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Ibn 'Arabî in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences¹

It may be helpful to begin this article by highlighting what should be obvious: that each regular reader of this *Journal*, and every serious student of Ibn 'Arabî, should be able to amplify—often at radically greater length—its few concrete illustrations of the multitude of 'invisible' (to textual historians), but nonetheless quite specific and 'objective', ways in which Ibn 'Arabî continues to influence people from virtually every culture and walk of life in the contemporary world. And if those readers should happen to turn their attention to that wider spectrum of less outwardly demonstrable 'spiritual' influences which were both the subject and the guiding intention of so much of Ibn 'Arabî's own writing and life's work (but which are normally carefully excluded by today's general norms of scholarly research and publication), then the simple phenomenology of the Shaykh's deeper influences would no doubt require not an essay, but a substantial book for many individuals. The point of those initial, common-sensical observations—and hopefully the wider interest of this particular case-study—is to underline the severe *limitations* of the available tools, both of written sources and of conceptual and methodological assumptions, which are still normally used by historians and students of religion (perhaps especially in the recondite fields of Islamic studies) when they approach these same recurrent issues of intellectual and religious 'influence' with regard to so many other key figures in our past. By focusing on the complex, but undeniable web of such influences which each of us naturally encounters and normally takes for granted in the course of life—but which will soon be entirely invisible to most future philologists and historians of texts—we can perhaps suggest some of the key facets of that necessary historical *imagination* which is indispensable for

¹ This is a revised and abridged version of a paper earlier prepared for the International Conference on '*Ibn 'Arabî and the Islamic World: Spread and Assimilation*' at the University of Kyoto, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, January 19-23, 2001, and also draws on related essays presented at in two earlier international symposia devoted to the 'heritage of Ibn 'Arabî' which were held in Murcia, Spain in 1996 and Marrakech, Morocco in 1997. Special thanks are due to the organisers and fellow participants all three of those events

reconstructing and adequately rediscovering the intellectual, religious and spiritual life of the past.

We begin with an anecdote that epitomises many of the key points elaborated below. A little more than a decade ago, several scholarly students of Ibn ‘Arabi were invited—along with other authorities in Christian and Islamic ‘mysticism’—to participate in an international conference in New York on the Spanish Jewish thinker and reformer Nachmanides; they were asked to provide a comparative historical and philosophic perspective on parallels to Nachmanides’ thought in the cognate Christian and Muslim traditions of medieval Spain, including those which are so profusely illustrated in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. At some point in those proceedings, after the name of Ibn ‘Arabi and his ideas had been repeatedly evoked throughout the conference discussions, a famous professor of Christian mysticism at our table leaned over and remarked: *‘If Ibn ‘Arabi didn’t exist, someone would have had to invent him!’*

I have never forgotten that moment for two reasons, both of which are at the heart of my observations in this article. First of all, the eminent professor was simply pointing out publicly something that is historically quite accurate, even if the underlying actors and actual historical processes are not nearly so widely recognised: the academic field of the ‘study of religions’ as it is today practised and taught in the West (and more particularly in North America) owes a large part of its basic, most often implicit, premises and conceptual framework—above all where the spiritual dimensions of religious life and phenomenology are concerned—to writers and teachers whose thought was profoundly influenced by the leading ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi (and therefore ultimately, one might add, by the conception of Religion, *al-Dîn*, developed throughout the Qur’an). But the second reason that professor’s remark was so striking is that in reality Ibn ‘Arabi’s far-reaching influence in the West has remained for the most part ‘invisible’ and unknown to all but a handful of scholarly specialists. Indeed, at the time that remark was made there was still no extended translation in any Western language of any representative sections of Ibn ‘Arabi’s magnum opus, the *‘Meccan Illuminations’*. So the closest that particular professor (and most of his learned audience there) were likely to have ever approached the actual words of Ibn ‘Arabi was quite indirectly through the profound, but nonetheless partial, studies by Toshihiko Izutsu or Henry Corbin.

So a fundamental reason for discussing Ibn ‘Arabî’s recent influences in Europe and North America in the particular context of historical ‘spread and assimilation’ (the focus of the recent Kyoto conference) is that by pointing out the remarkable depth, scope and varied nature of the ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî which we can all directly observe in our own short lifetimes—virtually none of which would even be discernible by the traditional scholarly methods of studying the historical spread of an author’s writings and direct citations and overt discussion of their contents—I may thereby suggest something of the actual, almost unimaginable richness of the unseen and still largely unexplored paths and fields of influence of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings throughout the Islamic world *in the past*, a richness which can only be very remotely suggested when one focuses (as intellectual historians naturally do) on such visible, relatively well-studied figures as the famous commentators of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, the influential poets Jâmî and Hamza Fansûrî, philosophers like Mulla Sadra and Shah Waliullah, or even Khomeini in our own time.

However, before mentioning specific figures and periods and the manifold paths of influence of Ibn Arabi in the ‘West’, it is surely helpful to stand back and notice one initial and extraordinary paradox: how can we even begin to speak of such influences, on an initially entirely ‘non-Islamic’ culture, by a thinker whose thoughts are expressed almost exclusively—indeed far more than any number of other Islamic philosophers, poets, artists and musicians—in terms and symbols expressly drawn from the Qur’an and the hadith, or from their even more unfamiliar elaborations in all the later Islamic religious sciences? Not surprisingly, much of the historical influence of Ibn ‘Arabî throughout Islamic history can be explained precisely by that fundamental rootedness of his thought in every detail of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s teachings: for as a result, Ibn ‘Arabî has constantly provided (and still does today) an indispensable and powerfully effective theologico-political instrument for defending and supporting creative spiritual movements of all sorts in predominantly Islamic cultural and political settings.²

² See the following articles on different, but equally important facets of this long historical process: *Ibn Arabî and His Interpreters*, JAOS 106 (1986), pp. 539-551, 733-756, and 107 (1987), pp. 733-756; *Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority*, in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), pp. 37-64; *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; and ‘*Except His Face...*’: *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s Legacy*, in *JMIAS* XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13.

Accordingly, one would normally expect that dense scriptural and symbolic allusiveness to form an almost impenetrable barrier to serious comprehension of his ideas by those from other civilisational and religious backgrounds. And indeed this paradox helps highlight and partially explains the mysterious—but certainly indispensable—alchemical ‘*translation*’ of the Shaykh’s intentions into more understandable Western terms and diverse creative expressions, in various domains of life, which typifies each of the seminal figures we shall briefly mention below.

At the same time, the extraordinary success of that process of ‘translation’, in so many different recent non-Islamic settings, surely has something to do as well with the essential *intentions* underlying and orienting all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work. To begin with, one can say that the aim of all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings (or at least all those I have encountered) can be readily summarised as the development of *spiritual intelligence*: it is the *joining* of these two terms—spirit *and* intellect—that is so unique in his work (whether within or beyond his original Islamic context); and it is their essential connection that basically explains both the perennial appeal of his writing for some, and its perennially troubling and subversive effects for others. Islam, like other religions and civilisations, has produced uncounted exponents of practical spirituality, as well as a considerable number of articulate philosophic and scientific defenders of the universal dimensions of human intelligence. However, intellectually cogent proponents of the universality and intelligibility of *spiritual* life are far rarer; and few, if any, of those can match the self-consciously universal *phenomenological* scope of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings. In other words, each of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings is carefully designed to move his properly prepared readers from the experiential ‘phenomena’ of their spiritual life to an unfolding perception of the universal laws and regularities (the ‘Reality’, *al-Haqq* or *haqîqa*) underlying those phenomena.

Once that necessarily personal and individual connection (between what the particular symbolic forms of what he calls the revealed divine ‘paths’ and their common ultimate Ground) has been made, the qualified reader of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works can immediately recognise the same phenomenological patterns in previously unfamiliar cultural and religious settings. When that necessarily empirical, experiential process of lifelong spiritual discovery (what Ibn ‘Arabî called *tahqîq*) has become sufficiently established, it leads to a concretely grounded realisation of three essential facts: (1) the *necessary individuality* and universality of the process of spiritual realisation, with all that recognition implies, including (2) the corresponding *multiplicity of paths* of realisation, at all times and under all circumstances; and (3) the ongoing, constant *necessity of*

creativity (in practice, communication, and wider social and political organisation) which is required to support and encourage that process of realisation in each particular case and circumstance.

