below for each Arabic root are only *very approximate* and in some cases include some “ordinary language” or divine-Name references of a term which are not directly used in reference to spiritual virtues.

7. We have opened each entry with *the most familiar verbal-noun form of each root*—Arabic forms that have often come to identify these particular spiritual virtues in many other Islamic languages—even though other grammatical forms of that particular root may be more common in the Qur’an itself.

8. An *asterisk* (*) before a virtue indicates that the Qur’anic description of those fully exemplifying this virtue is given in terms specially associated with the rare spiritual state of the prophets and various ranks of the saints or *awliyā’*.

9. Within the Qur’an itself, the best way to grasp what is actually intended by these key terms is often to look more closely at the particular *prophets* with which each of them is typically associated (for example, Jacob and *sabr*, or Joseph as a *siddīq*, *sālih*, and master of *ta’wīl*).

* * *

Imān (892 times): faith, inner peace and absolute assurance, implicit confidence and total trust, granted by God (intimately connected with imagery of LIGHT); for its “objects” (God, angels, divine “Books”, messengers), see the summary in the Hadīth of Gabriel (Appendix I above). The nearest Qur’anic equivalent is probably *absolute certainty*, *yaqīn* (28x)—which is almost the contrary of the commonly used English “belief”.

*‘Ilm*²⁶⁴ (876x, although more than half of those verses refer specifically to *God’s* Knowledge): *spiritual* knowledge, of God and the spiritual world, of the inner nature of things and the deeper spiritual realities underlying the phenomenal and historical world. It is *given by God*, and its human locus is the *Heart*, *qalb*; it is also intimately connected with the central Qur’anic imagery of *Sight* and *Light*. Its key contraries include “ignorance” or “barbarity” (*jahl*) and “unconsciousness” (*ghafla*).

The Qur’anic usage of “Knowledge” closely overlaps with *five related roots* relating to the soul’s more *active* recognition or realization of God’s presence and manifestation in the divine “*Signs*” (*āyāt*) in all creation and experience: *nazara* (112x); *‘arafa* (72x); *‘aql* (49x); *faqaha* (20x); *tafakkur* (18x). All five terms point to the rare spiritual ability—and human beings’ innate, intrinsic active *striving*—to recognize something as it really is, in its relation to the divine Name it manifests, to know inwardly, by

²⁶⁴ Because the key term *‘ilm* became historically associated in later centuries with the acquired, traditional “religious” learning (usually in Arabic-language disciplines) of the “learned” (the *‘ulamā’*), many later spiritual authors and traditions in Islam instead chose to use forms of the Arabic root *‘-r-f* (*ma’rifā*, *‘irfān*, *‘arīf*, etc.) to refer to the type of directly inspired or intuitive spiritual understanding that is normally called *‘ilm* in the Qur’an.

direct acquaintance, through profound penetration and reflection, etc.—i.e., “to know things as they really are,” as a famous hadith puts it. (See also *Basīra*/Insight below.)

Dhikr (292x): inner remembrance, mindfulness, awareness of God, *anamnesis*; see illustrations in the many related classical hadīth. (Its contrary is unconsciousness, heedlessness, forgetfulness: *ghafla*.)

* *‘Ibāda* (282x/often grossly mistranslated as “slave”, etc.): “*The worship, adoring service and total devotion flowing from complete inner surrender to one's beloved*”. In its perfect form, the state of the highest prophets, who alone are “God's true servants” (*‘abd Allāh*), those “wholly devoted” to him (*mukhlisūn*). (Closely related in meaning to *islām/taslīm*, and *itā‘a* below.)

* *Taqwā*²⁶⁵ (242x): “*Active God-awareness*”: Consciousness and awareness of God, inner *mindfulness* of the divine at every instant, combined with an eager, attentive orientation to *do* what that spiritual awareness demands. (Compare the closely related term *muslihūn/sālihāt* below). The Qur’an repeatedly discusses this as one of very highest spiritual states, fully embodied in the prophets and “friends of God”.

* *Ihsān* (191x): See the remarkable complete definition in the famous hadith of Gabriel—noting the essential connection there between right/beautiful *action* and the natural contemplative *vision/awareness of-and-by God*. Literally: “*doing-making-seeing as good-beautiful*”. Likewise described repeatedly as one of highest spiritual states.

* *Muslihūn/Sālihāt* (180x): Doing what is appropriate, fitting and needful in each particular circumstance; or specifically “making better” and “reconciling” situations of conflict or disorder.

* *Sidq/Siddīq* (154x): *Recognizing and acknowledging* the truth of what is true or real: hence the *inner sincerity and purity*, total confidence and trust (in God), and only by extension the outward expression of that state of inspired spiritual knowledge. (Compare the closely related virtue of *ikhlas* below.) Muhammad's close companion Abū Bakr became known as “the Siddīq” because of his immediate confidence and credence in Muhammad's account of his spiritual Ascension.

²⁶⁵Translated by Arberry and others as “godfearing”: it has *nothing* to do with the emotion of “fear” (*khawf*), which in fact is very rarely referred to in the Qur’an (and then typically in contexts of *awe* and natural *reverence*, not of *passional anxiety*).

Hamd (63x) and *s-b-h* (94x): (Fully deserved!) praise, glorification and adoration of the Truly Real. As the Qur'an explains, what the angels and all creatures (except for *bashar*) do unceasingly in their inner state, though we are ordinarily unable to perceive that state.

Basīra (148x, plus related uses of verb “to see” and related roots [“blindness”, etc.]): Specifically *spiritual* insight and awareness, especially as granted directly by God. Part of the complex Qur'anic imagery of Light and spiritual vision. Close in meaning to all the roots for spiritual “knowledge” and awareness above, as well as *shahīd* below.

* *Islām/taslīm/muslim* (137x—plus 73x for *ridā*): “The *peace* that passeth understanding, and the *inner concomitance of the divine and human will* that leads to that peace”, spiritual “surrender” and ecstasy (*salām*). [More rarely in later parts of Qur'an: outer, temporary compliance of late Bedouin allies with a few basic Islamic rituals.] *Ridā* is the same thing seen, as it were, from what is more commonly God's point of view: the *divine* contentment, satisfaction, complete agreement without any inner opposition or disquiet.

* *Shahīd* (159x, but often in other senses): Someone who *sees* or directly witnesses the spiritual truth, and then “*bears witness*” to it through action, especially the ultimate sacrifice of *martyrdom* (spiritual or physical) for God's sake.

Itā'a (118x/often mistranslated as “obedience”): The inner state of doing something *willingly*, because you *want* to do it (precisely as opposed to *karh*, *ikrāh*, or inner opposition and uneasiness, the spiritual state in fact often suggested by “obedience” in English!).

* *Hikma/Hukm* (109x, but with disparate meanings, plus 97x of God as *Hakīm*): divine *Wisdom* and the proper *judgment* (in all circumstances) and the certainty that flows from that inspired wisdom. (Compare the several closely related roots referring to God's Knowledge and its spiritual counterparts above.)

Sabr (99x): the *inner* state of someone who perseveres in allegiance to and pursuit of the truth *because they are aware* of the real nature and ultimate aim or true context of their difficult circumstances. (See *Itā'a* above.)

* *Hubb* (96x): “Love” in the particular sense of a special individualized response to and awareness of a particular worthy action of the beloved (as opposed to God's universal, all-encompassing

creative-maternal Love and Compassion, *rahma*). Almost always used in a context of divine-human *reciprocity* in the Qur'an (and the hadīth), applied to those exemplifying the highest spiritual virtues.

Tawba (87x): “Returning” to God (and His “turning” in forgiveness at the same instant); the inner state of “repentance-*and*-forgiveness” as experienced at the same time. More broadly, describes each moment one becomes inwardly aware of the divine after a condition of heedlessness.

Shukr (75x): Thankfulness, gratitude (for God's blessings and grace); differs from “Praise” only in having a more specific object or occasion. [Its contrary—*kufr*, or active metaphysical “ingratitude” and inner hostility to God, often mistranslated as “unbelief”—is one of the most frequent terms in the Qur'an, often used as the contrary of the central spiritual reality of *īmān* (see above).]

Tahāra (30x) and *zakkā* (26x as verb, plus 32x for *zakāt*): Terms referring to the inner “*purification*” of the soul from all distractions or tendencies contrary to God's Will (like *ikhlas*, *sidq*, etc.); in the latter case in connection with the virtue of *charity* (or of “compensating” for one's sins and manifesting true repentance through charity), eventually evolving into the later more public forms of *zakāt*. (* Closely connected with related root *s-f-y*, specifically referring to the unique divine *purification* and “singling out” of Mary and certain other prophets.)

Ihtadā/Hudā (59x for the human spiritual virtue alone): Being spiritually “*guided*” by the ultimate Guide.

Ijāba (43x): Like *tawba* above, the mutual relationship of “answering” or responding to the divine Call, often applied particularly to relations of prayer.

Tawakkul (43x): Total trust and confidence in God, inwardly “handing things over” to Him as one would to a trusted servant or trustee (*wakīl*).

* *Ikhlas* (31x): absolute inner purity of intention, doing whatever one does *entirely for God's sake*, in a state of pure inner *taslīm* and *ridā* (see above).

Hāfiz [*al-ghayb*] (51x, often of God): *Respectfully and appropriately responding to one's awareness of the spiritual world* in each instance, observing the appropriate *adab* in one's relations with God (as exemplified by each of the prophets in the Qur'an).

Chapter Nine

WALĀYA AND THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES: BETWEEN WRITTEN TRADITIONS AND
POPULAR SPIRITUALITY

Those who write about Islamic “mysticism” for all but specialized scholarly audiences are usually referring to a small selection of classical Arabic and Persian writings translated into Western languages, or to the handful of traditions of spiritual practice from the Muslim world that have become known even more recently in the West. In that situation the risks of serious misunderstanding, for an uninformed audience, are almost unavoidable, especially where some sort of comparative perspective is assumed. In the hope of helping non-specialists to avoid some of those common pitfalls, this essay is devoted to outlining some of the most basic features of the actual contexts of teaching and devotion within which those Islamic texts most often characterized as “mystical” were originally written and studied.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPT OF *WALĀYA*

Perhaps the most fundamental dimension of this problem is beautifully summarized in the following *ḥadīth qudsī*, one of the most frequently cited of those extra-Qur’ānic “divine sayings”:

(God said:) “For Me, the most blessed of My friends²⁶⁶ is the person of faith

²⁶⁶ *awliyā’ī* (singular *walī*): i.e., those who are “close to” God, probably alluding to the famous Qur’ānic verses 10:62-64: “...the friends of God, they have no fear and they do not grieve...theirs is the Good News in this lower life and in the next (life)...that is the Tremendous Attainment”.. The same Arabic term—which also carries significant connotations of “protector”, “guardian” and even “governor”—also appears as one of the more frequent Names of God (at 2:257; 3:68; 45:19; etc.). In most branches of Shiite thought it is one of the many Qur’anic terms taken as references to the spiritual function of the Imams, while in later Sufism—most elaborately in the thought of Ibn cArabī and his successors—the term is usually understood to refer to the particular spiritual state of proximity to God (*walāya*) shared by the divine Messengers, prophets (*anbiyā’*) and saints, besides the different spiritual functions that distinguish each of those members of the spiritual hierarchy. See the more complete discussion in M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn Arabī*, especially chapt. 1.

who is unburdened (by possessions), who takes pleasure in prayer, who carries out well his devotion to his Lord and eagerly serves Him in secret. He is concealed among the people; no one points him out. His sustenance is barely sufficient, and he is content with that.... His death comes quickly, there are few mourners, and his estate is small.”²⁶⁷

Now the living presence of the “Friend of God” or *walī* (pl. *awliyāʾ*), in one manifestation or another—whether it be Muhammad and his Family or certain Companions, any of the earlier prophets, the Shiite Imams, or the many pious Muslims who have come to be recognized posthumously as “saints”—has for centuries been a central focus of popular religious and devotional life in much of the Islamic world.²⁶⁸ But the true *walī*, as this hadīth stresses, is most often publicly “invisible” in this life,

In the influential poetic classics of the later Islamic humanities, this complex of Arabic terms is conveyed above all by the recurrent, intentionally ambiguous references to the “Beloved” or “Friend” (Persian *Yār* or *Dūst*, and their equivalents in Turkish, Urdu, Malay, etc.). There this relationship of *walāya/wilāya* becomes the central metaphor for the divine-human relationship and the theophanic nature of all nature and experience.

The intimately related theme of the spiritual virtues of poverty and humility stressed in this same divine saying is likewise reflected in many other hadīth, which together help explain the frequency of terms like *faqīr* and *darvīsh* (Arabic and Persian for “poor person”, “beggar”, etc.) to refer to the saints and their followers in later Islamic mysticism.

²⁶⁷This hadīth is included, with minor variations, in the canonical collections of Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, and Ibn Hanbal. See the full text and notes in W.A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 120-121.

²⁶⁸Throughout this paper it should be kept in mind that the English word “saint” (and its equivalents in other Christian contexts) is quite inadequate to convey either the centrality or the fluidity of the implicit associations and spiritual connections which are typically perceived in Islamic devotional contexts—e.g., in prayers at a specific shrine, or within a given Sufi path—between the divine al-Walī (*Yār*, *Dūst*, etc.) and the wide spectrum of human and spiritual exemplars or “theophanies” (*mazāhir*) who are typically available to each individual Muslim or local community. And even within Islamic religious scholarship, the learned theological explanations of these central popular devotional practices (e.g., in terms of functions like *wasīla*, *shifāʿa*, *wilāya*, spiritual “hierarchies,” and the like) usually depend on drawing firm distinctions and conceptual boundaries that scarcely reflect the intimate spiritual realities of actual prayer and devotional life.

outwardly indistinguishable from many other normally devout Muslim men and women. And even after death, for those *awliyā'* whose mission of sanctity or “proximity” to God (*walāya*) has become more widely recognized, the mysterious reality of their ongoing influence likewise remains invisible to most people, revealing itself directly only at the appropriate moments in individual, highly personalized means of contact: through dreams, visions, intuitions and spiritual acts of Grace (*karamāt*) or special blessings that only appear to “those with the eyes to see.”

Thus this famous *hadīth* suggests two basic considerations that should be kept in mind whenever one encounters the written works usually associated with Islamic “mysticism”. The first point is that with rare exceptions such texts were not originally meant to be studied by themselves. Usually they were understood, by their author and audience alike, to be only secondary or accessory means to their aim (and often their source): the *awliyā'*—taken in the broadest sense, including the prophets and Imams—and the gradual realization of that spiritual condition of *walāya*, or “closeness to God”, embodied in such individuals.²⁶⁹ The second, closely related point is that such “mystical” writings in their original context—and especially those works written in languages other than classical Arabic—were often quite inseparable from the whole range of “popular” religion, from the faith so diversely lived and practiced by the mass of the Muslim population (in contrast to the versions represented by the Arabic traditional religious sciences and the claims of their learned urban male interpreters). In fact in many regions of the Muslim world that faith was originally spread and inculcated almost entirely by such popular “mystical” writings and their even more widespread oral equivalents, or rather above all by

²⁶⁹ While the different actual roles of various types of mystical writings and their interplay with oral traditions and teaching in pre-modern contexts are discussed in more detail below, we should add that many of the same points are also relevant to the transmission of many other (non-“mystical”) forms of Islamic tradition and learning, including especially the oral transmission of *hadīth*, which continued for centuries beyond the more limited domain of their usage within the narrower sphere of Islamic law (*fiqh*). Perhaps the most visible and significant illustration of this point—and one by no means unique to the Islamic context—is the fact that many of the “founders” and eponyms of major Sufi *tariqas* were either relatively anonymous (at least in terms of contemporary written historical documentation), nearly illiterate, or authors of relatively few “mystical” texts if we compare them with the often prolific writers among later members of those same orders. The same relative anonymity often holds true as well for those innumerable local saints (and in Shiite settings, relatives of the Imams) whose shrines are the objects of pilgrimage and popular devotions throughout the Islamic world: the manifestations of their *walāya* are not sought in writing, and the “proofs” of their presence are not handed down in books.

the saints and other religious teachers who conveyed (and often created) both that literature and the music and other forms of spiritual practice that typically accompanied it.

If one keeps both those essential points in mind, it is easy to understand the practical and historical reasons behind the profusion of personalities and spiritual methods, symbols, practices, and beliefs that one discovers already in the lives of the classical exemplars of Islamic mysticism in Baghdad and Khorasan in the 3rd century (A.H.). But those same considerations also help us to appreciate the deep sense of disillusionment and failure, of something gone profoundly wrong, whenever the spiritual dimension of Islam has come to be identified with any particular, exclusive set of such historical forms.²⁷⁰ That recurrent realization was summed up in the frequently echoed response of the Khurasani mystic al-Qūshanjī (d. 348/959) to a disciple's naive question "What is Sufism (tasawwuf)?"

"(Today it's) a name without reality; but it used to be a reality without a name."²⁷¹

Whether name or reality, the unavoidable problem for students of religion is that there is still so little accessible literature that one can rely on to provide either of these essential contexts for understanding the wider religious functions and meaning of the many written—and the far more extensive unwritten—forms and expressions of Islamic mysticism.

II. THE QUR'AN AND THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES

²⁷⁰ A typical sign of this phenomenon recurring in different contexts throughout Islamic history is the characteristic progressive socio-linguistic devaluation of technical terms once used to refer to "mystics" as soon as the practices or institutions connected with those forms of spirituality have become popularly routinized and "corrupted" (from the perspective of different elites). To take only a few illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere at very different periods, there is the early succession from ʿābid to zāhid to ʿārif; the eventually even more widespread pejorative connotations of words like darvīsh, faqīr and sūfī (often coexisting with other positive meanings); and the post-Safavid Shiite scholarly opposition of terms like tasawwuf (or mutasawwifa)—in either case associated with Sunni or "folk", rural religious movements—to ʿirfān (true "gnosis).

²⁷¹ The dictum is repeated in two of the most famous Persian works on Sufism, Hujwīrī's (d. ca. 465/1071) *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (tr. R.A. Nicholson, London, 1911, p. 44, where the name is given as Fūshanjī), and Jāmī's (d. 1492) biographical dictionary, *Nafahāt al-'Uns* (ed. M. Tawhīdīpūr, Tehran, 1336 h.s./1957, pp. 255-56), apparently based on a more direct account in the earlier Arabic *Tabaqāt* of Sulamī (d. 412/1021).

Interestingly enough, there is a fairly simple experiment that quickly reveals both the origins of the many genres of Islamic “mystical” literature and the key to the contexts within which they originally functioned. If one simply makes a serious effort to communicate in English (or in any other non-Islamic language) something of the inner meanings and deeper message of the Arabic Qur’ān²⁷² to a cross-section of a given community—from children to adults, both women and men, with all their practical occupations, personal concerns, educational backgrounds, and spiritual and intellectual aptitudes—one quickly finds oneself obliged to recreate, in today’s idiom, virtually the full spectrum of what is usually called Islamic “mystical” literature, both theoretical and practical. Hence the typologies of form and audience outlined in the following sections are clearly determined by the necessary interplay between (a) particular topics or teachings drawn (directly or indirectly) from the Qur’ān; (b) the attitudes, expectations and capabilities of each particular audience; and (c) the individual teacher’s own perceptiveness and creative ability—using words, music, drama, and all the other instruments of human communication—to evoke in each member of their audience the indispensable immediate awareness of those ever-renewed theophanies “in the world and in their souls”²⁷³ which will actually bring that spiritual message alive.

²⁷²To date, even the best English “translations” of the Qur’ān bear roughly the same relation to the recited Arabic original as program notes to the actual performance of a classical symphony. The inadequacies of those efforts—which reflect the difficulties of the challenge, more than the talents of the translators—only highlight the extraordinary creativity and originality (and the frequently Qur’ānic inspiration) of the great masters of the poetic and musical traditions of the Islamic humanities discussed below.

Similarly, anyone performing this experiment in a Western language relatively untouched by Islamic culture will quickly discover the profound ways in which traditionally Islamic languages from the most diverse linguistic families (e.g., Persian, Turkish, Swahili, or Malay) have in fact become thoroughly permeated in their vocabulary and wider conceptual and symbolic universes by language and symbols drawn from the Qur’ān and hadīth most often mediated through the lasting creative influences of the oral and written “Islamic humanities” in each of those areas.

²⁷³A reference to the famous verses at 41:53, “*We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls*” (or “within themselves”), perhaps the most frequently cited Qur’ānic proof-text for the perennial human manifestations of the divine walāya.

Now if we may borrow the term “Islamic humanities” to describe the whole socially embedded and historically changing matrix of cultural forms—institutions, epics, myths and folktales, rituals, poetry, music, codes of right behavior (*adab*) and implicit values and expectations—through which that transmission of spiritual teaching actually takes place within each Muslim family or local social group.⁹ Unfortunately, surveys or accounts of Islamic religion for non-specialist audiences rarely begin to convey the fundamental sociological importance and historical preponderance of families (and at higher social levels, of small, rapidly shifting and largely informal associations of individuals, rarely organized as lasting “sects” or “congregations”) or of very small-scale, informal local groupings (urban quarter, village, local tribe) as the primary locations for the practice and transmission of “Islamic” teachings throughout history, at least until the radically new intervention of (to us) more familiar forms of nation-state and media-propagated mass religious ideologies, based on Western models, in the latter part of this century. As a result the actual social and cultural realities and extraordinary diversity of the religious lives of Muslims, in virtually any period or locality, are rarely discernible behind the textbook fictions of “Islamic” clergies, sects, theologies, laws, rituals, beliefs, orders, orthodoxies and orthopraxies, laities, and so on fabricated to fit their audiences’ expectations and paradigms of “religion” and “religious” institutions. (One measure of Max Weber’s intelligence and awareness of the historically grounded roots of his own “ideal-types” was his prudent reluctance to extend them inappropriately into the alien fields of Islamic religion and society.) then it is clear that the religious literatures traditionally associated with Islamic “mysticism” have indeed played a central (although by no means exclusive) role in that process of spiritual education for the majority of Muslims living in any period.²⁷⁴ And it is equally clear

²⁷⁴ As discussed in more detail below, it is essential to keep in mind that the religiously relevant “literatures”, in almost any Islamic context—and particularly for the women, villagers, peasants and tribespeople who have constituted the vast majority of Muslims in the world until this century—have been predominantly oral and vernacular, in creative, locally meaningful cultural forms that can seldom be understood simply as “diluted” versions of any of the learned Arabic sciences. The fundamental, ongoing religious importance of the *awliyā*’—whether physically present or through the spiritual archetypes communicated those local “literatures”—can only be grasped in light of their role in those specific, concrete contexts of individual spiritual teaching and practice.

The contemporary situation of thousands of African-American Muslims in the process of discovering and elaborating their own authentic forms of Islam—typically with only a quite limited contact with external traditions of Islamic literature and learning—is actually remarkably representative

that the immense corpus of *hadīth* (in both their Sunni and Shiite forms) constitute the paradigmatic example, the “prototype” as it were, for the subsequent creative development of all the Islamic humanities.²⁷⁵ Whatever their historical authenticity, the complex corpus of *hadīth* marvelously illustrates both the central Islamic assumption of the true “embodiment” of the spiritual teaching in the archetypal example of the *walī* (in this case the Prophet or Imams) and the fruitful, but problematic refractions of that living teaching through the particular perspectives and understandings of the many generations of individuals receiving and transmitting it. All the forms and dilemmas of later “mystical

of the local situations historians discover, wherever sufficient evidence exists, as they move beyond the learned, urban and courtly circles that were until recently the primary subjects of Islamic history.

²⁷⁵ In addition, from the point of view of the Islamic humanities, particularly at the level of popular, oral culture, the early religious forms of “tales of the prophets” (*qisas al-anbiyā’*), along with similar stories about the life of Muhammad (the *sīra*) and the Shiite Imams, are at least equally as important in forming Muslims’ images and understandings of the *awliyā’* and their teachings as the accounts preserved in the form of *hadīth*, despite the fact that such forms of “popular” literature were later accorded much lower religious status in the opinion of religious scholars attempting to form a normative learned consensus around a limited “canon” of *hadīth* precedents used in constructing the various systems of Islamic law (*fiqh*). Unfortunately, there are still no serious scientific translations (i.e., with the indispensable explanatory and contextual matter) even of the major books of Sunni *hadīth*, while the fascinating collections of *hadīth* attributed to the early Shiite Imams—a remarkable window into the incredibly diverse religious world of the earliest Islamic centuries—remain *terra incognita* even to most specialized Islamic scholars; recent specialized inquiries have focused on narrow questions of “authenticity” and related *isnād* analysis, in detailed polemic contexts. So it is all the more remarkable that, apart from the pioneering work cited at n. 2 above, there are still virtually no works devoted to *hadīth* (whether Sunni or Shiite) that would enable outsiders to perceive them in their fundamental religious role, in the wider Muslim community, as ongoing models of spiritual pedagogy and the insightful adaptation of Qur’anic teachings to different individual temperaments, interests and circumstances—precisely the function mirrored in the creation of the Islamic humanities and the activity of living *awliyā’* in later local settings. (In the latter context, the hundreds of more specialized, often local handbooks and collections [*arbacīn*, etc.] are often more revealing, from the point of view of a student of religion, than the early canonical collections.) In this regard, it should be stressed that the oral transmission of individual *hadīth* continued to be widespread for centuries throughout the Islamic world, among *muhaddithūn* of all sorts (including many famous Sufis), long after the written collection and subsequent diffusion of the “authentic” (*sahih*) texts underlying the narrower needs of certain groups of jurists beginning in the 3rd/9th century.

literature”, and of the Islamic humanities more generally, are already reflected and often beautifully dramatized in that vast literature of hadīth.

At this point non-Islamicist readers might well object that all of this must be so obvious as scarcely to require mentioning. The problem, however, is that this “self-evident” observation happens to run counter to some of the most fundamental paradigms, both normative and historical, underlying the classical Arabic “religious sciences” as they were written down and elaborated by small influential groups of learned religious scholars (the *ʿulamāʾ*) in the scattered cities of the Muslim world from the 3rd/9th century onward. (More recently, the same scripturalist and historicist paradigms have been perpetuated—for a wide range of reasons, and in many cases quite unconsciously—both by some Western students of Islamic traditions and by Muslim ideologists interested in manipulating them in novel ways within the context of new nation-states.) From the perspective of those scholarly paradigms, the revelation of the Qurʾān was considered as inseparable, both temporally and normatively, from the equally “revealed” teachings recorded and conveyed by the authentic hadīth and—in practice—from the related auxiliary Arabic linguistic and interpretive sciences. Together these Arabic textual studies came to be viewed by this small group of learned interpreters as constituting religious “Knowledge” (*ʿilm*) par excellence, the joint and unique foundations or “sources” (*usūl*) from which they could then derive, in a variety of ways, their own authoritative standards of properly Islamic practice and belief.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶Or more precisely, the limited acceptance, for practical legal purposes within certain schools of fiqh, of one or more of the ostensibly “canonical” hadīth collections. (The criteria of isnād criticism, within the science of hadīth, are at best a loose limit on the diffusion of the most obviously invented hadīth, and do not seriously enter into questions of the authenticity and significance of the actual text of most reports.) As indicated in the preceding note, the religious importance of that hadīth “canon” and the conflicting claims of its legal interpreters, were often disputed or simply ignored by a wide range of subsequent “traditionists” and mystics alike—not to mention the irrelevance of such criteria at the (religiously crucial) popular level of storytelling and preaching. For understandable reasons, subsequent learned Muslim scholars, whatever their school, have rarely cared to point out to what an extent even the earliest, most widely respected Arabic works of legal interpretation, Qurʾānic commentary, and biographies of Muhammad are inextricably grounded in an immensely complex body of oral traditions (by no means limited to the hadīth) written down many decades or even centuries after the events they recount. More inexcusably, the naive repetition of this particular paradigm of Islamic religious scholarship in most non-specialized modern Western accounts of the religion of Islam has of course

Thus the learned elite purveyors of those Arabic religious disciplines, while constituting themselves as the (self-appointed) authoritative interpreters of that wider Prophetic legacy, at the same time at least theoretically conceived of the immense majority of their fellow Muslims—especially such groups as women and illiterate rural and tribal peoples—as condemned to a doubly degenerate state of belief and practice. For according to their twofold “trickle-down” model of Islam,²⁷⁷ even the most learned and zealously pious students of these Arabic sources would necessarily come to be increasingly removed from the pure ideal represented by the short-lived Medinan community (or the earliest Imams), while the vast majority of Muslims could only imitate, at an even further remove, the various models of belief and behavior developed and expounded by this handful of learned interpreters.

From the standpoint of those later learned men, the Islamic humanities (both oral and written) and their representatives and creators could represent at best only an approximation to (or inevitable “compromise” with) their own authoritative standards of properly religious knowledge and behavior. 13- It should be stressed that the points of view of the *culamā'* in this very broad sense, except for the rare cases where a particular group was given a monopoly on political power, were never monolithic: typically one finds in any locality and period a profusion of legal, theological and other schools (*madhhabs*) or “ways of going about” interpreting the wider body of Sunni or Shiite learned traditions. Likewise one typically finds a wide range of alternative attitudes at the “interface” between those learned Arabic traditions and the actual local practice of Islam: e.g., in the constant legal interaction between abstract *fiqh* and local “custom” (*cāda*), or in the differing *fatwās* concerning the supposed religious status of music, saints, shrines, tombs, vernacular languages and forms of prayer and ritual, and so on. At worst, of course, the popular Islamic humanities, especially in their oral and non-learned

tended to obscure the multitude of competing, at least equally influential visions of religious authority, “knowledge”, tradition and practice which have in fact informed the historical landscape of so many Islamic societies from the death of Muhammad down to the present day.

²⁷⁷ A particularly extreme (and historically influential) case of this religio-historical paradigm is beautifully illustrated in the polemic work translated by M. U. Memon as Ibn Taymīya’s *Struggle against Popular Religion* (Mouton/The Hague, 1976). (It should be kept in mind that Ibn Taymīya was widely considered a fanatical “crackpot” in his own day and a marginal figure, at best, for centuries to come. His modern popular appeal reflects radically different world-historical and cultural circumstances.)

forms, tended to appear from that viewpoint as “deviant” and ignorant “survivals” of pre-Islamic “customs,” as the unmentionable—if sometimes practically unavoidable—“superstitions” and “popular” or even “nominal” religion of women and children, illiterate peasants and the masses of uncultured, only partly “Islamicized” tribal peoples.²⁷⁸

But that immense majority of less learned Muslims in the past, in all the regions of the Islamic world, certainly did not have to wait for the insights of modern students of religion, or the discoveries of modern ethnologists and social historians, to expose the many theological and historical fallacies and the ill-concealed political and cultural pretensions of that scripturalist paradigm of the *‘ulamā’*. Thus most of the types of “theoretical” mystical writings discussed below, for example, were in fact created precisely to defend the practices and presuppositions of the wider Islamic humanities—whether in their high-cultural and learned, or their oral and popular forms—by transforming or even replacing influential versions of that religious paradigm, either by exposing its theological and metaphysical inadequacies or by articulating the alternative spiritual claims of particular representatives of the *awliyā’*. And of course in many parts of the Islamic world people went on creating and living out the more practical local forms of the Islamic humanities, as they do today, without overly worrying about the disputes and alternative visions of those often far-off urban male learned elites.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸We have intentionally highlighted these key code-words of modern Islamicist political ideologies—too often naively repeated in uninformed scholarly as well as journalistic discourse—to help suggest the curious process of hybridization through which historically alien religious conceptions, most often reflecting Western Protestant or Marxist cultural paradigms, have been grafted with traditional paradigms of Islamic scholarship to give rise to such peculiar categories and typifications of various Muslim peoples. as, for example, “peripheral”, “nominal” or merely “traditional” (vs. “believing” or “practicing” or “authentic”), first under colonial regimes and even more pervasively under the pressing ideological demands of recently created nation-states. The essential point to bear in mind is that such ideologically motivated accounts—each claiming paradoxically to represent an (as yet imperfectly realized) “traditional” Islam— clearly have very little to do with how Muslims in general (and more particularly those groups thus typified) have actually viewed their faith and relations to God.

²⁷⁹See the particularly insightful illustration of this much wider phenomenon, in the case of one mountain village during the recent “Islamic Revolution,” in R. Loeffler’s *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, 1988) and E. Friedl’s *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village* (Washington, 1989). For similar phenomena in a wide variety of more urban, Arab contexts, see

Here again, the great obstacle for students of religion approaching the texts of Islamic “mysticism” is that any adequate phenomenological description of their social and historical contexts—assumed by the original authors and audiences alike—is still often inaccessible to non-specialists. The invaluable contributions of recent studies of the social history of all periods and regions of the Islamic world in revealing those local contexts, and especially in highlighting the immense lacunae in our knowledge of earlier Islam societies and the actual religious lives and practice (most notably of women and tribal peoples) outside a handful of urban cultural centers, have not even begun to be assimilated in surveys of Islam intended for non-specialists.²⁸⁰ And the equally important detailed descriptions of

the revealing anecdotes throughout M. Gilsenan’s *Recognizing Islam* (London, 1983). Closer to home, the pioneering research of Beverly McCloud (n. 24 below) provides fascinating firsthand descriptions of the same creative elaboration of meaningfully Islamic forms—often in conscious opposition to alien cultural models of custom and behavior—among small communities of African-American Muslim women with only the most tenuous contacts to learned Arabic traditions of religious scholarship.

²⁸⁰The amazing coexistence of scholarly handbooks on Islamic religion conveying, if anything, increasingly ideological and ahistorical portrayals of “Islam” (in terms of supposedly normative doctrines, practices, etc.) at precisely the same time as hundreds of detailed historical studies, in both Western and Islamic languages, have come to highlight the grave limits and constantly shifting motives and meanings of such idealized paradigms in any particular period and locale, is a curious paradox deserving its own study in the sociology of knowledge.

For students of religion interested in delving into that already immense recent historical literature—and for the time being, given the absence of reliable historical syntheses (especially with regard to popular culture and non-urban populations), no serious understanding of Islam, including Islamic “mysticism,” is really possible without immersing oneself in many such detailed local studies—two important cautions are in order. First, many of those recent historical inquiries are linked to the development of new nation-states and a naturally renewed interest by local scholars in their national “roots” and in “popular” movements conceived in modern national terms. The common danger in all such cases is an inadequate awareness of the wider relevance and interconnections of many areas of Islamic culture in pre-modern times, both of learned religious literature and of the written and oral Islamic humanities, in ways that usually transcend contemporary national, regional and linguistic boundaries. In the West this problem is aggravated by even more artificial recent “area studies” divisions in scholarly treatments of the Islamic cultures in question.

The second, less obvious, major barrier for students of Islamic religion, is that historical studies with rare exceptions focus on what is viewed as politically or historically “significant” and unusual “behavior”—i.e., on what stands out, often in terms of violence, rebellion, etc.—and not on the “longue

individual local Muslim communities (usually rural or tribal) by anthropologists and ethnographers in this century likewise have typically been carried out, in all but a handful of exceptional cases, in unfortunate ignorance of the historical depth and cultural complexities of the Islamic humanities and the widespread interplay of their localized forms with more learned traditions, especially those associated with Islamic mysticism.²⁸¹

durée” and the more universal, by definition almost “invisible,” spiritual dimensions of religious life. In the present context, for example, the pitfalls of this outlook are especially obvious in the focus of many studies of “Islamic mysticism” on the charismatic leaders of Sufi orders functioning as political leaders of anti-colonial resistance in the 19th century (e.g., the Mahdi in the Sudan, the Sanusiya in Libya, ^cAbd al-Qādir in Algeria, Shāmīl in the Caucasus, etc.), or on the equally striking case of Shah Ismail and the Safavid movement. For a student of Islamic religion, such studies often do not even pose the key questions: the “charisma” of religio-political leaders, as we know from experience, can be demonic or divine; and the thousands of “saints” who do correspond to Muhammad’s description (n. 2 above), whose teaching and example gives meaning to Islam and continues to guide other Muslims’ lives throughout the world, rarely enter anyone’s historical chronicles (at least until after their death).

²⁸¹ Since the very existence and multiple functions of the local Islamic humanities, much less their central role in the actual religious life of Muslims everywhere, are not even acknowledged in most non-specialist introductions to Islamic religion, anthropologists working in every area of the Muslim world have tended to assume the historicist paradigm of the *‘ulamā’* represents a descriptive as well as normative account of “Islam”—and thus have inevitably found it irrelevant (or hostile) to what they actually do observe in many local oral or written cultures somehow “remote” from the representatives of that elite learned Arabic tradition. (As noted above, that paradigm, in any of its variants, was certainly never historically descriptive, and could be construed as “normative” only in continually controversial and politically shifting sense.) The resulting difficulties in perceiving the centrally “Islamic” character of a multitude of local practices and attitudes conveyed by and centering on the *awliyā’* have only been aggravated by further intellectual interference from more recent Islamicist ideologies and other, often competing, nationalist accounts of the same local cultural phenomena.

Students of Islamic religion, however, face a much more daunting obstacle in attempting to “translate” the data of anthropological and ethnographic studies into religiously meaningful terms in a way that will reveal the essential interconnections between specific local practices and the more learned, “mystical” forms of the Islamic humanities. Since the meaningfulness of those local forms (literary, poetic, musical, etc.) depends on their capacity to awaken, within each participant, the awareness and practice of the universal spiritual virtues which are the heart of the Qur’ānic focus on *Dīn* (“Religion” in the sense of the intimate relationship between each soul and God), they are likely to be quite opaque to observers who are not looking for them or who are unwilling actually to enter into that spiritual life.

The fundamental relevance of the growing evidence from these disciplines for situating Islamic “mysticism” can be stated very simply: the closer one looks at the actual lives of individual Muslim women and men in any period (including the learned male scholarly elites), the harder it is to discern any indigenous literary or cultural category or social institutions (including those associated with “Sufism”) that could somehow be singled out as uniquely or authoritatively representing “Islamic mysticism”. At best, as in the fitting title of A. Schimmel’s classic study, one can speak broadly of the “mystical dimensions” of virtually every aspect of Islamic life and culture in the pre-modern world. Time and again, when one looks at the actual historical contexts, it turns out that what have often been identified as “mystical” practices or writings were in fact integrally embedded in the wider Islamic humanities, or what outside observers have often so revealingly labeled as “popular”—i.e, actually lived—religion and spirituality.

To give only a few examples directly illustrating the following discussion of the types of mystical literature, the repeated invocation of divine Names (the prayer of *dhikr*, or “remembrance” of God) turns out to be not simply a central “Sufi” ritual, but in some areas an important part of funerals and a common stage in the religious education of young people, who learn (even before the canonical prayers) the “Most Beautiful Names” and their recitation with the aid of prayer beads—a practice carried on throughout life without presupposing any official affiliation to a particular Sufi order. Likewise periodical visitations (*ziyārāt*) to the shrines and tombs of saints (and prophets, Imams, and some of their descendants) and associated festivals have long been an integral part of ritual and family life in virtually every region, with more widespread participation even today than the Hajj which typically figures so prominently in textbook accounts of Islam. And even more common and spiritually significant—if less visible—are the diverse practices of offerings, prayers, sacrifices and vows in connection with those dreams, spiritual visions, intuitions and blessings that are each individual’s

Since there is ordinarily nothing in the liberal arts background or professional training and preoccupations of anthropologists that would lead them to take that central dimension of the Islamic humanities seriously, it should not be surprising if even the best available ethnographic material on the religious life of Muslims (including “mystical” groups and practices) in any part of the world is rarely very accurate or helpful in communicating the spiritual life and experience of the individuals it attempts to describe. In fact, works of “fiction” from the same Muslim societies are typically far more effective in communicating the religious content and meaning of the local Islamic humanities.

decisive proof of the effective (and affective) power of a given walī. Finally, at least in traditional settings throughout much of the Eastern Islamic world, “mystical” and devotional poetry (frequently in conjunction with music) is often not just an incidental ornament or illustration of some more learned Islamic teaching, but in fact the primary vehicle for discovering and formulating the “mystical” dimension of the spiritually significant experiences and situations constantly arising in everyday life.²⁸² There those compelling vernacular poetic literatures and vast repertoire of popular stories about the prophets and saints are the equally complex equivalent in the Islamic humanities of the multitude of spiritually significant tales and legends—likewise only partially “scriptural”—whose reminders are built into the stained glass windows and elaborate stonework of Chartres and other medieval cathedrals.²⁸³

III. TYPES OF MYSTICAL WRITING: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

The following basic typology should help to bring out the importance of the actual contexts of the various writings often associated with Islamic “mysticism”, contexts which are rarely discussed in

²⁸²To give a few more particular illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere (from southern Iraq to Tadjikistan and northern Pakistan), one could mention the frequent divinatory consultation (fa’l) of the mystical poetry of Hafez in any life-situation requiring spiritual guidance; the central place of the *Dīvān* of Hafez on the haft sīn table at the center of the monthlong New Year’s celebrations (Now Rūz); or the preeminent place of Rumi’s *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīz* (alongside the *Qur’ān*) in mosques of Ismaili Shiite communities throughout that region. In such situations even the most “illiterate” villager often knows thousands of verses of these mystical poets by heart, recalling the appropriate ones whenever the corresponding experience arises.

Only those who are aware of the pervasive spiritual functions of these locally rooted Islamic humanities, or of their vernacular equivalents throughout other parts of the Islamic world, can begin to appreciate the devastating religious and cultural impact (potentially deeper than many earlier invasions, or even the script “reforms” of an Atatürk or Stalin) of the recent replacement of those local Islamic humanities in so many areas by newly invented national ideologies (Islamicist or other) and compulsory public “education” in them.

²⁸³G. John Renard’s forthcoming study of *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia, SC, 1992), is a remarkably comprehensive synthesis of the corresponding visual and epic “iconography” of the local Islamic humanities, including relevant “mystical” dimensions, in many regions of the Islamic world, from West Africa to Indonesia. See also the forthcoming volume by A. Schimmel, et.al., *The Popular Muhammad: The Person of Muhammad in Muslim Folk Poetry* (Columbia, 1992).

adequate detail in the still limited set of translations or analytical discussions of those texts available to non-Islamicists. This schematic analysis is based on an extremely simplified consideration of the main audiences and subjects of that literature, a procedure that is subject to several important qualifications mentioned below. A few reliable English translations are cited as illustrations in each case, as an aid to those working in related fields who might wish to use such texts in teaching or comparative studies.

The most fundamental distinction one immediately encounters in considering Islamic “mystical” texts is that between works addressed to the relatively small network of scholars conversant with the learned traditions of the religious and “rational” (i.e., philosophic, scientific, medical, etc.) sciences, which were usually written in classical Arabic²⁸⁴—works that we may broadly characterize as “theoretical” in their format and audience—and a vastly more complex and diverse literature of the Islamic humanities, both written and predominantly oral, in a multitude of languages, intended for the practical spiritual instruction or edification of far wider audiences. These latter, more practical types of writing typically share a common concern with directly communicating, in a locally meaningful form, essential spiritual teachings of the Qur’ān and hadīth.²⁸⁵

The selection of writings included in the following categories roughly corresponds to the broad set of subjects that are commonly associated with “Islamic mysticism” in modern translations and

²⁸⁴Or occasionally in Persian (or Ottoman Turkish), which often functioned as the lingua franca of intellectual and religious elites in many regions of the Eastern Islamic world down to the present century. It should also be stressed that many of learned, “theoretical” Arabic texts in question were (and are) equally inaccessible to Arabic speakers without years of initiation and study of those learned traditions—and that Arabic-speaking regions had their own local “Islamic humanities” (both oral and sometimes written), which have only very recently begun to interest students of religion.

²⁸⁵These practical spiritual writings, it should be noted, are usually quite distinct from the a wide range of vernacular works intended for the “popularization” or vulgar assimilation of the learned Arabic religious and rational sciences. The spiritual, aesthetic and ethical sophistication that typifies the adaptation of the traditional Islamic humanities in their local contexts, where (reflecting the Qur’ānic perspective) they are integrally adapted to the spiritual capacities and life-situation of each individual, offers a particularly radical contrast with the alien models of “religious education” and “Islamicization” (formulated in conceptual, often purely ideological terms and typically directed to the lowest common denominator) adopted by the national systems of compulsory public education in certain modern Muslim states.

discussions by students of other religious traditions. But in reality this standard selection is somewhat arbitrary and artificially limited in a number of crucial respects that must constantly be kept in mind if one is to appreciate the distinctive roles of these specific types of writing within the much wider complex of the Islamic humanities and their actual religious functions in particular local contexts.

To begin with, the typology of “mystical” writings outlined here does not directly include the traditional complex of Arabic “religious sciences” (fiqh, kalām, usūl al-fiqh, tafsīr, hadīth, related linguistic and historical studies, Arabic calligraphy, and the like), even though all of those disciplines have frequently been used and construed as important, even integral aspects of mystical or spiritual paths in various Islamic contexts by some of the learned elite to whom they were directly accessible.²⁸⁶ More importantly, we have left out of consideration here the vast realm of supposedly “non-religious” local literatures²⁸⁷—e.g., forms of epic poetry, “folk-tales”, proverbs and fables, traditional (family, tribal, etc.) genealogies, histories and legends, etc.—and related practices, even though those forms of the Islamic humanities are frequently central to the actual understanding and symbolic articulation of religious and spiritual experience in each local context. Hence the following typology of audiences and subjects, it should be stressed, is not directly based on any traditional literary genres: one could give both prose and poetic illustrations, in both written and oral expression, for each category of “mystical” writing outlined below. And certainly many of the classic, most lastingly and widely influential vehicles

²⁸⁶Those possibilities are well illustrated in some of the well-known later writings of al-Ghazālī, and even more voluminously throughout the works of Ibn ʿArabī; in the Twelver Shiite context, see the philosophic commentaries on the Qurʾan and a popular Shiite hadīth collection by Mulla Sadra (summarized in the Introduction to our translation of *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Princeton, 1981).

²⁸⁷I.e., all the literatures and other ethically and aesthetically significant local activities and customs which don’t happen to fit within the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of the ʿulamā’ discussed above. This artificial separation from the whole local complex of the Islamic humanities is especially devastating for anyone attempting to discover the actual spiritual dimensions of Muslim women’s religious lives (since, not surprisingly, they do not necessarily mirror learned urban male accounts of what is “Islamic”) or looking at anthropological work on religion in Muslim peasant or tribal communities outside the “Middle East”.

For two major forthcoming works that break down these barriers and begin to explore the unexamined religious dimensions of these Islamic humanities, see n. 18 above.

of the Islamic humanities (such as the *hadīth* themselves, the *Ihyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn* of Ghazālī, or the epic accomplishments of poets like Rumi, Attar and Hafez) include virtually all of the following categories.

Even more fundamentally, the actual spiritual functions of the limited types of writing discussed below in practice overlap and intersect with an far more extensive and diverse network of other forms of local practices, rituals, iconographies, social patterns and cultural assumptions which can differ radically from one family, quarter, village or tribe even to its nearest neighbors. Whether any aspect of a particular Islamic socio-cultural context (including its written and oral literatures) actually operates as—or is perceived as—“mystical” (or “religious”, “Islamic”, etc.) raises thorny questions of individual realization and broader cultural definition that are at least as complex and controversial in those local contexts as are their more familiar metaphysical and scholarly counterparts. Within the major urban centers of Iran, for example, such widespread rituals and practices as the ceremonies surrounding the solar New Year (Now Rūz)—or the recitation of Ferdowsi’s epic *Shāhnāme* (and its popular retellings); the extraordinary intertwinings of polite language (*ta’arrof*) and social etiquette and norms; the *zūr-khāneh* (men’s “gym”); the craft guilds and bazaar associations; mastery of *shekasteh* or other scripts; diverse items of dress; or the host of special foods and offerings whose preparation is prescribed for even relatively minor passages in life—have all taken on “mystical” meanings for individual Muslims and even for wider communities at different times.²⁸⁸ And if one looks more closely, it turns out that the same dynamic, creative processes go on today—likewise with virtually no traditionally learned or formally “Islamic” literary input, and often without public documentary manifestations—within the families and communities of African American (and other American) Muslims today.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ For an impressive portrait of those religious realities in an urban, educated setting, see such memoirs as S. M. A. Jamāl-zādeh’s *Isfahan is Half the World* (Princeton, 1983), or—for a woman’s perspective—S. Guppy’s more recent *The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood* (Boston, 1988). For the very different religious world of villagers not far away, see the work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

²⁸⁹ See the Ph.D. dissertation of Beverly McCloud (Temple University, Dept. of Religion, 1991) on the religious lives of three generations of Muslim women from five local African-American Islamic communities in Philadelphia. The total absence of published documentation on the actual religious life of those thriving, decades-old and quite indigenously American contemporary Muslim communities should serve as a sufficient caution to those who might assume that the fundamental problems of

Finally it should be obvious that the actual “mystical” or spiritual functioning of any of these forms of the Islamic humanities—at least in any deeper and consistently meaningful sense—still depends above all on the very different ways in which individual Muslims actively appropriate and experience them. At least for each of the “practical” categories of mystical writing, one could easily cite a long continuum of illustrations stretching from undeniably spiritual expressions to relatively banal, traditionally “folkloric” or even more grossly “superstitious” and mundane uses.²⁹⁰ (Perhaps that essential contrast is most obvious in the remarkable range of cultural and individual uses of the “occult sciences”, like alchemy, astrology or numerology, and of their psychic and cosmological symbolism.) In fact, just as with the full corpus of hadīth, one often tends to find the ostensible “extremes” of that spectrum of spiritual realization contained within the same literary work, or expressed at times in the life and activities of a single individual.

IV. PRACTICAL TYPES

— “Music” in the broadest possible sense²⁹¹—including the various forms and ritual circumstances of Qur’ān recitation; all the expressions of group prayer ceremonies (dhikr), whether

perception and presentation of Islamic religion and mysticism highlighted in this paper are simply the result of distance (in time or space) and relative unfamiliarity of foreign Muslim communities and religious practices. On the other hand, if the religious lives of these thousands of Muslim neighbors and colleagues have remained quite literally “invisible” to American religious scholarship for decades, hopefully that should suggest something of the reliability of portraits (and prejudices) drawn from far more distant worlds and vastly more limited and problematic sources.

²⁹⁰This continuum of radically different spiritual perspectives, within the essentially common oral religious culture and background of a single Iranian village, is beautifully illustrated by the various individual world-views portrayed in the major work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

²⁹¹We must stress the phenomenological inclusiveness of this dimension of Islamic “mysticism” because so many textbook accounts of this subject in Islamic contexts have unfortunately portrayed as either (unquestionably) normative or descriptive a multitude of highly problematic legal/theological categories and opinions: e.g., between “permitted” chanting or recitation of divine Names and “illicit” forms of singing or instrumental music; or between “religious” or “Islamic” ceremonies and “folk” customs or “local” rituals. Such widespread misconceptions of the Islamic humanities do beautifully illustrate the presuppositions and dangerous limitations of the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of certain ‘ulamā’ discussed above.

chanted or accompanied by instruments; as a common setting for the classics of mystical lyric poetry; at saints' shrines and festivals; and within a host of other religious rituals and life-cycle ceremonies—remains fundamental to any serious phenomenology of religious and mystical life in most Muslim societies, and to even the most elementary understanding of the Islamic humanities. Fortunately, students of religion now have at their disposal, even without travelling, a rapidly growing range of recordings and descriptive studies sufficient to give some idea of the centrality of music in a wide variety of Islamic spiritual paths and disciplines, especially in those rural, tribal and “popular” contexts so often neglected in general works on Islam.²⁹²

As a revealing contrast, studies of architecture and other visual arts as manifestations of the Islamic humanities—and more particularly in their relations to mystical and spiritual dimensions of Islam—have apparently been greatly limited by the art-historical disciplines' classical focus on a canon of “great” works or monuments associated with a select group of urban centers of patronage, trade and

²⁹²The pioneering work that comes closest to conveying the religious and spiritual dimensions of such music—truly a model in this field of Islamic studies—is E.H. Waugh's superb *The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song* (Columbia, SC, 1989). Two other excellent recent studies of even more explicitly “mystical” Islamic music and associated rituals, in related, yet very different religious worlds, are R. Burckhardt Qureshi's *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge, 1986, with cassette tapes); and *The Art of Persian Music*, by J. During, et. al. (Washington, 1991, with compact disc).

For Qur'ān recitation, which is an indispensable key to the understanding and genesis of so many of the visual and musical forms of the Islamic humanities, see K. Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ān* (Austin, 1985), and chapters 7-9 of W. Graham's *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, 1987).

Despite the publicly visible importance of dance in the local Islamic humanities throughout great parts of the Islamic world, whether in sessions of Sufi dhikr and other undeniably “religious” ceremonies involving spiritual states and trances, or in celebrations of weddings and other major feasts, useful ethnographic films and documentaries (not to mention articles or books) in this area are still extremely rare. Again the virtual nonexistence of serious studies of this subject perfectly illustrates the insidious role of the above-mentioned learned paradigms of Islamic religion in concealing key elements in even the most elementary phenomenology of Muslim spiritual life in those many regions where such dance forms are religiously important, as well as in blocking any appreciation of the typical interpenetration of “mystical,” Sufi practices and wider customary forms of popular religiosity in such Islamic settings (including the lives of contemporary American Muslims).

power, as well as by highly inappropriate, culturally limited definitions of what constitutes “fine” and minor or “decorative” (or “civilized” and “primitive”) arts.²⁹³ Certainly scholars are now paying increased attention to such relatively obvious phenomena as the interactions between mystical thought and literature and miniature paintings often produced in the same court settings, or to the social and political dimensions of Islamic “mystical” movements from the 13th through the 19th centuries, as their deeply rooted popular influences were mirrored in the fortunes of dynasties and the widespread official construction and endowment of saints’ shrines, tombs, *khanegahs*, and the like. But the more widespread popular reflections and subtle influences of mystical teachings and practice in such culturally diverse forms as calligraphy (in all Islamic languages) and the aesthetics and iconography of textiles, clothing, jewelry, utensils, ceramics, and carpets; in tombs; and in the plethora of more “rustic” mosques, *zāwiyas*, *Imāmzādehs* or *jamkhānehs*—especially as those physical creations interacted with particular local customs and social patterns—has yet to attract the same level of scholarly attention, above all with regard to those aspects that would most interest the student of religions.²⁹⁴ Thus, apart

²⁹³ Of course even those visual arts which are clearly “major” in the more familiar Islamic contexts (calligraphy, ceramics, textile design, metalwork, carpets, books and their illumination, etc.) are typically not at the center of aesthetic reflection and esteem in the West. But even more striking in these art-historical disciplines is the unquestioned persistence of distinctions mirroring the earlier paradigmatic opposition of learned Arabic literatures and understandings of Islam to “popular”, “local”, “customary”, or even “folkloric” forms of religious experience. Thus the artistic and aesthetic visual expressions of the Islamic humanities among supposedly “peripheral” Muslims in (not coincidentally) largely peasant or tribal areas like Indonesia and Malaysia, Central Asia, the Balkans and Caucasus, Kurdistan, West Africa, or the Swahili coast are typically ignored or at best mentioned in passing in virtually all textbook treatments of “Islamic art”. Two remarkable recent exceptions which highlight many of those unwarranted assumptions and their blinding effects are L. Prussin’s *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley, 1985), and the forthcoming study by J. Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia, SC, 1992).

²⁹⁴ This area is especially relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the deeper spiritual roots and socio-cultural influences of Islamic “mysticism”. Most obviously, in the actual practice of all these arts and music (in Islam as elsewhere) subtle “aesthetic” and “spiritual” values and disciplines are often inseparable. And in the everyday life of most Muslims, the deeper interpenetrations of spiritual life and the Islamic humanities were typically far more widely and profoundly mediated by these particular aesthetic forms—e.g., a few beautiful lines of calligraphy (“religious” or not); the properly moving recitation of the *Qur’ān*; the satisfying shape, color and decoration of a vessel for ablutions, a

from important studies of a few pre-modern cities and famous monuments, something as primordial as the concrete expression of the sacred and physical space of Islamic spirituality and mystical practice in non-urban settings, from West Africa to China and Indonesia, necessarily continues to be another mystery to all those (including many Islamic scholars) who have not been privileged to travel and live in those unique local contexts and communities.

— Reflecting the central focus in popular Islamic spirituality on sacred-human mediating figures (the *awliyāʾ*, Imams, prophets and especially Muhammad and his Family and Companions) already discussed above, by far the largest category of mystical literature (including corresponding oral forms) consists of what could very broadly be called “devotional” literature: prayers, invocations, blessings and praises, and (at least in Shiite contexts) rites of mourning and elegies typically directed toward, or else produced by, those central theophanic figures.²⁹⁵ In fact the importance of those human spiritual

bookstand, or a set of prayer beads; the ornamentation of a mosque or saint’s shrine; the inner layout of one’s own house; or the complex religious associations of a simple reed pen—than by nominally or self-consciously “religious” concepts and teachings. The widespread neglect of this fundamental religiously mediating function of the popular Islamic humanities has led to a remarkable unconsciousness of the full extent of the profound religious and spiritual consequences simply of the most physical dimensions of “modernization,” which may be even deeper than the transforming effects of national “religious education” discussed above.

²⁹⁵ One of the essential spiritual consequences of the continuum of *walāya* (the inner “proximity” connecting God, the *awliyāʾ*, and each soul) is that in “repeating” any of the prayers and invocations of the prophets, Imams and saints—as preeminently in the universal daily ritual recitations of the *Qurʾān* itself—the Muslim worshipper is not simply reproducing or imitating someone else’s prayers and devotions. Instead, what is ultimately aimed at and presupposed, in each of these endlessly diverse devotional forms, is a profound state of co-participation, if not spiritual union, with that divine Source.

In the Shiite ^c*Ashūrā* commemorations, of course, that inner spiritual connection is often sought (or manifested) in more physically palpable forms. In particular, the dramatic annual re-enactments of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Twelver Shiite communities, which so remarkably illustrate the complex role of the Islamic humanities at the interface between learned Arabic and local religious traditions, have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. See, e.g., the pioneering work of M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the devotional aspects of ‘Ashura’ in Twelver Shiism* (The Hague, 1978); and P. Chelkowski, ed., *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (N.Y., 1979).

exemplars is so overwhelming in virtually every sphere of Islamic spirituality²⁹⁶ that in practice it is extremely difficult to separate this category of spiritual writing and practice from almost all of the other “mystical” forms of the Islamic humanities discussed below: those other types of writing can all be understood (and often were consciously intended) as extended commentaries on one or another of these exemplary spiritual archetypes. The remarkable lack of translations²⁹⁷ of this kind of literature (not to

²⁹⁶Certainly this is no less true in most parts of the Islamic world, at the level of actual, observable religious and spiritual life, than with the roles of the corresponding sacred-human theophanies in Christian, Buddhist or Hindu spiritual practice. Again there is little or nothing in books about Islam intended for non-specialist readers that would even begin to suggest the importance and complexity of that dimension of Muslim spiritual life—although the widespread reactions underlying the “Rushdie Affair” may at least have suggested the popular centrality and sensitivity of this spiritual reality in certain Islamic contexts.

Along similar lines, one may note the even more egregious lack of focus on female spiritual archetypes (e.g., Fatima, Zaynab, Aisha, Khadija, and especially Mary—whose Qur’ānic description sounds disconcertingly “Catholic” to many Protestant readers) in the religious lives of Muslim women from the most diverse cultural settings. (In this regard, see the recent pioneering article by E.B. Findly, “Religious Resources for Secular Power: The Case of Nūr Jahān”, pp. 129-148 in *Colby Library Quarterly* XXV/1989.)

Above all, the peculiar domination of accounts of “Islam” by the theological categories and conceptions of small groups of learned religious scholars—or by the even more unrepresentative slogans of modern ideologists—apparently explains the refusal of most handbooks to recognize even the most obvious phenomena of Muslim spiritual life: namely, that depending on the particular devotional context, Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, Abbās, Abd al-Qādir, Muḥīn al-Dīn Chishtī, and a host of other awliyā’ are appealed to directly and intimately, on the same terms and in the same diverse life-contexts, as with the devotional roles of Jesus, various bodhisattvas, and similar theophanies in other religious traditions. (For those who have not been able to witness this directly, the best approach is simply to observe the “lyrics” of virtually any of the available recordings of Islamic mystical and spiritual music, especially from ceremonies taking place in “traditional”, less modernized rural or tribal contexts.)

²⁹⁷The most comprehensive popular introduction remains C. E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London, 1960), while A. Schimmel’s *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, 1985) provides profuse illustrations of these central religious expressions from many regions of the Islamic world, to be supplemented by the two major forthcoming studies cited in n. 18 above. See also W. Thackston’s translations of Abdullāh Ansārī’s classic Persian *Munājāt* (*Intimate Conversations*: N.Y., 1978 [Classics of Western Spirituality]).

mention in-depth studies of its actual religious functions in specific local contexts) may in part reflect the relative predominance of its oral or “popular”, vernacular forms and more particularly its associations with that (supposedly) “silent majority”—i.e., Muslim women—whose actual experience and practice of the spiritual life is still so strikingly absent from most of the available scholarly literature on Islamic religion.

— It would certainly be tempting, especially for students of comparative mysticism and spirituality, to try to separate out from the above category texts concerned more specifically with the actual practice of methods of contemplation, meditation, visualization and related disciplines pursued in the Sufi orders and other “mystical” forms of Islamic religion.²⁹⁸ The fact that such an effort would be doomed to failure even in the original languages reflects two fundamental and quite distinctive features of Islamic spirituality—both deeply rooted in the central mystery of the unique language and rhetoric of the Qur’ān—whose significance will be discussed in more detail at the end of this essay. First, from the time of Muhammad down to the present day, “mystical” or spiritual practices in Islam, despite all their diversity and changing forms, have typically not been viewed or portrayed as clearly distinct from the archetypal Prophetic model of constant prayer, devotion, awareness, vigil, fasting, and retreat—i.e., from the actualization of those more universal spiritual virtues which are the constant subject and aim of the Qur’ān itself. Secondly, for reasons also discussed below, detailed attempts to record or prescribe those spiritual practices in written form seem to have been virtually nonexistent. Even if translations

Probably the most useful and sensitive introduction to this subject for the student of religions is to be found in W.C. Chittick’s recent translation of Zayn al-ʿAbidīn’s *al-Sahīfa al-Sajjādiya*: The Psalms of Islam (London, 1988), especially the introductory explanations on “Prayer in Islam”. However, what has so far been translated or studied is in no way indicative of the volume and importance of such works in actual Islamic humanities, “mystical” or otherwise. The most fundamental gaps remain the lack of reliable and readable, adequately annotated English translations of the major collections of hadīth (both Sunni and Shiite) and of Ali’s *Nahj al-Balāgha*.

²⁹⁸ As for more “theoretical” accounts of those spiritual practices, combining metaphysical explanation and elaborate scriptural justifications, by far most complete and elaborate (and historically influential) versions in Islam are the detailed treatments of those subjects by al-Ghazālī (in his famous “Revival of the Religious Sciences” (*Ihyā’ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*), now being systematically translated by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge) and by the famous Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabī in his “Meccan Illuminations” (*K. al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya*), discussed in sections V and VI below.

were more widely available, the relatively few written works on such central mystical practices that do exist—such as summary accounts of the particular prayers and litanies associated with certain Sufi orders, catalogues of divine Names used for dhikr, or brief instructions on breathing or visualization—typically give no inkling of the complex, highly individualized application and adaptations of such procedures under the guidance of an accomplished master, nor of the critical process of their integration within the less “esoteric” (but no less indispensable) ethical and ritual forms shared with surrounding communities.

— Perhaps the next most common form of Islamic mystical literature, and one equally inextricable from the wider complex of Islamic humanities, is that of lives of the saints (and Imams and prophets). The formal grounding and inspiration of that immense and constantly accumulating mystical literature in the earlier Arabic prototypes of *hadīth*, the *Sīra* (Prophetic biography and legend) and the parallel popular genre of “stories of the prophets” should need no explanation.²⁹⁹ But whether in the

²⁹⁹For Muhammad and his Companions, see Ibn Ishaq (trans. A. Guillaume), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s ‘Sīrat Rasūl Allāh’* (Oxford, 1955), and the adaptation of Ibn Ishaq by M. Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, which is more readable and especially sensitive to those dimensions which are central to Islamic spirituality and mysticism. For the early Shiite Imams, see Shaykh al-Mufid (trans. I. K. A. Howard), *Kitāb al-Irshād: The Book of Guidance* (London, 1981). And for the “tales of the prophets” genre, see al-Kisā’ī (trans. W. Thackston), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā’ī* (Boston, 1978); and J. Knappert, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam*, (2 vols., Leiden, 1985)—the second volume largely devoted to stories of Islamic saints and famous Sufis, especially ʿAbd al-Qādir Jīlānī, from many parts of the Muslim world.

It is important to bear in mind that even in Arabic-speaking countries the Qur’an and *hadīth* have not been the primary vehicle for this communication of Islamic tradition for most Muslims throughout history. The learned understanding of Qur’anic language and contexts, requiring years of advanced study of many disciplines, is a very different matter from the far more common processes (in pre-modern contexts) of childhood memorization of certain verses for purposes of prayer, recitation, or even calligraphy. It is important to note that Muslims in the most disparate cultural settings (apart from the religiously learned elite) rarely distinguish in their awareness of spiritually significant stories between those conveyed by the local Islamic humanities, and those having their sources directly in the Quran or *hadīth*. Indeed the same spiritually significant stories are often told of or attributed to Muhammad, Ali, other saints and prophets, and heroes drawn from local

epic masterworks of Rumi and Attar or in the endlessly transformed oral versions of those often universal stories,³⁰⁰ it is remarkable how consistently the focus remains—as already in the hadīth—on the archetypal, on spiritually significant incidents or anecdotes intended to “illustrate” a more general, recurrent teaching. The absence of any tradition of self-consciously individualized spiritual “autobiography” providing a detailed and psychologically realistic account of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and initiation³⁰¹ is another of those distinctive characteristics of Islamic mystical writing whose origins and deeper significance will be explored in the concluding sections of this study.

vernacular epics and legends: see the many illustrations in J. Renard’s forthcoming study cited at n. 18 above.

³⁰⁰ A widely accessible hagiographical work introducing the most famous spiritual exemplars of the early Sufi tradition is F. Attar (abridged trans. by A.J. Arberry), *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya’* (London, 1966). M. Sells is preparing a forthcoming volume of translated selections from many of the classical figures and texts of early Islamic mystical hagiography for the “Classics of Western Spirituality” series (Paulist Press). In English, two extensive illustrations of the integration of such stories in contexts of Islamic mystical teaching are Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* (trans. M. Darbandi and D. Davis, London, 1984), and R.A. Nicholson’s 3-volume translation of *The Mathnawī of Jalālu’d-dīn Rūmī* (London, repr. 1977).

Unfortunately, there are still no widely accessible studies of particular local Islamic communities that adequately communicate the essential process of “spiritual contextualization” provided by the Islamic humanities in their local (usually oral) contexts, the way “illiterate” individuals are often extraordinarily sophisticated in making the essential connections between each particular mystical story or saying (whatever its source) and the specific type of life-event or inner experience to which it is spiritually or ethically applicable.

³⁰¹ Even such remarkable Shiite texts as the early Ismaili initiatic dialogue of *The Master and Disciple* (cf. our forthcoming Arabic edition and translation) do not really provide such an illustration: while the dramatic setting in that dialogue is clearly drawn, it is quite typically directed to bringing out the archetypal character of essential Qur’ānic passages, such as the encounter of Moses and Kheizr.

The handful of invaluable translations that do provide a more realistic picture of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and direction in very different Islamic cultural settings are not really exceptions to the above “rule” concerning the distinctive nature and limits of mystical writing throughout the Muslim world, since each of those books in fact reflects the extraordinary recording, by a contemporary observer, of typical cases of oral transmission and recounting of teachings and experiences which ordinarily would have remained an “invisible” and unrecorded part of the process of

— The broad category of ecstatic sayings and metaphysical paradoxes (*shatahāt* or Sufi “koans”), parables, aphorisms, and mystical tales³⁰²—drawn both from exemplars in the Qur’ān, hadīth and prophetic tales, and from the accumulated wisdom of every preceding religious tradition—represents a familiar, abundant type of Islamic mystical literature in which it is often extremely difficult to draw any rigid boundaries between written and oral teaching, between commonplace proverbs and profound spiritual intuitions. To be sure, many such riddles, stories and poems are clearly protreptic, designed simply to awaken their readers’ awareness of and interest in pursuing the deeper meaning behind the outward forms of religion and everyday experience. But again we have almost no scholarly literature that would adequately convey the complex higher religious functions of those short, easily memorable tales and sayings either as they are skilfully used by an accomplished master or as they resonate inwardly when their meaning is awakened in conjunction with the appropriate meditation or critical moment of spiritual insight.

spiritual guidance between a master and disciple. See the relevant sections of M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Shaykh Ahmad al-’Alawī (London/Berkeley, 1971); L. Brenner, *West African Sufi: The Religious Heritage & Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal* (London/Berkeley, 1984), especially the translated “spiritual discourses”, pp. 157-192; and our translation (in preparation) of Nur Ali Elahi, *Athār al-Haqq* (Tehran, 1366 h.s., 708 pp.).

³⁰²See, for example, Ibn ‘Atā’allāh (trans. V. Danner), *The Book of Wisdom* (New York, 1978); al-Junayd (trans. A. H. Abdel-Kader), *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd* (London, repr. 1976), pp. 120-183; as well as the forthcoming volume of translations by M. Sells cited at n. 35; and S. Suhrawardi (trans. W. Thackston), *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardi* (London, 1982). At the more popular, oral level such spiritual sayings and riddles are woven throughout all the previously mentioned hagiographic tales of the saints and prophets, and even into the multitude of popular “jokes” and comic stories concerning such figures as Jūhā or “Mullā/Khojā Nasruddīn”.

