

The process of realization (taḥqīq): Mullā Ṣadrā's conception of the Barzakh and the emerging science of spirituality

Authors: James Winston Morris, World Congress on Mulla Sadra (1999.05. : Tehran)

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**Eschatology,
Exegesis, Hadith**

**The Process of Realization (*tahqīq*):
Mullā Ṣadrā's Conception of the *Barzakh*
and the Emerging Science of Spirituality**

James Morris

I would like to begin with a poem which sums up, better than any book or article I have ever read, the very essence of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy. It is particularly poignant in that it was the last published poem of a great poet – not Rumi, although it well could be by him – written just before his own passage across that *barzakh* we will be speaking about:

*All worlds have half-sight, seeing either with
life's eye (which is if things appear) or
(if spirits in the guise of things appear)
deaths: any world must always half perceive.*

Only those with vision can create the whole

*(being forever born a foolish-wise
proud humble citizen of ecstasies
more step than climb can time with all his years)*

he's free into the beauty of the truth;

*and strolls the axis of the universe
 --live. Each believing world denies, whereas
 your lover (looking through both life and death)
 timelessly celebrates the merciful*

wonder no world deny may or believe

E.E. Cummings

The history of philosophy is not the same as philosophy, as the state and activity of loving and seeking after wisdom. Teaching about the history of philosophy requires a great deal of philosophic and historical background, and is therefore the restricted domain of specialists and professors. But philosophy itself is a vocation, a divine calling, and the lovers of wisdom, as Socrates, seem to have noticed, made themselves known at a young age and do not stand on ceremony. So, for some years now, since we first learnt of the project for this remarkable conference devoted to the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā, I have been asking myself what one could say about the actual *philosophic* relevance of Ṣadrā's thought today, whether in Iran or in a wider global context, that would speak directly to that much wider audience of lovers of wisdom. In short, has Ṣadrā today simply become another part of the history of Islamic philosophy, or can we also consider him to be a real living philosopher?

After some reflection, it occurred to me that perhaps the most obvious living contribution of Ṣadrā's thought is above all his philosophic *method*: i.e., his peculiar conception of *taḥqīq*—what one could very loosely translate as “realization”—which is in many ways unique in the context of Islamic thought. For his predecessors in the fields of Islamic philosophy and theology, the notion of *taḥqīq* usually referred simply to a thinker's intellectual thoroughness and exactitude, to his comprehensive and detailed logical grasp of all the relevant aspects of a given subject. For Ibn 'Arabi and his later Sufi interpreters, on the other hand, *taḥqīq* was an essentially existential, spiritual exercise. The *muḥaqqiq*, from their perspective, is that person who has actually practiced and come to realize some dimension of the Real, the spiritual Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), in the only domain in which that realization can take place, within their own soul and direct personal experience. In this context, the process of *taḥqīq* is inseparable from that

love – or if you will, that insatiable curiosity—which is the immediate manifestation of our first intuitions of truth and beauty; and *taḥqīq* is likewise inseparable from the simultaneously transforming and purifying power of that love carried into action.

What Ṣadrā did, in his own philosophic development and its later written expression, was essentially to combine those two very different dimensions of *taḥqīq* in a single inseparable process. In Ṣadrā's insistence on the necessary ongoing interplay of these two essential dimensions of intellectual reflection and contemplative illumination, his dialectical *method* of research is at least as essentially "Platonic" as the philosophic theses usually associated with his system. This dialectical combination is especially evident in two essential structural features of all of his later writings. First, his clear indication, throughout each of his books, of fundamental philosophic insights, which can *only* be realized by a challenging process of spiritual illumination (*kashf, shuhūd, ishrāq*) and concomitant practical preparation and spiritual discipline (*riyāḍat*). (The distinctive vocabulary of those *ishārāt* or "spiritual allusions" is familiar to anyone who has begun to study his works). The second, even more obvious feature, are the typically impassioned introductions and conclusions found in most of his works, in which he forcefully – and often polemically, against the 'ulamā of his time—evokes the indispensable personal qualities and activities of purification (and the wider supporting social conditions) which are always necessary for undertaking this individual effort of *taḥqīq*. Thus, as he never tires of pointing out, one cannot begin to seek the Truth, to open oneself up to the transforming power of love, without starting from a profound awareness of ignorance and need: *taḥqīq* is impossible for anyone who believes that they already know or somehow possess what is true. As Khwajah Ḥāfiẓ puts it:

*Bahrist bahr-e ishq keh hichash kinareh nist
Anja juz an keh jan besparand chareh nist*

In this sense, Ṣadrā's distinctive method of spiritual research is the very antithesis of *taqlid*, in every sense of that term. This may suggest some fruitful doubts as to the supposedly "systemic" nature of Ṣadrā's own thought and ultimate intentions.