In other words, that process of realisation which is at the very core of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work is both radically subversive of attempts at socio-political indoctrination and delimitation of individual spiritual life, and at the same time radically activist and creative (and potentially quite political) in the responsibilities it unfolds for those who take it seriously. When those three basic features of his work are clearly understood, the many obvious differences between the individuals and movements mentioned briefly below can be readily grasped as the necessary unfolding of those demands of realisation according to the specific circumstances in which each of those creative figures have found themselves.

The Problem of ‘Influences’ and the Parameters of Communication :

In the course of the discussions of the ‘spread and assimilation’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought at the conferences mentioned above, it became evident we need to examine more closely the different ways (and the underlying processes) in which we can speak of different ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings. Perhaps the most frequent source of misunderstandings in this regard has to do with the peculiar widespread identification of Ibn ‘Arabî, in so many later milieus, with a single book among his vast literary production, his ‘Bezels of Wisdom’ (*Fusûs al-Hikam*). More particularly, those recurrent misconceptions are often deeply rooted in the strange conjunction of two very different (and often quite unrelated) sets of long-lived historical phenomena: that is, between (a) widespread later movements of Islamic philosophy and religious thought deeply rooted in the study and commentary of the *Fusûs*; and (b) polemical ‘images’ and deeply distorted accounts of the Shaykh’s ideas and intentions, drawn almost exclusively from a few ‘scandalous’ phrases of the *Fusûs*, which were usually connected with the ongoing struggles for power and ‘authority’ (in all senses of that term) between competing social, intellectual and political interpreters of Islam from the 15th century down to the present day.³ A further obstacle or distorting assumption more common in modern times is the additional identification of Ibn

³ See especially A. Knysh: *Ibn ‘Arabi and the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*, (Albany, SUNY Press, 1999), and our review in *JMIAS*, XXVII (2000), pp. 75-81.

‘Arabî and his ideas and influences with that vast range of cultural forms, institutions and social phenomena vaguely associated by both friendly and hostile commentators, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, with what they assume to be ‘Sufism’ (always taken to be somehow ‘different’ from ‘Islam’ or other key areas of Islamic culture and religious life). So it may be important to start out by emphasising that the manuscript evidence for the study and transmission of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works—even in that most accessible body of evidence only partially provided (with an obvious emphasis on Turkish and Egyptian libraries) in O. Yahya’s classic bio-bibliographic survey⁴—suggests that writings like the *Futûhât* and especially his shorter treatises on spiritual practice have also been continuously studied by large numbers of Muslims over many centuries in virtually every area of the Muslim world; the instances of a profusion of alternative descriptive ‘titles’ for so many of his shorter works are particularly telling in this regard.⁵

Perhaps the simplest way to confront these stereotypes and the resulting misunderstandings that can easily keep us from perceiving the full scope of Ibn ‘Arabî’s influences and intentions is to take up each of the most common misconceptions in turn and then to look at the corresponding actual state of affairs. In all of this, there is nothing particularly difficult or ‘esoteric’: each of the following points can be very quickly verified by anyone who takes up the practical challenge of communicating and explaining any particular writing of Ibn ‘Arabî to a fairly diverse audience (whether of students or adults) with varying intellectual, artistic and spiritual sensitivities; different cultural, educational and religious backgrounds; and a fair range of ages and life experiences.⁶

⁴ *Histoire et classification de l’oeuvre d’Ibn ‘Arabî* (Damascus, I.F.D., 1964), in two volumes.

⁵ In Yahya’s repertoire of Ibn ‘Arabî’s extant writings, one finds that his classic shorter works on practical spirituality like the *R. al-Anwâr*, *K. al-Nasâ’ih*, and *K. al-Kunh* are each extant under literally dozens of descriptive or mnemonic titles. The extension of Yahya’s work to so-called ‘peripheral’ areas of the Islamic world (China, South and Southeast Asia, the Balkans, etc.) would provide the material for many fascinating studies; see in particular the contributions to Kyoto conference by W. Chittick, B. Ahmad, S. Murata and A. Matsumoto, summarising each scholar’s essential research in some of those relatively unexplored geographical and cultural regions.

⁶ Many of the observations below about the motivations and capacities of understanding Ibn ‘Arabî’s works among non-academic specialists are based on extensive classroom experience (using both my own and other English translations) with more than a thousand religious studies (1988-1999), as well as on more intensive workshop and seminar presentations in several countries over the same period. The ‘audiences’ in both cases have normally included a substantial number of Muslims from many different regional, cultural and sectarian backgrounds.

1. To begin with, Ibn ‘Arabî nowhere suggests that his writings are meant to be studied simply as ‘literature’, in separation from other equally indispensable contextual elements of practical experiential preparation and appropriate spiritual guidance and intention. On the contrary, all of his works that have survived are clearly intended as useful means or vehicles for actually understanding (a) the recurrent patterns and underlying meanings of our human spiritual experiences (the Qur’anic divine ‘*Signs on the horizons and in their souls*’); and (b) particular forms of revelation and scripture (and corresponding spiritual practice) precisely insofar as they are central practical keys to the deeper understanding of that necessarily individual experience.

2. To put the same point slightly differently, Ibn ‘Arabî nowhere suggests that study and intellectual comprehension of his writings (or of any other texts, including revealed scriptures) is adequate *alone* as an end in itself, without intimate ongoing interplay with the actual results and contexts of spiritual practice. (This point alone is certainly sufficient to distinguish him radically from many Islamic schools of philosophy and of theology.) Even when he is discussing the most abstruse topics in logic, cosmology, ontology, kalâm, etc., it is always quite clear from the context that the purpose of such discussions has to do with either dispelling recurrent illusions and obstacles on the spiritual path, or in clarifying the implications (and concomitantly, the limitations) of those forms of spiritual experience and illumination which each reader first has to experience and bring to the text in order for the purpose and meaning of that specific text to become apparent.

3. Despite the profusion of newly coined expressions, radically altered meanings (of familiar terms), and technical or symbolic vocabulary to be found throughout Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings—and the most accessible and extensive summary of such distinctive usages is surely still S. al-Hakîm’s monumental ‘Sufi Dictionary’ (*al-Mu‘jam al-Sûfî*)—any serious student of Ibn ‘Arabî quickly becomes aware that all of that new terminology is essential poetic or ‘dialectical’ in nature. That is to say, it arises most often in his writing in the context of previously disputed interpretations (intellectual, practical or both) about the proper meaning (or appropriate *way to approach the meanings*) of Islamic scripture (Qur’an and hadith), where it functions as a spiritual catalyst for helping to resolve and eliminate the various intellectual and practical obstacles to discovering that actual meaning in the reality of one’s own spiritual experience. Or else such new terminology originates, particularly in the early works written before Ibn ‘Arabî’s emigration from Andalusia and N. Africa, as a poetic, allusive expression for

his own personal experiences of realisation. The essential thing here—and the choice of formulation is intentionally provocative, but also quite literally accurate—is that *Ibn ‘Arabî* (like Plato) *has no ‘teachings’ or ‘doctrines’ of his own*. In other words, his constant emphasis and is to force his ‘readers’ to undertake their own indispensable effort of *tahqîq* (both ‘verification’ and ‘realisation’). That is, they are intended to help his readers discover the essential *connections* between the ‘forms’ of revelation (or their endless social and historical transmutations) and their underlying realities as revealed in each individual’s experience; and then to help them actualise the further demands of that *haqq*⁷ which are inherent in its ongoing discovery.