The most glaring gap for this major genre of Islamic mystical writing is surely the lack of a complete English translation of any of the major collections of (and commentaries on) the *Shatahāt*, the “metaphysical paradoxes” of the early Sufis discussed by C. Ernst in *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany, 1985). Already in the Islamic world the profound linguistic difficulties involved with translating (as opposed to paraphrasing and explicating) such works in any language is reflected in the vast commentary literature, in several Islamic languages, relating to each of the above-mentioned types of mystical writing.

— Another important category of Islamic mystical writing, which has only begun to be explored, consists of more practical guides to spiritual life, whether focused on the “rules” of proper behavior (*adab*) to be followed by Sufi novices, outlines of the “stages of the path” and spiritual psychology, or in actual letters of direction or students’ “transcriptions” (*malfūzāt*) of a master’s oral teaching to certain disciples.³⁰³ Once again, students of comparative religion who gain some familiarity with the Islamic works of this type are likely to be somewhat disappointed; for in most cases, including the translations just cited, such writings tend to be repetitive and relatively elementary, or too sketchy and fragmentary to be fully meaningful. Rarely will one find, for example, any detailed, phenomenologically adequate account of the particular Islamic uses of fasting, prayers, vigil and spiritual retreat, or of the awareness and appropriate interpretation of dreams, intuitions, and other spiritually significant events which in reality are so central to actual situations of instruction and spiritual guidance.

— Certainly the most problematic, but nonetheless extremely widespread and influential, category of Islamic mystical literature is the diverse group of so-called “occult sciences,” including such complex fields as the multi-dimensional sciences of letters and numerology (*jafr* and *ʿilm al-hurūf*); alchemy; astrology; talismans; chiromancy; and so forth.³⁰⁴ This sort of writing and associated

³⁰³ See, for example, Ibn ʿAbbād (trans. J. Renard), *Ibn Abbad of Ronda: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (N.Y., 1986); S. Maneri (tr. Paul Jackson), *The Hundred Letters* (NY, 1980); N. Rāzī (tr. H. Algar). *The Path of God’s Bondsmen from Origin to Return* (*Mīrsād al-ʿIbād*) (N.Y., 1982); and U. Suhrawardī (transl. W. Clarke, from the Persian tr. by M. Kāshānī), *A Dervish Textbook from the ‘Awārifu-l-Ma’ārif....* (London, repr. 1980). All of Ibn ʿArabī’s writings, including the recent English translations of selections from his immense *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya*, contain extensive illustrations of all three of these types of practical mystical writing. However, a great deal of this more practical spiritual literature remains to be explored even in its original manuscript form, especially for later periods in such vast areas as Muslim India, Ottoman Turkey, sub-Saharan Africa, etc.; one can thus expect some of the most interesting new studies in the areas of Islamic spirituality and mysticism to emerge from investigations of this broad range of practical Sufi literature.

³⁰⁴ The virtual absence of English-language studies and translations of such materials in no way reflects their relative importance in earlier forms of Islamic spirituality and mysticism. See our forthcoming review article of a number of recent French studies and Arabic editions in this field in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, and the vast amount of manuscript material (including only

practice—in many cases reflecting a common symbolic and cosmological heritage shared with late Antiquity and the medieval West—spans an enormous range of manifestations in most Islamic societies, from highly theoretical treatments and profound mystical elaborations (detailing cosmological or subtle psychological processes) to popular “superstitions” and their own pragmatic uses. For a variety of reasons, neither of those extremes has yet been subject to much sustained scholarly attention in the Islamic context, while recent religious modernists and reformers have typically considered both learned and popular manifestations of these disciplines to be embarrassing relics of a backward, “pre-scientific” superstitious mentality. Thus accounts of Islamic mysticism and related arts and poetry for modern audiences have naturally tended to neglect the decisive importance of their communication of a “sacred canopy” of common cosmological symbols (including the omnipresent letters of the sacred alphabet) in accounting for the wider efficacy and persuasiveness of many expressions of the traditional Islamic humanities across the whole cultural spectrum from court poetry and learned sciences to the most remote local oral traditions.³⁰⁵

texts exclusively devoted to these subjects) in the bio-bibliographic survey volumes on early Arabic alchemy and astrology in F. Sezgin’s *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*.

The most revealing introduction to the widespread uses of this genre in Islamic mysticism is the chapter by D. Gril (in French) on Ibn ʿArabī’s understanding of the “science of letters”, pp. 385-487 in the recent bilingual anthology from Ibn ʿArabī, *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, (Paris, 1989).

³⁰⁵ See the representative illustration of these types of symbolism throughout our translation of “Ibn ʿArabī’s Spiritual Ascension” (ch. 367 of the *Futūhāt*), pp. 351-438 and 574-607 in *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, (Paris, 1989). Materials of this type pose recurrent dilemmas for translators of Islamic religious writings into any modern language, since the related frameworks of cosmology, astrology, physics, physiology and numerology were often universally assumed in both learned and popular Islamic understandings even of the Qurʾān (and of the many hadīth on related cosmological matters) until modern times. Hence an adequate translation of such texts requires complex footnotes and detailed explanations, for the modern reader, of matters which were often implicitly assumed by pre-modern writers and audiences alike (very often in the Latin West as well): the situation is somewhat like attempting to explain a baseball sportscast (where the most complex rules and statistical categories are “obvious” to a numerically illiterate first-grader) to someone unfamiliar with that sport.

— Finally, there is the broad category of more direct expression, often in lyrical or even ecstatic poetic form, of actual mystical or spiritual experiences—a category which, because of its relative familiarity of subject and expression, has been a consistent favorite of modern Western translators.³⁰⁶ The popularity and immediacy of such classic texts, however, should not automatically be taken as an index of either their representative qualities or their adequacy for depicting the broader spectrum of Islamic “mystical” practices and presuppositions. To take only one striking example, the predominance in Rumi’s lyric poetry of universal images drawn directly from nature—even if those symbols are almost always intended as revelatory commentaries on familiar mystical themes from the Qur’ān and hadīth—surely helps explain the widespread appeal of his writing, especially to contemporary literary tastes. But the relative directness and simplicity of some of Rumi’s poetry is far from typical of the highly stylized, formalistic rhetorical conventions of much later Islamic mystical poetry, with its complex, entirely untranslatable play of musical associations on a multidimensional repertoire of symbolic and metaphysical archetypes (again often scriptural in origin) shared by writer and audience (whether learned or “illiterate”) alike. In those later, highly influential traditions, as exemplified in the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, poetry comes to be seen less as a vehicle of communication of

³⁰⁶ Some of the more poetically approachable English translations, among a number of recent efforts, are the recent collaborative translations of Rūmī by J. Moyne and C. Barks, including *Open Secret* (versions from the *Rubā’īyāt*) and *Unseen Rain* (translations from the *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīz*), (Putney, VT, 1984 and 1986). The immense bibliography of translations and studies of Rumi is also summarized in two complementary introductory and background volumes, W. C. Chittick’s *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, 1983) and A. Schimmel’s *The Triumphal Sun: A study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi* (London, 1980).

The familiarity for Western audiences of Rumi’s mystical symbolism (especially its frequently direct appeals to our experience of nature, or concrete images drawn from everyday life) and the relative lack of symbolic (though not musical) complexity of his poetic language helps to explain his great appeal to Western translators. (Similar points could be made about the popular Turkish mystical poetry of Yunus Emre: cf. *The Drop That Became The Sea: Lyric Poems of Yunus Emre*, tr. K. Helminski and R. Algan, Putney, VT, 1989.) However, it should be stressed that the mystical symbolism and poetic structures in the classical poetic expressions of the later Islamic humanities, at least in the Eastern Islamic world, are usually far more complex and indeed impossible to translate (at least as effective English poetry). Cf. the many attempts at translating the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, or the works of S. N. al-Attas on early Malay Islamic mystical poetry, including *The Mysticism of Hamza al-Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur, 1970).

some particular “original” individual insight than as a subtle mirror reflecting and revealing the deeper, archetypal dimensions of each reader’s/listener’s own momentary spiritual state. So again it turns out that the more genuinely religious and “mystical” (i.e., not merely conventional) dimensions of that central type of Islamic literature—whether in its learned or vernacular expressions—can only be discerned in light of highly complex practical and cultural contexts that are typically assumed, rather than openly stated.

V. THE ISLAMIC CONTEXT OF “THEORETICAL” MYSTICAL WRITINGS

It is important to note that the four broad types of “mystical” writing distinguished under this heading are relatively later phenomena in Islamic thought, since in both their Sunni and Shiite forms they presuppose the early foundational teachings of Muhammad and the Imams; then the broader development and spread of the earliest Arabic exemplars of the Islamic humanities (hadīth, Sīra, stories of the prophets, etc.);³⁰⁷ and finally the gradual intellectual “crystallization” or increasingly sophisticated theoretical articulation in classical Arabic—throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Islamic era, in a few urban centers of the Abbasid empire—of alternative learned understandings of the proper implications and interpretations (social, political, spiritual and intellectual) of that accrued body of diverse religious traditions. During that period several schools of what have been loosely (and somewhat misleadingly) called Islamic “theology” gradually developed a shared vocabulary for articulating different visions of the Arabic religious sciences, 43 I.e., kalām, usūl al-dīn, etc. In later periods these Arabic scholarly disciplines came to serve as a sort of “meta-theory” of scripturally based

³⁰⁷The actual processes of formation of “Islam” as a separate, self-consciously universal world religion during these first three centuries are still largely unexplored, or at best at the stage of working hypotheses in each of the relevant fields. (There is as yet nothing even remotely approaching the efforts that have been expended, for example, on exploring the comparable historical origins of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.) However, more detailed historical investigations can only show in much greater detail how what eventually came to be seen as “classical” learned Arabic religious disciplines actually represent only the earliest written stages of the Islamic humanities, reflecting the same processes of creative (and originally oral) individual expressions of Qur’ānic teachings in the context of the remarkable variety of pre-existing local cultural and religious traditions within the vast area of the initial Arab conquests. Again the existing hadīth collections—especially the still virtually unexplored materials on the early Shiite Imams—clearly represent many stages and facets of that long creative process.

justifications for the epistemological, rhetorical and other axiological premises of the various systems of *fiqh* (“Islamic law”); and recent research is indicating that the supposed founders of these disciplines in earlier periods were actually often involved in a wide variety of more active socio-political movements. In either case, however, neither the meaning nor the functions of any of those particular Arabic disciplines, at any period, ever remotely corresponds in importance to what is suggested by “theology” in Christian contexts—above all because the historically and politically crucial complex of councils, creeds, clerics and episcopal and ecclesiastical structures (and all the related religious and philosophic assumptions) taken for granted in the evolution of Christianity never came to exist in Islamic contexts. While Farabi and others (including many translators) were likewise developing an Arabic philosophic language capable of expressing the universal insights and pretensions of the inherited Hellenistic scientific and philosophic traditions. The remarkably successful creative melding of those two conceptual universes by the philosopher Avicenna (d. 429/1037) eventually resulted in a complex shared philosophico-theological language which was used by most later Muslim intellectuals, until the present century, to articulate and defend their alternative visions of the proper theoretical and practical understandings of Islamic tradition. The most famous and lastingly influential “theoretical” expositions of Islamic mysticism—including especially those by Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and Ghazālī (d. 1111), whose works are still widely read throughout the Islamic world today—both drew upon and further transformed that distinctive philosophic and theological vocabulary, which was freely adapted by most subsequent mystical writers in each of the four categories below.

Thus the place of these “theoretical” forms of Islamic mystical writing within this larger intellectual development—and more significantly, their relation to the more widespread popular and practical manifestations of mystical and spiritual teaching—was radically different from the role of outwardly similar intellectual forms developed in other religious or civilizational contexts. First, unlike the case of Hindu or Buddhist traditions, “mystical philosophy” (or theosophy) in a thoroughly speculative or primarily intellectual form hardly exists in the Islamic context. And those theoretical mystical writings that were produced in later periods were themselves rarely the inspiration of the far more extensive practical and devotional forms of mysticism spread by the Islamic humanities. On the contrary, even the types of theoretical writings discussed below appear relatively late and among a small intellectual elite, presupposing the complex of highly elaborated and deeply rooted practical mystical traditions they propose to justify or explain. Likewise these distinctively Islamic forms of theoretical

mystical writing did not historically grow out of earlier “non-mystical” forms of religious tradition, nor are they typically conceived or presented as special “interpretations” or further spiritual dimensions of such non-mystical religious forms,³⁰⁸ as in at least some historical presentations of kabbalah, for example.

Instead, when one examines these texts more closely, it turns out that the majority of more theoretical writings about Islamic mysticism are in fact primarily self-consciously “political” works directed toward influential elites of urban religious intellectuals. Through the presumed authority and wider educational influences of those intellectual elites, these writings were typically intended to affect, transform or protect the relative positions and wider social implementation of what their authors considered more properly or effectively spiritual understandings of the local forms of Islamic tradition and practice. As such, they usually involved intellectual debate against justifications of alternative socio-political interpretations (or “abuses”) of the same body of learned religious tradition. Hence in each case the actual practical implications of those seminal texts, both in their original historical contexts and in the controversies which have often swirled around them down through the centuries, only become clear when we can isolate in sufficient detail both the particular intended audience and the

³⁰⁸The only even remote approximation to such an approach, at any point in Islamic history, is possibly to be found in certain rare forms of later (Nizari) Ismaili Shiism, in an extreme reaction by a threatened religious minority that at times came to present its Sunni Seljuk opponents as exclusively “exotericist”. However, even in that case, as everywhere else in Islam, any such attempts to separate an “exoteric” *zāhir* from a spiritual or mystical *bātin* ran up against the basic fact that in the Qur’ān itself explicitly “mystical”, insistently universal teachings about the spiritual reality and destiny of human beings provide the primary context even for the (relatively few) specific “mundane” religious prescriptions.

Hence the more recurrently typical Islamic phenomenon—which continues to puzzle outsiders arriving with different expectations of “mysticism”—of a combination of exclusivist, even fanatical adherence to particular socially or scripturally “exoteric” versions of Islam combined with a curious insistence on highly original “mystical” forms of exegesis and spiritual practice. See, for example, in completely different Muslim traditions, such representative cases as the famous Hanbali Sufis Ansārī of Herat and ʿAbd al-Qādir Jīlānī; the Shiite hadīth-based spirituality of the Shaykhī movement in Qajar Iran and Iraq; and the more recent Naqshbandī Sufi *tariqa*.

specific issues of interpretation and practice in question.³⁰⁹ Whether they are viewed historically, practically or intellectually, the classic works of theoretical mystical writing in Islam thus appear as the proverbial “tip of the iceberg” in relation to the profuse forms of mystical and spiritual practice developed and spread independently by the much larger body of the Islamic humanities in each local context.³¹⁰

Now the disproportionate emphasis of earlier Western translations and secondary studies on such theoretical expositions of Islamic mysticism is quite understandable in terms of the pioneering European scholars’ natural interests in Islamic materials apparently comparable to their own “mystical” traditions, as well as the inherited expectations of their own audiences: the philosophic and theological vocabulary of those selected “mystical” texts is (or at least once was) more familiar to learned Western readers than the unfamiliar symbolic universes and complex socio-cultural presuppositions of the more widespread practical forms of the Islamic humanities. But the legacy of that problematic initial definition of

³⁰⁹The most prominent and enduring example of this process is the ongoing role of the works of the great 13th-century Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabī at the political and cultural interface between the learned Arabic sciences and various local expressions of the Islamic humanities down to the present day. Ibn ʿArabī’s lasting impact on the Islamic humanities throughout the Eastern Islamic world is outlined in our 3-part monograph on “Ibn ʿArabī and His Interpreters”, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107-108 (1986-87), while “Ibn ʿArabī’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority”, in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), outlines the philosophic and religious principles underlying the ongoing controversies surrounding those mystical texts. Th. E. Homerin, “Ibn Arabi in the People’s Assembly: Religion, Press, and Politics in Sadat’s Egypt”, pp. 462-77 in *The Middle East Journal* 40 (1986) discusses recent efforts to suppress—and to support—the new, more widely readable) edition of Ibn ʿArabī’s *Meccan Illuminations*. E.L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazālī’s “Best of All Possible Worlds”* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 92ff., traces the disputes between local Sufi movements and their clerical opponents in many parts of the Muslim world, over several centuries, as expressed in criticisms or defenses of Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī. And the polemic philosophic reaction of Ibn Khaldūn, foreshadowing modern “reformist” ideologies, is outlined in “Ibn Khaldūn’s Critique of Sufism”, forthcoming in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* III (1992).

³¹⁰Of course the most widely read of the learned Arabic, “theoretical” works on Islamic mysticism—above all the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and Ghazālī—were at the same time extremely influential, both directly and indirectly, within all the more practical categories of spiritual writing already discussed above.

“Islamic mysticism” has been to reinforce a potent combination of theological presuppositions and questionable historical paradigms that together have largely blocked a more adequate scholarly perception of Islamic “mysticism” (including the Islamic humanities)—and which by the same token have tended to obscure presentations of Islamic religious life more generally. Some of the resulting misunderstandings are still so deeply rooted that it is necessary to point out how they differ from the actual perspectives of the authors of both practical and more theoretical mystical writings in Islam.

To begin with, neither those Muslim authors nor their opponents tend to single out some separate realm of mystical or spiritual activities or experiences within the wider social and ontological domains of religion: typically there is no essential separation claimed or assumed between “letter” and “spirit”, “law” and “grace”, ritual and realization, etc. (The highly distinctive social and literary forms and assumptions peculiar to the various forms of Islamic “esotericism” discussed in section VII below are of a very different order.) Secondly, the fundamental focus shared by these theoretical writings—i.e., the realization of the spiritual virtues and their relation to the metaphysical ground and destiny of human souls—is itself at the very center of the explicit, “exoteric” Qur’ānic text. Thus any sort of text or practice one might associate with Islamic “mysticism” almost inevitably turns out to be nothing more than a reminder or actualization (within a particular socio-cultural setting) of unduly neglected fundamental aspects of those explicit scriptural teachings. The intimate, often inseparable relation between the outward forms and sacred-human exemplars of Islamic mysticism and those of popular religion, as well as the creative, ongoing development of the Islamic humanities in the most diverse cultural and social contexts, are rooted in the way those manifold cultural expressions return directly to the Qur’ānic archetype and its explicitly metaphysical, trans-historical perspectives. More often than not the “theoretical” writers of Sufism or esoteric Shiism were simply articulating the theological and philosophic explanations (and scriptural justifications) for what ordinary Muslims (not just “mystics”) were actually doing.

Thirdly, the fundamental issue at stake between virtually all the “theoretical” proponents of Islamic mysticism, both in Sunni and Shiite settings, and their opponents usually turns out to be the extremely practical—and indeed religiously unavoidable—question of the nature of the human spiritual

exemplars³¹¹ through which the full meaning of the revelation can be known and realized: i.e., who are those special persons (whether in this world or the “unseen”), and how can one best either locate and contact them (so as to follow their guidance and seek their aid and intercession) or else develop the spiritual qualities necessary to move toward that same state of perfection? Again, one may note (a) the fundamental continuities between Islamic “mysticism” and popular religious expressions on this point; and (b) the fact that this issue is likewise central to the Qur’ānic teaching concerning the ongoing, universal realities and perennial spiritual functions of all the divine Messengers, prophets and angels.³¹² So it should not be entirely surprising if in reality the differences of perception (and corresponding practice) between any two Muslim “mystics” concerning this fundamental religious question were (and still are) often at least as conspicuous as the differences separating either of them from many other groups of less avowedly mystical Muslims.

³¹¹This basic distinguishing factor is operative whether those spiritual intermediaries are understood to be directly accessible in this material world, or in the spiritual world through dreams, visions, *karamāt* and *barakāt* (particular evidentiary “acts of grace” and “blessings”) received through one or another of the *awliyā’* (including the prophets). The range of possibilities and combinations of these intermediary figures (in either world) in the spiritual life and experience of any given Muslim is typically extremely broad and often only loosely connected with visible sociological or historical considerations. See the vivid contemporary illustrations of these phenomena in the visions recorded in M. Lings’ *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1971) and in K. Ewing, “The dream of spiritual initiation...among Pakistani sufis,” in *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17 (1990), as well as the profuse illustrations of such dreams and visions of the *awliyā’* throughout the classical Sufi works already cited.

³¹²As Ibn ‘Arabī and other Muslim mystics have repeatedly stressed, that broader Qur’ānic teaching concerning the spiritual intermediaries also underlies the assumptions of the ‘ulamā’ about the inseparability of the Qur’ānic message from the life and example of (at least) Muhammad—conceptions which are axiomatic for all the Arabic “religious sciences” claiming a religious authority for their interpretations of the corpus of *hadīth* (and a similar premise for Shiite scholars taking a comparable stance with regard to the actions and teachings of their Imams, as well as Muhammad). Within the context of the Sunni religious sciences see the detailed explanations of this point, translated from Ibn ‘Arabī’s magnum opus, in *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque* (Paris, 1989), and W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn ‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of the Imagination* (Albany, 1989).

Finally, one can hardly exaggerate the determinative influence for the subsequent development of Islamic mysticism (including Shiite esotericism)—and for the evolution of the Islamic humanities more generally—of the unique historical circumstances (political, cultural and even geographical) which at critical moments prevented any single model or claimant from achieving anything approaching exclusive legitimacy for their claims to religio-political authority.³¹³ Far more than the few (and in fact not totally hostile) Qur’ānic allusions to earlier clerical, kingly and monastic religious institutions,³¹⁴ it was the historically effective stalemate between the many competing paradigms of religious legitimacy during the first four formative centuries of Islam that kept the exemplary Muslim mystics of those periods from being either suppressed or routinely institutionalized (e.g., in monastic foundations, etc.) by any of those contending claims to religious authority. And it was the extreme fragmentation and instability of all but the most local political authorities for much of the next five centuries that allowed the *awliyā’* (of very different sorts) and eventually the related Islamic humanities to take on their increasingly preeminent role in popular religious life and imagination from Africa to Central and South Asia.³¹⁵ Thus while non-Muslim observers from many backgrounds have continued to read their own

³¹³This is certainly not intended to deny the recurrent attempts (amply illustrated in virtually every generation down to the present day) to institutionalize virtually every conceivable human form of religious authority: e.g., Umayyad divine kingship; Shiite sacred priesthood; clerical legalism; tribal factionalism (often combined with various forms of charismatic religious leadership); radically egalitarian antinomianism; Messianic personalism; the enlightened philosopher-king; sectarian “ethnic” minorities; etc. Here again, what is remarkable is how the manifold historical and contemporary illustrations of this decisive fact—and the remarkable ways those alternative forms of authority actually combine and co-exist in specific Muslim settings—are strangely absent from the many handbooks claiming to describe “Islamic religion.”

³¹⁴At most, those Qur’ānic passages have offered ammunition to critics of one or another of the religious models of authority in question. They certainly have never stopped the contending claimants of religious authority—even in cases grossly illustrating the Qur’ānic criticisms—from attempting to institutionalize their conceptions wherever political circumstances have permitted.

³¹⁵In Islamic history, as with humanity generally, there are ample illustrations of the principle that strong central governments prefer honoring dead saints to putting up with living ones. During this period, the frequent lack of inherent religious legitimacy of even the most powerful (often Turkic) local military regimes, throughout the central Islamic lands, typically led them to play off popular charismatic (“mystical”) leaders and institutions against influential *‘ulamā’* and other contending religious

models of “religion” and religious authority—including equally inappropriate notions of “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy”—into the most diverse Islamic settings, modern historical research increasingly reminds us of the remarkable extent to which those decisive religious questions have actually remained creatively unsettled in past Islamic contexts, just as they so often still are today. Almost without exception, the masterpieces of Islamic mystical writing have been created in just such highly unsettled historical situations.

VI. “THEORETICAL” TYPES OF MYSTICAL WRITING

— The first common type of “theoretical” mystical writings to appear (in Sunni circles, at least) were relatively “defensive” or apologetic Arabic treatises, directed toward other elite religious scholars, proposing to demonstrate the consistency of already widespread popular Sufi practices and teachings with the particular religious standards and conceptions of that learned elite,³¹⁶ while often attempting at the same time to establish religiously appropriate standards for judging (and controlling) the various manifestations and perceived social or spiritual “dangers” of those popular spiritual movements.³¹⁷ The

authorities. Detailed social-historical studies over the past three decades have added immensely to our understanding of these socio-religious processes in particular urban, rural and tribal Muslim contexts, although the largely intuitive summary of M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1973), vol. 2, remains perhaps the best available survey for non-specialists. The contrasting attitudes and actions of modern Islamic nation-states of all ideological colors toward both Sufism and other traditional forms of popular Islamic religion likewise vividly illustrate the profound influence of changing local political frameworks on the visible social expressions of Islamic “mysticism”.

³¹⁶ Certainly the most widely translated illustration of this category is Ghazālī’s *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (“The Deliverer from Error...”) and other related works—e.g., in the version by R.J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazālī’s al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl and Other Relevant Works...* (Boston, 1980), with an extensive bibliography of other translations and studies of his works.

³¹⁷ In Sunni circles, those more worldly and spiritual concerns alike were often expressed in discussions centering on the symbolic role of the early Sufi martyr al-Hallāj: see the monumental study by L. Massignon, (tr. H. Mason), *The Passion of al-Hallāj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton, 1982, 4 volumes), and the more accessible summary in C. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany, 1985). In approaching the recurrent critiques by ‘ulamā’ (whether Shiite or Sunni) of “Sufism” and related movements and features of “popular” Islam, it is essential to keep in mind that one key dimension of the widespread popular respect for *awliyā’* (of all sorts) in Muslim rural and tribal settings, from the earliest

religious problems and paradigms isolated at this early stage—e.g., the alternative attitudes toward the exemplary case of al-Hallāj’s teaching and martyrdom, or the tragic events of Kerbala—tended to be repeated in such scholarly writings for centuries.

— A second, far more complex category would include more ambitiously “offensive” writings aimed at explaining and revealing the centrality of the spiritual life and practices of the various mystical groups and the decisive importance of the *awliyā’* (however understood) for properly interpreting and living out other learned forms of Islam—such as various Arabic religious sciences, or even the rational and philosophic sciences—ordinarily conceived of as being relatively separate from those spiritual matters. In a way, one could say that this type of Arabic mystical writings were essentially a more scholarly equivalent of what the spiritually oriented practical Islamic humanities were actually intended to do for Muslims in other walks of life. By far the most elaborate and historically influential illustration of this type of Islamic mystical writing is the immense summa of Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Meccan Illuminations”,³¹⁸ which discusses in endless detail the deeper spiritual meanings contained within all the scriptural sources and later religious (or even secular) elaborations of Islamic tradition. That work’s

Islamic periods (various Kharijite leaders and Shiite claimants) down to the present day, was the ever-present potential for protests, revolts, coalitions and invasions coalescing around such charismatic figures and their religio-political claims. Such immediate socio-political concerns are often more important than any deeper religious or theological issues in the long line of “theoretical” critiques of Sufi and related movements by Muslim scholars working in those contexts (including contemporary Islamic states). The constant reminders in such polemic theoretical works (whether for or against “mystical” tenets) of the public dangers of antinomianism and millenarianism are typically more concerned with the potential socio-political consequences of such popular movements—and their potential impact on the urban elite of scholars and merchants—than with the more profound individual spiritual dangers that are highlighted in practical spiritual works intended for mystics and Sufis themselves.

³¹⁸The growing number of translated sources available in English include the two anthologies from the Meccan Illuminations already cited at n. 47 above (including extensive bibliographies) and *The Bezels of Wisdom* (tr. R.W.J. Austin; New York, 1980). Ghazālī’s still widely read *Ihyā’ cUlūm al-Din* falls somewhere near the boundary between this type of writing and the preceding category, although it is even more directed more toward the spiritual dimensions of popular religious practice (in all of the above-mentioned categories) than to theoretical proof or persuasion. (The growing body of partial translations of that influential work are mentioned in R.J. McCarthy’s annotated bibliography in the volume cited in n. 58.)

persuasiveness and comprehensiveness eventually won its author the honorific title of “the Greatest Teacher” (al-shaykh al-akbar), and made it a primary source for most later Islamic writings of this sort—as well as for some of the more openly universalist philosophic expositions in the fourth category below.

— A third, very broad category would include actual intellectual or symbolic explanations of various dimensions of spiritual experience and their epistemological and ontological underpinnings, growing directly out of the need to understand and communicate the recurrent realities of the spiritual Path. An immensely complex creative effort of reflection in this direction already underlies the elaboration of the profuse technical vocabularies of even the earliest generations of Sufi teachers and comparable Shiite figures.³¹⁹ But it is typical of the wider social expression and essentially practical orientation of Islamic mysticism that the pursuit of any purely theoretical inquiry in these fields seems to have been reined in early on by a strong sense of the spiritual and social pitfalls of such intellectual activity pursued as an end in itself. Instead, one more typically finds such topics dealt with indirectly in the more “practical” types of mystical writing discussed above. Any boundary between these two aims and audiences would be very difficult to draw, especially where the works in question are not in learned Arabic: many famous works touching on these subjects are in Persian or other Eastern Islamic languages and clearly intended for practical use by Sufis and other spiritually-inclined Muslim readers. In terms of refined allusions to classical scriptural symbols or spiritually revealing anecdotes: in such works the pure theoretical impulse is constantly turned back toward what is instead portrayed as its proper, comprehensive human context of spiritual realization.

³¹⁹ In English, see Massignon’s work on al-Hallāj cited at n. 52, and G. Bowering’s *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur’ānic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustarī* (d. 283/896) (Berlin/New York, 1980). The most important other works in this category are in German, French and Arabic. The fundamental historical contributions of early Shiite esotericism (especially Jaʿfar al-Sādiq) in this area have been much less explored—partly because the earliest Shiite hadīth sources pose a variety of problems for modern Shiite Usūlī clergy. For illustrations of this category of mystical writing in a Shiite setting, see H. Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 109-170, for extended translations from much later Shiite sources (often influenced by Sufism), within a fairly limited domain.

— Finally, there are those theoretical works whose authors have attempted more comprehensive, openly universal philosophic accounts, in both ontological and epistemological terms, of the central insights and related practices of one or more forms of Islamic “mysticism”.³²⁰ Those monumental philosophic achievements—associated with such celebrated and diverse thinkers as Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn Sabʿīn, Mullā Sadrā and the many commentators of Ibn ʿArabī—became widely studied by intellectuals during later periods of Islamic history, especially within the complex multi-cultural, multi-confessional socio-religious worlds of the Mogul and Ottoman empires, with their significant resemblances (at least at the elite level) to our own world-cultural situation today.³²¹ But one cannot too strongly emphasize that even those more original theoretical explorations were ordinarily not conceived of as opening a privileged form of intellectual access to mystical or spiritual realization, nor indeed even as being necessary for such realization by themselves. For in most cases such writings presuppose the same wider practical contexts and methods of realization shared with the more popular expressions of Islamic spirituality. And indeed the most striking evidence of the ongoing cultural

³²⁰In earlier periods works of this category were apparently attempted in an assortment of gnostic, hermetic and Neoplatonic vocabularies drawn from earlier traditions. After Avicenna, Muslim authors—including such key mystical writers as Suhrawardī, Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī—almost always used versions of his creative combination of Aristotelean terminology, Ptolemaic cosmology, and kalām theological vocabulary to express their own insights. For Avicenna’s own role and motivations in this wider historical development, see our discussion of “The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna’s Political Philosophy,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1991). J. Michot’s study of *La destinée de l’homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (maʿād) et l’imagination*, (Louvain, 1987) provides extensive translations from the later Islamic mystical philosophers inspired by Avicenna.

³²¹For Suhrawardī, see the forthcoming translation of his *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Hikmat al-Ishrāq*) by J. Walbridge and H. Ziai. For the Shiʿite mystical philosopher Mullā Sadrā, see our study of *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mullā Sadrā* (Princeton, 1981). For Ibn ʿArabī and his interpreters and their far-reaching influences on the Islamic humanities throughout the Muslim world, see the translations and historical surveys cited at notes 40, 44 and 47 above. An illuminating (if somewhat diffuse) portrait of the diverse social and intellectual movements related to all of these figures within the religious world of Mogul India can be found in S.A.A. Rizvi’s *Shāh Walī-Allāh and His Times* (Canberra, 1983); for their influence in Malaysia and Indonesia, see the numerous works of S.N. al-Attas on Hamza al-Fansūrī and the Malay Islamic humanities, including the books cited at n. 46 above.

significance of the Islamic humanities, in both Arab and later Eastern contexts, is the fact that each of the authors of this theoretical type of Islamic mystical writing was obliged to turn to the alternative of more accessible popular forms of expression—whether Persian-language mystical tales and religious commentaries in the cases of Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mulla Sadra; or Arabic mystical poetry in the cases of Ibn ʿArabī and of Ibn Sabʿīn’s disciples—in order to reach out and influence wider, more popular circles beyond the learned religious elites.

VII. SPIRITUAL TEACHING AND THE LIMITS OF WRITING

By now our outline of the various types of Islamic mystical writing should have highlighted several distinctive characteristics that carry across many of the above categories and are in fact peculiar to virtually all the written expressions of Islamic mysticism. First, the great majority of those writings, when viewed in their original cultural setting, turn out to have been consciously directed either toward specific religio-intellectual elites not necessarily involved in any special spiritual disciplines (in the case of many “theoretical” writings) or toward other Muslims who were only potential mystical “beginners”—i.e., not readers who were already actively engaged in spiritual disciplines under the guidance of a master. Secondly, a further distinctive sign of this situation is the widespread reluctance in Islamic mystical writings to speak in concrete detail about such fundamental practical dimensions of the spiritual Path as meditation, retreat, fasting, prayers, vigil, dream visions, and so forth. Finally, an even more striking characteristic (at least for modern Western readers) is the peculiar reluctance of these Islamic mystics to write in an openly personal manner about their concrete individual experiences and insights.³²² Instead Muslim mystical writers of virtually all times, places and literary genres typically

³²²The rare partial exceptions to this rule, like Suhrawardī or Ibn ʿArabī, are all the more striking—and their exceptional personal openness is often related (as in these two instances) to such writers’ unusual assertion of a particular divine “mission” differentiating their case from that of other Muslims. However, there is certainly no lack of “individuality” in this mystical literature: instead the aesthetic ideal here, as in many other fields of Islamic art, was to express one’s individual experiences through highly nuanced allusions to a vast repertoire of scriptural and legendary archetypes and symbols conveyed by the local Islamic humanities. See the illustrations of this convention of the high-cultural Islamic humanities in our discussions of Mulla Sadra’s “spiritual autobiography”, in the study cited in the preceding note, and in S. F. Dale’s “Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zāhir al-Dīn Muhammad Bābur, 1483-1530”, pp. 37-58 in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22 (1990). This particular way of expressing individuality, which finds its most subtle expressions in the

prefer to allude to those more personal dimensions of their experience through archetypal symbols drawn from scriptural and other traditional sources. An unfortunate consequence of these recurrent features of reticence and discretion, for students of religion unfamiliar with their deeper social and practical contexts, is that initial acquaintance with the literature of Islamic mysticism may give a quite misleading impression of repetitiveness, relative (intellectual) superficiality or simplification, and even conventionality.³²³

In fact, each of these particular literary characteristics (like their close parallels in the other artistic expressions of the Islamic humanities) can only be understood in terms of the ways such writings were intended to operate in their original social and cultural contexts. These mystical texts are only the most visible aspects of a wider assumption of “esotericism” rooted in three foundational features of Islamic religious culture (both popular and elite) already cited at the beginning of this essay. The first of these is the remarkable centrality of “mystical” aims and practices in the Qur’ān, where the spiritual life is portrayed as the primordial essence of Religion (Dīn, the universal God-soul relationship), combined with the (apparently utopian) insistence that those spiritual realities be explicitly expressed and realized in the everyday lives of all people of faith, following the Prophet’s own example. The second key feature is the constant focus, beginning already with the archetypal cases of Muhammad and the other prophets (and of the Imams, for Shiites), on the practically decisive need for a living divine-human connection and exemplar (i.e., the walī or “Friend of God” in the broadest sense, whether in this world

later, highly stylized traditions of Islamic mystical poetry in India, Turkey and Iran, assuming an extraordinarily sophisticated and aesthetically alert audience, is gravely misrepresented in the influential discussions by G. von Grunebaum in *Medieval Islam* (Chicago, 1953). See the recent discussion of a “counter-example” that helps highlight these distinctive conventions of the high-cultural Islamic humanities,

³²³ It is likewise no coincidence if initial encounters with the central Islamic arts and humanities more generally—e.g., calligraphy, poetry, both learned and popular religious music, carpets, architecture, etc.—sometimes lead to similar reactions. In addition to the obvious unfamiliarity of much of their symbolism and religious references, those creations typically presuppose a common aesthetic and metaphysical outlook in their audiences—centering on the theophanic re-creation of shared spiritual archetypes—and the practical social contexts in which their explicitly contemplative functions could actually be realized. See the remarkably sensitive illustration of these essential points in W. Andrews’ *Poetry’s Voice, Society’s Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle, 1985).

or accessible spiritually) who can properly guide each Muslim's specific realization of those broad Qur'ānic injunctions. And the third essential point, discussed at some length above, is the profound integration of virtually all expressions of Islamic "mysticism" within the Islamic humanities and the surrounding local forms of popular religion.

Integration, however, is not the same as identity. And the outward "invisibility" of the Friend of God described in the famous hadīth with which we began beautifully expresses the inner paradoxes and tensions—and the profound limits of any writing—inherent in the distinctively "esoteric" context of spiritual teaching assumed by most forms of Islamic mysticism. For from that perspective the ultimate purpose of mystical writing, as of all the associated spiritual methods, conditions and ways of life, was rarely conceived or presented as a particular new set of beliefs or social practices that could somehow be stated or applied "literally" and unambiguously.³²⁴ Instead, within the Qur'ānic framework and its ongoing socio-cultural expressions (including all the related Islamic humanities), that aim could only be portrayed as a transformed insight or realization of existing, publicly accessible doctrines, norms and forms of experience—and as a transformation in principle (or degree) potentially accessible to all.³²⁵ Hence both the tenacious (and in the long run generally successful) resistance to any widespread institutionalization of religiously separate, exclusivist mystical sects or distinct sub-religions within the

³²⁴The closest approaches to such an exclusivist attitude (both intellectually and socially), in some forms of Shiism from early centuries down to the present, inevitably led to the "sectarian" social consequences largely limited to Shiite groups in Islam—consequences which are not at all typical of the most influential forms of Islamic mysticism. And even within later Shiite sectarian communities, "mystics" or esotericists typically formulated their teachings and pursued their practical activities in ways closely paralleling the situation of mystics working within wider Sunni settings.

³²⁵The resulting social and institutional fluidity of "mystics" and Sufis in most periods, with their profusion of orders, paths, and competing local shaykhs, has more typically resembled the indeterminate, constantly evolving relationship of contemporary "Twelve-step" spiritual programs to their surrounding American and European communities more than it has any rigid institutional models drawn from the later periods of Christian or Buddhist monasticism. Again and again, as already discussed at n. 5 above, one can observe in Islamic history the recurrent pattern of an almost automatic religious discrediting of those spiritual movements which took on the accoutrements of "successful" political, social, or economic institutionalization in ways that would thereby cut them off from the rest of the local Muslim community.

wider Islamic community,³²⁶ and the equally typical persistence of Muslim mystics' attempts to share their theoretical and practical spiritual insights (especially by means of the Islamic humanities) in forms ultimately accessible in some degree to all members of the wider Muslim community.

The second profound limitation on mystical writing, whose wider importance has already been discussed, was the almost universal assumption that the spiritual goal set forth by the Qur'ān could only be fully realized within the context of ongoing personal association between each disciple and an accomplished master (whether on earth or accessible spiritually, including all the prophets).³²⁷ As suggested by the frequent recourse to images drawn from alchemy, that essential spiritual process was not seen as involving the "concealment" of anything that could be communicated unambiguously to all comers. For virtually all Islamic mystics, it is precisely the true understanding of the scriptural symbols (and not those images themselves) that is "esoteric". From their perspective, the sacred texts themselves convey the Truth quite literally—so it is the disciple who must be gradually transformed, through the

³²⁶ Even the widespread Sufi tariqas of the 13th-19th centuries and their modern survivals have rarely been constituted as separate sects or "orders" in the institutional sense familiar, for example, in Catholicism. Instead they are typically voluntary associations (whose members remain immersed in the daily life of the surrounding Muslim community), local in their membership, surrounding a particular local leader, and more often than not dissolving or splitting up at the death of each locally accepted guide. Frequently they are in active competition with a range of similar local groups, with considerable movement from one guide to another; meetings may be held in homes or neighborhood mosques, with no special institutional locale required. In revealing contrast, the undoubtedly sectarian organization of Shiite groups in many Islamic contexts has usually occurred under very particular situations of extreme political hostility and persecution—situations which have normally had nothing to do with any particularly "mystical" activities or tendencies.

³²⁷ Of course this does not rule out certain extremely rare cases of individuals claiming to have reached spiritual enlightenment through direct divine intervention (the *majdhūb*)—e.g., as was claimed in various ways by Ibn ʿArabī and his famous 19th-century Algerian follower, ʿAbd al-Qādir. But it is revealing that even these exceptional individuals, before undertaking to teach others, first consciously undertook to pass through the "normal" stages of the spiritual path under the guidance of other masters: see M. Chodkiewicz, *Emir Abd el-Kader: Ecrits spirituels* (Paris, 1982) and *Le Sceau des saints* (Paris, 1986), and the longer biography by C. Addas, *Ibn ʿArabī ou la quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris, 1989).

guidance and teaching of a master, in order eventually to grasp that literal sense,³²⁸ to rediscover the essential connections between the sacred symbols and the corresponding realities and consequences in his or her own experience.

And finally, the fundamental principle underlying both of the above points and all their practical and literary consequences was Muslim mystics' characteristic awareness of the irreducible hierarchy of human spiritual capacities and predispositions (at least at any given moment), and their corresponding perception of the Qur'ān and hadīth as being carefully and appropriately addressed to this full, incontrovertible range of human types and possibilities. In this situation only a genuine master, it was assumed, could properly judge the readiness and aptitude of each individual student with regard to the relevant aspects of their character and spiritual development.

Now the above points, presented in this fashion, might seem abstract and even—for those without firsthand contact with the spiritual traditions in question—a sort of relic from another age.³²⁹ But already at the purely textual level, even the most sceptical readers can begin to appreciate the importance and actual functioning of these integral relationships between “mystical” text, master, and spiritual practice in the Islamic context by focusing in on two subjects—indeed two inescapable “mysteries”—whose practical existential importance, within any religious tradition, is as self-evident as their prominent position in Qur'ānic teaching. In both of these cases, inquisitive readers can begin to

³²⁸This typical attitude of Islamic spirituality—which is sufficiently contrary to models carried over from other religious contexts that it has frequently led to serious misunderstandings—obviously reflects the overt and irreducibly symbolic and musical character of the Qur'ānic text, which so often pointedly defies any translation or “obvious” understanding. Perhaps even more important for the predominance of this particular structure of writing and oral teaching in Islam is the repeated insistence, throughout the Qur'ān and in dozens of hadīth constantly cited by Sufis and other Muslims, that the prophets (awliyā', Imams, etc.) and angels are here now, and that most people are simply unconscious of their spiritual presence (as of the ever-present “unseen world”, al-ghayb, more generally).

³²⁹See the timely autobiographical illustrations of these points, within a contemporary Turkish Sufi order, in Part I of L. Hixon's *Heart of the Qur'ān* (Wheaton, IL, 1988). For all its sketchiness, that firsthand account reveals far more about the typical functioning of the above principles than most of the translated Sufi literature cited above. For similar contemporary illustrations of the processes of oral teaching in more traditional Islamic settings in Senegal, Algeria and Iran, see the translations cited at n. 36 above.

appreciate more fully what is ordinarily not stated in Islamic mystical texts, and the possible reasons why certain matters are only discussed orally within the context of actual spiritual guidance and disciplines, simply by considering the alternative conceptions and possibilities more openly discussed in other religious traditions.

The first of those two subjects is the deeper grounds of the interplay between individual spiritual capacities and advancement (and eventually the very meaning of divine “Justice”) and the ultimate consequences of each individual’s actions in the “other world”. In the Islamic context the meaning (and relative human importance) of this reality is conveyed by the detailed, remarkably complex eschatological symbolism which is probably the single most frequent subject of the Qur’ān. The second recurrent subject is that of the “spiritual hierarchy”: of the deeper relationship between the timeless spiritual realities of the divine intermediaries discussed repeatedly in the Qur’ān and hadīth (prophets, angels, saints, etc.) and their particular earthly manifestations both in history and as those figures are encountered more directly by each individual in the course of their spiritual itinerary.

Even a passing acquaintance with the treatment of these issues history of religions, whether in Islamic or other contexts, should be sufficient to suggest some of the ethical, social and political reasons for the persistent refusal of even the greatest and most respected Islamic mystics to write more openly than the Qur’ān, or to speak more publicly than the Prophet, concerning these two central spiritual mysteries.

VIII. THE INVISIBILITY OF THE SAINTS

Whatever one’s spiritual outlook and interests, the points we have outlined concerning the inner relations between Islamic mystical writings and the wider Islamic humanities, and their particular social manifestations within each Muslim community, are neglected, yet historically decisive phenomena that should be of the utmost interest to serious students of Islamic history, culture, religion and society. Like the “invisibility” of the Friends of God described in the celebrated hadīth with which we began, the very unfamiliarity of those perspectives to our own ways of thinking and viewing the world should at least suggest the possibility of realities, or at least new angles of vision, yet to be discovered.

A striking illustration of that possibility is provided by two short works by the great Muslim mystic Ibn ‘Arabī which have been partially translated under the title *Sufis of Andalusia*.³³⁰ They give one cautionary lesson with regard to the highly problematic relations between texts (of any sort) and the available portrayals of Islamic history and religion. Among the surviving monuments and literary records of Muslim Spain in the late 12th century (apart from Ibn ‘Arabī’s own voluminous writings), there is very little in the Arabic poetry, political chronicles,³³¹ biographies of learned legal and religious scholars, or the celebrated works of a philosopher like Averroes, to suggest any particular social significance, or indeed even much conscious awareness, of what later came to be viewed as “Sufism”. Islamic “mysticism,” in that later, more institutionalized and self-consciously distinctive sense, is in fact almost invisible in the writings of those learned and privileged elites. Yet Ibn ‘Arabī recounts in the most moving terms his own decisive personal encounters, over a few years of his youth, with dozens of men and women, from every region and walk of life, learned and illiterate, outwardly “religious” and less obviously so, whose extraordinary spiritual powers and influences were exercised almost entirely within the web of “ordinary” social and religious life and practice, visible in many instances only to those few specially motivated individuals who cared to seek them out.

The broader historical lessons that can be drawn from this telling example must surely be kept in mind when reading about any aspect of Islamic religion or culture. As for Ibn ‘Arabī, he was making a different point.³³²

³³⁰Tr. R.W.J. Austin, Oxford, 1971. For a more detailed analysis of the spiritual and personal significance, and the social-historical background, of those encounters, see the two pioneering French studies cited at n. 62 above (both forthcoming in English translation by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge).

³³¹Except for mention of some scattered popular rebellions connected with individuals who may also have been Sufi leaders, the recurrent problems—for the student of Islamic religion—posed by that (understandable) focus of historical texts have been mentioned at n. 18 above. Ibn al-‘Arif (trans. William Elliot and A.R. Abdullah), *Mahāsin al-Majālis: The attraction of mystical sessions*. (London, Avebury, 1980)

³³²See the remarkable contemporary illustration of that point—as of so many other central teachings of the Islamic humanities—in Wim Wenders’ *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987: distributed in English and French as “Wings of Desire”).

Chapter Ten

REMEMBRANCE AND REPETITION: QUR'ANIC
DIMENSIONS OF ISLAMIC ART

“God is Beautiful, and He loves beauty...”

(Prophetic saying)

***“...Surely hearts find peace in remembrance of God: ...
joyful bliss for them, and a beautiful returning!”***

(Qur'an 13:28-29)

The traditional Islamic arts are a special kind of “visual music.” The best way to begin to appreciate them, for someone brought up in the contemporary global media culture (which includes most young Muslims today), may be to listen to the traditional *music* of any Islamic culture. Beginning with Islamic music helps us to appreciate these visual arts in their own aesthetic terms, as they were experienced by their original creators and patrons, rather than through our modern assumptions which still largely reflect the influences of Western painting and sculpture. “Listening,” in this case, is much more than a metaphor. For centuries, Islamic music and visual arts alike have shared a common aesthetic model and inspiration in the inspired sounds and rhythms of the Qur'an, whose recitation is always a central part of each Muslim's daily life, beginning with the cycles of prayer.

Starting with music quickly brings out certain common forms and presuppositions that link Islamic art from the most diverse cultures, from West Africa to Indonesia. The most obvious of these characteristics is the recurrent patterns of *repetition* and *rhythm*. This central feature is equally evident in a multitude of artistic and social forms: in the distinctive patterns of tribal and courtly carpets; in the distinctive styles of Arabic calligraphy adapted for so many Islamic languages; in the ornamental interplay of “arabesque” and geometric elements in all the visual media (ceramics, wood, leather, textiles and metalwork); the architectural layout of fountains and gardens, tomb-shrines, palaces, or urban markets and religious complexes; in the multiple perspectives in certain schools of miniature painting; in the classic symbolic repertoire of mystical lyric poetry; or in the intricate formulae of social etiquette (*adab*), ritual and polite speech. In each case, this rhythmic repetition is meant to evoke in the

viewer or participant an inner harmony and symmetry, a transcendent inner balance that integrates the visible tensions and momentary attractions (both affective and intellectual) of each of the constituent parts. *It is the realized practical expression of tawhīd.*

Uninitiated modern observers of each of these artistic forms, of course, have often mistakenly perceived precisely these same shared aesthetic qualities and expectations as representing qualities of repetitiveness, “formalism”, “decorative” superficiality, and an apparent lack of originality or truly “authentic” expression. For as with any traditional art or ritual, it is certainly true that only long personal apprenticeship can reveal the heights of individual creativity and mastery that can be realized within the formal constraints of each of those fields.

This process is very obvious when we simply *look* at the kaleidoscopic “harmony” of traditional carpets. No matter how small the piece, our physical eye alone cannot begin to grasp all the interwoven patterns (whether of geometry, color, or ‘representational’ elements), much less hold on to them all. In fact those patterns are meant to entice our eyes, drawing them from one intriguing area or structure or detail to another—like sight-reading the separate “notes” or themes of a musical score—in a way that at first can seem almost physically exhausting. Only gradually, often without even noticing it happen, does our mind (or some deeper part of us) begin to settle into a mysterious kind of unity and balance that is really only “suggested” by the forms of the carpet itself. And as with any effective work of music, those deeper forms and patterns we discover are never quite the same: they change—as we do—with each viewing.

Islamic languages have a single multifaceted Qur’anic term for describing this mysterious inner process which is the aesthetic aim and ideal of each of the Islamic arts: the word itself is *dhikr*. It is no accident if traditional Islamic musicians almost anywhere would typically describe their performance—or their listening—not simply as music, but rather as *dhikr*: an act of “intimate prayer” or “remembrance” of God. No theory is needed to discover the mystery and intriguing beauty of this music. But a closer look at the concept of *dhikr* can help us to appreciate its connections with the other Islamic arts and the wider aesthetic world of their original creators and audiences. How that fundamental Qur’anic concept actually came so thoroughly to inspire and pervade the Islamic humanities in all their manifold creative expressions is a fascinating story that has yet to be written. But for our purposes here, it is sufficient to describe as succinctly as possible the fundamental spiritual role of the Islamic

humanities *as dhikr*—as both cultural “reminders” and repeated individual “invocations” of the archetypal divine Qualities, the “Most Beautiful Names”—within the broader Qur’anic vision of human being and the world.

REMEMBRANCE IN THE QUR’AN AND ISLAMIC ART

The Qur’an, in its origins and in the daily ritual and prayer life of Muslims through the centuries, has always been primarily an *aural*, a musical reality. The Arabic word *qur’ān* actually means “recitation,” and within the revelations that same term is also applied to the *divine* Archetype of all revelation and creation. Hence the fundamental Qur’anic image for God’s relation to the world is that of *Speaking*. So that creative divine Music is directly reflected in the response of *all* the creatures, even if we human beings too often remain spiritually deaf to that divine Concert: ***the seven heavens and the earth, and all who are in them, are singing His praises: there is no thing but that it is singing forth with His praise—and yet you do not grasp their song-of-praise!*** (16:44).

Within this metaphysical perspective, the ultimate purpose of the Qur’an is to help “remind” human beings of their unique role in that cosmic chorus. The forms of the Arabic root for *dhikr* express several equally essential aspects of that all-encompassing divine Concert: it can mean a *reminder*; the act of *remembering* or recollecting; *mentioning* or *repeating* something; and the process of “*invoking*” in prayer (whether silently or in audible chanting or rhythmic song) the divine Names, the archetypal Attributes of God that are made manifest in creation and then “returned” to their divine Source through each of our individual spiritual acts of recollection. According to the Qur’anic account (at 7:174), *all* human beings were *originally* aware of that constitutive relationship with God through their common primordial root in the divine Spirit: ***Remember God’s blessing on you by which He bound you, when you said: “We hear and we obey!”, and be mindful of God...*** (5:7). So all the realms of existence and experience alike are the constantly repeated divine “Signs” (*ayāt*) and archetypal “Likenesses” (*amthāl*) constituting God’s creative Act of Remembrance: ***We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truly-Real.*** (41:53).

From the human point of view, of course, few could argue with the Qur’an’s repeated observation that ***“no one really remembers, but the people of Hearts”*** (2:269, 3:7, etc.). Yet in response to the more frequent human condition of spiritual “deafness” and unconsciousness, the Qur’an constantly stresses our unique responsibility for *dhikr*, for “remembering” God and “mentioning” or invoking the divine

“Names,” at *every* moment of life: ...***remember God while standing, and sitting, and (lying) on your sides...*** (4:103, 33:191); ***and remember your Lord in your soul, humbly and in awe...in the morning and in the evening...*** (7:205); ...***and remember/mention your Lord, whenever you have forgotten!*** (18:24). Thus the imperative of *dhikr*, in this broader sense of all awareness, all recollection and realization of the divine Presence, extends far beyond the dozens of explicit Qur’anic references to include ultimately every facet of the practical spiritual role of the Qur’an, the earlier divine revelations, and the divine messengers, teachers and spiritual guides who are the present living embodiments of this divine “Reminder”.

The very essence of this inner movement of remembrance is the soul’s inner “returning” from the visible forms of this world to their true realities, the divine Names, in the “unseen world” (*al-ghayb*) or the “other life” (*al-akhira*) of the Spirit. That transforming movement of remembrance—what the Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra later called the “transubstantiation” (*haraka jawhariya*) from the familiar mortal ‘human-animal’ (*bashar*) into the fully theomorphic truly human being (*insān*)—is most clearly illustrated in the nearly intangible states and rhythms characteristic of the traditional musical forms of *dhikr*. But it also helps explain the inner aesthetic connections between the traditional Islamic arts, as well as their deeper ties to all the Islamic humanities within their surrounding cultures. Specifically, the central religious and ritual role of the Qur’an in Islamic life helped to mold the implicit canons and ideals of aesthetic expression and appreciation in at least the following ways.

THE AESTHETICS OF REMEMBRANCE IN ISLAMIC ART

First, as we have already mentioned, on the most fundamental formal and structural level each of the Islamic arts (whether musical, visual or literary) has typically come to reflect the Qur’an’s distinctive musical qualities of *rhythm* and constantly interwoven symphonic “*repetition*” and subtle elaboration of its central themes.

Second, the *visual iconography* of Islamic art, the selection of basic themes and formal elements chosen to be represented in the visual arts from the earliest period, has continued to be drawn from the central *visible images of the divine Presence* in the Qur’an itself. In the Qur’an, those recurrent images or “*reminders*” of the transcendent Reality revealed through all the appearances of the world fall into three basic groups. The most obvious of these symbols is of course the *Arabic calligraphy* of the divine “Words” themselves, which in itself developed into one of the most respected visual arts (and spiritual

disciplines) in many Islamic cultures. Equally evident in the visual arts and architecture, as well as in the basic symbolism of all Islamic mystical and lyric poetry, is the second distinct family of Qur'anic visual images: the paradisiac symbols of the "Other World," which include gardens, fountains and flowing streams of many hues, the celestial "banquet" (with its winebearers, companions, musicians), birds, greenery, fruits and foliage of every sort. Where allusions to such spiritual meanings are conscious and intentional, the complex aesthetic of *colors* can also subtly reflect the influence of these paradigmatic Qur'anic symbols (for example, in reference to the four elements, the "water of life," etc.). The third major family of Qur'anic visual symbols are all the *cosmological* references to the mysterious divine order of the heavens, Light (and "shadows"), the planets and stars (and celestial angels), the four sub-lunar elements, and the *geometric and mathematical patterns* underlying the creation and harmonious transformations and recombinations within each of those domains. Here, in particular, all the elements of Islamic religious architecture and its ornamentation offer some of the most striking aesthetic "reminders" of these all-encompassing patterns of the divine Artist.

The third guiding aesthetic assumption reflecting the Qur'anic model in each Islamic art is the essentially *contemplative aim* of each of these artistic forms. The essential purpose here is always *what is discovered "inside"* each viewer or auditor, the mysterious inner shift in awareness from the material, temporal forms in this world to their divine Source and Reality in the "other world": *the actual realization of tawhīd*. In this respect the endlessly varied musical forms of *dhikr*—whether chanted, sung, or with more elaborate instrumental accompaniment—most directly illustrate and embody that characteristic "re-creation" of Qur'anic intentions that takes more palpable form in the other Islamic visual and architectural arts.

A final formative principle of traditional Islamic aesthetics, again based on the Qur'anic ideal, is the assumption of the *actively transformational* or "*participatory*" nature of the spiritual relationship between the "creator" (or performer) and their "audience." An art designed to transport us from this world to the next, from spiritual unconsciousness to a heightened awareness of the divine Presence and Names in all our experience, is not likely to work in a passive or undemanding fashion. Such a radically *spiritual and participatory* guiding aesthetic conception obliges us to enter a very different world from one viewing the artist's work as simply another kind of "production" or distracting "entertainment." Appreciating any of the classical forms of Islamic art requires us to cross some of the boundaries between what contemporary culture tends to view as separate realms of religious, aesthetic, ethical, and

intellectual activity and experience. We are no longer used to thinking of—much less, actually living—embroidery or weaving or gardening or conversation as integral acts of prayer.

One striking indicator of this very different understanding of the spiritual role of artists and “aesthetic” values in traditional Islamic cultures is that the closest expression one can find for the fine arts in many Islamic languages is *adabīyāt*, a word that means something like “the spiritually and ethically appropriate intention and its harmonious expression in *right action* within each particular situation.” From this perspective, artistic creation and appreciation necessarily require an unsettling kind of inner surrender (*taslīm*), before one can discover the underlying peace of the divine harmony to which earthly beauty can lead. Those two inseparable aspects of this direct inner experience of the artist’s transforming intention—contemplative “surrender” and the resulting “peace”—are the original literal meaning of the Arabic word *islām*. As indicated in the famous Prophetic saying with which we began, Islamic art has accomplished its purpose when its viewer (or user or listener) disappears in the contemplation of *that* Beauty.

THE MYSTERIES OF *IHSĀN*

Yet another fundamental feature of the traditional Islamic arts and humanities—implicit in each of the points mentioned above—was the typical *anonymity* of their creators, and the pervasiveness of those distinctive cultural forms precisely among the most “popular” and “uneducated” elements of society. (As a visible emblem of this reality that once encompassed every area of social and communal life, one need only think of the countless masterpieces of carpets and textiles woven by unknown women from the most diverse tribal and village settings.) One striking indication of the deeper metaphysical truth of the Qur’anic perspective is the way that the actual concrete realization of these essential spiritual virtues, whether in the “arts” or any other area of human life, seems to have had remarkably little to do with the formal Arabic learning and “official” religious ideologies of the past or present.

The Islamic tradition has a singularly expressive term, *ihsān*, for describing this unique God-given capacity for actually perceiving, and then bringing into existence, what is beautiful—and at the same time truly good: this single word conveys the essential *inner unity* of that living awareness of the divine Presence. In the Qur’an, that rare spiritual virtue is connected above all to God’s special love for the prophets and the most accomplished ‘Friends of God’ (the *muhsinūn*), in a way that may inevitably

seem far removed from our own ordinary, socially constructed conceptions of either good or beauty. And in the famous Prophetic “hadīth of Gabriel” that is still widely used as a sort of catechism in many parts of the Islamic world today, the Prophet describes the true nature of *ihsān* in terms that clearly suggest the most characteristic principles of Islamic art: the harmonious marriage of aesthetic, ethical and intellectual perceptions and demands within their unifying spiritual Source and Aim.

That hadīth itself recounts the Messenger's replies to three questions posed by a mysterious white-robed stranger, who he eventually identifies for his companions as the angel “Gabriel, who came to teach the people their Religion” (*Dīn*, the primordial relationship between each soul and its Creator). Nothing more clearly highlights the culminating and guiding role of aesthetic perception and creation—and the essentially spiritual understanding of the artist's activity—within this tradition. The stranger's first two questions are about the intellectual and ritual dimensions of religion, which the Prophet answers by summarizing the objects of faith and the essential religious obligations of monotheism, prayer, charity, and fasting. Then Gabriel asks “What is *ihsān*?,” literally (in Arabic) the perception and realization of what is truly beautiful and good. Muhammad's reply is usually translated as “*To serve God as though you see Him; and even if you did not see Him, surely He sees you.*” But the last half of his reply can also be translated even more revealingly: “...and *if you are not*, then you *do* see Him...” Truly Islamic art, in this perspective, has fully accomplished its purpose precisely when its viewer (or listener) disappears in the contemplation of that divine Beauty.

The Islamic arts and humanities have their genesis, in every cultural and social setting, in the ongoing spiritual obligation to communicate the primordial message of the Qur'an (including that of all the earlier prophets and messengers) in ways that can *effectively* touch and transform the lives and souls of each human being. From that perspective, the recorded teachings of the Prophet and the Imams (including the hadīth we have just recounted) are really the first Islamic exemplars of that ongoing, necessarily creative process of teaching and transformation. An awareness of the fundamental spiritual necessity of that process, and of its indispensable practical preconditions at any time, suggests rather different perspectives and agendas from those so loudly and vociferously proclaimed by the modern “defenders” (and detractors) of religion.

Another way of opening up those forgotten perspectives is to reflect more deeply on just what it was that enabled the incomparable master of Shiraz, that extraordinary “guardian of the unseen” (*Hāfīz al-ghayb*), to compress everything we have discussed—and so much more—into these few lines:

The Musician/Composer of Love has a wondrous instrument and song:

The impression of each chord (S)he strikes has its way to a Place.

May the world never be without the lament of lovers—

Such a beautifully harmonious and joy-giving melody it has!

Chapter Eleven

ENVISAGING THE SPIRIT: THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF
‘ATTÂR’S *CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS*

Farîd al-Dîn ‘Attâr’s *Conference of the Birds* is not just a literary masterpiece: its wider popular influence throughout the Eastern Islamic world, both directly and through centuries of retelling of its stories by subsequent writers in Persian, Turkish, Urdu and other vernacular languages, can only be compared, for example, to the place of Milton, Bunyan or even the King James Bible in pre-twentieth century Anglo-Saxon culture. ‘Attâr’s primary aim, in this and all his other writings, was to bring the spiritual teachings and insights of the Quran and hadîth (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), as they had been understood by earlier generations of saints and Sufis, vividly alive for the majority of his compatriots unfamiliar with the learned Arabic forms of those traditions. As with the other monuments of Persian mystical literature, such as the poetry of Hâfêz or Rûmî, the very success of ‘Attâr’s effort makes it almost impossible for the modern translator to do equal justice to (a) the universality of the author’s ideas and intentions; (b) the poetic qualities and general readability of the original; and (c) the complex web of historical allusions, including scriptural themes and symbols, common Islamic practices and assumptions, specifically Sufi terminology and activities, and local social customs and attitudes, that is almost always presupposed. (In fact, virtually every story is meant to paraphrase or illuminate specific Quranic themes or canonical sayings attributed to Muhammad, and ‘Attâr’s treatment often presupposes many earlier literary or practical Sufi applications of those scriptural sources.) So it is a measure of the remarkable success of Darbandi and Davis’ masterly translation on the first two scores—and of the true universality of ‘Attâr’s artistry—that the uninitiated student can still read through *The Conference of the Birds* with both enjoyment and edification, without referring to explanatory notes or any further Islamic background.

The central—indeed the unique—subject of ‘Attâr’s poem is the intimate relation of God and the human soul, a relation that he describes most often in terms of the mystery or “secret” of divine Love. The actual Arabic words of his title, *Mantiq al-Tayr* (“the *language* of the birds”), refer in the Qur’an (27:17) to Solomon’s God-given ability to understand that secret as it is revealed in the inner states of all ensouled beings. Starting from the same Quranic chapter, ‘Attâr takes Solomon (and the

many other monarchs in his poem) to represent God, the hoopoe (and various messengers or ministers) to represent the prophets and other spiritual guides and intermediaries, and the birds to typify all the manifold human spiritual states and attitudes. For the love that concerns him throughout this work is not simply a particular human emotion, or even the deeper goal of all human striving, but rather the ultimate Ground of all existence: the birds’/soul’s pilgrimage itself turns out to be the unending self-discovery of that creative Love. Thus the entire poem is in fact an extended commentary on the famous divine saying “I (God) was a hidden treasure, and I *loved* to be known, so I created the world that I might be known”—and on another, even more celebrated hadith restating that reality from the human point of view: “Whoever knows his soul/self, knows his Lord.”

The poem as a whole moves from the outward statement to the full inner realization of that Love, to the true, ever-recurrent revelation. It begins with a dense summary of the underlying metaphysical doctrine and its Islamic symbols; proceeds through the more familiar manifestations of that reality in the universal human experiences of “separation”, of absence, longing, suffering and incompleteness; and gradually ascends through that awareness to the highest spiritual states of union and rapture. ‘Attâr’s long Introduction, woven together from key scriptural passages, echoes the Quranic insistence on God’s paradoxical transcendence *and* immanence, and on Adam’s theomorphic reality (and responsibility) as the divine vice-regent, the unique “talisman” through which that mystery becomes known. Its omission in this translation certainly does increase the dramatic power of his narrative for modern readers unfamiliar with (or even initially allergic to) his religious presuppositions, inasmuch as it creates heightened suspense about the goal of the birds’ pilgrimage and the nature of the divine *Sîmorgh* that is largely missing in the original. But the dramatic weight in the original poem is more evenly distributed over the individual episodes and the spiritual lessons potentially contained in each story, which each reader must re-discover for himself.

For the stage of ‘Attâr’s drama is not the outer world of history or of nature (as in many of Rumi’s ecstatic lyrics), but the human Heart—echoing the celebrated hadith identifying the heart of the person of faith as “the throne of the Merciful” which “encompasses” God, or mirrors Him. His birds are not “out there”; they are not just so many social or psychological types, but rather a sort of catalogue of all possible spiritual states, mirroring each individual’s own outlook and condition. The reader objectifies them at his own risk. That is even more true of the figures (messengers, ministers, the hoopoe, etc.) ‘Attâr uses to symbolize the spiritual mediation of the prophets, angels, saints and other

guides: his constant shifting of those symbols eventually forces the reader to see that their reality can likewise only be truly perceived in light of their divine Source—again as mirrored in one’s own soul and personal experience. The drama ‘Attâr celebrates is always within: his central protagonists are not so visibly God and man—although ultimately that is always the case—but rather the inner tension within each person between the uncreated Spirit (*rûh*), the vehicle of divine Grace, and the endless illusions perpetrated by the carnal soul, the egocentric “self commanding evil” (*nafs-i ammâra*, translated as “the Self” throughout in this translation).

‘Attâr’s drama—like its archetype in the Quranic account of Adam’s creation and temptation—is a story of loss and rediscovery. As in the Quran (or the Bible), that story is recounted and meant to be reenacted from two complementary—and practically inseparable—perspectives: the individual’s own efforts (of worship, ethical purification, and spiritual awareness and realization); and God’s grace, compassion and guidance. And here one crucial caution is in order, at least for modern readers, concerning ‘Attâr’s *rhetoric*, a warning that should not have been necessary for his original audience. His poetic language in this and other works involves a rhetoric of extremes, of hyperbole, violence, and almost Kierkegaardian paradox or contradiction designed to awaken each reader’s personal awareness of God’s grace and living presence, beyond the routine social observance of “religious” forms which was probably the norm in his own society (and the even wider tendency to separate and reify “God”). Clearly, such renewed spiritual awareness was only intended as a first step toward the types of appropriate effort and activity that are alluded to throughout the spiritual progression depicted in the later parts of the poem. Since *The Conference of the Birds* is the sort of universal spiritual guide whose deeper meanings only become clear over time, through the course of each reader’s life and particular spiritual itinerary, it is important to keep in mind that its apparently “antinomian” and “superhuman” counsels were not always meant to be taken literally. Those typical rhetorical features of ‘Attâr’s own poetic language become clearer if one compares this work with his equally famous stories of the earliest Sufi masters, in Arberry’s translation of selected passages from his *Tadhkirat al-Awliyâ’* (*Muslim Saints and Mystics*, RKP, repr. 1979).

