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Contemporary Appeals of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought

James W. Morris

The focus of this essay is on surveying a few key dimensions of the recent, rapidly expanding wider public appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas over the past decade, and on helping to understand the spectrum of underlying motivations for that growing interest in his thought among very different audiences – only a few of them now particularly academic or scholarly – around the world.¹ This is a significant new development. For when I last examined this subject, for several international university conferences devoted to Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy that were held in Oran, Murcia, Marrakesh, Kayseri and Kyoto over a decade ago, most of the present-day audiences and influences that I discussed were paradoxically to be found among Western students of religion, philosophers, poets, psychologists and Sufi teachers.² Yet while all those already extensive creative currents of interest in Ibn ‘Arabi have continued to unfold in the new millennium, the most dramatic recent development has been a suddenly

¹. A shorter version of this paper was originally presented at an international conference on the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi and the regional Islamic humanities held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in October 2009.
renewed interest in the contemporary socio-political relevance of this ‘Greatest Master’ (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) across very different regions of the Muslim world. So that publicly visible dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s current appeal is where I would like to begin, before moving on to other sets of interests, shared by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in the Shaykh and his teachings.

**IBN ‘ARABI’ S RENEWED ‘POLITICAL’ APPEAL IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**

The following anecdote from Turkey should help to suggest the extent of this recent public development, keeping in mind that this particularly dramatic illustration is less visibly echoed in the many government-supported and locally organized international conferences devoted explicitly to aspects of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought that have been held in other Muslim majority nations in recent years. In December of 2007, while attending

3. This essay follows the usage of historical specialists in using the expression ‘Akbari’ heritage to refer to the broad civilizational complex of later writers, poets, philosophers, theologians, artists and architects who were profoundly influenced by the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi throughout the post-Mongol era, often in ways closely paralleling the contemporary phenomena outlined below.

4. One visible manifestation of this renewed, specifically Muslim interest in the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the Akbari legacy has been related major international conferences on Ibn ‘Arabi or closely related thinkers held over the past decade, with government approval and occasionally direct support, at universities in Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Iran, and Azerbaijan. It is particularly important to note that the term ‘international’, in all these more recent settings, increasingly refers to scholarly participants attending from across the entire Muslim world, in open acknowledgement of the shared relevance of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought across very different contemporary cultural and political situations. This marks a dramatic shift from preceding decades, when ‘international’ conferences tended to bring together Western university experts and a limited set of local scholars often trained at the same European universities. This transformation is also marked in many of these countries by a burgeoning of locally produced editions, studies and translations directly related to the regionally relevant Akbari legacy, a development which deserves a separate detailed study.
the annual celebration of Rumi's death and spiritual marriage (‘urs) in Konya and contributing to one of the many international symposia devoted to that great mystic poet's poetry and wider legacy during that UNESCO ‘Year of Rumi' celebrating the 700th anniversary of his birth, all the participants were invited to a concluding, nationally televised Mevlevi semâ’ ceremony which was preceded by four long speeches by Turkey's President, Prime Minister, parliamentary speaker, and the main opposition party leader. Given the particular occasion of this celebration, it was not surprising that much of each speech that evening was devoted to recalling the wider Mevlevi heritage of Rumi and his successors, and also (with a nod to Turkey's many Alevi voters) to mentioning the parallel role of Rumi's famous popular Sufi contemporary, Hajji Bektash Veli. What was totally surprising in that celebration, however, was that all four politicians’ addresses actually concluded with extended references to the central historical place of Ibn ‘Arabi – hardly someone popularly associated with Turkey, Rumi or Konya – and to the ongoing contemporary socio-political significance of his thought. Now, whoever may have written those speeches – and given the political spectrum they represented, they were certainly not all by the same hand – the detailed insistence and recurrence of each of those highly public praises of Ibn ‘Arabi clearly evoked a much more widely based return to a positive evaluation of the historical influences and modern-day relevance of the distinctive theological perspectives of that earlier Muslim (and later, distinctively Ottoman) thinker whose characteristic approaches, as refracted through all the burgeoning Islamic humanities of that age, in fact dominated the rapid geographical expansion, cultural creativity, integrative capacity, and civilizational centrality of Islamic religion and culture all across Asia in the centuries following the Mongol invasions and the Crusades.

