Communication and Spiritual Pedagogy: Exploring the Methods of Investigation (*tahqîq*)

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 classical hagiographies and biographical dictionaries (*tabaqât*). (One finds such popular presentations, of course, 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 "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 *TAHQÎQ* AND THE PROBLEM OF *QIYÂMA*:

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[1], special qualities of intention and drive, capacity, native ability and character — and finally, of inexplicable grace or blessings, *bâraka* — 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 *tahqîq*. *Maslak*, for example, refers to the distinctive "path" to be traveled in the process of coming to understand the subject in question, a "path" which implies a long process of inner transformation *within* the "traveler" (the *sâlik*), as well as the effort of intellectual comprehension, which normally comes to mind when we think of "education" today. *Tahqîq* is even more complex: its Arabic root, *al-Haqq*, "the Real," is at once the ultimate Reality, Truth, Right, and the vast complex of human rights and responsibilities which are inseparable from our always partial recognition of the Real. Thus *Tahqîq* means the inseparably moral, spiritual and intellectual tasks of both discovering and investigating — and actually realizing or "making real" — everything that is demanded of us by the *Haqq* which we are striving to know.

The very different methods of *tahqîq* 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, one could describe the existential "equation" in question as: *âyât* + *nazar/tawajjuh* + *tafakkur* + *sabr* = *'ilm*. Or in slightly expanded form, God's infinite "Signs" (all that we witness and experience "*on the horizons and in our souls*")[2], plus our moments of "seeing" or "scrutinizing" and "paying attention" to them precisely *as* Signs, combined with our deepest efforts of reflection and penetration — carried out with dedication over the requisite periods of time and testing signified by *sabr* — may, with the indispensable element of grace, lead to true spiritual understanding (*'ilm*). Once we move on to later traditions of Islamic

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[1] 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 consciously like to attain or accomplish; students often have one of those sets of motives without having the other.

[2] See the famous 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)…."

learning (or the disciplines of the Islamic humanities), of course, this 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 would like to use to illustrate this wider point is the treatment of the times of the "greater" (universal) and "lesser" (individual) "Rising" (or Resurrection: *al-qiyâma*) in three central Muslim thinkers, al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1011), Ibn 'Arabî (d. 638/1240), and Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Dîn Shîrâzî, d. 1050/1641). The overall theme of *qiyâma* is particularly relevant to any discussion of concepts of "time" in Islam because of its 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 purpose. In fact, I began preparing this paper intending to compare the notions of the "times" and time-frames for Resurrection/*qiyâma* 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 (Qûnawî, Kâshânî, 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 (at least for all but the most specialized students of either thinker) was the dramatic contrast between their respective methods of investigation, including their underlying assumptions and patterns of thinking. While that contrast between Sadra and Ibn 'Arabi is in fact our main subject here, it may be helpful to start with a third great figure, al-Ghazâlî, 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 limited issue highlights the broader, more fundamental differences between the methods of *tahqîq* that each one exemplifies.

AL-GHAZÂLÎ AND THE LIMITS OF THE *IHYÂ'*:

Al-Ghazâlî composed at least two separate works entirely devoted to eschatological questions, his short treatise *al-Durrat al-Fâkhira*[3] and the final, fortieth chapter of his immense magnum opus, the *Ihyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*, now available in a superbly annotated English version[4]. The first of these is written in the style of a popular preacher, with Ghazâlî's familiarly convincing rhetoric and unmistakable ethical intentions of awakening the desire for paradise and the fear of hellfire in his readers. What he offers there is a very consistent "dramaturgy" of all the "events" and locales of the *Qiyâma* 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 literal form, and detailed consecutively and as vividly as in any film scenario. His portrayals 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 metaphysical discussions of the symbols of the Last Day.[5] In keeping with the clear rhetorical focus of Ghazâlî's writing, there is scarcely any hint in his discussions there of any deeper meaning behind those symbols.

In the corresponding chapter of the *Ihyâ'*, on the other hand, Ghazâlî again passes in review the discussions of these same symbols, but this time as they are actually discussed (more literally) in the Qur'an and the hadith. But in this work, which is certainly *not* intended uniquely for the common people (*al-'awâmm*), 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 his vast encyclopaedia of Islamic learning and practice would have accumulated many allusions to Ghazâlî's possible understanding of the deeper meaning of those symbols. Yet at the end of his

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[3] *The Precious Pearl: A Translation from the Arabic*, tr. Jane I. Smith, Scholars Press, 1979.

[4] *Al-Ghazâlî: The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, tr. and intro. by T. J. Winter, Cambridge, The Islamic Texts Society, 1989.

[5] See pp. 180-245 in our translation of Sadra's *K. al-Hikmat al-'Arshîya, The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981.

discussion, having repeatedly pointed out the 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 if one really wants to understand those sayings.

