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Ibn 'Arabi's "Esotericism": The Problem of Spiritual Authority

If there is a paradox (though not an ultimate contradiction) in the very notion of mystical *writing*, nowhere is that more evident than in Islam, where the paradigmatic spiritual figures of the early centuries--whether in Sufism or Shiite esotericism--are known not for their books, but rather through oral sayings and teachings handed down through many generations of disciples. And even the much later (and often apologetic) compilations of the classical Sufi literature (Makki, Kalabadhi, Qushayri, Sulami, etc.) are unanimous in their insistence that the "knowledge" underlying the mystical path is a science of experiential states, of forms of awareness that can only be attained through the combination of divine grace, individual practice and intention, and *suhba*, the companionship and guidance of a true master--not through their reflection in words, concepts and formal teachings. Hence in the case of Ibn 'Arabi the contrast is all the more striking between his monumental, virtually superhuman literary production¹ (with the vast culture and learning it presupposes) and the lives of many of his own masters and Sufi contemporaries, who were not infrequently poor, uncultured and relatively marginal with respect to the elites of his own society.² That problem is posed in its most extreme form in the case of his magnum opus, *al-Futuh al-Makkiya*, which encompasses virtually every "science" or form of knowledge available to Islamic culture in that time, with particular emphasis on the traditional (and often far from "mystical") religious sciences (kalam, hadith, fiqh, etc.). In the case of the *Futuh*, however, that apparent paradox--along with many related and equally puzzling features of Ibn 'Arabi's writing more generally--is largely resolved once we recognize the full ambitions of that work and the remarkable range of its intended audience, matters that are no doubt intimately connected with Ibn 'Arabi's own self-conception of his special providential role as "Seal of the Muhammadan Saints."³ (The historical reasons for the omission

¹Osman Yahia's *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Damascus, 1964 (2 vol.), the standard bibliographical reference, gives 846 works (although a number of these are apocryphal or duplications under different titles), and Ibn 'Arabi's own lists of his writings include almost 300 titles. References in this article to his *K. al-Futuh al-Makkiya*--which includes many of his shorter treatises either as chapters or parts of chapters--are to the four-volume edition of Cairo, 1329 A.H., giving volume, page and in some cases line numbers. Reference has also been given, when available, to the ongoing critical edition of Prof. Yahia, Cairo, 1972-present [abbreviated as "O.Y. ed."].

²The most accessible illustration of this is in the biographical sections of his *Ruh al-Quds* and *al-Durrat al-Fakhira* included in the translation by R.W.J. Austin, *Sufis of Andalusia*, London, 1971 (French tr., Paris, 1979). See also the case of his close and lifelong disciple in "Le *Kitab al-inbah 'ala tariq Allah* de 'Abdallah Badr al-Habasi: un témoignage spirituel de Muhyi l-din Ibn 'Arabi," ed. and tr. by Prof. D. Gril in *Annales Islamologiques* XV (1979), pp. 97-164. For Ibn 'Arabi, such relative "invisibility" is--barring a divine command to the contrary--one of the usual signs of the *malamiya*, the highest spiritual rank among the saints: see the extensive references from the *Futuh* in Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophetie et saintete dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabi*, Paris, 1986 [subsequently abbreviated as Chodkiewicz, *Sceau*], index s.v.

³See Chodkiewicz, *Sceau*, chapters VIII-X.

of these wider perspectives by most subsequent commentators, whether Islamic or Western, have been discussed in a separate article.)⁴ In short, the *Futuhat*, unlike most Sufi writing, is addressed not simply to a vast range of "practicing" Sufis,⁵ from novices to the most experienced masters--although that is no doubt its primary audience--but also to those potentially open to that spiritual perspective among a much wider literate public composed mainly of religious scholars, the '*ulama*' and *fuqaha*' of his day. Unlike many of his predecessors, Ibn 'Arabi's aim in addressing this broader learned audience is not primarily an apologetic one of defending or explaining Sufism, but rather the far more ambitious and far-reaching one of "converting" practitioners of those ostensibly religious sciences to a deeper awareness of their true spiritual grounds and intentions.⁶

At this more public and "exoteric" level, then, the very act of writing on such questions, with the many risks that entails, is a self-consciously *political* gesture: for what is at stake is in fact nothing less than the very grounds and conception of spiritual authority in Islam--and the centuries of ongoing polemics surrounding Ibn 'Arabi's work, in many different Islamic societies, are sufficient testimony to the wider, if often inchoate, awareness of that fundamental issue.⁷ As we shall see, for Ibn 'Arabi this essential "conversion" primarily involves neither a substitution nor a particular outward change in the accepted procedures of each of those traditional religious sciences, but rather a profound inner transformation in the perspective through which they are ordinarily viewed and applied. But what is entailed (and presupposed) by that inner shift in awareness and intention can easily be misunderstood, and nowhere were those real dangers and confusions more immediately evident than in the chiliastic and antinomian excesses so often historically associated with the recurrent "Mahdist" and messianic movements in Islam.⁸ For this reason, Ibn 'Arabi's discussion of the Mahdi and his "Helpers" in chapter 366 of the *Futuhat* brings out those sensitive issues of spiritual (and ultimately temporal) authority in the clearest possible fashion, while at the same time offering an ideal illustration of his usual

⁴"Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters," in three issues of the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 106 (1986), no. 3 and 4 and vol. 107 (1987), no. 1.

⁵"Sufi" is used here as a convenient but inadequate shorthand expression (corresponding to a profusion of more technical terms in Ibn 'Arabi's own writing) for all those readers conscious of their being on a spiritual path--a condition which, as Ibn 'Arabi repeatedly emphasizes, cannot be judged by any outwardly visible social and historical categories.

⁶This relative orientation of Ibn 'Arabi's work is especially clear if one compares it with the later Sufi writings of Ghazali--who demonstrates an outwardly similar concern for the "exoteric," formal teachings of Islam--and with the subsequent historical reactions to the two writers: see further references in notes 4 and 7.

⁷See the preliminary references in O. Yahia, *Histoire...*, I, pp. 114-135; E. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought*, Princeton, 1984, ch. 2; and our study cited in n. 4 above.

⁸See the article "*al-Mahdi*," by W. Madelung, in *EI²* (V, 1230-1238). While the issues and principles evoked by Ibn 'Arabi are humanly universal (and are clearly understood by him as such), for the sake of convenience this article remains within the historical and symbolic framework of Islam.

procedures of esoteric, multi-faceted writing.⁹ This article, based on a number of related chapters in the *Futuhāt*, is intended to provide a concise introduction to (I.) the distinctive features and principles underlying Ibn 'Arabi's esoteric writing throughout that work; (II.) the particular expression of those principles in the subject and structure of chapter 366; and (III.) the complex, interrelated questions of religio-legal authority and interpretation (*qiyas*, *ijtihād*, *taqlid*, etc.) that are developed at greater length here and in many other sections of the *Futuhāt*.

I. Foundations of "Esoteric"¹⁰ Writing in the *Futuhāt*:

The initial reaction of readers of the *Futuhāt*, no matter what their training and where they begin, is likely to include a certain confusion or even bewilderment in the face of the profusion and apparent disorder of the subjects treated, the immense literary and cultural background that is assumed, the frequent lack of any visible connection between the contents of a chapter and its title or opening verses, the allusive (indeed often completely enigmatic) and fragmentary nature of many discussions, and the constantly shifting perspectives from which Ibn 'Arabi tends to approach a given issue. These forbidding intrinsic obstacles, together with the sheer magnitude of the book itself and the lack of any comprehensive commentaries such as are available for the *Fusus*, no doubt help account for the relative lack of complete, representative translations and the often partial or misleading character of secondary accounts based on a few selected passages.¹¹ Such distinctive structural features have often been explained--whether admiringly or critically--in terms of Ibn 'Arabi's own repeated insistence on the "inspired" nature of his order and treatment of many subjects in the *Futuhāt* (as well as in several of his other works). However, quite apart from that problematic dimension of inspiration, relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that Ibn 'Arabi actually outlines in considerable detail a systematic and relatively coherent explanation for many of these characteristic stylistic and rhetorical procedures (as well as their deeper philosophic and spiritual presuppositions) at the very beginning of the *Futuhāt*: that account is to be found in his long Introduction (*muqaddima*), a

⁹A complete English translation and commentary of the relevant sections of chapter 366 (III, 327-340) is included in the forthcoming *Anthology* of representative chapters from the *Futuhāt* (Paris, Sindbad, 1989; general editor, M. Chodkiewicz), and part of that text will appear, together with a longer version of this article, in our planned sourcebook, *An Introduction to Islamic Esotericism*. In the notes here, references to ch. 366 are given both for the Arabic text of the *Futuhāt* (see n. 1) and the corresponding section number of our translation.