* *

The structure of ‘Attâr’s poem resembles a spiraling ascension around a central core. That core, with which he begins and ends, and to which he constantly returns, is the ineffable “mystery” or “secret” of God’s presence within each human being—a mystery which cannot really be told (despite all the

scriptural symbols and the poet's own recurrent attempts), but only lived and directly realized—as ‘Attâr stresses in his own concluding remarks (p. 229). The stories and symbols referring to this reality typically involve the paired figures of a ruler (prophet, etc.) and his subject (son, slave, etc.), and often a more enigmatic connecting figure representing the Spirit, or the various manifestations or “emissaries” of God's Grace: if the identification of one of these persons as “God” and the other as the “soul” is often obvious in the earlier passages, by the end of the birds' journey ‘Attâr has made it almost impossible to say which is which.

The gradual approach to that inner secret—which is of course only subjectively a voyage, since ‘Attâr constantly reminds his reader that our momentary feelings of God's “absence” are like a child's stubbornly closing his eyes to the sun's light—focuses on all the temptations and manifestations of the carnal Self (*nafs*), and on the activities and spiritual virtues needed to overcome that opponent. Both those aspects of the Way of perfection are depicted and analyzed at increasingly subtle and profound spiritual stages, beginning with obvious ethical and social allegories, but moving inward until in the final section their portrayal is often inseparable from the central spiritual realization itself. That dramatic structure can be outlined as follows, with ‘Attâr's puzzling reminders of the divine Mystery in the alphabetized paragraphs and the more accessible stages of spiritual progression in the numbered ones (Roman numerals):

A. *Scriptural Introduction* (omitted here): The omnipresence (and paradoxical “invisibility”) of God, and the human spirit/soul as the secret key to that mystery.

- I. Dramatic introduction (pp. 29-35): The “Simorgh's feather” of God's Love in each heart, and the need to overcome the carnal “Self” (*nafs*)—through God's Grace—in order to rediscover Him.
- II. The Birds' Excuses (pp. 35-51): The shortsightedness of our ordinary loves and attachments, the suffering and fears that flow from them, and the first step towards enlightenment: disciplining the Self.

B. *The Mystery of God and the human soul* (pp. 52-56): Human beings as the Sîmorgh's “shadows” (and veils); God's mirror in the Heart; the secret gateway of repentance and forgiveness.

III. Shaykh Sam‘ân (pp. 57-75): The transforming direct experience of God’s Love as the indispensable starting point on the Path; true surrender to His will—beyond outward piety and religious learning—as the corresponding attitude and goal.

C. *The Mystery of Grace and prayer* (pp. 76-82): Tales of providential transformation (the hoopoe’s “lot”; Bayazid’s “luck”; Solomon’s glance...), and humanity’s one duty: “Pray always”. The saving intercession of the prophets and saints, and three key stories on the central mystery of religious practice and divine compassion (the king and the fisherboy; the king and the old wood gatherer; the murderer redeemed by the glance of a true saint).

IV. The birds’ fears, and the proper response (pp. 83-124): ‘Attâr begins to explore deeper signs of attachment to the Self and the corresponding spiritual virtues (as distinguished from the more conventional ethical and social ones): repentance, renunciation, praise, devotion and surrender to God.

D. *The Mystery of loving submission* (pp. 125-128): true obedience and submission—to God, and to one’s spiritual master—as the condition for receiving divine guidance. It is no accident that this point, where the conscious awareness of the Way and the personal commitment to follow it come into play, is also where ‘Attâr necessarily begins to leave some readers behind. From now on the birds’ questions (and their master’s replies) refer less and less to outward, familiar attitudes and experiences, and increasingly deal with deeper spiritual temptations and discoveries.

V. The basic virtues of the Way (pp. 128-166): purity of intention, spiritual aspiration, and justice and loyalty (perseverance); the recurrent pitfalls of pride and self-satisfaction. This section (on “true dignity and servitude” in the spiritual path) deals entirely with what Islamic mystics called *adab*: the spiritually appropriate behavior and attitude of the disciple towards both God and his master, something which cannot be defined by outward, formal rules.

E. *Recapitulation*—the Seven Valleys of the Way (pp. 166-213): Here, as ‘Attâr artfully summarizes the wisdom of generations of earlier Sufis, each

“station” is in itself a window on the goal. The particular stages mentioned here (of spiritual Quest, Love, Insight, Detachment, Union, Bewilderment, and Poverty) should not be taken as a rigid or standard schema, either with regard to their order or their number. ‘Attâr’s Sufi predecessors (and later imitators) used the same terms to refer to other spiritual stations, or ranked them differently, often adding dozens of other stages, depending on their own context and intentions. But what is typical here—and perhaps even autobiographical—is not so much the specific order of these stages as it is ‘Attâr’s persistent emphasis on the revelatory, purifying value of suffering, and on the necessary painful emptying of one’s self (spiritual “nothingness”) in order for God’s will to be done.

F. *Journey’s End* (pp. 214-229): The decisive point here is not the “thirty birds”“ silent contemplation of the Simorgh’s image in their soul, since that mystery has already been mentioned dozens of times. Rather it is what happens afterwards (pp. 220 until the end), when “their Selves had been restored”: the further, endless journey *within* God symbolized here in Hallaj’s exemplary martyrdom and the last, bewildering story of temptation, redemptive suffering and self-sacrifice. Quite intentionally, that tale is a koan, an insoluble allegory whose only “interpretation” is transformation.

* * *

We began by emphasizing the explicitly popular and universal intentions of ‘Attâr’s poem. The “divine comedy” of his birds, especially as they set out on their journey, mixes the romantic, the tragic and the ridiculous aspects of everyday life in ways often more reminiscent of Woody Allen than of Dante—although, like Dante, it also points insistently to the ultimate context, the potentially transforming reality underlying those same experiences. What ‘Attâr asks of his reader to begin with, though, is not any particular religious belief or piety (his favorite targets!), but simply a willingness to look. More and more deeply. His poem, like Dante’s, is a marvelous portrayal of his own, now far-away world, but his subject is the deeper world that never changes. It succeeds to the extent that it can create a mirror for each reader’s own life, here and now.

Bibliographic Note

References throughout this chapter are to the translation by A. Darbandi and D. Davis, *The Conference of the Birds*, London (Penguin Classics), 1984. An earlier English prose version (by C.S. Nott, based on the 19th-century French translation by G. DeTassy), Berkeley, 1971, is quite readable, but generally less accurate and complete, although it does briefly summarize (pp. 3-7) the opening 615 lines omitted in the newer translation. The translation of 'Attâr's *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'*, (tr. A. J. Arberry, London, 1966) contains an illuminating account of his motives for writing in Persian, and is also a fascinating introduction to earlier Sufi tradition. A more detailed historical study of 'Attâr's specifically Islamic background can be found in Helmut Ritter's classic study, *Das Meer der Seele: Gott, Welt und Mensch in den Geschichten Fariduddin 'Attars*, Leiden, Brill, 1955 (now available in complete English translation, also with Brill). Since the initial publication of this introductory essay, Prof. Peter Avery has published a complete and more carefully literal English version of the *Mantiq-i Tayr* (*The Speech of the Birds*, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998), which is extremely useful for study purposes, with extended notes (paralleling Ritter) on Qur'an and hadith allusions and other sources embedded in the poem; equally important, it includes the long and theologically central Introduction omitted in the Darbandi/Davis version. Unfortunately, this version is not nearly as easily readable or effective in most undergraduate classroom situations as the earlier Davis/Darbandi translation.

Chapter Twelve

THE “ASCENSION OF THE WORD”:
RHETORIC AND READER ENGAGEMENT IN RŪMĪ’S *MATHNAWĪ*

The title of this essay³³³ is taken from a remarkably evocative expression, *mi‘rāj al-kalīma*, that Prof. Su‘ad al-Hakim once applied to describe Ibn ‘Arabī’s creative reworking of so many resources of classical Qur’ānic Arabic in his lifelong effort to awaken and to communicate all the phenomenological subtleties of our deepest spiritual experience. That richly allusive Arabic phrase directly conveys both the transformative “ascension” of the artistic word from its mundane origins to the highest dimensions of meaning; and correspondingly, the spiralling ascension of each active reader’s soul and intellect through that inspired poetic speech. Like Ibn ‘Arabī’s inimitable Arabic writing, and at virtually the same point in history, Rūmī’s incomparable Persian poetry brought to life an equally rich and effective transmutation of its Qur’ānic inspiration into the already well-established genre of the epic *mathnawī*.³³⁴ In his immense *Spiritual Mathnawī*, in particular, Rūmī’s ongoing fascination with the creative “Word”³³⁵ is specially highlighted by four memorable invocations of that key term already in his opening Song of the Reed (lines 1-35).

The purpose of this introductory study, focusing on those celebrated opening verses of Rūmī’s epic, is strictly pedagogical: to help Western students initially encountering his work (and therefore relying solely on translations) to become familiar with the characteristic set of rhetorical forms that the

³³³ [Renumber all internal footnote ref’s!!] A shorter version of this essay was originally presented at the International Rūmī Symposium sponsored by the Rūmī Institute (NEU, Cyprus) at the Mevlevi museum and shrine in Konya, during Rūmī’s annual ‘*urs*’ celebration in December 2007, as part of the international UNESCO commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the poet’s birth.

³³⁴ See the further discussion of some of those distinctive rhetorical features of the Qur’an that are creatively adapted in the *Masnawi* in the separate Appendix at the end of this essay.

³³⁵ Note the recurrence of the Persian *sukhan* (echoing the constantly repeated Qur’ānic references to the divine *kalima*, *kitāb*, *qawl*, etc.) and *zabān*, in verses 14, 18, 28 and 33 below, together with the corresponding centrality of active human spiritual “listening” (echoing the Arabic *samā’*) opening and closing this poem, at verses 1 and 35 (and 29).

poet carefully adapted—often with clear Qur’ānic inspiration—throughout his *Spiritual Mathnawī*. Here at its very beginning, as throughout the remainder of this immense poem, all those artistic features come together to serve first of all as an effective mirror of each reader’s particular states of soul, spirit and mind. At the same time, though, these striking rhetorical elements work together as a mysteriously *active* “spiritual mirror”—or polyphonic musical composition—that progressively brings about and reflects deepening levels of each reader’s participation and expanding insight.

At the very least, helping students of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* in translation to become aware of the foundational, unifying role of these rhetorical features should overcome one widespread popular misconception that this poem is somehow simply another didactic compendium of traditional Sufī, ethical and theological teachings.³³⁶ In fact, one has only to compare Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, from the very start, with its earlier Sufī prototypes by ‘Attār and Sanā’ī, to realize just how misleading that common interpretive approach to the *Mathnawī* is.

The recurrent problems that one encounters in attempting to teach and communicate the meanings of the *Mathnawī*—just as with the Qur’ān—are rooted in this poem’s constant interplay between initially unfamiliar metaphysical assumptions³³⁷ and subtle poetic and dramatic structures intended to elicit each reader’s illuminating experience of the realities and perspectives in question. With either text, translators and interpreters quickly discover that attempts at systematic explanation (both theological and philosophical) of that underlying web of metaphysical symbolism and corresponding practical prescriptions quickly lead to elaborate commentaries that can only too easily submerge the original text. On the other hand, translation alone, without a constant reminder of that

³³⁶ Readers limited to English sources can discover something (albeit in fragmented form) of later Islamic commentary traditions by following Nicholson’s extensive commentary volumes accompanying his translation and edition of the *Mathnawī*.

³³⁷ This problem is quite similar to the challenges encountered in trying to convey to modern audiences the now-unfamiliar philosophical and theological conceptions embedded by Rūmī’s near-contemporary Dante (d. 1321) throughout the Purgatory and Paradise sections of the *Divine Comedy*. In the case of the *Mathnawī* itself, this ongoing difficulty helps to explain the widespread and long-lasting use of ideas associated with Ibn ‘Arabī to interpret the *Mathnawī*, beginning soon after Mevlana’s passing: that is precisely because the Akbari philosophical, theological and practical spiritual tradition is likewise so profoundly rooted in close attention to the distinctive language of both the Qur’ān and hadith.

original underlying framework of active individual realization,³³⁸ necessarily keeps readers at a relatively superficial distance from what can then tend to appear as a disparate, fragmentary, even apparently random string of stories, parables, exhortations to virtuous action, wisdom sayings, didactic monologues, vivid eschatological reminders, and ecstatic utterances. As we have explained more fully in several related hermeneutical studies,³³⁹ these initial difficulties of appreciation quickly begin to disappear once students are sufficiently able to appreciate the close analogy between these characteristic Islamic literary structures and the roles of different instruments, voices, timbres, keys, themes and orchestration in musical composition; or with the corresponding functions of dramatic parts (including the chorus), characters, and stage directions in Western theatrical traditions. Such pertinent artistic parallels do highlight the degree of active individual participation and sustained study, practice and contemplation required to appreciate fully the *Mathnawī* (or its sacred exemplar), even after readers have assimilated the initial scaffolding provided by carefully accurate translation and an adequate commentary.

By carefully interweaving a number of key unifying rhetorical and structural procedures throughout his opening “Song of the Reed,” Rūmī highlights and introduces for his readers a number of pivotal literary features and interpretive considerations—already somewhat familiar, of course, to his original literate audience—which are indispensable for the active reading and study of all six Books of the *Mathnawī*. The remaining sections of this study are designed to familiarize beginning students with Rūmī’s elaborate interweaving of those literary devices and hermeneutical considerations by carefully “scanning” through these celebrated opening lines—while constantly referring to the literal, annotated English version provided at the end of this essay—from four successive perspectives. We begin with the

³³⁸ See Section IV below for a fuller discussion of this key unifying dimension of intellectual and spiritual “realization” (*tahqīq*)

³³⁹ See *Transfiguring Love: Perspective Shifts and Contextualization of Experience in Hāfiz’s Ghazals*, pp. 227-350 in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love In Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. L. Lewisohn, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2010); *Encountering the Qur’ān: Contexts and Approaches*, pp. 55-96 in *Voices of Islamic Tradition, vol. I: Voices of Tradition*, ed. V. J. Cornell, (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2007); and *From Allusion to Insight and Right Action: Political Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Hermeneutics of Spiritual Realisation*, pp. 41-83 in *Symbolisme et Hermeneutique dans la pensée de Ibn ‘Arabi* (Actes du Colloque), ed. Bakri Aladdin, (Damascus, Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2007).

basic structural indications provided by Rūmī's ambiguous use of different speaking voices, audiences, tonalities and resulting perspectives. Next we move through the unfolding inner drama and practical spiritual challenges that the succession of those contrasting perspectives poses for each reader. Then a third level of consideration—integrating reading, reflection, and potentially illuminated understanding—is posed by the contrasting chiasmic juxtaposition of each of the poem's eight paired and contrasting sections. The fourth and final element in this richly layered drama of experience and interpretation—and in each reader's own process of realization—is provided by Rūmī's introduction of the key thematic and existential touchstones that he goes on to develop throughout the following six Books.

I. SHIFTING VOICES AND EMERGING STRUCTURE IN THE “SONG OF THE REED”:

To begin with, the grammatical “voices” and corresponding “audiences” of each of the opening speakers here (highlighted in boldface type in the appended literal translation) provide an initial indication of the basic constitutive sections of the Song of the Reed. Thus these sudden perspective shifts in speaker, tone, and audience closely correspond to the explicit Persian prose division headings that Rūmī has carefully provided to mark out the constituent sections of the twelve story-cycles dividing each Book throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*.³⁴⁰

Line 1: Unusually, in comparison with the rest of this Song, the opening speaker here is unknown and vaguely indeterminate (much like the similarly indeterminate Speaker of so much of the Qur'ān), while the emphatically singular imperative makes it very clear that this poignant demand is addressed to each *individual* reader and listener. Equally uncertain is the tone with which this command is actually spoken and the nature of the open-ended “recounting” involved, which are open to many different interpretive possibilities—as students can readily confirm simply by acting out this line. More importantly, the key opening verb here—pointedly repeated in the final verse 35—recalls both the central human practices of prayer and the (often musical) liturgical collective remembrance of God

³⁴⁰ See the seminal study by Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi, *Rūmī's Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2009).

(*samāʿ*, literally “listening”). While on a metaphysical plane, it evokes the primordial instance of each soul’s “listening” and heart-response to God’s Call.³⁴¹

Against that well-known metaphysical backdrop—familiar to anyone in Rūmī’s original audience, and carrying over repeatedly throughout the entire *Mathnawī*³⁴²—it is important to keep in mind here the primacy of the poetic image (and implicit experiences) of the living “reed,” as well as the related musical associations with the reed-flute (*nayy*, in both cases). For this initial evocation of the green, well-watered bed of reeds soothingly caressed by the spirit-wind (a quintessential image of the paradisiac “Gardens” of the Qur’ān) suggests by contrast the traumatic rending (by an unnamed, but apparently external force), death, fragile drying, and multiple piercings that are needed to create the reed-flute, as well as providing the unforgettable occasion for the reed’s opening complaint. The other foundational Qur’ānic allusion underlying the image of the reed-flute here is the mystery of the reed’s true Player or Musician—the latter role again being a familiar poetic symbol of the Divine’s relationship to creation and to humanity in particular, building on the Qur’ān’s elaborate metaphysical symbolism of divine Speech and Writing. Finally, this opening imagery of the apparently empty reed of course echoes the multiple Qur’ānic accounts of the two-fold creation of Adam, the archetypal human being: first, as a visibly empty, fragile mortal tube of “stinking mud” or “clay” (15:26, etc.); but also as the theomorphic being whose spiritual potential and animating essence—and corresponding earthly task and responsibility—flows from the transformative inbreathing of the divine Life-Breath and Spirit (*rūh/jān*).

³⁴¹ Recounted in the well-known Qur’anic account at 7:172 of the primordial covenant and inner “witnessing” of all the human spirits (before their earthly manifestation) to the presence of their divine Lord and Sustainer, where God brings forth the spirits of all the descendants of Adam *and had them witness of the themselves, (saying) “Am I not your Lord/Sustainer?” (alastu bi rabbikum). And they said: “Yes indeed! We have testified.”* This famous allusion to the original unity, divine awareness, and pre-existence of the human spirits was a standard metaphysical concept already elaborately developed by earlier Persian poets in a wide range of erotic love-imagery (“last night,” etc.) familiar to Rūmī’s readers.

³⁴² Here we should also mention the implicit, complementary spiritual and metaphysical emphasis involved in Rūmī’s common pen-name (or concluding exhortation), in many of his lyrical ghazals, as *khamūsh*: “Be quiet!” or “Shut up!”—that is, so that we can actually begin to listen and appreciate the Concert of the infinite divine Signs within and around us.

Lines 2-7: The following six lines include *eleven* pointedly repeated uses of the first-person singular (*I*, *me*, and five times the possessive *my*), vividly highlighting the lonely, obsessively self-pitying and blinding egoism of the isolated reed that initially remains unaware of its deeper purpose and divine connections. As is only befitting for this self-centered litany of traumatic separations, these verses are essentially a soliloquy, with no apparent or worthy audience—since the reed here bitterly thinks that even its would-be “friends” (verse 6) only spuriously imagine that they know its innermost secrets. In the concluding line of this soliloquy, though, Rūmī introduces his readers to one of his own most common rhetorical secrets, which he follows throughout the rest of this opening Song and indeed the entire *Mathnawī*: that is, his use of the final line of each section, discourse or story as a kind of revealing enjambment or prefiguration of the central theme of the following section—here, in his first allusion to the illuminating divine “Light” of Love.

Lines 8-15: In the following lines—an intense, almost angry retort to this reed-flute’s initially plaintive and self-pitying complaint—a very knowing, but still distanced and objective narrative voice reminds Rūmī’s readers/listeners of the true reality and purpose of the reed and all its sufferings, and of the shared “Path” (lines 6, 8) and healing companionship and guidance that only emerges through the proper appreciation of its song. Whether one imagines this objective, sometimes almost didactic narrator to also be in some way the personal voice of Rūmī himself, this specific narrative voice of wisdom returns at key points throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*. (Indeed the most proverbial and best known individual wisdom-verses of this epic are usually expressed by this memorable summational voice.) But this first reflective and wise narrative voice is also strikingly different from the even more emotionally present and personal voice (i.e., one openly engaged with either Husamuddin or Shams himself), often prayerful or ecstatically rhapsodic, that suddenly intervenes here at line 16. And again, that same unmistakably ecstatic and irrepressible personal voice, often alluding to or recalling the ongoing presence of the true Shams/divine “Sun,” frequently reappears in the central hinge-sections of each larger story-cycle or discourse throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*.

As for the narrator’s relation to the audience of this section, its central and concluding verses (lines 11 and 15)—in keeping with Rūmī’s basic themes at this point of divine Love and God’s transforming, guiding Friendship (*walāya*)—suddenly and mysteriously shift to speaking of “us”, although that nascent inter-connection is here still specifically based on our all too palpable human

sharing in those common painful “veils” and “grieving” (the tell-tale causes and signs of separation and suffering) which were the defining characteristics of the lonely, isolated reed in the preceding section.

*Lines 16-18:*³⁴³ If the two preceding sections witness an almost hidden inner movement from the poem’s audience as a singular (and inherently separate) “you” to a nascent “we” sharing at least a common human experience of suffering (“veils”) and nostalgic grieving (verse 18), line 16 suddenly introduces yet another, even more personal and challenging Voice. Curiously, the first half of this climactic verse seems to be responding—curtly and abruptly in yet another singular imperative, like the monitory voice of a spiritual master—in salutary practical response to the renewed, self-pitying complaint shared by these newly assembled fellow travelers on this as yet undefined Path. Yet the second half of this same heartfelt verse—with its resonant Buberian “*Thou*”—takes on a sharply different tone and audience, addressing an intensely fervent prayer to a “You” that can only be divine. This “You” may be God’s momentarily more personalized human mirror and theophany in the person of Shams (or even the formal addressee of the *Mathnawī*, Husamuddin); or each reader’s own personal divine-human Friend and Guide (*yār*, *dūst*, *walī*). This memorable and powerfully autobiographical voice will quickly become familiar to each reader who progresses on through the *Mathnawī*.

Yet the remaining two lines of this central section just as suddenly move back from the full intensity of this unforgettable Encounter to a moving personal reflection on the peculiarly rending loneliness and difficulties of communication that still await us whenever we fall away from that transforming unitive Relationship—a kind of paradoxically inverted version of the more familiar sorts of painful separation and isolation with which this poem began. But this now calmly knowing reflection—as we can see and feel in the implicitly imperative, yet still longing and hopeful “Good-bye!” (*wa-s-salām*) at the end of end of the central verse 18—is definitely intended to challenge each reader at a far deeper and more decisive level than the opening “Listen!” Since each of us has some embedded memory of those unforgettable “I-Thou” moments of Reunion (if only in the primordial, forgotten “reed-garden”) and some premonition of the soul’s ultimate Destination (*rūzigār*, at line 4), Rūmī lovingly reminds each reader at this climactic point that we must take those rare, unforgettable ecstatic

³⁴³ Or lines 16-17, with line 18 then standing separately as the midpoint and chiasmic hinge of the entire opening Song, marking the singular moment of each reader’s necessary and decisive choosing (see Section II below).

moments of *non*-separation as promises and prefigurations, rather than as the occasions for further disappointment and alienating complaint.

Lines 19-22: The import of these equally central lines, which in many ways inaugurate an entirely new poem, is pointedly underlined by the opening half-line's allusive resonance ("O son") with a distinctively intimate, affectionate Qur'ānic phrase that is repeatedly used there only to evoke the transforming relationship of trust, guidance and support between a divine messenger or prophet and his son or potential disciple.³⁴⁴ The *singular* "you" and "son" addressed here—four times in the first two lines—take the form of an intentional and unmistakable challenge whose demanding practical preconditions, through the necessary purification of the lower, ego-self, are boldly enunciated in the following two verses.

Lines 23-26: At first, it appears that in these verses the same deeply personal voice of Rūmī (from the two short preceding sections) has simply returned to the intensely prayerful, worshipful mode of lines 16-18, only addressing God this time as "Love", as the divine Physician-Sage (*Hakīm*, a key divine Name) who can cure both soul (Plato) and body (Galen)—an unmistakable allusion to the central transformational mystery of the following longer story of the King and his maidservant. But what has in fact profoundly changed in this section is that this voice is no longer speaking in the singular, but now as or on behalf of a transformed, newly appearing "*We*" (three times in lines 23-24) that is apparently constituted by the communion of all devoted lovers—as this voice then goes on to make explicit in the revealingly intimate aside at line 26 (its slyly complicit "O lover"). In other words, this section suddenly presumes that the wavering, tentative "you" addressed in the preceding sections has now effectively joined in this Path of love and communion: thereby overcoming, as the archetypal divine theophanies of Muhammad and Moses make clear (lines 25-26), all the initially daunting, apparently even impossible metaphysical oppositions initially raised in verses 7-8.

Lines 27-34: These renowned concluding verses together constitute an almost unbearably poignant, openly autobiographical evocation of Rūmī's transforming encounter with Shams of Tabriz.

³⁴⁴ *Yā bunayya*, "O my dear little son": 11:42 (spoken by Noah); 12:5 (Jacob); 31:13-17 (Luqman); 37:102 (Abraham). The dramatically differing reactions of those addressed in each of these scriptural passages are also instructive concerning the fundamental spiritual choice that Rūmī is offering or suggesting here.

Paradoxically, they are also a first-person testimony, like the parallel opening “complaint” of the reed (verses 2-7), though here in a markedly different, metaphysically reversed key and tonality. The “I” that is speaking so tenderly and longingly—but also knowingly—to its Beloved here (“I” and “my” seven times in lines 27 and 32) is one of the deepest gratitude and acknowledgement of Grace, not of complaint and loss. And the poet’s ecstatic thanks here are punctuated and heightened not by any regrets, but by his compassionate sharing and concern for each of his fellow human companions (the intimately singular “you” of verses 29 and 34). As line 31 makes clear, this actively shared and effective human gift of Compassion (that divinely creative Lovingmercy, *rahma*, which is a uniquely all-encompassing divine Name in the Qur’ān)³⁴⁵ becomes manifest as the actualized Aim of the first reed’s apparent separations and the deepest answer to its serial complaints, as the true and mysteriously present formative “reed-bed” and promised Garden. Carefully echoing and amplifying the foundational divine saying of the Hidden Treasure³⁴⁶ so familiar to all readers of Rūmī’s own time and circle, this richly allusive concluding section responds to each of the reed’s initial complaints through its unfolding evocation of our shared human state—precisely in and through its familiar alternation and inner conjunction of loneliness and communion, isolation and reunion—as the sign, fruit, and ongoing seedbed for the Beloved’s breath-song.³⁴⁷

Line 35: While the opening *plural* imperative of this final verse explicitly echoes the singular “listen!” of the poem’s first line, everything that has transpired in the intervening verses is reflected in this profound grammatical shift from the soliloquy of the isolated ego to the transformed “We” and

³⁴⁵ As in the well-known verse 17:110: *Call upon God or call upon the All-Compassionate (al-Rahmān). Whichever you call upon, His are the Most-Beautiful Names.*

³⁴⁶ In this highly influential divine saying, God says: “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the creatures/human beings so that I might be known.” Throughout the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī continues to move back and forth between these two equally indispensable facets of the key Arabic term *al-khalq* here, as both that which is known (all the creatures), and that which alone fully knows and mirrors that creation (the theomorphic, fully realized human, *insān*).

³⁴⁷ In content and majesty of tone alike, these concluding verses are palpably echoed in the famous final lines of *Faust II*—not surprisingly, given Goethe’s fascination with these earlier Persian poetic classics.

loving communion of all the poet's "beloved friends."³⁴⁸ The same spiritual alchemy is likewise reflected in this poem's gradual transition from the prosaic, egoistically distorted, initially painful "recounting" (*hikāya*: mimesis) of each life's sorrows to the transforming symphony of the divinely inspired "revelatory story."³⁴⁹ The same reed, but a very different Player.

II. FROM SOLITUDE TO COMMUNION: DRAMA AND READER ENGAGEMENT

The carefully orchestrated chiasmic structures of each of the constitutive story-cycles in the *Mathnawī*—like their parallels and probable models in many Suras of the Qur'ān—mean that the successive internal sections of each story-cycle were intended to be read, experienced and studied in two very different ways.³⁵⁰ To begin with, reading a story or longer passage "straight through," as we normally expect to do, naturally awakens our life-like sense of intrinsic drama. That immediate sense of participation includes our desiring, willing, and emotionally judging sympathies (or antipathies) towards the different characters and events discovered in the story, together with our reactions to all the various authorial commentators or "voice-overs"—at times ecstatic, philosophical, moralizing, and so on—who are frequently interjected at key points throughout most story-cycles of the *Mathnawī*.

On the other hand, recognizing and then working with the parallelisms or nested correspondences between internal sections that are established by Rūmī's organizing chiasmic structure (illustrated in section III below) necessarily involves a more probingly critical and analytical process of comparison and reflection.³⁵¹ In fact, the alternation of these two rather different modes of engagement

³⁴⁸ *Dūstān*, which is also the core of the common Persian compound verbal expressions for "to love" (*dūst-dāshtan*: literally "to have as friend"). Together, these two Persian expressions carefully mirror the mystic unity of the Love/Lover/Beloved (Arabic *'Ishq/'Āshiq/ Ma'shūq*) celebrated in the concluding lines 27-34.

³⁴⁹ *Dāstān*, echoing the specific Qur'ānic term (*qisas*) for spiritually significant, symbolic or archetypal stories, especially in the description (at 12:3) of Joseph and his brothers as "the most-beautiful-and-best of stories."

³⁵⁰ See the ground-breaking study by S. Weightman and S. G. Safavi cited at n. 7 above.

³⁵¹ Initially, this second-order element of reflective understanding and derived wisdom might naturally seem more superficial or external than the linear dramatic sequence of outer events and storytelling. But

with the text (whether of the Qur’ān or *Mathnawī*) closely mirrors the familiar processes of everyday spiritual life, in which we are constantly engaged in what we perceive as “just experience.” Yet that relatively unreflective practical engagement in life’s immediate challenges proceeds simultaneously with the intricate inner processes (involving retrieval of related memories, analysis, projection, imagination, relevant levels of intuition and perception, judgment, inspiration, and so on) by which we gradually distill the deeper meanings underlying the ongoing flow of outer happenings and inner experience. In the cultural context of Rūmī’s original readership, of course, these multiple dimensions of reflective spiritual engagement and interrogation were already particularly encouraged through the supportive contemplative framework of the many required and supererogatory daily prayers, fasting, vigil, and the more focused “remembrance” (*dhikr*) disciplines of the Sufi Path (*ṭarīq*).

To begin with the reader’s linear, dramatic relationship to the different consecutive voices and perspectives of the Song of the Reed, it is apparent that this initial encounter with Rūmī’s poem already confronts each reader with at least seven or eight different perspectives on the meaning and proper direction of life and our awareness of the full dimensions of divine Love—and of our corresponding choices at each of these critical turns.³⁵² As with Plato’s richly comparable *Symposium*, it is possible to read through these challenges simply as a desired or ideal progression. In that case the result is an overall successive movement corresponding—just as in the archetypal Qur’anic account of Joseph and his brothers—to key stages in the human soul’s spiritual ascension (verses 1-18) and then its subsequent

as the course of life’s stories eventually becomes more repetitive and familiar—as is normal in the course of a lifetime’s “human comedy”—then the inner fruits of observation and reflection become relatively more weighty and significant. In the course of this lifelong process of spiritual reflection on the divine Signs of creation (what the Qur’ān calls *tafakkur*)—and this inner quest for discovering the inspired “original source/meaning of events” (*ta’wīl al-ahādīth*, the particular divine grace bestowed on Joseph, at 12:6) is constantly encouraged and illustrated throughout the Qur’ān—the search for ultimate causality and deeper meaning gradually supersedes youth’s practical preoccupation with proximate conditions, choices, and immediate consequences.

³⁵² It is noteworthy that the following tale of the King and his maidservant apparently includes a similar spectrum of symbolic “case-studies” of very different forms, expressions or dimensions of Love.

compassionate “return” (lines 19-35) to help awaken and enlighten other human seekers and communities.³⁵³

But Rūmī was acutely aware of the pitfalls and delusions inherent in the popularization and resulting premature, purely literary encounter with such idealized spiritual schemas, which were particularly widespread in his ambient poetic culture.³⁵⁴ Hence reading the Song of the Reed at even a few different occasions in life will quickly make it obvious that his concluding observation (l. 35) that this story “is itself the inner reality of our *current* state,”³⁵⁵ means that we will normally find our own self and existential situation differently illuminated and reflected each time we return to the *Mathnawī*. Who or what we currently understand to be the “Reed” (or Love, Light, Friend, Breath, or any of the other key elements of this play) will often appear quite differently after each visitation.

Line 1: To begin with the familiar state of indeterminate observation and relatively external, only superficially participatory or compassionate “listening” evoked in the opening verse, no further commentary is really needed. For it is clear that the mutual “recounting of complaints” and bittersweet revisiting of memorably painful separations (of oneself or of others) is indeed one of the most familiar human pastimes.

Lines 2-7: Suddenly the monotony of this familiar everyday pseudo-listening is broken by the plaintive complaint of this first anonymous reed-flute. If we as readers are not put off by the self-pitying tone and the metaphysical abstraction of its mournful song, and if we are unable to deflect or ignore its implicit demands—for such polished deflection is often our first possible choice and response, one that

³⁵³ See the discussion of these almost identical narrative structures and two-fold organizing “movements” in Chapter 7 above (*Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities*).

³⁵⁴ Especially suggestive of Rūmī’s suspicions in this regard is his powerful juxtaposition, at the very center of the entire *Mathnawī* (end of Book III, overlapping with the start of Book IV), of a long, highly idealized allegory of perfect spiritual love, which is suddenly followed by an ironic and painfully realistic love story focusing on the essential purifying elements of suffering, humiliation, devotion, guidance, patience, and dauntingly difficult spiritual discipline.

³⁵⁵ It appears that this remark applies equally to the preceding Song of the Reed and—even more obviously—to the following richly elaborate tale of the King and his maidservant.

we conveniently apply, almost habitually, in our daily encounters with the familiar or more intrusive expressions of this particular voice of suffering—then we are forced to interact with Rūmī's complaining reed in two other demanding and far-reaching ways. First, we are obliged to identify inwardly and personally with the poignant complaints of this voice of suffering: this response requires empathically identifying the corresponding painful, incomplete dimensions of our own inner life and experience with others. The second, possible response to this part of the reed's song is that our reflection and work of sympathetic identification may extend back into the past, engaging those suffering fellow-reeds we had previously encountered so that we find our focus shifting toward the unsuspected depths of other people's expressions of similar tales of suffering, loss, longing, and disappointment.

In other words, Rūmī here—in addition to offering a painfully revealing autobiographical evocation of his own secretly desperate inner state before his transformative meeting with Shams—is confronting each reader with a moving depiction of that all-encompassing human-divine interaction so beautifully depicted in a well-known divine saying (the “Hadith of the Questioning”) already familiar to his initial audience.³⁵⁶ While those encountering that celebrated hadith initially tend to identify with the unanswered sufferings of the multitude of unhappily neglected sick, hungry and thirsty souls, even a little further reflection reveals that we always find ourselves simultaneously living in *both* those

³⁵⁶ God says on the Day of the Rising: “O son of Adam, I was sick and you didn't visit Me.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I visit You, and You are Lord of the worlds!?”

God said: “Didn't you know that My servant so-and-so was sick, yet you didn't visit him? Or didn't you know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?”

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, did I not ask you for food, but you refused to feed Me?”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I feed You, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “Now didn't you know that my servant so-and-so asked you for food, but you didn't feed him? And didn't you know that if you had fed him you would have found that with Me?”³⁵⁶

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, I asked you for a drink, but you didn't give Me anything to drink.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I give You a drink, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “My servant so-and-so asked you for a drink, but you didn't give him any. But if you had given him a drink you would have found that with Me.”

quintessential human positions: i.e., both suffering at some level in all those ways, and either responding to or else neglecting that same suffering in others. And the next, deeper stage of reflection—which Rūmī summarizes here in the several alternative, intentionally complementary readings of line 3³⁵⁷—reveals that we are only capable of even perceiving, and then properly responding to, that very real suffering to the degree that we ourselves have previously passed through those same figurative but all too palpable “Fires”. Just where—and how—God comes into that cosmic picture of suffering and compassion is what Rūmī’s entire *Mathnawī* (and the remaining lines 8-35 here) are all about.

Perhaps the most important lesson dramatized in verses 2-7 is the immense gulf separating our merely conceptual, formal “knowing” of these basic spiritual laws from the demanding practical steps (both appropriate actions and heightened sensitivities) that are needed to translate those abstract principles into reality. The basic symbolic metaphysical framework assumed in these opening lines was quite familiar to Rūmī’s original readers. But the very cultural omnipresence of such spiritual principles—the importance of the soul’s deepest longing as our inner compass and source of animating energy; the profound need to know the divine “Friends” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) in all their personal manifestations and influences; the transformative “secrets” of the divine Breath/Spirit and Grace—only serves to intensify our awareness of our apparent helplessness with regard to properly applying them.

³⁵⁷ To begin with, the multi-faceted language here—which has given rise to many commentaries and interpretations, partly reflected in Nicholson’s translation—is an unambiguous allusion to one of the best-known short Suras of the Quran (94:1-8), which begins “*Have we not opened up (unburdened) for you your chest (= heart), and lifted off from you your burden, which was pressing down on your back...?*” But Rūmī’s more ambiguous language here suggests, beyond the intrinsic pain of this “open-heart surgery,” several simultaneous facets of this dilemma of suffering and longing for release: (a) the reed’s hope for its own consolation and release (alluding to the celebrated hadith image of the divine “Breath of the All-Merciful”, *nafas al-Rahmān*, whose grace came to the Prophet at the most difficult and hopeless moment of his mission); (b) the reed’s need for an empathic, deeply understanding and compassionate listener (like all the “Friends” subsequently evoked in this song) who has fully experienced the same loneliness and suffering; and (c) and finally *God’s* own loving “need” for such compassionate and receptive human hearts. This characteristic interplay of suffering, longing and Grace—often openly connected to Rūmī’s own transforming discovery and loss of Shams—is one of the most familiar themes in his celebrated quatrains and ghazals.

Lines 8-15: Dramatically speaking, in terms of the ongoing existential drama (and frustrating practical impasse) introduced in the preceding section, the new narrative voice introduced here—which initially sounds much like a learned, but not very practically helpful guide—seems at first only to intensify and highlight the ongoing helplessness and neediness of this “normal,” complaining reed. The ostensible practical lessons so readily proffered in this section—developing true inner humility (“becoming nothing”); and madly surrendering, like Majnūn, to the transforming passion of overwhelming divine Love—were familiar stereotypes of every Sufi handbook and spiritual poem of Rūmī’s day. But those suggestions are also radical, drastically life-changing steps that seem inherently to defy any voluntary enactment, since they depend on a rare inner burning “Fire”³⁵⁸ of passionate divine Love. Even more problematically, the symptoms and descriptions of that mysterious Love first described here (“poison and cure-all,” “a Path full of blood/suffering,” “crazy,” intoxicating, and so on) are not unambiguously enticing, especially since this divine elixir seems in any case to be dependent (as the allusions to Moses at Sinai and to Muhammad’s heavenly ascension pointedly suggest) on rare and extreme gifts of divine grace reserved only for specially favored prophets and saints.

Against this still unresolved practical backdrop, Rūmī’s narrator here only vaguely alludes, implicitly and in passing, to an as yet undefined “Path” of inner purification and potentially salvific fellowship—partners, intimate friends, revelatory tales and legends, shared prayer and grieving are all quickly mentioned at this point—that might yet offer some life-saving way out of this apparently helpless dilemma. The one new practical choice suggested here, however fragile and uncertain that might at first appear, is the foundational virtue of “spiritual perseverance” (*sabr*), which is the indispensable accompaniment of each of these demanding outward aspects of the Path that are tentatively introduced here.

Lines 16-18: From a dramatic perspective, the intensely personal, ecstatically longing words and voice of this new speaker cannot help but evoke Rūmī’s own equally impassioned lyric evocations of his transforming encounter with Shams of Tabriz—and at least equally important, of his eventual deeper discovery of the Living divine “Sun” behind and through the earthly Shams, following his companion’s

³⁵⁸ The Persian expression used here is equivalent to the Qur’ānic *al-nār* (“The Fire”), which is the most common scriptural description (in both Qur’ān and hadith) for the soul’s experience of estrangement from God’s Love and Compassion.

mysterious disappearance. For this is a personal voice that would already be recognizable to most of his initial readers through its unforgettable expression in much of his immense *Dīvān* of lyrical ghazals and quatrains. And readers of the *Mathnawī* itself will quickly discover that this same impassioned personal, apparently autobiographical lyric voice reappears throughout this epic at any number of key junctures. But where does this climactic new section and unforgettably rhapsodic voice actually leave the engaged reader? What new choice or alternative does it open up—especially for those jaded or sceptically inquisitive readers who may well ask how often most human souls are visited by the grace and rare destiny of meeting *their* own Shams? And how, such readers must surely ask, can we actually become that enlightened, immortal “fish”³⁵⁹ effortlessly swimming through the often terrifying divine Seas? Or how can we voluntarily become the properly mature, receptive and suitably “cooked” mature soul—a painfully explicit image that recalls instead the preceding (and understandably worrying!) images of Love’s destructively purifying “Fire”?

The remainder of the poem begins to articulate Rūmī’s own personal response to these key practical challenges. But verse 18, at the literal midpoint of this opening poem, only repeats and highlights that central choice: either one can stay engaged on this still practically unknown, only intermittently visible Path, seeking (whether out of desperation or fascination) the necessary guidance and companionship to do so. Or else, having so sharply portrayed the attendant risks and challenges of that choice, Rūmī calmly and directly invites his less courageous or still unprepared readers to simply walk away. Indeed his final “and Peace be with you!,” under these circumstances, seems more of a regretfully knowing blessing (or even a promise of eventual discovery), than a critical or angrily dismissive gesture.

Lines 19-22: In terms of practices and formal teaching, the next short section appears to introduce, above all, the variegated practical processes of inner purification and non-attachment which constitute one of the main recurring subjects of the entire *Mathnawī* (as well as essential foundations of

³⁵⁹ The richly complex imagery in lines 17-18 is all connected to the influential symbolic account, at the center of the Sura of the Cave (18:60-82), of Moses’ long search for and eventual discovery—or sudden recognition—of the Water of Life (at “the meeting place of the two Seas” of body and Spirit), when his dried fish is suddenly revived (the central theme of the entire Sura) and joyfully returns to its original Home. See also the related imagery of the oyster and Pearl, at line 21 (n. 39 below).

the institutions later elaborated in the Mevlevi Sufi path). And if the reader does choose to remain with Rūmī and his guidance, then this practical work is indeed the necessary next step.

On the more dramatic, personal level, however, this short central section is marked by two other key developments and implicit choices. First, in suddenly and unexpectedly referring to his still-engaged reader as “my son” (see n. 12 above), Rūmī boldly suggests the practically critical possibility that—much like an outward spiritual guide or master—he (or his transforming “Word,” at verses 18 and 33) may be able to help more directly in liberating the reader from his or her debilitating attachments and veils. This initiatic role of the inspired “Word” of grace also recalls the transforming power of music, already evoked in the underlying reed-flute imagery of this entire poem.

The second dramatic dynamic of this deceptively brief section is to propose Rūmī’s equivalent of a kind of Pascalian wager, a spiritual gambit which is apparently intended to help more timorous readers to overcome any anxieties and outright fears evoked by the poet’s earlier emphasis (at lines 8-15) on the risks and sufferings entailed by the surrender to Love. Adopting a more positive and seductive tone, the poet highlights here the infinite disproportionality of the soul’s gamble on Love, whose rewards and consequences—if they are granted—so palpably outweigh all the other momentary satisfactions and uneasy comforts of the unenlightened life. On an equally positive note, this master-like voice more openly alludes (l. 22) to the crucial motivating role of Love in underpinning all the daunting efforts (and offsetting the apparent risks and sacrifices) that are inherent in the demanding lifelong disciplines of purification. Both of these positive observations apparently lead Rūmī—momentarily neglecting his disciple-readers (or leaving them to ponder these varied and weighty benefits)—back to the rhapsodic “ode to Love” that constitutes verses 23-26.

Lines 23-26: If each of these constitutive sections of the Song of the Reed seems to articulate a particular unifying spiritual virtue, then this short section is visibly devoted to the central Qur’ānic virtues of thankfulness and praise (*hamd, shukr*). This effusive celebration of divine Love is not simply a moving autobiographical expression of Rumi’s own transforming encounter with Shams—though the passionate invocation of similar memories does frequently interrupt every Book of the *Masnavi*. What

is even more important for each reader here is the poet's grammatically telling inclusion³⁶⁰ of *every* lover, whose ecstatic discovery of and by Love unforgettably reveals this archetypal overcoming of the earlier apparent separation (lines 7-8) of soul and body, heaven and earth. As Rumi then reminds us, the Source and full implications of this transforming gift of Love are memorably prefigured in the archetypal theophanic illuminations of Muhammad and Moses (verses 25-26).³⁶¹ And against that backdrop, the unexplained, challengingly intimate personal address of the final line here ("O lover") openly suggests that at least some readers' earlier hesitancies have now been definitively set aside.

Lines 27-34: In a centuries-long poetic tradition particularly devoted to elegantly compressing the greatest number and depth of potential meanings into the briefest possible aesthetic form, the succinct interweaving of musical and erotic imagery in the opening half-line of this section would surely place it among the prize contenders. For each of this verse's alternate understandings suggests a different dramatic perspective and possible conclusion to this song. Since the "intimate Friend" (*damsāz*: literally "Breath-maker" or "Breath-player") so directly evokes the universally animating, life-giving divine Spirit, Who plays out through His fragile human reed the universal drama of Love and creation, Rūmī's image here suggests that we (or rather "We"?) are individually *both* a player and (even more certainly) the specially adapted instrument—and audience—of the divine Concert. Both of those "vertical", metaphysical possibilities seem almost inseparable by this point. Yet both of these possibilities are further concretized and emotionally heightened by their resonance and reflection at the intensely present "horizontal" level of the human *kiss*, with all its endless possible meanings and expressions of love—and through the paradigmatic inseparability of any imagined "subject" and "object" within that archetypal symbol of Love.

³⁶⁰ In the space of only two lines (23-24), Rumi emphatically (albeit mysteriously) speaks three times of "*our*" curing and healing.

³⁶¹ For a more adequate explanation of these complex allusions, from both Qur'ān and hadith, to the Mi'rāj (archetypal spiritual ascension and return) of the prophet Muhammad and to the Qur'ānic account of the theophanies of Moses, see our detailed study of *The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj*, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 107 (1987), pp. 629-652, and vol. 108 (1988), pp. 63-77. (Soon to be available in our forthcoming volume *Ibn 'Arabī and His Interpreters: Contexts and Foundations*.) The significance of Rūmī's allusions here is summed up in the Qur'ānic insistence (at 17:1) that the Prophet's entire journey was "... so that We might cause him to see, among Our Signs."

In the second half-line (of verse 27), that musical-erotic dimension of the “reed” is further extended to an even more inclusive Qur’ānic symbol of God’s supreme cosmic and artistic creativity: the divine (reed-) “Pen” of the universal Intelligence that writes out all the Books of created existence.³⁶² The ironically punning connection here between that divine instrument of all creation and the poet’s own authorial hand no doubt also alludes to Rūmī’s conviction concerning the particular inspired character of this poem, which he had already so boldly emphasized in the famous opening lines of his prose prologue to this first Book of the *Mathnawī*.³⁶³

The rest of this celebrated concluding section dramatically alternates between further classic expressions of this unitive realization of Love, subsuming all individuals and apparent “egos” in the One divine Breath, and a poignant series of potentially still-painful reminders (at verses 28, 29, 31 and 34) of the isolated, passing, discordantly singular “I” of the reed’s earlier soliloquy. But what has changed at this end-point—even for readers still personally caught up in the ruminations of that longing solitude—is Rūmī’s careful metaphysical contextualization of that repeated human experience of suffering, loss and apparent separation within the larger divine framework of Life, Love, Grace, Light and the Word³⁶⁴ which unveils that suffering’s deeper meaning. For by this point, the apparently irredeemable isolation, nostalgic longing and object-less love that filled and fed the first reed’s mourning now turn out to mirror at every stage the very Heart of creation, in this poem’s memorable concluding evocation of the influential Divine Saying: “*I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known; so I created creation/human beings in order that I might be known.*”³⁶⁵

³⁶² Because the pen (*qalam*), in Islamic civilization, was always made from carefully cut and trimmed reeds, Rūmī’s reference here to “my reed” directly recalls not only the reed flute and cosmic Qur’ānic imagery of the divine Speech and Breath/Spirit, but also the close parallelism between his own inspired poetic creation in this *Spiritual Mathnawī*, and the source of earlier divine revelations.

³⁶³ Western readers will be reminded of the parallel role of Prospero’s “books” and “magic” in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*.

³⁶⁴ Lines 30-33 form a successive litany, an almost ritual reminder (*dhikr*) of each of those transforming divine Names.

³⁶⁵ See also the note to the translation below (lines 33-34) briefly explaining the Qur’ānic and hadith references to the “rust” and “polishing” of hearts, as well as the fuller treatment of this theme in chapter

Verse 35: As already suggested, this final verse apparently reverses (or more accurately completes and fulfills) each of the elements of this poem's opening invocation. For "*this story*"—which is both the reed's song just completed, and the more elaborate narrative retelling of that opening story which follows—is a mirror that necessarily includes and illuminates all conceivable stories and attitudes, in language that clearly evokes its Qur'anic inspiration (12:3) in Joseph's "best-and-most-beautiful of tales." *Wherever we happen to turn* and find ourselves, this last verse suggests, *there too is the Face of God* (2:115).

Thus Rumi's tentative, yet boldly inclusive claim in this final opening verse already foreshadows his notoriously problematic ending to the entire *Masnavi*. There (Book VI, verses 4876-4916) he concludes by highlighting the paradoxical comprehensiveness of that mysteriously enlightened "laziness," of our inner surrender to peace (*taslīm*) and faithful perseverance in that surrender (*sabr*, which is also the last word and culminating lesson of Book I)—a spiritual station transcending and incorporating all of life's dramas of love and the soul's quest for knowledge—which paradoxically carries away the ultimate divine Prize at the very end of this vast epic of the soul.

III. CHIASMUS AND REFLECTION: RECONSIDERING THE SOUL'S UNFOLDING DRAMA:

As we already noted (section I above), a preliminary examination based primarily on the shifting voices and perspectives in the Song of the Reed suggests a succession of eight distinct sections (or nine, if we separate out the central hinge-verse 18), with the central subjects of each of the first four sections closely paralleling the final four, only in inverse order (i.e., sections 1 and 8; 2 and 7; 3 and 6; 4 and 5). This linking chiasmic structure, which turns out to be followed (although in increasingly more complex forms) throughout—and apparently also across—each of the six Books of the *Mathnawī*,³⁶⁶ creates a

2 of *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn 'Arabī's 'Meccan Illuminations'* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2005).

³⁶⁶ The recent pioneering study of these organizing structures of Rūmī's *Mathnawī* (n. 8 above) promises a further detailed volume devoted to Book II, while one of its authors (Dr. S. G. Safavi) has since published a series of short articles in the journal *Transcendent Philosophy* (www.iranianstudies.org) demonstrating Rūmī's careful development of the same chiasmic procedure (of 12 "discourses" divided among three successive "blocks" of four) throughout each of the remaining Books of the *Mathnawī*. However, one should hasten to add that the visibly growing complexity of those structures in each successive Book of the *Mathnawī* also illustrates Rūmī's visible resistance to any sort of arbitrary,

remarkably intertwined aesthetic and intellectual structure in which each section in the first half typically raises a problem or issue that is then resolved, transformed or answered in some way by its later, corresponding “parallel” section. The careful adherence to this organizing procedure already throughout the Song of the Reed, albeit in such a simplified and relatively visible form, suggests that this opening poem was meant to provide Rūmī’s readers with something like a master-key to the chiasmic structures developed in the twelve, quite visibly coherent and constitutive story-cycles of Book I and each succeeding Book.

Although we began our earlier discovery of this deeper organizing structure (in section I) by exploring the revealing grammatical and formal features of Rūmī’s opening poem, the usefulness and reliability of those indications is richly confirmed when we consider the primary subjects and progressive development of the four corresponding pairs of sections here.

Sections 1 and 8 (verses 1 and 35): As already discussed above, both of these framing lines start with the imperative “Listen!” But everything we find in the concluding line 35 involves a dramatic perspective shift from the mournful loneliness, unexamined subjective “recounting” and complaining focus on painful separations expressed in the first verse and throughout the following section. Instead the tone, the addressees, and the speaker’s relation to them in the final line 35 (which basically summarizes the preceding eight-line section) all boldly highlight a dramatic reversal of each constitutive element of the opening verse: here those addressed are now our fellow “friends” (*dūstān*), sharing intimately in a common, spiritually meaningful archetypal “tale” (*dāstān*) which reveals to us the deeply-purposeful “inner reality” of “our” (at once each reader’s, and all of humanity’s) actual spiritual state.

Sections 2 and 7: The shared theme here is that of the ego, but speaking in the sharply contrasting voices of two totally different “I’s”. The first speech (tellingly, all “complaint”) of the reed is a desperately lonely one: isolated, bereft, pained and separated from both its divine Source and its outwardly sympathetic (but inwardly indifferent) fellow human beings, singing only the mournful lament of nostalgia and unrequited longing. In a word, it represents the alienated condition of the dead, uprooted, fragile, traumatically pierced stick somehow imagining itself to be the

unnaturally rigid uniformities—a feature again mirroring the unpredictable architectonic structures of each Sura of the Qur’ān.

Musician's transforming breath and touch. By the end of the poem, the "individual" speaker is revealed instead as the underlying communion-kiss of the loving divine "Breath"³⁶⁷—here at once Life, Love, Grace, Light, Word, and Heart—expressed and perceived in the shared music-creation of each of Its human instruments, even those whose heart-mirrors may be momentarily clouded by the obscuring fog of distraction, loss, attachment or solitude.³⁶⁸

Sections 3 and 6: These corresponding transitional sections present the manifestations and perception of divine Love from two very different, but progressive and complementary perspectives. The first section (lines 8-15) already acknowledges the transforming centrality of Love, but still almost entirely from the narrow, self-limited perspective of the solitary and mournful reed.³⁶⁹ Hence it focuses on the tumultuous passion and familiar poetic litany of the symbolic sufferings and inner troubles associated with love: blood (uncontrollable emotion and suffering), craziness (the literal Arabic root meaning of *Majnūn*'s name), grieving, darkness, poison, boiling, and wine's intoxicating ferment. The only positive side emerging here at first is the liberating force of Love perceived as a persistent motivator (in the face of loss and death) and accidentally effective destroyer which conveniently breaks through "our veils" and illusions of separation.³⁷⁰ Only in the middle of this

³⁶⁷ As explained in the translation notes, Rūmī assumes his readers will be aware of the underlying identity of the Spirit (Arabic *Rūh*) as literally both "wind" and the life-giving divine "Breath; and of the closely related Qur'ānic term for "soul" (*nafs*) as both the individual soul-breath and the ever-renewed divine "Love-Breathing" (*naḥās al-Rahmān*) that re-creates all manifestation at every instant.

³⁶⁸ See n. 81 below on the "rust"—and necessary "polishing"—of the mirror of the human heart (lines 33-34).

³⁶⁹ The reed's lonely opening complaint here is functionally equivalent to the already widely familiar Sufi poetic image of the perpetually alienated and romantically longing "nightingale"—hopelessly singing the beauties of its unattainable divine Rose—that openly emerges only at line 29.

³⁷⁰ Here and throughout Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, it is essential for Western readers to keep in mind that the recurrent symbolism of "veiling" refers to what can be safely "seen through" in all the endlessly unfolding theophanies of the divine Beauty and other Names, not to any simple blocking of our spiritual vision. The classical scriptural source for this guiding theophanic insight is the well-known "hadith of the Veils":

third section (at lines 11-12) do we encounter the first acknowledgement of the actually central, catalytic role of the divine “Friend,” Guide and Guardian (*yār/walī*): first as the otherwise unspecified “universal antidote” (*tiryāq*: also ironically the word for opium!) for life’s persistent pains; then as the indispensable consolation of the longing lover; and finally as the reed’s true soul-mate, the “breath-giving/breath-playing” (*dam-sāz*) Musician behind the reed’s song.

In section 6, of course, Rūmī’s eloquent praise and celebration of Love restores “our” properly balanced human perspective and intrinsically dependent relations to the full divine reality of Love, as that can only be perceived by fellow lovers (l. 26). The archetypal theophanic experiences of Moses and Muhammad allusively evoke and briefly summarize the heights of Love’s transforming influences, aims, and universally healing, spiritually curative effects—which continue to be elaborated in the longer concluding section. Ultimately the divine reality discussed here is that first so problematically, and distantly encountered in section 3. But the poet’s (and reader’s) perspective in relation to the effective reality and presence of that all-encompassing creative and redemptive Love has shifted completely here, as though from night to day.

Sections 4 and 5: The inner connection between these two shorter central sections is essentially practical, and in this case quite visible and understandable. As section 4 reminds us, our unforgettable moments of theophanic encounter with the divine Friend, whatever their outward forms and occasions, inevitably give rise afterwards to a sense of tormenting attachment, painful loss, and unsatisfied longing—demoralizing states of the fragile ego-reed that could readily drag us back to all the familiar short-sighted egoistic distractions and other dead-ends that were more elaborately evoked in the opening sections. And Rūmī’s cryptic challenge to each reader at this midpoint of this poem (l. 18) suggests that for many, that frustrating return to the lonely reed-world and its mournful musical solace may often seem inevitable. But section 5 suddenly opens up the alternative, necessarily *practical* prospect of undertaking the lengthy purifying work and gradual

“God has seventy thousand [or in some versions, 70/700] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendors of His Face would burn up whoever was reached by His Gaze.”

detachment of the faithful and devoted lover³⁷¹—while highlighting the necessary catalytic role of grace (God’s directly experienced Loving) in making possible that challenging soul-work of transformation.

In each of these four nested pairs of linked sections, it is important to keep in mind that the actual individual spiritual process implied and demanded by these comparisons is a living reality quite different from the mere intellectual or symbolic articulation of the visible differences between these two parallel states or conditions—even if that reflection and understanding may constitute an essential first step in this process. Instead, what is really revealed by this contrasting parallelism, in each case, is a kind of specifically existential “mystery”: that is, the deeper challenge of understanding and then realizing within ourselves this dramatic shift in perspective. The eventual results of each of these pairs of contrasting spiritual states may be unmistakably visible, but the actual deeper workings and inner development underlying those transformations force us to focus more directly on our own cognate personal experiences and moments of unexpected illumination and insight—and on the sustained and quietly determined inner work underlying them—which eventually help give rise to such dramatic and initially unsuspected inner changes.

IV. FROM GRAMMAR TO METAPHYSICS: REALIZING THE *MATHNAWĪ*’S UNIFYING THEMES

The entire movement of the Song of the Reed could be very simply summed up—and indeed is, in the pairing of its first and last lines—as the mysteriously unfolding development of the Spirit from an apparently solitary, alienated and embittered ego; through a series of transforming encounters with Love (the “Thou”/you of all the divine/human Friends and Beloveds); to its destined realization as the “W/we” of the Spirit that lives and acts within the fuller awareness of that One creative Love. Each of this poem’s four pairs of chiasmically linked sections together dramatizes and highlights one key

³⁷¹ Here, at line 22, it is particularly important to be aware of all the interrelated symbolic references to the process of spiritual growth and perfection included in the Qur’ānic image (already familiar from the gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl”) of the “Pearl” of the fully realized human soul. The oyster-shell of the body, immersed in the “bitter” salt-water of material-temporal existence, was understood to open up at special rare moments to a single pure heavenly “rain-drop” of the Spirit and Grace, which then required ages of incubation and perseverance (*sabr*) to arrive at its ultimate perfection.

dimension or manifestation of that ongoing, revelatory transformation: the simultaneously cosmic and internalized individual unfolding of that divine hidden Treasure which “loves to be known.”

But here one basic caution is also in order. Rūmī, throughout the *Mathnawī*, rigorously and quite self-consciously avoids the familiar kind of systematic, didactic allegorization which is so obvious in his well-known Persian poetic predecessors, such as ‘Attār and Sanā’ī.³⁷² The recurrent danger which he systematically works to avoid at every turn in this epic is that such familiar ways of writing ultimately lead their readers to remain at the primarily intellectual level of simply “recognizing” and aesthetically appreciating the refined artistic representation of teachings and truths with which they were already quite familiar, in Rūmī’s own religious and cultural context, from a host of earlier Islamic religious sciences, practical disciplines, spiritual traditions, and popular wisdom-literatures. Readers have only to turn to a carefully close reading of the final story-cycle of Book I (the saga of Ali’s forgiveness of his opponent in battle, his enemy’s sudden illumination, and the mysterious “passion” of Ali’s servant and eventual assassin) to see how Rūmī, within every section of that cycle, is constantly moving back and forth, often within every few lines, through the different alternating perspectives and stages of the overall movement so systematically orchestrated in the Song of the Reed.³⁷³

The guiding purpose of all these challenging metaphysical and poetic complexities, however, is quite clear. What happens in each of those stories and reflections is that a homiletic popular story or teaching which Rūmī’s reader naturally expects to express, in poetic guise, a familiar and externally

³⁷² Those who have read through even a single Book of the *Mathnawī* quickly discover that Rūmī is constantly playing with our natural human tendency to expect some comforting allegorical regularity and constancy in his use of particular images and symbols—so that the “hero” (real or self-proclaimed) of one story often becomes the dupe or villain of another. (This literary process closely mirrors filmmakers’ familiar use today of often ironic and humorous, but meaningful allusions to familiar scenes from earlier classics.)

³⁷³ This particularly fluid and indeterminate rhetorical aspect of the *Mathnawī* offers remarkable similarities with the often untranslatable Arabic poems of Ibn ‘Arabī (in his *Futūhāt* and elsewhere), where each line must often be read from two or three different—but ultimately complementary and indispensable—metaphysical perspectives.

considered didactic point,³⁷⁴ is instead subtly “reversed” or turned upside-down. The result is that each unsuspecting new reader suddenly finds, at some point in that process, that the whole purpose of that section was instead to catch and draw out for more conscious reflection certain practically crucial, but previously unconscious aspects of the reader’s own soul and deepest patterns of conceiving God, the world, and our own destined place in that ongoing drama. In other words, every story and passage in the *Mathnawī* eventually turns out to be an exquisitely shifting mirror designed to “catch the conscience of the King.” In the religious and philosophical sciences of Rūmī’s day, this distinctive way of teaching and learning was described as *tahqīq*:³⁷⁵ a term which means simultaneously “realizing” (spiritually and intellectually) what is in fact true; while likewise “actualizing” in ongoing reality (both in spirit and in deed) that truth which was previously simply believed or formally accepted, or which had remained even more profoundly unconscious. The enduring appeal and lasting fascination of this *Spiritual Mathnawī*, across so many centuries and despite all the inevitable further losses in translation, has everything to do with Rūmī’s extraordinary creative mastery of this rhetoric of realization.

However, there is one more critical feature of Rūmī’s distinctive artistic language that ultimately can only be approximated or externally described, since its actual workings have to be experienced repeatedly in order to become clear: that is the mysterious transforming element of spiritual intuition or inspiration. Just as with so many celebrated verses and chapters of the Qur’ān, Rūmī’s rapid and unexplained shifting of metaphysical and contextual perspectives secretly draws the actively engaged reader into a kind of bewildering impasse. Indeed the very complexity of those existentially compelling considerations and their potential implications—throughout Book I, for example, Rūmī’s ongoing theological insistence on both divine determination and individual free will and responsibility; or the intertwined mysteries of bodily death, mortality, evil and suffering that connect each story-cycle—

³⁷⁴ Something of the ecumenical range of earlier literary, philosophical and religious sources for Rūmī’s tales and imagery in the *Mathnawī*—most of them somewhat familiar to his contemporaries, or at least to those learned readers culturally at home (like himself) in both Arabic and Persian—can be gathered from Nicholson’s extensive abstracts (in his commentaries) of earlier Islamic commentators, Furuzanfar’s *Qisas al-Mathnawī*, and especially the slowly expanding body of available translations in Western languages from his classical Persian poetic predecessors.

³⁷⁵ A key expression that we have elsewhere translated as “spiritual intelligence”: see the extensive study of this distinctive spiritual and literary practice in our work cited at n. 33 above.

eventually leads his readers into a state of deep inner bewilderment (*hayra*) that cannot be resolved simply by intellectual means.³⁷⁶ It is precisely at that crucial point that this disorienting inner puzzlement is memorably answered by an illumination, an unexpected inner change of state or new consideration that opens up, in a profoundly convincing way, an enduringly changed perspective or resolution which is both existential and intelligible.

In what may be a helpful analogy, this characteristic experience of discovery when studying the *Mathnawī* over time closely mirrors the common experience of that particularly memorable aspect of prayer which many Sufi writers, before and after Rūmī, have vividly described as *ilqā'*: as the sudden divine “throwing” or emergence into our momentarily receptive consciousness—just as in an indubitably spiritual dream or vision—of a particularly apt illuminating verse of the Qur’ān (or a similarly transformative insight or intuition) which is the immediate response to our current state and need.

It is against that wider backdrop that we can appreciate one final preparatory role of the Song of the Reed: this prelude is Rūmī’s carefully open-ended first introduction to many of the practically central leitmotifs and perspectives of the entire *Mathnawī*. What is important here is that each of these basic considerations and their symbolic exemplifications introduced here does not simply provide significant unifying literary and theological themes, but rather that Rūmī here is providing his readers with a much smaller set of guiding “touchstones” that we can use to gauge our actual personal relation to his teachings at any point in this epic. The great advantage of these guiding existential considerations is that this inherently subjective element is directly accessible and normally requires no further explanation or commentary. Each reader (and no one else!) can and must provide this key catalytic element for each story’s interpretive process.

- The first of these constant touchstones, introduced already in the poem’s opening line, is the familiar spectrum of relative separation and reunion or proximity with the divine Beloved, which is

³⁷⁶ The centrality (and relative rarity) of this spiritual station of *hayra* is discussed in detail in all of the recent studies of Ibn ‘Arabī’s historically influential thought, but its most accessible literary representation can perhaps be found in the available translations of ‘Attar’s renowned account of the “Seven Valleys of Love” in his *Conference of the Birds (Mantiq at-Tayr)*—a book which (along with ‘Attar’s *Ilāhī-Nāmeḥ*) exercised a profound influence on Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*.

of course mirrored in the grammatical structures and shifting voice-perspectives and alternative responses outlined above (section I). Rūmī's Song of the Reed opens with the apparent opposition of these experiential poles, in which the reality and presence of the all-encompassing divine Love and Compassion is at first known and perceived only through the reed's desolate egoistic sense of loss, conflict, longing, and separation. But Rūmī quickly moves on to the dynamic revelation of all the mediating, motivating, and transforming influences of that Love: the divine "You", all the divine "Friends" and guides,³⁷⁷ their Water (of Life), and the personal Path that eventually emerges through those lifelong encounters and alternating subjective states of apparent separation and proximity. And even a small amount of reflection on our cycling between these two polar conditions—above all as constantly encountered in everyday life, not just while reading this epic—quickly reveals the immense spectrum and variation of each soul's movements and conscious states along that Path, as well as the ongoing mystery and challenge of just why we happen to find ourselves in each of those momentary positions, and where we are now headed.

- A second dynamic and far-reaching touchstone introduced here, which quickly becomes the dramatic heart of the following story-cycle of the love-struck King and his mysteriously ailing maidservant, is the soul's gradual discovery and appreciation of the divine Cure, Healer, and Friend, in all their infinitely varied manifestations. This discovery only becomes possible through the humanly embodied spirit's ineluctable suffering—and especially through the purifying "fires" of loss, estrangement, longing, tears, and inner perseverance which are inherent in that mortal condition. It is no accident that this opening Song's central line (l. 18) unambiguously highlights this secret of the initially innocent, "raw" human soul's necessary purifying, maturing and "cooking" by all the painful fires so unforgettably described throughout the Qur'ān and related hadith³⁷⁸—until through "illuminating perseverance" (*sabr*, the concluding word of Book I) and the life-giving waters of grace, that fire (*nār*) is transmuted into Light (*nūr*).

³⁷⁷ See the related notes to the translation below on *walāya* (divine "Friendship", Guidance, Protection, Mediation) and the saintly *awliyā'*.

³⁷⁸ For a coherent and more detailed account of the complex traditional eschatological/spiritual symbolism (and its scriptural sources) developed throughout the *Mathnawī*, see chapter 5 of our study cited at n. 33 above.