4. A further implication of each of the above-mentioned points is that Ibn ‘Arabî has no single or exclusive ‘audience’ for which his writings are intended. In particular, the interpreter of any of his typical works is faced in this regard with a strange double paradox. First, it is readily apparent that most of those ‘people of God’ (to use Ibn ‘Arabî’s own pregnant expression for his true companions and ideal readers) who would be uniquely qualified to understand these strange writings, in his time or any other, do *not* ordinarily devote most of their time to reading books and pursuing similar intellectual pursuits. Yet most of Ibn ‘Arabî’s *writings* presuppose nonetheless an rare and challenging intellectual mastery of religious and philosophic sciences and Arabic literary forms which must have been relatively uncommon even in his own day (not to mention our own). The second, further paradox is the extraordinary, lasting (indeed often lifelong) interest which those writings have nonetheless for centuries tended to awaken and sustain in so many devoted students and readers, as evidenced by the profusion of well-annotated manuscripts in the past, and of extensive translations, elaborate studies and Arabic editions more recently. An adequate resolution of this puzzle would require a book in itself, but two basic preliminary observations can already be noted here. First, even a cursory reader of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works will quickly notice that he was deeply suspicious of the increasingly institutionalised forms of what would later be called ‘Sufism’ that he encountered during his lifetime, for perennial reasons (not at all limited to the historical or individual particularities of that age) that

⁷ This underlying Arabic term, a favourite of Ibn ‘Arabî, encompasses both the divine ‘Reality’ and all that is right and due or obligatory as an inseparable dimension of that same Reality.

may in fact constitute some of his most important lessons.⁸ Secondly, his voluminous treatment of all the forms of the Islamic ‘religious sciences’ is not simply intended to point his readers toward the spiritual meanings potentially expressed exclusively in that revelation and its diverse historical interpretations. By natural extension (as we can see vehemently reflected in the extensive spectrum of Ibn ‘Arabî’s later and present-day Muslim critics), his distinctive approach to Islamic scripture and its interpretation also constitutes a massive body of profoundly ‘constructive criticism’ of many existent (mis-)interpretations, and a concomitant inspiration to the—unstated but omnipresent—challenges of creative and positive revivification of the wider intentions and perennial goals of all revelation.

Now if we bring together each of the *positive* counterparts to the recurrent misconceptions we have briefly enumerated above, we can perhaps more easily conceive of the complexities involved in envisaging and ‘capturing’ (from the historian’s very limited perspective) the multiple dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘influences’ on anyone who has begun to understand what he actually demands of his readers. This is especially important, of course, in that vast majority of cases where history has subsequently hidden an individual’s original contact with Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings.⁹ Indeed here we have only look to the situation today of a student of Ibn ‘Arabî in virtually any contemporary nation-state with a majority Muslim population (or any such student whose livelihood and identity are primarily developed within a minority Muslim community): there we can readily see that in almost all such cases today it would normally be decidedly unconstructive (if not dangerously self-destructive) to highlight Ibn ‘Arabî as the

⁸ In the following discussion of Ibn ‘Arabî’s contemporary ‘influences’ in the West, we have suggested several key reasons why most of the individuals publicly involved (whether ‘Sufi’ or not) have taken considerable pains *not* to draw undue attention either to Ibn ‘Arabî or to the various cultural (including ‘Islamic’) contexts in which they may have first encountered the Shaykh’s influence. To have emphasized either point would have meant both cutting themselves off from many of their potential audiences and—far more importantly—running the risk of short-circuiting the necessarily creative and ongoing demands of the process of realisation in favour of a spiritually ruinous ‘idolatry’ of particular social and cultural forms. That dilemma is *never* escaped, and—from Ibn ‘Arabî’s perspective—was surely just as poignant in the time and surroundings of each of the prophets as it is centuries later.

⁹ A particularly striking example, both in the past and down to the present day, is R.W. Holbrooke’s marvellous article on the group of heads of the main Sufi orders in Istanbul who would regularly meet to study and discuss Ibn ‘Arabî’s works: see *Ibn ‘Arabî and the Ottoman Dervish Traditions: The Melâmî Supra-Order, Part I*, pp. 18-35 in the *Journey of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabî Society (JMIAS)*, IX (1991), pp. 18-35; and Part II, XII (1992), pp. 15-33.

actual source of one's particular religious understanding and creative religious and social ideas.¹⁰ For what should be equally obvious reasons, it would be similarly pointless or self-defeating for a teacher or interpreter (even in ostensibly 'tolerant' Western settings) primarily working with Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or avowedly 'secular' audiences and traditions to point out explicitly the central role of Ibn 'Arabî (or certain of the Shaykh's modern interpreters) in that teacher's own understanding and interpretation of the tradition in question¹¹—even though we all know personally such friends and colleagues from various religious backgrounds whose own shelves are well stocked with books by Ibn 'Arabî or especially his contemporary interpreters discussed below.

In short, once we recognise that Ibn 'Arabî's essential purpose, in any of his works, is the realisation of actual spiritual understanding which is necessarily 'translated' into a wider process of realisation and appropriate action, then we can readily see how each of the three equally indispensable parameters of communication—i.e., the particular *communicator* /translator/creator; the particular *operative symbols* (visual, musical, scriptural, cinematic, etc.) in the cultural and inner life of their audience; and the actual circumstances and possibilities of each particular *audience*—are necessarily constantly changing and requiring new, necessarily creative forms of communication which can remain spiritually efficacious only by appropriately adapting to all the ongoing changes in any of those three parameters. If we assume, that the most intelligent and capable of Ibn 'Arabî's students and readers were (and are) those who are able to most consciously and capably respond to those further demands of effective communication,

¹⁰ A somewhat ironical case is the way in which Ayatollah Khomeini's personal fascination with Ibn 'Arabî (growing out of his own lifelong scholarly specialisation in the study of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, and highlighted in his famous 'Letter to Gorbachev' shortly before his death) and his published super-commentary on the *Fusus* have had the widespread effect of rendering the study and even the publication of the undoubtedly rigorously 'Sunni' works of Ibn 'Arabî more or less 'respectable' in Iran after they had spent centuries under considerable suspicion among Shiite clerical circles. Perhaps an equally dramatic illustration is provided by Prof. Paul Fenton's recent extraordinary discovery in a Jerusalem library of a Syrian manuscript of Ibn 'Arabî's very important *K. al-Tajalliyât* written in Judeo-Arabic characters. In light of what we are highlighting in this study, it is important to notice that such a remarkable manuscript could just as easily signify the *beginning* of a longer chain of 'influences' in an unexpected milieu (especially given the key ensuing developments of Jewish mysticism in nearby Safed) as much as the 'end' of the sorts of written evidence usually available to historical scholars.

¹¹ One should stress that such considerations are by no means limited to Ibn 'Arabî: the same considerations would be true as well for Christian (or Muslim) teachers teaching parts of the Bible in light of their study, for example, of a book like the *Zohar* (which offers endless parallels to Ibn 'Arabî's work).

then it is likely the case that in any age the great majority of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘influences’ and most effective ‘transmitters’ will necessarily remain hidden from the view of historians.¹² Thus the few contemporary examples we have enumerated below throw a fascinating light on that larger historical process precisely because we are in the privileged situation of being close enough to the actual creative actors and their audiences and circumstances to know something of Ibn ‘Arabî’s central role and ‘influences’ in their lives and creations. In each case, it is therefore fairly easy to see how those different parameters of communication have helped generate the particular forms of expression and creation in question.

Since the basic structure of these demands on anyone seeking to truly ‘communicate’ Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions to any range of audiences remains much the same across time and cultural boundaries, it may be helpful here to underline a handful of key practical observations which are equally relevant to the contemporary ‘Western’ cases discussed below as they are to the larger processes of ‘spread and assimilation’ of the Shaykh’s ideas in any earlier historical context. In particular, it is important to keep in mind what was the actual historical reality of the great centres of Islamic culture and intellectual, artistic and cultural creativity in that long period (14th-19th centuries) when Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas became so influential in so many different domains. For those crucial cultural centres in that period—the Ottoman heartlands (outside what we now call the ‘Arab world’), the Timurid and Safavid realms (including most of Central Asia and the Caucasus), the Mogul empire and many other Indian Muslim principalities, the trading entrepôts of Southeast Asia, and the centres of high Chinese culture—were all *locally* cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, multi-confessional and filled with vigorously competing forms of spiritual praxis in ways which can only be even mirrored today, if at all, on a much wider, global geographic scale.¹³ Once the concrete historical realities of those specific times and places are known, it is much easier to recognise their frequently close contextual parallels to the recent ‘Western’

¹² The ‘chance’ discoveries of V. Holbrooke and P. Fenton (notes 9 and 10 above) offer dramatic illustrations of such influences (actual or potential) which would otherwise have passed completely unknown.