Now while the antithetical perspectives of Ibn Taymiyya and the ideological slogans of his recent Wahhabi and Salafi heirs clearly continue to dominate public cultural and political discourse throughout many Muslim nations today, there can be no doubt that this remarkably visible and widely-based evocation of the historical example and potential contemporary inspiration
of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought reflects a growing inchoate awareness, in at least some Muslim nation-states, of the compelling need for a credible, inherently persuasive theological alternative – in every sphere of life, from the private to the most public – to the appealing but ultimately empty ideological slogans of those recent dualist Islamist political ideologies that have so faithfully mirrored their earlier apocalyptic Marxist and Christian models. Just as with the fate of those earlier disastrous ideological experiments of the past century, the ongoing rapid democratization of education and digital communication, along with the concomitant extension of effective politico-economic participation to ever wider and more diverse social groups, have slowly begun to erode the previously uncontested totalitarian claims and messianic revolutionary expectations often associated with these recent pseudo-religious dualistic ideologies. In this recent Turkish case, a higher level of public educational attainment and more active wide-based social participation – as we can also see in Iran – eventually help to make it clear that the informed demands of an existentially grounded, individually credible understanding of the Qur’an and other elements of Islamic tradition necessarily lead not to some monolithic, factitious mass unity of action and belief, but instead to an evolving, necessarily co-existing complex of ever more diverse and creatively adapted interpretations of religious tradition. And that growing diversity of appropriate action and understanding is gradually reflected in wider intellectual and public spheres, just as it is within the evolving spiritual life of each individual. So there are grounds for envisaging that, just as in the Islamic past, the unfolding of this foundational, spiritually illuminated understanding and acceptance of the necessary, intrinsically positive role of diversity and creativity of interpretations within one’s own religious tradition can eventually open the door to a more tolerant, even positively co-operative attitude toward other neighbouring religious, social and ethnic communities and traditions.

To be sure, the prominent political speakers at this recent celebration in Konya – like many thoughtful cultural and political figures elsewhere throughout the Muslim world who have
been following less visibly in their footsteps – were unlikely to have been speaking primarily from their own direct acquaintance and study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings and their traditional commentators. Instead, they were invoking the appealing symbolic image and potential inspiration of that seminal theological figure whose thought and writing were most intimately and widely associated, almost everywhere in the pre-colonial Muslim world (not simply among Ottoman elites), with the diverse, cosmopolitan, creative, profoundly multicultural and relatively tolerant and inclusive polities of that era of the great Muslim empires. Today, this peculiar celebratory – and at least in Turkey, openly nostalgic – public evocation of that image of Ibn ‘Arabi is all the more striking because his pervasive theological, cultural and eventual political influence during the earlier apogee of Islamic civilization cannot be realistically identified with any particular simplistic set of beliefs or doctrines, nor with any particular religious sect or school. Instead, that lasting historical influence seems to have flowed from Ibn ‘Arabi’s peculiarly comprehensive and inclusive spiritual and intellectual method of spiritual practice, interpretation and understanding – an approach which was quickly manifested throughout the Eastern Islamic world in highly diverse poetic, social, literary, musical, architectural and other forms of creativity – and from its eventual influence in shaping those localized Islamic humanities in areas far beyond what we usually think of today as narrowly ‘religious’ domains. Yet that distinctive method of inquiry and transforming personal ‘realization’ (of tahqīq, or ‘conforming to the Real’), as Ibn ‘Arabi usually called it, in fact requires an extraordinary combination of practical, devotional, intellectual and spiritual commitments expressed through lifelong engagement and reflection.⁵