- The third, equally universal touchstone arising here—again already present in the opening line—is the intimate divine/human need for communication and creative expression, for shared, inter-active “speech” (or Music) and for the equally indispensable receptive dimension of empathic, contemplative “listening.” This particular semantic web, so central to all of Rūmī’s poetry (not just the *Mathnawī*), stretches from the cacophonies of everyday human interaction to the central focus of the Qur’ān itself on all the inherently creative dimensions and manifestations of the divine “Words” (a term notably including all the messengers and their Books), the harmonious angelic Concert of all creation, and the key cosmological symbols of the divine Pen, Inkwell and Tablet, as well as the individual eschatological “books” of each soul’s life and destiny. Understandably, this symbolic matrix—and its central vivifying dynamic of divine Love and human need—is in reality inseparable from the following theme of divine/human companionship, grace and guidance (*walāya*).
- One of the most intimate and essential dimensions of each soul’s path is of course the touchstone of the divine protecting and guiding “Friend” (*al-Walī*)—of all the unfolding discoveries and instruments of Grace, the indispensable catalysts in the longing soul’s transmutation from raw and lonely ego to the culminating, fully cooked “We” of the Spirit. The centrality of this multifaceted reality in Rūmī’s spiritual vision and teaching is reflected in the profusion of intertwined synonyms introduced already here in these few opening lines: *yār*, *walī*, *dūst*, *hamrāh*, *hamzabān*, *damsāz*—as well as in the constant flow of allusion (and the sudden surprising interjection of open addresses) to the central figures of Shams-i Tabriz (or Husamuddin) in Rūmī’s own personal love-story. Fortunately, the full dimensions of this transformative autobiographical dimension of the *Mathnawī* can now be much more directly grasped through the recent availability of two English translations of the transcribed teaching-sessions of Shams, with their revealing and colorful amplifications in Aflaki’s later voluminous and influential hagiography.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁹ See *Rūmī’s Sun*, tr. C. Helminski and R. Algan (Morning Light Press, 2008), and *Me and Rūmī: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabriz*, tr. W. Chittick (Fons Vitae, 2004). Both versions are explicitly incomplete, given the extraordinary challenges posed by the surviving Persian text of Shams’s *Maqālāt*. Aflaki’s invaluable later hagiographic compilation of stories surrounding Rūmī, Shams and other key figures in the nascent Mevlevi movement is now also available in a full English translation by John O’Kane, *The Feats of the Knowers of God: Manāqib al-‘Arifīn* (Leiden, Brill, 2002).

- Finally, perhaps the most intimate and multi-faceted touchstone of all is the complex of allusions—almost all of them ultimately Qur’ānic in origin and wider semantic context—which Rūmī introduces to convey the ever-present polarities and possibilities of the Heart. Here this spiritual locus of all perception and awareness, as throughout the Qur’ān, is at once “our” heart and the Heart of all Being, both the divine Names and their human reflections. These central symbolic families include, in just these opening lines: Love, the soul’s innermost secret or mystery (*sirr*), Light, Spirit, Sea, mirror, Pearl, “inside”—as well as all their intrinsic corollaries (“outside,” rust, body, corpse, veils, senses, alienation, reflection, senses, wind). All the inescapable polarities which, taken together, make this singularly fragile and broken reed the fully theomorphic instrument of that Heart’s endlessly unfolding Song.

Literal Version of the “Song of the Reed” (verses 1-35)³⁸⁰

[Section 1: line 1 (Narrator to *singular* reader)]

Listen (sing.) to the reed/flute,³⁸¹ as it recounts a story,

complaining of separations:

[Section 2: lines 2-7 (Reed/flute’s soliloquy)]

[2] “Ever since they tore **me** from the reed-garden,

men and women have been weeping at **my** cry.

[3] **I** want a chest torn open,³⁸² torn open by separation,³⁸³

so that [for such a listener?]³⁸⁴ **I** can give expression to the pain of longing!

³⁸⁰ This intentionally literal version (also adhering closely to the original phrasing and word order) is adapted from both Nicholson and the recent verse translation of Book I by Alan Williams, *Rūmī: Spiritual Verses* (London, Penguin Classics, 2006). For the analytical purposes developed in section I above, we have highlighted certain key grammatical markers and also added in square brackets our tentative identifications of the main sections and the possible speakers and audiences in the different sections.

³⁸¹ Throughout this opening poem, it is important keep in mind both meanings of the Persian *nayy* here: as both the fragile, dead flute (or even the reed-pen, at line 27) and the living reed from which it is made. These two senses correspond to the twofold Qur’ānic account of the origination of humanity, as both the celestial, eternal spirit (at 7:172; see n. 9 above) later breathed into Adam, and the mortal bodily (and similarly tube-like) human form, created of “stinking clay.”

³⁸² See n. 25 above for the Qur’ānic resonances (98:1-8) of this image and its multiple contrasting, but inter-related senses here. While we have kept the literal “chest” (*sīneh*, Qur’ānic *sadr*) in English here, in the Qur’ān this term refers to the outermost dimension or covering of the “Heart” (*qalb*), which is the locus of all the levels and forms of human perception and cognition (i.e., not at all restricted to emotion and feeling).

³⁸³ Here *firāq* is the Arabic synonym of *jidā’i* in opening line, usually referring more specifically in poetry to one’s separation from the longed-for Beloved.

[4] Each person who remains far from his/her own Source/root
 is seeking after the destined-Day of their Reunion.³⁸⁵

[5] I was weeping in every gathering:
 I joined with those who were sad and with those who were happy.

[6] Each person, from their own supposition, (imagined) he became **my** Friend³⁸⁶—
 (yet) none sought **my** secrets from within **me**.

[7] **My** secret³⁸⁷ is not far from **my** weeping—
 but the (bodily) eye and ear do not have *that* Light!”³⁸⁸

³⁸⁴ See note 25 above for a more detailed explanation of the complex possible meanings of the Persian here.

³⁸⁵ Although we have not interrupted the quotation of the reed’s complaint here, this entire line 5, without any first-person marker, seems to shift into a very different, proverbial voice of wisdom, as though Rūmī is already interjecting a wiser, deeper context for the reed’s initial feelings of loss and longing. Such mysterious and unexpected interjections or sudden “jumps” to a higher metaphysical perspective are in fact common throughout *Mathnawī*—as they are in the Qur’ān.

³⁸⁶ *Yār* here is the first of a large number of Persian expressions in this opening poem (all familiar from earlier Persian mystical poets) corresponding to facets of the central Arabic notion of *al-Walī*: both the divine Name and Attribute designating God’s “closeness” and protecting, guiding “proximity” to all creation, and more specifically all those divine “Friends” and Mediators (*awliyā’ Allāh*, in the Qur’ānic expression) who are the instruments and mediators of God’s protection, guidance and eventual salvation, both in this world and in higher realms.

³⁸⁷ *Sirr* is a key Qur’ānic expression referring to one of the innermost dimensions of the human Heart; “mystery” or “essence” may come closer to conveying that aspect of spiritual psychology.

³⁸⁸ Rūmī (or the reed) here uses specifically (among many more mundane Persian expressions for light) the highly charged Qur’ānic expression and divine Name (24:35 ff.) *Nūr*—a term originally referring to moonlight, and hence to all the theophanies of the divine Sun “reflected” in the planes of creation. Thus its symbolic role and nature here is very close to the parallel imagery of the divine “Spirit” or “Breath” (*rūh*) in the Qur’ānic symbolism of God’s creative Speech and Music that runs throughout this opening poem.

[Section 3: lines 8-15 ([same?] narrator to everyone)]

[8] Body is not veiled from soul,³⁸⁹ nor soul from body—

yet no one is permitted to see the soul.³⁹⁰

[9] *Fire* is this cry of the reed; it isn't (mere) wind:

whoever lacks *this* fire, may he become nothing!³⁹¹

[10] *Fire* is Love that has fallen into the reed,

Love's boiling-ferment, fallen into the wine.

[11] The reed is the partner of whoever is torn away from Friend-ship/a Friend:³⁹²

its notes/His veils have torn **our** veils apart.³⁹³

³⁸⁹ *Jān* is also “Life” and (through its equivalence to the Arabic *nafs/naḥās*) the soul or “life-breath” quickening and illuminating the human body.

³⁹⁰ Rūmī's expression here directly echoes the well-known verse (6:103): “The vision (of the eyes) does not perceive/encompass Him, but He encompasses that vision”—reminding his readers of the repeated Qur'ānic contrast between human beings' vast potential power of spiritual insight (*basīra*) and the sharply limited scope of the physical eyes' visual range (*basar*: originally the “visual ray” thought to emanate from the eye in the process of ocular vision.)

³⁹¹ There is a serious pun here between the everyday sense of this idiom (“may he just disappear”) and Rūmī's repeated emphasis—here in the *Mathnawī* and throughout his poetry, following ‘Attar and many earlier Sufi writers—on the state of ego-less “nothingness” (*nāstī* and *hīch*) as the very highest human spiritual condition of absolute surrender and pure servanthood (*‘ubūdiyya*).

³⁹² *Yārī* : see n. 54 (line 6) above. This term (equivalent of the abstract Arabic *walāya*) is both the inner state of the saints or “Friends of God” and the wider reality of all the effective expressions of God's divine Assistance, Grace, Help, Protection and Caring.

³⁹³ The Persian *pardeh* here refers both to musical “melodies” or frets on an instrument, and to “veils”. As explained at n. 38 above, the latter reading alludes to widely cited hadith of God's 70,000 Veils, which contrasts the translucently revealing “veils” of divine Creation with the obscurities of our human supposition.

[12] Who has seen a poison and a cure-all like the reed?

Who has seen an intimate-friend (*damsāz*) and a longing-lover like the reed?

[13] The reed tells the legend of a Path full of blood/suffering:

it tells the tales of crazy (Majnun's) Love.³⁹⁴

[14] The only intimate/worthy of *this* understanding is the “senseless” one:³⁹⁵

there is no buyer for the tongue but the ear.

[15] In **our**³⁹⁶ grieving, the days are out of place [= resemble nights]:

the days travel the Path together with burning (sorrows).

[Section 4: lines 16-18 (Rūmī to God/Shams/?)³⁹⁷]

[16] If days have gone, say “**Go!**”³⁹⁸—it doesn't matter:

You stay! O **You**, whose Purity none can match!³⁹⁹

³⁹⁴ Both terms for a spiritually significant story used here (*hadīth* and *qisas*, directly echoing the Sura of Joseph, 12:3) have strong religious and Qur’ānic overtones. Majnūn is both “crazy” and the archetype of the purely devoted lover in the popular love-story of Layla and Majnun.

³⁹⁵ Here (and further at l. 26 below), Rūmī is following a long-established Sufī understanding of the Qur’ānic account of Moses’ swooning at Mt. Sinai (“... I fell down stunned”, 7:143) as an allusion to the lofty spiritual state of *fanā*, the “dissolving of the ego” within its divine Source.

³⁹⁶ If one reads this line in light of Rūmī’s passionate evocation of his grief and loss in so many of his shorter lyrical works, then it is hard not to read this “our” as a possibly autobiographical reference. In any event, how one understands this “our” inevitably colors one’s sense of the identity of the speaker responding in the following line 16.

³⁹⁷ There are several ways of imagining the speaker(s) and who is being addressed in these central lines, though all of them include the reader, as the implicit “witness” of this dialogue.

³⁹⁸ The Persian imperative here is singular and intensely personal.

³⁹⁹ This final half-line seems to echo the emphasis on the divine uniqueness in the familiar Sura *Iklās* (112:4).

[17] Everyone but a fish becomes satiated with His Water;

whoever is without H/his daily bread,⁴⁰⁰ their day becomes long.

[18: exact center of poem] No one who is raw can understand the state of the cooked:

so (this) word must be short—and farewell in Peace (*salām*)!

[Section 5: lines 19-22 (Rūmī to *single* reader)]

[19] Break **your** chains and be free, o **son**!

How long will **you** be enslaved to gold and to silver?

[20] If **you** should pour the Sea into a pitcher,

What part of that will it hold? One day's worth!

[21] The pitcher of the greedy ones' eye can't be filled;

as long as the oyster-shell is not content, it can't be filled with pearl.⁴⁰¹

[22] Whoever's clothes have been torn apart by a Love/Loving,

they will be pure of greed and every fault.⁴⁰²

[Section 6: lines 23-26 (Rūmī (for “*us*”) to Love)]

[23] Rejoice, O Love, our happy passion/trade,⁴⁰³

O Physician for *all* **our** many illnesses!

⁴⁰⁰ The Qur’ānic term *rizq* suggested here refers in fact to all the forms of divine support and sustenance.

⁴⁰¹ See the full explanation of the complex symbolism presupposed here, at n. 39 above.

⁴⁰² Here the imagery of clothing and nakedness reflects the familiar contrast of spiritual humility and true servanthood (“nothingness”/*nīstī* at n. 59 above), as opposed to the ego’s normal attachment to all its inner and outer accoutrements of apparent “being” (*hasī*). The imagery of the passionate lover here no doubt also alludes to the Qur’ānic account of Joseph and Zulaykha (at 12:25-27), and to the eventual sartorial consequences of that encounter.

[24] O Cure for **our** egoism and pretension,

O You who are **our** Plato and **our** Galen!⁴⁰⁴

[25] Because of Love, the earthly body soared to heaven;

the Mount (Sinai) started to dance and became nimble.⁴⁰⁵

[26] When Love came to Sinai's soul, **o lover**,

Sinai became drunk and "*Moses fell down thunderstruck*".

[Section 7: lines 23-34 (Rūmī intimately to *single* reader)]

[27] If **I** were pressed to **my** intimate-friend's⁴⁰⁶ lips,

then like **my** reed⁴⁰⁷ **I'd** tell what must be told.

[28] Whoever is separated from the one who shares his tongue⁴⁰⁸

is speechless, though he have a hundred songs (to sing).

⁴⁰³ The Persian here expresses a mix of intentionally contrasted meanings: *sowdā'* as melancholy and passion (a normally painful state of mind); and *sowdā* (without the final hamza) as a trade or transaction, alluding to the many Qur'ānic references to our short-sighted "selling" of our soul for illusory ends.

⁴⁰⁴ In Rūmī's culture, these figures represent the two classical philosopher-healers (*hakīm*, as in the following story, refers to both philosophers and physicians), of spirit/soul and of body, respectively.

⁴⁰⁵ See n. 29 above for a fuller explanation of the Qur'ānic and hadith allusions in these two lines to the spiritual journey of Muhammad (as well as the ascensions of Jesus and Ilyās/Idrīs), together with the Qur'ānic account of Moses at Sinai.

⁴⁰⁶ The literal sense of this key expression (first introduced at l. 12) is both "breath-maker" and "breath-player", with each of those aspects applying both to the player of the reed and to the divine Source of the soul's Spirit-breath.

⁴⁰⁷ See n. 30 above on the reed as the usual source of the pen (*qalam*) in Rūmī's day, suggesting "my reed" as a punning reference to the poet's own creative literary activity.

⁴⁰⁸ While we have kept the most literal, linguistic sense of this term, it refers of course to all the manifold forms of deeper empathy and sympathetic understanding.

[29] And when the Rose is gone, the Garden faded: after that
 you [*sing.*] will no longer *listen* to the adventures of the nightingale.

[30] All is the Beloved, the lover (but) a veil;
 The Living One⁴⁰⁹ is the Beloved, the lover a corpse:

[31] When Love is not caring/concerned for (the lover),
 s/he is like a bird without wings—alas for him/her!

[32] **Me**, how can **I** understand (things) all around,
 when/if **my** Friend's Light⁴¹⁰ is not all around?

[33] Love *wants* this Word to become manifest:
 how can the mirror be without reflection?⁴¹¹

[34] Do **you** [*sing.*] know why **your** mirror has no reflection?
 Because the rust has not been separated from its face.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ The Persian here suggests one of the most central divine Names, *al-Hayy* (the Living, Source of Life), but also all those souls discovering their inner relation with that Life.

⁴¹⁰ See n. 56 (line 7) above.

⁴¹¹ The last word here is literally someone “winking back (seductively)” (*ghammāz*), a far more lively and mysteriously moving image than a mere abstract “reflection”. These celebrated lines express an even more compressed version of the influential “Hidden Treasure” divine saying translated and discussed at note 14 above.

⁴¹² This verse refers to the ongoing care and great effort required to polish pre-modern copper and brass mirrors. More specifically, this mirror-imagery in verses 33-34 involves a complex allusion to a number of Qur’ānic descriptions of the Heart (most notably 83:14, “... and what they were acquiring has rusted on their Hearts”) and to the well-known hadith: “hearts rust like iron, and their polishing is through the Remembrance of God and the recitation of the Qur’ān.” See the fuller explanation of the many related Qur’ānic verses on the Heart in chapter 2 (“Listening: Contemplation and the Purified Heart”) of our

[Section 8: line 35 (Narrator to dear friends)]

[35] **Listen** (pl.) to this story, o beloved-friends!

it *is* itself the inner reality of **our** current state.

Appendix: QUR'ANIC RHETORICAL AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES ADAPTED IN THE *MASNAVI*:

More detailed illustrations of each of the following characteristic rhetorical and structural features of the Qur'an—and of Rumi's *Masnavi*—can be found in Chapter 7, our discussion and experimental “literal” translation of the Sura of Joseph, the highly symbolic narrative divinely denoted (Qur'an 12:3) as “the most-beautiful-and-best of tales” (*ahsan al-qisas*). By carefully interweaving each of these significant rhetorical and structural procedures throughout his opening “Song of the Reed,” Rumi immediately highlights and introduces for his readers central literary features and interpretive considerations—already familiar, of course, to his original literate audiences—which are indispensable for the active reading and study of all six Books of the *Masnavi*. Since the functioning of these basic rhetorical elements in the *Masnavi* is illustrated in greater detail in Sections I-IV of the preceding essay (and are best appreciated, in any case, as they appear in their original Qur'anic contexts), their descriptions here have been kept as brief as possible.

- One of the most striking and mysterious features of the Qur'an is the constant interplay of shifting, multiple “voices” apparently emerging from or representing very different (and often mysteriously uncertain) planes of being or origins. These very different divine voices—which interact in complex ways with what are often equally indeterminate or puzzling times, states, audiences, intentions, tones and other elements of each verse's combined situational perspective—include (just as we find from the very start in the *Masnavi*) unidentified “narrators”, “I”, “You,” a particularly problematic and recurrent “We,” various actors within stories, the soliloquizing thoughts of certain speakers, and so on. Perhaps most importantly for the present consideration of the *Masnavi*, the Qur'an constantly leaves it to each reader or reciter to properly “fill in” and dramatize each of these mysterious voices and their applicable situations and intended audiences. This constant creative and meditative challenge gradually unfolds in alternative ways that necessarily mirror and reveal—especially as the sacred text is daily performed (in ritual prayer) and contemplated throughout all of life's illuminating circumstances and dramatic embodiments—our successive interpretations and realizations of the manifold intentions and immediate relevance of each verse.
- A second, equally striking rhetorical feature of the Qur'an—deeply rooted in particularities of classical Arabic language that are hard even to conceive (and even more challenging to communicate) in Indo-European languages—is its constant ambiguities and uncertainties of

time and of the relevant contexts and reference-points tied to those temporal options. Rather than the familiar, linear, earthly progression of past, present and future so deeply embedded in English (and other Indo-European tongues), the Qur'an constantly moves back and forth "vertically", between clearly divine perspectives (and corresponding Voices) that are metaphysically situated somehow "above" or beyond the normal linear succession of earthly time-events; other perspectives that are apparently (or often quite problematically) apparently situated within the flux of transpiring psychic or external times; and many others somewhere in-between. Within the Qur'an, the cadenced rhythms and sudden perspective-shifts between these alternating vertical metaphysical perspectives are perhaps the most familiar, recurrent manifestation of the perception of *all* things as uniquely revelatory "Signs," "theophanies" (*tajalliyāt*) and divine "Presences," ever-renewed manifestations of the One Real revealed in and through the created many.⁴¹³ Given the very different linguistic facilities⁴¹⁴ and challenges of Persian, Rumi's re-creation of that characteristic trans-temporal spiritual vision requires extraordinary poetic means, most visibly in the recurrent sudden appearance—at first apparently arbitrary and puzzling—of paradoxical perspective-shifts (unexpected jumps and swings of voice, audience, tone and situation) that still strike even the most naive readers of the *Masnavi*, even when those mysterious shifts have been partially "ironed out" by translators.

This recurrent rhetorical feature of sudden perspective-shifts—each of which requires the reader (whether of the Qur'an or the *Masnavi*) to suddenly stop short and reconsider what is actually happening at that point of apparent confusion, or indeed simply to figure out where and how the *speaker, audience, subject, and situational key or tone* have actually shifted—may

⁴¹³ *We shall continue to show them* ("cause them to see") *Our Signs on the horizons and in their own souls until/so that it becomes clear* ("shines forth") *to them that Hū is the truly Real (al-Haqq)...* (41:53).

⁴¹⁴ For example, the relative indeterminacy of Persian grammar, together with other special allowances peculiar to the rules of prosody, allow a variety of far-reaching ambiguities of reference that are very helpful in suggesting alternative metaphysical and theological perspectives within a single line or phrase. Most importantly, the absence of gender markings (both for verbs and for nouns and adjectives), makes the central ambiguity of theophanic reference (as pointing simultaneously to the Divine Love/Beloved and to readers' own immediately present beloveds) far easier to convey and sustain in this poetic tradition.

seem a good deal less mysterious when we consider the many familiar parallels to the extraordinarily rapid “cuts” of time, location, and both inner and outer perspective shifts that are now found so abundantly in contemporary film and related video and musical media. Despite the complexity and rapidity of the visual or musical clues normally signaling those perspective shifts—changes which were once literally unimaginable for earlier audiences who would often experience difficulty recognizing even simple flashbacks (or flash-forwards, or subjectively imagined or remembered or re-played scenes by different “actors”) outside a single simple temporal narrative flow⁴¹⁵—today even young children familiar with these media experience little difficulty following such complex visual and aural clues, and thus can quickly begin to appreciate their aesthetic and intellectual significance and artistic possibilities as mirrors of our manifold human fields of perception and imagination.

- A third fundamental rhetorical feature of the Qur’an, which goes to the very heart of its meaning and uniquely transforming impact on readers throughout the centuries, is its complex, intentional ambiguities of pronoun reference, regarding both the speaking and acting subjects (i.e., the mysterious multiple divine “Voices” already mentioned) and even more so the intended “objects” and audiences of that divine Address. The existential and metaphysical crux of this key element—just as much in the *Masnavi* as in the Qur’an itself—is the intensely problematic identity of the singular “you,” of the ultimate or original intended audience of this revealed/inspired speech.⁴¹⁶ In the Qur’an, of course, that singular “you” being addressed is often clearly or initially Muhammad (or some other prophet or divine messenger). But at the same time—and always in trenchant contrast to the external, unenlightened plural “you-all” of

⁴¹⁵ Here we have only to recall the often uncomprehending initial reactions a century ago to the comparable narrative and poetic innovations of Proust, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Virginia Woolf and many others .

⁴¹⁶ English or American translation of these classical Islamic texts, since the passage of the thou-forms from current everyday usage, presents constant difficulties in conveying the constant and absolutely fundamental contrast between plural (usually external and relatively non-problematic) and heightened singular “you,” especially as that contrast is most often embedded in Arabic or Persian *verb* forms (indeed normally left completely untranslated for imperative verbs), as well as in separate pronouns.

the human collective—this pointedly singular “you” in many situations is also somehow the soul of each purified, fully realized “person of real faith” (*mu’min*), insofar as this shared pronominal reference reflects our real or potential identity or sharing in the deeper logos, “Word,” or spiritual reality of the prophetic figures in question.⁴¹⁷ In other contexts—including the entire dramatized progression of the opening “Song of the Reed” here in the *Masnavi*—a similarly critical ambiguity engages the intended pronominal referents of “Us” and “We” (with or without capitalization, which is of course absent in the Persian). This open-ended collective reality could refer potentially to all (realized and illuminated) people, readers, and effective participants in the divine Spirit. But often, as so clearly and fundamentally in the concluding verses (34-35) of the Song of the Reed, it clearly points as well to the awareness of each (or every?) human being as potentially or actually the theophanic spiritual mirror of the divine “We” encompassing all the divine Names.

In the *Masnavi*, this central spiritual and existential ambiguity of the Qur’an is further intensified and complicated by Rumi’s intentionally problematic literary presentation throughout the poem (detailed in his opening Prologue) of his companion Husamuddin as the initial, formal literary “addressee” of the *Masnavi*—in some way representing every ideal, properly receptive reader, or at least what his suitably gifted and persistent readers could potentially become.⁴¹⁸ But at the same time, throughout the *Masnavi*, this already deeply

⁴¹⁷ This central Logos-connection of the primary “addressee” of the Qur’an (as divine and eternal Speech) is of course amplified in later prophetologies integrating as well the hadith of the *mi’rāj* and other related hadith. By Rumi’s time, those interpretive perspectives were widely reflected both in popular devotional life (the multitude of devotional songs, poems, and popular hadith identifying Muhammad as the creative “Light” or divine “Intelligence”), and in complex philosophic and theological discussions of the Logos underlying all prophecy as the “Muhammadan Reality” (*Haqīqa Muhammadiyya*). See also J. Renard, *All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, SUNY Press, 1994.

⁴¹⁸ In many ways, the persona of this very ambiguous, idealized “recipient” of the poem (whose role is repeatedly highlighted and recalled in the prose prologues to each of the *Masnavi*’s six Books)—who also appears as the concretely present, active party to almost conversational exchanges in many other passages—corresponds to a kind of addressee-persona equivalent of the traditional Persian authorial “pen-name” (*takhallus*). In English literature, one finds richly analogous parallels, for example, in the mysterious addressees of familiar sonnets of Shakespeare.

problematic recipient “you” often suddenly shifts sharply “upward” to reflect the deeper, more poignantly intimate spiritual presence of Shams (at once the divine “Sun” and the deathless spiritual reality of Rumi’s friend), as the real, ever-present and watchfully caring divine Friend. Finally, the evocative, open-ended richness of this singular “you”/“You” in the *Masnavi*—as indeed in all the classics of Persian spiritual poetry—is further heightened by the absence in Persian of grammatical gender markers, which opens up even more pointedly and explicitly the full human range of earthly addressees and actual “beloveds” manifesting the One divine Beloved (e.g., in the famous verse 30).

- Always depending on how one momentarily understands and “reads” these first three basic compositional elements, their combination immediately generates that characteristically mirroring, *interactive* dramatic interplay of constantly ambiguous and shifting relational perspectives which is so central in each reader or listener’s encounter with both the Qur’an and the *Masnavi*.

Two fundamental implications of this fourth distinctive rhetorical feature are particularly significant. The first essential point is that each of these “internal” dramatic relationships—i.e., the different meanings and understandings that so often arise, depending on one’s momentary understanding of the subject/speaker, object/addressee, and their possible metaphysical/temporal relationships—necessarily presupposes as well the additional active imaginal construction of their intended *contexts* (a kind of “hidden drama” that must be actively, creatively and interactively supplied and exemplified by each reader) and their appropriate emotional “*tones*” (for example: ironic, reproachful, ambivalent, diffident, regretful, seductive, wise, ecstatic, accepting, and so on), ultimately drawn from the vast spectrum of human emotions and attitudes that could potentially fill in the existential contexts and situations in question.

Truly accomplished Qur’an reciters, of course, are able to directly communicate many of these essential realities and interpretive perspectives aurally, even (or perhaps especially) to listeners without any deep knowledge of the verbal meanings of the Arabic text. But the simple effort to act out seriously a few lines of the *Masnavi*, especially in the company of a few other reader-actors, will immediately reveal (just as with Shakespeare, for example) both how much active participation Rumi expects of his serious companions, and how many different ways his poetry can and must be understood. Furthermore—and many facets of Rumi’s poetic language

(including the points outlined immediately below) absolutely demand this of his readers—this inner participation necessarily requires the active engagement of the full scope of our intellectual, imaginative and spiritual capacities and relevant experience. In short, reading the *Masnavi* slowly, carefully and contemplatively requires something much like the attentive reader’s “internal” staging and dramatization of Shakespeare, or the internally imagined performance of a complex classical orchestral score.

The second, even more essential point here is the way that this central rhetorical feature of the *Masnavi* (and the Qur’an) necessarily leads to the gradual heightened realization by each reader of the unavoidable “reflexivity” of this ongoing hermeneutical process: not just in regard to Rumi’s poem, but as absolutely integral to our participation in and shifting perception of life itself. In other words, to the degree that we as readers actively respond to the all the peculiar puzzles and demands posed by Rumi’s extraordinarily challenging poetic language, we gradually come to recognize both the full multiplicity and range of our own internal “parts” and spiritual dimensions—corresponding to all the alternative voices, audiences and attitudes which our imagination is able to supply—and to our own inalienable responsibility for whatever we eventually discover in this remarkable dramatic mirror. Happily, this exquisitely constructed reflexivity also means that each renewed reading of the *Masnavi* normally opens up entirely new insights and perspectives, carefully reflecting the evolving contours and situations of our own personal “spiritual epic” and path—as Rumi so trenchantly observes here in his closing transition (line 35) to the key opening story of the *Masnavi*.

- A fifth distinctive feature of Qur’anic rhetoric richly mirrored throughout the *Masnavi* is the apparent “scattering” (*tabdīd*) of essential elements of a complexly coherent teaching—for example, regarding eschatology, angelology, prophecy, the divine Friends, and any number of foundational spiritual practices and virtues—throughout a vast number of locations and exemplary situations, so as to require of each reader an ongoing intensive effort of gradual spiritual, practical and intellectual realization which eventually brings into play all our unique existential pre-requisites for an adequately comprehensive understanding. This indispensable active participatory role of each reader, necessarily drawing on all relevant dimensions of our thought, spirit and memory, would at all times be blocked or short-circuited by a premature, narrowly conceptual perspective on the personal spiritual experiences and realities in question.

The resulting challenges, in both the *Masnavi* and the Qur'an, of apparent thematic "repetition"—and corresponding superficial critical impressions of randomness, of arbitrary or disordered organization, or even of a purely rhetorical restatement of the same familiar ideas and symbols—are necessarily only heightened by the process of translation, especially those translations whose understandable guiding aim is to provide a fluid, "easy" reading experience. As already explained in Section IV above, the Song of the Reed does not simply introduce many of the central themes that recur throughout the rest of the *Masnavi*, so that those vital spiritual issues can be recognized in all their poetic and dramatic guises. More importantly, it also provides each reader with a series of much deeper "existential touchstones" or essential spiritual reminders for recognizing and gauging our actual degree of engagement with and responsiveness to the teachings and lessons which are introduced at each stage of Rumi's epic, as those issues are awakened and mirrored in all the relevant domains and levels of our own being.

- One of the key unifying structural and compositional features of the longer Suras of the Qur'an—particularly evident in the organization of the Sura of Joseph (Chapter 7 above)—is the recurrent use of *chiasmus* or *inverted parallelism*. With regard to the *Masnavi*, the central systematic role of complex chiastic compositional techniques—whose practical pedagogical and mnemonic dimensions, before the advent of printing, have been highlighted in very different scriptural and poetic contexts⁴¹⁹—has only recently been revealed and painstakingly outlined in their overarching architectonic significance and complexity, for every compositional level of Rumi's work, in the groundbreaking research of Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi. As we have seen in sections I-III above, careful attention to the emergence of the different shifting voices and perspectives in the opening Song of the Reed directly leads to the discerning reader—especially those literate readers of Rumi's day who were so deeply familiar with the extensive Qur'anic precedents—to distinguish the underlying nested chiasmic structure and

⁴¹⁹ See the introduction to *Rumi's Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi*, Book One, by Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi (SUNY Press, 2009), which highlights the pioneering Biblical studies by Mary Douglas, as well as precedents in the Persian poetic works of Nizami which were certainly familiar to Rumi.

thematic correspondence of parallel sections, which Rumi then goes on to develop far more elaborately throughout the rest of the *Masnavi*.

- Finally, yet another characteristic rhetorical feature of the entire *Masnavi* that is carefully introduced by repeated examples in this opening Song of the Reed is the poetic “condensation” of richly complex teachings of the Qur’an, hadith and earlier Islamic spiritual tradition—both metaphysical and practical—in a single richly allusive word, phrase or symbolic image. This distinctive expressive element of the *Masnavi* (and indeed of virtually all later Islamicate spiritual poetry) provides something like a semantic Persian equivalent for the richly symphonic complexity of multiple complementary meanings inhering in that unique family of triliteral Arabic consonantal roots which so powerfully and inimitably weave together the Qur’an at every level (while rendering it quite literally un-translatable into other languages). Unfortunately, although for perfectly understandable practical reasons, virtually all translators of the *Masnavi* have been reluctant to encumber each line of their translation with the multi-paragraph footnote explanations that would often be required to elucidate the complexly allusive dimensions of these key “condensed” words and symbols.

In our accompanying literal translation of these opening lines, in order to convey something of what would be required by a literal, study version of the *Masnavi*, we have provided highly abridged footnote indications of some of those key condensed expressions—keeping in mind that these allusions were for the most part readily accessible, without any further commentary at all, to most of Rumi’s original literate readers. For just as with the immense Latin (and underlying Greek) learning and complex theological and philosophical precedents presupposed by Dante’s spiritual epic, Rumi’s original literate readers were necessarily profoundly bilingual (or more accurately, fully bicultural) in the manifold learned Arabic traditions that are alluded to in virtually every line of the *Masnavi*, as indeed was already the case in earlier classics of Persian spiritual poetry.

Chapter Thirteen

TRANSGURING LOVE: PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS AND THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF
EXPERIENCE IN THE GHAZALS OF HAFIZ

The following observations grow out of several decades of experience teaching the ghazals of Hafiz to students lacking any direct access to the original Persian—and out of an even longer period of immersion in the multilingual complex of now largely unfamiliar spiritual, philosophic, scientific and theological disciplines which provided the original cultural context and network of symbolic allusions that were once intimately familiar to this poet and his original learned courtly audiences, together with his connoisseurs and imitators throughout subsequent centuries. Not surprisingly, the greatest challenge and frustration of that contemporary pedagogical situation is how to communicate clearly and adequately those implicit structures and assumptions which must be understood in order to begin to appreciate the full poetic richness and spiritual depths of Hafiz's lyrics.

The focus of this essay is on only one key dimension of that wider hermeneutical and pedagogical problem: the characteristic progression of metaphysical and existential shifts in perspective—first revealing, and then potentially transforming each reader's love, desire, will and self-understanding—that typically structures and unifies each of Hafiz's ghazals. As we shall see, that distinctive underlying structural feature of Hafiz's writing (which is normally invisible in English translation) also helps to explain some of the mysterious spiritual efficacy of his poetry in the therapeutic process of spiritual divination and illumination, the longstanding ritual of *fa'l*, paralleling the familiar uses of the *I Ching*.

One way to begin explaining that distinctive process of transformation is to start with the fundamental existential challenge with which this poet actually concludes each of his lyrics, with all that is actually evoked and intended by the far-reaching implications of his poetic pen-name "Hāfiz", a deeply problematic expression which is too often taken simply in its familiar social usage referring to someone who has memorized the Qur'an. With a heightened appreciation of the potential aims and demands highlighted by that repeated concluding reminder, we then move on to introduce the intended effects and forms of participation suggested by this poet's distinctive unifying rhetoric of carefully

orchestrated, progressively shifting perspectives, voices and audiences, before briefly illustrating concretely how those unifying poetic features are developed in two typical shorter ghazals.

PART ONE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

I. BECOMING "HĀFIZ": THE H-F-Z ROOT AND ITS WIDER QUR'ANIC RESONANCES:

The spiritual world view assumed by Hafiz and his original audiences—a perspective at once metaphysical, religious, aesthetic, and ethical—can be summed up as an infinite play of unique, ever-renewed theophanies, in which all of our experience is understood as the constantly shifting Self-manifestation of the One divine Source, the ever-renewed "Signs" of the creative Breath, as they are reflected in the mirror of each divine-human spirit. Yet Hafiz's lyrics, of course, are not intended to teach or explain that familiar metaphysical perspective or the richly complex, constantly intersecting registers of its symbolic expression—both of which were already intimately familiar to his original learned and courtly audiences. Instead, they are designed *to awaken the actual realization of that reality* within the uniquely personal and shifting situations of his individual readers. That guiding intention, and its far-reaching demands and implications, are beautifully summarized in the multivalent meanings and associations of his concluding pen-name.

To begin with, the familiar Qur'anic divine attribute or distinctive quality of being suggested by the Arabic active present participle *hāfīz* immediately evokes in each informed reader a complex semantic family of divine qualities and corresponding human responses and responsibilities—while it simultaneously heightens our awareness of our relative realization of that particular divine Name, including our deeply-rooted failures to do justice to its demands. The resulting ironic complicity of the poet and his readers is of course one of the most familiar features of the concluding verses of Hafiz's ghazals. At a second, deeper stage of reflection and attention, which necessarily resonates with the reader's active assimilation of each preceding line of Hafiz's ghazal, we are reminded that this same familiar concluding expression can often also be read (in its original Arabic) as an even more compelling *singular imperative*, demanding that we realize and put into action—"assiduously, constantly, and perseveringly", as the intensive 3rd-form imperative implies⁴²⁰—all the implications and

⁴²⁰ E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London, Williams & Norgate, 1865), part 2, p. 602.

responsibilities of our true human spiritual reality and ultimate destiny, as someone who is indeed "*Hāfīz*".

So let us start with the multiple meanings of that key Arabic root (*h-f-z*), which occurs a total of forty-four times in the Qur'an: fifteen times in relation to God (and three more regarding His angels or spiritual intermediaries); six times in relation to the Prophet; with the remaining twenty verses referring to corresponding human qualities and responsibilities, or the lack thereof. As with each of the other divine Names and attributes in the Qur'an, the dramatic interplay of these two equally essential metaphysical perspectives—the divine Reality and its ongoing human manifestations and discoveries—lies at the heart of all the love-imagery of Hafiz and the wider poetic tradition culminating in his work: i.e., in its pervasive symbolic framework of the ongoing mutual courtship of the human soul and divine Beloved. The complex range of meanings of this *h-f-z* root in the Qur'an are very wide indeed, including (a) to maintain, sustain, uphold; (b) to protect, guard, preserve. These first two meanings are most obviously involved in the verses referring to *God's* creative and sustaining activities. But other related aspects of this Arabic root more obviously relating to our corresponding human demands and responsibilities include: (c) to watch out, take care, bear in mind; (d) to be heedful, mindful, attentive; and finally (e) to follow, observe, comply with (an oath, covenant, divine command, etc.). Thus, by the time we have reached the end of each of Hafiz's poems, he suggests, reminds us, and then often insists—in the immediate, insistently personal singular imperative—that we reflect on our actual realization of each of these fundamentally human spiritual responsibilities. In other words, the "*Hāfīz*" pen-name and its corresponding imperative sense provide a constantly reinforced reminder of those fundamental human-divine covenants which, in the Qur'anic perspectives familiar to the poet's original readership, constitute our very being and ultimate purpose.

Equally importantly, the Arabic root *h-f-z* does not stand alone in the Qur'an, so that at each concluding repetition Hafiz's readers (or at least those familiar with its underlying scriptural background) are also immediately reminded of an equally important set of closely associated symbols, realities and obligations. To begin with those fifteen verses where this Arabic root explicitly describes God's actions, this expression is directly connected to the most fundamental divine functions: i.e., to God's constant creation, sustaining and protecting of the heavens and the earth; of the divine Archetype of all creation and revelation, the heavenly "Book" and cosmic "Reminder" (*al-dhikr*); of the angels

(6:61); of the "Pedestal" (*kursī*) of the divine Throne (2:255), that encompasses all manifest being; and of that "Tablet" recording the cosmic Qur'an (85:22). Indeed God is repeatedly described, using an intensive form of this same root and divine Name, as *Hafīz of every thing* (11:57; 34:21; 42:6)—a quality inseparably associated with His infinite creative Love and Compassion: *God is the Best Sustainer/Protector (Hāfīz) and the Most Loving/Compassionate of the Loving Ones* (12:64).

When we turn to consider those twenty verses where this same Arabic root (*h-f-z*) is used to describe specifically human spiritual virtues, the fields of semantic association are equally fundamental and far-reaching. Most simply, that verb is often applied to our human responsibility for upholding and carrying out our oaths and agreements (5:89), an emphasis immediately recalling the central Qur'anic theme of God's primordial Covenant with all human souls, the famous "*rūz-i alast*" (at 7:174) that is alluded to throughout Hafīz's poetry and the traditions of which it was a part. Thus this same root is applied to our responsibility to follow God's commandments (9:112); to preserve modesty and self-restraint (24:30-31 and four other verses); to properly uphold and bear witness to *the Book of God* (5:44); or—in ironic contrast to the behavior of Joseph's siblings (12:12, 81)—to properly care for all our human brothers. Moreover, in a number of other key Qur'anic passages (at 4:34; 50:31-35; and especially 33:35) this distinctive human attribute of being *hāfīz* is closely tied to a long catalogue of closely related, near-synonymous central spiritual virtues characterizing the very highest rank of prophets, saints and realized human beings, those granted *the Day of Eternity* (50:34). These spiritual qualities and obligations include *remembering God greatly/repeatedly* (33:35); *being contrite and penitent* (50:32); and most pointedly and mysteriously, *safeguarding and preserving the Unseen (ghayb) which God has preserved* (4:34; 12:81). Finally, the essential dependence of all these active human qualities expressed by this *h-f-z* root upon the foundation of divinely inspired awareness or direct spiritual knowing (*'ilm*) is explicitly highlighted in the prophet Joseph's emphatic self-description (12:55), using Arabic expressions ordinarily reserved in the Qur'an for divine Names: *Verily I am hafīz and truly knowing ('alīm)*!

Given the range and spiritual depth of all these pre-eminently human responsibilities and spiritual imperatives associated by the Qur'an with the qualities of being truly *hāfīz*, it is not surprising that the concluding lines of Hafīz's poems often convey a profoundly ironic and realistically self-deprecating, sometimes openly humorous note, even as they necessarily evoke the full range of qualities and ideals evoked by this far-reaching divine—and potentially human—Name.

Finally, it is particularly important to note how insistently and repeatedly the Qur'an stresses that the Prophet Muhammad (6:104 and five other verses)—and more generally, all those with true faith (at 83:33)—are *not* themselves responsible for (*hāfīz/hafīz*) the spiritual decisions and ultimate fate of other human beings who may fail to follow and put into right practice the divine guidance. Being *hāfīz*, as the Qur'an pointedly insists in all these verses, is necessarily a *uniquely individual* spiritual responsibility, and the emphasis on that uncompromising spiritual individuality is surely one of the most familiar distinguishing hallmarks of all of Hafiz's poetry. Thus these particular Qur'anic verses, in so pointedly stressing the necessarily *individual* nature of each human being's spiritual responsibilities, directly point to some of the most recurrent themes and dramatic contrasts throughout his ghazals. They are directly mirrored in Hafiz's paradoxical glorification of the inner freedom and true responsibility of the *rind* or *malāmī*, whose conscious spiritual integrity poignantly exposes the recurrent human tendency—epitomized in his ghazals by the hypocritical pretensions of the judgmental "critic" and the "prosecutor/pretender" (the *muhtasib* and *muddā'ī*), in all their familiar inner and outer masks—to replace each soul's unique experience and inalienable individual responsibility by careful outward conformity to a safely limited set of shared social conventions.

II. FROM ASSUMPTION TO AWARENESS: DIALOGICAL PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS IN THE POETIC JOURNEY

Thus from the perspective evoked and suggested by this multi-faceted and revealing pen-name, each ghazal of Hafiz constitutes a very particular kind of inner journey, whose goal is to become—at least momentarily and relative to each reader's unique existential starting point—*hāfīz*, in all the senses of that multi-faceted term we have just briefly outlined. While the aim of this essay is to highlight that characteristic pattern of progressive shifts in perspective that are meant to be elicited within the reader in the course of that poetic journey, it may be helpful to recall a few of the more visible beginnings and conclusions of that overall process of spiritual transformation, since each poem understandably highlights only a few recurrent phases, stages, and manifestations of that wider process. Thus, to mention only a small sample of those unifying and guiding parameters familiar to any reader of Hafiz, we can speak of the perspective shifts from the mortal human-animal (*bashar*) to the theomorphic, spiritual and fully human *insān*; from duality and lonely separation (from the divine Beloved) to realized presence and reunion; from random likes and aversions to reasoned choice and intentional union with the One Will; from unconscious ignorance or delusion to spiritual awareness and inspired knowing; from self-centered impulses and desires to true mutual love and compassion; from a painful sense of

cosmic determinism to the realization of true freedom; from inevitable conflict to providential harmony; or from the prison of earthly time to the timeless realm of the Spirit.

Now while the list of those contrasting metaphysical perspectives typically opening and closing each ghazal could be expanded indefinitely, what is most crucial for understanding the inner working and distinctive progression of these lyrics is something much simpler and more directly experienced. That is to say, each individual normally begins this particular spiritual and poetic journey not with a conscious set of determinant metaphysical or theological ideas, but instead with a particular, immediate and undeniable *emotional state* (often anxious, fragile, or uncomfortable), which itself has apparently been "caused" or occasioned by the particular outward circumstances and constraints of our momentary mundane condition. At a deeper level, of course, that specific initial existential state reflects and is ultimately generated by an underlying, normally unconscious interpretive framework, by an apparently given set of determining psychological assumptions. But normally we all quickly learn how practically ineffective it is to attempt to change or remove such particular states and feelings simply through the purely abstract discussion and manipulation of such deeply embedded concepts and belief-patterns—all the more so as that kind of metaphysical reflection often tends to arrive only at still further intellectual paradoxes and antinomies. As with any effective therapy, actual spiritual transformation requires the mysterious awakening and engagement of unsuspected spiritual resources of desire, intention, and understanding—whether those openings subjectively appear to us as either inner or external—that at first seem invisible or impossibly remote.

Hence what is practically needed in this recurrent initial predicament posed by each ghazal—and what is so richly provided already in the unique rhetorical structures of the Qur'an and their creative reflections in the immense earlier Sufi literature familiar to Hafiz (both poetry and prose)—is an operative repertoire of literary tools that are particularly effective in first eliciting and then ultimately transforming our unconsciously governing inner metaphysical assumptions. And this requisite transformation of perspective cannot be primarily abstract or conceptual, but rather must bring into play all the intimately associated personal memories, choices, emotions and earlier experiences that together give our largely unconscious assumptions their existentially dominant influence on our outlook and experience at this particular point in time. This is where the unique artistry and extraordinary guiding wisdom of Hafiz are so powerfully evident, as attested by centuries of repeated efforts, in many subsequent Islamicate languages and poetic traditions, to somehow re-create his poetry's distinctive

spiritually transforming effects. Thus it is essential to keep in mind, as we continue to identify, analyze and illustrate some of the key formal elements contributing to this particular dialogical pattern of perspective shifts in Hafiz, that the outlining of these literary techniques is not an end in itself. What we are seeking to understand is rather their unifying goal and final cause: i.e., how and why these different constituent rhetorical features actually work—as they certainly so often do—in gradually moving each actively engaged reader towards a more effective and memorable realization of genuinely becoming "*hāfīz*," including the particularly urgent individual obligations which that rediscovered divine attribute (and human imperative) reveals and entails each time.

Within the ghazals of Hafiz, these typical progressive shifts in metaphysical perspective are normally expressed through the masterly use of a familiar set of rhetorical devices which have their own operative and literary equivalents in Rumi and other earlier classics of this spiritual and poetic tradition.⁴²¹ Most fundamental in Hafiz, of course, is the richly evocative *dramatic dialogical embedding* of these shifting perspectives, whose typically mysterious and intentionally provocative development is best illustrated through the actual analysis of the short poems later in this essay. In other words, just as throughout the Qur'an, each line of Hafiz normally suggests and requires the most careful attention to the dynamic, often highly unstable inner connection or implicit "conversation" between four equally essential elements. These elements of metaphysical dialogue include the particular momentary existential situation (at once spiritual, psychological, material) of the external reader/listener; the corresponding apparent, imagined state of the internal speaker(s) of each line; the potential audience(s) for the internal speaker(s); and finally the spectrum of possible tones, purposes and (mis-)understandings connecting the first three essential participants (reader, internal speaker, and that speaker's audience).

As indicated by the complexities of this already simplified summary, Hafiz notoriously revels in creating—often already *within* each line of his ghazals—a richly contrasting set of intensely dramatic, intentionally mysterious, open-ended and multi-faceted potential constellations of understanding. In consequence, the awakening and effective application of those potential alternative understandings, at each moment, entirely depends on the particular range of imagined meanings which each reader is able

⁴²¹ In particular, the underlying Qur'anic roots and inspiration of these characteristic perspective shifts and other related rhetorical features are discussed in much greater detail in our forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

to supply for each of these indispensable dialogical components embedded in the intensely condensed internal dramatic speech of each line of the ghazal. Perhaps the most immediate way for modern, non-expert readers of Hafiz in translation to begin to appreciate all that is potentially going on within these short ghazals—indeed often within a single line—is to encounter some of the extraordinarily dramatic, richly evocative miniature paintings which were later inspired by and devoted to mirroring and elucidating these unique poetic masterpieces.⁴²²

The particular demands of this uniquely polyvalent, multi-dimensional dramatic dialogical structure of each line of the ghazal on the properly prepared and seriously engaged reader can perhaps best be appreciated, by students approaching Hafiz's ghazals with little or no prior cultural preparation, by analogy to the similar degree of active intellectual and affective participation (and preparation) required by Plato's dramatic dialogues or by the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, which itself so closely mirrors the traditional divinatory rituals and expectations surrounding the *Dīvān* of Hafiz. Perhaps an even closer analogy, for some readers, may be suggested by the familiar features of complex role-playing computer games; or by recent cinematic thinkers fascinated with depicting the complex interplay between each human actor's outward destiny, character and inner history, fateful decisions, and the revealing consequences of our inner and outward acts of free will.⁴²³ For within each distinctively multi-faceted line of Hafiz, the actively engaged reader is unavoidably challenged to "write out"—and simultaneously to *act* out, since it is our own self and inner personal history and imagination that is so pointedly mirrored in our particular hypothetical understandings of the possible speakers, audiences, and speech-situations at issue—several plausible, but necessarily contrasting, mini-dramas, along with the consideration of their eventual outcomes.

⁴²² See our study of a later remarkable Safavid illustration of Hafiz and the ghazal in question in "Imaging Islam: Intellect and Imagination in Islamic Philosophy, Poetry and Painting", pp. 294-318 and 466 in *Religion and the Arts*, special volume on "The Religious Inter-religious Imagination", ed. R. Kearney (vol. 12, issues 1-3, 2008).

⁴²³ E.g., in *Sliding Doors* (dir. P. Howitt, 1998) and K. Kieslowski's *Blind Chance* (*Przypadek*, 1987); or the similar depiction of alternative destinies in *Run, Lola, Run* (*Lola Rennt*, dir. T. Tykwer, 1998).

Next, in the following line or two, Hafiz typically moves on to evoke a radically different perspective (both metaphysical and practical) that—just as with the interplay of different characters and personalities in Plato's dialogues or other great dramas—immediately tends to cast a very different light on the issues and alternatives raised by the immediately preceding lines. Thus each reader's simultaneous active inner creation and subsequent reflective re-consideration of each of these alternating mini-dramas—only further enriched by their interactions with the further dramas and perspectives of each succeeding line—precisely mirrors the familiar existential processes by which participants in therapy gradually become more aware of—and eventually responsible for and relatively detached from—the largely unconscious, non-reflective, and painfully one-dimensional dramas and dilemmas that originally brought them into the therapeutic quest. This is also why, just as with the study of Plato and other great dramatists, teachers quickly discover that the best practical initiation into these typically individualized and unavoidably interactive psycho-spiritual complexities of Hafiz's poetry is through carefully attentive *group* reading and study. For such shared discussion quickly reveals and highlights the dramatic alternative perspectives and resulting dialogues (together with their manifold individual implications and outcomes) so carefully embedded in each successive line and half-line of his ghazals.

In short, these progressive dialogical perspective shifts are part of a carefully crafted process designed to elicit from Hafiz's readers both new relevant experiences and contrasting interpretive alternatives, through such familiar devices as evocative, but initially puzzling symbols (paralleling a key feature of the earliest Qur'anic suras); contrasting schemas of interpretation, including the elaborate metaphysical and philosophical traditions well known to Hafiz and his original audiences; and the familiar Qur'anic principles of explicit metaphysical paradox and incongruity. Second, these dramatic shifts help to heighten each reader's awareness of key unconscious elements (i.e., our inwardly operative assumptions, blinders, prejudices, and so on) and previously unexamined possibilities, through the carefully suggestive mirroring of those inadequate assumptions or their destructive consequences, emotionally heightened by Hafiz's frequent (and often disarmingly self-deprecating) use of humor and irony. Third, Hafiz often uses these sudden perspective shifts to elicit each reader's habitual forms of projection (i.e., the emotionally charged mirroring of our own inner impulses in others), through more openly voicing our inner conflicts and assumptions in the guise of those familiar, recurrent conflicts and dramas that run through all his poems. Finally, each ghazal as a whole integrates those preceding elements in the reader's gradual movement from an opening state of one-sided egoistic desire and

associated emotions (needfulness, anxiety, longing, nostalgia, despair; or transient sensual distraction from that deeper suffering) to the potential transfiguration of that desire in the active reciprocity of true mutual love and spiritual awareness: i.e., in all the states and actions of the divine *Hāfīz*—and His/Her human mirrors—which are so pointedly and insistently recalled in each ghazal's concluding line.

For the poet's concluding pen-name is at once divine Name, human description and obligation, and *singular* active imperative. As such, however we may encounter it at the end of each ghazal, it constitutes an unavoidably revealing litmus test of where this challenging poetic voyage has left us, especially in contrast to the uniquely personal situation and dilemmas with which each of us necessarily begins this journey. Like the "Book" of all our actions, thoughts and influences that each soul, according to the Qur'an, is given to contemplate at its judgement, each ghazal brings us face to face with our own humanity, and with the immediate imperatives we discover there.

PART TWO: TWO ILLUSTRATIVE GHAZALS

Due to practical pedagogical concerns relevant to English-language students of Hafiz who are unable to read the Persian (including the ready availability, range and variety of translated ghazals, their relative literalness, and the helpful provision of a facing Persian text), we have based the following two illustrations on our own slightly revised versions of the translations by Elizabeth T. Gray in *The Green Sea of Heaven: Fifty ghazals from the Dīwān of Hāfīz* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1995), pp. 49 and 69. The original translations have been supplemented here only as necessary to indicate particular important original textual key words or clues (usually more literal or in some cases underlying Arabic meanings) that are referred to in the following discussion of each ghazal. The particular numbers identifying each ghazal here (6, 13) refer to their original order in that published volume of English translations.

I. PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS IN GHAZAL 6: THE "ABSENCE" OF THE FRIEND

This short and relatively straightforward ghazal offers a richly illustrative introduction to Hafiz's typical use of subtle and rapidly shifting, typically ambivalent shifts in perspective and voice. To begin with, almost every phrase in the opening line—as we shall see in more detail below—offers a complexly evocative set of inescapable existential alternatives (engaging and awakening each reader's will, love, understanding, and intention) which are then articulated and given voice in an ongoing, gradually

ascending internal dialogue throughout the rest of the poem. For the sake of simplicity, we could call these two parallel starting points the "two faces of the intellect" (*'aql*) already so familiar from the Qur'an and centuries of earlier Islamic spiritual poetry: i.e., the intrinsically limited, ego-mind of the basharic human-animal, in contrast with the all-inclusive, inspired and penetrating spiritual Intelligence. Initially, each pair of verses retains a single similar formal perspective, while at the same time subtly preparing the way for the more comprehensive points of view articulated in the following set of lines. The final verse, as is usually the case with Hafiz, stands alone as the definitive—hence almost always knowingly ironic and multi-faceted—response to all the preceding interrogations, inherently recapitulating and integrating all those possible multiple perspectives within the whole of each reader's experience.

Ghazal 6:

O dawn wind, where is the Friend's resting-place/shrine/tomb?

Where is that moon's stopping-place, that rogue, killer/enticer of lovers?

The night is dark, the way to the valley of [the burning bush] is up ahead.

Where is the fire of Sinai? Where is the promised time of *seeing* (the Friend)?

Whoever comes into this world bears the mark of ruin/transience:

In this tavern/ruins, say: Where is the sober/wise one?

He who understands spiritual signs lives with glad tidings.

There are so many subtleties: Where is the intimate of secrets?

Every tip of my hair has thousands of works with You:

We, where are we? And the work-less blamer, where is he?

Reason has gone mad. Where are those dark/musk-scented chains?

The Heart of/from Us went into retreat. Where is the eyebrow of the Heart-Holder (Friend)?

Wine, musician and rose are all ready, but

Life without the Friend is not ready! Where is the Friend.

Hāfīz, don't be pained by the wind of autumn across the plain of Eternity/time:

Have a wise thought: say, where is the rose without thorns?

Lines 1-2: Lost and indeterminate subject and object—but richly evocative audience:

In the first two opening lines here, both the speaker and the identity of the beloved Friend,⁴²⁴ the object of the speaker's deepest longing, are all kept carefully and rigorously indeterminate—an indeterminacy which readily draws in and encourages each reader to read these lines as a strictly personal soliloquy, immediately substituting the peculiar situation of their own unique experience of love, loss and nostalgic longing. However, the audience and time of this recurrent plaint also suggest immediately concrete and undeniable signs of hope and *presence*: the first dawn light, and the wind-messenger of the divine Beloved, with its fresh spring reminders of the reality and proximity of the Garden. The second line—indeed like each of the phrases in the opening verse—continues that opening question, but filled with the poignant reminder of the still abstract possibility of reunion: of those transforming theophanic encounters that tauntingly remain, at this moment, either in the mythical past (the burning bush and Sinai) or in the still distant eschatological future (each soul's "promised *seeing*", *ru'ya*, and ultimate meeting with God). Yet that abstract reminder is itself enough to suggest and constitute that inner way and lifelong path which will be revealed and discovered in the rest of the poem. Hence the constant concluding "Where?" refrain already begins to move away from the opening hopeless, helpless complaint to a nascent, more focused and hopeful inner quest.

Lines 3-4: The voice of abstract, generalized reason:

In these lines, Hafiz suddenly switches to the distant, all too annoying voice of abstract, detached and universal wisdom—to the familiar most outward (and equally abstract) "narrative" voice of the

⁴²⁴ As throughout these ghazals, the *yār* ("Friend") evokes at once God as *al-Walī* (the Close, Protecting One), and also each of the protecting and guiding "Friends of God" (*walī Allāh*) described in several key passages of the Qur'an. This keynote term (*yār*) is repeated twice here in the last half-line of verse 7, and indicated as well in Hafiz's direct allusion at the end of line 5 to the famous verse 5:54 on the divine renewing/salvific function of these Friends of God as the *malāmiyya*: "... those who do not fear the blame of any blamer."

Qur'an, that voice which pointedly speaks to the indeterminate "you-all" ("say" here is unusually in the second-person *plural*). In the familiar modern imagery of animated cartoons, this reminder of the transient nature and dualistic conditions of "this lower life" (*dunyā/jihān*) is the remonstrative voice of the white angel on the protagonist's shoulder, accurate and pertinent, but also painfully soft and distant. And in line 3 Hafiz gives full ironic voice to the bitterly hopeless, despairing anger that such sober, abstract reasonableness tends to evoke among those (and each part of our self) still helplessly attached to these passing tavern-ruins. Surprisingly, then, line 4 unexpectedly provides the beginning of a real, effective—and necessarily individual—answer to that ironic query, pointing toward the radical transformation of perspective articulated in the first person in verses 5-6. Appropriately enough for the turning-point of the entire poem, the first half-line of verse 4 (together with the beginning of the second half) offers what is still a poignantly abstract reminder of those dozens of Qur'anic verses emphasizing the omnipresence of the divine Signs, in every domain and instant of our inner and outer experience, and of the "glad tidings" (*bishārat/bushrā*) necessarily flowing from their proper appreciation and understanding.

Hence the conclusion of this line, marking the climactic transition of the whole ghazal, is a poignantly personal question, perhaps even the voice of an entirely different speaker (already the "I" of lines 5-6?). For each of us, there is only one possible and indispensable "intimate of spiritual secrets", and no real choice (or way out of this dilemma) but to turn in the direction of that Friend.

Lines 5-6: The Heart's essential Work of I and Thou:

In line 5 Hafiz, at least, openly takes that inevitable turn inward, from the abstract, critical intellect to the necessarily personal and uniquely individual—powerfully marked here by the very first mention of "I" and the divine, Buberian "Thou"—to the *Heart* (*dil/qalb*), the dynamic, mutual meeting place of the divine Spirit and its individual manifestations, and the unique locus of the defining human *Work* of creation, spiritual transformation and awakening. As the second half of line 5 indicates, those who are consciously busy with that infinite sacred Work of the divine-individual "We" are indeed in a radically different place from that complaining, critical, fault-finding "ego-self" whose many inner voices (already richly amplified in lines 1-4) are all too familiar to each of us. The forcefully emphasized "We" opening the second half of line 5 is not a polite rhetorical substitute for Hafiz's or our own ego-self (much less a vague bunch of people), but rather a radical and far-reaching, truly

transforming insight into this poet's own distinctive reading and understanding of that peculiarly mysterious divine "We"-voice which so intimately speaks so much of the Qur'an. The essential identity of this profoundly personal divine/human "We" with the transforming presence of the Walī/Friend is highlighted here by its explicit opposition to the "blamer" (*malāmatgir*, the inner ego-"blamer"): that opposition here is meant to openly echo the famous Qur'anic verse (5:54) on the saving, restorative divine function of all the saintly Friends of God, "... *who do not fear the blame of any blamer.*"

Line 6 then moves on to describe more completely the decisive inner transformation—and the constantly available spiritual choice—between the real "We" of the Friend/Spirit and the self-separating, illusory ego, which was so sharply evoked in line 5. This inner union of the heart-self and its divine creator-beloved Friend always remains bewildering and "crazy" (*dīvānih/hayra*) to our limited ego-intellect. For our individual ego-intellect alone—in Hafiz's already classic poetic imagery for conveying the foundational hadith of the blinding Face of the divine Beloved and its "70,000 veils" of all created manifestation⁴²⁵—by its very nature cannot see beyond the endless veils of created phenomena, which for it are always psychic "chains" of distraction and temptation. Only the Heart, when it is properly focused or "withdrawn" into itself (*khalwa/gūshih-girift*), can follow the subtle fragrances of divine attraction—here echoing that perfumed dawn-breeze (*nasīm*) which so evocatively opens this ghazal—back to the very Eye/Essence (*'ayn/ābrū*) of the One "Heart-holder" and ever-present Friend.

Line 6, then, leaves each reader faced directly with one essential question: with the apparent choice between seeing—and living—in perspective, in that loving awareness of Heart and Spirit which is both real and always connected with the divine Friend (every hair linked "by thousands of works"). Or else of dis-integrating and returning to the lonely separation of the ego-intellect and all the familiar sufferings (the "thorns" of the concluding line) inherent in its "nearer-world" (*dunyā*) of transient material entities, space and time—all quite literally destined to the pervasive "ruins" (*kharābāt*) of l. 3. Or between the divine Friend, the Beloved Herself, and her dark and endlessly veiling—but also fragrantly alluring! (*mushkīn/mishkīn*)—chain of tresses. More honestly, of course, we rarely seem to

⁴²⁵ "God has seventy [or 700/70,000] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendors of His Face would burn up whoever was reached by His Gaze."

have much effective choice between these two alternatives, finding our conscious selves, from moment to moment, apparently entranced in either one of these states or the other.

But Hafiz's final poignant "Where?" here obviously does not mean that we have simply returned to the initial helplessness and despair that marked the beginning of the poem. For the poet has actually brought his readers a very long way at this point, and his final two lines in fact are devoted to clarifying the realization and deeper insight into the universal nature of each Heart's individual *path* and *work* which has only now become possible. In short, we are simply asked to begin to recognize that the "Path" of this quintessentially human Work is not the apparent, dramatic motion from one lower spiritual point to another apparently higher one, as from line 1 here to line 5. Rather, that uniquely individual work, and resulting path, always lies in the *ongoing dynamic process* of spiritual learning and growth that constantly takes our heart back and forth from one state and momentary stopping-place (*manzil*, in line 1) to another. So that what we first took as separation, loss and failure is in reality the essential precondition for the ongoing human task of loving, of the striving and discovery of the Friend.

Lines 7-8: Recognizing the Friend's Work: Recapitulation and Conclusion:

Line 7 here, like the end of line 6, might at first appear like another simple and poignant repetition of the spiritual dilemmas first raised in the opening verse: indeed its opening (and pointedly eschatological) banquet-imagery, at first glance, is as close to familiar and banal as one will ever find in this poet.⁴²⁶ And Hafiz clearly intends for that confusion to arise, since he leaves it quite ambiguous whether we are to read line 7 simply as a continuation of the very personal and intimate voice of lines 5-6, or as a return to the more inclusive, objective, wiser voice that his readers often expect from his conclusion—the kind of all-knowing, reproaching wisdom-voice we clearly do find in the last line here. The transforming answer to that dilemma, as we might expect, comes in the second half of line 7, where we are reminded that Life itself (*'aysh*, which is far more than just enjoyment) is impossible without the Friend. So this time, what is pointedly absent from this scene is the opening pretense of the lost and

⁴²⁶ Or at least on the surface, at first reading, since in fact the simple "but" (*valī*) at the end of the first half-line here is itself also the Qur'anic Arabic term for the divine "Friend" (*yār*) whose presence (and apparent absences) are the subject of the entire ghazal.

lonely ego. Since we have been reminded that that Friend *is with you all wherever you may be* (57:4), there can be no question now of who is asking, and who is really being asked.

The concluding line 8 of this ghazal is a particularly striking illustration of the essential double function and meaning of Hafiz's pen-name: both as *vocative*—addressed to *every* human being and to all the far-reaching responsibilities of our cosmic role and potential as *hāfīz*; and in this case also as *imperative*, demanding (in the intensive 3rd verbal form) that we actively, assiduously, constantly "be mindful, watch out, observe, uphold, and be heedful." And both functions, of course, are unavoidably in the necessarily individual *singular* form.

Beyond that telling form of address, the rest of the first half-line here appears at first as a beautiful poetic reworking of the famous hadith: "Don't curse *al-dahr* [the apparent cyclical eternity, suffering, and fatality of the material world's order, often blamed in pre-Islamic poetry], because it is among God's Names!" But Hafiz's concluding, typically ironic formulation here—together with the rest of this ghazal—goes much deeper in offering a deeply insightful explanation of the reasons underlying that Prophetic prohibition. For as he has made clear, it is in fact *only* through the transforming human Work of our own necessarily unique and individual experience of suffering, loss, distance and separation—through constantly discovering the cyclical polarities and oppositions inherent in all those divine Names that are mirrored in the fully human being (*insān*)—that we can ever begin to discover, appreciate, know and love that Friend whose apparent painful, arbitrary "absence" (and constant guiding Presence) makes the whole drama of loss and redemption possible.

II. VOICE AND PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS IN GHAZAL 13: SURRENDER OR SEPARATION?

This short, apparently simple ghazal well illustrates the particular challenges of interpretation that so often arise when Hafiz leaves out some of the familiar grammatical and syntactical markers that normally signal important shifts in perspective and tone or voice. In the face of such intentional indeterminacy, each reader's particular understanding of the shifts in question, both in voice and perspective, tends to be built—as we shall see below—on the basis of apparent allusions to connected problems, meanings, and frameworks of interpretation familiar from other ghazals and from the poet's wider cultural and literary background. In this case, for example, we are obliged to assume from the start that the pointedly contrasting perspectives quite clearly articulated in verses 5-7 must be read back into the first half of the poem, and particularly into the two halves of the opening verse.

Ghazal 13

What is more happy than life/pleasure, spiritual conversation, the garden, and spring?

Where is the Saki? Say, what is the cause of waiting/expectation?

Take as a blessing each instant of happiness that is given to you:

No one knows (for sure) what the outcome of the Work is.

The connection of life is tied with a single hair: Be aware/wise!

Focus on (the cause of) your own pain—what is the pain of fate/time/the world?

The real meaning of the Water of Life and the garden of Iram:

What is it but the edge of this flowing stream and wholesome/delicious wine?

Since the sober/“veiled ones” and the (God-)intoxicated are both from one tribe,

We, to whom should we give the Heart? What is (arbitrary) choosing?

What does the heavenly sphere know of the Secret behind the veil? Silence!

O critic/pretender/complainer, what is your quarrel with the Veil-Keeper?!

The ascetic wants the drink of Kawthar, and Hafiz wants the Cup (of the heart):

So between the two, which does the Creator/Doer choose!?

*Line 1: “What is the **cause** of this waiting?”*

The opening verse of this ghazal sets out the two opposing metaphysical perspectives that are contrasted throughout this poem. The first half-line, a purely rhetorical question—and in reality an ecstatic exclamation of pure delight—straightforwardly articulates Hafiz’s (and each accomplished spiritual Knower’s) immediate perception of the inherent good of the Spirit and the realized divine

Presence, of the “Garden” of divine proximity as already present in the purified and receptive human Heart, and in the active “spiritual conversation” (*suhbat*) or interaction with the Beloved that fills it. In poignant contrast—both emotionally and spiritually—the twin questions forming the second half of this opening verse raise the recurrent problem of that unconscious spiritual blindness and profound “veiling” of the heart (line 5) which leave the critic/plaintiff/pretender (*muddāʿī* of line 6) and piously hopeful ascetic (*zāhid* of line 7) feeling painfully separated from God, unhappily waiting for the imagined future coming of the divine Wine-bearer (*sāqī*) and desperately searching for the presumably external cause (*sabab*) of this difficult separation and interminable state of expectation.