I would like to illustrate this question of philosophic method, to explore one of those “ways out” of that fundamental human situation, by referring to one key innovative area of Ṣadrā’s philosophy, his philosophical conception of the *barzakh*, or “intermediate world” of the divine “Imagination” (*khayal*)—a conception which goes far beyond the theological language of competing conceptions of the resurrection (*qiyāma*) and the post-mortem states of the soul in which, it is largely expressed on the superficial doctrinal level. (You will find his own tightly condensed summary of his most personal views and his dialectical method of exposition most clearly stated in his short treatise *al-Ḥikmat al-‘arshiyya*, which is why we originally chose to translate it, as a particularly helpful introduction to his thought for a non-specialist audience).¹ For in retrospect, Mullā Ṣadrā has turned out to be a key philosophic forerunner in envisioning the emerging science of spiritual drawing on a multitude of convergent contemporary theoretical and practical developments in such diverse areas as psychology, medicine, biology, ecology, and the phenomenology of religious experience.

* * *

Ṣadrā’s philosophic conception of the *barzakh* was grounded above all in Ibn ‘Arabi’s comprehensive phenomenology of spiritual experience as that was developed above all in his immense *Meccan Illuminations*—a phenomenology which came to function widely throughout later Islamic civilization as a defense and “explanation” (at once theological and philosophic) of the full range of spiritual practices, therapies and cultural forms broadly associated with Sufism (and with its Shi’ite equivalents).

Ṣadrā’s understanding of the *barzakh* clearly placed all those recurrent spiritual phenomena in a wider ontological context, within which the *barzakh* was itself only one essential facet of his comprehensive conception of *al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*, of the soul’s (and all being’s) immense ongoing journey from *mabda‘* to *ma‘ād*. Within that wider context, what is actually at stake in this area of Ṣadrā’s thought is not so much competing theological notions of the “afterlife”, but rather the ultimate context, purpose and ongoing practical implications of that “World of Imagination” for our earthly existence, here and now.

What is of the utmost importance, in particular, is the way our deepening recognition of the ontological *reality* of the *barzakh* explains and helps us to understand the process and parameters of humanity's "spiritual pedagogy" – especially the ongoing interrelations between each soul and its "guides" (angels, Imams, prophets, etc.) and the particular learning contexts or spiritual "tests" (to use the key Qur'anic expression) which eventually help to constitute its ultimate destiny and spiritual perfection. In this comprehensive vision of the soul's vast process of spiritual perfection, Ṣadrā's philosophy remains centered throughout on fundamental Qur'anic themes. Even if those themes – in their philosophic expression – are clearly transmitted largely indirectly through the complex intellectual traditions associated with Ibn 'Arabi, other famous Sufi authors and poets, and to a lesser extent, Suhrawardī.

Today, curiously enough, we are again witnessing everywhere the first halting steps in the development of a comprehensive science of spirituality. On a global scale, those developments are comparable in many respects to the condition of the nascent social sciences, chemistry or biological sciences in Ṣadrā's own time - all of which likewise began with the careful (if to us now strikingly "primitive") attempts at gathering and systematically classifying the relevant natural phenomena, while very hesitantly seeking appropriate hypothetical models and explanations. This similarity is particularly evident if you compare the contemporary writings available in the fields I am about to mention with the – to our modern eyes – very quaint and partial "phenomenologies" of social laws and realities to be found in Ibn Khaldun's famous *Muqaddima* (and the rest of his *K.al-'Ibar*), in Montesquieu's *l'Esprit des Lois*, or in Vico's *New Science*.