What that transformative process of ‘spiritual realization’ actually involves can best be appreciated by the careful, ongoing frequentation of the Shaykh’s own teaching and instruction, which is most readily and comprehensively accessible through his magnum opus, the Meccan Illuminations (al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya), an immense work which is only recently and very slowly becoming more accessible, through an increasing range of partial translations, to much wider, non-specialist audiences. For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient simply to mention and highlight certain key presuppositions of that hermeneutical method which so sharply and unmistakably distinguish it from the parameters of any familiar political (or politico-religious) ideologies. In short, Ibn ‘Arabi’s approach of tahqīq requires the demanding devotional personal practice of at least four equally indispensable elements: (1) careful lifelong attention to the inner and outer consequences of one’s ongoing spiritual discipline and practice; (2) sincere, comprehensive, reflective engagement (tafakkur) with all the actually operative elements of the unfolding divine revelation, which include scripture, our highly personalized and intimate interactions with the prophets and awliyā’, and the full range of divine ‘Signs’ manifest both inwardly and in all other creatures and nature; (3) intellectual commitment to discerning and communicating the coherence and universality of the fruits of these first two elements; and (4) effective exercise and appropriate communication of that wider intellectual, ethical and spiritual authority which inherently flows from actualized realization. Finally, as one eventually discovers in the course of apprenticeship with Ibn ‘Arabi (or with his many influential interpreters through the ages), careful

attention to the interplay of our individual destiny and our personal responses to its demands, in the light of the practice of all four of these foundational commitments, gradually reveals the actual locus and meaning of the scriptural eschatological promises, threats, and descriptions through the unfolding of each soul’s unique process of spiritual learning and evolution.7

Now simply listing these complex practical preconditions for Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive approach of ‘realization’ (tahqīq) might at first glance seem to have taken us very far indeed from the familiar concerns and intentions we normally associate with politicians anywhere, or even with history’s much rarer genuine statesmen. Why, then, should those speakers at Konya, with their very different practical political agendas, have concluded their nationally televised speeches with this same curious positive stress on the central historical and potential contemporary role of Ibn ‘Arabi, rather than the world-famous and universally appreciated mystical poet they had come there to celebrate? At least part of an answer quickly emerges if we simply contrast those challenging presuppositions of the Shaykh’s methodological approach just mentioned with the incomparably simpler dualistic assumptions – and painfully familiar eventual consequences – of totalitarian mass ideologies (whether of right, left, or centre; and whether socialist or ostensibly ‘religious’). As we all know, the practical reliance of such modern populist ideologies on enforced ignorance, fear, resentment, insecurity, and violence can sometimes be momentarily effective in inducing a widespread outward attitude of apparent unquestioning obedience – but only at the cost of so many genuinely human virtues, including ones that are also pragmatically essential, in the longer term, for any deeper social cohesion, active political engagement, and economic innovation, development and competitiveness. In contrast, the particular set of demanding rights and responsibilities effectively presupposed by each of Ibn ‘Arabi’s

7. See our planned volume of extensive translations of key chapters from the Futūhāt and the accompanying contextual lectures given at the Sorbonne (EPHE) in 2003: Ibn ‘Arabi’s ‘Divine Comedy’: Eschatology and Spiritual Realisation in the ‘Meccan Illuminations’. 
just-mentioned interdependent elements of realization, as one quickly discovers in their practical application, are intrinsically human, universal, and ultimately shared and assumed by each enduring religious tradition. As such, the actual individual practice of realization – which might at first appear as some impossibly esoteric and elitist spiritual ideal – paradoxically encourages and perhaps even practically underpins the indispensable human virtues of self-discipline, responsibility, creativity, intrinsic motivation, voluntary sacrifice, spontaneous and intelligent service, and actively positive, constructive co-existence. Given the depth of that contrast, Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive civilizational options – demanding as they surely are – may well deserve more reflection and even wider attention, as this spectrum of Turkey’s political leaders so eloquently and memorably suggested.