¹⁰The quotation marks here and in the title of this article indicate the technical use of this term to describe a common set of rhetorical methods and assumptions frequently shared by writers from the diverse intellectual traditions of Islamic philosophy, Sufism and esoteric Shiism which are amply illustrated in this article. To avoid some common misunderstandings, it should be stressed that (1) the essential feature of this sort of writing is not simply its focus on an "esoteric" reality or intention (whether spiritual or other), but rather the complex *interplay* (in writing, interpretation and reception) between that level of meaning and the relatively "exoteric" or public modes of understanding; (2) it is not opposed to a genuine "literalism," since for Ibn 'Arabi the spiritual meaning *is* precisely the literal one (and what are usually considered to be the "literal" meanings are themselves revealed to be "interpretations"); and (3) the level of "esoteric" understanding or intention does *not* involve "concealment" of something that could otherwise be plainly or unambiguously stated.

¹¹See the detailed discussion of this point in Part I of our *JAOS* article cited in n. 4 above.

key section which he substantially expanded in his final recension of that work. While a detailed study of that Introduction must be reserved for a separate article, its implications for the structure (and intended reading) of the rest of the *Futuhat* are summarized in two key passages at its conclusion:¹²

"As for the credo of the 'quintessence of the elite' (*khulasat al-khawass*) concerning God--may He be exalted!--that is a matter beyond this,¹³ which we have dispersed throughout this book, because most (people's) intellects are veiled by their thoughts and fall short of perceiving this, because of their lack of (spiritual) purification (*tajrid*)."

"And as for explicitly stating the credo of the 'quintessence (of the spiritual elite)', we did not separate it out in particular, because of its profundity and difficulty. Instead we have placed it dispersed throughout the chapters of this book, in full detail and clearly explained--but, as we have mentioned,¹⁴ separated and scattered: so whoever God grants its understanding will recognize it and distinguish it from the rest. For that is the True Knowledge and Veracious Saying, and there is no aim beyond it. 'The blind man and the seeing are alike' in it,¹⁵ (for) it joins the furthest things with the nearest, and brings together the lowest and the most high."

¹²The entire *muqaddima*, following the long *khutba* and *fihrist*, corresponds to I, 31-47 (representing final recension) and O.Y. ed., I, 138-214. (For the earlier and later versions of the *Futuhat*, see Dr. Yahia's introduction to his critical edition, vol. I, pp. 23 ff.) A detailed study (including translation and commentary of relevant sections) of this Introduction, whose importance for the interpretation of the *Futuhat* could hardly be exaggerated, is in preparation. The first passage quoted here appears at the very end of the Introduction (I, 47; O.Y. ed., I, 213), while the second passage (I, 38; O.Y. ed., I, 173) precedes an intervening section (see following note) added in the second recension. Although not included in the earliest version of the *Futuhat*, both passages summarize points explained in detail in the earlier core section discussed below (n. 18).

¹³I.e., beyond the "credo of the elite (*'aqidat al-khawass*) of the people of God," based on methods "between *nazar* and *kashf*" (O.Y. ed., I, 187) outlined in the preceding section; this highest "credo" therefore apparently corresponds to that comprehensive spiritual "knowledge of the secrets" (*'ilm al-asrar*), discussed earlier in the Introduction (cf. n. 17), which is only realizable through inner "unveiling" (*kashf*).

¹⁴This phrase apparently refers to the much earlier statement (O.Y. ed., I, 74; also added in the second recension) describing the Introduction as "the preliminary presentation of the divine, secret (forms of) knowledge (*'ulum ilahiya asrariya*) comprised within this book (as a whole)."

¹⁵Judging from the conclusion of this sentence, this phrase is apparently an intentionally paradoxical echo of the many Koranic assertions (using the same Arabic words) that "the blind man and the seeing are *not* alike" in their *perception* or awareness of God: as such, it would point to the relative or

These statements clearly bring out three essential features, underlying the composition of the *Futuhāt* as a whole, that are particularly relevant to Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the central problem of spiritual authority, both in chapter 366 and elsewhere.

1. The first and most obvious point is the dispersion or scattering of the particular essential meanings intended for the "elite(s)" among his readers. Even on a purely intellectual level, without regard to the more profound questions of spiritual comprehension and preparedness also involved here, every serious student of Ibn 'Arabi quickly comes to realize to what extent his works (and more especially the *Futuhāt*) constitute an immense and endlessly fascinating puzzle in which the intended meaning of an initially obscure symbolic detail or allusion is often to be found in the most remote and unexpected context--and in which some apparently familiar scriptural expression just as frequently receives a new and freshly illuminating spiritual interpretation.¹⁶ On a deeper level, these statements are a further reminder both of the difficult practical conditions posed for those individuals who would claim to belong in some way to that "elite," and of the fundamental fact that a text like the *Futuhāt*--as with virtually all the Islamic esoteric traditions--was always meant to be read primarily in the company of a master, with the guidance of his *oral* commentary and taking into account the specific capacities of each student.

2. The second point, and the principle underlying the elaborate use of "dispersed," esoteric writing by Ibn 'Arabi (and by many other pre-modern Muslim authors), is his constant recognition of the natural diversity and hierarchy of abilities to understand and realize the matters at issue here--and his corresponding awareness of the dangers and inevitable illusions and misunderstandings that arise whenever such questions are approached without that necessary preparation. In the *Futuhāt*, this principle is explained in detail in the core of the Introduction, where he carefully distinguishes between three primary types of knowledge and the methods or sources appropriate to each: "intellectual" (*aqli*) knowledge, based on reasoning (*nazar*); the knowledge of "states" (*ahwal*), known only by each individual's immediate experiencing (*dhawq*); and divinely bestowed knowledge of the (spiritual) "secrets" (*asrar*), "specific to the prophets and saints," which reaches "beyond the stage of intellect" and "encompasses and subsumes all the (other forms of) knowledge."¹⁷

"illusory" nature of such distinctions from the comprehensive metaphysical perspective of the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*) and the Perfect Man. At the same time Ibn 'Arabi seems to be alluding to another fundamental point he first made in introducing the "credo of the common people" (*'aqidat al-'awamm*) earlier in this Introduction (O.Y. ed., I, 154-162): namely, that the formal credo of the mystics and "men of God" is outwardly identical with that of the unreflective believer--given their common basis the words of the Koran--while they differ only in the degree of inward spiritual realization (*tahqiq*) of what is actually intended by those expressions.

¹⁶The study of the *Futuhāt* (or a wider range of Ibn 'Arabi's writings in general) quickly brings out the limitations and partial perspectives of that learned tradition of philosophic commentaries on the *Fusus al-Hikam* which has usually been taken to represent "Ibn 'Arabi" both in Islam and in the modern West: see our review article cited in n. 4 above.

¹⁷I, 31-33.11; O.Y. ed. I, 138-147 (already part of the earlier recension). (See also our forthcoming study of the *muqaddima* mentioned in n. 13 above.) Many of these same essential points, especially concerning the necessity to veil the *'ilm al-asrar*, are developed in more accessible summary form, using similar scriptural references, in his *K. al-Fana' fi al-Mushahada (Rasa'il Ibn 'Arabi)*, Hyderabad, 1948, vol. I, no. 1), pp. 2-5 (tr. M. Valsan, *Le livre de l'extinction dans la contemplation*, Paris, 1984, pp. 30-35).

Now the obvious problem in writing (or publicly speaking) of this last type of purely spiritual knowledge, as he goes on to explain at some length, is that the majority who do not share it naturally tend to respond in one of two ways: either they completely reject such statements, treating them as lies or the fantasies of a madman or heretic--in which case the speaker himself is endangered; or else they try to "understand" and apply them by unwittingly reducing them to the level of their more familiar rational and experiential knowledge--in which case the listeners are actually turned away from those truths and can easily become a danger to themselves or society. One possible (and historically popular) response to this situation was not to write at all, to speak only to a few chosen disciples with the appropriate "preparedness"--or else to write in such a way that only such rare individuals could grasp one's deeper intentions; that course may have guaranteed a certain security, but at the cost of relatively limited influence.