If the first half-line represents a kind of immediate, uncomplicated spiritual communication (*suhbat*) between Hafiz and each of his receptive readers, the perspective of estrangement and longing assumed in the second half-line is much more problematic, in that the relationship of the questioner and his or her intended audience assumed there can be understood on at least three distinct levels, each with very different meanings. To begin with, from the perspective of the speaker of the first half-line (whether we conceive of that voice as Hafiz himself, or his persona of the idealized spiritual Knower familiar to his readers from many other poems), the two parallel questions in the second half-line are entirely ironic, perhaps even openly mocking, since that opening speaker is well aware that he or she is *not* waiting or expectant, and always knows (as we are told again and again in the Qurʾan and hadith) that the divine Saqi and promised Gardens are *already* with us and at hand. Instead, if we do assume that same opening speaker is also raising these two questions, then most charitably he can only be doing so as an initially pointed, well-intentioned challenge to that host of deeply “veiled” (lines 5-6) critics, ascetics, and hypocritically pious “pretenders”—familiar characters in each of Hafiz’s spiritual dramas—inquiring inwardly as to why they still find themselves waiting for that same God whose Face, as they must paradoxically admit, we all must see “wherever we turn” (2:115). Finally, we can understand these two questions as reflecting the inner state of all those “veiled” individuals, plaintively wondering why God still keeps them personally “waiting” (until death or some other future time) to reappear and fulfill all those repeated metaphysical assurances and scriptural promises—assertions which the Qurʾan itself tellingly places in the *present continuous* tense, though they paradoxically insist on reading them into their own imagined or wished-for future.

The particular word for “cause” (*sabab*) in the second opening question here also suggests the underlying metaphysical issue or controversy shaping the entire poem, since in the longstanding

language of Islamic philosophy and spirituality, this technical term referred specifically to our mind's grasp of the complex chains of relative, secondary, spatio-temporal "occasions" for the manifest appearances in this world: or in other words, to the conception of our destiny as depicted according to the deterministic material world-view of the philosopher-scientists of that time. For Hafiz, of course, that opening analytical perspective of the ego-intellect here is dramatically contrasted to the spiritual Knower's immediate perception of God as the One and Unique Cause, the ever-renewed *Creator* (*kardigār*) at every instant, whose Presence in the Heart is so emphatically recalled and celebrated at the very end of this ghazal (line 7).

Lines 2-3: The "Instant" and its demands:

In these following verses, it is not immediately clear whether the speaker and intended audience (apparently an undetermined singular "you", effectively identified with each engaged reader) is the same as the opening voice (= Hafiz's own persona?) at the very beginning of the poem. Certainly the tone of confidence and particular emphasis of its spiritual teachings in these two lines closely echo the advice of the wise *pīr*, Magus, and related spiritual guide-figures familiar from so many other ghazals. What more particularly distinguishes this mature voice of wisdom here is its immediate, careful correction—first theoretical, and then intensely practical—of the recurrent human illusions underlying those two initial pained questions offered by the critic/ascetic/pretender at the end of the opening line. The Sufi, according to a famous phrase, is the "child of the present instant" (of the Heart's *waqt* or "eternal now" that tellingly opens line 2 here), and his spiritual Work is to remain attentive in the Heart with God, filled with the awareness of each new instant of the ever-renewed creation—the essential point with which Hafiz concludes this poem. For the veiled ones (in lines 5-7), of course, all the meanings and realities described in scripture are envisaged as "elsewhere" and in an imagined "another time" than this real now—an illusion (and self-delusion) so profound that the sad ascetic of this ghazal's final line would happily trade willful suffering and self-imposed separation for his imagined future reward.

The next line 3 then moves on to the more practical spiritual consequences of this initial metaphysical reminder: "Be conscious!" and closely attentive to that subtle life-connection ("a single hair") of the Spirit-breath always connecting the human Heart and its Creator at every instant. (Essentially, this command suggests the same meaning and central human responsibility conveyed by the Arabic verbal imperative form *hāfiz*, as explained earlier in this essay.) Above all, the second half of

line 3 reminds us that this inner spiritual attentiveness, that quintessential human “Work”⁴²⁷ and duty just highlighted in line 2, quickly reveals the ways that the hidden cause—answering the initial query at the end of line 1—of our apparent separation from the Beloved lies nowhere but in our own distractions, expectations, and deeper veils of belief and self-delusion.

Line 4: Here and Now:

Whatever its speaker and audience, line 4 provides perfectly balanced and centrally situated aesthetic continuation of this ghazal’s beatific opening half-line, which is recalled and reaffirmed yet again in the contrasting terms of the poem’s closing comparison (line 7). It is certainly possible to read this verse as a direct continuation of the same voice in lines 2-3, poignantly—and no doubt somewhat provocatively—expressing the natural consequence of those preceding lines’ emphasis on the immediacy of the Heart’s direct Knowing of the divine theophanies. For the divine Presence is certainly to be found exclusively in each human soul’s unique “*here*”, just as it can be found solely in the Heart’s unique present instant (lines 2-3). But the apparent coincidence between the poet’s opening self-described idyll and these particular ostensible scriptural-symbolic correlates—only valid if we assume that the speaker is indeed still the same here and in the ghazal’s opening half-line—also suggests a naïve and highly problematic attitude: it is almost as though Hafiz were instead ironically reminding his less perceptive readers of the recurrent dangers and classic misunderstandings that flow from such symbolic attempts to communicate the most essential spiritual realities to unprepared audiences. For such naively literalist (if not forthrightly stupid) readers might well read this middle line, like the opening verse, as though the poet were actually speaking “*only*” of this particular outward wine and stream of Shiraz—rather than of that Wine and Stream and spiritual Conversation, of that ever-renewed creation, which fills each human heart at every moment. In that case, one might imagine this line being spoken instead, with heavy implicit irony, by a rather gullible and uncritical, easily tempted, and already intoxicated adolescent listener who is excitedly responding to his own fantasy image of this poem’s three opening lines.

⁴²⁷ *Kār*: intentionally echoing the eternally “Working-Creator”, *Kardigār*, Who appears at and as the conclusion of this journey, at the very end of line 7. (See also line 5 of the preceding poem.)

Line 5: Divine “veiling”, wisdom and surrender:

Line 5 marks the essential turning-point in this ghazal, in that the speaker (who may still be the same sage in these concluding lines as in lines 2-3) now reminds his readers—and simultaneously includes them all, in the sudden emphatically repeated “We” at the very beginning of the second half-line—that our common humanity means that we *all* find ourselves, from time to time, in the contrasting states of painful “veiling” or of spiritual illumination and union (“drunkenness”). We have already noted Hafiz’s repeated allusions in so many other poems (including the preceding ghazal just discussed here) to the spiritual necessity, in the divine school of each soul’s earthly life, of experiencing and passing through the constant cyclical phases and oppositions of the different divine Names, before we can reach the realized state of *insān*, of the human being’s theomorphic perfection. Likewise here the radically opposed perspectives expressed in the preceding (and concluding) lines by the fully enlightened sage (the “drunken” inspired spiritual Knower) and the self-centered, egoistic complaints and hypocritical manipulations of the critic/pretender/ascetic are brought together in such a way that Hafiz’s readers—as an integral part of this “one tribe” of Adam—are obliged to recognize those dimensions and polarities within themselves.

Even more pointedly and controversially—since the remaining lines continue to elaborate this point—Hafiz forcefully reminds us (following strict and repeated Qur’anic precedents) that all the transformations and states of our Heart, at each stage of our path, are inevitably and ultimately in God’s hands, not the result of our own illusions of “arbitrary choosing” (*ikhtiyār*). For in reality they are always guided and determined by the ineluctable and all-Wise divine Will or Intention (*khāsta/irādat*), highlighted in the final words of this ghazal. From that perspective, once again, the “We” significantly beginning the second half-line here refers not simply to our common humanity, but to the two dramatically contrasting possibilities which that human state always offers us: to the extent that the “We” in question is the loving dyad of I and Thou, of our true self in surrendered harmony with the Spirit and the Beloved’s Intention (the “amorous glance”, *ishva*, in all its infinite and constantly changing forms), then there is no illusion of arbitrary or random willing (*ikhtiyār*), where our choice and God’s are already the same. This is the familiar “intoxicated” state of inner trusting surrender (*taslīm/islām*) and proximity already beautifully conveyed by so many of the earlier lines here—and a state which even Hafiz’s most obtuse and recalcitrant readers may have experienced from time to time.

The other way of understanding and experiencing this “We” is of course at least as familiar to every reader: instead of the human soul and Spirit in union and surrender, we can also focus on the constantly struggling and competing tendencies, tropisms and aversions of our basharic ego-self (*nafs*), whose complexities and deep-rooted contrariness readily give rise to our common illusion of arbitrary willfulness (*ikhtiyār*) and to the endless oppositions, complaints, and fruitless hidden scheming (*makar*) of the critic/plaintiff (*muddāʿī*) and ascetic (*zāhid*) alike. That illusion—and the pathways to its eventual dissolution—are the subjects of the following line.

Since the theme of God’s “veiling” of the normal, unenlightened "sober" human soul (*mastūr*, in the first half of line 5)—understood here and throughout Hafiz not as some sort of deserved punishment or arbitrary destiny, but as the most essential metaphysical *precondition* for our spiritual growth and perfection—is what most essentially connects lines 5 and 6 here (and indeed ultimately unifies all the verses of this ghazal), it is absolutely essential to refer back at this point to the underlying Qur’anic verses at 17:45-53. Not only is the state of those who are momentarily *mastūr* beautifully described at this point (see partial translation immediately below), but more significantly, the Qur’an here goes on to describe their railing and carping, blindness and illusions, and constant bitter questioning of God and the Prophet, in such vivid and dramatic terms that it is immediately clear that this whole ghazal can be seen as a beautiful poetic, orchestral transposition of that long scriptural passage. Here are the first two verses of that decisive Qur’anic section, which also pointedly highlights the ultimate divine responsibility for all the states of the human Heart, the ongoing reality that Hafiz so forcefully emphasizes in this line and throughout this ghazal:

And whenever you recite the Qur’an, We place between you and between those who do not have faith [=spiritual certainty] in the spiritual world a veiled barrier (*hijāb mastūr*). / And We place over their hearts shrouds, lest they should understand It, and deafness upon their ears. So whenever you mention your Lord, the One Himself, in the Qur’an, they turn their backs in loathing.... (17:45-46).

Hafiz’s intelligent readers—in his own time, as today—would immediately recognize here the dramatic (and one suspects, quite intentional) parallels to the almost identical forms of spiritual incomprehension and misunderstanding that his own inspired verses have so frequently encountered throughout history.

Line 6: Discovering the divine Secret:

In this line Hafiz—or the enlightened persona who has spoken throughout most of the preceding lines—directly addresses the strident, previously unnamed “complainer-critic” (*muddā’ī*) whose voice we first encountered in the second half of the opening verse, who was looking there for the (humanly manipulable or knowable) this-worldly “cause” (*sabab*) for all those reprehensible features of this world and creation which such characters (within each of us!) unavoidably see as the signs of an inexplicable divine tardiness, absence, or general failure to “perfect” the world according to the fantasies of their own imagination. The Mystery that lies beyond the veil of the celestial spheres (*falak*), of course, is the infinite divine domain of the spiritual and imaginal worlds of the Heart—a reality too often invisible and silent for such veiled and deafened characters, as the underlying Qur’anic verses just cited so pointedly emphasized.

But Hafiz’s essential point here has nothing to do with the relative merits of particular philosophical or theological schemas of causality. Instead, the poet’s bold exhortation of “Silence!” here—explicitly echoing one of Rumi’s favorite injunctions in his ghazals—is not so much an expression of impatience, as it is the indispensable first *practical* step toward the Heart’s eventual spiritual opening and transformation. Even the slightest effort of attempted meditation and silence, as we can all only too easily verify, quickly reveals both the radical contrast between the inspirations and illuminations of the heart, on the one hand, and the endless chattering and quarreling and plotting of the *nafs*, of the recalcitrant “monkey-mind” that is indeed so rarely truly silenced. Hafiz’s final question, at the end of the second half-line here, pushes the “pretender-critic” to pursue that process of meditation and introspection—of the constant Qur’anic injunction of *dhikr* or recollection, in all its senses—even more deeply, until we begin to discover all the depths of pride, impulse, manipulation, and grandiose self-divination lurking beneath this only too familiar hidden quarrel with God.

Now precisely to the extent that Hafiz’s reader takes this injunction and question to heart, this penultimate verse will quickly begin to reveal another very different, entirely transformed meaning. For the complex cosmological associations of the key terms *sabab* and *falak*,⁴²⁸ as we have explained,

⁴²⁸ The heavenly “spheres” whose motions together were assumed, in the Ptolemaic-Aristotelean cosmology of Hafiz’s time, to be the ultimate (visible) instruments of the chains of divine material causality, equivalent to the *sabab* which is inquired about in the opening verse.

inevitably suggest at first glance that the “Veil” and “Veil-Keeper” mentioned here must refer to God and to the apparently impenetrable metaphysical barrier—or so the thickly veiled critic imagines it!—between this visible world of matter, space and time, and that vast hidden spiritual realm whose infinite realities he can only imagine (as does the ascetic/*zāhid* of the final line) in terms of more familiar fantasies and parallels drawn from his experience of this lower world. But once the attentive reader begins to realize that the veils and their keeper in question are none other than the barriers of his own ego-self (*nafs*), of its profound “compound ignorance,” confusions, and chattering distractions, then every word of this line takes on a radically ironic meaning—and above all, profoundly different *practical* implications and consequences.

The source and nature of the critic/pretender’s perennial illusions is further defined and highlighted at this point by the key term *nizā’* (“quarreling”), whose many telling Qur’anic usages repeatedly focus on the multiplicity of conflicting perspectives and futile stratagems and plotting that characterize those who rely on their own limited means and worldly understanding, without true spiritual insight and inspired guidance. The description of the panicked reaction of Pharaoh and his counselors to the challenges of Moses (at 20:62), for example, also emphasizes the intrinsic secrecy and hiddenness of these murky psychic depths of the *nafs*: “So they quarreled among themselves about this matter, and they kept secret their plotting.” That inner psychic realm is indeed a “secret behind a veil,” unknown to the heavenly spheres—but potentially very familiar to those who undertake the Work-path of silence and spiritual purification....

Line 7: Balance, surrender, and the divine perspective

The true *hāfiz*—in each of those transforming and far-reaching senses that we explored at the beginning of this essay—already knows that the theophanic, mirroring Heart is indeed always filled with the wine of Kawthar and the Spirit at every instant—as is, of course, the deeper heart of the critic and ascetic as well, “if they only knew.” And in the course of life each reader, each human being, has passed back and forth between those polar states of “veiling” (with its concomitant resistance, dissipation, and empty imagining) and of ecstatic union and surrender (*mastī*) enough to appreciate both perspectives, to at least recognize each of the contrasting voices and possibilities that are so beautifully articulated throughout the course of this ghazal. The *apparent* human choice, then, is as simple here at the end as it was in the first half-line of this verse: between wanting what *is*, the ever-renewed plenitude

of created Being; and desiring an imagined illusion, while ignoring or even deprecating what actually is (and its Creator).

But to state the issue that bluntly in fact serves only to highlight our apparent existential helplessness and inability to influence or carry out that choice at all: neither the true *hāfīz* nor the veiled critic and ascetic seem to “choose” what is gifted to each of them in every instant. Hence the paradox—and deeper existential challenge—of the poem’s final half-line, whose question likewise seems at first to be equally rhetorical: “*So between them, what is the Wish of the Creator/Worker?*”, of the One Whose Will, as the Qur’an insists countless times, is truly absolute and unimpeded. Again, the question itself seems at first a near truism: God’s creation always Wills exactly what is. But that creative Willing of whatever is means not only these two nearly-caricatural extremes of human surrender and desire, or of veiling and understanding, which unfold and intertwine in the course of this enchanting ghazal. That Willing also includes the more familiar movement back and forth between those extremes, the movement that constitutes the constant actual turnings and unveilings of our Heart (*inqilāb al-qalb*).

So the simple recognition of these dramatic alternatives immediately provides its own ineluctable answer: Hafiz the poet leaves us with the next, imperative stage of the divine Wish—with the appropriate action and intention of the true *hāfīz* (already so perfectly exemplified in each of these ghazals), whose silent, joyful surrender to that Wish means recognizing and upholding each of these covenants so deeply embedded in our being and creation.

CONCLUSION: ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION, AND COMMUNICATING HAFIZ

Since the purpose of this essay is simply to introduce certain basic rhetorical structures and rhetorical presuppositions of Hafiz’s poetry for students limited to working with translations, the best possible conclusion is to move on to explore how those distinguishing features are developed in other, often more complex poems throughout his *Dīvān*. At the same time, it may be helpful to point out that comparable spiritual intentions and correspondingly inventive literary structures (or their visual and aural equivalents) can be found in many other fields of the later Islamic humanities, including other visual and musical arts, in ways we have suggested in a number of related studies. In each of those fields, much work is still needed in order to reveal and elaborate the still unappreciated role of such characteristic artistic devices—whether we are exploring them elsewhere in Hafiz, in the Qur’an, Rumi’s *Masnavī*, the unique language of Ibn ‘Arabi, or many other masterworks of the Islamic

humanities—in ensuring the effective participation and engagement of each reader (or listener/viewer), a participation which is almost always at once spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, and certainly (in the comprehensive Platonic sense) erotic.

Engagement and Participation:

My original discovery of the existence of these distinctive dialogical perspective shifts and their deeper functions in the ghazals of Hafiz grew out of many years of experiencing and then reflecting on the extraordinary power and efficacy of his poems when consulted for spiritual guidance (the familiar process of divination known as *fa'l* or *istif'āl*)—a mysterious but demonstrable quality and influence of his writing which I had repeatedly witnessed in the experience of friends and colleagues from very different cultures, backgrounds and walks of life, and which I had only seen roughly paralleled in very similar uses of the Qur'an and the *I Ching*. It was first in that long practical and therapeutic context of frequenting Hafiz that I began to appreciate and explore the ways that the peculiar intense combination of this poet's very different voices and perspectives perfectly mirrored—and so deeply engaged and revealed—different, often initially unconscious or inchoate dimensions of our soul (intellect, mind, desire, inner and outer conditioning, personality) which together shape and determine each individual's unique perception of the world, of the depths and possibilities of each unique situation in which we find ourselves. Compared with the *I Ching*, however, with its relative emphasis on the archetypal regularities and patterns of the more visible human social and political worlds, the particular mastery (and mystery) of Hafiz clearly lies in his extraordinary revelation of inner spiritual worlds and insights—in his long-acknowledged, but always mysterious, unique efficacy as the "voice of the Unseen," *lisān al-ghayb*. There is nothing like watching Hafiz so fully and richly mirrored in the varying reactions of a classroom of committed students to realize how comprehensive and inclusive his cast of characters and archetypal dramas really are—and how powerfully even translations of his ghazals can continue to engage such new audiences today.

Communicating Hafiz:

Given the distinctive structural features of the ghazals highlighted in this essay, it should be obvious that students of Hafiz interested in translations designed to more faithfully convey the forms and meanings of the original poetic text—a project which will always remain indispensable for any student or lover of poetry who is actually interested in learning to read and explore Hafiz in something approaching the original Persian—must pay special attention to each of the key rhetorical and structural

features illustrated above. Thus translators or teachers having that particular pedagogical aim in mind need to preserve, note, or make visible in some way to their non-Persian readers at least the following basic information.

- The essential perspectival clues and signs—key pronouns, number (singular or plural), verb tenses, imperatives, questions, etc.—embedded in each line and half-line of this poetry.
- The essential thematically unifying terms or themes, which are almost always deeply embedded in a bilingual, widely related semantic field drawn from the Qur'an and subsequent literary and practical spiritual traditions (Sufism, philosophy, theology, and so on), which must be clearly and fully explained to modern, non-specialist audiences.
- Those intended key alternative meanings or potential levels of understanding (whether of whole lines or of key terms), which shift and transform kaleidoscopically as each reader's own understanding and perspective is awakened.

Because of the shrinking number of contemporary readers and interpreters who are sufficiently familiar with even a few of the most essential fields of traditional Islamic learning and artistic forms assumed by Hafiz and his original audiences (Qur'an, hadith, Islamic philosophy, kalam theology, a particularly immense and rich Sufi intellectual tradition, and so many earlier Persian and Arabic poets), the challenges of elucidating these complex rhetorical unities and their intellectual presuppositions are becoming increasingly demanding and difficult, both for scholarly specialists and especially for their wider potential audiences. Against that backdrop, one can only hope that scholars aware of these growing pedagogical needs will eventually take up the challenge of providing students and lovers of Hafiz—especially those limited to English and other languages other than Persian—with something like the spectrum of more literal, carefully annotated translations and essential interpretive tools and studies that are now so readily available at every level for students of Dante, Plato, or the *I Ching*.

Finally, a more widespread appreciation of these distinctive structural features in Hafiz should also help future editors, translators, and other critics in their necessary editorial judgments regarding the often difficult and recurrent questions of alternative verse orders, choices of alternative readings and manuscript evidence, authenticity, and the like. The usefulness of this awareness is particularly obvious with regard to the much-debated question of the unity of the ghazal form, as well as in encouraging a more adequate appreciation of the different structures of and forms of the ghazal favored by those later

poets in various Islamicate languages who were so widely influenced by the prestigious model of Hafiz's poetic work.

Chapter Fourteen

COMMUNICATION AND SPIRITUAL PEDAGOGY: EXPLORING THE METHODS OF INVESTIGATION IN
CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

One of the greatest frustrations one constantly encounters as a teacher of virtually any area of Islamic thought (philosophy, science, theology, metaphysical Sufi writings, etc.) is the apparent assumption, in so many popular—and unfortunately, sometimes in supposedly scholarly—presentations and summaries, that the different representatives of the traditions in question, although living in very different times and cultural and intellectual contexts, were actually dealing with identical problems using identical methods of investigation and research. Thus one ever more frequently comes across books claiming to introduce an ostensibly unitary “Islamic” philosophy and theology, or “Shiite” thought, and so on, in a way strangely reminiscent of the pious formulas found in the classical hagiographies and biographical dictionaries (*tabaqāt*). (Of course one also finds such popular presentations with regard to Western traditions of thought as well; but in that case no educated person is likely to take seriously such one-dimensional versions of Plato’s and Aristotle’s supposed “beliefs,” as though all philosophers were somehow embarked on a single common enterprise.) Such writings are all the more misleading and dangerous in that they only reinforce a wide range of misguided pressures on today’s educational institutions to simplify, speed up and otherwise popularize established methods of teaching—through such supposed revolutions as “distance learning” (a radical oxymoron, from the traditional Islamic perspective!) and hundred-page manuals of lifelong fields of study—in ways that are unlikely to aid any genuine learning and understanding of the subjects in question.

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF *TAHQIQ* AND THE PROBLEM OF *QIYĀMA*:

Nowhere are such current assumptions more radically out of place than in popular presentations of the classical fields of Islamic thought (and many of the other Islamic humanities as well), all of which traditionally presupposed a longstanding master-disciple relationship, involving essential prerequisites, on the part of the would-be student, of needs, motivations,⁴²⁹ special qualities of intention and drive,

⁴²⁹ Arabic allows us to distinguish, in a way we can’t easily do in English, between (often unconscious) “pushing” drives and motivations and the “pull” of desires for things we would more

capacity, native ability and character—and ultimately, of inexplicable grace or blessings (*bāraka*)—that are in fact just as essential to genuine education in our own day as they were in past centuries. This is especially evident in the untranslatable Arabic expressions which were normally used in Islamic traditions of thought for the processes of investigation and research distinguishing each field: words like *maslak* and *tahqīq*. *Maslak*, for example, refers to the distinctive “path” to be traveled in the process of coming to understand the subject in question, an itinerary which implies a long process of inner transformation *within* the “traveler” (the *sālik*), as well as the complex efforts of intellectual comprehension which normally comes to mind when we think of “education” today. The key traditional expression for true education, *tahqīq*, is even more complex: its Arabic root, *al-Haqq*, “the Real,” is at once the ultimate divine Reality, Truth, Right; and at the same time the vast complex of human rights and responsibilities which are inseparable from our always partial recognition of the Real. Thus *tahqīq* means the inseparably moral, spiritual and intellectual tasks of both discovering and investigating—and then actually realizing or “making real”—everything that is demanded of us by that *Haqq* which we are striving to know and recognize.

The very different methods of *tahqīq* exemplified by the three Islamic thinkers briefly examined below can perhaps be appreciated most clearly against the background of the highly significant language used by the Qur’an to describe the same processes. In highly over-simplified terms, and employing the multi-faceted symbolic language of the Qur’an, one could describe the underlying existential equation in question as: *āyāt* + *nazar/tawajjuh* + *tafakkur* + *sabr* = ‘ilm. That is to say, the divine Signs, together with our necessary efforts of attention, careful reflection, discernment, and perseverance, open the way to the divinely inspired awakening of real “knowing”. Or in slightly expanded form, God’s infinite “Signs” (all that we witness and experience “*on the horizons and in our souls*”),⁴³⁰ plus our moments of “seeing” or “scrutinizing” and “paying attention” to them precisely *as* Signs, combined with our deepest efforts of reflection and penetration—all this carried out with dedication over the requisite periods of time and difficult learning and testing signified by *sabr*—may, with the indispensable mysterious

consciously like to attain or accomplish; students often have one of those sets of motives without having the other.

⁴³⁰ See the famous Qur’anic verse (41:53): *We shall show them Our Signs upon the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth/the Real (al-Haqq)....*

element of grace, lead to true spiritual understanding (*‘ilm*). Once we move on to later traditions of Islamic learning, or to the even more demanding disciplines of the Islamic humanities, of course, this fundamental educational equation is further deepened by the addition in most cases of historically developed social institutions and forms of learning *specific* to the evolution of the discipline in question.

The example I have chosen to use to illustrate this wider point here is the treatment of the times of the “greater” (universal) and “lesser” (individual) “Rising” or Resurrection (*al-qiyāma*) in three central classical Muslim thinkers, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1011), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, d. 1050/1641). The overall theme of *qiyāma* is particularly relevant because of its undeniable centrality in the Qur’an: the multitude of verses relating to that subject in the Qur’an are inextricably connected with any Muslim thinker’s conception of the ultimate purpose or finality of human existence and action, as well as their notions of the proper paths and means to reach and fulfill that essential purpose. In fact, in preparing this study I originally intended to compare the notions of the time and the time-frames for Resurrection/*qiyāma* in Mulla Sadra and in Ibn ‘Arabi, who is often treated as the historical source for Mulla Sadra’s extensive philosophic discussions of this subject, since Sadra often quotes the later philosophic interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabi (Qūnawī, Kāshānī, etc.) in the course of his own discussions. What I found, however, was that Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussions were so subtle, complex, and intimately tied to specific Qur’anic verses or wider cosmological perspectives unique to his own thought, that any attempt to compare “notions of time” in the two thinkers would have amounted to comparing (or confounding?) apples and oranges.

What was of far more interest in this case was actually the dramatic contrast between their respective methods of investigation, including their underlying assumptions and patterns of thinking. So while that contrast between Sadra and Ibn ‘Arabi is in fact our main illustration here, it may be helpful to start with a third great intellectual figure, al-Ghazālī (see Chapter Two above), whose relevant works and approaches in this area are both better known and already available in reliable English translations. As is often the case, the contrast between the approaches of these three thinkers on this particular eschatological issue also highlights the broader, more fundamental differences between the characteristic methods of investigation and realization (*tahqīq*) exemplified by each of these figures.

AL-GHAZĀLĪ AND THE LIMITS OF THE *IHYĀ'*:

Al-Ghazālī composed at least two separate works entirely devoted to eschatological questions, his short treatise *al-Durrat al-Fākhira*⁴³¹ and the final, fortieth chapter of his immense magnum opus, the *Ihyā'* *Ulūm al-Dīn*, now available in a superbly annotated English version.⁴³² The first of these is written in the style of a popular preacher, with Ghazālī's familiarly convincing rhetoric and unmistakable ethical intentions of awakening the desire for paradise and the fear of hellfire among his relatively uneducated readers of that work. What he offers there is a very consistent dramaturgy of all the events and locales of the *Qiyāma* and the "Last Day," with the complex symbols of the Qur'an (and some hadith) entirely abstracted from their individual Qur'anic contexts, taken in their most literalistic or apparently physical form, and detailed consecutively and as vividly as in any film scenario. His portrayals there are so powerful and consistent that they have been borrowed by any number of later Muslim authors, including Mulla Sadra, who takes them as the narrative framework for his own elaborate metaphysical discussions of the symbols of the Last Day.⁴³³ In keeping with the clear rhetorical focus of Ghazālī's writing, there is scarcely any hint in his discussions in this popular, exoteric work of any deeper meaning behind those symbols.

In the corresponding chapter of the *Ihyā'*, on the other hand, Ghazālī again passes in review the discussions of these same symbols, but this time as they are actually discussed in the Qur'an and the related hadith accounts. But in this work, which is certainly not intended uniquely for the common people (*al-'awāmm*), he goes out of his way to recall both the original scriptural contexts of those symbols and repeatedly hints that they clearly cannot be understood as somehow "literally" descriptive of a given set of material events in a specific, undetermined future time. In fact, readers who had worked their way through to this point at the end of this immense encyclopaedia of Islamic learning and practice would have accumulated many allusions to Ghazālī's possible understanding of the deeper meaning of those symbols. Yet at the end of his discussion, having repeatedly pointed out the

⁴³¹ *The Precious Pearl: A Translation from the Arabic*, tr. Jane I. Smith, Scholars Press, 1979.

⁴³² *Al-Ghazālī: The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, translation and introduction by T. J. Winter, The Islamic Texts Society, 1989.

⁴³³ See pp. 180-245 in our translation of Sadra's *K. al-Hikmat al-'Arshīya, The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, Princeton University Press, 1981.

difficulties—and the centrality—of these passages in the Qur'an and their utmost practical importance for each Muslim, he leaves his readers with the fundamental, still open question of what one should do next if one really wants to understand those expressions.

Within the larger context of the *Ihyā'*, however, there can be little doubt that Ghazālī is pointing his properly disposed readers toward the necessity of a qualified spiritual guide and of following the difficult paths of spiritual practice and realization under that guide's careful and demanding direction. So the key to Ghazālī's proposed method of investigation here actually turns out to be something essentially *outside* of his writings themselves: i.e., the role of the spiritual master and the wider institutions of the Sufī path—institutions which were still relatively new and actively developing historical creations in his own day.

MULLA SADRA AND THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF AVICENNAN PHILOSOPHY:

In the much later writings of Mulla Sadra (d. 1641), on the other hand, the themes and language of the *qiyāma* are treated within the context of a detailed, comprehensive philosophical system whose basic terms and presuppositions would be familiar even to most students of Western philosophy—a familiarity which reflects a shared set of historical roots and traditions. There the highly problematic eschatological symbols drawn from the Qur'an and the hadith are basically identified with corresponding metaphysical concepts and theological issues—such as the relations between the timeless divine Intellect and the “time” of the soul, or between the corresponding aspects of the human intellect and psychic experience. As in most earlier Islamic philosophers, neither the complex details of the original Qur'anic usage of those symbols nor the recurrent human spiritual phenomena to which they might correspond are really raised as significant issues.⁴³⁴ Instead, the larger conceptual framework (at once philosophic and theological) of Sadra's particular intellectual system—like that of his most influential intellectual predecessors, especially Ibn Sīnā—is both the subject and the explicit framework for his discussions of this problem.

In this case, both the aim of the overall discussion and the methods used to reach that aim are essentially intellectual and conceptual. And as with Ghazālī, those methods of investigation presuppose

⁴³⁴ See the detailed discussion of these issues in the notes and Introduction to our English translation of Sadra's work in the preceding note.

a wider institutional framework—in this case, of the existing books, schools, and learned professors of scholastic, Avicennan philosophy—which Sadra and his students and wider audience could take for granted, a framework which has largely continued to flourish in the religious schools of Iran and Iraq down to our own time. Given the fundamental similarities to other, more familiar philosophic and theological methods and schools, there is no need here to enter into the details of each philosopher’s system.

IBN ‘ARABĪ AND THE UNFOLDING OF SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE:

With Ibn ‘Arabī, on the other hand, one enters an entirely different universe, with a method of investigation radically different from that of most Muslim philosophers and theologians (of any school), or of anyone else primarily concerned with the elaboration of purely intellectual arguments and systems. As we shall see, his method of investigation throughout his magnum opus, the “Meccan Illuminations” or “Openings” (*al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya*)⁴³⁵ in fact closely mirrors and only elaborates on the forms and method—i.e., the intrinsic spiritual demands—of the Qur’an itself.

That characteristic method typically involves the constant complex interweaving of three distinct rhetorical elements (each with its equivalents throughout the Qur’an), whose intended deeper effects arise precisely from their ongoing interference and interaction; none of them is meant to be an intellectual end—much less a “teaching” or coherent “system”—in itself. The first of those threads is his constant elaboration of the actual, detailed symbols and language of the Qur’an, not by transforming the symbols into concepts (as was typically the case with the philosophers and theologians), but rather by etymologically and often paradoxically “deconstructing” the commonly accepted (and often fairly empty) understandings of those terms, while expanding their capacity to help reveal those multiple, deeper possibilities of existential meaning almost always implicit in their Arabic roots and their interconnections in the semantic universe of the Qur’an, which correspond to each reader’s own

⁴³⁵ See the very partial illustrations of these points in the eschatological passages we have translated in *Ibn ‘Arabī: The Meccan Revelations* (New York, Pir Press, 2002). It is now much easier to follow Ibn ‘Arabī’s discussion of these (and any other) issues and themes throughout his vast *Futūhāt* using the recently published CD-ROM (Qumm, Noor Publications) entitled *Noor-‘Irfān*, which includes a searchable text of the *Futūhāt* and the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, as well as a number of key later Islamic commentaries on the *Fusūs*.

distinctive level of spiritual experience and realization. Secondly, Ibn ‘Arabī repeatedly elaborates and alludes to all the intellectual, rationalizing approaches to the meanings of the Qur’an extant in his own day (philosophic, theological, cosmological, etc.), but in ways which always end up by reminding his attentive readers of the *limits* of those intellectual approaches, of the aporias, unanswerable questions and apparent contradictions to which such restrictively rationalistic, intellectual approaches always give rise. And finally, he constantly develops, throughout these “*Meccan Openings*”, an endlessly fascinating spiritual phenomenology of descriptions of and allusions to the vast gamut of actual spiritual experiences and inspirations—drawn from his own illuminations, hadith, the contributions of earlier and contemporary Sufis, and so on—which potentially correspond to and reveal some of the intended personalized “content” of the central Qur’anic symbols.⁴³⁶

Now the results of this distinctive method of investigation,⁴³⁷ to begin with, are quite intentionally inexhaustible and continually changing. In any event, they are absolutely impossible to summarize or conceptualize: any attempt to do so leads to portraying three very different, and irreconcilable, Ibn ‘Arabī’s—as though they were an intellectually coherent aim in themselves—, since the would-be systematizer necessarily ends up describing only one or the other of these three actually inseparable methods of realization. In fact, what actually results from this rhetoric, if the reader stays with Ibn ‘Arabī’s own writing and approach in its own terms, is an extraordinarily individualized and *personal dialectic between the soul and the mind* (intellect) of each reader which is grounded in the constant, ever-changing interplay between one’s own intelligence and one’s own ongoing spiritual

⁴³⁶ See the much more detailed discussion of the language and aims of this distinctive procedure of *tahqīq* in our recent two-part article: *Ibn ‘Arabī’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and “Translating” the Meccan Illuminations*. Part I in *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, vol. XXXIII (2003), pp. 54-99; Part II, vol. XXXIV (2003), pp. 103-145.

⁴³⁷ For Ibn ‘Arabī’s own explanation of the epistemological and other concerns underlying his distinctive form of writing in the *Futūhāt*, see our translations and discussions of key passages from his Introduction to that work in “How to Study the *Futūhāt*: Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Advice”, in *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī: 750th Anniversary Commemoration Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan, Element Books, 1993, pp. 73-89; and the more detailed commentary on those issues included in our forthcoming *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s “Meccan Illuminations”* (Fons Vitae, 2005).

experience. This dialectic⁴³⁸ process of spiritual intelligence unfolds between the “push” of the engaged reader’s moment-by-moment recognition of the coherence and revelation of each directly experienced “Sign” (*āya*) of the Real; and the contrasting “pull” of the constantly repeated suggestions and intimations of unknown, mysterious, not yet fully realized dimensions of that Reality, which have yet to unfold. In other words, what one actually discovers through this mysterious and initially daunting rhetoric, is the underlying reality of one’s own, uniquely individual, ongoing “dialogue with God”—an unfolding prayer, at once spiritual and profoundly intelligible in its own terms, which is at the same time a constant intimate and necessarily personal “unveiling” and “witnessing” (*kashf wa shuhūd*) of the actual inner meaning of revelation.

Now what is fascinating and so utterly distinctive about this process of the gradual unfolding of spiritual intelligence is that it is in no way dependent on particular external books (beyond the Qur’an) and studies, concepts, institutions, systems and teachers—although all of those, in whatever forms they may exist, are also potentially useful and fully integrated in its dialectic. One need look no further for the grounds of that perennial suspicion which this profoundly and necessarily individualistic work (*The Meccan Openings*) has repeatedly aroused among the proponents of all sorts of particular religious institutions and claimants of this or that exclusive truth. For in its most fundamental terms, Ibn ‘Arabī’s distinctive method returns to the simple and direct, inherently universal essentials of that basic Qur’anic equation with which we began this study. And if we have occasionally described this method as necessarily “individual,” that qualification should not at all be misunderstood as solipsistic or anti-social: the key to this method is always each individual’s unique *living practice and experience* of the revelation—in the forms and Signs which are necessarily unique and renewed at every instant, as Ibn ‘Arabī constantly reminds us. And the guides to the meaning of those forms—themselves centrally important Signs—are everyone we encounter, everywhere, all the time.

The stages of the path of realization and spiritual intelligence this “greatest teacher”⁴³⁹ has in mind, and its universal human roots, are beautifully summarized, not just for an elite, but for every

⁴³⁸ This term is used here in very explicit allusion to the special—and ultimately, equally inimitable—literary form elaborated in Plato’s dramatic (early and middle) dialogues, which is dictated by very similar philosophic motivations.

⁴³⁹ *Al-shaykh al-akbar*, as Ibn ‘Arabī has traditionally been known in later Islamic civilization.

person in their own unique way, in the extraordinarily compressed verses of *Sūrat al-‘Asr* (103: 1-3):

*By the fading light,*⁴⁴⁰

Truly the human being is in a predicament—

Except for those who have faith and do what is right,

and encourage each other in what is Right/ Real (al-Haqq), and

*encourage each other in persevering-in-faith.*⁴⁴¹

⁴⁴⁰ Although the key term *al-‘asr* here is commonly taken, no doubt because of its connections with the daily prayers of the same name, as referring to the declining, evening time, its Arabic root immediately suggests a “pressing” (designed to extract the “essential oil”) and painful pressure, close in meaning and its connotations to the equally rich expression *khusr* (impasse, dilemma, being lost and in great danger, etc.) in the following verse.

⁴⁴¹ *Sabr* is the untranslatable Qur’anic expression for the intuited but *active* spiritual awareness of the deeper significance of all the suffering that is inseparable from earthly existence; or for the true spiritual human being (*insān*) living in earthly time.

Chapter Fifteen

MAPPING ISLAMIC “THEOLOGIES”:
CONTEXTS AND CONNECTIONS

Theologians, as their name implies, do like to talk. And hopefully, they also like to *communicate*, to connect with their interlocutors in fruitfully productive ways that may lead to an enriched and genuinely shared understanding of their inherently infinite Subject. So unsurprisingly, among the most common—and at the same time, the most unconscious—obstacles to that effective communication in today’s omnipresent inter-religious and inter-civilisational encounters is the failure to grasp the radically different cultural forms and social contexts in which “theologizing” actually takes place and effectively influences people’s lives in *unfamiliar* historical settings. Thus, for example, those familiar scholarly accounts of “Islamic theology” that have been produced in the West since the 19th century have naturally tended to focus on the historical outlines of a handful of later learned Arabic disciplines—essentially what Muslim scholars have usually called *‘ilm al-kalām*, and a handful of early Muslim philosophers who profoundly shaped medieval Latin scholastic thought—that happened either to directly influence certain Christian theologies, or more often simply to resemble them superficially, in their outward form and topics. Yet despite the intrinsic interest of those particular learned traditions the truth is that *their* role and significance within Islamic civilization, even in their most accomplished representatives, has never been even remotely comparable to that of theologians (beginning already with St. Paul), throughout history, within every branch of Christian tradition.

So what I would like to do here today, instead, is to outline *the actual operative contexts and recurrent forms of theological inquiry and reflection* which have persisted for many centuries throughout the wider Muslim world, and which continue to determine the directions and possibilities of constructive change and communication—both within Islamic settings, and in Muslims’ wider interactions with other religious and cultural traditions. Since we happen to live in a time when no one can avoid the pressing demands for effective inter-cultural communication across an immense spectrum of fundamentally human religious and spiritual concerns, I hope it will be apparent that today’s talk is not simply a purely “academic” discussion. Of course, what I have to explain here does also help to sketch out the essential contexts for my own scholarly work. But more importantly, I hope that this talk

will convey certain essential, very *practical* principles that we all need to be aware of in order to undertake effective dialogue and “theological” interaction at any level in Islamic settings, from everyday situations at work and in local community mosques and schools, through universities and more rigorous scholarly research and exchanges, on up to global political and cultural encounters.

Today’s talk is divided into three Parts. First, a brief discussion of basic *contexts* for theological inquiry and reflection in Islamic settings, emphasizing some important cautions about the very different ways those contexts have been structured throughout Islamic history. Secondly, a short list of six or seven basic “ideal types”—in the strict Weberian sense of that term—or different emphases, fields, and aims of theological reflection and debate that compete and co-exist throughout all historical *and contemporary* Islamic religious settings. Finally, Part III turns to some of the more *constructive practical implications* of the preceding discussions, suggesting the ways that respectful attention to these basic cultural realities can encourage genuine theological understanding, effective communication, and deeper possibilities for lasting inter-religious cooperation.

One way of introducing and concretely illustrating all of the problems I’ll be talking about today is to refer to a remarkable book that I’ve often used for precisely this purpose in both undergraduate and graduate courses: Reinhold Loeffler’s *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village*. What that anthropologist brilliantly describes in his small Iranian village is an apparent paradox that I’ve personally encountered wherever I’ve taught and travelled in the Muslim world. First, most of his book is devoted to a detailed typological description of more than twenty distinct theological “world-views” that are adopted and lived out by different villagers, often from within the same extended family, but always in an ongoing, dynamic interaction with their own spiritual experiences, personalities, occupations, and highly individualistic spiritual outlooks. What is striking about this situation, to begin with, is that it takes place in a relatively remote and largely illiterate village where there had rarely been any resident religious scholar, and virtually no formal religious teaching or instruction whatsoever. Secondly, as Loeffler also clearly describes and acknowledges, those same villagers—despite their multiplicity of radically different theological outlooks and conceptions of religious life—almost all firmly share a common set of ethico-political values and powerful sense of communal solidarity. The paradoxical result is that an outside observer focusing on superficial political or sociological questions would immediately tend to lump these villagers together as a single homogenous group, without even suspecting the extraordinary richness and the creative, constantly evolving complexity of their

individual religious and spiritual life. As we shall now see in more detail, this often radical contrast between the social and the spiritual, the outwardly apparent and the inwardly real—or the *zāhir* and *bātin*, to use the standard Qur’anic theological terms—is a basic cultural reality pervading many different aspects of Muslim religious life, wherever one may be.

Part I. Basic Contexts and Cautions:

To start with some of the most basic meanings of “theology” that we ordinarily take for granted in Christian contexts, they would surely include the following three elements: (1) First, rationally elaborated, systematic examinations of the meanings and implications of scripture and relevant tradition. (2) Secondly, socially or politically influential or authoritative statements of elements of proper belief or action more widely applicable to *others*, within or even beyond one’s own religious community. And (3), as a natural extension of these first two elements, reasoned arguments for or against *alternative* theological interpretations, again whether within or outside one’s own religious community.

Now even beginning with apparently similar public, learned forms of what we might consider to be parallel “theologies” in Islam, certain **fundamental differences** immediately jump out at us, which we can briefly list here:

First, at the public, more learned level, those disciplines outsiders normally call ‘theologies’ in Islam (especially *‘ilm al-kalām*) have been primarily concerned *not* with these first two (and for Christians, primary) dimensions of theology—but rather with disputations⁴⁴² and polemics between different alternative interpretations or justifications of proper religious **practice** (and much more rarely, of belief). Secondly, throughout history, such theological polemics and disputations have almost entirely been directed toward **other Muslims**, and not toward other religious or philosophical traditions. In other words, public Islamic “theologies”, from the earliest period of the Umayyad dynasty and the constant bloody civil wars that marked the first formative centuries of the nascent Islamic religion, have arisen primarily as *dialectical justifications of alternative forms* of Islamic religious **praxis** (NOT beliefs) within the *same* community. As a result, nowhere do we find scholars concerned with

⁴⁴² (ironically, an activity repeatedly and expressly condemned in the Qur’an!)

articulating some comprehensive account of beliefs or practices shared by a supposedly monolithic “Islam” and contrasted with external religious or philosophical alternatives.⁴⁴³

In other words, particular *official*, learned theologies in Islamic settings, today as much as in the past, usually function as *social “markers” of specific communal identities*. As such, their meaning is related above all to their *correlative socio-political associations*, and NOT to any specific intellectual or spiritual “content” as such. One very dramatic classical illustration of this perennial situation is the famous theologian al-Ghazali’s (d. 1010) bitter words⁴⁴⁴—reflecting his own painful official situation as influential “court theologian” and ideological spokesperson for the Seljuq Turkish conquerors of the Islamic heartlands in his own day—about the arbitrary nature of the rampant conflicts of theological and juridical schools that had led to endemic civil wars and violent upheavals all around him. What Ghazali’s own theological output in that context actually reflected, he makes clear, was the ongoing ideological “world war” of his own day between those recent Seljuq invaders who were his patrons, and the Fatimid rulers of Egypt, a war intellectually mirrored in his polemic books’ elaborate outward facade of Sunni-Shiite theological disputation.

This very restricted public role of “theology” in Islam—in comparison to even the earliest periods of Christian history—is certainly related both to specific contents and emphases of the Qur’an itself, and to radically different formative historical events and settings. To begin with the historical side, we know of course that there were energetic—but in the end disastrously ineffective and counter-productive—attempts by both the Umayyads and the succeeding Abbasid dynasties to institute state-controlled schemes of universal theological teachings and controls, similar to the powerful Byzantine and Sassanid models of strictly organized state religion that had prevailed in the same regions for many centuries prior to the Arab conquests.⁴⁴⁵ And the egregious failure of those sporadic bloody attempts at instituting and promulgating official theological definitions of “Islam” meant that such failed efforts to

⁴⁴³ Historically, VERY LIMITED intellectual/theological interaction with ‘outside’, NON-Muslim alternatives (radically from Christianity vs. other philosophies and cults); NB: universality of Qur’an—PLUS politico-social dominance of conquerors— = absence of concern with ‘converting’ others, especially in terms of theo-logos: what matters is very minimal PRAXIS..

⁴⁴⁴ *Mīzān al-‘Amal*... & McCarthy translations...

⁴⁴⁵ Crone, mihna, etc....

institute a monolithic official state theology were certainly not followed by the scattered local military regimes which then ensued over the next millenium.

Another possible source of authoritative “theological” definitions of Islam might have been the learned urban practitioners (the *‘ulamā*) of the spectrum of Arabic religious disciplines that gradually emerged in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Islamic era. But those widely scattered nascent scholarly groups quickly ended up generating a *multitude of consistently differing* hermeneutical disciplines, schools, perspectives, and sectarian claims—articulating radically contrasting visions of the proper faith and practice of Islam—and eventually institutionalizing a standard spectrum of “theological” alternatives that has largely persisted down to our own day, as we will describe in the following section.

Curiously enough, the mythical self-conception of *each* of those alternative learned traditions of the Islamic “religious sciences”—usually naively mirrored by Western observers who tend to take the “learned” as somehow “officially” religious “clerics”—has often tended to include a dramatically grandiose image of their own religious authority and significance as “heirs to the Prophet”. We can sum up that peculiar scholarly self-image (to borrow some equally dubious terminology of modern economics) as a combined “trickle-down” and “trickle-out” understanding of Islam and religious authority: i.e., the notion that *true* religious praxis or belief is solely articulated by this or that learned Arabic discipline, and then somehow taught, imposed, or “handed down” to the wider, less educated masses (*taqlīd*); and secondly, that “Islam” (understood as somehow defined by one or another of those scholarly disciplines) then is somehow “spread” outwards from a few urban centers of learning toward “peripheral” cultural and linguistic spheres that were again less educated, or less Arab, and therefore somehow less “authentically” Muslim.

However, there is actually very little historical evidence, at any period, that the wider popular understanding and practice of Islam was ever uniquely influenced or determined by such Arabic learned traditions—i.e., as opposed to a much wider *spectrum of charismatic, vernacular, often highly sectarian local forms and expressions of Islam*. (The spectrum of modern-day equivalents of those other endlessly diverse expressions of the Islamic humanities, for example, has been much more clearly visible in the comparable rise of multiple forms of African-American Islam and of even more multifarious forms of Sufism in N. America over the past century.) Moreover, in light of the universalist principles (and repeated anti-clerical warnings) of the Qur’an itself, there were from the start a host of persuasive

scriptural and foundational arguments militating against any particular single learned “theological” definition of Islam, whatever its particular emphases and criteria.

What eventually developed out of this singular historical situation during the first three formative Islamic centuries was two widely accepted, implicit principles of religious authority that have ever since tended to govern the social and cultural expressions of theological reflection in Islam: (1) First, the *practical, operative* centrality of **individual**—whether visible or invisible—directly known and respected human “**exemplars**” persuasively modeling each abstract theological alternative. That is to say, what has always mattered to most Muslims, learned and popular alike, is not the particular abstract, learned “theology” in question, but ***the way it is actually lived out*** in the wider community and by exemplary individuals.⁴⁴⁶ And (2) secondly, in the intellectual and textual expressions of those theological alternatives, there has been the operative principle of a corresponding extreme *conservativism*, emphasizing *the centrality of much earlier classical “models”*. As in comparable areas of Jewish tradition, this fundamental assumption has had dramatic **pedagogical** implications, since Muslims even today continue to look to the **best** earlier models of each of these basic theological alternatives, not to the most recent or innovative theories as such.

The practical socio-cultural outcome of these two assumptions, which still predominates in most areas of the modern Muslim world, was *a shared social consensus of “esotericism”*, whose principles are profoundly rooted throughout the Qur’an.⁴⁴⁷ What this means, very simply, is that local Muslim communities everywhere (just as in Loeffler’s Iranian village with which we began) have tended to combine a common “*exoteric*” *consensus concerning shared visible **social practices*** (rather than beliefs) with a deep-rooted practical acceptance of multiple alternative pathways of interpretation, understanding and belief, whose richness and intimate interconnections with scripture, spiritual experience, and the exigencies of particular cultures, personalities, and ways of life often defies

⁴⁴⁶ Think of the community of ‘living books’ in Bradbury’s (Truffaut’s) *Fahrenheit 451* ...

⁴⁴⁷ (complex: prophets’ constant aim of communication, not coercion or domination; strict prohibition of ‘disputation’ (jidl) and pointless argument; emphasis on HIERARCHIES of understanding and faith in all domains and worlds; emphasis on open-ended, unfolding and transformational nature of faith (īmān; NOT belief) and ‘appropriate actions’ (sālihāt) flowing from those levels; emphasis on DIVINE action and responsibility.

description. The proponents and practitioners of each particular alternative perspective, of course, have inevitably considered their own way to be the best and “truest” theology in that situation, but the fundamental Qur’anic principle of the progressive hierarchy of spiritual awareness and divine knowledge meant that each such theological group would normally consider itself to be the elite ‘people of true faith’ (*mu’minūn*)—in contrast to the wider commonality of *muslimūn* (in the later Qur’anic usage of that term), who at least acknowledged those minimal social practices dictated by the locally operative religious consensus.⁴⁴⁸

The practical consequence of this near-universal social assumption of esotericism has meant that the alternative operative Islamic “theologies” in any context—from remote villages to the courtly centers of high culture and learning—have normally been multiple, overlapping and potentially competing, but not mutually exclusive or even opposed. Thus Islamic courtly arts had their marvelous visual expressions of this theological reality in their familiar images of courtly protocol, which pointedly depict a wide gamut of jurists, learned scholars, Sufis, poets, and sectarian representatives (including those of other faiths) carefully arrayed surrounding the local ruler. In other words, all the conceivable Islamic “theologies”—and operative social forces—are depicted there as present and harmoniously interacting under the same guiding and supportive imperial wisdom.

In particular, this fundamental *social* assumption of esotericism has meant that each of the basic “ideal types” of Islamic theology discussed in the following section is ordinarily *not* associated specifically with any particular sect or branch or region of Islam. Instead, *each* dimension of this potential theological spectrum has tended to flourish, depending on the circumstances, *within* the different sects, branches, cultures or regional expressions of Islam. Secondly, it has also meant that these different basic theological alternatives likewise cannot simply be associated unilaterally with any particular learned disciplines or their expert practitioners. In fact, most of the following major theological “types” can be found among the noteworthy individual specialists in such disparate scholarly fields as *fiqh*, *hadith*, Qur’an interpretation, *kalām*, *‘irfān*, *tasawwuf*, etc. Indeed those archetypal sacred figures (such as the Prophet and the first Imams and most noted Companions) who are normally presented as the paradigmatic ‘models’ of each of these theological tendencies tend to have been quite

⁴⁴⁸ explain iman, islam, relation to ihsan at end...

prominently involved in at least several of those broad intellectual-practical domains: hence the Prophetic hadith, or ‘Ali’s *Nahj al-Balagha*, can readily be interpreted or “theologized” by almost any of those different theological approaches we are about to summarize.

Before moving on to Part II now, let us stop to notice just how different these operative Islamic theological contexts really are from what we naturally tend to assume in Christian settings, whether today or in the past. These broad types of Muslim “theologies” are almost exclusively *intra*-religious; they are always *multiple* and alternative, and therefore rarely associated with the exclusivist assertion of sole political or religious legitimacy and authority; they have little direct connection to major sectarian or denominational groups; nor can they be individually tied to any specific discipline or single tradition of learning; and they exist just as diversely, complexly, and creatively in completely illiterate, remote settings, cultures and languages as they do in traditional centers of Arabic religious learning. It is probably true that relatively little lasting damage is done when erudite modern scholars unconsciously apply familiar Western, Christian assumptions about theologies and their contexts to explaining or describing Islamic civilization. But already it should be a little clearer just what dramatic miscommunications tend to result whenever individuals, governments, businesses, or any other groups try to interact with Muslims and Muslim communities on the basis of such radically different sets of theological and cultural assumptions—especially when those assumptions involve the naïve “political theologies” underpinning our own momentarily dominant political and economic order. In today’s world, everyone should be able to supply their own familiar illustrations of those highly visible misunderstandings.

Part II. Types of Theological Approaches—Methods and Meanings:

“Ideal types”, as Weber explained, are simply a very conscious methodological “thought-experiment”—and never a substitute for the real-world complexities and individualities of the actual history they are only meant to help illuminate. So with that essential caution constantly in mind, I would like to briefly outline for you today a set of six or seven basic theological approaches that one tends to find recurring throughout Islamic history, including today. My focus here is not so much on “methodology”, but rather on three even more fundamental defining criteria: the distinctive *field of reference*, of actual human experience, which each of these paradigmatic theological types tends to focus in on, to take as its defining “**problematic**” in connection with interpreting and illuminating the

authoritative scriptural sources; its specific arena of hermeneutical evidence or “**proof**”; and its corresponding characteristic **socio-political aim or intention**. Needless to say, there are also certain equally basic **internal** subdivisions and interpretive tendencies within each of these theological types, to which we can only allude in passing.

Now to make this brief experiment at once more practical and more concrete, what a basic grasp of these basic theological types can help us to do, whenever we encounter a significant expression of Islamic religious reflection (whether in a person or a text) that we would seriously like to understand, or even to engage in dialogue, is to begin to situate or “map” that person’s characteristic situation and approach in terms of these alternative perspectives, to discover the **particular type of “theology”**—**usually only implicit**—that is dominant in their life and wider situation. For one quickly discovers that in reality there is no simply corresponding Islamic equivalent of those standard more publicly visible theological “markers” (whether sectarian and denominational, philosophical, or political) that have for centuries normally served that identifying function in familiar Christian settings.

(1) The first of these theological types, historically developed in the Arabic intellectual systems of *‘ilm al-kalām* and *usūl al-fiqh*, is centered on the intellectual and the **social** elaboration of an evolving, all-inclusive “system” of religious prescriptions and prohibitions—in other words, what is essentially a “**nomology**” rather than a theo-logy; and on the necessary *theological justification* of that hypothetical juridical system in terms of its specific corresponding notions of the divine, prophecy, learning, and human responsibilities. What is essential to this particular learned theological type is the basic assumption of a humanly elaborated intellectual *system of social rules*, and *the institution of expertly trained specialists* able to discern and properly apply those rules in various recurrent social situations. Within this broad theological type, there is almost always a perennial tension—already beautifully dramatized in Plato’s *Euthyphro*—between the two polar possibilities of the understanding of that system: first, as reflecting humanly understandable, worldly ethical purposes of justice and prudence; and secondly, in reaction to the fear that such pragmatic human understanding somehow undermines the *divine* specificity of true revelation, the Euthyphro-like assertion that justice is instead whatever God (or rather, His chosen learned interpreters) commands to be so. Depending on that unavoidable choice, the aim of this theological type is normally conceived as either the maintenance of a just and stable worldly social order, or else the posthumous rewards flowing from conformity to these otherwise arbitrary revealed divine prescriptions.

(2) A second basic theological option, deeply rooted in the Qur’anic emphasis on the symbolic orders of the natural, created world and the corresponding repeated injunction to discover God through the endless divine Signs “*on the horizons*”,⁴⁴⁹ focuses on the intellectual or noetic penetration and individual reflective mirroring of the divine Intellect and Wisdom manifest throughout the visible created realms of nature, society and history. This wide-ranging theological type includes not just those political philosophers (like Farabi, Averroes and Avicenna) most famous in the West, but a much wider gamut of doctors, scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, and seminal historians and social scientists (al-Biruni and Ibn Khaldun), for whom this rigorous unfolding of the human-divine Intellect is both the primary *method* and the ultimate *goal* of theological reflection. In the political-ethical realm, this theological outlook has often been associated with the striving toward a more ideal socio-political and educational order that would properly support and encourage this ultimate human-divine aim. As such, one usually finds the supporters and practitioners of this hermeneutical approach surrounding and patronized by powerful rulers or influential reformers who are seen as having the necessary worldly resources to actually transform this kind of theology into a transformed social order.

(3) Thirdly, one finds throughout Islamic history a recurrent line of what we might call fiercely exclusionist, “*communalist-ethical*” theological interpreters who focus on the establishment or preservation of a sole, unique “**community of the just**”—usually identified with fidelity to a certain idealized mytho-historical group—and who, where they can attain power, concentrate on their corresponding duty to identify and wipe out the much wider number of deviants, misguided outsiders, and heretics who threaten that imagined group of “true followers” of the revelation.⁴⁵⁰ Although Muslim heresiographers normally identify this theological approach with the memorable murderous “Khārijī” tribal “secessionist” groups who were so central to the decades of bloody civil wars (the *fitan*) following the death of the Prophet, later influential proponents of this sectarian ideal like Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyya and ‘Abd al-Wahhab continue to inspire highly visible and determined disciples and continuators of that third theological option today.

⁴⁴⁹ Explain relevant verses...

⁴⁵⁰ Explain hadith of 72 sects,...

(4) The elaborate theologies of the diverse followers of the omnipresent Qur’anic injunctions to reflect on the divine Signs “*in their own souls*”⁴⁵¹ are devoted to discovering the **spiritual laws** and **theophanic realities** underlying *all* human experience, including those realms embedded and revealed in the closely parallel devotional and liturgical forms and teachings of each revelation. Theologically, these rich hermeneutical traditions have usually focused on (a) the spiritual-ethical and devotional dimensions of the divine Proximity and Guidance (*Walāya*) and on exploring the immense fields of human spiritual experience and creativity; (b) on the challenges (always both practical and theoretical) of the process of spiritual growth and perfection; and (c) on their essential socio-political preconditions of creativity, innovation, diversity, and effective wider forms of spiritual realization and cooperation. One can readily—but in the end, artificially—subdivide this type of theology according to relative emphases: ethical, ascetic, devotional, metaphysical, or creative and aesthetic. Historically speaking, for example, this theological tradition includes the extraordinary aesthetic “theology of Beauty and Love”, whose incomparable poetic, musical, artistic and social forms have dominated the post-Mongol, Persianate Islamic civilization shared by $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world’s Muslims (everywhere outside Africa and the Arab world) for almost a millenium, whose characteristic accomplishments of cultural creativity, co-operation and fruitful co-existence continue to powerfully influence creators and seekers throughout today’s emerging global civilization. And central theological figures in this particular tradition, like Ibn ‘Arabi, created what is probably the only truly comprehensive and detailed, fully coherent hermeneutics of the Qur’anic text—an extraordinarily inclusive “phenomenology of the spirit” that continues to inspire researchers from every religious tradition today.⁴⁵²

(5) Throughout Islamic history, although often less visibly than the four preceding types, we always find forms of theology focusing on the claims and inspired teachings of a particular charismatic, ‘divinely guided’ (*mahdī*) **individual**, whether those theological claims happen to be articulated in outwardly Sunni or Shiite historical settings and titles (Imam, walī, bāb, Mahdī or messiah, and so on.) While such perennial theological claims are inevitably perceived as sectarian or even heretically “non-Islamic” by other Muslims—as in recent cases like the Ahmadi, Babi-Bahā’ī, or Elijah Muhammad

⁴⁵¹ verses...

⁴⁵² Endless parallels with Greek Fathers and similar metaphysical and spiritual traditions in all major world religions...

groups, to take only some more publicly visible examples from recent times—other such figures, such as the founder of the Safavid dynasty or Ayatollah Khomeini, have had more widespread and lasting historical and theological influences. And anyone familiar with the Islamic world is well familiar with the perennial psycho-social underpinnings and mass potential of such messianic dimensions of this tradition, already clearly articulated in the many competing messianic Mahdi-figures described in the hadith and active in the first century of civil wars in Islam.

(6) Yet another fascinating and endlessly diverse theological type in Islamic tradition are the many *dualistic* theologies, of which the preceding type might simply be considered one subset. As throughout human history, those dualist theologies may take a ‘gnostic’, quietistic, world-rejecting form—or else explode in a violently millenarian, apocalyptic form. In either case, they persuasively articulate an imagined ‘refuge’ from painful worldly circumstances, an approach which has obvious perennial appeal both to certain psychological types and to any human community which finds itself momentarily caught up in extremely oppressive, endangered and fragmented circumstances. Thus we find such gnostic tendencies and hermeneutical options, in an abundance of individual and more visibly sectarian forms, everywhere in the tumultuous earliest centuries of the Islamic tradition—not surprisingly, to anyone familiar with the fascinating cultural and religious background of those regions just prior to the advent of Islam. Despite the obvious contradiction of such dualisms with the overwhelming Qur’anic emphasis on the divine Unicity (*tawhīd*), their obvious attraction to anyone caught up in apparently unjust, oppressive and frustratingly meaningless circumstances guarantees this theological option a perennial appeal which is particularly obvious in the shattered post-colonial and suddenly globalized circumstances of new Muslim nation-states in recent decades.

(7) Here, as one final theological type, I should simply like to point out that the particular theological dualisms articulated by all contemporary Islamist political ideologies share four further distinctive features that betray their uniquely modern and largely alien, adopted origins: (a) their materialist, this-worldly focus (unimaginable to anyone who takes the Qur’an at all seriously); (b) their historicist deification of their particular mytho-history, whether that be focused on an ideal past or future community; (c) their exclusivist/exclusionist assumptions; and (d) their radical rejection of the shared premises and implications of Qur’anic ‘esotericism’ which we explained earlier.

Now to tie all these alternative theological types back into the wider historical and social contexts outlined in the preceding section, we must mention one final and absolutely crucial reminder: *Every Muslim “theologian”, whether a learned scholar or one of Loeffler’s illiterate Persian villagers, must always elaborate their particular theologies within the all-encompassing practical context of the locally operative Islamic humanities.*⁴⁵³ In other words, the common Islamic emphasis on ethical and social *praxis* as the integrating context for intellectual activity (including theology) in general, means that any purely intellectual ‘theology’ in itself can have only very limited immediate effects on wider social spheres, unless it is first ‘translated’ into those spheres through either personal charisma or newly created *popular* expression of the Islamic humanities.

In other words, the centrality of explicitly UNIVERSAL, necessarily individualized, metaphysical and spiritual-ethical teachings within the Qur’an has always had as its basic outcome this practical tendency to include within the local Islamic humanities everything found within each historical context : i.e., (a) virtually ‘anything’ can be integrated into the all-encompassing religious demands of that message; and at the same time, (b) ‘everything’ one encounters in life actually must or should be so integrated. Let us give a few key illustrations of this basic interpretive caution. In early Islam, understanding what really came before and is presupposed in the Qur’an (or the hadith), given the much later and radically limited historical sources for that place and period, means that theological interpreters from the start have had to follow up—and often blatantly create and manipulate--endless different interpretive hypotheses and emphases: for example, notions of pagan Arab bedouin ethics; reconstructions of the mysterious local forms of Judaism and Christianity; or the egregious reliance of the early Muslim religious sciences on much later written reflections of the ambient Islamic humanities (*tafsir*, *sira*, *qisas al-anbiya*’, and most hadith). Turning to recent and more familiar contexts, likewise we can readily see how Muslims’ endlessly diverse theological reflections in America, today and over the past century, always involve the constantly creative and innovative integration of local cultural forms (in every domain of life) with selectively borrowed themes from earlier Islamic traditions,

⁴⁵³ (Pedagogically, this is particularly difficult to do, given the academic tendency to construct artificial ‘histories of books’ and theories corresponding to Muslim scholars’ own philological ‘trickle-down’ conception of their activities as closed-off historical ‘layers’ (*tabaqāt* [explain?]) of an abstracted, purely intellectual evolution.)

whether that be among dozens of small African-American groups, hundreds of Sufi paths and teachers, and even more diverse recent immigrant groupings... And even more globally today, we are all witnessing all around us the revolutionary transformation of the traditional Islamic Humanities—and their equivalents in other world religions—from the multitude of local, oral, and story-based non-literate cultures (typified by Loeffler’s Iranian village and its equivalents everywhere) to far more widely shared **visual and digital** cultures providing a radically unexpected common imagery of new spiritual, ethical, oneiric, and political assumptions and possibilities....

Part III. Prospects and Implications:

In conclusion, I would simply like to mention very briefly a few of the essential practical lessons that we can draw from the preceding discussion of the many specificities of “theologies” in Islamic contexts, in respect to three issues that are likely to interest everyone in this audience. And I should hasten to add that these conclusions are and always have been **equally** applicable to *Muslims*, whether theologians or others, whatever their situation and degree of learning, who would like to seriously impact the wider understanding of their faith. The first lesson is what these observations suggest about the *practical pre-conditions for real understanding* of particular texts, liturgies or practices we encounter in Islamic religious contexts. Secondly, what these considerations suggest about the *conditions for effective communication*. And finally, what further conditions, beyond understanding and communication, may be necessary to effect *lastingly fruitful cooperation*. Although I’ve had to greatly abridge this final section of the talk today, all three of these final points have direct and ongoing connections to my teaching, research, publications and other outreach activities, in ways I’ll be happy to elaborate during the questions that follow.⁴⁵⁴

To begin with pedagogical considerations, we now have sufficient original sources and contextual studies available in translation, for almost all disciplines of Islamic learning, so that students and scholars working primarily in other theological and religious traditions can begin to acquire each of the following four key elements needed to begin to understand these different “theologies” or hermeneutical alternatives we have just outlined in their actual operative contexts. These essential preconditions include: (1) Sufficient *mastery of the Qur’an and hadith*, **independent** of specific later

⁴⁵⁴ See McGill and Penn lectures...

hermeneutical traditions, so that one can immediately map or situate a particular thinker, recognizing what that interpreter is leaving out, what they are simply repeating, and what they are actually creatively developing. (2) An appreciation of how the *locally relevant Islamic humanities* naturally arise from every effort to relate those authoritative scriptural and other sources to the corresponding dimensions of human life. (3) A well-grounded awareness of the “*classical*” *models and paradigms of interpretation* within each primary tradition of traditional theological learning and communication, which always remain authoritative reference-points. (4) And finally, whether in historical or contemporary settings, a well-informed, nuanced, and constantly *active sensitivity to all the related human dimensions of religious life* (i.e., to the relevant Islamic humanities).

Here I am alluding not to some impossible ideal, but simply to the obvious *necessary reciprocal awareness*⁴⁵⁵ of the kind of experientially grounded spectrum of “implicit knowing” and complex awareness that almost everyone in this audience, for example, would bring to even the most informal discussion of the actual existential meanings of the sacrament of communion, in all its everyday and festal contexts, which is available simply from growing up and living within that tradition. Exactly the same is true, of course, for such fundamental and equally all-encompassing Islamic rituals and liturgies as *ziyāra* (not just the ritual “visitation” of outward tomb-shrines, but one’s lifelong evolving relationships with all the *awliyā*, the “Friends of God”, who guide and inform the decisive moments of each soul’s destiny); the *majlis* or “teaching circle” of shaykh and disciples that transmits and brings to life each tradition of learning; the all-encompassing world of *dhikr* or “remembrance of God”—in all its manifestations from collective spiritual music and chanting, dance, to its more intimate silent forms; *suhba*, or “spiritual communion” and conversation with the master in all its forms; or those constantly renewed “circles of communion” and remembrance to which the angels themselves—according to one of the most famous hadith—are always inviting us. Fortunately, even a basic minimal awareness of the way these central Islamic ritual and liturgical forms operate throughout lifetimes and collective and individual contexts is usually sufficient to give us the requisite sensitivity to *what we do not know—and therefore still need to learn*—in each religious context and situation we may be exploring.