¹³ Here it is essential to take into account not just the different ‘religions’ in the reified way they are often are popularly conceived today, but especially the multitude of socially effective, actively competing ‘schools’, ‘paths’, ‘sects’ and the like within any of the milieus in question. Today it is difficult for all but historical specialists in the periods in question to begin even to imagine the degree of

communicators and interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabî discussed below. Here are a few basic practical observations about these parameters of communication.

To begin with, as in our opening anecdote, the possible range of ‘influences’ in this domain are normally determined less by the efforts of the ‘communicator’ (teacher, shaykh, artist, etc.) in question than they are by the pre-existing spiritual ‘needs’ and aptitudes of each particular audience. Anyone teaching Ibn ‘Arabî or trying to communicate his writings quickly recognises that their natural, most immediate ‘audience’ is not at all academic philosophers or theologians—who typically can only see the conceptual interplay of ideas and concepts visible within their own familiar intellectual schemas—but rather those who are existentially driven to seek the ‘realities’ or ‘meanings’ (Ibn ‘Arabî’s own terms) underlying the symbols through which spiritual meanings are conveyed: that is, poets, musicians, artists, writers; or in more ‘vocational’ terms, psychologists, teachers, healers, parents and other therapists.

Secondly, with such audiences—whose primary motivation is the inner search for what is ‘Real’¹⁴—any teacher quickly discovers that Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and intentions are often immediately comprehensible without reference to any particular (formal or ‘official’) religious and cultural upbringing at all. Indeed vast amount of translators’ and teachers’ time must ordinarily be taken up with ‘deconstructing’ and eliminating potential contamination by the unrelated or misleading suggestions of his vast Islamic symbolic vocabulary, for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike—albeit in very different ways—in order for each student to begin to get at what Ibn ‘Arabî actually means in terms comprehensible to a modern audience. (Any translator or teacher of Ibn ‘Arabî can supply dozens of pertinent illustrations of this point.)

Thirdly, as soon as one begins to explore the area of the serious spiritual apprehension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions, his communicators—if they want to have any effect at all—are immediately forced to work with the symbols actually operative in the lives and souls of the particular audience and individuals they are addressing. With most contemporary audiences (usually including the non-traditional, educated classes of officially ‘Muslim’ countries), those operative symbols are not immediately, primarily or exclusively drawn from any particular

cultural and religious diversity which is extremely well-attested (both by travellers and internal witnesses) for so many parts of the present-day ‘Islamic world’ prior to the transformations of the past century.

¹⁴ See n. 7 above.

‘religious’ tradition. (Not incidentally, one suspects that this has in fact been the case with most non-clerical, non-‘educated’ populations in most pre-modern cultures as well.)¹⁵ In other words, one cannot begin to communicate Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in any serious way without constantly investigating and then rediscovering what those operative and effective symbols actually are for the people with whom one is interacting. The fact that in most contemporary contexts those effective symbolic fields turn out to be the present-day equivalent of what we now often naively take to be the ‘classical’ Islamic humanities—i.e., spiritually effective, familiar and therefore ‘popular’ visual and story imagery (= cinema today), music, innovative social and ritual forms, etc.—brings us to our last key observation.

Finally, the expanding waves of further ‘influences’ which grow out of the genuine individual comprehension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and intentions (as opposed to the facile ‘parroting’ of particular terms, practices, etc. which is also quite familiar to every teacher) can themselves only be expressed by further creative transformation and uses of the same context of shifting cultural and social possibilities (and ‘givens’) involved in each of preceding points. In particular, if those influences are lastingly effective, their original relation to Ibn ‘Arabî (and his symbols) will actually become *less and less apparent* with each successive ‘ripple’ of transmission and further spiritually effective work of creation and transformation.

Thus whenever we examine the following contemporary cases more closely, each individual facet of this larger process of transmission of ideas may resemble an adventure novel or spiritual autobiography more than what we usually think of as history.¹⁶ Certainly any detailed and remotely adequate ‘history’ of each individual and group mentioned briefly here

¹⁵ Thus the same necessary conditions of communication, on a wider scale, also explain the central factors affecting the development of the local ‘Islamic humanities’, using vernacular languages and familiar ‘local’ symbolisms and cultural forms (in poetry, music, and vast fields of associated ritual), first in ‘new Persian’ and subsequently in the many other Islamic languages in the course of the long development and spread of Islam as a world religion.

¹⁶ I must acknowledge Prof. Alexandre Popovic (the noted French authority on Sufism in the Balkans) for first making this point so explicitly to a group of curious Algerian interlocutors (at a conference on Ibn ‘Arabî in Oran in 1990) who were posing the perennial question, ‘How did you ever become interested in Ibn ‘Arabî [Islam, Sufism, etc.] in the first place?’ A similarly illuminating occasion was listening to a group of academic ‘experts’ on Ibn ‘Arabi (at a conference in Noto, Italy, in 1989) respond to the question of how each of them had actually first encountered and then became interested in the Shaykh: one suspects that a collection of those frank responses, if suitably detailed, would make a popular book both more intriguing and more spiritually effective than most academic studies in this field.

would be the subject of a long book. In this limited context, however, one can only mention only a few illustrative names and groups, remaining at the level of what is hopefully common public knowledge¹⁷ and focusing on the corresponding wider *audiences* for each of these transmitters, with their specific needs and creative uses of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas. And of course, in reality the individuals, influences and audiences mentioned schematically and successively here have often overlapped and influenced each other, sometimes in major ways.

*Guénon and His ‘Successors’*¹⁸:

According to students of this tradition, probably the first Western translation of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work (at least in modern times) dates from the beginning of the twentieth century, when a ‘*Treatise on (Divine) Unicity*’ apocryphally attributed to him was independently translated into French and English.¹⁹ For more than fifty years, the primary translations of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings

¹⁷ In many of the cases mentioned below the ‘proof’ of the influences of Ibn ‘Arabî would involve revealing personal confidences and private knowledge acquired over several decades of personal contact with a wide range of individuals directly involved in the various groups and situations described here only in very general terms. Even where written references have been cited below, in most cases they are useful only in situating and broadly describing groups and individuals alluded to here; phenomenologically accurate and in-depth descriptions in this area are still almost non-existent.

¹⁸ One uses the term ‘successor’ here only very reluctantly and as a concession to existing public usage, in the broadest sense of a particular subset of the many schools and individuals claiming ‘Guénonian’ roots and antecedents (many of which, particularly in France, have not focused explicitly or centrally on the role of Ibn ‘Arabî in his thought). Moreover, this language should *not* be taken to imply any sort of wider ‘dependence’ on Guénon (to the exclusion of many different sources, Islamic and other) or any general agreement with any of his particular pronouncements at different periods of his life. The actual diversity, disagreements and independence of thought and outlook one quickly discovers in studying the thought and life of each individual loosely associated with these ‘schools’ fully corresponds to all the radical diversity we discover in tracing Sufi ‘paths’, ‘lineages’ and succession processes throughout history—especially whenever a relatively ‘charismatic’ figure dies. For Guénon himself, the most useful biography (especially for his later life in Egypt) remains P. Chacornac, *La Vie simple de René Guénon*. (A forthcoming book on this subject announced by a professor at the American University in Cairo was not yet available at the time this essay was completed.)