EMERGING GLOBAL DIMENSIONS OF IBN ‘ARABI’S APPEAL

When we move from the context of new Muslim-majority nation-states to the wider global stage, on which every religious and ethnic group is itself necessarily a distinct minority, it quickly becomes apparent that the contemporary appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspectives, both of thought and method, in fact constitutes a kind of natural extension of its multiple functions within the great empires and scattered Muslim trading cultures of the post-Mongol, pre-colonial period. Throughout those centuries, the distinctive theological and spiritual perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabi helped to support, justify and encourage two pre-eminent historical achievements of Islamic civilization of that era. The first of these was the ongoing cultural and social creativity of lastingly effective and appealing forms of the Islamic humanities suitably adapted to the many languages, customs, and particular circumstances of extraordinarily diverse local

populations – a process that was of course inseparable from the gradual spread of Muslim religious identity throughout the various regions concerned. The second accomplishment, whose distinctive virtues are perhaps more apparent today in historical hindsight, was the creation of inclusive ethical, political and social institutions capable of successfully accommodating populations from a host of radically different ethnic, religious, social and cultural backgrounds. Today, we have only to think of the range of disputed contemporary issues and conflicts normally associated – at least in public, journalistic contexts – with the term ‘religion’ (whatever the particular tradition in question) in order to appreciate how radically different were the civilizational perspectives and outcomes that were traditionally associated with the cosmopolitan and ecumenical influences of Ibn ‘Arabi and the Akbari heritage.

In the contemporary world, what is strikingly new about this recent wider appeal of the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi is the ways that both the positive and the negative impacts of economic, technological and cultural globalization have led to the suddenly expanded public awareness – above all among those younger generations whose life-worlds have been most radically transformed by digital technology and near-universal literacy – of a spectrum of practically unavoidable issues and challenges whose effective resolution can only take place within an inherently global (i.e., not merely ‘inter-national’) perspective. In each of these cases, the acute awareness of these wider global issues – both as challenging problems and as potential opportunities – was once restricted to a relative handful of intellectual specialists: philosophers, higher-level theologians, visionary poets, political and economic thinkers, philanthropists, and scientists. But today the increasingly ‘democratized’ and pointedly existential awareness of these inherently collective ethicopolitical issues is often raised not simply by the obvious spread of mass literacy and the unforeseen impact of digital media, but even more concretely and existentially by the painful practical consequences and dilemmas of the global developments in question. In each of the three cases outlined below, it is obvious that these widely shared human dilemmas profoundly precede
any possible appeal to the potentially helpful thoughts and insights of Ibn ‘Arabi, or of similar figures in other pre-modern traditions.

The first and most recently emerging area of the possible appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, against the backdrop and impacts of globalization, lies in the closely inter-related challenges posed by the preservation of the natural environment and the establishment of justice in all its inter-related dimensions (i.e., of economic, social, and political balance and harmony). Anyone working with and educating young people anywhere in the world today cannot avoid noticing how poignantly aware new generations often are both of the unavoidable global ethical and political challenges posed by the rapidity of transforming ecological, technical, and economic change – and of the apparent lack of convincing, potentially effective responses within both the dominant official representations of traditional religions (particularly where those traditions are simultaneously reduced to local extremist political ideologies, as in so many new nation-states) and the once-appealing post-Enlightenment political theologies of scientism and Marxism. However, simply listing a few unavoidable features of any conceivable effective response to these global issues immediately points us toward the distinctively wholistic and universal perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabi. These typically Akbari emphases include an awareness and vision of the practical inseparability of ethical and intellectual virtues; of the necessity for intensive and far-sighted, ongoing cooperation between all human groups (not simply enforced or grudging ‘tolerance’); of positive spiritual and psychological support for the indispensible but difficult virtues of self-discipline and self-sacrifice; of effective sustaining service to those manifold marginalized groups unable to participate profitably in the global knowledge economy; and of the ongoing need for a fundamental creative reworking and communication of universal ethical norms and imperatives (originally expressed and promulgated in agrarian or even tribal social settings) in terms appropriately adapted to the radically new structures and conditions – involving both new limits and new possibilities – of modern economic life. In each of these
areas, one can easily recognize the contemporary relevance and potential creative appeal of this philosophy whose central leitmotif and practical goal is fully realized service and perfect servanthood (‘ibāda and ‘ubūdiyya).