A far more difficult challenge, reflecting the much wider ambitions and achievements of the prophets,¹⁸ was to write (or speak) in a way that could also simultaneously reach--and potentially touch and transform--the full range of guiding intellectual elites (i.e., the *'ulama'*), while avoiding the recurrent pitfalls we have just mentioned. In fact, Ibn 'Arabi's subsequent reputation (and the concomitant historical focus on his *Fusus al-Hikam*) have tended to obscure the full ambitions and scope of the *Futuhat* in this regard. For the characteristic rhetorical style of that work flows from a distinctive combination of dialectical "reasoning" (*nazar*) and allusions to the fruits of spiritual practice and "unveiling" (*kashf*)--as both are mirrored in the archetypes of the Koran and hadith--designed to awaken the spiritual sensibilities of readers versed in each of the traditional religious sciences, to lead them to question (and eventually transcend) the limited "reasoning" and presuppositions of those traditional disciplines.¹⁹ Since the desired transformation or spiritual "alchemy" is necessarily different for every individual, given the unique interplay of these different forms of knowledge in the actual process of spiritual realization (*tahqiq*), Ibn 'Arabi's language is often intentionally open and dialectic, puzzling (or outright provocative), and capable of multiple (and usually complementary) interpretations.²⁰ But at the same time such passages are often artfully interwoven, as in chapter 366, with more

¹⁸See the references at n. 3 above on the specific functions and responsibility implied by Ibn 'Arabi's self-conception as "seal of Muhammadan saints," to which he alludes in several important passages of chapter 366 (sections I and II-6 of our translation).

¹⁹Cf. his mention of the spiritual obstacle posed by the "veils of thoughts" in the statement quoted at n. 12 above.

An additional problem, accounting for the extreme difficulty of translating Ibn 'Arabi for modern audiences now unfamiliar with those sciences, is that this rhetorical procedure presupposes considerable acquaintance with the vocabulary and broader assumptions of each particular discipline (as illustrated in the case of *fiqh* below); the background explanation required for contemporary readers inevitably tends to obscure the play of allusions and ironic shifts in meaning that are a recurrent feature of Ibn 'Arabi's dialectical use of those disciplines.

²⁰If the commentator ignores these essential rhetorical and dialectical intentions and their presuppositions (as outlined in the Introduction to the *Futuhat*), it is easy to present an endless variety of apparently mutually contradictory pictures of "Ibn 'Arabi." Hence the two extreme--and, one would think, otherwise quite incompatible--historically recurrent portrayals of Ibn 'Arabi either as a "rationalizing" theosopher intent on reducing the mysteries of faith to an all-encompassing conceptual system, or as a sort of inspired "shaman" defying rational understanding and established socio-religious norms.

"exoteric" discussions that could have been taken almost verbatim from works on fiqh, kalam, etc., employing the vocabulary and types of reasoning ordinarily used in each of those religious disciplines.

3. The third distinctive feature mentioned above, and one of the most pervasive characteristics of Ibn 'Arabi's work more generally, is his special attitude of what we might call "spiritual literalism": i.e., his constant insistence on the ultimate coincidence (not simply in outward formulation) between the precise, revealed literal formulations of the Koran or hadith and their essential spiritual truth and intentions as realized and verified by the saints.²¹ Reflecting this perspective is his usual favorable view of the unquestioning, implicit faith of the common believer, and his corresponding distrust of all contrived intellectualist "interpretations" (*ta'wil*)--a judgment which he extends to some of the basic presuppositions and procedures of the historical Islamic religious sciences (see section III below). This outlook is also expressed in the structure of many chapters in the *Futuhat*, which typically take their point of departure from a Koranic verse or hadith whose true spiritual meaning is then unfolded at great length--and often in initially unexpected directions.

II. The Case of the Mahdi's "Helpers"

Chapter 366 of the *Futuhat* provides a particularly striking illustration of all these typical features of Ibn 'Arabi's esoteric writing, since each reader is forced to provide the essential--and inherently problematic--connection between the initial, apparent subject (i.e., the traditional accounts of the Mahdi and his earthly accomplishment of justice and the divine commandments at the "end of time") and the profound reality of the corresponding spiritual stage which underlies the *perennial* spiritual authority of the accomplished saints, based on their uniquely inspired realization of the Source and intended meanings expressed in the literal forms of the Koran and hadith.²² Now the dangers of any open, written discussion of this subject are rather

²¹An excellent short survey of the many manifestations of this principle, both in issues of Islamic law and spiritual interpretation of scripture more generally, is the article of M. Chodkiewicz, "Ibn 'Arabi: la lettre et la Loi," pp. 27-42 in the *Actes du colloque Mystique, culture et societe* (ed. M. Meslin), Paris, 1983. (We are indebted to Mr. Chodkiewicz for first drawing our attention to the importance of chapter 366 and other chapters of the *Futuhat* discussed below.) To avoid a common misunderstanding, it should be stressed that Ibn 'Arabi repeatedly brings out the ways in which what are ordinarily taken to be the "literal" (i.e., apparently non-symbolic) meanings of Scripture inevitably assume their own--ultimately incoherent and self-contradictory--frameworks of interpretation.

²²The particular importance of the spiritual stage (*manzil*) discussed in this chapter is further underlined by its qualification in the title (according to Ibn 'Arabi's *fihrist*, O.Y. ed., I, 107) as "Muhammadan"--i.e., pertaining to the universal Source of all Revelation (the *haqiqa muhammadiyah*) which encompasses the spiritual "realities" of all the other prophets and their revelations (cf. the illustration of this in the *Fusus al-Hikam*).

That special universal dimension of this subject is further illuminated in the following chapter 367 of the *Futuhat*, which contains the key autobiographical account of Ibn 'Arabi's own spiritual Ascension (*mi'raj*) leading to his culminating realization of the "Muhammadan Station" and the inner meaning of the (universal, noetic) "*Qur'an*." See our comparative study of chapter 367 and related works, including the *K. al-Isra'*, in "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabi and the Mi'raj," in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 107 (1987) and vol. 108 (1988), and the more complete translation and commentary of ch. 367 to appear in the forthcoming *Anthology* of

evident: on the individual, psychological level, unprepared readers could easily be tempted to "short-circuit" the implicit challenge to realize for themselves something of the spiritual stage in question (with the long and difficult efforts that would require) and instead focus--whether admiringly or with hostility--either on the more visible criticisms of the *fuqaha'* (and associated ruling authorities) or on the author's own apparent claims to some sort of superior inspired wisdom. And in the outward, social realm those temptations were reflected in a number of potential excesses, often historically associated with claims concerning the "Mahdi" or "Imam" (understood in a temporal, political sense) that were familiar to all of Ibn 'Arabi's contemporaries. The most obvious of these dangers were (1) the illusion of a millenarian transformation "transcending" all spiritual and temporal norms, whether that be expressed in a revolutionary messianism or in more private antinomian tendencies; and (2) the confusion of spiritual authority with mere worldly domination (*riyasa*), and the resulting use of Mahdist (or related Sufi) rhetoric as an ideology by persons in fact seeking personal power for various worldly ends.

Given the delicacy of this subject and the notoriety of these dangers, Ibn 'Arabi artfully arranged the structure of this chapter and the order of its topics so as ward off potentially hostile exotericist critics (and inapt Sufi readers) while only gradually unfolding his deeper insights for those genuinely prepared to share that spiritual realization. Thus the chapter begins (III, 327-331) with extremely long and literal citations of hadith concerning the Mahdi and his encounters with the Antichrist (*Dajjal*), interspersed with only a few hints about the subject indicated in the title. Similarly the long concluding section (III, 338-340), just as in the other chapters from this division of the *Futuhat*, consists of a list of dozens of spiritual insights associated with this particular station, but usually mentioned in terms so enigmatic as to be virtually meaningless for someone without a profound acquaintance with Ibn 'Arabi's thought and writing, as well as the realities in question. Moreover, if we add to these features the location of this chapter far within the *Futuhat* itself (not to mention the difficulties of access to such a work in the pre-modern period), it is clear that under ordinary circumstances only serious, qualified and highly motivated readers would ever be likely to reach the more controversial middle section.

In that central section (III, 332-337), on the other hand, Ibn 'Arabi speaks much more openly and directly, clearly underlining the perennial nature and importance of his deeper subject.²³ But in explaining his own understanding of this issue he again begins by recalling the rare and exceedingly difficult *preconditions* for the divine inspiration of the saints--matters developed much more fully in preceding chapters of the *Futuhat*--before turning to the problems raised by the "application" of that inspiration in judgment of more worldly matters. And even in the latter sections, his undisguised criticisms of the majority of jurists and their methodological presuppositions are formulated in such a way that the attentive reader is still constantly faced with the difficult practical and spiritual conditions for realizing that alternative perspective. As can be seen below (and throughout the *Futuhat*), those conditions are such that the reader who takes them seriously no doubt finds the focus of his attention turning from the possible shortcomings of others to more urgent and intimate concerns.

representative selections from the *Futuhat* (Paris, Sindbad, 1989; general ed. M. Chodkiewicz) cited in n. 9 above.