¹⁹ One of the additional ironies of this situation is that this initial text of Ibn ‘Arabî translated into both English and French, the *Risâlat al-Ahadiyya* (‘Essay on the Divine Unicity’) was actually the work of a later Persian Sufi author (al-Balyânî) with very different ideas and teachings from those of Ibn ‘Arabî himself. See the important historical material on the western discovery of Ibn ‘Arabî in Michel Chodkiewicz’ Introduction to his translation of Balyânî’s work, and the further discussion of this text in

available to wider audiences, including the first extended selections from his *Fusûs* and *Futûhât*, were in French.²⁰ The historically best-known element in this process, particularly in the French-speaking world, is the very broad and diverse ‘school’ of religious writers, translators and teachers loosely associated—to move down through the past century—with René Guénon, the Algerian Shaykh al-‘Alawî and the Shâdhilî Sufi tariqa (in both Egypt and North Africa), and eventually the writings of F. Schuon, T. Burckhardt, M. Lings, and the many other contributors to the journals *Études traditionnelles* and *Studies in Comparative Religion*. While all of these authors shared certain intellectual and, in most cases, initiatic connections, their perspectives and chosen fields of activity were also quite diverse, and we do not yet have anything approaching a comprehensive history of their personal, intellectual and artistic activities.²¹ Without entering

our review article on ‘*Ibn Arabî and His Interpreters*’ (n. 2 above) and in ‘Theophany or “Pantheism”? the Importance of Balyânî’s *Risâlat al-Ahadîya*,’ in *Horizons Maghrébins* (Toulouse), special festschrift number for Michel Chodkiewicz, no. 30 (1995), pp. 43-50 and 51-54.

Further helpful historical context (albeit often rather superficial) is provided by related chapters in A. Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters* (Chicago, Open Court, 1997), and more useful material on F. Schuon is provided in M. Lings’ *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawi* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1971), S.H. Nasr’s introduction to his collection of *The Essential Writings of Fritjof Schuon* (NY, Amity House, 1986), and J. Cutsinger’s *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany, SUNY, 1997). In French, see the more comprehensive recent study, *Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998): connaissance et voie d’intériorité, Biographie, études et témoignages* (Paris, Connaissance des Religions, 1999).

²⁰ And also, of course, in Asin-Palacios’ pioneering Spanish studies of Ibn ‘Arabî’s life and the parallels between his eschatological writings (from the *Futûhât*) and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; however, it is fair to say that those writings Ibn ‘Arabî’s own presence and distinctive perspectives are often very hard to detect or to separate from the views of his translator/interpreter. The key authors whose translations certainly did the most to begin to make Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings available to non-academic circles were T. Burckhardt and M. Valsân, both in independent books and through their many contributions to the journal *Études traditionnelles*, in itself the most accessible historical source for all the contributors to this movement. (Unfortunately, other early European academic studies of Ibn ‘Arabî—especially Nyberg’s translations and editions—were of less representative works, and were accessible at best to a handful of academic specialists).

²¹ It is interesting that publications by the writers in question (including a large body of English translations) are in general far more accessible than any reliable biographical and critical studies (see notes 18-19 above). The bio-bibliographical study by J. Borella, ‘René Guénon and the Traditionalist School’, pp. 330-58 in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. A. Faivre and J. Needleman (NY, Crossroad, 1992), presupposes prior knowledge of the authors in question and is disappointingly thin, with an even more inadequate bibliography. Interested readers would do better to turn directly to the many available writings by the authors in question.

into the details of that history, one can say that the direct ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî, in almost all those cases, were inseparable from the wider role of the Shaykh’s thought and teachings in recent North African and Arab Sufi traditions; that the majority of contemporary scholars actively translating Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings into English and French have continued to be directly or indirectly influenced by those same Sufi traditions; and that the most influential and prolific contemporary popularisers and public exponents of those ideas in English (especially Huston Smith and S. H. Nasr) have largely emerged from that same context.

However, when we turn to the wider influences of this ‘school’, beyond the translation and direct study of Ibn ‘Arabî, what immediately stands out is the profound effect of the abundant writings of F. Schuon in applying the central ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî to *articulating* (but in the long run also deeply shaping) an understanding of the spiritual dimensions of religious life appealing profoundly to several generations of philosophers and theologians seeking to develop a comprehensive, non-reductive ‘philosophy of religions’ enabling mutual understanding and active co-operation between the followers of different religious traditions and the increasing number of citizens who do not consciously identify exclusively with any particular historical tradition.²² Because of the peculiar vagaries of academic opinion and respectability, this wide-ranging influence is rarely mentioned publicly (unlike that of the scholars mentioned in the following section), but is to be found virtually everywhere.²³ (Of course this contemporary process closely mirrors the equally pervasive way Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in this domain were largely developed in the past by those seeking to explain, justify and support the creativity and diversity of forms of spiritual life *within* the wider Islamic tradition.²⁴) In the generations following

²²The prominence of the truly ecumenical interest in this dimension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought in the English-speaking democracies—like the parallel post-WW II growth in university departments of ‘religious studies’ unaffiliated with particular religious denominations—reflects not only the political and social diversities of those cultures (which are arguably no greater than in many other countries), but also the peculiarly limited political and historical weight of any established traditional theologies in these (at least historically) predominantly Protestant cultures.

²³ One rarely encounters academic specialists in the spiritual dimensions of religious studies who have not in fact read several of the works of Schuon. (The peculiar processes of academic ‘canonisation’ by which a writer like M. Eliade, for example, is considered academically ‘respectable’—while, for example, a J. Campbell is not—are familiar to specialists in these fields.)

²⁴ See notes 2, 3 and 9 above and the important new contributions to be published in the Proceedings of the Kyoto Conference concerning the spread of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas (often through creative poets like Jâmî and al-Fansûrî) into China and Southeast Asia, as well as Turkey. As the study of

Schuon, the authors and translators historically associated with this application of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in English themselves have come from and write for readers from every major religious tradition, not just Sufism or traditional Islam. In fact, what has had the widest influence here—whether among academic specialists or a wider public readership—is not any particular set of ideas that could be identified as a single philosophical or religious ‘school,’ so much as a broader shared focus on those spiritual dimensions of religious life *common* to all the revealed religions—an element largely neglected in the reigning sociological and historicist theories of religion—and on the elaboration of an adequate metaphysical framework within which one can understand and appreciate all the observed diversities of religious life and experience. Thus all of those writers foreshadow important facets of that emergent ‘science of spirituality’ to which we return at the end of this essay.

The Metaphysics of Imagination: Corbin, Izutsu and the Eranos School

An intellectually related development in the application of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas—but with a wider, more diverse and less strictly academic audiences—has been the role of these students and interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabî in the elaboration, in both learned and more popular forms, of a persuasive ‘metaphysics of the imagination,’ and in the subsequent adoption of their ideas by artists, writers and others (especially Jungian psychologists) looking to justify their own creative activities and spiritual worldviews. The thought of Corbin (and other Eranos colleagues) and Izutsu was especially relevant in that Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture of the US which had lacked a strong explanation and justification for such creative and therapeutic activities within its own cultural inheritance²⁵; the need for such an explanation and justification was only aggravated by those pervasive Marxist and historicist intellectual currents that dominated Western

Ottoman culture and spiritual life—with its key dimensions shared not only by the many regions of the empire, but also by cognate learned and creative traditions of other faiths—gradually begins to emerge from the atomised nationalisms (of each successor-state and ethnic group) of the last century, one can expect an ongoing series of further discoveries of Ibn ‘Arabî’s wider influences, developing the pioneering work of V. Holbrooke in this domain.

²⁵ This phenomenon is especially visible in the otherwise remarkable (given the advanced and early development of Islamic scholarship there) relative lack of interest in Ibn ‘Arabî in German-language regions of Europe, which is hardly unsurprising in light of the plethora of German mystics, philosophers and artists (most obviously Goethe, with his powerful mirroring of Hafez), from the Middle Ages (Meister Eckhardt or J. Boehme) down to the 19th century, whose ideas and expressions have so powerfully articulated many central insights and concerns of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work.

intellectual discourse during at least the first half of the last century. Here one must note especially the remarkably widespread influence of English translations of Henry Corbin's works on Ibn 'Arabî and related Islamic writers, and of later books and lectures by Toshihiko Izutsu, in both cases through publications (by 'Spring' publishers and the Bollingen translation series at Princeton) closely associated with Eranos conferences and popular proponents of Jungian psychology. In an important new study, S. Wasserstrom has at least suggested some of the seminal and less visible ways Corbin's understanding of Ibn 'Arabî influenced M. Eliade and other foundational figures in the study of religion in the second half of the last century,²⁶ in ways that often paralleled or coincided with the ongoing (but less officially 'academic') influences of Schuon and his colleagues already mentioned above.