The second area of wider contemporary appeal of Ibn 'Arabi's thought – and more particularly of his Futūhāt, as its contents are gradually translated and made available to much larger interested audiences – has to do with a potentially transforming perception, which one frequently encounters among educated, thoughtful young people of every imaginable background all over the world today. This shared recognition is inchoately expressed in their constantly encountered assertion – to use the simplest possible expression of a profoundly complex intuition – that 'I am spiritual, but not religious'. This significant overt admission of our shared human spiritual innate capacity and responsibility (or fitra, in Islamic terms) and of the profound universality of the divine Reality/Religion (dīn al-Haqq) in all its manifestations immediately points anyone who would care to explore the meaning and deeper challenges – both intellectual and practical – of this familiar contemporary confession of faith toward the most fundamental aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. For if the universality of the Shaykh's intellectually formulated metaphysical and theological positions, most influentially articulated in his enigmatic and allusive 'Bezels of Wisdom' (Fusūs al-Hikam) and its many generations of commentators, quickly became central to Islamic intellectual and cultural life in succeeding centuries, most of the communicators and creators of that influential Akbari tradition devoted less open attention to its indispensable practical spiritual underpinnings that are so clearly and extensively articulated throughout his much longer and more practically challenging book of 'Meccan Illuminations' (al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya).

For Ibn 'Arabi's Futūhāt, as we have often suggested, constitutes one of the most comprehensive and elaborately detailed 'phenomenologies of the Spirit' – of the transforming individual interactions between the Divine and the multiple dimensions and potentialities of the human soul – that have been recorded in any religious or philosophical tradition. That is to say, the
Shaykh’s constant focus throughout that vast work is on revealing and carefully describing all the illuminating, transformative dimensions and expressions of the divine Nearness and Guidance⁹ which were opened up to him, both in his own impressive experience and through the wider tradition and revelation that he records and illuminates from that perspective throughout all his writings. Those rich dimensions of the divine walāya, as they are carefully described and evoked throughout those massive volumes, go far beyond the usual associations with the (already almost endless) description of the different roles and manifestations of the angels, prophets and holy beings in every dimension of human life, eventually merging with astonishingly powerful, yet persuasively familiar evocations of the most personal expressions, perceptions and workings of the Spirit. Most importantly, throughout the Futūhāt Ibn ‘Arabi takes great pains not simply to evoke and convey these realities using traditional scriptural, theological and poetic symbols – all of which might be initially problematic or vaguely abstract cultural ‘givens’ – but also to provide more concrete, individualized illustrations from his own experience and the accounts of his spiritual companions (a very broad term indeed, where the Shaykh is concerned!) and earlier exemplary figures, stories which are particularly effective forms of communication for modern audiences largely unfamiliar with his original cultural and practical spiritual contexts.

Since Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive rhetorical combination, throughout his Futūhāt, of these different forms of scriptural allusion and phenomenological description helps to encourage deeper spiritual understanding while avoiding the familiar misunderstandings or sometimes dangerous illusions that so often accompany the awakening of deeply transforming, but ‘immature’ spiritual experiences, his phenomenological approach is particularly

9. i.e., the twofold sense of walāya, of all the manifestations of God as ‘al-Walî’, both intimate Lover (dūst, yār) and Guiding Friend and Protector. See the foundational study by Michel Chodkiewicz, Le Sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabi (Paris, 1986; English translation: The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabî (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993)).
useful and effective in today's inherently multi-cultural global patchwork of religious and cultural symbols and philosophies drawn from many different religious traditions and cultural contexts. For one of the peculiar consequences of actually realized spiritual experience (i.e., of walāya as encountered in actual practice) is the heightened capacity to recognize that same newly-discovered spiritual reality in many of its other, previously unfamiliar forms, whether that be in different scriptural and symbolic contexts or in the living experiences of other individuals. This richly multi-faceted pedagogical procedure in his Futūḥāt is the concrete foundation of the ongoing irenic and ecumenical appeal of Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive spiritual method of phenomenological realization (tahqīq) or natural 'spiritual realism', which works by grounding spiritual discovery, practice and eventual communication in observable spiritual-ethical laws and in the shared experienced results of practical spiritual inter-action – rather than in arbitrarily interpreted formal symbolisms, doctrines or beliefs.10 In Ibn 'Arabi's works, whether for popular or more learned audiences, the real grounds of universal ethical and spiritual laws gradually emerge from their actual individual application, practice and discovery, in ways that visibly unfold across religious, historical, social, and cultural boundaries. Of course we should hasten to add that the same efficacy of communication is certainly true of many other classical, lastingly influential spiritual works – particularly artistic masterpieces, whose effective liturgical universality theologians have too often carefully ignored – in each of the world's major traditions. 11 Finally, from the wider political and social perspective with which we began, it is important to keep in mind that for Ibn 'Arabi the active and effective perception of the divine Presence (of walāya in all its necessarily intimate dimensions in the soul) is a necessary precondition for fully