²³Thus, for example, he begins to refer to the "Imam of the Age," rather than simply to the Mahdi, and to the saints (*awliya'*) and the "people of unveiling" (*ahl al-kashf*), rather than to the Mahdi's Helpers, who are not even mentioned as such in this section.

III. Problems of "Law" and Authority

Even the casual reader of chapter 366 is likely to be struck by Ibn 'Arabi's repeated critical contrast between the "true Muhammadan *Shar'*"--whether as that is applied by the Mahdi or realized by the saints and "people of (spiritual) unveiling"--and the historically developed systems of Islamic law maintained by the professional jurists (the *fuqaha'*) of his day. However the positive principles underlying that critique and the conclusions to be drawn from it are not nearly so clearly stated; indeed, if one looks only at the individual points of criticism, they could easily be mistaken as minor corrections of the existing legal schools on mere items of detail. In fact, the full scale of Ibn 'Arabi's disagreement and the very different paradigm governing his conception of the Sharia only emerge when one compares the many related discussions of these and related "legal" questions throughout the *Futuhat*. In this section, therefore, by reversing Ibn 'Arabi's usual procedure of dispersed writing discussed above and reassembling a few of his many scattered allusions to this subject, we shall attempt to present--albeit in highly simplified form--something of the inner coherence of his own understanding of the Sharia underlying his scattered criticisms of the *fuqaha'*.

To begin with, while the common translation of *shari'a* (or *shar'*) as (divine or revealed) "Law" does correspond to many of the assumptions of the Islamic jurists Ibn 'Arabi is addressing, it fails to convey the primary concerns and guiding insights in his own conception of the Sharia, both here and in other chapters: the term "law," as usually understood, both leaves out too much that is essential--especially the questions of worship, prayer, belief, and ethical and spiritual states and norms that are his central focus--and inevitably suggests a great many unavoidable worldly matters (e.g., questions of taxation, state organization and legislation, regulation of social and economic life) about which he has relatively little to say in the *Futuhat*.²⁴ (Ibn 'Arabi's relative silence about the more practically indispensable legal functions of fiqh, as we shall see, could therefore be interpreted in a number of ways.) In any case, his criticisms of the *fuqaha'* almost all turn on their relative neglect of the *spiritual* grounds and finality of revelation: hence his immediate aim in these critiques is primarily rhetorical--i.e., to turn the individual reader's attention toward that deeper spiritual reality and its demands--and not the practical possibility of some fundamental reform or replacement of the existing schools of law. Just as in his treatment of other Islamic sciences (especially *'ilm al-kalam*), Ibn 'Arabi's use of technical terms from fiqh or *usul* in this wider spiritual context typically involves a radical transformation of their usual meaning that is designed to bring out their "original" (or at least potential) spiritual intention. His guiding principles in these discussions can be summed up in the following five points:

1. The keystone of Ibn 'Arabi's criticism of the *fuqaha'* and his own understanding of the true spiritual "authorities" is of course the *presence of Muhammad*--in the sense of the universal "Muhammadan Reality" (*haqiqa muhammadiya*)--and of the *Qur'an* (again as the noetic Reality underlying the Koran and all other revelations). For it is this possibility of direct access to the Source of revelation, however rare and difficult that may be, that underlies his claims concerning the greater clarity and certainty of the saints' direct insight into the meaning and intention of the

²⁴The primary focus of Ibn 'Arabi's concerns on the spiritual reality (*haqiqa*) underlying each "divine," revealed Sharia (cf. chapters 262-263, II, 562-3) is especially evident in his choice and treatment of subjects (prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, etc.) in the long earlier "legal" chapters of the *Futuhat* (ch. 68-72: I, 329-763).

Sharia. Of course these same principles also form part of the very foundation of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical and cosmological system. But what is crucial here is that these are not just metaphysical concepts or indeterminate symbols, but a living spiritual reality whose contact and presence is repeatedly affirmed in chapter 366, both for Ibn 'Arabi himself (e.g., in his remarks on his special relation with the *Qur'an*)²⁵ and for the saints and "people of unveiling" more generally (at III, 335).

The true spiritual "authorities" are therefore those with immediate, living access to that reality, those who are "following a clear Proof."²⁶ Hence Ibn 'Arabi's repeated vehement assertions that "for us the only permissible *taqlid* in the Religion of God is the *taqlid* of the *living*"--i.e., of the saints who, as the true "heirs" of the Prophet, are the "people of remembrance" (21:7) and the true "people of the Koran and hadith," those who actually realize and safeguard (on earth) the universal Reality of the Muhammad and the eternal *Qur'an*.²⁷ As he was well aware, claims to such authority (even if these principles are accepted) are not easy to verify or to arbitrate, and could easily give rise to any number of irresponsible and misleading pretensions.²⁸ We have already indicated the extreme care he took, in composing the *Futuhat*, to discourage those who might have been misled by such abuses--along with hostile critics who could use the threat of such dangers to discredit the methods and intentions of the "people of unveiling" more generally. But for the properly motivated and qualified reader, his scattered allusions to this reality and its implications are together more than sufficient to indicate the difficult practical steps required to realize this spiritual "stage" or at least to find a guide who has done so. The remaining points all

²⁵See III, 334.29 ff. (section II-6 of our translation) and III, 329 (section I of our translation). In this regard, see also the important autobiographical accounts of Ibn 'Arabi's culminating realization of the "Station of Muhammad" and the comprehensive Reality of the *Qur'an* both in the following chapter (367) and in his earlier *K. al-Isra'* (both passages included in our forthcoming article in the *JAOS* cited at n. 22) and further references in Chodkiewicz, *Sceau*, chapters IV, VII and IX.

²⁶*'ala bayyina* (47:14; etc.): see S. al-Hakim, *al-Mu'jam al-Sufi* (an excellent comprehensive study of Ibn 'Arabi's technical terminology), Beirut, 1981, pp. 229-230 for further references to the key role of this conception. [Abbreviated hereafter as Hakim, *Mu'jam*.] The conditions of this special spiritual guidance are briefly explained in Parts II-1 to II-3 and II-6 of our translation of chapter 366 (III, 332-334).

²⁷The first quotation here is from ch. 88 (II, 165); the contrast of the "living" (saints) and the spiritually "dead" jurists is an allusion to one of Ibn 'Arabi's favorite sayings from the famous Sufi Bastami (cf. ch. 29, O.Y. ed. III, 241). For the saints as the *ahl al-dhikr* (Koran 21:7), who are also the true "people of hadith and the *Qur'an*," see ch. 88, II, 165 and ch. 69, I, 494--on both occasions in explicit contrast to the groundless claims of the *fuqaha' al-zaman*. Moreover, Ibn 'Arabi goes on to insist that "*taqlid*" of the saints (besides being subject to each person's choice and responsibility: see point III-4 below) is not really submission to those individuals themselves, but rather to *God's* commandment (*hukm*) as known through their inspired spiritual knowledge. See also the further attacks on *taqlid* as understood by the jurists elsewhere in ch. 69 (I, 392: noting the irony of the claims of the *fuqaha'* to impose their *taqlid* on others, which is the worst kind of "*ijtihad*" on the part of those who deny being mujtahids!); and in ch. 318 (III, 70: the "Imams" of the legal schools would be the first to deny this sort of *taqlid*).

²⁸In fact, those obvious problems would be limited to a considerable extent by the severe *restrictions* (cf. point III-4 below), some of them mentioned explicitly in ch. 366, which Ibn 'Arabi places even on the saint's right to discuss (much less impose on others) what is revealed to him in this state of inspiration.

flow from this central assumption of the living presence of the Prophet, but together they afford a clearer idea of the particular contours of this vision.