Here I can only mention briefly a few of those convergent developments², which are the practical global equivalent in our day of the complex Islamic "phenomenology" of spiritual experience available in Ṣadrā's own time. While one can find hundreds of book titles illustrating these developments in any large bookstore, it is perhaps even more important to look concretely at the diverse and very widespread *social* movements and realities underlying these literary and intellectual manifestations. For my point here is this: the kind of *taḥqīq*—of concomitant intellectual inquiry and active spiritual investigation – which was the remarkable achievement of a handful of true philosophers like Mullā Ṣadrā, only a few centuries ago, has today become an unavoidable practical

responsibility and a simultaneously public and private *necessity*, which necessarily engages an increasing proportion of the entire human race. As the developments which I am about to outline unfold, more and more people, all over the globe, are unavoidably placed in the situation which gave rise to Ṣadrā's own pioneering efforts of *taḥqīq* in this domain.

The nature of this global crucible means that, as Ḥāfiẓ indicated, there is literally no "way out" through unquestioning acceptance of inherited traditional forms. And the increasing universality and visibility of this dilemma means that the social and political implications of each individual's efforts, and the practical consequences of their discoveries and new creations, are likely to be increasingly visible in the decades to come.

- The first aspect of this new global situation is that the religious and historical sciences (and their contemporary offshoots among the social sciences) are making possible an ever wider empirical phenomenology of spiritual practice and experience, including an increasingly global range of cultures and creeds. At the same time – and perhaps far more important than more academic developments in themselves – the global transformations in communication and mobility are bringing about, on a more practical socio-cultural plane, a previously unimaginable degree of public availability and at least potential familiarity with an enormous range of religious practices, symbolism and experience: the practical effect of this public transformation, which one can see so strikingly among students and young people of every religious and cultural background, is to shift their focus of attention towards the empirical, practical results and conditions of actual spiritual life, rather than its abstract theological justifications or inherited ritual contexts.

- On a more theoretical, intellectual level, these radically convergent cross-cultural developments in practical spirituality (*irfān-i 'amālī*) are bringing about a kind of "hidden revolution" with respect to the longstanding historical and political role of theologies and related religious institutions in the agrarian civilizations and world religions of the past three millenia. That is, these transformations are inevitably driving serious thinkers from many religious traditions toward a unified, comprehensive "theory" of human spiritual life (*irfān-i nazārī*) precisely like that which was already prefigured in the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā and his Islamic

predecessors. Again, to return to the more practical level, this reflects the increasingly empirical orientation of seekers and practitioners – from many different cultural backgrounds – toward justifications of religious practice and adherence in terms of observable, concretely verifiable experiences, rather than traditional historical allegiances. Or to put it in the language of my students' (and children's) generation, the persecutions and other outrages, which they witness being committed so publicly and visibly today all over the world in the name of tribal "religions", only highlight and reinforce what they fortunately perceive as the axiomatic indispensability and universality of practical "spirituality".

In the domain of psychology – in the very broadest sense of that term – we can only mention here such disparate new fields of research and practice as the cross-cultural study of near-death experiences, hypnotic regression therapy (and a host of similar phenomena arising in the practice of many other "body-centered"³ therapies), the spiritual and imaginal life of children, organically inexplicable forms of "mental illness", out-of-body experiences and other unusual states of consciousness, and so on. Again, what is striking in each of these cases is (1) the way in which initially isolated and *ad hoc*, empirically based forms of practice, therapy and experience almost immediately demand a wider intellectual and spiritual framework of understanding; and (2) the way scientific and objective approaches to any of the particular "phenomena" in these fields quickly moves toward the deeply complex reality of their wholistic spiritual context. Or in other words, the ways in which practitioners and therapists (or "patients") in any of these areas are necessarily pushed toward precisely what Mullā Ṣadrā called *taḥqīq*.

- As the destruction and disappearance of age-old agrarian ways of life have torn away the intrinsic connections between our daily experience of the natural world and virtually all the rituals and symbolism of traditional religions, which were so deeply embedded in that experience of nature, people all over the world are desperately seeking to recover something of that essential connection. But along with the complex physical, economic and political dimensions of this ecological crisis, the combined effect of this challenge is to oblige individuals and communities to plunge

into a collective, creative and highly conscious effort of “realization”/taḥqīq, which is increasingly pulling together people, at a necessarily all-encompassing level, from hitherto separate civilizations and cultures in the search for new spiritual and practical forms of life that will maintain that essential connection with all the dimensions of nature. This most dramatic reflection of Ṣadrā’s *al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya* – equally central in the Qur’an and in the mystical poetry of his predecessors such as Rumi – is increasingly engaging the efforts of young people all over the world.