Much less studied, but no less influential in the longer run, have been the direct and indirect influences of Ibn 'Arabî's ideas (again largely through the translations and Eranos lectures of Henry Corbin, and again often overlapping with the authors mentioned in the preceding section) on more creative artists and writers. (Again all of these recent Western developments closely parallel the ways Ibn 'Arabî's ideas were earlier used in the Islamic world to justify and interpret the extraordinary creative achievements of the later Islamic humanities, as for example in the long tradition of learned commentaries on the incomparable mystical poetry of Rumi, Ibn al-Fârid, Hafez and others.) In Britain, along similar lines, one could cite the achievements of Keith Critchlow (one of the pioneers in adapting Ibn 'Arabî's ideas to the understanding and practical preservation of many Islamic visual arts) in so effectively supporting and reviving 'traditional' artistic forms and practices, including especially those of Islam; of influential writers like Kathleen Raine (editor of *Temenos*); and of other artists, writers and creators associated with the Beshara Trust. A particularly dramatic illustration of this sort of creative influence is Rafi Zabor's recent (1998) award-winning 'jazz novel', *The Bear Comes Home*, which was inspired by the reading of Ibn 'Arabî and was developed through decades of

²⁶ S. M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, P. Univ. Press, 1999). Although the author's perspective, sources and organising thesis are avowedly somewhat partial, the book is extremely helpful in suggesting and tracing the many diverse 'channels of influence' and analysing the multiple 'audiences' which are the primary focus of this essay.

careful study of his (translated) writings.²⁷ Similar influences can be traced in the ‘Black Mountain’ school of American poets (Olson, Creeley and others).²⁸ However, the cases of artists and creators actually citing or openly developing these influences of Ibn ‘Arabî and his interpreters are no doubt far fewer than those where the inspiration of their reading and study passes directly into appropriate creative action²⁹—in a way not unlike the multitude of learned Muslim readers of the *Futûhât* who for centuries have applied Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and insights for their disciples and students in their own sermons, teachings and interpretations, in ways that are often only discernible to those intimately familiar with the Shaykh’s works.

The same hidden influences are particularly evident in the wider domain of what one might call ‘applied spirituality’³⁰—including the actual practice of therapists (of all sorts), psychologists, and spiritual teachers (both within and outside traditional religious denominations)—where Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings and teachings help provide a much-needed inspiration for the creative tasks of spiritual communication and pedagogy facing those seeking to develop the modern-day equivalents of the Islamic humanities, that complex of vitally inspired spiritual poetry, music, and new ritual and social institutions (including what we now call ‘Sufism’ and much more) which shaped Islamic cultures and civilisation in the centuries following Ibn ‘Arabî’s death. Today those individuals in the West who read, seek out, and then apply in their own traditions and religious contexts the practical spiritual lessons contained in Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings come from every religious background, and use all the contemporary artistic,

²⁷ NY/London, W.W. Norton, 1998; winner of the Pen-Faulkner award. Apart from the epigraph of two short unidentified phrases from Ibn ‘Arabî, there would be no way for most readers even to suspect the pervasive inspiring and organising influence of Ibn ‘Arabî on this work, were it not for the author’s own lengthy and fascinating explanation of Ibn ‘Arabî’s relation to the genesis and form of the work at the Ibn ‘Arabi Society international Symposium held at U. C. Berkeley in November 1998.

²⁸ These references are thanks to the poets M. Bylebyl and P.L. Wilson..

²⁹ The central Qur’anic term is of course ‘*sâlihât*’, the active expression of true faith through what is ‘spiritually appropriate and fitting’ at every instant.

³⁰ Fittingly enough, during the Kyoto Conference at which this paper was originally delivered, my host for a brief visit near Tokyo—an old friend and former student—was working as the Japanese translator for a seminar given by a noted creative figure in transpersonal psychology (and active Sufi teacher from a Jerrahi-Khalveti background) who was openly applying ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî and related Sufis in the practical context of that discipline. This friend’s discussion of the many problems of ‘translating’ those Sufi principles and teachings, in their native Californian form, to an audience of psychologists practising in Tokyo, vividly illustrated the many challenges and dimensions of communication summarised above.

practical, devotional and creative equivalents of the classical Islamic humanities. Because those modern-day creators are motivated by their own spiritual, artistic and political needs, they are equally inspired to translate his ideas into the ‘appropriate means’ for their own situation and field of action: normally that means working with audiences and seekers from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Buddhist, as well as Muslim backgrounds, using the artistic and social forms available in this contemporary culture. To take only one of the most obvious and widely influential examples, one could cite any number of recent feature films which are extraordinarily effective translations of Ibn ‘Arabî central ideas and their common ground of ‘esoteric’ Sufi spiritual teachings into that extraordinarily effective medium for popular spiritual teaching: *Wings of Desire*, *Field of Dreams*, *Afterlife*³¹, *The Colour of Paradise (rang-i Khodâ)*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *The Fisher King*, and so many others.

*Other ‘Sufi’ Teachers and Influences:*³²

If we approach Ibn ‘Arabî’s influence in the West from the perspective of the study of religions, rather than the history of texts and translations, then the first thing we discover—as everywhere when we examine the spread of Sufism—is the key catalytic role of living guides and the small groups initially connected with them,³³ both in encouraging the first translators of Ibn ‘Arabî and in providing the initial audience and readership for those translations and studies of his work. As in the case of the first group discussed above (Guenon, Schuon, etc.), those

³¹ In the original Japanese, *wandarafu raifu* (echoing the F. Capra classic).

³² The best broad introduction to the basic spectrum of Sufi movements in the U.S.—simply as a kind of preliminary ‘catalogue’ and ‘direction-finder’, rather than a full-length description or analysis of any of the particular groups discussed—is probably to be found in two pioneering articles by Marcia Hermansen, ‘Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements,’ in *Muslim World*, 90 (2000), pp. 158-197; and her earlier ‘In the Garden of American Sufi Movements: Hybrids and Perennials’, in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. P. Clarke (London, Luzac, 1997), pp. 155-178. Nothing remotely equivalent exists as yet for the different countries of Western Europe (although many of the groups listed by Hermansen are also active in different countries there), and the diversity and multiplicity of movements and expressions, throughout the European community as a whole, is certainly as great as in the North American context.

³³ I am not personally familiar enough with earliest representatives of this type of Sufi activity in the West, Gurdjieff and H. Inayat Khan, to judge any direct or explicit influences of Ibn ‘Arabî in their work: certainly there are key teachings and distinctive practical approaches of both (or of their later disciples and interpreters) which do reflect themes of Shaykh’s thought widespread in the Sufi traditions (of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and S. Asia, respectively) from which they drew the teachings they then creatively communicated to Western audiences.

pioneering spiritual teachers, themselves coming from the most diverse regions of the Islamic world, have provided, along with their disciples and students, the essential seed-beds for a wider ‘transplanting’ of the Shaykh’s influence into non-Islamic settings. And when one looks more closely at the lives of the translators, publishers, and popularisers of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas (anywhere in the West, not only in English speaking countries), one almost always discovers the essential catalytic role of Sufi teachers (or occasionally other Muslim scholars) in educating and motivating the translators and initial audiences for Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought. What is most fascinating about this ‘secret history’ is that—like the initial, creative phase of so many earlier religious movements—it has typically been a private, historically almost invisible process, requiring a detailed autobiographical knowledge of each individual actor and his or her personal history, a process in which the awareness of that necessarily individual dimension of spiritual communication and ‘reception’ tends to disappear from recorded history after each generation. One of the most striking aspects of this history is the way in which the transmission of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought into the English-speaking world, in the second half of the past century, has largely continued to reflect the full range of his earlier influences in every region of the Islamic world, through the key role of teachers from former Ottoman realms (primarily Turkey), South Asia (India and Sri Lanka), and Iran who have passed on to their students, in equally influential ways, something of the central cultural and spiritual roles the figure of the ‘Shaykh al-Akbar’ had taken on in those diverse regions.³⁴

Each of these stories would require a long book simply to recount the most basic facts.³⁵ But what is shared by those spiritual teachers and groups in which the influence of Ibn ‘Arabî is

³⁴ The categorisation by ostensible ‘tariqa’ affiliation adopted in the articles cited in n. 32, while of limited explanatory or descriptive utility, does have the additional virtue of highlighting this important aspect in the ‘translation’ of Sufi movements more generally (not just Ibn ‘Arabî) into new Western contexts, since these vast regional and cultural differences of origin are typically ‘invisible’ or at least quite unfamiliar to non-Muslim audiences in the new countries of ‘adoption’.