10. See our detailed discussion of this distinctive hermeneutical process in the recent study, 'Freedoms and Responsibilities: Ibn 'Arabī and the Political Dimensions of Spiritual Realisation' (n. 5 above).

11. This key dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's thought (and of the wider Islamic tradition) is the subject of a number of individually focused case studies in our forthcoming volume Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities.
and accurately mirroring and manifesting that Presence, and for eventually realizing – or at least approaching – the state of spiritually effective service and true servanthood (‘ubūda and ‘ibāda). And that transformative spiritual state is the distinctive property and mission of each of those ‘divine Friends’ (awliyā’ Allāh), whose endlessly varied spiritual qualities, functions and responsibilities are so carefully described as the central subject of the entire Meccan Illuminations.  

The third, more intellectually specialized and already much more explicitly developed area of Ibn ‘Arabi’s contemporary appeal – and in this case, of his actually traceable influence – lies in the ongoing global projects of a ‘science of spirituality’ and a ‘comparative theology of religions’ (not a new religion!), immense collective efforts that call upon the insights and discoveries of scientists and scholars who are exploring and attempting to bring to light the common human grounds – at once experiential and intellectual – of those spiritual, aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical elements shared by the world’s religions (or indeed by humanity more generally). Given the centrality of such universalist claims in the Qur’anic account of humanity, revelation, walāya, and divine creation and revelation, and the undisputed pre-eminence of Ibn ‘Arabi as the most elaborate

12. For this central theme in Ibn ‘Arabi, see n.9 above. For some sense of the contemporary (as well as earlier historical) diversity and relevance of such key figures across the Islamic world, see J. Renard’s Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment and Servanthood (Berkeley, U. of Calif. Press, 2008) and especially the many representative case studies included in his edited companion collection, Tales of God’s Friends: Islamic Hagiology in Translation (Berkeley, 2009).

13. To a great extent, these ongoing collective projects already mirror on a global scale many key features of the centuries-long development of the ‘Akbari’ tradition of commentaries on the Fusūs al-Hikam – and the concomitant application of those insights in both helping to create and later interpreting (to religiously learned audiences) the explosion of locally adapted forms of the Islamic humanities throughout the post-Mongol expansion of Islamic civilization. One illuminating, still ongoing historical illustration of these challenges can be seen in the efforts of Haydar Amuli, Mulla Sadra, and other Shiite thinkers to convey the universal relevance of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought for initially suspicious Shiite scholarly audiences.
and dedicated exponent of those universal perspectives within the Islamic tradition, it is not surprising that ever-wider circles of contemporary researchers in these domains continue to be both inspired and informed by the gradually emerging fruits of the Shaykh's own 'Illuminations', as his Arabic work is gradually translated and conveyed in forms accessible to much wider interested audiences.

THE SPECIFICITY OF IBN 'ARABI AS A PRACTICAL SPIRITUAL GUIDE

A third major area of Ibn 'Arabi's ongoing contemporary appeal, and one that is relatively easier to document and illustrate, is the specific role of his works both as direct tools of spiritual guidance and especially as indirect ones, through their creative practical adaptation by shaykhs and other spiritual teachers and preachers.\textsuperscript{14} One telling concrete indication of the ongoing usage of his works for this particular purpose – especially many of his short practical treatises, which have likewise been among his first works translated into both French and English\textsuperscript{15} – is the survival of hundreds of manuscript exemplars of those works, clearly copied for usage within different Sufi tariqas, throughout all parts of the Muslim world, as recorded in the classic biobibliographical work of O. Yahia,\textsuperscript{16} now further amplified by the invaluable manuscript collection and digitalization projects

\textsuperscript{14} See the discussion of several telling contemporary illustrations of this kind of profound pedagogical influence (often nearly invisible from the perspective of explicit literary references) – whose earlier historical dimensions in the Arab world have been extensively developed in pioneering research by M. Chodkiewicz, D. Gril, and R. McGregor – in our earlier study 'Ibn 'Arabi in the "Far West": Visible and Invisible Influences' (see n.2).