2. The second key point underlying Ibn 'Arabi's critique of the *fuqaha'*, as we have already mentioned, is his consistent focus on the ultimate *spiritual finality of the Sharia*--a point which again is only a particular expression of his more comprehensive understanding of man's destiny and role in creation. While not denying the obvious this-worldly functions shared by divine and political laws alike,²⁹ his own constant attention is on the universal spiritual *intentions* characterizing the Sharia of Muhammad, which ultimately underlie the revelations of all the other prophets as well. This fundamental distinction, assumed throughout chapter 366, is brought out most clearly in several key chapters where Ibn 'Arabi stresses the primordial aim of every revealed Sharia as a "Path" towards the Truth.³⁰ For him, that relationship is summed up in the Prophet's saying "I was sent to perfect the *makarim al-akhlaq*" (a phrase that he interprets in reference to man's obligation to take on the divine attributes, as enjoined in another famous hadith): "For the Sharia is like that, if you didn't understand--or else you do not understand the Sharia." Indeed ultimately "there is nothing in the world but Sharia (i.e., the 'Path' to God)!"³¹ Thus the common concern underlying Ibn 'Arabi's many particular criticisms of the categories and methods of fiqh, when they are confused with the revealed "Path" of the Sharia, is the way that the legal preoccupations expressed in those guiding assumptions--which may in fact be necessary and inherent parts of any system of *laws* as such--inevitably tend to obscure the primary spiritual intentions of the original revelation. The best illustration of this tendency, to which he returns repeatedly in chapter 366 and throughout the *Futuhat*, is the misguided use of *qiyas* ("analogy") by the *fuqaha'* to create what for them is in effect another, purely human and arbitrary source of revelation (*shar'*) and spiritual authority alongside the Koran and hadith.³²

²⁹Cf. his statement at the beginning of chapter 339 (III, 151) that "the (general) aim of the path of the *shari'a* is the sensible happiness, and the *Haqiqa* is not its aim *fi al-'umum*," and his mention later in that chapter (III, 153) of the "general welfare" (*maslaha*) assured by every Sharia, both the "divine" ones brought by the prophetic messengers and "politico-philosophic" (*hikami siyasi*) laws established in all (other) societies by those he calls "warners" (*nudhara'*). But the principles and procedures required to ensure that sort of "sensible happiness" are clearly not his primary concern in the *Futuhat*.

³⁰See especially chapter 339 (on "...the Kneeling of the Sharia before the *Haqiqa*..."), III, 150-154; ch. 66 ("True Knowledge of the Inner Secret of the Sharia...," introducing the long chapters on the prescribed forms of worship), I, 222-225; ch. 88 (on "...the Inner Secrets of the Principles of the Judgments of the *Shar'*"), II, 162-166; and chapters 262-263 (on "true understanding" of the Sharia and *Haqiqa* and their inner relations), II, 561-563.

³¹Ch. 262 (II, 563.7-14); for the sources of the first hadith (on *makarim al-akhlaq*) and related sayings, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, II, 75. For Ibn 'Arabi's complex treatment in the *Futuhat* of the famous hadith enjoining "*takhalluq bi-akhlaq Allah*," which he calls "the basis of this Path" (II, 42, 267), see, e.g., I, 124, 216; II, 42, 54, 93-94, 126, 128, 153, 166, 232, etc.

³²The essential object of this criticism is not reasoning in general, but (a) its use to *extend* the realm of the Sharia far beyond what was actually revealed (cf. the following point III-3); and (b) the claim of *religious* authority for arbitrary "personal opinion" (*ra'y*) that underlies the abuse of *qiyas* by the jurists--and which he repeatedly contrasts with the inspired spiritual insight and certainty of the saints (cf. point III-1 above).

Ibn 'Arabi's vehement criticisms in ch. 366 and elsewhere (e.g., ch. 318, III, 68-71) of the jurists' effective consideration of *qiyas* as a religious equivalent of the Koran and hadith must be

3. An equally fundamental principle separating Ibn 'Arabi from the *fuqaha'* is his insistence that "the primordial (divine) judgment (*hukm al-asl*)"--i.e., prior to the explicit indications (*nass*) revealed in the Koran and hadith (or in the teachings of earlier prophets)--"is that there is *no* divinely imposed obligation (*taklif*), and that God created everything on earth for us." In other words, "there is no (divine) judgment concerning everything about which (the Koran and hadith) are silent except for this primordial *ibaha*."³³ For Ibn 'Arabi, there are really two sides to this principle of "*ibaha asliya*": quite apart from its sweeping negative consequences for the common legalistic conceptions of revelation, it reflects above all a comprehensively *positive*, "ontological" awareness of the divine Bounty and Mercy revealed in all of Being, a reality which is only fully perceived in the enlightened vision of the saints.³⁴ More particularly, in the context of arguments against the sharply opposed conceptions of the *fuqaha'*, Ibn 'Arabi repeatedly develops three favorite scriptural references to this principle: "***He did not place any undue restriction (haraj) upon you in Religion***" (22:78); "***We only sent you as a mercy for the worlds***" (21:107), a sign that Muhammad "wanted to *reduce* the difficulty of traveling on the Path"; and a long hadith in which the Prophet urges the faithful to "leave me alone (i.e., don't ask for any more divine commandments) as long as I leave you alone."³⁵

understood in the light of some essential qualifications concerning "our *madhhab* in this matter" that he provides at the beginning of ch. 88 (II, 163.1-16). There (1) he vigorously affirms the necessity and importance of *qiyas* (in the wider sense of "intellectual inquiry" or reflection, *nazar 'aqli*) for arriving at the basic principles of faith (Attributes of God, etc.) underlying the divine revelations (*shara'i*); (2) he admits its legal use in rare "cases of necessity where no explicit scriptural indication (*nass*) can be found;" and (3) he states that "although I do not profess *qiyas* for myself, I do allow someone to judge according to it whose *ijtihad* has led him to affirm it--whether he be wrong or right in doing so." However, he again insists (III, 165.7) that this latter usage must be exclusively personal: "I do not profess *qiyas*, and I absolutely do not accept *taqlid* following it at all."

³³Both quotations are from chapter 88: II, 165.6 and 165.21-22; the terminology suggests an ironic allusion to the recurrent criticisms of Sufis (by the '*ulama*') as "antinomians," *ibahiya*.

³⁴See the illustrations of this key insight in key passages at the end of ch. 366 (III, 338-340; Part III of our translation); this is only one manifestation of the pervasive role of the divine "Mercy" (*rahma*) in every aspect of Ibn 'Arabi's thought (religious, cosmological, ontological, etc.).

³⁵The first citation is from ch. 88, II, 165 and II, 163, where this verse is cited as a principle (i.e., opposing *tahjir*) for deciding between two apparently opposed scriptural indications. The second verse is commented in ch. 69 (I, 392.21), with regard to Ibn 'Arabi's denial of *taqlid* and corresponding stress on the existence of differences in interpretation of scripture as a divine "mercy" (allowing each person to judge for himself); the quotation concerning the Prophet's intentions is from ch. 339 (III, 151). This particular hadith--cited in chapter 366 at III, 337 (section II-9 of our translation)--is mentioned by both Bukhari (*I'tisam*, 2) and Muslim (*Hajj*, 411), in response to a question as to whether the Hajj should be considered an annual obligation. As Ibn 'Arabi explains in chapter 262 "On the Inner Knowledge of the Sharia" (II, 561-562), the Sharia includes both "the precepts (*ahkam*) God prescribed of His own accord (*ibtida'an*)" and "what was prescribed at the request of the community," so that "if they had not requested it, then that (precept or commandment) would not have been sent down." Elsewhere (II, 162-166; ch. 88, "On the Inner Knowledge of the Secrets of the Principles of the Precepts of the *Shar*"), Ibn 'Arabi points out the parallel between this hadith and the following Koranic injunction: "***O those who have faith, do not ask about things which, if they were revealed to you, would harm you. And if you ask about them when the Qur'an is being sent down, they will be revealed to you.... For a people before you***

The other side of this principle, and the crux of Ibn 'Arabi's disagreement with the *fuqaha'*, is obviously a severe limitation on the realm of divine *taklif* and--what is practically of greater importance--on the religious value of the accepted methods for pragmatically developing the literal materials of revelation (*shar'*) into the more comprehensive historical systems of Islamic law.³⁶ To begin with, the "*sunna*" of the Prophet, as Ibn 'Arabi understands it, does not extend to all his reported actions--since "that would be the ultimate extreme of *haraj*" (contrary to verses 22:78 and 21:107)--but only includes those which he *explicitly* proclaimed to be obligatory, i.e., "only the action through which he showed us something with which we (should) worship," such as the steps of the ritual prayer.³⁷ Ibn 'Arabi's conception of the validity of "consensus" (*ijma'*) with regard to the Sharia is even more radically restrictive: by pointedly limiting it to the *unanimous* and *explicit* agreement of the Prophet's immediate Companions³⁸ (without even mentioning the pretensions of subsequent '*ulama'*) he again undermines the claims to exclusive spiritual authority of *any* particular sect or group, while establishing the bases for his own distinctively spiritual and irenic (because essentially individual) conception of *ijtihad* based on the Koran and hadith.