³⁵ One such study under preparation is the doctoral dissertation currently being developed by I. Jeffrey at Exeter, which focuses only on the activities of the ‘Beshara School’ and its publications in the UK, over a period of little more than three decades. One quickly discovers that even the accurate generally ‘external’ description of a relatively limited spiritual group is in itself a daunting task, which can become almost limitless as soon as one embarks upon the sort of phenomenology of religious life and experience which is necessary for the serious understanding of any such group and its eventual ‘influences’ and inspirations. The article by M. Hermansen (n. 32 above) mentions several other

most direct and explicit is a *common*, quite visible, factor which clearly marks them all off from the many other explicitly ‘Sufi’ tariqas which have simply attempted to ‘export’ unchanged local forms of Islamic practice to new Western settings: i.e., an explicit common intention to communicate the *spiritual universality* of Qur’anic teaching in ways appropriately adapted—which necessarily means creatively, even if protestations of ‘orthodoxy’ are sometimes required—to the distinctive circumstances of seekers in the contemporary world, relatively few of them ‘Muslim’ in terms of their own immediate cultural heritage. In this respect, some of the most visible and active influences in supporting and communicating the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî have come—not entirely surprisingly—from Sufi traditions deeply rooted in the spiritually cosmopolitan, diverse and sophisticated world of the Ottoman empire. Thus the Beshara School, founded by the profoundly Ottoman figure of Bulent Rauf, has for several decades pioneered in the practical teaching of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings to a wide international audience drawn from all walks of life. Equally significantly, its more academic offshoot, the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, through its *Journal*, library and annual symposia that bring together scholars and translators from all over the world, has succeeded in creating a remarkable global network of editors, translators, and interpreters of the Shaykh’s works which is increasingly effective and influential not only in English-speaking countries and among academic specialists, but also in Muslim countries where intellectuals earlier in the past century had tended to reject the aspects of Islam associated with Ibn ‘Arabî. Under the initial impetus of the charismatic Sheikh Muzaffer, the American branches of another originally Ottoman order (the Khalwati-Jerrahi tariqa) have also been extremely active in creating the vehicles needed for publishing, translating and disseminating Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings and ideas.³⁶

Reflecting the wide-ranging influences of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in South Asian Islam (most beautifully symbolised in Ibn ‘Arabî’s detailed inspiration for the architectonic form of the Taj

pioneering descriptive studies of this type, though none of those are so directly and profoundly linked to Ibn ‘Arabî as the Beshara group.

³⁶ This is evident both in the editions and translations undertaken by Pir Publications (related to one New York branch of that order), as well as the translations and commentaries (not always identified as such!) of several works by Ibn ‘Arabî translated by T. Bayrak and R.T. Harris, from the other regional branch of the same tariqa. On the West coast, the psychologists R. Frager and J. Fadiman (from yet another branch of the same order) have published a number of more creative books relating ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî and other related Sufis to the practice of psychology, counselling and other forms of therapy, as well as the popular anthology *Essential Sufism* (NY, Harper Collins, 1997).

Mahal)³⁷ other pioneering teachers originally from Muslim South Asia—Hazrat Inayat Khan (Chishti musician, teacher and founder of the Sufi order in the West), his son Pir Vilayat Khan, the Sri Lankan Sufi teacher Bhawa Mohyieddin, or Meher Baba—likewise have continued to emphasise and practically apply the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî, as they had been transmitted and transmuted in the multi-religious Indian context, in their formation and direction of their American and European disciples, in ways that have subsequently been creatively adapted to the practical tasks of medicine and healing, psychology, and spiritual guidance, as well as more creative artistic endeavours.³⁸

And finally, the central role of Ibn ‘Arabî in so much of later Iranian thought (both Shiite and Sunni), poetry and the Islamic arts has been communicated in the West (and especially the English-speaking world) through even more diverse channels: the publications and seminars sponsored by the Ni‘matullahi Sufi order and other originally Iranian spiritual groups; the above-mentioned works of Henry Corbin, S.H. Nasr, and Toshihiko Izutsu (all the direct fruit of their long-term residence, study and scholarly contacts in Iran); and more recently through the ongoing translations, interpretive studies and academic courses undertaken by a number of more recent scholars—Asians, Europeans and Americans—who had studied both with those older scholars and with more traditional representatives of Islamic spirituality in Iran. And again, within each of the recent broader Sufi movements just cited, the spectrum of immediate ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought would cover at least thousands of individual cases, ranging

³⁷ See the fascinating study by W. Begley, ‘The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning,’ in *The Art Bulletin*, LXI:1 (March 1979). Begley’s study is another extraordinary example of fundamental, undeniably direct influences by Ibn ‘Arabî (in this case the architect’s books and notes directly based on the eschatological/cosmological chapter 371 of the ‘Meccan Illuminations’) which would have been absolutely ‘invisible’ were it not for a particular ‘chance’ discovery of that key historical link.

³⁸ In addition to the helpful description of the various offshoots of Hazrat Inayat Khan’s legacy in the article cited at n. 32 above, see above all the fascinating documentation contained in the many contributions to *A Pearl in Wine: Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, ed. Z.I. Khan (NY, Omega, 2001). This new book is important not only for its invaluable detailed historical and background studies (which are virtually non-existent even for fairly recent Sufi figures in so many cases), but also for its more autobiographical descriptions in the concluding section, which again provide the indispensable ‘spiritual phenomenology’ which—taken together—is the actual reality on which any collective activity and description actually depends. The ‘case studies’ detailed there illustrate how much the ‘fantastic’ and extraordinary tales and experiences (of dreams, illuminations, ‘calls’, spiritual ‘coincidences’, ‘miracles’ and the like) scattered throughout Ibn ‘Arabî’s *Futûhât*, in particular, continue to be lived and experienced in contemporary contexts in very similar forms and expressions.

from the spectacularly public and visible (such as the best-selling Rumi translations of Robert Bly and Coleman Barks) to the no less important level of each such individual's spiritual growth and active contributions to their wider community. In each of those instances, the profusion and creative diversity of reactions powerfully defies the historian's inherited vocabulary and conceptual baggage of 'influences', 'traditions', 'communities', 'teachers' and the like. For example, some of the most visible and effective 'influences' of Ibn 'Arabi in the U.S., by each of the channels of communication above, have been on individuals who have gone on to be particularly active in various 'Jewish renewal' movements.³⁹ But while those phenomena and the deeper reasons for that particular influence might seem quite 'obvious' to religious specialists (at least those living and working in the U.S.), they would no doubt require more a extensive explanation for those coming from more distant cultural contexts .

In conclusion, therefore, it may be helpful to draw a few more explicit connections between the contemporary phenomena and potential case-studies we have just mentioned and the broader issues of 'communication' and 'influence' outlined at the beginning of this essay. The focus of the field of academic religious studies (and of Islamic studies with it) has recently been turning toward the more publicly 'interesting' (and intellectually apparently less demanding) study of contemporary religious phenomena, but all too often such studies have betrayed the unfortunate unconscious importation of stereotypes and other misplaced assumptions which can quickly lead to profound and far-reaching misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the phenomena in question. For that reason, a few further 'contextual' explanations (and heuristic suggestions) may be in order. First, in almost all of the cases we have mentioned above, the 'communicators' in question have *not* been trying to use Ibn 'Arabi and his ideas primarily in order to 'convert' people either to Islam or to any particular Sufi order or other social grouping. Whether we are referring to academics, artists, or activists, psychologists and other innovators, any such suggestion (or assumption) would completely misrepresent the intentions of these communicators and their audiences alike. Secondly, if one wants to explore in an accurate and reliable fashion the actual spectrum of influences of the writings, music, therapeutic methods, institutions and the like created by those connected with any of the broader movements

³⁹ Of course there are many more obvious and more public examples, in that general context, of an even broader range of various Buddhist 'influences'; but it is certainly not hard to see why there would

mentioned above, it would be necessary to begin (and constantly to remain) on the plane of the *actual spiritual autobiographies of the different individuals* so influenced. (In other words, ‘sociological’, quantitative approaches and assumptions are normally applied in these domains only by researchers who haven’t seriously thought about what they’re actually assuming.) Finally, for most of the effective communicators mentioned above, questions about what is or is not ‘Muslim’ (or ‘Buddhist’, etc., whatever such terms might mean) in these particular contexts—whether we are speaking of communicator, audience, or the cultural symbols through which communication is possible—are not (indeed practically cannot) be at the centre of their practical efforts at communication, which have to remain focused on their *real spiritual effects and influences* on their given audience, within its given cultural milieu, if their efforts are to have any lasting fruits. Indeed, as we suggest in conclusion, the wider parameters of spiritual communication in the modern world may be shifting in ways that open up new possibilities of communication and creative ‘influence’ that either transcend or practically replace earlier forms, norms and assumptions in these fields.