- Finally, even in the more skeptical domains of official medicine and biological sciences, under the competing pressure of growing popular interest many forms of “alternative medicine” drawn from various civilizations and spiritual traditions, we are witnessing the first empirical studies – that is, in terms of the accepted methodologies of modern science – of the actual effects of prayer, music, meditation, fasting, and a host of other age-old spiritual disciplines and practices (blessings, holy places, etc.) associated with traditional forms of spiritual healing, therapy and realization.

* * *

In short, I do not think it is any exaggeration to say that Mullā Ṣadrā stands out as perhaps the first true *philosopher* of Religion (*dīn*) in Islamic tradition: that is, as an avowedly philosophic inquirer focused not on the political and historical forms of *madhhabs* and *millats*, but whose central philosophic topic and concern is a scientifically grounded understanding of the full universality and reality of the spiritual dimensions of human existence (*dīn al-ḥaqq*). (This is not to say, I should hasten to add, that the wider traditions of Islamic thought are not full of remarkable religious thinkers of universal significance and ongoing value; it is simply to observe that those earlier Muslim thinkers typically did not fully and unreservedly embrace an explicitly philosophic, universal vocabulary and form of expression.)

But, one might object, if our argument about the novelty and ongoing importance of Mullā Ṣadrā’s method of research is sound, why haven’t we witnessed same kind of far-ranging creative reworking and

application of Ṣadrā's insights as in the cases of such earlier seminal Islamic thinkers as Fārābī, Ghazālī, Ibn Sinā or Ibn 'Arabi? Why, instead, do we find several centuries of largely scholastic treatment of Mullā Ṣadrā – both in Iran and more widely – as either another commentator of Ibn Sinā, or at best simply another systematic alternative to Avicenna's "Peripatetic" thought, a kind of Islamic Hegel? (In that regard, it is interesting to note that one of the most vigorous and radical intellectual reactions to Ṣadrā's thought was in the intensely hostile critiques of Shāykh Aḥmad Aḥsā'I, whose radically anti-rational, anti-philosophic standpoint cannot help but recall Kierkegaard's response to Hegel – or Ibn Taymiyya's equally vociferous anti-rationalist critique of Ghazālī and earlier Islamic philosophers.)

Fortunately, in the process of preparing for this congress, I happened to come across at least one extraordinary modern Iranian reworking of Ṣadrā's religious philosophy, which is a remarkable masterpiece of creative adaptation of his methods and central ideas – especially, concerning the *barzakh* and *haraka jawhariyya* – to the new global situation we have briefly described above. I am referring to a short, but thoroughly rich and thought-provoking philosophic work, apparently composed in the 1960's by the late ustād Nūr 'Alī Ilāhī (d.1974), entitled "True Knowledge of the Spirit" (*K.Ma'rifat ar rūḥ*) which I have recently translated and hope to publish later this year. There one finds a remarkable elaboration of Ṣadrā's discoveries and methodology of spiritual research explicitly and creatively applied to developing the connections of Ṣadrā's theory of the *barzakh* to all the above-mentioned developments in the contemporary phenomenology of spiritual life. Like Ṣadrā's philosophy in its own time, that hitherto neglected study is likely to stand out in the future as a significant pioneering effort in the unfolding of this new science of spirituality which we are all witnessing everywhere around us today.

In conclusion, as an expression of my hopes for the fruitful outcome and lasting influence of this congress, I would like to cite the following Qur'anic verse which is also a remarkable summary of the most central features of Mullā Ṣadrā's thought: *And for each one there is a goal toward which they are heading – so may they all strive to be first in (accomplishing) the good things. For wherever you – all may be, God comes with you all together: surely God is capable of every thing! (2:147)*

Notes

1. See *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Ṣadrā*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981
2. Needless to say, every individual also constantly encounters the necessity for the dialectic of spiritual insight/contemplation and rational understanding through all the usual, more personal “tests” that awaken our spiritual senses: moments of intense suffering, loss, pressure, ecstasy, illumination, etc. Here we are only focusing on those more collective, relatively recent global phenomena which are so rapidly accelerating the public, intellectual dimensions of this process of realization.
3. This recent American neologism is somewhat misleading, since it refers in fact to a host of therapeutic methods all involving working with spirit-body interconnections.