⁴⁵⁵ See “10 commandments” for basic cultural understanding...

As for the implications and lessons regarding inter-religious—and just as unavoidably, *intra*-religious--dialogue and *communication*, once we have acquired the minimal background needed for a nuanced understanding of this constant spectrum of Islamic “theologies” and hermeneutical traditions, the practical upshot of what we have just outlined today is the absolute necessity of *knowing one’s audience, in its very specific context and concerns*, and then responding and communicating appropriately. “Knowing” here includes above all a healthy awareness of the intrinsic limitations of what can actually be accomplished in any particular learned or popular context, given the deep-rooted diversity of the actual living spectrum of operative theological assumptions and corresponding practices. This is an area in which, as in so much of life, we are constantly encountering new and valuable “learning experiences” which are usually most visible at the public and political levels. [Add, if time, government efforts in Europe, and Karim’s book on Shiite-Sunni rapprochement.] If nothing else, I hope that today’s brief discussion has suggested, to begin with, why such uninformed governmental or institutional efforts at dialogue and communication--modeled as they usually are on the radically different religious assumptions and cultural histories of Christianity and European history--so often end up feeling, for all concerned, like frustrating efforts at “pushing on a string”, or indeed quite literally a “dialogue of the deaf”. But I also hope that I have succeeded in suggesting some of the basic conditions and positive prospects for more effective and fruitful communication, once we have recognized these specific defining characteristics of the wider Islamic tradition.

Finally, our final point has always applied *within intra*-Muslim contexts, from the family to the civilisational level, and continues to be equally applicable to any wider possibilities of cooperation in that global civilization within which we are already living and working today. Very simply, lasting cooperation begins, as it ends, not with words, but with ***visible actions and communication of shared human aims and experiences***. Thus the most effective ‘theological’ interaction and approach in any Muslim context begins not with any theory or outward *logos*, but with clearly sharing, revealing and building ‘*what is good-and-beautiful*’, with those accomplished works of *ihsān* (the central Qur’anic spiritual virtue) *that are the aim of all faith and right practice, according to the famous “hadith of Gabriel.”* There *ihsān*—knowing, being and doing what is good-and-beautiful—is presented as the actively realized culmination of all the preliminary elements of faith (*īmān*) and ritual practice (*islām*). And it is described as the direct vision, whether mediated or immediate, of the divine Presence, in words

which again powerfully reflect the fundamental Islamic theme of the outward and inner, *zāhir* and *bātin*: Doing the good-and-beautiful, the Prophet explains, means:

... Worshipping/serving God *as though you see Him*—for even if you don’t see Him, He sees you.

That is the universal, outward reminder. But the very same Arabic words can also be read as a reminder of the deeper theophanic reality and the spiritual tasks of purification that are the ultimate aim of all Religion (*dīn*): “and *if you are not*, then you **do** see Him; and He sees you.”

In the Qur’an itself, that same foundational lesson is summed up in following unforgettable verse

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And for each one there is a direction toward which he is turning—so let them (each) compete to bring the good things (fa’stabiqū’l-khayrāt)! Wherever you all may be, God is bringing you all together. Surely God is Capable of every thing!

⁴⁵⁶ (at 2:148, in the context of disputes over proper direction of ritual prayer, the *qibla*, but the same injunction is repeated elsewhere in relation to all then providential differences of interpretation both within and between the divine Revelations)

III. Looking Forward: Prospects and Challenges

[? Hadith of *man sanna sunna hasana*? = *Part III epigraph*?]

Chapter Sixteen

ISLAMIC STUDIES IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES: THE CENTRALITY OF
THE QUR'AN AND THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES

Given the present auspices and historical occasion of these lectures, I suspect that one can assume that most of my audience today is already personally well acquainted with the peculiar intellectual—perhaps even spiritual—benefits and challenges of close study and immersion in radically different times and cultures: of the way such study and ‘travel’, whether through books and texts, or through physically journeying, inevitably brings about a sometimes radical questioning of our otherwise unconscious assumptions and cultural givens, and the disclosure—sometimes embarrassing and sometimes surprisingly liberating—of otherwise hidden and implicit agendas and frames of understanding. One of my long-time companions on those journeys, Ibn ‘Arabî, constantly refers to that recurrent condition of sudden perplexity, confusion and wonder (*hayra*), as a high spiritual state, indeed as the essential precondition for any genuine knowing and illumination.

If that is so, then I must certainly begin by thanking the organisers of this lecture series for this year-long occasion for reflection and ongoing ‘confusion’, of Ibn ‘Arabi’s sort. For my initial title, in response to their invitation, was something that seemed both topical and important, but also relatively simple and straightforward. Having very recently landed in an intellectual and wider public culture in which the very *existence* of ‘religious studies’—both as a popular academic discipline and as an essential part of wider public life—was still apparently unknown to most students, academics and intellectuals, it seemed a useful and reasonably simple task to outline just a few of the many dramatic ways in which that wider discipline has begun to transform how university-educated people elsewhere *do* actually study, write, think and teach about ‘things Islamic’. (Indeed it appears that my two colleagues from that field of religious studies who have already spoken here felt something of the same necessity, to judge by their announced titles, and I hope that I have tailored today’s remarks to complement and build upon their earlier lectures, rather than simply reduplicating their conclusions.)

However, I very quickly discovered that one could readily apply to this task of summarising or briefly defining ‘religious studies’ Hafez’s famous words about ‘(divine) Love’, *‘ishq*, in the very opening line of his *Dîvân*, where he says: because like love, it ‘*seemed easy at first, but then the*

difficulties started'. For the longer I reflected on what students of religion (Islam included) today actually *do* and teach and try to communicate, the more I was struck with how as yet un-articulated and taken-for-granted were many of the most essential assumptions and procedures of that rapidly growing discipline and wider element of public life in other countries. It is a very simple fact that great numbers of people are so busy *doing* and *creating* 'religious studies' that there really aren't as yet any adequately comprehensive and serious volumes explaining to a wider, uninitiated audience what that vast enterprise actually involves and entails. Indeed in the end, I still can't be sure whether what I had initially wanted to describe on this occasion should be seen as simply a minor historical development in the wider 'sociology of knowledge' in a few Western countries; or rather as the initial signs and opening stages of much wider, global transformations. Whatever the case, what follows are intentionally presented as a series of brief *observations and interrogations*, which we have no time even to describe adequately, much less to attempt to 'prove' or otherwise defend.

With those essential qualifications in mind, I have divided today's lecture into two roughly equal parts: the first is intended to sketch out a few essential features of the wider contemporary 'enterprise' of Religious Studies; and the second half will very briefly suggest some of the distinctive features and future directions of 'Islamic Studies' when viewed from within that broader perspective of Religious Studies. Given the limitations of this lecture format, these brief remarks necessarily constitute a set of 'allusions and admonitions' (*ishârât wa tanbîhât*) which in many cases would require much lengthier explanations if time permitted...

PART ONE: THE 'VENTURE' OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

I've adapted the title of this section in the hopes that for those of you involved in some area of Islamic history and culture, it may recall Marshall Hodgson's pioneering world-historical conception of the ongoing set of 'tasks' and 'visions' that gradually brought into being the civilisations centred around each of what we call the 'world-religions'. My purpose in alluding to Hodgson—who, along with so many of his colleagues in related fields at the University of Chicago only a generation ago, helped to shape and create this new discipline of religious studies—is to help you keep in mind the much wider, *extra-academic* parameters of this enterprise. For as a wider public phenomenon, shaping not just university liberal arts education, but through that various extended domains of intellectual and cultural creation and political life, 'religious studies' is in fact only a generation old. To be quite specific, when

I was an undergraduate, I don't know of any American college or university where Islam was actually taught within the rare religious studies undergraduate programmes that may have existed then. Yet today, in both countries (U.S. and Canada), Islamic Studies is almost entirely pursued and taught within a religious studies context, in virtually all the most prestigious and selective colleges and universities. Moreover, that radical transformation in the academic place of Islamic Studies is itself dwarfed by the concomitant shift in the ways undergraduates learn about and approach Christianity and Judaism: for within that same generation, the proportion of university-level students who learn about those religions within traditionally 'religious' teaching settings has largely been overtaken by hundreds of thousands whose first serious intellectual encounter with those traditions is now within religious studies courses.⁴⁵⁷

This vast institutional and intellectual transformation, which has taken place so quickly that it remains virtually unstudied, has relatively little to do with the inherited, elite university discipline, with its roots in a few 19th-century Protestant countries, of the 'comparative study of religion' or 'the history of religions'; those terms, although still used in popular discourse in some places (and in other languages), have virtually disappeared from serious academic usage, for a host of compelling reasons. One symptom of the wider social and cultural (as well as intellectual and 'religious') transformations in question is the way practitioners and students of this new field normally and institutionally refer to their enterprise: i.e., either as the 'study of religion' (with a very significant *singular*, referring pointedly to the universality of the full range of phenomena in question), or else as the 'study of religions' (where the plural is a grudging concession to persisting *popular* conceptions of a multiplicity of historical 'religions'); or finally, the judicious, politically correct compromise term 'religious studies', which helpfully avoids all sorts of recurrent misconceptions.

Now one of the fundamental differences separating this wider historical phenomenon from the older academic study of 'comparative religions' is the incredible diversity of its 'practitioners' and contributors and their multiple audiences—both as students and as ongoing consumers of its indirect

⁴⁵⁷ In sheer quantitative terms, this is best reflected in the way the 'American Academy of Religion' (the official grouping of religious studies professors which began in the 1950's as an offshoot of the 'Society for Biblical Literature', the established official organisation for theology and religion professors in seminaries and religious training schools) has come to far outnumber the SBL, both in participants and in its wider public presence and range of activities.

wider intellectual, practical and artistic ‘productions’. Those individual academic ‘practitioners’ could be viewed separately—and professionally speaking, often still are seen—as specialised historians, philologists, linguists, philosophers, political scientists, anthropologists, theologians, psychologists, and interpreters of arts, music, literature, architecture. (By the way, the length of that catalogue—still only very partial—is quite intentional. However quixotic it might seem, no serious, self-respecting student and teacher of religious studies today could possibly reject or leave out of account the ongoing necessary contributions of *any* of those disciplines. That listing also helps to suggest how radically different and demandingly creative ‘Islamic Studies’ must appear whenever it is pursued within that wider context of religious studies, as it is increasingly today.) Yet the practitioners, students and wider audiences in this field of religious studies are also bound together by distinctive set of common assumptions, procedures, purposes and motivations.

Another fruitful way of approaching the transformations in question is to turn to bookstores, which—considerably more than academia—are forced to reflect, fairly accurately, the interests and tastes of a wider educated public. Here again, if we enter a major bookstore⁴⁵⁸ and look at the books commonly read by someone interested and trained in ‘religious studies’, we discover that related books would include what were once separate domains of philosophy, theologies, mythologies, psychology, much of literature and film study, and many forms of healing and therapy. In most of those cases, of course, the corresponding university disciplines in many countries have also recently turned inward and taken on highly specialised, narrowly self-referential forms, while surrendering their traditional audiences to the new enterprise of religious studies, which now increasingly encompasses the wider audiences and the perennial motivations for students and readers of any age to turn to those intimately connected areas of spiritual expression, practice and inquiry.

⁴⁵⁸ In the English-speaking world, that is. In France, the same range of books are normally brought together in more specialised ‘esoteric’ bookshops to be found in every quarter, neighbourhood or town, already for many decades. Although the ‘sociology of religious studies’ does not yet exist, one may speculate that that earlier development of such specialised bookstores in France reflects that country’s earlier experience—going back at least for several centuries--of the separation of its official public ‘religion’ from the wider practice and pursuit of spirituality (a key English word whose current uses also reflect a French origin.)

At this broadest, public level—at least in the areas so far most visibly concerned—people are motivated to study and pursue ‘religious studies’, both inside and outside the university, because it is the one place they can still go to pursue those unavoidable, universal metaphysical questions of spiritual orientation which never leave us: i.e., who are we, where have we come from, what is our ultimate purpose here, and how do we translate that purpose into effective and principled action? Thus that wider public interest in ‘religious studies’—and the astonishingly rapid creation of corresponding academic facilities and possibilities for its exploration—clearly corresponds to that widely felt necessity for discovering a common, mutually comprehensible language and forms of practical expression suitable for (a) clearly taking into account *common* human roots of disparate historical traditions of spiritual guidance and discovery/realisation; and (b) for revealing and making possible genuine *communities* of realisation (of both vision and effective action). In this respect, as I have pointed out elsewhere,⁴⁵⁹ the remarkable growth and wider public appeal of religious studies has closely paralleled in many significant ways the simultaneous academic and popular development of ecological or ‘environmental studies’, which likewise integrates a wide range of pre-existing physical and social sciences around similarly common, universal challenges and increasingly global domains of action. And of course both of these wider public phenomena (in the development of religious studies and of environmental studies) raise a wide range of ‘causal’ and comparative questions—i.e., why have these developments happened at all, and why so much more visibly and institutionally in some places than others—which unfortunately we cannot pursue in a single lecture.

To return to the unifying motives and assumptions shared by the ‘audiences’ and ‘practitioners’ of this new field of religious studies, in the highly summary form required by this lecture setting, the methodological code-word employed by almost all those working in this field—no doubt precisely because it can be understood in many entirely different ways!—is ‘*phenomenology*’: that is, the shared commitment to ‘*describe* the phenomena’ or recurrent ‘forms of manifestation’ of religious life as accurately and adequately as possible, without the reductionisms and exclusions that continue to bedevil each of its ‘constituent’ fields of research in the social sciences and humanities. (Any serious discussion of the field, of course, would have to raise the obvious question whether all these disparate

⁴⁵⁹ See the final chapter of our new book *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2001).

attempts at ‘phenomenology’ are simply a kind of stopgap, temporary steppingstone on the way to some more adequately explanatory ‘science’; or whether that convenient term is instead simply a useful temporary ‘flag of truce’, momentarily disguising a host of entirely incompatible methodologies from those distinct component disciplines.) In either case, the actual practice of religious studies for the time being operates on the following three basic assumptions or ‘working hypotheses’, whose ongoing utility and convincing power are primarily to be found in the actual practice of the discipline, rather than in any sort of scientifically objective or universally persuasive ‘demonstration’.

The first basic assumption is that, at each relevant level of phenomena and their analysis (social, political, cultural, etc.), the observable laws and regularities one discovers apply to *all* human beings, without being limited to any particular culture’s or religion’s momentary definitions of what might be considered ‘religious’. This is of course already a basic working assumption of each of the subsidiary ‘constitutive’ social-scientific disciplines (anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, etc.): the further assumption here in the ‘science of religion’ is that those constituent scientific fields can themselves eventually be *integrated* within a larger and more inclusive domain of description and explanation.

The second basic assumption—or again, the common goal and working hypothesis—is that the study of religion must be *comprehensive*: that is, that it must adequately include and integrate *both* of the equally essential and ultimately inseparable dimensions of all religious life. In other words, its phenomenology must adequately describe and include not only the ‘external’, historically visible phenomena largely covered by the above-mentioned social sciences, but also the ‘inner’, *experiential* dimensions of religious life expressed and recorded in all the relevant areas of expression: music, literature, poetry, arts, myth, ritual, metaphysics and the absolutely central domains of our ethical life and practical spirituality, which are often so much more universal and pervasive than what we normally think of as ‘religious’ practice and rituals in almost any historical context. (Many of my brief remarks in the second part of this lecture have to do with the extraordinary neglect of that immense dimension of Islamic Studies, to date, and the ways that inherited situation is accordingly likely to change for students and teachers of Islamic Studies working in the wider context of religious studies.)

The third basic assumption of the field of religious studies, providing a sort of capstone for the two hypotheses just mentioned, is that it must potentially offer a *comprehensive integration* of the

descriptive (and explanatory?) methods of each participating sub-discipline which is uniquely fitted to those *specific*, uniquely ‘spiritual’ dimensions of religious phenomena. In recent decades, of course, the newly participating sub-disciplines in religious studies—as it has emerged from its historical and philological origins—have been drawn mainly from the social sciences; but in the future that synthesis will no doubt increasingly involve related life-sciences (medicine, biology, ecology, psychology, etc.) and related practical, ‘therapeutic’ disciplines which can provide new insights into what we have long considered ‘meta-physical’ realms and influences. Without this final methodological assumption—or dream or hope, if you prefer—religious studies in the narrower academic sense would of course gradually disintegrate into its many contributing methodologies and sub-disciplines. And more importantly, it would quickly lose precisely that wider *public* dimension, which is what is actually motivating the vast majority of its students and ‘audiences’, that it has increasingly taken on in the last generation.

Of course each major civilisation and world-religion—and in less immediately visible ways, many of the pre-literate cultures and communities studied by anthropologists—has already developed its own ‘maps’, guides and disciplines (both theoretical and practical) specifically devoted to integrating the metaphysical dimensions and processes of spiritual realisation shared by all human beings. Thus the essential core of ‘religious studies’ today, just as in those cognate fields in the past, continues to lie in those two practically inseparable aspects of our spiritual life: *ontology*, metaphysics or (in mythical and symbolic terms), *cosmology*, on the one hand; and on the other, *epistemology* and the dimensions of spiritual realisation (or in symbolic language, *eschatology*). As in the past, a persuasively comprehensive and adequate ‘phenomenology of the Spirit’ is indispensable in order to make sense of all the subsidiary and derivative phenomena of human beings’ inner and outer lives, and of all the visible diversity—both within and between the historical ‘religions’—of practical ‘means of approach’ and their disparate outward forms and expressions: prescriptions, rituals, myths, and so on. The increasing public interest in the ‘study of religion’, in all its manifestations, is primarily rooted in the quite understandable search for convincing answers to those perennial human questions of orientation already mentioned above, only within the peculiar new *global* circumstances (economic, cultural, social and political) of contemporary life which have so radically transformed the traditional roles and shapes of the world ‘religions’ outside their original agrarian contexts.

One of the remarkably ironic aspects of that search—given the temporary public prominence of the most reductionist ‘islamist’ ideologies at the moment—is that the operative versions of that ‘phenomenology of the Spirit’ and its religious expressions employed in the field of the study of religion anywhere in world today, whatever the particular religions in question, are largely drawn from and refer to ideas and schemas which Ibn ‘Arabi (and his host of lastingly influential intellectual and artistic successors) originally developed in a similar quest to understand and account for the extraordinary range of creative (and often conflicting) expressions of Islam, in every domain of life, in the key centuries of its still largely unstudied development and spread as a world religion, prior to the 18th century.⁴⁶⁰ Thus this new enterprise of ‘religious studies’, curiously enough, has found its deepest common roots in the Qur’an’s universal metaphysical conception of human beings and their situation and destiny. And the emerging ‘science of spirituality’ toward which the venture of ‘religious studies’ is currently leading us is likely to continue to draw disproportionately on the great thinkers, poets, artists and other spiritual writers of those later Islamic humanities. So if that historical ‘secret’ is best kept hidden from certain publics, for obvious practical reasons, it does suggest a host of new tasks and as yet unexplored avenues of research for those now pursuing Islamic studies within the context of religious studies.

PART TWO: THE QUR’AN AND THE ‘ISLAMIC HUMANITIES’ IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

What goes on in actually *teaching* the ‘*study of religion*’—especially at the undergraduate level, where students are only ‘learning how to learn’—is quite different from what may appear to outsiders who approach this practice only through books or analogies with more familiar disciplines. I mention this because in describing some basic points about that process of teaching I can also make clear what I mean here by the ‘Islamic Humanities’—or by their constantly evolving equivalents in *every* religious and cultural setting. There are two equally indispensable sides to the ongoing ‘phenomenology’ of

⁴⁶⁰ See the discussion of those processes of transmission in our paper on ‘*Ibn ‘Arabi in the ‘Far West’: Spiritual Influences and the Science of Spirituality*’, forthcoming in the proceedings of the recent (Jan. 2001) University of Kyoto international conference on the influences of Ibn ‘Arabî in Asia. Of course the same wider—one might even say ‘indispensable’—role of Ibn ‘Arabî’s immense phenomenology of the spiritual life also helps to explain the extraordinary number of conferences and symposia devoted to his thought each year, in so many parts of the globe.

religious life: the first, most visible, aspect has to do with the search for adequate, accurate and comprehensive *descriptions* of the ‘phenomena’ in question, on whatever plane. Ordinarily this can and does look a lot like ‘normal’ historical and philological (or contemporary ‘field-work’) scholarship. The other side has to do with discovering and communicating the actual *understanding* of the phenomena in question, of the essential, recurrent principles and laws, at the particular level of reality concerned, which are manifest in those particular phenomena. As any teacher in this field, at any level, quickly comes to understand, we can pile up endless relevant descriptions, on the one hand, and any number of abstract or symbolic discussions of the relevant laws and principles, on the other, without our students actually being able to make the essential *cognitive* connection between those two processes. The ‘secret’ of successful teaching and genuine communication—in the classroom or any other context—depends on two further essential factors: the requisite *motivation, aptitude or necessary ‘preparedness’* (*isti’dād*) of each student (which elements vary greatly, for each individual, according to the level of reality and prior experience in question); and the discovery of an effective ‘*catalyst*’—the mysterious anecdote, story, film or other effective device (the list is endless) which can enable the properly prepared student to make the essential connection between the particular ‘examples’ and religious phenomena one is trying to teach and the manifestations of that same principle which that student has already experienced but somehow failed to connect to these ‘new’ phenomena, symbols, rituals, and so on.⁴⁶¹

Now one of the fascinating dimensions of the study of religion (as indeed of its constituent disciplines individually) is the way the actual grasp of an underlying law or principle, once it is actualised, immediately carries over into the actual understanding of any number of previously unfamiliar examples, experiences, and cases which happen to manifest the same laws or principles. In my own teaching experience, for example, I discovered the extraordinary teaching and communicative power of appropriate films for unlocking the secrets of unfamiliar scriptures and religious traditions,

⁴⁶¹ One basic consequence of these conditions, of course, is that the relatively ‘familiar’ political and sociological dimensions of religious life are correspondingly easy to teach to almost any set of students, at any age; while those central spiritual and metaphysical dimensions requiring a substantial degree of spiritual experience, contemplative awareness and philosophical reflection can only be taught to those students who have already acquired or awakened those particular indispensable qualifications, which may be relatively more rare (at least at younger ages), and which certainly are not favoured by contemporary cultural surroundings.

precisely in the process of looking for any available means of communicating such realities to students who were ordinarily encountering those scriptures and religions for the first time. My astonishment, I should add, had less to do with the ways those particular films ‘worked’ in illuminating the particular historical tradition I was trying to teach at the time, than in the ‘synergistic’ ways those films (or rather, scripture-film combinations) eventually continued to be equally powerful and lasting tools for helping to understand *other* religious traditions which those beginning students had not yet encountered. For example, for students beginning to understand the recurrent processes, within any religion, by which spiritual communities are formed, then institutionalised, and eventually fossilise, decay and are more rarely renewed, will find the film *Babette’s Feast* a remarkable template and unforgettable key, whatever the tradition in question. (The same is true with the wholistic insights into ‘esoteric’ eschatology structuring *Field of Dreams*, that modern ‘Divine Comedy’; or in the essential Qur’anic metaphysics of Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*.) The remarkable level of relative understanding and insight that can thus be accumulated over several years of such study and instruction, at such a young age, certainly helps to explain the peculiar fascination—for teachers and students alike—and extraordinarily rapid growth of this new humanistic discipline.

In precisely the same way, those who have several children will know from direct experience how one is obliged to teach each of them life’s basic moral and spiritual essential lessons using examples, illustrations and symbols drawn directly from the unique repertoire and set of experiences—not to mention the unique individual character--of each one of them, since their operative symbolic ‘worlds’ (usually transmitted by television and the other mass media, everywhere on the globe) are so different and radically changing these days, even in outwardly settled circumstances. And that area of ‘religious education’ is a particularly helpful springboard to the Islamic humanities because we are ordinarily far more aware of the indispensable role of the *uniquely individual* elements of ‘preparedness’ (*isti’dād*) where our own children are concerned, than we are with a large group of relative strangers in a classroom.

One last case I would like to mention was the experience—with my graduate students, in this case—of teaching students from ‘new Muslim’ backgrounds (largely, but not exclusively, African-American) about different topics in Islamic history, while pointing out in passing the multiple ways the phenomena of creation and adaptation of Islam in new settings we were studying in the past were virtually identical to the challenging situations (and gamut of actual responses) of creation and

adaptation within which they and their families were actually living. In other words, it turned out that their own religious lives and communities—which they at first had tended to view as exceptional (and sometimes even as ‘heretical’ or ‘deviant’ in comparison with the cultural norms of this or that recent immigrant Muslim group from other cultures)—were a highly visible ‘living laboratory’ for understanding the processes and archetypal creative responses they were studying in earlier Islamic history. That living laboratory was also particularly useful in that it so clearly highlighted the immense lacunae, the endless areas and periods and subjects of near-total ‘invisibility’, in our historical record and picture of what the actual lives of most Muslims were really like throughout most of the periods, cultures and traditions we happened to be studying.

Now there is nothing at all unusual or unique about such ‘educational experiences’: anyone teaching any religion in the field of religious studies, not just Islam, to large numbers of undergraduates could add hundreds of their own equally telling anecdotes—and would no doubt draw the same obvious conclusions I can only briefly summarise here today. The only thing that even makes those conclusions worth noting is that ‘Islamic studies’ is often still being taught and conceptualised, outside of religious studies, as though its very narrow (and quite restricted, even in its original cultural settings) particular approaches were in some way ‘*descriptive*’ and phenomenological, in ways that often unthinkingly mirror certain outward forms of traditional ‘religious learning’ (*‘ilm*), but without also providing students with the immense contexts of ‘implicit knowing’ and other far richer and more complex forms of communication and realisation that once were assumed and taken for granted by all the formally ‘educational’ institutions of traditional religious cultures. What even a few years of religious studies does, hopefully, is to shift our attention and our ‘phenomenology’ radically and single-mindedly toward the concrete and empirical, even if—for many *historical* settings in the past—one of the first immediate results of that shift is to highlight our radical and far-reaching ignorance of so much we would like to know.

More positively, what religious studies does—and hopefully the three contemporary situations I have just mentioned will help clarify why and how this is the case—is to make us realise how necessarily complex, diverse, and constantly creative are the processes by which spiritual realities and understandings are ‘*transmitted*’, *communicated* and *expressed* within any particular setting. The particular complex of institutions, social and cultural forms within which those archetypal understandings are communicated and expressed in any given Islamic context is what I have elsewhere

termed the ‘Islamic humanities’. (For those familiar with the multivalent spiritual term ‘*adab*’, we could say that religious studies is always looking at ‘*adab* in context,’ a social and cultural reality which extends far beyond what we normally think of as the canon of high-cultural ‘*adabiyyât*’.) Whatever the particular context, past or present, one of the most obvious results of approaching those contexts as part of ‘religious studies’ is, ironically, to highlight how little of the relevant Islamic humanities in any situation have to do with what educated people—then or now—normally have happened to call ‘religious’ phenomena.

Any student of religion constantly has to move back and forth between contemporary and past situations, and between more or less familiar traditions. So the following points—the basic ‘a-b-c’s of the discipline, so to speak—are equally applicable to historical or to contemporary communities. It may be easier to focus on each point using historical illustrations at first. But it is also useful to keep in mind again that most people do study such things in order to guide and orient their own lives, so we will return to those contemporary dimensions at the very end.

1. Certainly one of the most basic premises or presuppositions of the study of religion (for all religions) is that all ‘phenomena’ are equally deserving of our attention and understanding: i.e., that there is no higher rationale for any notions of ‘centre’ or ‘periphery’, or any limited focus on a particular class, gender, region, period, ethnic group, form or expression, except as may be dictated of course by our sources, personal interests, and the parameters of a given project. But becoming aware of and highlighting those unavoidable limitations and parameters transforms how other people (especially non-experts) will contextualise and use one’s discoveries. Our startingpoint then—although *not* our conclusion—is the actual multiplicity of ‘islams’ and relevant contexts at *any* time or location. Beginning with those phenomena, one is then driven to seek wholistic and wider conclusions, interpretations and generalisations—and that wholistic, comparative dimension is likely to highlight those laws and generalities which unify ‘parallel’ phenomena across what we unthinkingly consider cultural or religious ‘divisions’ or boundaries.⁴⁶² Incidentally, there’s nothing at all new about this: pre-modern Islamic (and Jewish and Christian) philosophers were developing the same perspectives in

⁴⁶² Alluding here to the constantly repeated, profoundly challenging Qur’anic injunction that all the people of true faith (the *mu’minûn*) ‘do not distinguish between a single one’ of the divine messengers.

lastingly influential ways for centuries in the past; the multi-faceted Muslim scientific genius, al-Bîrûnî, is a particularly striking illustration—already a millennium ago—of almost every point we have highlighted in this lecture.

2. Secondly, religious studies demands that we start with what is *real*—which is quite different from what is learned or ‘believed’, anywhere and anytime—for each soul, individual, and particular community: unless one wants to join Protagoras and his fellow sophists [i.e., in maintaining that the human-animal (*bashar*) is ‘the measure of all things’], a ‘science of opinions’ is a contradiction in terms. In other words, that lived, concrete reality is the inevitable basis for genuine communication. What is real, as one quickly discovers in the classroom, *can* be communicated: in the case of Islam, as with other religions, that means that the most effective means of communication are typically music, poetry, the visual arts, architecture, and—where possible—the actual living experience of festivals, rituals, *dhikr*, prayer, fasting and other spiritual disciplines, and so on. Serious students of religion—of *any* religion—get out of the classroom and into people’s homes, lives and places of worship as quickly as they possibly can. Once the student has begun to discover what is real (in any situation), then the relative historical roles of ideologies and ‘beliefs’⁴⁶³ gradually falls into perspective. This basic injunction of the study of religion is particularly pertinent and indispensable in Islamic Studies, given the absolute centrality of what is ordinarily ‘invisible’ (*al-ghayb*, *al-âkhira*, etc.), but pre-eminently real, in the Qur’anic conception of human being and its authentic expressions in every area of Islamic culture.

3. With some historical religions, one might have to argue at some length for the principal role of the spiritual virtues, and the ongoing challenges of creativity⁴⁶⁴ and renewal which the realisation of those virtues always places on each of us. That is clearly not the case with the Qur’an, where our

⁴⁶³ My beginning students are still surprised to learn, given the woefully inadequate Qur’an translations they must use, that the Arabic word for ‘belief’ *never* occurs at all in the Qur’an—unless one wants to equate ‘belief’ with *zann* or *ghayy*, which the Qur’an depicts as the worst possible human state, insisting on its utter incompatibility with genuine *îmân* and *’ilm*.

⁴⁶⁴ In the central sense of *îhsân*, as it is explained in the ‘hadith of Gabriel’ with which we conclude below.

actions *only* take on any real meaning as an expression of spiritual realities and intentions.⁴⁶⁵ In practice—and here Islamic Studies in any case rejoins all the other branches of the study of religion—any approach to the birth, emergence, communication and expression of those spiritual virtues means focusing on their actual *human exemplars* (in Islamic terms, the ‘Friends of God’, the *awliyâ*) through whom those virtues become real and form wider communities.⁴⁶⁶ From this perspective, the hadith and all the rest of Islamic early ‘sacred history’ emerge clearly as the first visible stage of this ongoing process of the expression or construction of the Islamic Humanities—and of the inevitable processes of decay and re-construction which follow in that and other living spiritual traditions.

4. While students of religion have to be aware of the ongoing roles of the ‘classic’ forms of their scriptures and humanities, their roles as ‘classics’ become real and illuminated only when we are able to view them *in their actual operative contexts*, which are the particular, concrete local expressions of the Islamic Humanities—a focus that often extends to their diverse contemporary contexts as well. Of course that concrete, empirical ‘phenomenological’ focus on their actual, shifting local contexts is not just an end in itself, but part of the collective disciplinary process of moving toward a balanced and accurate comprehension of *all* the relevant dimensions of spiritual communication and expression. Paradoxically, if that scientific process of ‘phenomenology’ is carried out conscientiously, the most concrete, empirical studies of actual religious ‘phenomena’ end up highlighting, again and again, the humanly inexplicable, persuasively ‘spiritual’—indeed often undeniably ‘miraculous’—dimensions of what we otherwise tend to take for granted as ‘simply history’.

⁴⁶⁵ See the famous opening hadith of Bukhârî’s *Sahîh*: ‘actions are *only* (judged) according to intentions’.

⁴⁶⁶ Islamic studies is only beginning to assimilate the much wider implications of recent pioneering studies of classical Islamic theories and explanations of *walâya* (especially in Sunni contexts), not only in transcending still repeated notions about the ‘separation’ of ‘Sufism’ and ‘popular religion’, but also in developing an adequate ‘spiritual phenomenology’ of the omnipresent institutions of pilgrimage, festivals, and related music and forms of devotional life in all parts of the Islamic world. See our programmatic essay, “*Situating Islamic 'Mysticism': Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality*,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R. Herrera, New York/Berlin, Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 293-334.

5. Finally, in the case of the usual historical and intellectual subjects of Islamic Studies, putting into practice these various injunctions highlights the ongoing central role of ‘*esotericism*’ not just as a characteristic literary and rhetorical assumption, but as an even more pervasive, ongoing social and cultural reality of critical importance in many of the Islamic Humanities down to the last (20th century). A recognition of that pervasive contextual reality is not only indispensable for studying the particular Islamic subjects in which that assumption of esotericism is so integrally embedded—Islamic philosophy, music, ritual, Sufi poetry, eschatology and so on.⁴⁶⁷ In more practical terms, such carefully attentive contextual studies—like the study of religion more generally—are certainly a highly effective antidote against any form of reductive ‘ideology’, whether islamist or other.

But having ended with a mention of those particular Islamic subjects to which my colleagues have devoted several decades of study, teaching and writing, I must admit to a further, more subversive and controversial result of taking the ‘study of religions’ seriously—one which constitutes a sort of unmentionable ‘blind spot’ in the academic discipline which (like the ‘emperor’s new clothes’) is blatantly visible to students and non-specialist participants in that wider enterprise, if not to the tenured professors themselves. That blind spot is the general reluctance of the scholarly discipline as such to deal openly with anything really alive⁴⁶⁸—especially phenomena that are historically new or only recently created—and its understandable preference to stay safely focused on the reassuringly ‘objective’ data drawn from past historical religions, even in the face of the world-wide shrinking of those traditionally ‘religious’ forms and their replacement everywhere by a confusing host of newer

⁴⁶⁷ See our forthcoming book *Between the Lines: An Introduction to Islamic Esotericism*; many of the studies and translations to be included there have already been published in various journals and collected volumes.

⁴⁶⁸ This no doubt reflects the institutional, philological origins of such studies in what was originally often considered (and even named) as ‘the *history* of religions’. One emblematic practical illustration—which certainly carries over into other academic disciplines as well—is the curious insistence that students nominally paying £20,000 per year for their undergraduate studies (as is now often the case in many North American universities) must continue to study world religions only in the classroom and from books and libraries, given the hitherto unimaginable pedagogical possibilities for religious studies that are now so readily accessible all over the globe (and often within a single great metropolis).

equivalents. Are we academic students of religion—‘on the job’, at least, in our professional focus on the ‘phenomenology’ of what is already dead—what a shaykh I know once politely called ‘*les archéologues des cimetières*’?

The answer to that question, on the purely academic side of Religious Studies, depends of course on the creativity, dedication, and intellectual courage of that indispensable handful of scholars who are capable of responding appropriately to the wider (and still growing) expectations surrounding that enterprise in the face of the ongoing disappearance and ideological self-destruction of the traditional forms of religious life everywhere we turn. Such intellectual virtues, we all know, are not particularly encouraged by the normal conditions of academic life. But the central issues of this larger enterprise, in all its dimensions, are also universal and unavoidable. And certainly the tens of thousands of young students who turn to the study of religion each year—not to mention the even larger publics who continue to read related books and participate in the more practical and innovative institutions which are constantly growing out of that enterprise—are *not* drawn into their studies by archaeological or philological motives. If there is one thing that the historical study of religions teaches us, again and again, it is that political power and the noisy shadow-play of ideologies are as ephemeral as dust in the wind. While the invisible imperatives of the spirit and the enduring communities they engender and sustain are the unexpected creation, in every case that we know of, of a handful of usually anonymous and initially ‘insignificant’ visionaries whose reality and influence only emerges and intensifies long after their outward disappearance. Religious studies, whenever it approaches the divine reality of *Dîn*, inevitably becomes the contemplation of *ihsân*, of that always mysterious emergence of the good-and-beautiful so aptly described in the Prophet’s celebrated definition: ‘*that you worship-and-serve God as though you see Him; for even if you don’t see Him, He sees you.*’ The central paradox of that indispensable study, and its ever-renewed challenges, are all beautifully expressed in that simple, so essentially human ‘*as though*’....

Chapter Seventeen

WHICH “REPUBLIC”? THE PUBLIC
AND PRIVATE DIMENSIONS OF ISLAMIC ESOTERICISM

I would like to speak with you today about the wider importance and contemporary relevance, both historical and philosophic, of the problem of “esotericism” in Islamic thought. The very nature of this phenomenon is such that its adequate description, even for a single thinker or intellectual tradition, normally requires an extremely wide background and complex explanatory framework. And the forbidding complexity of that task has no doubt dissuaded many specialists in the related Islamic fields from even attempting such descriptions in writing. Today, however, I would like to turn from those particular investigations—which you can examine at leisure in my own writings and those of others working in this area—and look at some of the wider issues that account for the continuing broader interest of these traditions, especially for the contemporary Islamic world. Of course this approach means that again and again I must offer allusions or bald assertions whose full justification would often require a separate lecture in each case. But I hope that in this way, whatever your background, each of you may come away with a clearer sense of the broader, perennial problems posed by these Islamic traditions. That is why I would like to begin with two writers whose very different perspectives can help set the framework for our discussion.

Plato, in the middle of Book II of the *Republic*, turns from the consideration of justice in the individual, in the soul, to what is more clearly visible in cities, promising to come back later to consider its likeness in the soul, and whether those two forms of justice are really the same, or how they may be related. By the end of Book IX, however, when Socrates and his interlocutors have had a glimpse of the life devoted to wisdom and its contrast with the other, existing regimes, the analogy of the city and the soul, and the proper political activity of the philosopher, seem far more problematic.

As Glaucon objects, the person who is wholeheartedly devoted to “the regime within him” “won’t be willing to mind the political things.”

“But yes,” Socrates replies, “he will in his own city, very much so. However, perhaps he won’t in his fatherland unless some divine chance coincidentally comes to pass.”

“I understand,” says Glaucon. “You mean he will in the city whose foundation we have now gone through, the one that has its place in speeches (*logoi*), since I don’t suppose it exists anywhere on earth.”

“But in heaven,” Socrates concludes, “perhaps a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees. It doesn’t make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere. For he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other.”

Plato’s remarks here and throughout the *Republic* are clearly meant to extend to all souls and to all cities, and to philo-sophia in its original and largest sense. Quite apart from any questions of historical influence, therefore, it is interesting to note how thoroughly each of the three main traditions of Islamic esotericism transmutes and re-creates many of these same guiding insights into the problematic relations of the active and contemplative life, including their own independent versions of the critical Sun-line-Cave sequence at the heart of the Republic.

In volume 2 of *The Venture of Islam* (pp. 192 ff.), Marshall Hodgson discusses at great length the multiple intellectual manifestations and functions of “esotericism” throughout what he calls “higher Islamicate culture” after the time of al-Ghazali. Both the practices of “esoteric” expression and their wider socio-cultural presuppositions, he asserts, came to permeate “all the more imaginative sides of intellectual culture in Islam” to a degree that was not really paralleled in any other major civilization, whether earlier or contemporary. The paradoxical result of that phenomenon, as he points out, is that while “the range of knowledge that would have been accepted [by the Shari’ah minded ‘ulama’] was probably narrower than in any other major citied society..., in practice, provided certain rules were observed, Muslims were free to learn almost anything with only a minimal risk of penalization.” Thus it is all the more astonishing—if no less significant—when one turns to the concluding volume of this pioneering work (on “Modern Times”), to discover that the very notion of “esotericism” has disappeared entirely from the index, and that the dramatic historical “rejection” of those central Islamic traditions is

noted only in passing, reflecting the author's personal conviction that "a more dynamic way must be found for resolving the tension between universalism and communalism" in the Islamic world (p. 435).

Once again our purpose in quoting Hodgson is not to analyze or criticize his treatment of these subjects, but rather simply to establish three basic realities that provide the essential historical framework for our remarks today. (1) The first of these is the fundamental importance of that complex of methods of teaching and writing which we may conveniently lump under the name of "esotericism" in those intellectual and spiritual traditions which are the most universal expression and achievement of Islamic civilization. (2) The second is the equally undeniable ignorance or forgetfulness of those traditions—which is not necessarily at all the same thing as their conscious "rejection"—throughout the Islamic (and non-Islamic) world today. By "ignorance" here I mean not simply the obvious widespread lack of awareness of their very existence, but also the more profound loss of their original context and functions, both individual and social, even where the texts themselves continue to be studied. (This will be our main subject in the second half of this lecture.)

(3) The third basic reality, which is only one symptom—but also a cause—of the wider ignorance just mentioned, is the remarkable lack of reliable writing, in virtually any language and at any level of specialization, adequately presenting this phenomenon of esotericism, in its full ramifications, in any of the relevant traditions of Islamic thought. If students would like to verify or deepen Hodgson's remarks, we can still direct them, at best, to only a handful of studies of two or three individual Islamic philosophers. But the void is especially striking if one looks—as present-day Muslims are more likely to do—for competent studies of later Shiite and Sufi intellectual traditions from this perspective, in a way that would do real justice both to their profoundly Islamic roots in the Qur'an and hadith and to their wider historical functions and intentions. The manifold reasons for this void, and the very real obstacles to filling it, are familiar enough to specialists in the disciplines concerned, and we will come back to some of them later.

Against this background, the rest of this lecture will take up two basic dimensions of this problem: First, we shall look at the phenomenon of Islamic "esotericism" itself, in order to isolate and clarify just what distinguishes the three traditions in question and what are their common presuppositions. Here the examination of certain recurrent prejudices and misunderstandings can help us to see more clearly the essential conditions for a genuine, comprehensive historical understanding of

these phenomena. Secondly, in light of those essential presuppositions, we can examine some of the diverse historical factors involved in the recent “rejection” or disappearance of these traditions. And finally, quite briefly and tentatively, I would like to turn to the future, to look at the longer-term consequences of our present ignorance of these traditions, especially with regard to Islamic education, and some possible responses.

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Perhaps the most effective way to arrive at an accurate portrayal of the traditions of Islamic “esotericism”—in the sense that interests us here—is to start with the stereotypes and preconceptions which are most frequently suggested by that term. This is especially true since virtually all the existing discussions of these traditions tend to view these phenomena (whether consciously or not) through these same distorting lenses. And since each of these misconceptions does reflect some half-truths and partial insights, they can quickly help us to get closer to the full reality of the situation. To summarize, we can call these misleading explanations the “specialist” or “technical” approach; the theory of “persecution” (and “concealment”); and the assumption of “misplaced literalism” that usually underlies both of the preceding hypotheses.

To begin with, then, it is absolutely essential to note that Islamic intellectual history is full of disciplines, both scientific and artistic, that are highly “esoteric,” in the sense of being extremely technical or specialized and often demanding years of study and apprenticeship, but which at the same time concerned themselves hardly at all (at least in writing) with their relation to popular religious opinions and beliefs. This is true even where, as in the practice of Greek mathematics, alchemy, magic, medicine, astronomy and astrology, or of music and certain of the visual arts, those disciplines were of visibly non-Islamic origin and were not infrequently called into question on religious or moral grounds. But in fact, the procedures and assumptions typical of Islamic “esotericism” were by no means universal even within those fields where they often had their most elaborate development. Here I would ask you to reflect on such significant contrasts as those between al-Biruni and Ibn Sina, Jabir ibn Hayyan and the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Kindi and al-Farabi, Miskawayh or al-‘Amiri and Averroes or Ibn Tufayl, Ibn al-Haytham and Nasir al-Din Tusi, or an Abu Madyan and Ibn al-‘Arabi.

Simply listing these contrasts, I hope, is enough to bring out dramatically three fundamental points about the distinctive type of “esotericism” that interests us here. First of all, it is a very specific

rhetorical form—i.e., a type of writing (not just an activity)—paradoxically typified by its comprehensive concern precisely for the “exoteric,” public conception of the larger activity or discipline in question. Secondly, its adoption was a matter of choice and intention, and often of real creativity, not something that automatically came along with one’s practice of a particular science or spiritual discipline. (In fact, as we have just noted, there are any number of famous Islamic philosophers, Sufis or Shiite thinkers, at many periods, who did not adopt the characteristic features of this mode of expression—and a vastly larger number who simply chose not to write at all.) And the final point—although this should become clearer in what follows—is that the conscious adoption of this mode of “exoteric” expression, in any of these traditions, reflected a far-sighted, essentially political sense of responsibility for the fulfillment of man’s ultimate, “contemplative” end within a world for the most part devoted to very different activities.

The second misleading explanation is that in terms of “persecution”—an explanatory hypothesis which is almost inevitably accompanied in practice (especially in the historical enemies of the traditions in question) by the twin assumptions of “concealment” and of what I have called “misplaced literalism.” To begin with, as we have already noted, this factor fails to explain precisely the intentional risk that was run, in each of our three “esoteric” traditions, by the detailed elaboration of a distinctive “exoteric” mode of expression designed to call into question, however subtly and indirectly, many of the assumptions and pretensions of the prevailing religious sciences. (Otherwise, as with mathematics, alchemy, and all the other disciplines mentioned above, it would have been easy enough—especially given the oral conditions of transmission of each of these traditions—simply to teach one’s own disciples, without resorting to new writing. And of course the vast majority of Sufis, Shiite gnostics and others did—and still do—precisely that.) Once again, though, the factor of persecution (or more precisely, the much wider range of socio-political pressures and priorities that term reflects) does indirectly point to the thoughtful, carefully presented challenge that each of these traditions offered to the underlying assumptions and authority or self-sufficiency claimed by the beliefs and activities they implicitly called into question—an authority that might be intellectual, spiritual or simply political in each case.

But here again, the nature and scope of that challenge was almost inevitably and universally misconceived (both in the past and in most modern presentations of this phenomenon) in terms of a sort of misplaced “literalism.” By this I mean the assumption that the lifelong activity and ongoing search

for insight, for practical and theoretical wisdom, which constituted the very essence and *raison d'être* of philosophy or the spiritual path (in Sufism and Shiite gnosis) was inevitably perceived at first, on the popular and uninformed level, as an attempt simply to substitute or replace more familiar, literal forms of belief, doctrine or prescribed action. One can see this quite clearly, for example, in Ibn Taymiya's reaction to all three of these traditions, or in the heresiographical presentations of philosophy or Shiite thought throughout Islamic history. But we should note that precisely the same assumption is shared by the "ghulat," the "extremist" proponents and interpreters of each of these traditions. And in fact this tendency, however unjust, is of course a natural, inevitable human reaction, aptly dramatized in Plato's discussion of the prisoners in the Cave. So it is no coincidence if the most widespread and influential later forms of Islamic esotericism—i.e., the tendencies developed by Avicenna, Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi—owed their relative success to their creation of an "exoteric" form of presentation so carefully and creatively attuned to the prevailing theological and legal dogmas of their time. But the real positive and creative contribution of each of these traditions, however, lies precisely in the essentially problematic relation between this exoteric "shell" and the deeper intentions to which it points.

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Just how problematic those relations are should become clearer as we turn now to a more positive enumeration of the basic presuppositions shared by each of the major traditions of Islamic esotericism, and to the diversity of functions of that style of writing. (Needless to say, our focus here on the common features of those traditions should not be taken to deny the full range and importance of their historical and philosophic particularities.)

To begin with, what constitutes the "esoteric" dimension of each of these traditions is not primarily a new set of beliefs or norms, but rather (1) a transformed insight into the ultimate aims and grounds of existing, publicly accessible doctrines, norms, and forms of experience. And inseparably from this, it is, (2) the full range of methods and conditions, the "way of life" in the largest possible sense, necessary for realizing this insight—"realizing," that is, in the twofold sense first of reaching it and then of actually carrying out its further demands and implications. It quickly becomes evident to serious students of any of these traditions that the relation between these two fundamental existential dimensions and even the most profound and technically "esoteric" writing is at best one of a sort of constantly ongoing dialogue. (Of course the reasons why this is so are beautifully developed throughout

the Republic and other Platonic dialogues.) This fundamental role of what later authors in these traditions tend to call *tahqiq*, of personal “realization” or “actualization” of these decisive insights, is obviously easiest to demonstrate in the case of the metaphysical and epistemological formulations of Sufi and Shiite literature, but is no less present in the foremost Islamic philosophers as well.

The second fundamental assumption shared by each of these traditions (and an essential consequence of the point we have just made) is the very limited role of writings as such within the larger context of the ongoing relations between an accomplished teacher and his students. (This factor is often referred to as the “oral” or “initiativ” context, but such terms tend to imply the mysterious “hiding” of something that could otherwise be communicated literally and immediately to all comers, as though symbols could be reduced to the level of unambiguous doctrines and beliefs.) The relevant points here are (1) that the “master,” however conceived, is able to judge the readiness and aptitude of the individual student, at each step, with regard to all the relevant aspects of his character and development. And (2) that it is only through this sort of direct ongoing contact—today just as much as in the past—that the properly prepared student can be assured of seeing the essential connections between the principles consigned to writing (whether those be, for example, religious symbols or the abstract arguments of philosophic theology) and their corresponding realities and consequences in his own world and experience. This irreplaceable context of personal teaching also helps to explain why, incidentally, much of the most important and original writing (and teaching) in each of these traditions takes the form of commentaries, both on Scripture and on earlier “classical” texts. At least for Sufism and Shiite esotericism, the paradigmatic illustration of this reality is of course the relationship between the Prophet and his most intimate disciples, and the “sources” of Islam cannot be adequately interpreted and understood without constant reference to this key factor.

A third basic assumption of each of these traditions is that their aim (and the associated complex of methods and activities) constitutes a privileged, if not necessarily exclusive, way to each human being’s ultimate end and perfection (*kamāl*, or *al-sa’adat al-quswā*). There are two equally important sides to this assumption. To begin with, it is a claim that clearly differentiates the proponents of these specific traditions from practitioners of many of the otherwise “esoteric” disciplines and activities we mentioned earlier. At the same time, it inevitably creates a sensitive and problematic—although not necessarily conflicting—situation vis-a-vis other supposedly “authoritative” interpreters of the prophetic legacy. This was particularly so since this sort of claim was usually understood to extend to man as

such, and not simply to men of a particular age or community. Again, such a claim was by no means necessarily “extra-” or “anti-Islamic,” but it could certainly be perceived as such by persons unable or unwilling to grasp the distinctive philosophies of history and complex understandings of the Qur’an and prophecy which it presupposed.

Finally, and most important of all, there was the shared assumption of an irreducible hierarchy of human capacities and predispositions, and a corresponding perception of the Qur’an and hadith as being carefully and appropriately addressed to this full range of human types and possibilities. Certainly, more than anything else, it is this profound awareness of the natural, hierarchically ordered variety and limits of human aims and activities, combined with a realistic sense of the terrible fragility and rarity of any political arrangements favoring the highest of those aims, that underlies the parallel developments in the written expression of each of these traditions. The importance of this point could hardly be exaggerated—all the more so as it runs counter to many widely accepted cultural and political assumptions of our own day. Granted this key assumption, however, it is relatively easy, simply as an historian, to show how it ties together with the other basic presuppositions we have just discussed in order to explain the various forms and multiple intentions of this sort of rhetoric. (We shall return to the more controversial question of the validity and implications of this assumption at the end of this chapter.)

In the epistemological language of these traditions, the consequences of this fundamental assumption are expressed in such key sets of contrasting terms as *‘ilm* vs. *ra’y* or *i’tiqād* (in falsafa); *ma’rifa* vs. *‘ilm* (in later Sufi writers); and *īmān* (or *‘aql* or *‘ilm*) vs. *islam* (in Shiite esotericism). Yet whatever the actual terms and the complexity of their development, the intended contrast, just as with *nous* (or *episteme*) and *doxa*, is not between a “true belief” and “false belief” that it could somehow simply replace. For the “lower” term here cannot be replaced—but only changed or modified—in terms of its wider, public ordering functions in the political and social world. And likewise the “higher” term reflected in the esoteric symbolism or doctrine, whether it is understood intellectually, ethically or spiritually, in each case remains beyond the reach of most people not because it was intentionally “hidden” or restricted, but because most individuals, to begin with, lack the indispensable combination of motivation and inner preparedness to set out in its search. This is why most “esoteric” writing in Islam, in any of these traditions, is addressed primarily neither to the elite of practitioners or adepts of the discipline in question, nor to the mass of common believers (except in its outward adaptation of their

beliefs), but rather toward the few potential students or disciples among the small literate class of ‘ulama’ similarly devoted to intellectual pursuits, to those who might be tempted—and able—to go further. For that educated and reflective public, what appears at first glance as simply an apologetic or ideological “justification” of the activity in question, in terms of more popular beliefs and conceptions, could likewise serve as a stepping stone toward a deeper appreciation and lifelong commitment.

Whether that door is opened, of course, depends entirely on each reader. And the most lastingly influential writers in these Islamic traditions—figures like Ghazali, Avicenna and Ibn ‘Arabi—were masters of this rhetorical art whose success depends on the most intimate acquaintance with one’s intended audience. Thus the primary aim of this sort of esoteric writing, on this more public level, was to awaken both the desire for the contemplative life (however variously conceived) and the intention to create its necessary conditions—a desire and an intention that must be continually reawakened and actualized, individual by individual, down through history. Not surprisingly, whether that sort of writing was then interpreted in what we would call a “quietistic,” intellectually critical, or more politically activist manner seems to have depended—then as now—above all on the particular circumstances (both inward and outward) of different readers. But what is essential, in all these cases, was the way that this sort of “esoteric” writing could help establish, at a minimum, that space of inner freedom so indispensable for the contemplative life (as indeed for all genuine thought and creativity), vis-a-vis the prevailing public beliefs and ideologies.

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Although we have had to cover these points rather quickly, I imagine that you will all have noticed not only that these basic presuppositions of Islamic “esotericism” are essentially interrelated, but also that they form a coherent set of philosophic assumptions or principles that are clearly understood to apply to man as such, to any society or civilization, not just to their own time and place. (This is true, incidentally, whether the language they use to describe this situation is drawn from the observation of “nature” or taken from the Qur’an and hadith: the opposition we might tend to imagine between those two perspectives is conceived quite differently in all three of these traditions.) Now clearly this is not the moment to try to justify or criticize the ultimate validity of those assumptions—all the more so since, as we have just seen, their own proponents were the first to stress the rare and difficult nature of their realization. But it would be philosophically challenging—as well as a revealing test of those

assumptions—to look at how these same presuppositions and understandings, so beautifully illustrated in the Republic, have been adapted and transformed in the very different circumstances of Western history, and especially in the transition from the Middle Ages (with their obvious analogies to the pre-modern Islamic situation) to the novel conditions of the contemporary world. At the very least, that sort of comparative reflection would force us to recognize, as in our opening quotation from Marshall Hodgson, the central, ongoing role of these “Islamic humanities” in the broader cultural vitality and harmony of Islamic civilization up until very recent times.

But quite apart from the deeper questions raised by these traditions, I hope that it has now become a bit clearer how an historically adequate picture of the cultural role and reality of Islamic “esotericism” must give full weight to the essential and constantly changing triad of interactions between these Islamic traditions, their perennial human aims, and the specific constellation of circumstances and possibilities they were attempting to influence. The failure to consider any one of these elements inevitably gives a truncated, fatally distorted vision of what they were doing. And incidentally, but no less importantly, it also deprives these traditions of any serious consideration in the elaboration of modern Islamic thought.

That is why I would now like to turn to look briefly at some of the reasons that have been (or could be) cited in order to explain the apparent disappearance of these Islamic “esoteric” traditions as a visible force in contemporary Muslim intellectual life. Again, I hope that this brief exploration will help bring out the critical importance of the underlying aims and presuppositions we have just discussed, since those humanly decisive dimensions are so often taken for granted in scholarly presentations and simply ignored in more popular accounts of these traditions.

To begin with, though, I would like to point out that the “disappearance” of these traditions in their vital and actively influential form is extraordinarily recent, historically speaking. We need only consider such diverse examples, from very different traditions of Islamic esotericism, as Hadi Sabzavari, Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi, and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri—all of whom were publicly active, vigorously creative representatives of these traditions little more than a century ago. And if I cite those names (without being able to go into details here), it is not simply or even mainly because of their literary production, but because of the broader range of their activities and interests, and in particular the large

number of students and disciples they were able to attract and motivate at that time, from many regions of the Islamic world. So what has happened since then?

To begin with the most superficial, purely literary aspect of these traditions, it is definitely not the case, as one might at first suspect, that they were simply “disproven” or “replaced” by other, truer sciences. It quickly becomes evident to the serious student of any of these traditions, who is aware of their deeper intentions and the type of realization required in each case, that those dimensions do not ultimately depend on the literal validity of Ptolemaic-Aristotelean cosmology and physics, nor on the apparent assumptions and language of kalam theology which were often adopted for their exoteric expression, especially in the post-Avicennan period. However, the undeniable role of those theological formulations in the later written expressions of these traditions is a very important reminder of the great extent to which, as we have seen, such writings were primarily directed toward the narrow educated class of the ‘ulama’, fellow specialists in the traditional (Arabic) religious sciences. It should be no surprise then, if much of what we have to say about the fate of these “esoteric” Islamic traditions is also largely applicable, with some important qualifications, to the transformed situation and social functions of the traditional religious sciences and ‘ulama’ more generally.

Most obviously, then, the replacement throughout the Islamic world of the traditional religious educational systems—precisely in their most advanced and culturally influential reaches—by a variety of radically new alternatives based on other languages and technical disciplines almost entirely cut off the new intellectual and cultural elites from any serious access both to the traditional religious sciences and to those expressions of Islamic “esotericism” which often took a mastery of those sciences for granted. (Nowhere in the Islamic world, even today, do we have any more than the most rudimentary beginnings of an equivalent to that vast centuries-long movement of translation and creative humanistic transformation, at all levels of education, of the medieval Latin religious heritage into vernacular languages that accompanied the transition to modernity in the West.) Simply on the most superficial, literary level, this means that any renewed non-scholarly interest in these esoteric traditions, now and in the future, is likely to be concentrated in two particular areas: (1) writers from these traditions working in less abstract, mainly poetic modes of expression in non-Arabic languages (even if that involves the loss of much of the intellectual background originally assumed), much as Dante, for example, is read in the West today. And (2) relatively early Arabic writings from within each of these traditions which directly treat the basic Islamic sources and their fundamental interpretive assumptions, without adopting

the unfamiliar apparatus of kalam and *usul al-fiqh* often assumed in later writings; here one thinks of seminal texts as diverse, but equally radical and original, as the works of Farabi and the hadith of the early Shiite Imams.

The longer-term consequences of this recent two-track division of education for the wider role of Islamic esotericism, however, were far more subtle and far-reaching in several other respects. Perhaps most important was the inevitable concentration of recruitment of the “elites” in the senses normally indispensable to each of these Islamic traditions—i.e., in terms of intellect and understanding, creativity, initiative and independence—in fields almost entirely divorced from the existing religio-intellectual traditions, whether exoteric or esoteric. (As I have stressed earlier, and as one repeatedly realizes whenever faced with the challenge of communicating these traditions, their origin and *raison d’être* are entirely tied up with these different human capacities and possibilities, without which the texts themselves are simply historical curiosities.) Equally important, in the socio-political domain, was the breakdown of each of the essential connections in the complex system of political relationships and authority assumed by virtually all of the classical authors in these traditions: however problematic the actual situation in practice, they have in common the assumption of a simultaneous continuity and hierarchy between faith of the mass of common believers, the systematic maintenance and transmission of their norms and beliefs by the exoteric religious sciences, and the ultimate guidance and direction—grounded in a deeper, universal perception of Reality (*al-Haqq*)—provided by the “esoteric” Islamic traditions. (One can see this assumption at work, for example, in each of the three 19th-century Islamic thinkers cited above.) Without going into details, it should be clear that the result of the new educational framework, which can still be found with minor variations in each Islamic state today, was to shatter this organic relationship into three basically autonomous worlds—that of the masses (whether literate or not), a technically educated social elite, and a small group of “traditionally” trained ‘*ulama*’—, each with very little deeper awareness of or larger responsibility for the problems preoccupying either of the other groups.

However, this troubling educational dichotomy (or trichotomy) throughout the Islamic world is only one of the most obvious signs of four more fundamental and comprehensive changes that have completely transformed the larger situation within which the traditions of Islamic esotericism—and indeed its equivalents in other civilizations—operated in the past.

First of all, there is the undeniable fact that those rare individuals who created and sustained the literary side of the “esoteric” traditions of Islam—whether it be in the philosophic, intellectual, artistic or spiritual realms—are today actually working, to a great extent in reality and not just ideally or potentially, in a world polity, in a global city. Now I have already argued that that kind of universalistic perspective was already implicit (and frequently explicit) in the most noted Islamic proponents of these traditions, whether or not they happened to adopt an “exoteric,” written mode of expression calculated to communicate their insights more widely within the bounds of their historical community. And in fact the cosmopolitan nature of intellectual life in pre-modern Islam—both the way in which leading thinkers addressed themselves to their peers throughout the Community, as well as the relative speed with which new developments and modes of expression traveled among the concerned elites—is a remarkable prefiguration of this contemporary situation. But it is also obvious, as we have just remarked, that the linkages and possibilities of communication between that genuine “city” and one’s physical “fatherland,” to borrow Plato’s expression, have become extremely problematic, if not often completely broken. This globalization of intellectual life and its accompanying dilemmas for communication and effective action are both largely inescapable today, incidentally, no matter where a Muslim interested in these traditions happens to live and work, and whatever the particular political regime he chooses to live under. On the other hand, of course, the fact that such creative and reflective individuals are today largely free to migrate (just as they did in the past!) to where they can find the most favorable conditions for their work and teaching can also have devastating political and cultural consequences for the society that is thereby deprived of their influence.

The second fundamental change in the situation of Islamic esotericism—and again one affecting all religions and civilizations—is a profound shift in the governing assumptions concerning man’s ultimate end, marked by an undoubtedly “democratic” (in the classical sense), increasingly universal acceptance of economic abundance and social security as the goal of man’s existence and religio-political organization. From this perspective, “knowledge” (including religious values and belief) is only a tool, an ideology—to be judged, manipulated and even “created” according to its usefulness in contributing to this ultimate social end. And it is not difficult to imagine where those who were once potential Islamic philosophers, poets or saints are now socially encouraged (if not constrained) to direct their energies: from this perspective, religious figures and teachings pointing in other directions are inevitably viewed as “marginal”—or else must be reinterpreted to fit in with and justify this new set of

assumptions. (You can supply the examples.) Interestingly enough, from this point of view one can readily see how the “esoteric” traditions of Islam and most representatives of the traditional religious sciences (i.e., the ‘ulama’) were actually in fundamental agreement—and why in most cases they are both equally attacked or at best neglected by the full range of modern Islamist ideologies, from the most secular to the most avowedly “religious.” Again, for obvious reasons, this basic assumption and aim is openly shared by virtually all the contending theories of education and political organization in Muslim countries, from the most Marxist to the most verbally “Islamic.”

A third, and equally universal, but much more concrete change affecting the prospects of the esoteric traditions of Islam is the radically changing conditions of existence—in the richest and poorest states alike—with regard to the most basic practical conditions for the contemplative life: i.e., ample free time, and freedom from external distractions. If the preceding sort of change makes it difficult even to conceive of the human ends and kinds of activity presumed by these traditions, this ongoing process makes it that much more difficult to begin to actualize them in practice. And again, this sort of cumulative change—whose reality and unsuspectedly profound impact can still be directly experienced simply by traveling to certain relatively unmodernized (and by no means exclusively Islamic) parts of the world—is equally threatening to the spiritual dimension of all the “traditional” Islamic sciences and forms of learning, the “exoteric” just as much as the esoteric ones, and to their equivalents in other religions and civilizations.

Finally, the practical impact—if not the very existence—of any of the traditions of Islamic esotericism is severely limited today by the effective domination of public discourse and education in virtually all Muslim states by a set of warring ideologies (whether Marxist, secular or the many shades of “Islamist”) each claiming to offer the most just and effective means of realizing a common set of practical socio-economic aims through the exclusive assumption of national state power. What is important about these ideologies, from the standpoint that interests us here, is that since the mass appeal and *raison d’être* of each of them (“Islamist” or not) resides precisely in its exclusive focus on a narrow circle of emotionally charged symbolic issues and slogans, they form a virtually impermeable barrier against any form of insight or understanding (whether spiritual, intellectual or even aesthetic) which can only be achieved or communicated through a sustained individual effort. Here again, this current public situation, in education or elsewhere, could not be more radically different from that prevailing in both the exoteric and esoteric Islamic sciences in the past, where the transmission even of the most “exoteric”

knowledge—e.g., of particular hadith, or of a particular school of fiqh—was in its advanced stages inevitably an intimate personal exchange explicitly allowing for many degrees and nuances of understanding, interpretation and practical application. And of course what we have treated here as “esoteric” traditions had their origins in just that kind of contact and exchange, as in the paradigmatic cases of the Prophet and the awliya’. Perhaps the most symptomatic change in this respect, in contrast with the traditional situation, is the modern notion that “education” is something primarily concerning children.

* * * *

But the time has come to draw together the themes from the two halves of this discussion, and to look at the relation of both of them to the basic practical question of *why* one should study these Islamic traditions at all. That is, what is their usefulness for Muslims today? And perhaps even more critically, what are the consequences of continuing to ignore them?

In the first half, we explored what these “esoteric” disciplines considered to be the essential, albeit rarely attainable human conditions for a genuine, comprehensive understanding of the aims and ultimate intentions of revelation, and we looked at the ambiguous, complex political relationships between that rare metaphysical insight and its diverse “exoteric” expressions in terms of the other religious sciences and the much wider domain of popular practice and belief—that is, between the two “cities” at the end of the Republic.

In the second half, we examined the ongoing transformation of the conditions and basic framework of relations that had been assumed, down through the 19th century, between these “esoteric” Islamic traditions and the wider body of religious sciences, and the corresponding implications of this whole of Islam for man’s relation to his worldly “fatherland” and history. The essential point here is that from this perspective these two kinds of tradition were understood to form an inseparable whole, one in which the “exoteric” religious sciences transmitted and maintained the symbolic bases of Law and belief (the common world of the Cave), while the “esoteric” disciplines provided the more difficult path to realizing the Truth and ontological grounds of those symbols, the universal spiritual dimensions of Islam (or in Plato’s image, the world of the Sun and Light). And in turn, the accession to that insight provided, at least potentially, the indispensable wisdom for guiding and directing the wider, public realm. Now if I used the word “transformation”—and not simply “destruction”—to describe the

apparent recent fate of these Islamic traditions, it is because we naturally tend to see only their written, historical forms, which were obviously designed for the circumstances of another age.

At the same time, though, there is no denying the fact that the current ignorance of these Islamic traditions and the millenium of spiritual and philosophic insight and investigation they have embodied does constitute—from their point of view, at least—a sort of cultural “decapitation” whose disorienting consequences, in both the intellectual and political domains, are hidden from no one. As one of the more perceptive contemporary students of this phenomenon has put it, “A people that deprives itself of philosophy ... commits intellectual suicide”⁴⁶⁹. And on the individual level, for those Muslim thinkers and creators—the former sustainers of these esoteric traditions—who are thereby obliged to seek the realization of certain fundamental, inescapable aspects of human experience in apparently alien, “non-Islamic” forms, the result is that painful sort of cultural schizophrenia which inevitably comes from attempting to live in two quite different political (or metaphysical) orders at the same time.

Now for the proponents of these traditions (as for Plato), there was no doubt that the human—and divine—realities underlying these disciplines are continually re-created, that the essential qualities of what these authors called *himma* (intention) and *isti‘dad* (inner preparedness) will inevitably find their expression and realization despite almost any obstacles. Or as the Prophet said of Salmān al-Fārisī [in the hadith recorded by al-Bukhārī]: “Even if true Faith were in the Pleiades, men like this would reach it.” Thus the first, and truly primordial, justification for the study of these Islamic traditions is so that such individuals may even know that these paths have already been forged. For one cannot fairly speak of the “rejection” of traditions whose very existence today, even for most educated Muslims, remains essentially unknown. And needless to say, this justification also defines the particular forms in which scholarly study can make a genuine contribution to the wider awareness of these traditions, since this condition of ignorance can only be remedied by that specific combination of substantial translations, adequate commentaries and fully contextual explanatory studies which is necessary today in order to bring out the living roots and intentions of these disciplines.

⁴⁶⁹ F. Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, pp. 157-58.

And finally, on the more public, societal level, we have already noted that the contemporary situation is necessarily far more complicated, given the disappearance of both the learned consensus and the social order underlying many of the older forms of exoteric expression, and the warring variety of new ideologies which have so far failed to take their place. But here again, historical studies of key figures in these “esoteric” Islamic traditions can contribute precisely by bringing out the relativity and specific functions of their changing “exoteric” forms and expressions, in relation to their perennial intentions and inspiration. And here, once again, these “esoteric” Islamic traditions inevitably rejoin their “exoteric” companions. For if that creative inspiration is to find any wider, lasting echo in the Community, in the future as in the past, it will no doubt continue to be drawn from their common sources in the Qur’an and hadith.