Translating the ‘Meccan Illuminations’: Toward a ‘New Science’ of Spirituality?

So where does this brief sketch of a history leave us, particularly outside the ‘Islamic world’?⁴⁰ If we can project forward from past historical experience, there are at least two domains in which the appeal and development of Ibn ‘Arabî’s heritage beyond the Islamic world is likely to continue to grow in coming decades. In both those cases (as in the Islamic past), that wider potential interest in his work is likely to arise not directly from the study of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings themselves, but rather from compelling historical situations where—as in the anecdote with which we opened this essay—the unavoidable need for ‘something like’ the Shaykh’s guiding ideas and conceptions will become increasingly apparent to people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. The first domain has to do with Ibn ‘Arabî’s profoundly rooted

be more reticence today about admitting ‘Islamic’ influences in such situations.

⁴⁰ The analysis of the growing renewal of interest in Ibn ‘Arabî in all parts of the contemporary Islamic world, which we have partially undertaken elsewhere (see our articles in note 2 above), would of course take us in very different directions. However, those distinctive directions, differing so radically from one ‘Muslim’ country and region to another, again illustrate the importance of close attention to the particular contexts and ‘audiences’ in question.

explanation of the inevitability and essential good which is embodied and expressed in the *diversity* of human understandings and expressions of our spiritual nature (including, but by no means limited to, the diversities of what different cultures arbitrarily call ‘religious’ life and activity). The ultimate fruit—and practical challenge—of Ibn ‘Arabî’s insight here is a *true mutual understanding* which goes far beyond what we ordinarily think of as tolerance, as a kind of grudging acceptance of the political necessity of the ‘other’. That ongoing process of genuine mutual understanding itself is always an essential human task, a ‘work in progress’ which is very hard for anyone to realise—and which is scarcely emphasised in the most public representatives of any of the monotheistic religions—but which lies at the practical and metaphysical centre of Ibn ‘Arabî’s worldview. It should be clear enough, without any detailed explanation, how ongoing world-historical developments will increasingly oblige people of *every* religious background at least to contemplate what Ibn ‘Arabî has to teach us all in this regard.

The second domain in which Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas are likely to have an increasing appeal is in some ways simply a wider practical extension of the point we have just made. The unprecedented global technological and economic transformations in the human situation through which we are living, and their still largely unpredictable cultural and political consequences, have so far had as their universal consequences (1) a severing of essential relations with the natural world and natural orders which were presupposed in the ritual and symbolism of every traditional religion; (2) a world-wide ‘homogenisation’ and reduction of the traditionally rich and diverse local forms of social and cultural life (including ‘religion’); and (3) a strong corresponding political and ideological tendency to reduce the reality of human beings to a relatively narrow set of publicly visible ‘social’ and ‘ethical’ needs—whether that tendency is expressed in overt forms of totalitarianism or in more subtle forms of socio-economic conditioning. Ibn ‘Arabî’s understanding of human beings and their place in the universe (along with any number of other wisdom traditions, to be sure) would suggest that each of those three recent global tendencies cannot ultimately be sustained, and that theomorphic beings will inevitably resist, revolt and creatively move beyond those recent destructive historical developments in many different ways. To the extent that such creative reactions do develop, growing numbers of people (and by no means only Muslims) are likely to continue to find inspiration and justification for their intuitions—and for their personal creative revelations—in

what Ibn ‘Arabî has to teach about the spiritual necessity and complementarity of the invisible spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of human being.

If Ibn ‘Arabî’s inspirations in both these areas are to become more widely accessible, one indispensable practical condition for that is the useful translation (with the necessary explanations and contextual matter) of all or most of his ‘Meccan Illuminations’ (*al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*).⁴¹ As already noted above, it is a curious fact that probably the dominant strands of his influence up to now, whether in the Islamic world or more recently in the West, have concerned his much shorter (though equally challenging) ‘*Bezels of Wisdom*’ (*Fusûs al-Hikam*)—along with the vast commentary literature, largely philosophic in nature, which rapidly grew up around that work. The *Futûhât*, as more and more students are beginning to understand, is something unique and very different: one might say that it offers a ‘*phenomenology* of spiritual life’ so comprehensive, detailed and subtle in its depiction of the actual laws and regularities of spiritual experience that nothing significant has escaped its purview. Certainly its contents provide a unique and powerful argument for Ibn ‘Arabî’s conception of the real universality and all-inclusiveness of the ‘Muhammadan Reality’—a key symbolic expression which unfortunately is too often misunderstood (whether in English or Arabic) to mean the exact opposite of what Ibn ‘Arabî actually intended. It is hard to convey the excitement and sense of constant discovery that always accompanies the exploration and unfolding of this immense work: without exaggeration, it is surely the equivalent in this domain of spirituality of what the ‘New World’ must have seemed to its first explorers half a millennium ago. As with the truly timeless creations (Shakespeare, Plato and their like), one comes back to the *Futûhât* each time wondering why one had been spending time on anything else. Although it would be foolhardy to try to predict the wider impact of its gradual unveiling, certainly that discovery process will change the ideas of anyone who still believes that Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions can be summarised or reduced to a sort of intellectual ‘system’, to any unambiguous ‘doctrine’ or a single rigid set of theological teachings or public beliefs.

⁴¹ See further discussion of this theme in our long new ‘Introduction’ to the forthcoming reprint, by Pir Publishers (NY, 2001), of the extensive English translations (by W. Chittick and J. Morris) originally published by Sindbad (Paris, 1989), and the extensive references to other translations included in that essay.

People often describe the prevailing approach of that (itself relatively quite new) ‘science of religions’ which is largely based on ideas derived from Ibn ‘Arabî as a kind of ‘*phenomenology*’—that is, an approach to uncovering the laws and regularities underlying ‘religious’ phenomena at different levels or domains of reality: political, social, ritual, symbolic, etc. Having said that, anyone working in the field of religious studies is well aware that there are all sorts of unwritten taboos still in operation—most obviously, in its continued primary focus on earlier (and safely ‘dead’) historical systems and theological doctrines and ‘beliefs’, and in the embarrassed scholarly reluctance to approach a genuinely comprehensive phenomenology of spiritual *experiences* in the way one finds much more clearly set out in either the immense range of popular spiritual literatures or in the closely related literature of fields like psychology, medicine and various forms of therapy. In other words, the ‘folk’ who populate this particular scholarly universe are normally still far removed from that ‘subjective objectivity’ which was so typical of those ‘*qawm*’ (the ‘people of God’) whose experiences and insights are the constant subject and reference-point of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘*Meccan Illuminations*’. As I have recently discussed at greater length in other places,⁴² it is clear to all concerned that there is a growing convergence today, where the phenomenology of spiritual life is concerned, between the historical data and approaches of the academic discipline of religious studies and a wide range of closely related scientific and therapeutic fields. As that convergence continues to unfold, more and more researchers and ‘verifiers’ (*muhaqqiqûn*) will find themselves doing, in our own time, what Ibn ‘Arabî so thoroughly and far-sightedly undertook in his *Futûhât*.

⁴² A number of studies on this theme (especially as it relates to the philosophy of Mulla Sadra and its continuation in the more recent works of Ostad Elahi) are brought together in our volume entitled *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2001).