Within the larger context of the *Ihyâ'*, however, there can be little doubt that Ghazâlî is pointing his properly disposed readers toward the necessity of a qualified spiritual guide and of following the difficult path of spiritual practice under that guide's direction. So the "key" to Ghazâlî's proposed method of investigation actually turns out to be something essentially *outside* of his writings themselves: i.e., the role of the shaykh and the wider institutions of the Sufi *tarîqa* — institutions which were relatively new 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 *qiyâma* are treated within the context of a detailed philosophical "system" whose basic terms and presuppositions would be familiar even to most students of Western philosophy (reflecting their common historical roots). There the 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 Intellect and the "time" of the Soul, or between the corresponding aspects of the human intellect and psychic experience. As in many 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[6]. Instead, the larger conceptual framework (at once philosophic and theological) of Sadra's particular intellectual "system" — like that of his predecessors, especially Ibn Sînâ — is both the subject and the explicit framework for his discussions.

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 Ghazâlî, those methods presuppose a wider institutional framework — in this case, of the books, schools and professors of scholastic,

Avicennan philosophy — which Sadra and his students and wider audience could take for granted, and which has largely continued to flourish 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 'ARABÎ AND THE UNFOLDING OF SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE:

With Ibn 'Arabî, on the other hand, one enters an entirely different universe, with a method of investigation entirely different from that of the philosophers (of any school), theologians and anyone else concerned with intellectual arguments and systems. As we shall see, his method throughout his magnum opus, the "Meccan Illuminations" (*al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*)[7] in fact closely mirrors and only elaborates on the forms and "method" (or spiritual demands) of the Qur'an itself.

That method typically involves the constant, complex interweaving of three distinct elements (each with its equivalents in the Qur'an) whose intended 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 with the philosophers and theologians), but rather by etymologically "deconstructing" the commonly accepted (and often fairly empty) understandings of those terms, while expanding their capacity to help reveal those multiple, deeper possibilities of meaning almost always implicit in their Arabic roots (and their interconnections in the semantic universe

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[6] See the detailed discussion of these issues in the notes and Introduction to our study of Mulla Sadra and accompanying English translation of his best-known eschatological work cited in the preceding note.

[7] See the very partial illustrations of these points in the eschatological passages we have translated in *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations: Textes choisis/Selected Texts*, general ed. M. Chodkiewicz, Paris, 1988, pages 158-189. (The English translations which comprise more than 2/3 of this work are now available in a separate paperback volume: Ibn 'Arabî: The Meccan Revelations, NY, Pir Press, 2002.) It is now much easier to follow Ibn 'Arabî's discussion of these (and any other) issues and themes throughout his vast *Futûhât* using the recently published CD-ROM (Qumm, Noor Publications, 1990) of Noor-'Irfân, which includes a searchable text of the *Futûhât* and the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, as well as a number of key later Islamic commentaries on the *Fusûs*.

of the Qur'an), which correspond to each reader's own level of spiritual experience and realization.   Secondly, Ibn 'Arabî 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 approaches, of the aporias, unanswerable questions and apparent contradictions to which such purely rationalistic, intellectual approaches always give rise.   And finally, he constantly develops an endlessly fascinating "spiritual phenomenology" of descriptions of and allusions to the vast gamut of spiritual experiences and inspirations — drawn from his own illuminations, hadith, the traditions of earlier Sufis, and so on — which potentially correspond to and reveal some of the intended "content" of the Qur'anic symbols.[8]

Now the results of this distinctive method of investigation, 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 'Arabi'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 'Arabî'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 experience.   This dialectic[9] unfolds between the "push" of the engaged reader's moment-by-moment recognition of the coherence and revelation of each "Sign" 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

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[8] For Ibn 'Arabî's own explanation of the epistemological and other concerns underlying his distinctive form of writing in the *Futûhât*, see our translations and discussions of key passages from his Introduction to that work in *How to Study the Futûhât: Ibn 'Arabî's own Advice, in Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî: 750th Anniversary Commemoration Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan, Element Books, 1993, pp. 73-89.

mysterious and initially daunting rhetoric, is the underlying reality of one's own ongoing "dialogue with God" — an *ongoing 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 shuhûd*) of the 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 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 has repeatedly aroused among the proponents of all sorts of religious institutions and claimants of this or that exclusive truth. For in its most fundamental terms, Ibn 'Arabî's distinctive method returns to the simple and direct, inherently universal essentials of the basic Qur'anic equation with which we began. And if we have described this method as necessarily "individualistic," that qualification should not at all be misunderstood as solipsistic or anti-social: the key to this method is each individual's *living practice* of the revelation — in the forms and Signs which are necessarily unique and renewed at every instant, as Ibn 'Arabî constantly reminds us — , and the guides to their meaning (themselves Signs!) are everyone we encounter, everywhere, all the time.

The stages of the path of realization he has in mind and its universal roots are beautifully summarized, not just for an elite, but for every person in their own unique way, in the extraordinarily compressed verses of *Sûrat al-'Asr* (103: 1-3):

> *By the fading light,[10]*
> *Truly the human being is in a predicament …*

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[9] The term is used here in very explicit allusion to the special — and ultimately, equally inimitable — literary form of Plato's dramatic dialogues, which is dictated by very similar philosophic motivations.

[10] Qur'an 103:1-3. Although the key term *'asr* here is usually taken, no doubt because of its connections with the daily prayers of the same name, as referring to the 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.

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 sabr.[11] (103:1-3)

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[11] *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 the spiritual human being (*insân*) ***in time***.