Chapter Eighteen

CIVILISATION AS DIALOGUE: SPIRITUALITY AND PHILOSOPHY
IN MULLA SADRA AND TODAY

... and every Day He is in a (new) Affair

(Qur'an 55:29)

In the domains of ethics and spirituality, at least, civilisation is always an invisible balancing act, a tenuous and fragile, truly providential achievement. Justice and inner harmony (*'adl* and *i'tidāl*) are always dynamic, living realities, born out of all the unavoidable, recurrent conflicts and challenges of both human and external nature. And this is equally true in any setting: from each soul, through the family, on to all the more complex social and cultural forms of human community.

Not surprisingly, many people speak casually of 'civilisation' without really thinking through what that term implies. One common dimension to those mysterious historical phenomena we most often identify as civilisations is the central role and ongoing interplay of two equally essential elements. The first is the development of an adequately all-encompassing, living spiritual and religious dimension that comes to be shared by many different cultures. The second is those gradually accumulated symbolic and moral worlds of thought, culture and the arts which together articulate and integrate, balance, and subtly illuminate those recurrent conflicting human tendencies and strivings. In that sense, each true civilisation in fact comes to be and is maintained through dialogue—but only through genuine, necessarily inclusive dialogue. And equally, civilisation in that spiritual sense immediately breaks down whenever that foundational dialogue disappears—something which can and does repeatedly happen, for a host of all too familiar reasons. Again, if my speaking of 'civilisation' here seems too remote and abstract, we have all witnessed the detailed functioning of these same underlying realities and spiritual laws in the internal dynamics of marriage, or of true friendship.

So whenever the essential conditions for that dialogue which *is* civilisation disappear, then philosophy (the intrinsically dialogical quest for wisdom) and *adab*, those 'humanities' that are the constantly creative expression of living philosophy and spirituality, immediately fall prey to one of two recurrent dangers. Either of scholasticism, of a mysterious 'fossilisation' due to their separation from

their living spiritual roots. Or else of ideologisation, of all the familiar forms of political mythology and magical thinking, as genuine dialogue and philosophy decays—or is betrayed—into a hollow, illusory, self-destructive justification for all the familiar forms of basharic domination (of *riyāsa*). Quite tellingly, whatever problems we might have in defining civilisation, no one really has any trouble recognising either of those classic *failures* of civilisation, in all their manifold and all-too-familiar forms.

So against the backdrop of that age-old drama, which has played itself out again and again through the foundational dialogues of every earlier civilisation, it is especially instructive to regard the example of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, in relation to both his predecessors and his epigons. What lessons can we draw from the fruitful example of the ongoing dialogue between Mulla Sadra and all his peers, his spiritual colleagues (*ham-kārān*) from the wider Islamic heritage? Or more specifically, what central human problems do those master philosophers continue to illuminate, at the heart of that gradually emerging 'science of spirituality' which is one of the most pressing philosophical facets of our ongoing task of constructing a renewed and necessarily global civilisation ?

Today's discussion falls into three parts. First, a short preliminary clarification of what we mean specifically by 'civilisation' in this particular context (as contrasted with cultures and other equally legitimate usages of the word 'civilisation' in other settings). Secondly, a brief outline of some of the indispensable elements or pre-conditions for that dialogue which underpins any living civilisation. Then we move on to the way those essential elements are illustrated in the works of Mulla Sadra and other pioneering creators and sustainers of that remarkable Islamic civilisation which came into being and spread throughout so much of Asia in the post-Mongol period. Finally, and even more briefly, we allude to some of the wider challenges facing any possible continuation or active renewal of Sadra's civilizational project today.

I. Clarifying our References: 'Civilisation' and Culture

In English and other European languages, the term 'civilisation'—and the equally problematic 'culture'—have been and still are used in so many quite different ways that we cannot avoid some preliminary clarification. (The terminological situation today in Persian or Arabic is certainly no less confusing.) Simply for the very particular purposes of this discussion and this Congress, we must explain at the outset that we are not concerned here with such common usages of that term as those

referring to a certain remarkable historical level of scientific, technological, or artistic accomplishment, or of relative economic or social organisation and achievement (of *tamaddun* or *'imrān*, in the language of an Ibn Khaldun, for example). Nor are we using 'civilisation' here as simply another synonym for cultures—indeed quite the contrary. For to paraphrase Aristotle's famous remarks in his *Politics*, people everywhere, in *any* time or place, are intrinsically and unavoidably 'cultural' beings, necessarily living within a multitude of local cultures necessarily shaped and defined by the particular shifting factors of language, natural environment, material culture, historical heritage, and the specific sets of aims and intentions favoured by each culture. Whatever defining factors we might select or emphasise, no one would have much trouble describing and identifying the characteristics of any specific culture.

In contrast, we are using 'civilisation' here to refer to a unique reality that is historically rare, fragile, and mysterious, in a sense that is quite intentionally and unapologetically 'value-based': i.e., to refer to the construction of an effective moral, intellectual and spiritual framework which momentarily creates the *conditions for ongoing dialogue*, for a kind of shared 'spiritual homeland' (*mawtin*), within which people from very different regional cultures and linguistic communities can converse and create together.⁴⁷⁰ Historically speaking, observers speaking of 'civilisations' in this particular sense have tended to identify them by reference to particular common sacred languages, scriptures, and learned elites. Yet while such incidental external factors might possibly be included among the necessary conditions for the creation of a lasting civilisation, they are even more obviously not sufficient causes in themselves—shared as they also are, in each case, by a large number of disparate, often warring cultures and barbarisms.

Such considerations help to highlight the basic fact that civilisations in this particular trans-cultural sense—like other spiritual realities—are intrinsically *living realities*, created, shaped and sustained by individuals of rare creativity and sensitivity. From this particular standpoint, what is essential for each great civilisation, and what is thus normally characteristic of each of the central texts

⁴⁷⁰ Thus those who first began to speak of that reality very quickly identified it with the existence of *cities*. That was not out of some arbitrary disdain for those rural, nomadic, or mountainous villages and tribes where most of humanity has always lived until past century, but rather in recognition of those *essential elements of diversity and dialogue* that are normally inseparable from complex citted life in all historical settings.

and interpretive traditions associated with that civilisation, is a comprehensive, fully inclusive and inherently dynamic spiritual understanding of all the elements and processes of human perfection or realisation (*kamāl al-insān*). Indeed, each of those rare true civilisations that we can identify in this sense—as opposed to the endless cultures, tribes, and peoples manifesting the manifold possibilities of basharic (‘human-animal’) existence—could be simply described as the potential ‘home of the true humanity’: *dār al-kamāl*, or *dār al-insān*. And by its very nature, that reality—whose living expression is the equally untranslatable mystery of *adab* and *ihsān*—cannot be externally defined or delimited. What we can describe in every case, though, are some of the essential preconditions for dialogue, for that foundational *seeking* on which the very possibility and the eventual mysterious creation of each civilisation depends.

II. The Conditions for Dialogue: Freedom, Creativity, Diversity and Tolerance

While we can all witness and study retrospectively the disintegration, decadence and shattering of the rare civilisations of the past, it is surely significant that the essential creative moments in the forging of each great civilisation, like the unique manifestations of true genius in all its forms, remain essentially mysterious. Historically, what remains and what people point to, of course, are the handful of prophets, *awliyā’* (‘Friends of God’), and other creative figures whose masterworks and influences eventually—but usually much later—gradually became identified with the spiritual achievements and identity of each civilisation. Yet just as with the parable of the sower (Qur’an 48:29), the actual lasting influences of those seminal creative figures in fact remain utterly dependent on the far more complex and mysterious realities of their ‘seedbed’: that is to say, on *the slow creative forging of new symbols, ideals, and forms of dialogue and communication providentially shared across the boundaries of many different languages and cultures*, a mysterious process that necessarily always occurs ‘from the bottom up’, almost invisible precisely to those most immediately involved in it—just as we can still see happening all around us today.

Fortunately, the actual conditions for that dialogue which is so indispensable to the forging of civilisation, to the transcendence of the usual boundaries of each culture and linguistic community, are not mysterious or hidden at all. That foundational dialogue, anywhere and at any time, depends on four quintessentially human (*insānī*) qualities, characteristics which were of course key elements in the creation of classical Islamic civilisation. These four defining pre-conditions and qualities of true human

being—which are so beautifully described in the Sura *al-‘Asr* (Qur’an 103)⁴⁷¹—form a kind of ascending cycle or spiralling expression of the spirit (*mi‘rāj al-rūh*), in which the actual realization of any one of these elements makes possible, but also in some respects presupposes, each of the other three. For like so many metaphysical realities, it is easy enough to list or discuss these conditions for dialogue and civilisation abstractly; while it is something radically different and far more challenging to transform them daily into living realities, into actualized virtues within the given social and political dimensions and challenges of each culture. Yet what we can say with confidence is that without any one of these four qualities, no real trans-cultural dialogue—and a fortiori, no real civilisation—is even possible.

- The first precondition for inter-cultural dialogue and realised humanity is *freedom*, in the comprehensive sense of rational, clear-sighted choice (*irāda*); corresponding moral action; and effective responsibility for its consequences and for that reflection and deciphering of the resulting life-lessons which are only possible within that entire ‘learning-cycle’ of freedom. Without all those indispensable elements of freedom, of course, there is no real moral responsibility, no genuine choice, and no spiritual learning or realisation—and thus no possibility of realised humanity. Or in the straightforwardly incontrovertible observation of the Qur’an: *lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*.⁴⁷² There is simply no substitute for the unavoidable lifelong processes of spiritual learning, experimentation, and refining trial-and-error that underlie the slow attainment of each of the universal degrees and realities of true faith: that is, of *īmān*, as opposed to the facile public ideologies and untested suppositions of each culture’s and individual’s limited, largely unconscious governing belief-systems, their *i‘tiqād*. The ultimate fruit of this real, actualised freedom and choice—whether or not it attains the kind of collective, historically enduring ‘critical mass’ needed to become outwardly visible in an enduring civilisation—is spiritual assurance or knowing ‘faith’ (*yaqīn*, *īmān*, and *‘ilm* in its root Qur’anic sense), which everywhere includes the inner recognition, the inspired direct knowing, of that *natural hierarchy*—that ‘sacred spiritual order’—which intrinsically informs all expressions of spirit, both in nature and human beings.

⁴⁷¹ See the further development of these essential dimensions of human ‘realisation’ (*tahqīq*), in relation to this Sura 103, in the Preface and Introduction to our recent *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype, 2004).

⁴⁷² Qur’an 2:256: *There is no compulsion in the (divine) Religion....*

• The natural and inseparable consequence of actual human freedom is **realised creativity**, the most intrinsic and self-evident quality of the Spirit (*rūh*) in all its manifestations. In the language of the Sura *al-‘Asr*, these are the accomplished, ongoing actions of *sālihāt*, those truly ‘fitting’ and appropriately transforming expressions of spiritual insight which—like that universal divine ‘Activity’ (*sha’n*) in our opening verse (55:29)—are necessarily ‘new’ and creative within each particular situation. And this open-ended creative capacity for the effective realisation of our true humanity is in reality inseparable from a profound, experientially grounded knowing of *all* the dimensions, conditions and consequences of our actions and intention. Or in the language of the even more familiar ‘hadith of Gabriel’, this realised creativity is the all-encompassing virtue of *ihsān*, that mysterious making-manifest of the divine beauty-and-good which, as the Prophet defines it in his response to Gabriel, flows from ‘serving God as though you see Him’—and which reaches its earthly perfection with the effacement of the basharic ego, in each transcendent moment of ‘and if you are not,...’,⁴⁷³

• One of the most obvious conditions for genuine and lastingly constructive dialogue, and eventually for the elaboration of any civilisation—and at the same time, the inevitable natural outcome of the indispensable transformative combination of human freedom and creativity—is an ever-increasing **diversity** of both beliefs and beautiful practices. In its foundations, this indispensable (and always problematic!) creative diversity reflects in the human sphere the distinctive infinite diversity of natural endowments and capacities so evident in every other sphere of divine creation: that inimitable ‘divine Colouring’ and creative artistry, *sibghat Allāh* (Qur’an 2:138). For the constantly shifting sets of spiritually individualized tests and challenges constituting our momentary earthly existence mean that the spiritually ‘appropriate responses’ (the true *sālihāt*) are always an ongoing *creative* process requiring ever-renewed experimentation and that distinctively human ‘beautiful innovation’ (*bid‘a hasana*) that is *ihsān*. And in its fully actualized consequences, of course, this characteristic cultural creativity and diversity which makes possible any genuine civilisation reflects that intrinsic **individuality** and individuation which is one of the most obvious outward signs and expressions of realized human ‘completion’ or perfection (*kamāl*).

⁴⁷³ ‘And if you are not, then you *do* see Him’, in the esoteric reading of that infinitely multi-faceted Prophetic response (*wa in lam takun, tarāhu*).

- The fourth pre-condition for meaningful dialogue and civilisation—and again a natural consequence of each of the previously mentioned points—is the active, necessarily collective spiritual virtue of ‘mutual recognition and cooperation in seeking and realising what is Real and Right, in the face of all the obstacles and impediments that creative cooperation always encounters.’ This is simply a very approximate English rendering of the incomparably more elegant and concise conclusion of the Sura *al-‘Asr*: *wa tawāsaw bi-l-Haqq wa tawāsaw bi-l-sabr*. Normally in English this quintessentially civilizational reality, an absolute precondition for meaningful dialogue at every level, is popularly rendered, for peculiar historical reasons, by the rather anodyne expression ‘*tolerance*’—although that unsatisfying word itself is far from adequate for expressing the necessarily *active*, positive dimensions of this very spiritual virtue; its profoundly spiritual roots; and its *necessarily cooperative* human presuppositions and expressions.

To summarize, then, these are four indispensable pre-conditions—although certainly not alone sufficient ones—for dialogue, at any level, and hence for the eventual elaboration of that enduring multi-cultural dialogue we call ‘civilisation’. To begin with, the most basic prerequisites of *freedom* and reasoned choice—the fundamental spiritual dimensions of theomorphic human being, according to the Qur’an—direct our attention to the processes by which people actually grow spiritually, gradually learning from the consequences of their actions and intentions. Secondly, our fully human responsibility is only actualised through the ongoing processes of *creativity*—with the indispensable motivating role of beauty and the love it naturally inspires—and the transforming roles of those arts and spiritually effective institutions (the Islamic humanities, and their equivalents in each civilisation) through which people can actually begin to exercise and realise their potential humanity. The natural result of those twofold defining human responsibilities of freedom and creativity is the ongoing expression of a naturally increasing *diversity of individualised beliefs and spiritually effective forms of right-and-beautiful action (ihsān)*. And each of those preceding foundations naturally fosters—while again practically depending upon—the wider public understanding of the spiritual roots of creative diversity and the recognition of those unfolding practical tasks of ongoing *co-operation* (at once ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, cultural, political.) which that awareness always entails.

Again, it may seem arbitrary or overly simplistic to outline so straightforwardly these essential preconditions for that transforming, constructive dialogue which ultimately *is* civilisation. However, that impression should quickly disappear if one simply re-reads each step in the preceding discussion

while imagining what the humanly alternative positions are and have been available at each stage of that argument. Doing so is extremely illuminating, because that imaginative exercise quickly draws our attention more clearly to those perennial philosophic, theological, and practical (ethical, social and political) factors and situations of conflict, compulsion, manipulation, and constraint which are the familiar backdrop to the rare re-discovery and realisation of these higher, uniquely human potentialities.

III. Mulla Sadra and His ‘Colleagues’ in the Defence of Islamic Civilisation

In this section we turn from the abstract consideration of those essential preconditions for the elaboration of a civilisation, to the revealing exploration of the extraordinary concrete historical achievements underlying the actual elaboration and safeguarding of that wider Islamic civilisation of which Sadra himself was such an impassioned defender. More specifically, in a learned gathering primarily devoted to Sadra’s philosophy and theology—rather than to the much wider spiritual, artistic, and cultural underpinnings of his thought in the monumental civilisational achievements of those great creative masters of the Islamic humanities, from Ibn ‘Arabī to Rūmī and Hāfiz, who are the constant implicit reference-points of all his thought—it should be understandable that my attention here is focused specifically on the similar ‘defensive’ role of other key later philosophic figures from other, largely Sunni, cultural and geographic regions of later Islamic civilization.

Now most of the distinguished scholars attending this Congress are understandably accustomed to the specialised, ‘microscopic’ approach to studying the works of Mulla Sadra—or indeed of almost any other comparable philosopher and thinker—primarily through the familiar, very focused techniques of textual, philological, doctrinal, and comparative historical analysis, tracing and highlighting the creative transformations and continuations of the ideas of earlier Islamic thinkers and traditions in the thought and literary expressions of this great figure. In this section, I would simply like to suggest a rather different, much broader (and yet complementary) set of historical and comparative perspectives which naturally arise when we look at Mulla Sadra and his writings from the far wider perspective of the elaboration and sustaining of Islamic civilisation—as it were, from a kind of ‘telescopic’ perspective. This is a kind of thought-experiment which those professionally concerned with civilizational studies are constantly undertaking, and in this short compass I can only make at best a few comparisons and suggestions that may provoke some further useful thought and reflection on the lessons that might be drawn from this approach.

Surely one of the most remarkable and as yet little-studied phenomena in the scholarly fields of religious studies and civilizational studies is the extraordinary emergence, out of the singularly unpromising chaos and apparent disaster of the Mongol invasions (and the simultaneous Crusades and ‘Reconquista’), of extraordinarily effective new expressions of Islam—both as a truly *world* religion, and as a civilisation inspiring and encompassing endlessly diverse cultures and communities throughout much of Asia and central Europe—in the centuries immediately following the initial massive cultural and human destruction of the Mongol era.⁴⁷⁴ For the most part, wherever historians and related scholars have explored this extraordinary phenomenon, they have found that this remarkable civilisational process took place not through conquest or official conversion by local rulers (which in any case would not account for the massive cultural creativity involved in each stage and locality), but rather through a mysterious development of ‘creative osmosis’ in which the most outwardly visible role was played by originally Persianate forms of the Islamic humanities in poetry, music, the visual arts, and a host of associated social and devotional practices—all both spiritually effective and quickly creatively integrated in a host of different pre-existing cultures and linguistic communities. Eventually this still unchronicled, far-reaching, profoundly popular and truly ‘democratic’ historical profusion of religious and cultural creativity—so memorably and vehemently denounced at its very inception by Ibn Taymiyya, and by his fervent imitators on to the present—gave rise to that far-flung Islamic civilisation which has continued to shape and inspire the faith and practice of the considerable majority of the world’s Muslims down to our own day.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ In many different cultural domains, of course, the creative models and initial vehicles for communicating that broader understanding of Islam were in that ‘new-Persian’ language which became for centuries the cultural, diplomatic, commercial, and spiritual *lingua franca* of the wider Islamic civilisation of that period, from central Europe to East and Southeast Asia. And equally, in later centuries and down to our own time, the gradual disintegration of that wider Islamic civilisation has everywhere been marked by the slow disappearance of the Islamic humanities conveyed by that *lingua franca* and its local vernacular continuations.

⁴⁷⁵ Western readers of this essay may not be sufficiently aware of the remarkable fact that the range of locally dominant political ideologies and historical ‘mythologies’ that have come to govern over the past century the dominant political and cultural discourse and self-conception within the dozens of smaller nation-states that today occupy the same geographical expanse as that vast pan-Asian (and

Against the backdrop of the remarkable forging of that new, multi-cultural—and almost everywhere notably multi-confessional—pan-Asian Islamic civilisation, what immediately stands out, when we consider the essential content and underlying intentions of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, is that we find certain remarkably comparable philosophical and spiritual 'colleagues' (the Persian expression *ham-kārān* is perhaps more evocative of their affinities and their common tasks) in each major cultural sphere of that newly configured Islamic civilisation. In each case, the thought and active work of each of these influential philosophic peers, in very focused and lastingly effective ways, was carefully centred on the active defense and intellectual maintenance of the above-mentioned essential pre-conditions for dialogue and civilisation. On a purely textual, intellectual level, the philosophy (and often the poetry) of each of these historically key defenders of that new Islamic civilisation is devoted to the creative communication of the balanced harmonisation and integration of the three equally indispensable classic elements of *kamāl* (human perfection): of spiritual experience and inspiration; their scriptural and devotional foundations; and of rationally responsible reflection and action: what the textbook accounts typically summarise as the three approaches of '*aql*, *naql*, and *kashf*'.

Of course what those three emblematic expressions, and their far more complex philosophical and poetic elaborations, actually stood for is well known to historical specialists studying of each of these seminal figures and their original settings. Yet what is surely equally important, in a wider civilizational perspective, is what their distinctive ideas also stood *against*: i.e., in contrast to those perennial intellectual and cultural currents (to be found everywhere, certainly not just in Islamic thought!) that would necessarily destroy each of the above four essential conditions for genuine dialogue and the ongoing creative elaboration of civilisation. That ongoing 'civilizational *drama*' underlying their philosophical efforts is of course most familiar, for today's Iranian scholars, in the manifold ways subsequent generations have dealt with, reinterpreted, attacked, defended, and approached the thought and writings of Mulla Sadra. However, what is perhaps much less adequately appreciated is the way

eastern European) Islamic civilisation all have in common—despite their dramatic outward disparity of outlooks—an extraordinarily far-reaching attitude of historical 'erasure' toward the previous presence and ethico-cultural underpinnings of the locally operative expressions of that wider Islamic civilisation. This is just as true in newer nation-states with ostensibly 'Islamic' ideologies as it is in countries with predominantly Marxist, ethno-linguistic, or other 'religious' forms of nationalism.

those same recurrent dramas have been re-enacted in both the works and the equally controversial and eventful heritage of so many of Sadra's peers in other cultural regions of that later Islamic civilisation.

To take only a few decisive names of such central figures who have recently begun to attract increasing scholarly attention—and in each case, not just as historical curiosities, but because of their obvious ongoing relevance to perennially heated debates about the possibility and very desirability of dialogue and civilisation—we might begin with the figure of Da'ūd al-Qaysarī.⁴⁷⁶ Best-known in later Iranian thought (including Sadra's own works) for his remarkably accessible and authoritative commentary on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusūs al-Hikam*, Qaysari's wider, lasting influence in the creation and elaboration of Islamic civilisation in fact flowed from his important guiding role (along with many other like-minded collaborators, of course) in the creation of an official Ottoman educational system in which the intellectual formation of the elite administrative-clerical class and their understanding and application of the *sharī'a* in that thoroughly multi-confessional, multi-cultural empire was in fact centred on the far-reaching, intrinsically creative civilizational perspectives of Ibn 'Arabī. This centrality of Ibn 'Arabī as a primarily authoritative exponent and interpreter of the *sharī'a* (the foundational body of Islamic religious sources and interpretive disciplines) among certain key foundational elements of later Ottoman culture is an entirely unsuspected historical reality—at least in the distorting light of today's prevailing Islamic polemics—whose still enduring influences I was only recently surprised to rediscover while lecturing to Muslim theology students in Sarajevo.

Among the widely scattered, but historically longstanding, Hui Muslim communities of China, the pioneering studies of Sachiko Murata (together with several of her Chinese and Japanese colleagues) have brought to light the comparable creative philosophical role of figures like Liu Chih (early 17th century), in initiating and making possible a far-reaching and lastingly influential civilizational dialogue between Islamic thought—again as represented above all by Ibn 'Arabi and his Persianate interpreters

⁴⁷⁶ See the many important contributions in the bilingual volume of the *International Symposium on Islamic Thought and in the XIIIth and XIVth Centuries and Daud Al-Qaysari*, ed. T. Koç (Ankara, 1998), including my article on 'The Continuing Relevance of Qaysari's Thought: Divine Imagination and the Foundations of Natural Spirituality'.

such as Jāmī—and the surrounding ‘neo-Confucian’ cultures of the Far East in Sadra’s time.⁴⁷⁷ As with each of these Asian Muslim thinkers only briefly mentioned here, the larger relevance of these writings flows not so much from their own philosophical, theological and intellectual content, as from the decisive cultural-political role of those writings in defending (whether explicitly or implicitly) and helping to make possible much wider, popular, and far-reaching forms of cultural dialogue, creativity and exchange: essential civilisational conditions which are immediately threatened, or quite simply become impossible, whenever the intellectual and cultural leadership of a particular community opt for alternative forms of religious authority and interpretation which would instead destroy the foundational conditions for dialogue and potential civilisation.⁴⁷⁸

In Southeast Asia, the even more widely influential contemporary figure of the Sufi poet and religious thinker Hamzah Fansūrī, whose seminal creative works helped to shape the Muslim language of that immense region, is at least known by name, thanks to the pioneering studies of Prof. al-Attas.⁴⁷⁹ But today a number of younger Malaysian and Indonesian scholars (including my own doctoral student, Mr. Rushdan Jailani, and others speaking later in this conference programme) are only beginning to explore the actual historical contexts and inspiration of Fansūrī’s seminal writings, and of the long chain of scholarly controversies and interpretations—so highly reminiscent of Sadra’s own equally eventful posterity here in Iran—which developed around his writings in subsequent centuries. What those recent historians have already discovered, though, strongly highlights the central role of the Persianate Islamic humanities, including the classical Sufi poets and above all the decisive figure of the philosopher-poet-theologian-courtier Abdurrahman Jāmī (a true ‘Renaissance man’), in inspiring—just as he did in

⁴⁷⁷ Sachiko Murata (and W. Chittick), *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2000), including parallel translations of Liu Chih’s *Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* and the parallel passages of Jāmī’s *Lawā’ih*.

⁴⁷⁸ Detailed, and often truly pioneering regional illustrations of this ongoing civilisational conflict can be found throughout the extensive volume (840 pages), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. Dejong and B. Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999).

⁴⁷⁹ To which one should add the recent pioneering historical studies by Prof. C. Macinkowski (ISTAC, Malaysia) which concretely illustrate the extensive specifically Iranian influences (as well as the wider, better-known influences of Persianate South Asian literatures) in the earliest stages of the transmission of Islam throughout the coastal regions of Southeast Asia.

Muslim China—so many of the characteristic themes and expressions of Fansuri’s work, and indeed many other characteristic expressions of Islamic civilisation, in that key formative period of Southeast Asian Islam.

The recent scholarly rediscovery of the inspiring influence of Jāmī—not simply as a widely read poet, but above all as a decisive intellectual, theological and philosophical defender of the fundamental conditions for dialogue and for a multi-cultural, multi-confessional Islamic civilisation—in both Southeast Asian and Chinese Islam is of course anything but accidental. For the theatre of the most widespread, multi-faceted and multi-lingual creative elaboration of Islamic civilisation in the post-Mongol period is of course to be found throughout the Indian subcontinent, including quite disparate linguistic and cultural areas, as in South India and Sri Lanka, often far removed from any overt forms of Muslim political and military domination. And in that theatre, of course, the perennial human choices between dialogue and domination, between philosophy and miso-sophy, and between civilisation and barbarism (*jāhiliyya*) have been repeatedly and quite dramatically played out, in ways whose visible consequences have remained visible for all to see. And almost everywhere that those choices have been for the creative, constructive possibilities of genuine dialogue and civilisation, we find the unmistakable signs of the lasting influence of central figures like Jāmī and his own poetic and intellectual guides and predecessors—above all, of the ‘Greatest Master’ (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), Ibn ‘Arabī.

IV. Conclusion

Many lessons could be drawn from each of these Sadra-like historical figures—as they could be from other comparable later Muslim thinkers and creators who could be added to this unavoidably brief list. Here I would simply like to highlight one such lesson which might not be so obvious. Young students, in every civilisation, often turn to the study of philosophy because of the answers they think it may provide to the pressing existential questions which led them to that study. In contrast, the practical, contemporary relevance of detailed historical studies of earlier cultures often seems much less obvious, while its many immediate practical demands must seem both painstaking and boring. When we turn our attention to civilisations, though, something like the opposite turns out to be the case.

For civilisation, like those fundamental conditions for dialogue which sustain it and make it possible, is a remarkably rare, and perhaps an unavoidably ephemeral human achievement. Yet like so many divine gifts, it is also something that people tend to take for granted, and which they only really

begin to appreciate once it has disappeared—as so obviously has happened, almost everywhere in this world, in recent times. And with that disappearance, as Hegel famously remarked, wonder—and thus philosophy—reappears. So in this case, it is precisely deeper, more probing and thoughtful *historical* studies that can perhaps alone remind us—everywhere that ‘civilisation’ has so miraculously appeared in the past—of the daunting spiritual tasks and responsibilities of dialogue and co-operative creation which actually were required to bring those remarkable civilisational achievements into existence.

For the same tasks are still incumbent today on anyone who takes seriously the challenges of rediscovering and re-creating that indispensable vehicle for fully realizing our common humanity. In the face of the extraordinary achievements of a Mulla Sadra, or of any of those other incomparable, often anonymous creators and poets who together brought into being that Islamic civilisation (and the constituent Islamic humanities) he was so passionately striving to defend, it is all too easy to forget that the ongoing ‘clash of cultures’ and of barbarisms is not some quite unheard-of tragedy or some uniquely modern dilemma. On the contrary, it is exactly what all the outward history of this world is apparently made of—and at the same time, it is the absolutely essential seedbed for genuine dialogue, creation and any nascent global civilisation. We may wake up each morning to the din of barbarism. But the uniquely human spiritual possibility of dialogue and creation, of *ihsān* and *adab*, is all our own.

In that light, it is surely no accident that I was suddenly reminded, while composing this essay, of a line from Sa‘adī’s *Gulistān* that must have been some of the first words I ever read in Persian. For it so beautifully and simply sums up everything there really is to say—and more importantly, to do—about these recurrent human challenges of dialogue and civilisation:

Seven dervishes can be wrapped in a single blanket;

But even the seven climes can’t hold two emperors.

Chapter Nineteen

PATHWAYS TO UNDERSTANDING: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND ISLAM

Today I would like to explore with you the intersection of what at first might seem two quite separate issues. My first subject is to suggest a few key dimensions of the task of integrating the study of Islam in the wider discipline of the study of religion—a process which has only just begun in recent decades, and so far primarily here in North America. The second topic, which I can only mention briefly at the end of this talk, is the potentially much wider significance of that multi-dimensional, comprehensive exploration of Islamic religious tradition—which at present can perhaps *only* be freely pursued in a religious studies context—for responding effectively to a wide range of pressing intellectual, cultural, artistic and political needs facing every contemporary Muslim community and culture. Or to put this last point more directly, the need for an informed historical and theological vision, that is so painfully absent from today's momentary ideological furor, means that students approaching of Islam from a wider religious studies context are almost inevitably destined to play important creative and leadership roles in the indispensable cultural, social and political transformation of Muslim communities in the coming century.

The unspoken backdrop to both these subjects today, of course, is the pervasive global influence of distorted media images, paradigms and assumptions of what is “Islam” and “Islamic” that unconsciously reflect the historically quite recent spread of a few highly publicized political ideologies. Of course those recent ideological developments closely mirror, in both their socio-historical contexts and their dualistic symbolic structures, long-familiar cognate forms of fascist and Marxist thought throughout Europe and Latin America—just as they bear at least equally problematic relations to any of the longstanding and actually prevalent forms and expressions of Muslim *religious* life and tradition. Yet unfortunately, whether one is teaching in a university classroom or communicating with wider Muslim audiences anywhere in the world today, one finds that this novel ideological backdrop is almost everywhere taken for granted as the implicit framework for any public discussion of Islam. Of course, there is also one decisive difference: most Western audiences, with no serious background or familiarity

with the wider cultural and historical contexts of those recent Islamist ideologies, naturally tend to assume that their empty journalistic rhetoric is somehow descriptive—or even worse, *prescriptive*—of actual religious, social and cultural realities. Whereas most Muslims can at least partially contextualize such slogans and ideological phenomena in better informed ways that immediately highlight their novel, extreme, and highly problematic nature, just as any normal American audience can immediately contextualize the roughly comparable “Christian” views and rhetoric of a David Duke or Pat Robertson.

Against that background, perhaps the central defining task of the teaching of Islam within undergraduate religious studies departments in North America—departments which have taken an increasingly central role in the liberal arts and humanistic studies at many leading colleges and universities in recent decades—is to provide our students with *the necessary intellectual tools to begin to recognize and properly situate the full phenomenology of the actual religious lives and experience of Muslims in all relevant cultural and historical settings*. The focus of my discussion here today is simply to highlight what is required and implied by that basic intellectual and pedagogical challenge. So I am confident that each of the following brief observations are shared by my scattered scholarly colleagues who have participated in this challenging new task of integrating Islamic studies within the field of the study of religion over the past few decades. For it is crucially important to recognize that this collective effort of understanding and communication—whose wider *public* dimensions and importance should now be obvious to everyone, given today’s circumstances—is simply not going to take place in any other academic discipline or area studies field, since in each of those other disciplines their restricted subject matters and narrower hermeneutical horizons almost automatically rule out any adequate phenomenological basis for deeper religious understanding and true communication.

I. Integrating Islam in Religious Studies

So let us turn now to our opening question: what are the basic conceptual tools, or foundational perspectives, that students and teachers of religious studies need to keep in mind today, simply in order to begin to perceive—and then to understand and adequately conceptualize—the actual phenomena of Islamic religious life in their almost unimaginable diversity? This initial heuristic challenge is equally unavoidable whether our interest begins with exploring contemporary, or past historical settings. Here I will focus simply on a few key intellectual dimensions of that challenge, on central Islamic perspectives that can help us to overcome the familiar blinders of ideology, reification, misplaced paradigms,

unconscious assumptions, and the like which must be tackled at the very beginning of this enterprise. To simplify this presentation, I have adopted four pivotal Islamic terms or concepts—each of them untranslatable by any single English equivalent term—which together express the widest foundational dimensions of the religion of Islam, as well as an essential nexus of universal realities and wider human concerns that tradition shares with the broader study of religion.

The religious centrality of these perspectives throughout the wider Islamic tradition, grounded in the Qur'an and the earliest sources of that tradition, is significantly indicated by the fact that each of these four crucial terms has typically been retained in most other Islamic languages, from West Africa to Indonesia, far beyond their original Arabic sources. These four foundational perspectives, which I will gradually “translate” and explain more fully as I introduce each one in turn, are: *Dīn*, *walāya*, *adab*, and *ihsān*. (Each of those four fundamental principles is also quite tellingly absent from those prevailing media and ideological categories I alluded to at the beginning of this talk.) And each of these perspectives is equally central not only in the Qur'an itself, but throughout all the foundational expressions of Islamic thought.

As we turn to consider each of these four foundational principles, though, it is no less important to highlight the equally decisive pedagogical challenge of ensuring an adequate firsthand acquaintance, for anyone claiming to teach about Islamic religion as a whole, with a sufficiently broad range of typical cultural expressions and historical settings of Islam. As anyone teaching in religious studies quickly learns (and never ceases to re-learn), the best practical antidote to the familiar and natural human spectrum of unconscious stereotypes, blinders and inappropriate assumptions is direct, firsthand experience with the actual phenomena of religious life. And in the case of Islam, whether today or in the past, what is most daunting for any student of that tradition is its extraordinary *diversity*—often just within the setting of a single family or village, even without moving on to its singularly diverse expressions in wider cultural and historical contexts. Only when students (and potential scholarly specialists) in Islam and religious studies have effectively assimilated these initial basic conceptual principles, and then fleshed them out with adequately wide-ranging firsthand experience of their intrinsically diverse consequences and creative expressions, will they then have the necessary bases for integrating those further detailed historical, social, and cultural investigations that are of course always necessary for the exploration and proper understanding of each particular context and expression of Islam.

1. THE UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVE OF *Dīn*:

The Qur'an, almost everyone would agree, is about *Dīn*: about the primordial metaphysical relationship between the divine creative Source and the infinite forms, expressions and levels of *all* creation (including the central role of human souls) within that cosmic drama, in ways that pointedly apply to all times and places. Thus each of the three further perspectives we will discuss after this only refers to particularly important *human* dimensions of that same all-encompassing metaphysical relationship. One of my most lastingly influential memories of my own undergraduate studies was a visiting lecture by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in which he showed how it actually took several centuries before Muslims began, at first quite gingerly, to use new substantive forms of the word "*islām*" (which is not an abstract noun at all in the Qur'an) to refer to a particular specific new "religion" and social or cultural grouping, understood as somehow inherently opposed to other, earlier religious traditions. What Smith did not need to mention explicitly in that study, but which is perhaps even more important for those teaching about Islam in a religious studies context today, are two very basic realities: first, that most Muslims teaching and writing about their faith and religious life, at least up until the last century, continued to refer primarily to the universal, shared human realities of *Dīn* (i.e., not to a reified, historicist, particularist "Islam"); and secondly, that—given the ongoing centrality of the Qur'an in virtually every form of Islam—the vast majority of Muslims everywhere still continue to practice and live their faith within those intrinsically all-inclusive Qur'anic perspectives of *Dīn*.

What is actually at stake, in evoking this particularly central Qur'anic principle, is not merely some curious intellectual or theological distinction: for one's awareness of the universal perspective of *Dīn* also evokes a quite palpable and far-reaching *human reality* that anyone can immediately and unforgettably experience for themselves, as a stranger walking into any unfamiliar "Muslim" social situation, anywhere in the world. Either one is warmly welcomed there, as in the archetypal case of Abraham's angelic guests, as another kindred spirit, another theophanic participant in the cosmic divine drama of *Dīn*. And fortunately, that is still surely the most common experience in most places even today. Or else one immediately encounters the familiarly fraught public landscape of heated conflict and alienation shared by modern dualistic political ideologies in all their protean forms. For it is the centrality of that Qur'anic understanding of the intrinsic universality of *Dīn* that underlies the extraordinary phenomenological diversity, and the remarkable historical spread and adaptability, of so

many varied, yet usually peacefully coexisting, *alternative* forms and expressions of Islam across such a vast range of different cultural and historical contexts.

Now the consequences for the place of Islam in the study of religion of this centrality of the metaphysical teachings of *Dīn*—and of the correspondingly universally human *spiritual virtues* at the core of the Qur'an—are particularly fascinating and potentially far-reaching. To begin with, the insistent metaphysical universality of the Qur'anic perspective of *Dīn* makes it impossible to conceptualize or teach about Islam, as people often do with other religious traditions, by starting out with a single simplified “standard,” “mainstream,” or “orthodox” account that we can assume to be suitably descriptive of Islam in a particular geographic area or cultural context; and then to proceed by gradually adding on, as further options or “heterodox” or “minority” views, a range of other supposedly subordinate qualifications or alternative descriptions gradually modifying that basic core account. Instead—and I know that most of my colleagues actually teaching about Islam in religious studies would wholeheartedly concur in this most basic observation—we can *only* begin studying Islamic religion first through the primary revealed sources. Then we must immediately introduce and point out within that all-encompassing Qur'anic and wider scriptural context—including, as that revelation explicitly does, the host of all other divine revelations and messengers—the immense spectrum of *alternative interpretive paradigms*, and the corresponding range of *alternative models of authority and creative interpretation*, that immediately arise from within that all-inclusive network of intrinsically open-ended and problematic religious symbols.

That is to say, from the very start, any serious study of Islamic religion has to recognize quite clearly and take into explicit account virtually the entire range of hermeneutical approaches and corresponding forms of religious authority familiar to us from the wider study of religion. And this imperative, I should stress, is equally inescapable whether we begin with a strictly historical approach—since, so far as one can tell, all of those possible interpretations had been visibly elaborated and tried out by the second or third centuries of the Islamic era—or whether we prefer instead to start with the actual spectrum of attitudes, experiences and self-conceptions of contemporary Muslims themselves. For in the latter case, we inevitably find essentially the same range of alternative interpretive approaches and understandings of authority already clearly represented within any good-sized extended family or local community.

Given those unavoidable foundational realities, the frustrations of new students of Islam are quite understandable, since their formative encounters with other religious traditions—not to mention the drumbeat of completely contrary media and ideological conceptions of “Islam” reverberating everywhere around them—initially lead them to expect to find at most a handful of “primary” models of authority and right interpretation that could then be adequately explained in some kind of readily digestible textbook or manual form. The misunderstandings typically flowing from such misplaced expectations are legion.

In radical contrast to those initial student expectations, though, there are many deeper and more widely applicable lessons yet to be learned, at all levels, from the eventual integration of the study of Islam—as *Dīn*, that is—into the field of religious studies. One of the most obvious of those points, to anyone starting from the Islamic side of that challenging process, has to do with the inadequacy of many prevalent models of religious life—whether formally academic (drawn from theology, sociology, politics, economics or anthropology), or at the level of corresponding popular and media assumptions—that focus exclusively on *external* factors and criteria in the description and even the purported “explanation” of the wider phenomena of religious life and experience. In particular, the inexhaustible living diversity and creativity of actual religious life wherever we actually stop to look at *Dīn*, whether throughout Islamic history or in the contemporary world, should lead us to seriously question any accounts of religion based exclusively on the “top-down” or “outside-in” inculcation of particular beliefs and cultural practices by external authorities and institutions. Likewise, the universal perspective of *Dīn* leads us to question any account of religion that fails to recognize those challenging intrinsic dimensions of creativity and spiritual particularity that one immediately finds whenever we begin to explore actual faith and religious experience of *individual* Muslims (or other human beings), in any setting. To put it another way, from the Qur’anic perspective of *Dīn*, the inner spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of religious life and experience—dimensions that have sometimes been viewed as relatively derivative, minor, or particularist phenomena by outside interpreters unconsciously applying cultural or sociological categories drawn from more familiar Christian and Jewish traditions—in reality often turn out to be absolutely foundational elements shared by all Islamic traditions.

2. THE PERSPECTIVE OF *WALĀYA*:

Walāya is perhaps the most inclusive and familiar expression for this central and unavoidably individual, “*inner*” human dimension of Religion/*Dīn* that is the very heart of all the key teachings of the

Qur'an, and thus of all those expressions of Islam actually rooted in a comprehensive engagement with the Qur'an. The Arabic term itself refers to the omnipresent divine "Closeness" or proximity to each creature, and to the constant divine guidance and providential protection flowing from that intimate divine Presence. In short, it conveys that existentially critical dimension of the divine as *al-Walī*, the divine "Friend or "Beloved" (*dūst/yār*)—the very term which becomes perhaps the most central of the particular divine Names in all those Persianate forms of the Islamic humanities that went on to shape the faith and practice of the vast majority of the world's Muslims ever since the 13th/7th century. Indeed what we have to say in our next two points below about the centrality of both *adab* (the "Islamic humanities") and of the working-of-beauty (*ihsān*) in the study and teaching of Islamic religion are only further corollaries of this truly foundational Qur'anic principle.

This same multi-faceted term also refers to the decisive role in every domain of Islamic religious life, today as at every other period, of those exceptional, almost always outwardly anonymous, *individuals* who are the spiritually effective, creative, transforming expressions of that divine Proximity: the "Friends of God" (*awliyā' Allāh*, often rather problematically translated as the "saints")—the *walī* being a central expression, in both the Qur'an and hadith, which notably encompasses *all* the divine messengers, prophets, and "saints" of every time and tradition, indeed ultimately all the human instruments of grace and guidance. So whenever we embark on the serious phenomenological study of Islam, in any setting, we always come down in the end to the transforming influence of those particular spiritual personalities, who are equally indispensable in two outwardly very different roles. First, as the visible, earthly sources and sustainers of all the endlessly creative forms and living manifestations of this religious tradition, without whose presence everything else is quickly reduced (at best) to cultural "fossils" and empty "tales." And secondly, as those mysterious but truly omnipresent spiritual objects of devotion (in prayers, invocations, music, collective festivals, holy days, shrines, pilgrimage and visitation, and so on) who—at least for the vast majority of Muslims whose lives are structured around such liturgical activities—are indeed the real "subjects" and ongoing key spiritual actors in the cosmic drama of *Dīn*.

In both of these respects, of course, these omnipresent and practically decisive roles of the *awliyā'* throughout Islam immediately suggest wider commonalities and deeper reality-structures in the study of religion which few have as yet even begun to explore. In any case, what is truly amazing, in view of their practical devotional and experiential centrality everywhere, is the extraordinary absence of

books, films, and other serious studies actually detailing those recurrent phenomena for students of Islam in religious studies. To take a very concrete example from my own traveling cross-cultural courses on pilgrimage (while guiding religious studies undergraduates through three millennia of traditional devotional centers in France and Turkey), almost the first visible monuments students encounter whenever they enter any major Islamic city (and usually even more so in the case of villages and towns) are the domed shrines and surrounding cemeteries or mosque-complexes of the local *awliyā'*. Indeed in most cases the entire devotional life of the people of that town or city, most visibly in the still “traditional” quarters, circles around those same devotional focuses: from the annual cycles of saints’ festivals and mawlid; to weekly shrine-gatherings of *dhikr* and prayer; to the ritual life-cycle associations flowing from the prayers and offerings preceding marriage, birth, name-giving, circumcision, and so on down to one’s hoped-for burial in the proximity of that local *walī*. The same complex web of festivals, commemorations, and other customary practices and liturgical observances, with minor local adaptations, forms the most essential ritual framework of religious and devotional life for Muslims of every sect, from West Africa to Indonesia, from Tanzania to Tashkent. Yet today the only book which really effectively captures anything of that complex phenomenological web of individually probative experiences (*karamāt*), memories, intentions, dreams, and commitments underlying those near-universal Islamic practices and spiritual relationships of *walāya* is paradoxically S. Ben-Ami’s remarkable case-study of “*les pèlerinages judéo-arabes*” in North Africa!

One other illustration of this second foundational principle must suffice for today. At a conference on comparative spirituality some years ago, after I had given a presentation on the centrality of these paradoxically “invisible” (to Western scholars) phenomena of *walāya* in every area of Islamic devotional life and religious experience, Ewart Cousins (the well-known Franciscan scholar and founder of the Paulist Press translation series of classics in Western spirituality) stood up and shared his own dramatic experience of those realities near the end of a sabbatical year in Jerusalem. For most of that year, he explained, he had unsuccessfully sought to locate and meet some surviving local “Sufis.” Until one day a scholarly friend there happened to mention that he did happen to know one old, rather pious man who “prayed a lot.” Through that single resulting contact, in the few remaining few months of his stay, he was then able to meet personally with hundreds of Sufis of all ages, to discover a web of multiple living “paths” and ongoing spiritual gatherings in homes and mosques throughout Jerusalem

and the West Bank—all entirely *invisible*, of course, in terms of what he had previously been able to “see” amidst all the well-publicized troubles of that region.

Needless to say, students of religion who happen to approach Islam in terms of the polemical ideological categories now so widely popularized by the media—from which the determinant spiritual realities of *Dīn* and *walāya* are always quite self-consciously and vehemently excluded—will be doubly blinded to these most central, and most humanly accessible, dimensions of all Muslim religious life. Hence the critical practical importance, if the study of Islam is to eventually enter effectively into the wider study of religion, of translating and otherwise highlighting and explaining the key scriptural foundations, expressions and justifications of each of these central spiritual principles underlying every living cultural expression of Islamic religious tradition.

3. THE PERSPECTIVE OF *ADAB* AND THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES:

The term *adab*, which has made itself indispensable in virtually every Islamic language, refers to the fitting inner and outer individual expression of the proper spiritual attitude and intention—as such, always simultaneously contemplative *and* active—appropriate to each particular momentary situation and person we encounter in life. Together, the gradually accumulated effective social and cultural expressions of true *adab*—a process which necessarily expresses itself in every domain of human life and action—eventually came to form the constantly shifting creative corpus of what I have conveniently termed the “Islamic humanities.” For most Muslims, of course, this never-ending personal process of what has been called each soul’s unique “*translating-from-God*” is most beautifully and completely expressed in the transmitted images of the sayings and doings of Muhammad, as well as those of his spiritual companions and heirs, earlier prophets and messengers, and all those who are effectively known as the “Friends of God” (the *awliyā*’ whom we have just encountered). Once students have grasped the practical centrality of these Islamic humanities—and of their indispensable *human* exemplars—in shaping each historically significant expression of Islamic religion, many fundamental points fall into place. And the resulting understandings naturally tend to illuminate their perception of other religious traditions (and of their own life-worlds) as well. In particular, a basic familiarity with the Islamic humanities quickly reveals to students from any background the inner necessity and constantly repeated processes—both inner and outer, personal and socio-cultural—that result in those

recurrent observable phenomena of religious diversity, creativity, transformation, authenticity and fossilization that we encounter at any stage or particular location in the wider Islamic tradition.

In addition, for Muslim students (and future teachers and community leaders), a well-grounded appreciation of the Islamic humanities and of the wider *responsibilities*, both individual and collective, which flow from that appreciation is absolutely indispensable for responding effectively and creatively to the deeper challenges facing their communities in this age when the publicly prevalent Islamist ideologies are either oblivious or else profoundly hostile to any of these fundamental spiritual considerations. In that context, much of my own writing and teaching (both academic and more public) has sought to highlight the determinant role played, in the eventual spread of Islamic cultures throughout Asia and the Balkans from the 13th century onwards, by the contagiously appealing complex of new forms of the Islamic humanities—social, poetic, artistic, devotional, intellectual, and musical—that were created by a small number of extraordinary creative figures and small groups just before and after the devastating Mongol invasions. The significance of those investigations has to do with the ways they reveal the actual recurrent human processes by which the central Qur’anic teachings and symbols of *Dīn* were so effectively re-created in those challenging new cultural, linguistic and social settings—so successfully that those works eventually became themselves some of the most lastingly influential “classics” and cultural models of subsequent Islamic civilization.

Now the ultimate goal of this re-awakened understanding of the Islamic humanities is not just historical curiosity about the incomparable creative thinkers, poets and musicians of those formative centuries. Rather, it is to awaken an informed and actively responsible awareness of the cognate creative phenomena that are so urgently needed in the remarkably similar global circumstances of our own day. For all the same classic phenomena of religious re-creation and transformation so familiar in the earlier spread and adaptation of Islam into those wider cultural settings are once again taking place all around us now—not just in the dozens of visibly experimental social forms of Islam and Sufism that one encounters throughout this country today, but also in the familiar works of recent creative figures like Robert Bly, Doris Lessing, Frank Herbert, Coleman Barks, or those comparable, even more widely influential film-makers and musicians who are now actively shaping and creating the Islamicate cultures of this new century. As always, the most lastingly effective expressions of *adab* and the Islamic humanities go far beyond the imagined boundaries of any particular historical tradition, precisely through their re-awakened awareness of the universal human realities of *Dīn*.

In that regard, one memorable image that immediately comes to mind is of a public lecture I was asked to give on related aspects of the Islamic humanities more than a decade ago, in the vast auditorium of Iran's national Academy of Arts and Sciences, the training center for many of that country's most promising classical musicians and film-makers. The front three or four rows that day were populated by black-robed, turbaned, solely male religious scholars and government officials who nodded and smiled happily, if rather automatically, when I began by citing the compelling verses of the Qur'an and familiar hadith on our fundamental human responsibilities of *adab*, creativity and spiritually effective action, and then went on to allude to their creative expression in those masterpieces of classical Persian poetry that for centuries have shaped and inspired the most influential forms of Islam throughout so much of Asia and Europe. But the rest of that amphitheater was filled with a dramatically younger crowd of filmmakers, artists, and musicians—equally women and men—who applauded far more enthusiastically whenever I went on to explain that the Rumi and Hafez of our own time would necessarily be working today within the new global media of music, cinematic and video arts. So today, little more than a decade later, I am always reminded of that striking encounter whenever I find myself using the now world-renowned, globally accessible creations of some of those once-anonymous young Iranian filmmakers for precisely these same underlying spiritual purposes, in workshops and seminars for audiences all over the Islamic world, as well as here in the West.

4. THE PERSPECTIVE OF *IHSĀN*: NATURE, CREATIVITY, AND ACTS OF BEAUTY

Perhaps the central defining characteristic of the effective outward expressions of *adab* in every area of life, as in all the Islamic humanities, is their visible and moral *beauty*. For in the words of one of the most familiar hadith: '*God is Beautiful, and He loves Beauty*.'⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, according to one of the most famous and influential of all the Prophetic hadith, *ihsān*, the distinctively active awareness and realization of beauty and good,⁴⁸¹ is in itself the ultimate purpose and accomplishment of *all* Religion (*dīn*)—and the defining spiritual characteristic of every fully realized human being (of *insān*, as opposed

⁴⁸⁰ *Huwa jamīl wa yuhibb al-jamāl.*

⁴⁸¹ For the Arabic expression for both ideas, as with the Greek *kalos*, is exactly the same. According to that same hadith, those creative individual expressions of good and beauty are themselves necessarily the mirror of our own individual perception of the divine, for *ihsān* is defined there as "worshipping your Lord *as though you see Him*...."

to the mortal *bashar*). Another constantly repeated Qur’anic term even more commonly used to express the same human reality is the universal injunction to the constant “remembrance of God”, *dhikr Allāh*—a far-reaching which is normally applied to many of the key spiritual forms of the Islamic humanities, especially the widespread liturgical uses of spiritual music, chanting, poetry, and movement.

In this light, then, it should not really be surprising if we observe that by far the most lastingly effective pedagogical instruments for communicating—and eventually for motivating the active realization of—the actual realities of *Dīn* in any cultural setting are the Islamic arts and humanities in all their forms, beginning with the most widespread and indeed pervasive of all the Islamic humanities, with the infinitely varied forms of Muslim spiritual music and poetry that are at the spiritual core of so many traditional Islamic cultures. If this decisive communicative and pedagogical role of *ihsān* is so demonstrably effective already in the classroom, I must hasten to add that the central role of *ihsān* in the characteristic aesthetic forms and cultural expressions of traditional Muslim societies is itself normally heightened as well by the carefully conscious integration and preservation of the beauties of *nature*—whether in the location of so many traditional shrines and holy places, the integration of flowing water and gardens in so many areas of practical and ritual life, the spiritually heightened awareness of the appropriate treatment of animals and the natural world strongly prescribed throughout the hadith, and so on.

Against that unforgettable centrality of esthetic dimensions and of the divine creative Presence in the natural world in all the traditional historical and cultural expressions of Islam and *Dīn*, what is so surprising today is not so much the relative marginality of the Islamic humanities in so many familiar Western approaches to the teaching and comprehension of Islamic religion. For that prevalent ignorance of the Islamic humanities among outsiders can at least be excused by the understandably uninformed application of historically alien conceptions of what is elsewhere considered central to “religion” and religious life. Rather, what is far more deeply astonishing and troubling today is once again the total absence of any significant recognition of those fundamental spiritual realities and shared human responsibilities in recent Islamist ideologies and their journalistic reflections. Indeed we more often encounter in those movements a distinctive attitude of actively negative abhorrence, fear, and even intentional destruction of these absolutely central dimensions of beauty, *ihsān*, and the “spiritual ecology” of the natural world—a paradoxically willful and perverse denial of the pervasiveness of the

universal divine “Signs” in all creation and experience that is surely the very heart of the Qur’anic message of *dīn*.

In this respect, just as with each of our three preceding foundations, any effort at a more accurate and comprehensive communication of all these integral dimensions of Islamic religious life is not simply an indispensable condition for the effective integration of Islam within the wider academic discipline of the study of religion. For in each case, the awareness of these four fundamental principles also dramatically underlines the wider providential human grounds of constructive inter-religious (and even more obviously, of *intra*-religious) co-operation: of ethical and spiritual creativity, its expression in ever-expanding cultural diversity, a shared awareness of the central spiritual dimensions of the natural world, and a host of related consequences which were once the defining characteristics of the highest accomplishments of Islamic civilization. Or as the “greatest Master” of this tradition once more elegantly expressed that same illuminating insight, this culminating spiritual virtue of *ihsān*, the ultimate aim of all Religion (*dīn*), includes:

... knowing that what God has made manifest to vision in the bodies is an adornment for those bodies; ... and (the awareness) of which eye it is that a person sees with, *when they see the whole world as beautiful*—when they *do* see it—*so that they respond to it spontaneously with beautiful actions*. For this spiritual knowing is one of the most beautiful and most beneficial forms of knowing about the world.⁴⁸²

Part II: The Potential Significance of Religious Studies for Contemporary Muslims

The four points I have just briefly outlined are of course essential for any serious integration of the study of Islam within the study of religion, and there should be no need to explain the importance of that already challenging task for properly training future professors of religious studies, and especially for the adequate formation of other teachers and professionals in those many different professions whose work today necessarily requires an informed awareness and communication about Islam. Yet those

⁴⁸² Ibn al-‘Arabī: *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, end of chapter 366. Full translation and references in *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s “Meccan Illuminations”* (Fons Vitae, 2005), ch. 4.

most simple civic demands of *religious literacy* that are so indispensable for the sustaining of any multicultural society, anywhere in the world today, are far from simple to explain and inculcate when one encounters them in the classroom. And many of the most essential pedagogical materials and translations (e.g., of the canonical Sunni and Shiite hadith collections) are still completely lacking in the accurate, reliable, sufficiently annotated forms needed for any serious work in religious studies.

In the case of the study of Islam more particularly, however, the field of religious studies has a potential responsibility and unique historical opportunity in relation to Muslim intellectuals and future religious leaders—whether here in North America or globally—which is still as largely unsuspected by most faculty working with other religious traditions, as it is obvious to aspiring Muslim students of religion themselves. For the most part, this momentarily unique opportunity and challenge has to do with particular contemporary historical circumstances which do not apply in the same way to the other religious traditions normally studied in religion departments. To put this point as succinctly as possible, thoughtful and reflective Muslims everywhere in the world today are facing almost unprecedented needs for the effective creative development of newly adapted forms and expressions of religion (*Dīn*) which are at the same time profoundly and unassailably grounded in the actual sources and living wellsprings of that tradition. Everywhere one turns in the Islamic world today, one encounters the ongoing, apparently irreversible destruction of those traditional forms and expressions of *dīn* that had been slowly developed through centuries of collective accumulation of individual acts of *ihsān* and the creative elaboration of the locally adapted Islamic humanities—all due to a host of concrete global historical reasons whose explanation would require another, very different background lecture.⁴⁸³ And surely one of the most virulent and violently destructive expressions of that underlying historical process—just as happened at an earlier period in Europe and elsewhere—is the spread of sloganeering totalitarian ideologies and messianic, apocalyptic mythologies violently blocking all serious reflection and constructive action, inevitably resulting in the now harrowingly familiar self-destructive cycle of sterile polemics, civil wars, repression, genocide, and all the rest.

As a result of those wider processes and pressures (especially of dualistic ideologies and their fanatical adherents), there are very few places indeed in the world today, outside of North America,

⁴⁸³ See *Orientations: Islamic Thought in Islamic Civilization* (London, Archetype, 2004).

where Muslims are in fact sufficiently free to pursue in small group and community settings the necessarily experimental and ongoing cultural processes of spiritual *innovation and creativity* which are always required by the central religious imperatives of *adab* and *ihsān*. On a more strictly intellectual level, there are at most only a handful of higher educational institutions where future Muslim theologians and religious leaders can explore and develop in an undisturbedly objective, non-ideological way a sufficiently concrete historical awareness of the ways each of these indispensable religious processes of inspiration, creativity, and hermeneutical transformation of the foundational scriptural sources has unfolded in the past—and where they can thereby envisage how those resources and inspirations could now be applied to contemporary needs and demands. What the field of religious studies potentially provides to such aspiring students and future intellectual leaders is *an inclusive, solidly grounded global perspective on religious tradition and change*—an indispensable constructive spiritual perspective which is almost the diametrical opposite of the narrowly nationalist, particularist, polemic and apologetic ideological demands dominating public intellectual discourse in so many recently created nation-states.

So the reason that many Muslim students today with sufficient intellectual vision and ambition to see beyond the literal “dead-ends” of current ideological discourse are flocking, whenever they have the chance, to the handful of available graduate programs in religious studies including Islam (whether in Europe or North America) has very little indeed to do with any kind of lingering “neo-colonialism” or prospects for personal prestige and professional advancement. It is quite simply because only in such rare circumstances can serious students today find those *basic pre-conditions of intellectual liberty, knowledgeability, breadth, integrity, and historically grounded vision* that are so essential to lastingly effective spiritual creativity.

To make this point even more concretely, if someone wants to discuss before a Muslim audience anywhere today the essential contemporary tasks of religious understanding, creativity, innovation, and communication that are such obviously pressing needs everywhere we turn, the members of that audience will immediately recognize and classify the spectrum of possible speakers into one of four well-known groups. First, and most commonly, there are the spokespersons for this or that pre-fabricated ideology, whether that be Islamist, pseudo-Marxist, and so on, with empty slogans appealing to an ignorant, momentarily young and heedless audience. Secondly, there may be well-dressed Western-educated intellectuals, glibly parroting whatever are the latest fashionable intellectual causes,

modes, and theories in their favorite Western culture of reference—who speak almost entirely to minuscule elites from their own sheltered, cosmopolitan social class. Thirdly, there are the classic “top-down” Muslim “reformers” who—like the historically most influential traditional Islamic philosophers of the past—who are eager to provide what are at best competent, historically coherent religious justifications for whatever particular modernizing projects the local rulers may happen to favor at the moment. So whatever the particular Muslim country or issue in question, each of these three familiar groups is by now readily recognizable, and almost instantly discredited, among any but their particular narrow chosen audiences. Their wider credibility and lastingly *constructive* effectiveness, in all three cases, are typically very limited.

In contrast, what Muslim students seriously interested in the contemporary spiritual renewal of Islam everywhere are actually looking for, and find so rarely today, is something quite different. For the wider and lasting credibility of potential renewers depends, as it always has, on their ability to make the essential hermeneutical connections—not just in rhetoric and mere words, but in the equally *key dimensions of intellectual coherence, historical knowledgeability, and palpable spiritual intention*—between the pressing contemporary social and cultural needs for authentic religious creativity and innovation (*adab* and *ihsān*), and their roots in the accepted scriptural sources and the most far-sighted classical thinkers of the Islamic tradition. Even more than in the past, the task of such trained “students of Religion” (i.e., as *dīn*), those who are in reality as well as name the true “knowers” of the Muslim community (i.e., both ‘*ulamā*’ and ‘*urafā*’), has to do with recognizing, acknowledging, legitimating, and explaining to their wider community the authenticity of those creative results of true *ihsān* and *adab*, processes which are by their very nature *inherently democratic and spontaneous*—appearing “from the bottom-up” as effective responses to real, widely-felt needs, and then mysteriously spread and rapidly adopted throughout the wider community.

Chapter Twenty

THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FACING AMERICAN MUSLIMS IN THE
NEW CENTURY

No doubt everyone at this millennium conference is aware of the Qur’anic passage (2:143) which speaks of the “central,” model role of the Prophet’s own community: *And thus We made you-all a central community (ummatan wasatan) so that you might be witnesses against the (ordinary) people—and so that the Messenger may be a witness against you....* It is a verse that well expresses all the special opportunities and challenges I would like to speak of tonight. And I should emphasize from the start that my remarks should not be taken as some sort of prediction or exhortation; they are simply based on observation of the very special situation in which American Muslims find themselves, and on a historian’s awareness of the relative rarity and great importance of moments of genuine creativity in any religious tradition. Finally, in speaking of the “next century,” I am not referring to some far-off future, but to the adult lives of our children and grandchildren, to conditions and challenges that those of us who are educators (and parents) can already witness directly in the lives and dilemmas of young Muslims growing up in America today.

The unique opportunities I have in mind are three special conditions which most Americans, and probably most Americans Muslims as well, tend to take very much for granted: *the means, the diversity, and the freedom to create*. Certainly freedom is the most primordial of those three, but in real life it needs diversity and adequate means to be actualized and realized in any lasting way. And as soon as we turn our attention to other Muslim communities anywhere in the world, it is very clear that virtually all of them lack one or more of those three conditions. Even in Western Europe, for example, where many Muslims may enjoy the requisite freedom and prosperity, the strong social pressures of ethnic identity and the usual predominance of a single Muslim immigrant background (Maghrebi, Turkish, or South Asian, depending on the country in question) tend to encourage group-feeling and solidarity, a narrow focus on the interests of one’s own familiar group, in ways that are quite familiar among many immigrant communities here in the past. Indeed, what is really unique about the American Muslim community at present—but what has also been typical of many of the most creative Muslim communities throughout the past—is a fourth historical factor: the *necessity* of creating and innovating,

if their faith is to survive and flourish in coming generations. I should not have to belabor the fact that today Americans of any faith, Muslims included, live in (again, historically unique) circumstances such that they can hardly assume that their own children will follow their own religious traditions, and can only influence their children's eventual commitments in often indirect and subtle ways.

To a great extent, of course, that necessity grows out of the unique diversity and relatively equal balance among American Muslim groups, which is such that no single group is able to dominate the others in any significant way. Not only have American Muslims come to their faith by three very different routes: through recent immigration from Islamic countries, rediscovery of the deeper roots of their African heritage, or the teaching and inspiration of Sufi paths. But in fact each of those three larger categories (immigrants, African-Americans, and Sufis) are subdivided in their actual religious practice, motivations and commitments, into incredibly diverse sub-groups scattered throughout this continent and virtually all social and economic classes. While that diversity must frustrate those who might seek to translate it into more visible political power, it has always been, historically speaking (and not only in Islamic history), a most effective kind of “greenhouse” or nursery for developing and testing different spiritual and practical emphases and new forms of communication.

Now it may be somewhat shocking to the adherents of certain ideologies to speak so openly of freedom, diversity and creation or innovation as opportunities (as well as necessities), but what I have in mind is above all the deeper *spiritual sincerity and clarity* which are generated by these circumstances, when nothing in inherited tradition can be taken for granted and when the entanglements of worldly or personal motivations of any sort are fairly transparent—perhaps most of all to one's own children and students. Here one may recall the centrality and deeper meaning of that spiritual sincerity, expressed in the complex Arabic expression *tatawwu'*, in the marvelous long “hadith of intercession” recorded in several versions by both Bukhārī and Muslim.⁴⁸⁴ There, in the most dramatic circumstances, the Prophet insists that *only* those souls who bow down in prayer “for God's sake,” out of entirely voluntary and heartfelt *tatawwu'*, will be immediately admitted to the Garden—where one of their special tasks will be to return to the Fires of this world and attempt to bring out their friends and companions. If one may translate that eschatological drama onto the plane of our communal life in this world, it is

⁴⁸⁴ A full translation is included below as an Appendix to this lecture.

interesting to note as a historian the way that the effective, lasting history of virtually every significant religious movement is above all the story of such (most often anonymous) faithful souls, not of the visible, momentarily striking religious entanglements of kings, states and empires.

So the three broader groups of American Muslims already mentioned—all relatively recent and for the most part first-generation Muslims in the American setting—are equally faced with a common challenge: they must move both *together* (toward greater cooperation and institutional collaboration) and at the same time *outward* (witnessing and appropriately engaging their neighbors, relatives, co-workers and the other communities of which they are a part), if they are to fulfill the intentions of the *Aya* with which we began—and indeed if that community is to survive in any significantly influential way. The areas in which that cooperation will have to take place are not abstract or difficult to discern—and a conference such as this one is a remarkably hopeful and pioneering sign of the sort of efforts that will be increasingly necessary. Nor will this cooperation and creation be the preserve of a handful of specially trained or “activist” individuals. In reality, for the most part the challenges in question will necessarily engage each Muslim at the levels of family, work, local masjids and communities, not to speak of larger forums.

In the remaining time, one can simply indicate four key challenges or areas in which American Muslims will increasingly have to work together as a genuine community. However, this brief listing is not meant to be exhaustive or prioritized in any order of importance; obviously the particular items highlighted here, and the aspects of them that we shall mention, are rooted in (and limited by) my own experiences as a teacher, lecturer and parent, and everyone here should easily be able to add to it on the basis of their own life-experiences and concerns:

EDUCATION:

Considering that, as we have already noted, most American Muslims are still of the first generation (with their children as the second), almost everything remains to be done in this area, and the needs are so self-evident that no one can be oblivious to the enormous range of institutions, trained people, teaching media, and skills which must be developed in this area. At the same time, though, we are all aware that the social pressures and definitions of “success” and prestige in this society, which are often felt disproportionately by children in the second generation, are not likely to encourage the traditional Islamic devotion to values of religious learning, wisdom, and devotion to teaching and

sharing that knowledge. This unavoidable reality only heightens the importance of encouraging those rare individuals who do discover a true vocation in this domain.

Education is also an area, of course, in which the American history of other, earlier immigrant groups and their educational efforts (most obviously of Catholic and, more recently, Jewish communities) may offer both helpful lessons and even potential models. But at the same time, one must keep in mind (a) the sometimes very different emphases of Islam and Islamic tradition (which would not normally, for example, encourage the formation of a narrow group closed off from the wider community); (b) the historical particularities (such as the great diversity and geographical dispersion) of contemporary American Muslims, which we have already noted; and (c) the particular wider social circumstances of our time (greater mobility, rapid social change and uncertain values, pressures toward ‘secular’ lifestyles, etc.) which young people of any background cannot escape.

Since the fundamental needs in this area are, for the most part, already quite obvious to American Muslims from any background, I would simply point out two larger, long-term areas whose importance might not be so self-evident to concerned parents and community leaders. The first of these points is that although the first and natural impulse is to adapt to the American situation educational practices, methods and materials already used elsewhere in the world, such an approach can only be of limited utility—and may in many cases have something like the opposite of the initially intended effect. This is an area where appropriate means of creativity and innovative adaptation can only be discovered by well-intentioned trial and (all too frequently!) error. And in those cases where “copying” older or foreign methods and materials does not work, what is brought in to replace them needs to be grounded in a deep understanding of the Qur’an, hadith and Islamic tradition which itself depends on a level of education and readings (or other media resources) which often do not yet exist.