Finally, as already mentioned in the preceding section, Ibn 'Arabi's repeated denial of any intrinsic validity for *qiyas* and *ra'y* as means of individual insight into the intentions of revelation turns to bitter irony whenever he considers their further abuse in the jurists' vast and unwarranted extension of the revealed texts to comprise a multitude of "interpretations" which "God never intended"--an act of hybris which finds its ultimate expression in the their claims concerning *taqlid*.³⁹ Instead, for Ibn 'Arabi, the differing individual interpretations of scripture (and

did ask (such) things, and after that they began to disbelieve in them" (5:101-102). Cf. also the related discussion in ch. 339 (III, 151).

³⁶Again it is important to stress that Ibn 'Arabi's criticisms are of the assumptions that the "laws" thereby derived are themselves part of the truly divine "revelation" (*shar'/shari'a*) and share its essential *spiritual* intentions; that does not necessarily imply any particular judgment as to the practical necessity or appropriateness of such methods with regard to the aims of temporal laws and government. (See Conclusion below.)

³⁷Chapter 88 (II, 165.7-8); see also the related references in n. 34. The mention of "worship" or "devotion to God" (*ta'abbud*) as the (spiritual) object of these prescriptions and the concrete example of *salat* are not fortuitous: see the detailed illustration of Ibn 'Arabi's understanding and "application" of this spiritual method in the immense chapters 68-69 on ritual prayer and ablutions.

³⁸Chapter 88, II, 164.31 ff. Ibn 'Arabi forcefully and explicitly points out that the reported *silence* of even a *single* Companion on a given point is enough to invalidate any claim to authoritative consensus--a restriction that effectively, and no doubt intentionally, limits the material or literal sources of revelation to the Koran and (certain) hadith.

³⁹See Ibn 'Arabi's repeated criticisms of the *fuqaha'* for actually (albeit unconsciously) claiming the authoritative power to "make up" revelation throughout chapter 366 (especially in the impassioned remarks in sections II-7 and II-9 of our translation). Note also his bitter attacks on the unwarranted liberties of the jurists in ch. 231, II, 530-531: "There is nothing more harmful for the servant (of God) than *ta'wil*" (i.e., the *ra'y* or *qiyas* of the jurists), and "the most hidden (manifestation) of God's 'Ruse' and its densest veil is among the *muta'awwilun*, and especially if they are among the people of *ijtihad*" (i.e., in the sense claimed by the jurists). *Ta'wil*, in such contexts, is usually opposed to the divine "clear guidance" (*bayyina*: see n. 26 above) provided by the immediate spiritual inspiration of the saints, and the *muta'awwilun* in the broadest sense refer to all those who seek to "interpret" the divine word (Koran or

ultimately, the full variety of intimate beliefs more generally) are a natural, positive result of the profound divine intentions:

"God made this difference (of legal judgment and its sources) a mercy for His servants and an accommodation (*ittisa'*) for them regarding the obligation of worship He imposed on them. But the *fuqaha'* of our time unduly restricted (*haraju*) and narrowly limited the common people who blindly follow the '*ulama'*...and this is one of the greatest calamities in Religion!"⁴⁰

The positive alternative underlying this criticism leads us to the question of Ibn 'Arabi's distinctively individualistic conception of spiritual "*ijtihad*" and to the key role of the study of hadith which is one of its main practical presuppositions.

4. The essential motivation of Ibn 'Arabi's criticism of the assumptions underlying the religious paradigm of the *fuqaha'*, however, is not any sort of "liberation" from religious (or legal) constraints, but rather his consistent stress on the *individual's inalienable responsibility* in realizing the spiritual intentions of revelation, along with the *freedom* which is the prerequisite of that responsibility and the *diversity and openness* that are its inevitable consequences. All of these aspects are summed up in his characteristic understanding of the obligation of *ijtihad* as the ongoing "individual effort," in every area of each person's life, required to grasp and realize the deeper intentions of revelation. If this distinctive conception of "*ijtihad*" is only distantly related to the usual technical meaning of that term, it is--once again not surprisingly--intimately rooted in the usage of that verbal root in the Koran (22:78; etc.) and hadith.⁴¹ For "the *ijtihad* the Prophet mentioned" (i.e., as opposed to that claimed by the *fuqaha'*), Ibn 'Arabi insists, "is *only* the (individual effort of) seeking the sign indicating the particular applicability of the (divine) judgment (as expressed in the Koran or hadith) to the actual question (one faces)--and *not* the

hadith) in rationalizing ways that inevitably tend to be governed by their interests or limited preconceptions. (On the conscious, theoretical level, therefore, Ibn 'Arabi is usually referring to the Islamic jurists, theologians and philosophers.) An extreme illustration of this abusive "ta'wil" of the jurists, recounted in ch. 318 (III, 69-70), is the case of the complaisant faqih who assured the ruler of Aleppo, al-Malik al-Zahir, that he could perform the fast of Ramadan in whatever month he liked.

⁴⁰Chapter 69, I, 392.14-21. Ibn 'Arabi also notes here the practical objection of the *fuqaha'* that his proposed tolerance of and openness to a variety of schools and interpretations "would lead to making a mockery of Religion," and remarks that, given the very different conceptions of "religion" (*al-din*) involved here, "this is the ultimate extreme of their ignorance!"

⁴¹In the Koranic verse (22:78) which Ibn 'Arabi takes (ch. 318, III, 69) as an expression of the individual obligation of *ijtihad*, that divine commandment is immediately followed by God's denial of any unnecessary burden (*haraj*) in (true) Religion (see n. 35 above): for Ibn 'Arabi, the relation of these two notions is clearly anything but coincidental.

For the numerous hadith on this subject, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, I, p. 390. Ibn 'Arabi's discussions of *ijtihad* refer with special frequency to the famous hadith insisting that the person who practices *ijtihad* will receive "two rewards if he hits the mark," but will *still* be rewarded even if he is mistaken: the relevance of this Prophetic saying to his tolerance of the inevitable mistakes and differences of opinion implied in his own conception of *ijtihad* should be clear. This particular hadith is cited, in varying forms, by both Bukhari (*i'tisam*, 13, 20, 21) and Muslim (*aqdiya*, 15), as well as by Nisa'i, Darimi, Ibn Maja, and Ahmad b. Hanbal.

prescription (*tashri'*) of a (new, merely human) judgment with regard to the case: for that is '*prescribing what is not with God's permission*' (42:21)!"⁴²

Given Ibn 'Arabi's fundamental assumptions concerning the spiritual source and aims of revelation--and the fact that their specific domain is the intimate realm of the individual's spiritual consciousness (infinitely more complex than limited set of outward, "legal" matters ordinarily dealt with by the *fuqaha'*)--, this obligation to seek the intended inner meaning of the revealed scriptures is necessarily both universal and intrinsically individual in nature. Hence the requirements for its exercise are quite open: "If we know the language (of the Koran and hadith) and what (their) judgment requires, then we and the (so-called) 'imam' (of the legal schools) are on the same footing."⁴³ To be sure, this individual effort of understanding will often be incomplete or in error--since only the divine guidance (*bayyina*, etc.) afforded the accomplished saints can offer the assurance of absolute certainty⁴⁴--but Ibn 'Arabi, relying on a famous hadith, repeatedly emphasizes the salutary role of this sort of *ijtihad* indicated by the Prophet's assurance of a divine recompense even in those cases where the person is mistaken and led astray by his carnal soul.⁴⁵

This essentially individual spiritual responsibility--and the openness it presupposes--are further accentuated by the severe restrictions Ibn 'Arabi places on any attempts to "generalize" from the results of this effort of understanding or to impose its results on others, even on the part of the accomplished saints.⁴⁶ (The obviously radical "impracticality" of these restrictions, from the

⁴²Chapter 318, III, 69.14-15. These remarks are repeated, in virtually identical terms, in ch. 88, II, 165; ch. 69, I, 392; and ch. 231 (II, 530-531), where Ibn 'Arabi reiterates that the proper role of *ijtihad* is in "seeking the sign (in a particular case) indicating the (applicability of) the judgment (from the Koran or hadith)," and "not in (artificially) extracting a (further extended) judgment from the (scriptural) report through *ta'wil*." In the rest of this passage (III, 69.15 ff.), the crucial "sign" (*dalil*) mentioned here is understood to be the "goal" or "end" contained in the literal form of the revealed judgment, and the saints' true perception of this (spiritual) goal is forcefully contrasted with the artificial "interpretations" (*ta'wil gharib*: cf. n. 39 above) and "arbitrary opinion" (*ra'y*: cf. n. 31) of the *fuqaha'*. See also the similar vehement criticisms throughout Parts II-7 and II-9 of our translation of chapter 366.