This last point brings me to the challenge and importance of higher education, by which I am not referring to the formation of Imams and religious figures in the traditional sense, but rather of a much wider and more numerous range of Muslim professionals—active in all walks of life—who are also at home with and deeply versed in the foundational elements of Islamic tradition. My own experience as a professor in religious studies (and one shared by most of my colleagues) is that in perhaps the majority of cases today, young Americans—of every religious background, including Islam—are often encountering their first serious discussion of religious issues and traditions only at the university level,

in ways that will continue to engage them for the rest of their lives. Whatever the causes of that phenomenon (which we can only affect in limited ways in the wider society), it does highlight the importance of supporting and establishing appropriately oriented university-level courses and professorships in Islamic Studies—educational developments which should also have a major long-term impact as well on the wider public awareness of many dimensions of Islam and related political and social issues. In fact, if one can judge by the effects of the proliferation of endowed Jewish Studies programs throughout the country over the past generation, it is precisely such serious independent programs at the university level which can best encourage the full spectrum of creative minds, community leaders and committed vocations which are so obviously needed to develop Islamic educational and social institutions in different local settings.

LOCAL COOPERATION AND WIDER COMMUNITY:

If American Muslims from any of the three above-mentioned larger groups are to develop the sorts of community which are needed to survive and flourish in the next century, they cannot afford to be totally delimited by either imported or native-grown divisions and inherited enmities and suspicions. This does not mean that each group must give up its specific allegiances, roots, traditions and emphases, and so on—which is something that will certainly not happen. But those involvements and historical inheritances—whether they have to do with national political struggles abroad, Shiite-Sunni divisions, the age-old competitions of Sufi tariqas, or recent proselytising groups and their charismatic leaders, and the like—are often incomprehensible to younger American (or Canadian) Muslims who typically are far more concerned with asserting or discovering their *common* Muslim identity (already felt to be a somewhat endangered minority), than with encouraging further divisions and sectarian disagreements.

The overcoming of those divisions may well be impossible for Muslims born in and still deeply involved with the struggles and stakes concerned—and it will surely be painful and challenging for anyone rooted in those earlier situations. But it is still an unavoidable historical necessity in this new American situation where the net result of perpetuating such disputes would be to render serious forms of cooperation and social influence all but impossible. And on the more positive side, it does not take too much imagination to see that American Muslims who work to cooperate—both among themselves and with other local groups and faiths sharing common interests and goals—will be far closer to fulfilling the Qur’anic injunction and ideal (of the *umma wasata*) with which we began, both in this country and in their impact on the wider global scene.

CREATIVITY AND COMMUNICATION:

It is obvious to anyone, even without knowing any of the historical details, that the spread of Islam as a world religion, to perhaps a wider range of cultures and geographical settings than any other faith, has constantly involved processes of creative adaptation to those circumstances, in which the spiritual *intentions* that are central to the Qur'an (and indeed to far more hadith than people might suspect) were expressed and communicated in forms appropriately adapted to and drawn from those local circumstances. (The clerical forms and institutions of the Arabic "religious sciences," which many have come to take as "traditional" Islam, are only one of the more dramatic expressions of that ongoing process of innovation.⁴⁸⁵) And indeed one might argue that not only Muslims, but people of faith all over the globe (not just in America) are facing just such a set of radical new historical circumstances in our own time.

But be that as it may, there is surely no doubt that while many American Muslims have already become Muslim precisely through such historical processes of creative innovation (most obviously with the origins of many influential African-American Muslim groups), the children of immigrants (and their parents!) in particular are faced with especially dramatic challenges in this regard—challenges familiar enough to most Americans through their dramatization in the vast array of literature and films reflecting the experiences of earlier immigrant groups. The challenge of first discerning what is essential and central in the inherited forms of one's religious and cultural traditions—and it is part of the particular adaptive genius of Islam in the past that so many outwardly distinctive cultures have come to express its intentions in every area of life—and then going on to find completely new ways of communicating and establishing those values in a radically new social and cultural setting is a daunting one. But it is also an everyday necessity for many families (and not only of Muslims!) in this country at this time. Moreover, out of that necessity and the experimentation which it unavoidably imposes on so many parents and communities, one can be sure that new tools and methods, of proven efficacy, will gradually develop.

⁴⁸⁵ Given the success of certain recent political ideologists in portraying all innovation (*bid'a*) as some kind of forbidden "heresy," interested readers may refer to the actual full text of the celebrated hadith that begins "whoever establishes a good tradition..." (*man sanna sunna hasana...*). That hadith is recorded, with many variants, in Muslim ('ilm, 15, etc.; *zakāt*, 59), Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, Darimi and Ahmad b. Hanbal. (See Wensinck, *Concordance*, II, 552.)

Here I may mention one striking personal experience in this regard. As a teacher in religious studies raised and educated in a culture of books and reading, I was painfully aware—as a new generation of students largely raised on television, video, and media culture began to reach university age—of the challenge of finding new ways of making the connections, for these new students, between religious scriptures and related classical texts, on the one hand, and the perennial existential dilemmas and experiences in which those religious forms and scriptures are rooted. It was really through my observations of my own children, to begin with, that I began to experiment using certain feature films (*not* ostensibly “religious” ones!) to dramatically illuminate for those students, collectively and in a very short period of time, the actual archetypal spiritual, ethical and political issues dealt with in the traditional religious texts.⁴⁸⁶ And it was only through the remarkable success of that experiment, which I have since fruitfully verified and extended with all sorts of groups of different ages, religions and national backgrounds, that I actually became aware of the way how so many classical and even “scriptural” forms of Islamic tradition (such as many of the stories and symbols in the hadith) were actually providing very similar forms of communication in their own original cultural settings.

RETURNING TO THE QUR’AN:

Finally, each of the challenges I have briefly mentioned here—and, I suspect, whatever others one might readily add to this list—will necessarily force American Muslims, whatever their historical background and commitments, toward a deeper awareness of and more profound reference to the Qur’an. For in the midst of such extraordinary diversity of expressions of Islam (which is in itself an encouraging sign of health), it is only in the Qur’an that all these different groups can expect to find what is *common, central* and *primordial*—indeed, not only what they share in common as Muslims, but also what links them in community with all the other human beings they encounter in the other domains

⁴⁸⁶ Although this is not the moment to elaborate this point, one may mention the extraordinary correspondences, in the film Field of Dreams, with both the spiritual dimensions of the Sīra and challenges of the early Muslim community (as well as the relation of Abraham and earlier traditions to Islam), and the deepest eschatological teachings of the Qur’an and hadith; of Babette’s Feast with many central commemorative rituals in Islam (and all the Abrahamic faiths); or the pervasive illustrations in films like Groundhog Day (even suitable for children) or The Fisher King (*not* for children) with central Sufi teachings and forms of expression—to which one could certainly add a number of recent classical Iranian films, including the extraordinary The Color of Paradise (whose original title echoes the Qur’anic *sibghat Allāh*).

of life. And here—to complete a kind of circularity among these different challenges—it is quite evident that we, as educators and shapers of the future community, face great challenges in finding the appropriate forms of translating and teaching the Qur'an (not to mention other Islamic classics) in English that will actually begin to communicate its intentions, essential meanings and unique forms and qualities in an effective way to the vast majority of Muslim students and young people who are no longer able to spend years learning the necessary levels of Arabic and related knowledge. Surely no other responsibility could be more important in the longer run.

In conclusion, no one can be under the illusion that there is any simple or wholly adequate answer to any of these challenges, or that the answers of one family, community, or group will be adequate to the needs and circumstances of others. But we can take heart from another Qur'anic verse (5:48) which so beautifully describes all the infinite divine intentions that are manifest precisely in this situation and this responsibility we all must share:

...For each one of you We have placed a path and a way; and if God had wished, He would have made all of you a single community. But instead [He made many] so as to test you all concerning what He has given you. So strive to come first with all that is good. For to God you are returning, altogether; and He will inform you all about that wherein you differ.

Appendix : The “Hadith of the Intercession”⁴⁸⁷

[... from Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī , who said:] Some people during the time of the Messenger of God asked him: “O Messenger of God, will we see our Lord on the Day of the Rising?”

The Messenger of God said: “Yes! Do you have any trouble seeing the sun at noon, on a bright clear day when there are no clouds? Or do you have any trouble seeing the full moon on a clear and cloudless night?”

“No, O Messenger of God!,” they replied.

He said: “You will have no more trouble in seeing God on the Day of the Rising than you have in seeing either of them!”

[The Prophet continued:] Now when it is the Day of the Rising, a Caller called out “Let every *Umma*⁴⁸⁸ follow what it was worshipping!”

Then there is not a one of those who were worshipping idols or graven images other than God, but that they all go on falling into the Fire, one by one.

(This continued) until none remained but those who were worshipping God, both the pious and the sinners, among the People of the (revealed) Book who lived long ago... [But most of them also turn out to have “associated” others in their worship of God, so that their “thirst” is recompensed by the “mirages” of the Fire.]

(This continued) until none remained but those who are worshipping God (alone), both the pious and the sinners. The Lord of the Worlds came to them in the form farthest from the one in which they

⁴⁸⁷ *Al-tahawwul* or *al-taqallub fī al-suwar*: translated here from the Sahīh of Muslim, *īmān*, 81. This hadīth and the immediately following one (in Muslim) are both recorded in almost identical terms, near the end of Bukhārī’s Sahīh (*tawhīd*, 23 and 24; repeated in the chapter on *riqāq*, 52); see also Wensinck, Concordance, I, 348 (versions also recorded by Ibn Māja, al-Tirmidhī, al-Dārimī and Ibn Hanbal).

⁴⁸⁸ Usually translated as “(religious) community.” But here—as often in the Qur’an, where the expression is forcefully applied to *all* creatures (6:38, etc.)—the term is evidently to be understood in a more complex and clearly less historicist sense.

imagined ('saw') Him. He said (to them): "What are you-all waiting for?! Every Umma is pursuing what they used to worship!"

"O our Lord," they replied, "we kept away from *those* people⁴⁸⁹ (while we were) in the world,⁴⁹⁰ no matter how much we were in need of them, and we had nothing to do with them!"

So he says (to them): "(But) I am your Lord!"

"We take refuge with God from you!," they say. "We don't associate anything with God!" (And they keep on saying this) two or three times, until some of them are just about to turn around and go away.

Then he says: "Is there any Sign (*āya*) between you-all and Him by which you would recognize Him?"

And they say: "Yes."

Then (*the True Reality*) is revealed...,⁴⁹¹ and **the only ones who remain, who God allows to pray, are those who used to bow down to God spontaneously, out of their soul's own desire.** As for all of those who used to bow down in prayer out of social conformity and to protect their reputation (out of fear of what others might say or do), God makes them entirely into 'backs,' so that whenever they want to bow down in prayer, instead they keep falling back on their backs!

Then they will raise up their heads (from prayer), and He will already have been transformed (back) into His form in which they saw Him the first time (i.e., in this world).

Then after that He said: "I am your Lord," and they are saying: "(Yes), *You* are our Lord!"

⁴⁸⁹The term here is *al-nās*, here in the pejorative sense of what they take to be "ordinary," "sinful" people (including those of other religious communities).

⁴⁹⁰*Al-dunyā*: i.e., the earthly, material world (since the story has now placed them in the "other" world, *al-ākhirā*).

⁴⁹¹The hadith here presupposes quite literally the situation in the rest of this Qur'anic passage (68:42-43): *...and they are called to bow down (in prayer), but they are not able, their eyes abased, humiliation overcoming them—although they used to be calling (others) to pray, when they were whole and sound!*

Then after that the Bridge (*al-jisr*) is set up over Gehenna, and the Intercession takes place and they are all saying: “O my God, protect, protect!”⁴⁹²“

Then someone says: “O Messenger of God, what is this ‘Bridge’?”

He said: It is a slippery, precarious toehold, covered with hooks and spikes and thorns like a bush in the desert they call “*al-sa’dān*.” The people of faith pass over it as quickly as the glance of an eye, or like lightning, the wind, birds, fast horses or camels. Some escape untouched; some are scratched and torn, but manage to get away; while others tumble into the Fire of Gehenna. (And this continues) until the people of faith are safely free from the Fire.

Now by Him Who holds my soul in His Hand, not one of you could implore and beseech (someone) in seeking to gain what is (your) right and due any more intensely than the people of faith plead with God, on the Day of the Rising, on behalf of their friends who are in the Fire!

They are saying: “O our Lord, those (friends of ours) used to fast with us, and they were praying and they were loving!”

Then it is said to them: “Bring out whoever you-all knew (among them)!” So their forms are kept protected from the Fire, and they bring out a great many people whom the fire had already consumed halfway up their legs, or to the knee.

Next they say: “O our Lord, there does not remain in the Fire a single one of those whom You ordered us (to bring out).”

So He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even a dinar’s weight⁴⁹³ of good!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we did not leave in the Fire a single one of those whom You ordered us (to bring out).”

⁴⁹²These words (*sallim, sallim*) could be taken either as the cry of the various “intercessors” (see below) pleading with God for *others*, or more generally as expressing the inner state of all the souls terrified (for *themselves*) by the events of the Judgment and sight of Gehenna.

⁴⁹³An extremely tiny, “feather-weight” gold coin. The version of this same hadith given in Bukhārī substitutes “faith” (*īmān*) in each case where this version has “good.”

Next He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even *half* a dinar’s weight of good!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we did not leave in the Fire a single one of those You ordered us (to bring out).”

Next He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even ‘*an atom’s-weight of good*’⁴⁹⁴!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we didn’t leave in the Fire any good at all!”

Now Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī was saying [as he recounted what the Prophet said]: “If you-all don’t believe what I’m recounting in this hadith, then read, if you will, (the Qur’anic verse) ‘*Surely God does not do even an atom’s weight of wrong, and if it be a good-and-beautiful (action), He multiplies it many times, and He brings from His Presence an immense Reward!*’ (4:40).”

Then God says: “The angels have interceded; and the prophets⁴⁹⁵ have interceded; the people of faith have interceded. Now none remains but ‘*the Most Loving and Compassionate of all*,’⁴⁹⁶”

Then He grasps a handful from the Fire, and He brings out of It a group of people *who never did any good at all*, who have already returned to charred ashes. Then He throws them into a river in one of the openings of the Garden, a river that is called “the River of Life.” And they come out of (that River) like a seed that grows out of the muddy silt carried along by the flood: haven’t you seen how it grows up next to a rock or a tree, green on the side facing the sun, and paler on the shady side?

⁴⁹⁴ Alluding to a well known Qur’anic passage at 99:7 (and several related verses, including the one at 4:40 which Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī goes on to quote below).

⁴⁹⁵ *Al-nabīyūn*: the all-inclusive Qur’anic term for many of the pre-Islamic divine Messengers, saints and sages.

⁴⁹⁶ *Arham al-rāhimīn*: alluding especially here to the verse 12:92, although the same divine Name is also cited at 7:151, 12:64, and 21:83.

He continued: They will come out like pearls, with seal-rings on their necks. Then the people of the Garden recognize them: “These are those who have been set free by the All-Compassionate, Who has admitted them into the Garden without any (good) deed that they did or sent before them.”

Then He says: “*Enter the Garden* (cf. 89:30)—whatever you see there is yours!”

They say: “O Lord, You have granted us blessings which you did not grant to anyone else in the world!”

And He says: “There is with Me (a blessing and favor) better than this.”

And they reply: “O our Lord, what could be better than this?”

He answers: “My **absolute Love-and-Satisfaction**:⁴⁹⁷ I will never be angry with you after this!”

⁴⁹⁷ *Ridwānī*: alluding to such Qur’anic verses as 57:20, 5:16, 9:21, etc. (mentioned 13 times, in addition to related uses of the root *r-d-y*); the term is often translated as divine “Satisfaction” or “Contentment,” but such English expressions are obviously utterly inadequate in this context.

Additional Sources: Related Qur'an and Hadith Selections

THE HUMAN CONDITION: SOME REPRESENTATIVE QUR'ANIC VERSES

The following is a short selection of representative verses from the Qur'an outlining the basic metaphysical terms of the human condition from the human, earthly perspective (primarily in relation to God and the higher spiritual worlds); a host of additional verses could be cited to illustrate each point. This selection does not deal with the elaborate Qur'anic account of the eschatological process and terms of the human soul's gradual "Return" to God (*ma'ād*), which includes half or more of the verses of the entire Qur'an. At the end here we have added three typical examples of the ways three later masters of the Islamic humanities (figures already encountered in Chapters 3, 4, 12 and 13 above) have managed to communicate the same complex teachings in extraordinarily compact and subtle artistic forms.

I. "The Origin and The Return": Faith and Right Action; Religion (*Dīn*), and the Cosmic drama of the Spirit (*Rūh*):

We have already created the human being (insān) in the best of forms;/
And then We brought it back to the lowest of the low/,
Except for those who have true faith (īmān) and do the appropriate things (sālihāt)—for
they have a reward that is never cut off./
So what will tell you Religion (Dīn) is a lie after that?/
Isn't God the most Just of those who judge? (95:4-8)

*Certainly We sent It down on the Night of Destiny*⁴⁹⁸
And what can make you know what the Night of Destiny is?
The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months:
The angels and the Spirit descend during It, with the permission of their Lord for every
matter
Peace it is until the rising of the Dawn. (97:1-5)

...from God, Master of the Ascensions
to Whom the angels and the Spirit ascend in a Day whose length is fifty thousand years.
So persevere with a beautiful perseverance:
They see that [Day] far away,
But We see It near.... (70:3-7)

⁴⁹⁸The cosmic sense of the term (God's "determining" or "apportioning" of all created things) is further explained at 44:3-5: "*Certainly We sent it down on a blessed Night, certainly We were warning./ In that [Night] each matter is wisely separated/ as a Command from Us, surely We were sending/ a Mercy from your Lord....*"

*The Day the Spirit stands up, the angels in rows...
That is the True Day.... (78:38-39)*

*...don't despair of God's Spirit: no one despairs of God's Spirit but the people who are
ungrateful. (12:87)*

II. The Creation of humankind (Adam and Animal); Spirit and Soul:

II-A. THE HUMAN BEING'S COMMON SOURCE:

O humankind, take care for your Lord who created you all from one soul (nafs).... (4:1)

And Hū⁴⁹⁹ it is who brought you all into being from one soul.... (6:98).

Hū it is who created you all from one soul.... (7:189).

Your (pl.) creation and your raising are only as a single soul.... (31:28).

II-B. THE CONTINUITY OF CREATION (AND THE "RETURN"):

*You all return to Him/Hū, all together—God's promise in Truth. Certainly He begins the
creation, and then He repeats it again.... (10:4).*

*Don't they see how God begins creation, and then He repeats it!? Certainly that is easy
for God. (29:19).*

... God begins the creation, and then He repeats it again.... (10:34).

*So were We weakened by the first creation? Yet they are in doubt about a new creation !
(50:15)*

*To God (belongs) the Unseen of the heavens and earth, and to Him the whole matter
returns.... (11:123)*

⁴⁹⁹ This particular divine Name—often considered “the Name of the divine *Essence*,” or the most all-encompassing and deepest of all the Names—is in these Qur’anic contexts anything but an “indeterminate” pronoun, and refers the deepest Reality of all, far beyond distinctions of gender or other created forms. In order to avoid common misunderstandings in English, we have kept to the Arabic (as it is pronounced in sessions of *dhikr*, where it openly mirrors the divine ‘Breath’ or ‘Spirit’). Unfortunately, English requires a masculine or feminine ‘subject’ of all the Qur’anic verbs, and in those cases we have conceded to the usual English usage of “He”—but readers should keep in mind that the actual divine ‘Subject’ (whatever the Name connected with each verb) is likewise in no way connected with our familiar English ‘gender’ distinctions or qualifications.

*God begins the creation, and then He repeats it again, and to Him you are all returned. (30:11).*⁵⁰⁰

...Every thing is perishing except His Face; His is the Judgment, and to Him you are all returning. (28:88).

*Every one who is upon it (the earth) is passing away,
But the Face of your Lord remains.... (55:26-27).*

... So wherever you all may turn, there is God's Face... (2:115)

II-C. THE CREATION OF ADAM/INSĀN AND HIS POTENTIAL SUPERIORITY TO THE ANGELS:

And then your Lord said to the angels: "Surely I am placing a deputy (or "steward": khalīfa) on the earth."

They said: "Are You placing there someone who will work corruption in it and shed blood, while we sing your praises and sanctify You?!"

He replied: "Surely I know what you do not."/

So He taught Adam the Names, all of them. Then He showed them to the angels, and said: "Tell me about the Names...." /

They said: "...We only know what You have taught us...." /

*He said: "O Adam, tell them about their Names...." (2:30-31).*⁵⁰¹

Surely We created human being (insān) from clay....

And when your Lord said to the angels: "Indeed I am creating a mortal (bashar) out of clay....

*So when I have shaped him and breathed into him from My Spirit, fall down and bow to him." (15:26-29).*⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ See also 13:6, 17:49, 17:98, 85:13, etc. on the ever-renewed creation.

⁵⁰¹ The rest of this central story of the angels' bowing down to Adam, and of Iblis' refusal to bow down before that "**creature of clay**," is repeated with important variations and amplifications at 7:11-27; 15:26-33; 17:61-65; 18:50; 22:115-123; etc.

⁵⁰² See also the related accounts of the creation of the mortal *bashar* simply from "water" (25:54) or "dust" (30:20), and the physical stages of that process described at 22:5, 18:37, etc.

*Indeed the likeness of Jesus with God is like Adam: He created him from dust, then He said to him “Be!”, and he is. (3:59)*⁵⁰³

II-D. THE HUMAN BEING’S “STEWARDSHIP” ON EARTH; THE DIVINE “TRUST”:

Indeed We offered the Trust to the heavens and earth and the mountains; yet they refused to take it on, and they were afraid of it. But the human being (insān) took it on.... (33:72).

Hū it is Who created for you-all what is on the earth.... (2:29).

Hū it is who placed you-all as stewards of the earth.... (6:165).

Then after them We placed you-all as stewards on the earth, so that We could see how you act. (10:14; see similar statements at 7:69, 7:74, 7:129, 10:73, etc.)

II-E. THE CARNAL AND ANGELIC SOULS; INDIVIDUALITY OF SOUL:

[Joseph said]...Surely the soul is commanding (me to do) evil, unless my Lord has mercy.... (12:52).

But no, I swear by the reproaching soul! (75:2).

By a soul and What formed it,/

And inspired in it the things that are wrong for it and what is right for it:/

Whoever purifies it has truly prospered... (91:7-9).

O thou soul at peace,/

*Return to your Lord, content (with Him) and in His good pleasure!/
So enter among My servants,/*

And enter My Garden. (89:27-30).

Your (pl.) creation and your raising are only as a single soul.... (31:28).

We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, until it becomes clear to them that Hū is the Real/True One.... (41:53).

III. The Covenants of Humankind and God:

And when your Lord took the descendants of the children of Adam from their loins, and He made them bear witness by their souls, (saying): “Am I not your Lord?”

They answered: “Yes indeed, we bear witness!”—Lest you all should say on the Day of Rising: “But we were unaware of that.” (7:174).

⁵⁰³ See also 4:170 on Jesus as “a Spirit from God”.

Remember God's blessings on you all and His covenant by which He bound you all, when you said: "We hear and we obey!", and take heed of God.... (5:7; see also 13:25).

[The covenant of the prophets]:

And when God took a covenant with the prophets, (He said): "This is what I have brought you from the Book and Wisdom. Then there came to you a messenger confirming what is with you: you should have faith in him and support him."

He said: "Do you agree, and will you take My burden upon you?"

They said: "We agree."

He said: "Then bear witness, and I am with you among those who bear witness."/

So whoever turns away (from God) after that, they are the wrongdoers. Then do they seek something other than the Religion of God—when those who are in the heavens and on earth surrender to God, whether willingly or resisting, and to Him/Hū they are all returned?!/

Say: "We have faith in God and in what He has brought down to us, and what was brought down to Abraham and Ismail and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between a single one of them and we are surrendered to Him."

And whoever seeks other than surrender (to God: islām) as Religion—it will not be accepted from them, and they will be among those who are losers in the next world. (3:81-85)⁵⁰⁴

IV. God's Relation to Human Beings: Proximity, Love and Mercy:

IV-A. THE NEARNESS OF GOD:

..... So wherever you all turn, there is God's Face; certainly God is All-encompassing, All-knowing. (2:117).

⁵⁰⁴ Note also the mention of covenants between God and Adam at 20:115 ff.; of "*those who were given the Book (of God),*" at 3:187; and the numerous references to the covenant of the Children of Israel.

Indeed We created the human being (insān), and We know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than his jugular vein. (50:16).

When My servants ask you about Me, then surely I am near: I answer the prayer of whoever who calls upon me in prayer.... (2:186).

... And know that God passes [or: “is transformed”] between the man and his heart, and to Him/Hū you are all being raised. (8:26).

...He who is standing over every soul.... (13:33).

... There is no gathering of three, but the He/Hū is the fourth of them; nor of five, but He is their sixth; nor of fewer than that, or more. But He is with them wherever they may be... (56:8)

...God is always encompassing every thing. (4:126; see 2:255, 6:59, 17:60, and dozens of similar verses).

The seven heavens and the earth and (all) those who are in them are praising Him, and there is no thing but that sings His praise; but you all do not understand their praise.... (17:44).

IV-B. GOD’S LOVE AND ALL-ENCOMPASSING COMPASSION/LOVINGMERCY (*rahma*):

... And I inspired in you love from Me, that you might be shaped according to My Essence/Self. (20:39).

... say: “Peace be with you! Your Lord has prescribed Compassion for Himself...surely He is all-Forgiving, all-Compassionate.” (6:54).

...(God) said: “...My Compassion encompasses all things. Therefore will I ordain it for those who...” (7:156).

... “Bring us into Your Compassion, for You are the Most Compassionate of all!” (Arham al-Rāhimīn). (7:151; etc.).

... He loves them, and they love Him.... (5:54, of the “Friends of God”).

Say: “If you all love God, then follow me: God loves you and forgives you your sins, and He is all-Forgiving, all-Compassionate. (33:31).

And among humankind are those who take rivals instead of God, loving them with the love (they owe) God; but those who have true faith are stronger in their love for God.... (2:165).

...and do what is good-and-beautiful (ihsān), for surely God loves those who do what is good-and-beautiful ... (2:195).

... Surely God loves those who turn to Him (in repentance), and He loves those who purify themselves. (2:222).

V. The Human Response: Remembrance and Awareness:

V-A. REMEMBRANCE AND SPIRITUAL RECOLLECTION (*dhikr*):⁵⁰⁵

So remember Me, and I remember you; and give thanks to Me, and do not be ungrateful. (2:152).

...And remember Him as He has guided you, though before this you were among those gone astray.

....So when you have completed your worship, then remember God as you remembered your fathers, or with an even stronger remembrance.... (2:198-200).

He gives Wisdom to whomever He wills—and whoever is given Wisdom is given a great good. But no one really remembers but the people of Hearts. (2:269).

... No one knows the inner meaning (ta'wīl) of the (divine Book) but God and those who are deeply rooted in knowledge. They say: "We have faith in It; all of it is from our Lord." But no one really remembers but the people of Hearts. (3:7).

Certainly in the creation of the heavens and the earth...are Signs for the people of Hearts,/

Who remember God while standing, and sitting, and (lying) on their sides, and who reflect deeply on the creation of the heavens and the earth.... (33:190-191).

So when you have completed the ritual prayer, then remember God while standing, and sitting, and (lying) on your sides.... (4:103).

Remember God's blessing upon you all and His covenant by which He bound you when you all said: "We hear and We obey!".... (5:7).

And remember your Lord in your soul, humbly and in awe, without speaking loudly, in the morning and in the evening.... (7:205).

Those who had faith and whose hearts are at peace through the remembrance of God—for surely hearts find peace in the remembrance of God!—, Those who had faith and did the appropriate things: joyful bliss for them, and a beautiful returning. (13:28-299).

⁵⁰⁵ See also verses 6:80, 126, 151-152; 7:3, 26, 57, 69, 86, 130; 9:126; 11:24; 13:19-24; 14:5-6, 25, 52; 16:13, 17, 43-44, 90; 18:24, 28, 101; 20:99; etc.

V-B. PROFOUND REFLECTION/PENETRATION (*tafakkur*):

*... God makes clear to you all His Signs, so that you all may reflect deeply/
On this world and the next.... (2:219-220).*

... Say: "Are the blind and the seer alike?! So why do you not reflect?" (6:50).

... So tell them the tales (of earlier prophets) so that they may reflect (on them). (7:176).

*Hū it is Who spread out the earth and placed in it.... Surely in that are Signs for a people
who reflect deeply! (13:3; see also 13:2, 4; 16:11-13, 65-69; etc.)*

VI. The Earthly Condition (the School of Souls):

VI-A. TRIALS AND PERSEVERANCE (*sabr*):

*And We will certainly try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of property,
lives and crops; but give good news to those who persevere,
Who, when a misfortune strikes them, say: "We are God's, and to Him we are
returning."/*
*Those ones have God's blessings and compassion, and they are the rightly-guided.
(2:156-157)*

*Or do you all suppose that you will enter the Garden (of Paradise) while there has not
yet come to you the like (of what happened) to those who went before you? They were
touched by afflictions and adversity, and profoundly shaken.... (2:214).*

*Do people suppose that they will be left alone because they say "We have faith," and that
they are not tried?*

*We have already tried those who were before them, and surely God knows those who
speak sincerely and those who lie. (29:2-3).*

*... For each of you We have made a path and a way. And if God had wished, He would
have made you all one community. But (He did not) so that He might test you in what He
gave you. So strive to be first in good things.... (5:48)*

*He it is Who placed you all on earth as stewards and raised some of you above others in
rank, so that He might test you in what He gave you.... (6:165).*

*And We separated them on earth as peoples: some of them do the right things, and some
of them are below that. And We tested them with good things and bad things, so that they
might return. (7:168).*

*... And you did not throw when you threw, but God threw, so that He might test those with
faith in Him with a good test.... (8:17).*

Don't they see that they are tried a time or two in each year? And yet they do not turn (in repentance) or really remember! (9:126).

And He it is who created the heavens and earth...so that He might try you all, which of you is best in action.... (9:7).

Certainly We placed what is on the earth to make it attractive, so that We might test them, which of them is best in action. (18:7).

VI-B. THE ROLE OF IBLĪS/SHAYTĀN:⁵⁰⁶

(God) said: "O Iblīs, why is it that you are not among those (angels) bowing down (to Adam)?"

....(Iblis) said: "My Lord, since You tempted me, surely I will make attractive for them (what is) on earth, and I will tempt them all together,/ Except for Your truly sincere servants among them."

(God) said: "This is a straight path (incumbent) upon Me,/ But you will have no power over My servants, except for those seduced ones who follow you." (15:32-44).

And when We said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam", then they bowed down, except for Iblis.

He said: "Will I bow down before someone You created from clay!?"

(God) said: "Go, ...and arouse whoever you can of them with your voice...and be a partner with them in their property and children, and make promises to them—for Satan only promises to them in deception./

But (as for) My servants: surely you have no power over them...." (17:61-65)

And Satan said, (on the Day) when the affair was judged: "Surely God promised you the promise of Truth, and I promised you, and then I abandoned you. For I had no power over you except that I called to you and you answered me. So don't blame me, but blame your (own) souls! ... (14:22).

⁵⁰⁶ See other versions of Iblīs' story at 2:29-38; 7:11-17; 18:50; etc.

Part II: Three Summary Images from Later Islamic Writers/Musicians:⁵⁰⁷

Hafiz's image: Two opening lines of a ghazal by the famous Persian poet

The Musician/Composer of Love has a wondrous instrument and song:

The impression of each chord He/She strikes has its Way to a Place.

May the world never be without the lament of lovers:

Such a beautifully harmonious and joy-giving melody it has!

* *

Ibn 'Arabi's Image: the "Divine Comedy":⁵⁰⁸

"Whoever wants to know the inner reality of what we have alluded to concerning this question [of the deeper reasons for death and human suffering, ignorance and sin in this world] should reflect on the illusion/imagination of the screen and the forms of the shadow-play. Who is the speaker, for the little children who are far from the veil of the screen set up between them and the person playing with those characters and speaking through them?

Now that is how it is with the forms of the world: the majority of people *are* those little children we just mentioned—so you should know how it is that happened to them. The little ones at that show are happily playing and having great fun; (and likewise) *the heedless ones consider* (this world only) *an amusement and pastime*.⁵⁰⁹ But those who truly know reflect and see more deeply, and they realize that God has only established this as a likeness (or symbol: *mathal*).

⁵⁰⁷ The following three illustrations are *not* passages from the Qur'an, but instead typical examples of the memorable ways the creators of the Islamic humanities (three authors studied in more detail in Chapters X, Y, and Z above) were able to vividly summarize and communicate hundreds of verses and central teachings from the Qur'an, including those detailed in this selection, in a single vivid image or composition.

⁵⁰⁸ From chapter 317 of *The Meccan Illuminations*, by this famous 13th-century Spanish theologian, poet, mystic, and philosopher.

⁵⁰⁹ Cf. 30:7 (for *ghāfilūn*); 6:70 and 7:51, on "those who consider their Religion an amusement and pastime, having been deluded by the life of this world...."

That is why at the beginning of the show a person comes out who is called the “Describer”. He delivers a speech in which he glorifies God and praises Him. Then he talks in turn about every sort of form that will emerge behind that screen after him, and he informs the audience that God has established all this as a likeness for His servants, so that they can reflect on it and come to know that the world, in relation to God, is like these shadow-forms with the person who is moving them, and that this veil is the mystery of Destiny governing the creatures. Yet despite all this the heedless take it to be an amusement and pastime, as in God’s saying (concerning): “...*those who have taken their religion to be an amusement and pastime [and have been deluded by the life of this world... they forgot the meeting (with God) this Day and denied Our Signs]*” (7:51).

Then the Describer disappears. And he is like the first to exist among us, Adam: when he vanished, his absence from us was with his Lord, behind the veil of God’s Unseen. *And God speaks the Truth, and He shows the right way* (33:4).”

* * *

Rumi’s Image: the Divine Concert (opening verses of his *Spiritual Masnavī*):

Listen to the reed-flute, as it tells its story

As it complains of separations:

“Ever since they tore me from my reed-bed,

Man and woman have wailed at my cry.

I want a heart torn, rent by separation, so that

I can set out the pain of love’s longing:

Whoever has remained far from their Source,

Seeks to return to the Day of their reunion...

My secret isn’t far from my wailing,

But that Light is not for eyes and ears.”

Body and soul, soul and body, aren’t veiled from one another—

Yet no one is able to see the soul.

This sound of the reed is fire, not wind;

Whoever lacks this fire is nothing:

The fire is Love, that has fallen in the reed;

It's the bubbling of Love that's fallen in the wine.

FOUNDATIONAL HADITH IN THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES

This listing of some of the most popular shorter hadīth cited or alluded to in Islamic spiritual writings of all types and periods is by no means complete, and no attempt has been made for this purpose to distinguish the “canonical” hadith (i.e., those drawn from the six major Sunni collections) from others not found in those standard hadith collections. While these hadith usually are encountered in these abbreviated proverbial forms (which are often extremely brief and memorable, even rhyming, in the Arabic original), the full original sayings in hadith collections are often much longer. Hadith for which it is important to know that God is the original speaker are indicated by the annotation (h.q.), for *hadīth qudsi* (“divine sayings”).⁵¹⁰

— Whoever knows their self/soul, knows their Lord.

— “I was a hidden treasure, and I *loved* to be known; so I created the world /human creatures (*al-khalq*) so that that I might be known.” (h.q.)

— “My earth and My heaven do not encompass Me, but the heart of My faithful servant does encompass Me.” (h.q.)

— “O son of Adam, I created you for My sake, and I created all things for you.” (h.q.)

— “...My servant continues to come nearer Me through the acts of piety, until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his tongue with which he speaks, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot on which he walks.” (h.q.)

— “I have prepared for my servants who do right what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and what has never occurred to the heart of the human-animal (*bashar*).” (h.q.)

— He is Beautiful, and He loves beauty.

— “When God created creation, he prescribed for Himself: ‘My Compassion has precedence over My Wrath’.” (h.q.)

— Take on yourself the qualities/virtues of God.

— Adam was created according to the form of the All-Compassionate (*al-Rahmān*).

⁵¹⁰ For more detailed discussions of many of these divine sayings (with annotated translations and complete Arabic texts), see W. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*.

- The *mu'min* (person of faith) is the mirror of the *mu'min*.⁵¹¹
- “My earth does not encompass Me, nor does My heaven; but the heart of My servant, the person of true faith, does encompass Me.” (h.q.)
- The Throne of the All-Compassionate [God] is the heart of the person of faith.
- The heart of the person of faith is God’s sanctuary, and it is forbidden for any but God to enter it.
- Each child is born according to the primordial purity (‘*alā al-fitra*), and it is the two parents who make the child Jewish or Christian or Zoroastrian...
- People are sleeping: when they die they awaken.
- Die before you die.
- None of you will see his Lord until he dies.
- There is no ease for the person of faith until the meeting with God.
- Each person is with what they love.
- The spirits are (like) armies drawn up for war: those who recognize one another like one another, and those who do not dislike one another.
- God has seventy [or 700/70,000] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendors of His Face would burn up whoever was reached by His Gaze.
- Islam began as a stranger⁵¹² and will return, as it began, as a stranger: So blessed are those who are strangers (to this world).
- This world is forbidden for the people of the other world; the other world is forbidden for the people of this world; and both worlds are forbidden for the people of God.
- When God loves a servant he tests him: if he endures patiently, He singles him out; and if he is content, He purifies him.
- “My saints [*awliyā’i*: “those close to Me”] are under My domes; no one knows them but Me.” (h.q.)

⁵¹¹ Or *al-Mu'min*, which is also one of the usual list of divine Names, “the Source of Faith.”

⁵¹² Or *something* strange and rare, or “out of place” and alone (*gharīb*).

- The people of faith are like a single person.
- None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.
- The best of people are those who are most useful to others.
- An hour of contemplation is better than a year of (outward) devotions.
- O my God, don't leave me to myself (*nafs*), even for the blink of an eye.
- The person of faith who frequents other people and suffers from them is better than someone who seeks seclusion.
- If God wishes good for one of his servants, He opens the eye of his heart. [or: "...He lets him see the faults of his soul."]
- The faith of none of you will be rectified until his heart is rectified; and his heart will not be rectified until his tongue is; and his tongue will not be rectified until his actions are.
- In the days of your time there are fragrant breezes from your Lord. So watch out and receive them!
- There is a certain attraction among the attractions of God which outweighs (all the efforts of) humankind and the jinn.
- All the hearts of the children of Adam are held between two fingers of the All-Merciful like a single heart: He turns it about as He wishes.
- A report is not like direct vision.
- The present Moment is a sharp-edged sword.
- Whoever *acts* according to what they know, God will give them knowledge of what they do not know.
- Whoever is humble before God is raised by Him.
- Speak to the people according to the capacity of their understanding.
- There is a polisher for everything: the polisher of hearts is remembrance (*dhikr*) of God.
- Whoever sets out seeking knowledge is "*on the path of God*" until they return.
- The search for knowledge is a duty for each Muslim man and woman.

— The ways to God are as numerous as the souls of all creatures.

HADITH CONCERNING MUHAMMAD:

— O my God, cause me to see things as they really are.

— I was a prophet when Adam was still between clay and water (or “between spirit and body”).

— I am Ahmad without the ‘m’. [= *Ahad*, “The Unique”, one of the central divine Names.]

— “If it were not for you [M.], I would not have created the heavens.” (h.q.)

— We are (outwardly) the last of all, (inwardly) the first of all.

— The first thing God created was *my* Light.

— The first thing God created was Light.

— The first thing God created was the Intellect (‘*aql*).

— Who has seen me has seen God.

— I was sent with the all-comprehensive Words....

— I have a moment (*waqt*) with my Lord that is not shared by any angel or any prophetic messenger

— I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form....

— I came to know my Lord through my Lord.

— My eyes sleep, but my heart is awake.

— Poverty is my pride.

— O my God, keep me alive in poverty, make me die poor, and raise me among the group of the poor.

— The leader of a people is their servant.

— O my God, increase my bewilderment in You....

— May You be praised! We have not known You as You deserve to be known.

— You (ordinary people) are more knowledgeable (than me) in the best interests of this world (*dunyā*) of yours.

- My Companions are like stars: whichever one you follow, you will be rightly guided.
- I am the City of Knowledge and Ali is its Gate: So whoever seeks knowledge should enter through the gate.
- However much I joke, I only say the Truth.

HADITH ON THE VISION OF GOD

THE “HADITH OF THE VEILS”

“God has seventy [or 700/70,000] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendors of His Face would burn up whoever [or: ‘whatever creature’] was reached by His Gaze.”

THE “HADITH OF THE SUPEREROGATORY WORKS” (*HADĪTH AL-NAWĀFIL*)

The Messenger of God said that God said: “Whoever opposes a Friend (*walī*) of Mine, I declare war on them. And My servant does not come near to Me with anything more lovable (*ahabb*) to Me than what I have made a duty⁵¹³ for him.

And My servant continues to come nearer to Me through the further acts of devotion⁵¹⁴ until I love⁵¹⁵ him. Then when I love him I *am*⁵¹⁶ his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he holds, and his foot with which he walks.

⁵¹³ From the same root as *farīda*, the technical term for the *obligatory* religious “duties” (the daily ritual prayers, fasting in Ramadan, etc.) in later schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

⁵¹⁴ *Al-nawāfil* in later Islamic tradition becomes a technical legal term referring to the supplementary acts of personal devotion, often mentioned in the Qur’an and described at length in the hadith, which were constantly practiced by the Prophet and his close Companions, especially in the early Meccan period, but which were not made incumbent on the wider body of Muslims in Medina and in later legal schools. These devotions would normally include longer and more numerous *prayers*, especially at night, much more frequent *fasting*, spiritual *retreats* during Ramadan (and some other times), a wide range of *invocations* (*dhikr*), and more specific devotional *vows* (*nadhr*). Possibly even more relevant is the original meaning of simply “*what comes next*” (i.e., after the obligatory forms of worship), originally referring to the end of a caravan.

⁵¹⁵ The root for “love” (*hubb*) here, as in the Qur’an, refers to the *individual*, “particularized” and *reciprocal* divine Response to the devotion of the Friends of God; that “personal relationship” is always discussed there in terms quite distinct from the universal divine “Lovingmercy” (*rahma*) that “encompasses all things.”

⁵¹⁶ Literally: “(already) *was*,” a dimension of the saying that is often very important in later interpretations. The Arabic conditional used here grammatically requires the past tense, but can be translated in the past, present or future, according to the context and sense.

And if he asks Me, I most surely give to him. And if he seeks My help, I surely help him. I have never hesitated about anything I do as I hesitate about (taking) the soul of the person of faith who dislikes death, since I dislike hurting him”

THE “HADITH OF THE QUESTIONING” (AT THE RESURRECTION)

God says on the Day of the Rising: “O son of Adam, I was sick and you didn’t visit Me.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I visit You, and You are Lord of the worlds?!”

God said: “Didn’t you know that My servant so-and-so was sick, yet you didn’t visit him? Or didn’t you know that if you had visited him *you would have found Me with him?*”

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, did I not ask you for food, but you refused to feed Me?”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I feed You, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “Now didn’t you know that my servant so-and-so asked you for food, but you didn’t feed him? And didn’t you know that if you had fed him *you would have found that with Me?*”⁵¹⁷

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, I asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give Me anything to drink.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I give You a drink, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “My servant so-and-so asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give him any. But if you had given him a drink *you would have found that with Me.*”

THE “HADITH OF GABRIEL” (ON THE MEANING OF RELIGION)

The Prophet came out for the people (to meet him) one day, and a man came up to him who said: “What is faith (*īmān*)?”

He replied: “Faith (means) that you have faith in God, His angels, His Books, in (your) meeting Him, in His messengers, and that you have faith in the Resurrection.”⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁷ This literal translation seems to accord with the intentional reference to the “eschatological” context here— in which the souls of those being judged are themselves understood to be suffering from the spiritual “hunger” and “thirst” often mentioned in those contexts in the Qur’an.

Then he asked: “What is *islām*”⁵¹⁹?”

He answered: “*Islām* is that you worship God and don’t associate (anything) with Him, that you perform the prayer (*salāt*), give in charity,⁵²⁰ and fast during the month of Ramadan.”⁵²¹

Then he asked: “What is *ihsān*?”⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ All of these points are frequently included in Quranic enumerations of the “objects” of faith (e.g., at 2:285), although the Quran even more frequently mentions simply “Faith in God and the Last Day (resurrection)” (at 2:8, etc.).

⁵¹⁹ Here, as in some of the later passages in the Quran and in a number of hadith, the root *islām* has taken on a specific association with basic practices typifying Muhammad’s nascent religious community. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the primary Quranic sense (closer to the Arabic root) refers to the highest spiritual condition of total “*surrender*” to God’s will, in which meaning it is often applied in the Qur’an to pre-”Islamic” prophets, messengers and people of exemplary faith.

⁵²⁰ Or “acts of charity” (*zakāt*): the meaning of this Arabic root— originally referring to “purification” (of the soul)— in the Qur’an itself remains closely linked to acts of charity and the root sense of spiritual “purification” in general: cf. 2:177, 261, 267; 9:60. In the hadith and later forms of Islamic law the same term was more often applied to the forms of annually *prescribed* charitable giving, as opposed to other more voluntary forms of charity (the *sadaqa* discussed in section IV above).

⁵²¹ This version in Bukhārī (unlike the longer variant in Muslim’s *Sahīh*) does not mention the Pilgrimage (*Hajj*) specifically. Muslim’s version, reported by *Umar* instead of Abu Hurayra, also discusses *islām* before *īmān*, adds faith in “the decreeing of good and evil alike” (a later theological issue), and includes more description of the “mysterious stranger”: each of those additions is a likely indicator of a later literary and theological reworking of the simpler version recorded by Bukhārī.

⁵²² Literally (although the definition given here is far more appropriate to its particular Quranic usage): “*to do what is both good and beautiful or noble*.” The reference in the hadith is certainly to the Quranic usage of the term, where “those who do *ihsān*” are referred to frequently (25 times) with the highest praise, promised the highest paradise, associated with the prophets and messengers, connected with the central spiritual virtues, etc. Even more strikingly, the Quran insists that “**Verily God is with those who act in awareness of Him and the *muhsinūn***” (16:128; again at 29:69); “**Do *ihsān*, verily God loves the *muhsinūn***” (2:195; the restriction of God’s profoundest Love (*hubb*) to them is repeated similarly at 3:134, 3:148, 5:13, 5:93;); and “**God’s Lovingmercy (*rahma*) is near to the *muhsinūn***” (7:56).

He replied: “To worship God as though you see Him. And if you don’t see Him, surely He sees you.” [The last sentence could also be translated as “*And if you are not, you see Him*; and surely He sees you.”.]

Then he went off, and (the Prophet) said: “bring him back.” But they couldn’t see anything. Then he said: “This is Gabriel, who came to teach the people their Religion (*dīn*).”

THE “HADITH OF THE VISIT” OR “HADITH OF THE DUNE (OF VISION OF GOD)”⁵²³

Abū Hurayra said to Sa‘īd: “I ask God to bring you and me together in the Market of Paradise!”

And Sa‘īd asked: “You mean there’s a Market there?”

Abū Hurayra replied: “Yes, the Messenger of God informed me that:

When the people of the Garden (of Paradise) enter it they settle down in it according to the excellence of their *actions*. After that, during the period corresponding to the Day of Reunion⁵²⁴ among the days of this world, they are called and they visit their Lord: He shows them His Throne, and He manifests Himself to them in one of the meadows of the Garden.

Then there are set up for them platforms (“*minbars*”) of Light and pearl and ruby and emerald and gold and silver. The lowest ones of them and those among them who are beneath them take their seats on dunes of musk and camphor. And those sitting down do not see that those who are on the pedestals have more excellent seats than them.

I asked the Messenger of God: “Do we see our Lord?”

And he replied: “Yes indeed! Do you all have any doubt about (your) seeing the sun, or the moon when it is full?”

“No,” I said.

⁵²³This particular hadith, quoting Abu Hurayra’s account of his conversation with the Prophet, is recorded in essentially the same version by al-Tirmidhī (*sifāt al-janna*, 15, 25; *birr*, 54) and Ibn Māja (*zuhd*, 39)— from which this translation is taken— as well as by al-Dārimī (*riqāq*, 116) and in a number of places by Ahmad ibn Hanbal; see the complete full references in Wensinck, *Concordance*, V, 542-543. This hadith comes at the very end of Ibn Māja’s entire hadith collection, and is therefore clearly understood there to concern the ultimate ends and finality of human actions.

⁵²⁴That is, *yawm al-jum’a*, or Friday; but the reference is essentially to the fact that all the people of Paradise, whatever their rank, are brought together on this “Day.” The vague phrase *fi miqdār* underlines the very different nature of whatever “time” is appropriate in this context.

“So likewise you all do not have any doubt about seeing your Lord! Now And there does not remain a single person in that gathering but that God is present and conversing with him so intimately that He will say to (each) one of you:

“Don’t you remember so-and-so to whom you did such and such?”— and He reminds that person of some of their (acts of) treachery and deceit in this world.

Then that person says: “O Lord, didn’t You forgive me?”

And He says: **“Indeed it was through the vastness of My Forgiveness that you have reached your station here.”**

And while they are together like that clouds will form above them and perfume will rain down upon them, sweeter and more fragrant than anything they have ever experienced.

Then He says: **“Rise up, all of you, to that which I have readied for you from My Grace, and take what you desired.”**⁵²⁵

[Muhammad] continued: “So we are brought a Market that has been enclosed and surrounded by the angels, containing that whose like *‘no eyes have seen, ears have not heard, and has not occurred to hearts.’*⁵²⁵,”

He said: “Then whatever we desired is brought to us. There is no selling in it, nor any buying there. And in that Market the people of the Garden encounter one another. So if a person who has a higher station meets someone who is below them— yet there is no lowly place there— and that (second) person is delighted with the garment (the first one) is wearing, even before they have finished speaking a garment even more beautiful than that appears⁵²⁶ to them upon that person. And that is because there must not be any sorrow there.”

⁵²⁵This same divine description of “what God has prepared” in the Garden occurs separately, in almost the same words (adding only “of mortals’ [*bashar*] at the end), as an even more famous *hadīth qudsī* that is included in *all* the canonical collections, and echoes I Corinthians 2:9, Isaiah 64:4, and even more literally the *Gospel of Thomas*, saying no. 17 (tr. T. Lamdin, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. Robinson, p. 128). See the detailed discussion of the variants and sources in W. Graham, *op. cit.*, 117-119.

⁵²⁶Literally: “is imaged” or “its likeness appears”; the root is that of all the Qur’anic “likenesses”, and the verb is that used there to describe the forms of perception of the blessed in Paradise.

[He continued:] Then we return to our stations and meet our spouses,⁵²⁷ who say: “Welcome back! But now that you’ve come back your beauty and your fragrance are much finer than when you left us!”

And we answer: “This Day we gathered in the company of our Lord, and He gave us the right to come back transformed⁵²⁸ the way we are.”

THE “HADĪTH OF THE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE FORMS”⁵²⁹

[This whole hadīth can be understood, at least in part, as a sort of extended commentary on the Qur’anic verses 39:42-75, especially the following ones:

God receives and greets⁵³⁰ the souls at the moment of their death and those which haven’t died in their sleeping.⁵³¹ So He takes those for which He decreed death and

⁵²⁷Or “our spiritual twins”: the celestial counterparts or companions mentioned in many Qur’anic verses concerning Paradise.

⁵²⁸For this transformation (*inqilāb* and *taqallub*) or “turning inside-out” in the resurrected state, see the Qur’an 84:9; 7:165; 26:50 and 227; 43:14. The first part of this sentence could also be translated: “And He obliged us to...” or “authorized us to...”.

⁵²⁹*Al-tahawwul* or *al-taqallub fī al-suwar*: translated here from the *Sahīh* of Muslim, *īmān*, 81. This hadīth and the immediately following one (in Muslim) are both recorded in almost identical terms, near the end of Bukhārī’s *Sahīh* (*tawhīd*, 23 and 24; repeated in the chapter on *riqāq*, 52); see additional references in W. Graham, op. cit., pp. 134-135 (for the *hadīth qudsī* section only) and Wensinck, *Concordance*, I, 348 (versions also recorded by Ibn Māja, al-Tirmidhī, al-Dārimī and Ibn Hanbal). This hadith is obviously similar in meaning and structure to the following “Hadith of the Intercession,” although Ibn ‘Arabi (and others) tend to cite the opening section of both versions (concerning the “hypocrites” and their inability to perceive what surpasses their beliefs) independently of the rest of the hadith.

⁵³⁰*Tawaffā*: the root of this untranslatable term—which the Qur’ān also uses several times to describe the angels’ “receiving and greeting” each human soul at the moment of death—also has equally important connotations of (1) giving satisfaction, completion and fulfillment; (2) giving someone their due, fully requiting or compensating them; and (3) fulfilling and keeping faith with a vow or promise; (4) restoring wholeness, perfection, abundance and completion.

⁵³¹Or “dreaming”: the root of *manām* can refer to both states.

He sends⁵³² the others until a named limit. Indeed there is a Sign in that for a people who reflect and penetrate deeply! (39:42)

...Say: “O My servants who have gone to excess against their (own) souls, do not despair of the Loving-Mercy of God!” Surely God forgives the sins altogether! Indeed He is the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful/Loving. (39:53)

... “And they did not conceive of God according to the Truth/Reality of His Qadr⁵³³ ...on the Day of the Rising....” (39:67).]

[...By ‘Atā’ ibn Yazīd, from Abū Hurayra, who reported that:]

Some people said to the Messenger of God, “O Messenger of God, do we see our Lord⁵³⁴ on the Day of the Rising?”

Then Messenger of God replied: “Do you have any trouble⁵³⁵ in seeing the moon on the night when it is full?”

⁵³²“Sends (back?)”: the verb used here (*arsala*) is actually the same used to refer to the divine “sending” of the “Messengers” (*rusul*), a term which in the Qur’ān often refers to as well as the Lawgivers among the prophets (*anbiyā’*).

⁵³³This Qur’anic phrase has two closely related meanings: in its ordinary, extended usage it would mean something like “They did not value/ appreciate/esteem/rank Him properly/truly.” But three more literal and concrete senses of this verb and *masdar* from the root Q-D-R are even more relevant to the hadīth commentary in Muslim. *Qadr*, as an active participle form, is frequently used in the Qur’ān to refer to (1) the divine “determination” or “specification” of all manifest existence (e.g., in *Laylat al-Qadr*, Sura 97). (2) The same root—especially in the divine Name *al-Qadīr*, the All-Capable, “Omnipotent”—has the common sense of “ability”, “capacity”, “possibility” (of doing something). And (3), *qadr* commonly refers to the size or extent, “amount”, “degree” or “measure” of something (whether qualitatively or quantitatively). This following hadīth well illustrates the failure of ordinary human “estimation” (*taqdīr*) of the ultimate Reality in respect to all three of these meanings of *qadr*.

⁵³⁴All of what follows becomes clearer if one keeps in mind that the expression *Rabb* (“lord”, “sustainer”, “provider”, etc.) here is always used by speakers in the Qur’ān to refer to their most undeniable, ultimate concrete, personal and intimate awareness of the Truly Real, the particular “Face of God” that is most powerfully and undeniably real to them.

⁵³⁵Literally, both here and in the following question (and in the same exchange in the following hadith as well): “Does it give you pain to...?”—which suggests other interpretive dimensions of the

“No, O Messenger of God,” they said.

“Do you have any trouble,” he said, “about (seeing) the sun when there are no clouds beneath it?”

“No, O Messenger of God,” they said.

“Then surely you do see Him⁵³⁶ just like that!”, he replied.

God brings together the people⁵³⁷ on the Day of Rising and says: **“Let whoever was worshipping something pursue that.”**

So whoever was worshipping the sun pursues that, whoever was worshipping the moon pursues that, whoever was worshipping the *Tāghūts*⁵³⁸ pursues them, and there remains this Community (*umma*), including its ‘hypocrites’ (*munāfiqūn*).

Then God comes to them in a form other than His form that they recognize (or ‘know’), and He says: **“I am your Lord!”**

And they say: “We take refuge with God from you! This is our place until our Lord comes to us. And when our Lord does come we’ll recognize him (immediately)!”

Then God comes to them in His form that they do recognize and says: **“I am your Lord!”**

Then they say: “*You* are our Lord, and they pursue (*that* form).”

And the “Bridge” (*al-sirāt*) is set up over the two sides of Gehenna, and I and my community are the first to cross. No one speaks that Day but the Messengers, and their petition (to God) that Day is: “O My God, save (them), save (them)!...”⁵³⁹

contrast here (with complex echoes of Qur’anic symbolism) between our direct vision of the moon and the sun.

⁵³⁶The verb here, as in the original question, is in the ongoing *present imperfect* (as with most of the “eschatological” language in the Qur’ān), here with a further intensive suffix indicated absolute certainty and affirmation. Although such verb forms can be understood as English “future” tenses, it would be very easy (and common) to add a prefix ruling out any ambiguity, had that been desired.

⁵³⁷*al-nās*: the vague, indefinite plural used in the Qur’ān as an approximate, loosely pejorative equivalent to the English “most people”—typically in explicit contrast to those whose spiritual senses (“heart”, “inner vision”, etc.) have been awakened.

⁵³⁸The mysterious recurrent Qur’ānic term referring to all the illusory objects of desire and attraction that lead people toward the “shadows” of illusion and obscure the “Light” of the divine Presence.

Then the people are seized by the (“Hooks” of Hell) according to their *actions*: among them is the person of faith who remains behind because of his (bad) actions, and among them the one who receives his recompense (of a limited punishment) until he is saved.

(This process proceeds) until when God has finished judging the servants and wished, in His Loving-Compassion, to bring out those whom He wishes among the people of the Fire, He ordered⁵⁴⁰ the angels to bring out of the Fire those— among those on whom God wishes to show Loving-Compassion— who did not associate anything with God, among those who *say* “*There is no god but God.*”.

For the angels do recognize them in the Fire. They know them by the effect of their praying,⁵⁴¹ for the Fire eats up everything of the descendants of Adam but the effect of their praying. Because God has forbidden the Fire to consume the effect of praying.

So they are brought out of the Fire, all scraped and torn apart. And the Water of Life is poured over them, so that through it they spring back to life just like the seedling carried along in the silt by the flood.

Next, God finishes judging among the servants, and still there remains a man whose *face* is turned looking toward the Fire, who is the last of the people of the Garden to enter the Garden.

Now that person says: “O My Lord, turn my face away from the Fire! For its wind (or: ‘smell’) was hurting me and its flames were burning me up!” So that person calls upon God and asks Him for what God had wished that person would ask of Him!

Then God says: “Wouldn’t you want to ask for something else, if I did that for you?”

And that person says: “I’m not asking you for *anything* else!” And he gives his Lord all sorts of pledges and promises (not to ask for anything more), as God wishes.

Then God turns that person’s face away from the Fire, and when He has brought that person close to the Garden and he has seen It, he is silent (or: ‘becomes calm’), as (long as) God wishes for him to be silent.

So then that person says: “O my Lord, bring me close to the Door of the Garden!”

⁵³⁹Or “protect (them)” (*sallim, sallim*). [Here translation omits a short description of the “Hooks” that seize those crossing this Bridge.]

⁵⁴⁰As in the Qur’ān, these references to the “Rising,” as described from the divine perspective, are typically in the past “perfect,” *already accomplished* tense.

⁵⁴¹*Sujūd*: literally, their “bowing down” in (true) prayer; the word translated as “effect” here could also refer to a more visible “mark” (like that left on the forehead after frequent prostrations).

And God says to him: “But didn’t you just give all your pledges and promises that you wouldn’t ask Me for anything but what I’d given you?! Woe unto you, O son of Adam— look how untrustworthy you are!”

So that person says: “O my Lord!,” and they keep on praying and pleading with God until He says to them:

“Now won’t you want to ask for something else again, if I grant you that?”

And that person replies: “No, by Your Majesty!,” and he gives his Lord all the pledges and promises that God may wish.

Then God brings him up to the Door of the Garden, and when he is standing next to the Door of the Garden, Paradise is opened up to him, so that he sees all the good and the joyful pleasures It contains.

Now that person will be silent and calm as long as God wishes for him to be so, and then he says: “My Lord, bring me into the Garden!”

So God says to him: “Didn’t you give Me all your pledges and promises that you wouldn’t ask Me for anything more than what I’d given you!? Woe to you, O son of Adam, how untrustworthy you are!”

Then that person says: “O my Lord, don’t make me the most wretched of Your creatures!” And he keeps on praying and calling on God until God laughs because of him!

So when God laughs because of him He says: “Go on, enter the Garden!” And when He had caused that person to enter Paradise, God said to him: “Wish (for whatever you desire)!”

So that person keeps on asking his Lord and wishing as long as God keeps pointing out to him (all sorts of things), reminding him first of this and then of that...until, when all his wishes and desires are quite exhausted, God says to him: “*All that is yours, and its like along with it!*”.

Now ‘Atā’ ibn Yazīd [the reporter of the whole hadith] continued:

Now Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī was with Abū Hurayra all along, and he didn’t correct him about anything in it until Abū Hurayra mentioned that God had said to that man “...and *its like* along with it.”

Abū Sa’īd said: “(No, God said) ‘And *ten times as much* like it, along with it!’, O Abū Hurayra.”

Abū Hurayra said: “I only remembered His saying ‘All that, and its like along with it!’

Abū Sa’īd said: “I swear that I learned it by heart exactly from the Messenger of God, that he said: ‘That, and ten times as much like it!’”

Abū Hurayra concluded: “And that man was the last of the people of the Garden to enter the Garden.”

THE “HADITH OF THE INTERCESSION”⁵⁴²

[... from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī, who said:] Some people during the time of the Messenger of God asked him: “O Messenger of God, will we see our Lord on the Day of the Rising?”

The Messenger of God said: “Yes! Do you have any trouble seeing the sun at noon, on a bright clear day when there are no clouds? Or do you have any trouble seeing the full moon on a clear and cloudless night?”

“No, O Messenger of God!,” they replied.

He said: “You will have no more trouble in seeing God on the Day of the Rising than you have in seeing either of them!”

[The Prophet continued:] Now when it is the Day of the Rising, a Caller called out “Let every *Umma*⁵⁴³ follow what it was worshipping!”

Then there is not a one of those who were worshipping idols or graven images other than God, but that they all go on falling into the Fire, one by one.

(This continued) until none remained but those who were worshipping God, both the pious and the sinners, among the People of the (revealed) Book who lived long ago... [But most of them also turn out to have “associated” others in their worship of God, so that their “thirst” is recompensed by the “mirages” of the Fire.]

(This continued) until none remained but those who are worshipping God (alone), both the pious and the sinners. The Lord of the Worlds came to them *in the form farthest from the one in which they imagined (‘saw’) Him*. He said (to them): “What are you-all waiting for?! Every *Umma* is pursuing what they used to worship!”

“O our Lord,” they replied, “we kept away from *those people*⁵⁴⁴ (while we were) in the world,⁵⁴⁵ no matter how much we were in need of them, and we had nothing to do with them!”

⁵⁴²This hadith, a somewhat different version of the preceding one, narrated this time by the Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī who corrects Abū Hurayra at the end of the preceding hadith, comes immediately after that hadith in both Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s *Sahīh* collections.

⁵⁴³Usually translated as “(religious) community.” But here— as often in the Qur’an, where the expression is forcefully applied to *all* creatures (6:38, etc.)—the term may be understood in a much more complex and clearly less historicist sense.

⁵⁴⁴The term here is *al-nās*, here in the pejorative sense of what they take to be “ordinary,” “sinful” people (including those of other religious communities).

So he says (to them): “(But) I am your Lord!”

“We take refuge with God from you!,” they say. “We don’t associate anything with God!” (And they keep on saying this) two or three times, until some of them are just about to turn around and go away.

Then he says: “Is there any Sign (*āya*) between you-all and Him by which you would recognize Him?”

And they say: “Yes.”

Then (*the True Reality*) is revealed...,⁵⁴⁶ and the only ones who remain, who God allows to pray, are those who used to bow down to God spontaneously, out of their soul’s own desire. As for all of those who used to bow down in prayer out of social conformity and to protect their reputation (out of fear of what others might say or do), God makes them entirely into ‘backs,’ so that whenever they want to bow down in prayer, instead they keep falling back on their backs!

Then they will raise up their heads (from prayer), and He will already have been transformed (back) into His form in which they saw Him the first time (i.e., in this world).

Then after that He said: “I am your Lord,” and they are saying: “(Yes), *You* are our Lord!”

Then after that the Bridge (*al-jisr*) is set up over Gehenna, and the Intercession takes place and they are all saying: “O my God, protect, protect!”⁵⁴⁷

Then someone says: “O Messenger of God, what is this ‘Bridge’?”

He said: It is a slippery, precarious toehold, covered with hooks and spikes and thorns like a bush in the desert they call “*al-sa’dān*.” The people of faith pass over it as quickly as the glance of an eye, or like lightning, the wind, birds, fast horses or camels. Some escape untouched; some are

⁵⁴⁵ *Al-dunyā*: i.e., the earthly, material world (since the story has now placed them in the “other” world, *al-ākhirā*).

⁵⁴⁶ The hadith here presupposes quite literally the situation in the rest of this Qur’anic passage (68:42-43): “...and they are called to bow down (in prayer), but they are not able, their eyes abased, humiliation overcoming them— although they used to be calling (others) to pray, when they were whole and sound!”

⁵⁴⁷ The phrase mentioned here (*sallim, sallim*) is exactly the same as in the previous hadith’s account of the Intercession, except that the “they” concerned are not specifically identified here: these words could be taken either as the cry of the various “intercessors” (see below) pleading with God for *others*, or more generally as expressing the inner state of all the souls terrified (for *themselves*) by the events of the Judgment and sight of Gehenna.

scratched and torn, but manage to get away; while others tumble into the Fire of Gehenna. (And this continues) until the people of faith are safely free from the Fire.

Now by Him Who holds my soul in His Hand, not one of you could implore and beseech (someone) in seeking to gain what is (your) right and due any more intensely than the people of faith plead with God, on the Day of the Rising, on behalf of their friends who are in the Fire!

They are saying: “O our Lord, those (friends of ours) used to fast with us, and they were praying and they were loving!”

Then it is said to them: “Bring out whoever you-all knew (among them)!” So their forms are kept protected from the Fire, and they bring out a great many people whom the fire had already consumed halfway up their legs, or to the knee.

Next they say: “O our Lord, there does not remain in the Fire a single one of those whom You ordered us (to bring out).”

So He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even a dinar’s weight⁵⁴⁸ of good!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we did not leave in the Fire a single one of those whom You ordered us (to bring out).”

Next He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even *half* a dinar’s weight of good!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we did not leave in the Fire a single one of those You ordered us (to bring out).”

Next He says: “Return, all of you, and bring out anyone in whose heart you find even ‘*an atom’s-weight of good*’⁵⁴⁹!”

So they bring out a great many people, and then they say: “O our Lord, we didn’t leave in the Fire any good at all!”

Now Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī was saying [as he recounted what the Prophet said]: “If you-all don’t believe what I’m recounting in this hadith, then read, if you will, (the Qur’anic verse) ‘*Surely God does not do even an atom’s weight of wrong, and if it be a good-and-beautiful (action), He multiplies it many times, and He brings from His Presence an immense Reward!*’ (4:40).”

⁵⁴⁸ An extremely tiny, “feather-weight” gold coin. The version of this same hadith given in Bukhārī substitutes “faith” (*īmān*) in each case where this version has “good.”

⁵⁴⁹ Alluding to a well known Qur’anic passage at 99:7 (and several related verses, including the one at 4:40 which Abū Sa’īd al-Khudrī goes on to quote below).

Then God says: “The angels have interceded; and the prophets⁵⁵⁰ have interceded; the people of faith have interceded. Now none remains but ‘*the Most Loving and Compassionate of all.*’⁵⁵¹”

Then He grasps a handful from the Fire, and He brings out of It a group of people *who never did any good at all*, who have already returned to charred ashes. Then He throws them into a river in one of the openings of the Garden, a river that is called “the River of Life.” And they come out of (that River) like a seed that grows out of the muddy silt carried along by the flood: haven’t you seen how it grows up next to a rock or a tree, green on the side facing the sun, and paler on the shady side?

He continued: They will come out like pearls, with seal-rings on their necks. Then the people of the Garden recognize them: “These are those who have been set free by the All-Compassionate, Who has admitted them into the Garden without any (good) deed that they did or sent before them.”

Then He says: “*Enter the Garden* (cf. 89:30)— whatever you see there is yours!”

They say: “O Lord, You have granted us blessings which you did not grant to anyone else in the world!”

And He says: “There is with Me (a blessing and favor) better than this.”

And they reply: “O our Lord, what could be better than this?”

He answers: “My *absolute Love-and-Satisfaction*:⁵⁵² I will never be angry with you after this!”

⁵⁵⁰ *Al-nabīyūn*: the all-inclusive Qur’anic term for many of the pre-Islamic Messengers, saints and sages.

⁵⁵¹ *Arham al-rāhimīn*: alluding especially here to the verse 12:92, although the same divine Name is also cited at 7:151, 12:64, and 21:83.

⁵⁵² *Ridwānī*: alluding to such Qur’anic verses as 57:20, 5:16, 9:21, etc. (mentioned 13 times, in addition to related uses of the root *r-d-y*); the term is often translated as divine “Satisfaction” or “Contentment,” but such English expressions are obviously utterly inadequate in this context.