⁴³Chapter 69, I, 494.26 ff.; note also Ibn 'Arabi's fascinating set of practical guidelines for deciding between apparently conflicting indications in the Koran and hadith, in ch. 88, II, 162-164. Here again (as in our earlier qualifying remarks concerning Ibn 'Arabi's critique of *qiyas* and *taqlid*, nn. 32, 35, etc.), it is clear that he is not criticizing the efforts of particular jurists *per se*, but rather their wider claims of spiritual validity and religious authority over *others* in general.

⁴⁴See point III-1 above (especially n. 26), as well as all of Parts II-1 through II-5 of our translation of chapter 366 (III, 332-334). Cf. also the extensive related cross-references in Hakim, *Mu'jam*, pp. 1247-1252 (entry for *yaqin*).

⁴⁵For the particular hadith in question, see references at n. 41 above. This hadith is the basis for an extraordinarily detailed spiritual analysis of such cases--applied primarily to the pretensions of the *fuqaha'*--in chapter 318 (III, 68-71: aptly entitled "The Station of the (Arbitrary) Abrogation of the Sharia, Both Muhammadan and Non-Muhammadan, By the Goals of the Carnal Soul") and in ch. 231 (II, 529-531), concerning the divine "Ruse," *makar*, exemplified in the case of the jurists' assumptions.

⁴⁶It should be noted that the criteria contained in these restrictions--which constitute an interesting test for claims of "sainthood" more generally-- would, if taken seriously, eliminate the vast majority of the

standpoint of the establishment and functioning of any worldly system of law, again serve to emphasize that Ibn 'Arabi's primary concern is to awaken his readers to the full reality of *spiritual* authority and responsibility, not to support some particular practical alternative to existing legal arrangements.) One of the most striking of these restrictions, at the end of chapter 366, is the extraordinary limitation on right of the saints even to *dispute* (much less to use force!) with someone about religion, "unless specifically ordered to do so by a divine command (*ma'mûr*)."⁴⁷

Equally important in this regard is his insistence (at III, 334) that the only *spiritually* authoritative "judge" (*hâkim*) or ruler (*wâli*) is the one who has received the explicit divine command to do so, as well as the "sublime knowledge" implied by that rare and weighty responsibility. In stressing that those difficult conditions have only been fully fulfilled on earth (at least most recently) by Muhammad, and by the Mahdi yet to come--or on a spiritual plane, by those saints (*awliya'*) who are the Prophet's true "heirs" and the Mahdi's true guides and "helpers"--, Ibn 'Arabi points to the more fundamental and pervasive (albeit unconscious) ignorance "that is the root of all injustice in the holders of (temporal) authority." At the same time he suggests to the interested reader the very different nature (and potential source) of that *genuine*, spiritual knowledge "which necessarily and inevitably implies (the corresponding) action," a knowledge which is the ultimate subject of the *Futuhat* as a whole.⁴⁸

A further manifestation of this same distinctive spiritual perspective is Ibn 'Arabi's famous (or in some quarters notorious) openness and sensitivity to *all* forms of "belief" (*'aqa'id*), a characteristic aspect of his religious and metaphysical thinking so central that it has been mentioned in virtually every general account of his thought.⁴⁹ However, commentators have--for fairly obvious reasons--less frequently drawn attention to a statement at the beginning of his chapter "on the inner knowledge of the Sharia" which is a natural consequence of these same principles, but whose implications, in practical terms, are perhaps even more radical:

more notorious "messianic" or "Mahdist" pretenders to divine inspiration, whether in Islam or elsewhere. (Cf. also the discussions of Ibn 'Arabi's wide-ranging criticism of *taqlid* in the preceding sections.)

⁴⁷III, 340 (Part III of our translation); similar remarks can be found in ch. 339, III, 152.14 ff. And even if the saint receives such an order, Ibn 'Arabi adds, "the choice (of whether to argue) is up to him."

⁴⁸Both quotations from chapter 366, III, 333 (Part II-4 of our translation). Cf. the similar point made in chapter 69, I, 494, where he notes that "the *fuqaha'* of our time" are actually completely "ignorant of the *Qur'an* and Sunna--*even if they have memorized them* (i.e., their outward forms)!" The specifically *spiritual* concepts of "knowledge" and "ignorance" implied by such statements, again based on many indications in the Koran and hadith, are developed throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writing.

⁴⁹To avoid misunderstanding, it should perhaps be added that the distinctive use of "belief" in this context, throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writing, refers to the total range of human forms of perception and comprehension of Being, in every age, not just the limited set of notions discussed by the '*ulama'* of certain religions. In addition to the passages from the *Fusus al-Hikam* and his poetry that are the primary basis for most of the standard secondary accounts (references in our review article in the *JAOS* cited at n. 4 above), see especially his illuminating description of the lofty station in Paradise reserved for the "knowers of God" (i.e., of the "comprehensive Name" *Allah*) among the prophets and saints--those who remain receptive to and absolute "servants" of *all* beliefs and all manifestations of the divine, rather than only to certain more restricted divine Names--in ch. 73, question 67 (II, 80-81).

"The Sharia is the outward practice (*sunna*) brought by the (prophetic) messengers according to God's command and the practices (*sunan*) devised according to Path of proximity to God, as...in the saying of the Messenger: 'he who establishes a good practice (...)', in which he allowed us to devise (practices) that are good and mentioned the reward for the person who devises it and those who practice it."⁵⁰

Quite apart from the wider practical perspectives suggested by the second half of this definition (where Ibn 'Arabi may be referring mainly to certain practices of the Sufis), nothing could indicate more clearly the profound philosophic differences separating this conception of the "Sharia" from the corresponding assumptions of the *fuqaha*'.

5. Finally, a crucial practical presupposition of Ibn 'Arabi's own understanding of the Sharia (within Islam) is his continual emphasis on the role of ongoing *individual study of hadith*--along with the Koran, of course--in providing the literal materials for the effort of "*ijtihad*" just described. Thus he repeatedly contrasts those "who truly know God's *shar'* among the *muhaddithun*" with "those *fuqaha*' who blindly follow the people of *ijtihad* (i.e., their "imams"), like the *fuqaha*' of our time, who do not know either the *Qur'an* or the *sunna*." For the "people of Remembrance," the true spiritual authorities mentioned in the Koran (21:7), are precisely "the people of the *Qur'an* and of hadith."⁵¹ This advice was not just theoretical: Ibn 'Arabi's own

⁵⁰Chapter 262 (II, 562); the plurals reflect the subject of that chapter, which is all of the *shara'i* in general. This statement must be understood in the context of Ibn 'Arabi's explanation, in the same passage, that the "Sharia" prescribes the appropriate means (*masarif*) for realizing the *makarim al-akhlaq* that are its ultimate aim (as explained in section 2, notes 29-30 above). The Koranic term (57:27) translated here as "devised" (*ubtudi'at*) strongly implies novelty and creative invention; as in the case of Ibn 'Arabi's use of *ibaha* (n. 33 above), it is no doubt intended as an ironic reproach of those '*ulama*', who habitually denounced many of the basic practices of Sufism as *bid'a* or what they considered to be "unlawful" innovation. Thus in chapter 69 (I, 194), Ibn 'Arabi insists that it is really the unfounded religious claims of the *fuqaha*' (concerning *taqlid*, *qiyas*, etc.) that are the truly reprehensible *bid'a*--i.e., the *sunna sayyi'a* also mentioned in the hadith discussed here--a pretension "for which they have no excuse with God!"

For the hadith that begins *man sanna sunna hasana...*, and whose conclusion is briefly paraphrased here, see Wensinck, *Concordance*, II, 552. That hadith is recorded, with many variants, in Muslim (*'ilm*, 15, etc.; *zakat*, 59), Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, Darimi and Ahmad b. Hanbal.

⁵¹The first quotation is from chapter 69, I, 494; the second from ch. 88, II, 165. (For Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive understanding of the spiritual meaning of "knowledge" assumed here, see n. 48 above.) Chapter 318 (III, 68-71), almost entirely devoted to this theme of the fundamental importance of hadith (and their neglect by the *fuqaha*'), describes Ibn 'Arabi's personal encounters "both in the East and the West (of the Islamic world)" with a long series of jurists who--despite the contrary advice of Abu Hanifa and Shafi'i, whose "school was hadith"--always refused to deny the opinions (*ra'y*) of their "imams" even when confronted with explicit hadith to the contrary; thus "the Sharia was abrogated by (their) desires, although the reports (concerning the Prophet) are to be found recorded in the sound books (of hadith)!" See also his recounting in the same chapter (III, 69) of two fascinating dream-visions likewise stressing the abandonment by the Community of the "pure and easy Path" provided by hadith for the "books of *ra'y*" of the jurists. (For a suggestive study of some of the wider historical and sociological background

massive reliance on hadith (and the Koran), although not adequately suggested in most available translations and secondary accounts of his work, is amply illustrated throughout the *Futuhat* and all his other writings. Of course this recommended reliance on hadith certainly does not imply any exclusive and unquestioning acceptance of the usual assumptions of *'ilm al-hadith* (e.g., as a sufficient method for determining the "truth" of a particular report), nor is it based on any naive illusion of a single "obvious" literal meaning that would somehow preclude all differences of interpretation and understanding. Instead it assumes the application of all those characteristic features of Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual outlook and method outlined under the preceding headings.⁵² Those distinctive traits are summed up in a key passage where, after reiterating that "my own school (*madhhab*) is hadith," Ibn 'Arabi goes on to suggest what one should do in case that still does not provide sufficient guidance:

"Now you must know that if a human being (*al-insan*) renounces his (own personal) aims, takes a loathing to his carnal soul (*nafs*) and instead prefers his Lord, then God (*al-Haqq*) will give him a form of divine guidance in exchange for the form of his *nafs*...so that he walks in garments of Light; and (this form) is the Sharia of his prophet and the Message of his (prophetic) Messenger. Thus he receives from his Lord what contains his happiness--and

of these disputes in Andalusia prior to Ibn 'Arabi, see D. Urvoy, *Le monde des ulemas andalous du v/xie au vii/xiiiie siecle*, Paris, 1978.)

⁵²See especially the discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive "spiritual literalism" in section II above; it should be added that his strong reliance on hadith does involve a notable *selectivity* in the choice and citation of sayings that also deserves further study. Ibn 'Arabi refers in a number of places to the special ability of the saints to recognize, with the aid of divine inspiration, the falsity of certain hadith with a sound *isnad* and the authenticity of other hadith judged to have a "weak" chain of transmission: see, e.g., chapter 29 (O.Y. ed., III, 240-241) of the *Futuhat* and his *K. al-Fana' fi al-Mushahada (Rasa'il Ibn 'Arabi*, Hyderabad, 1948, vol. I, no. 1), p. 4 (tr. M. Valsan, *Le livre de l'extinction dans la contemplation*, Paris, 1984, pp. 32-33). For a brief summary of Ibn 'Arabi's lifelong studies of hadith and his numerous books in that field (now mostly lost), see the Introduction to the translation of his famous selection of *hadith qudsi*, the *Mishkat al-Anwar*, by M. Valsan, *La niche des lumieres*, Paris, 1983.

The fundamental differences separating Ibn 'Arabi's perspective from that of the *Zahiri* legal school (as well as the other schools of Islamic law) are amply indicated above. However, Ibn 'Arabi was sometimes obliged to explain the essential difference of his outlook, given the practical or verbal coincidences sometimes resulting from his emphasis on hadith and outwardly similar criticisms of certain methods of *fiqh* (*qiyas*, etc.): see further references in the article of M. Chodkiewicz cited at n. 20 above. Goldziher's influential description of Ibn 'Arabi, in *The Zahiris: Their Doctrine and Their History* (tr. W. Behn, Leiden, 1971), pp. 169-171, as an "exponent of the *Zahiri* school" rests on such superficial resemblances. That passage does give a fascinating account of a dream-vision in which Ibn 'Arabi was informed of Ibn Hazm's great rank and authority as a *muhaddith*, although "I had never heard of Ibn Hazm's name before." See a similar illustration of his apparent ignorance of a basic *Zahiri* tenet (and of his characteristic reliance on hadith and direct inspiration) at n. 54 below.

some people see (this divine guidance) in the form of their prophet, while some see it in the form of their (spiritual) state."⁵³

In the former case, he continues, "that (form) is the inner reality of that prophet and his spirit, or the form of an angel like him, (who) knows his Sharia from God.... And we ourselves have often received in this way the form of many things among the divinely revealed judgments (*ahkam shar'iya*) which we had not learned about from the '*ulama*' or from books."⁵⁴ But "if the form is not that of his prophet," he concludes, "then it still necessarily refers to his (spiritual) state or to the stage (i.e., the appropriate spiritual intention) of the *shar'* with regard to that moment and that (particular) situation in which he saw that vision...." And even in that instance, "apart from what is forbidden or enjoined (by the Sharia), there is no restriction (*tahjir*) on what he accepts from (that vision), whether with regard to beliefs or other things--for God's Presence includes the totality of beliefs (*jami' al-'aqa'id*)."

IV. Conclusion

There should be no need to expand on the practical and intellectual dangers and distortions that would result if virtually any of the points discussed in the preceding section were taken in isolation or separated from their original context--especially if they were misrepresented as "alternative" theories of Islamic *law*, or taken as allusions to the recurrent temporal claims to be "Mahdi" (or "Imam," etc.). We have already pointed out (in sections I and II above) the complex practical measures that Ibn 'Arabi, following earlier Islamic writers, took to make sure that only the most determined and capable readers would piece together these scattered allusions and--what is far more important--the unifying intention and realization that connects them all. For the primary aim of each of these remarks, as we have seen, was certainly not an "attack" on "the Sharia" or even a "critique" of certain principles of *fiqh* (intended as a practical legal alternative

⁵³Chapter 318, III, 70.21 ff; the language used throughout this passage pointedly emphasizes the universality of this situation. The repeated use of "*his* prophet" or "the form of *his* messenger" also refers to Ibn 'Arabi's insistence, throughout the *Futuhat*, that the saints (and ultimately all individuals) are "following in the footsteps" of a certain prophet or prophets with whom they have a special spiritual affinity. (This understanding is also reflected, e.g., in his association of certain spiritual stages with Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad, etc. and in his description of certain Sufis as "*'isawi*," "*musawi*," etc.) See further references and explanations in Chodkiewicz, *Sceau*, chapters 3-5 and Hakim, *Mu'jam*, pp. 1191-1201.

⁵⁴The following personal illustration (III, 70.28-34) of this sort of knowledge revealed directly by the form of the Prophet that Ibn 'Arabi provides here is especially interesting because it concerns the "raising of the hands" (*raf' al-yadayn*) during the ritual prayer, something "which is not professed by a single person in our country" (i.e., Andalusia), and which he only later found described in several of the canonical hadith collections (Muslim, Malik, Tirmidhi, etc.). This is another indication, incidentally, that Ibn 'Arabi was quite unaware of this Zahiri tenet discussed by Goldziher, *op. cit.*, p. 177, in an anecdote that also well illustrates the general ambiance of intolerance in at least part of Andalusia at this time.

or a new set of substitute beliefs), but rather an *inner* transformation in the reader's deepest assumptions and awareness as to what is meant by such terms.

That intended shift in insight, which is the constant aim of Ibn 'Arabi's elaborate rhetoric, is not really a change in "beliefs," but rather a *transformed awareness* of what the vast majority of his readers no doubt already believed. As he indicated in his Introduction to the *Futuhat* (section I above), the reality of the spiritual world (corresponding to the *'ilm al-asrar*) cannot be "explained" except to those who are already aware of it--and who can therefore already grasp it, without further explanation, as expressed in the simplest and most familiar religious symbols. Thus it is surely far from accidental that the very center of Ibn 'Arabi's revealing--and highly sensitive--description of the characteristics of the Mahdi's "Helpers" in chapter 366 (III, 334) is largely devoted to his description of a personal acquaintance, a *qadi* from Ceuta who so responsibly (and quite practically) exemplified these traits precisely in his own application and realization of the truly divine Law.

Finally, it should be evident by now that the transformation to which Ibn 'Arabi points, and which underlies his repeated criticisms of the majority of "unenlightened" *fuqaha'*, involves, among other things, a clearer recognition of the essential distinction between the spiritual and mundane aspects of man's being, between truth and belief, and between the corresponding aims of "laws" (in the broadest sense) and of true revelation--a distinction which in itself was subject to popular suspicion and misunderstanding in his (and perhaps in every) society. The fact that his characteristic style of esoteric writing enabled him to develop and communicate those insights in a responsible and effective manner, despite those apparently hostile historical circumstances, is a reminder of the potential contemporary relevance of this neglected form of writing so carefully illustrated in his discussion of the Mahdi's "Helpers."