\textsuperscript{15} For the early reception of Ibn 'Arabi's thought in Europe, see 'Ibn 'Arabî and His Interpreters' (n.6 above) and especially the foundational research by Michel Chodkiewicz that is summarized and still most readily accessible in his seminal introduction to Balyânî's \textit{Epître sur l'unicité absolue} (Paris, Deux Océans, 1982).

sponsored by the Ibn ‘Arabi Society. In addition, as Michel Chodkiewicz has indicated in his courses and several important studies, it appears that the most commonly occurring public use of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futuḥāt*, for many centuries, was in the frequent – and normally unacknowledged – re-presentation or reframing of its ideas and perspectives for public preaching and teaching purposes. Often this extensive ‘borrowing’ was in the full range of scriptural allusions and theological and homiletic explanations, but one finds such characteristic influences as well in more complex theological and philosophical contexts, as for example throughout the lastingly influential later philosophical treatises of such otherwise diverse thinkers as Mulla Sadra and Shah Waliullah of Delhi.¹⁷

While Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, teachings and actual writings continue to be used today in this very traditional setting of spiritual guidance and teaching, especially within Sufi groups and their offshoots,¹⁸ it is also clear that their readership and eventual

¹⁷. See, for example, M. Hermansen’s *Shah Wali Allah of Delhi’s Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha (The Conclusive Argument from God)* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996); the introduction and index to our *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, Princeton U. Press, 1981); and throughout P. Peerwani’s new translation of the corresponding chapters of Sadra’s *Asfār, Spiritual Psychology: The Fourth Intellectual Journey in Transcendent Philosophy – Volumes VIII and IX of The Asfār* (London, ICAS, 2008). These studies and translations are also significant for highlighting the recurrent ways such creative and influential philosophical and theological interpreters often carefully concealed or underplayed the profound influences of the *Futuḥāt* and other works of Ibn ‘Arabi and his commentators.

¹⁸. Recent years have seen a continuation of this long tradition in the continuing stream of translations, in both French and English, of shorter practical spiritual works and excerpts of brief, popularly accessible selections from longer volumes, in both French and English. See, for example, the expanding catalogue of such short prayers and practical spiritual treatises by Anqa Publishing (http://www.ibn-arabi.com). A readily accessible example, among many, is S. Hirtenstein’s recent translation of the classic *The Four Pillars of Spiritual Transformation: The Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed (Hilyat al-abdal)* (Oxford, Anqa, 2008), which includes a short corresponding chapter from the *Futuḥāt*. 
practical use in teaching settings have recently extended rapidly to wider (non-Muslim) spiritual contexts as well. This new development should not be at all surprising, in light of the particularly noteworthy features that clearly distinguish most of the Shaykh's spiritual writings – both the short individual treatises, and the more extended treatments found throughout the *Futūḥāt* – from much of the immense, but often highly repetitive, Sufi literature of spiritual guidance. This is because under pre-modern conditions, in each of the Abrahamic traditions, specialized spiritual teaching and guidance tended to be given orally by practiced and specialized masters, in carefully adapted private institutional settings that allowed for the teacher's immediate oral explanation, intervention, adaptation and guidance in ways personally adapted to each individual student's progress and specific conditions. In those traditional initiatic and supervisory settings, there was understandably little need for written guide-books (with all their inherent limitations already so persuasively outlined in Plato's *Phaedrus*), so that much of the relevant literature that does survive is so broadly repetitive and either apologetic and polemic (i.e., directed to external, non-practicing audiences) or so hermetic and esoteric (i.e., typically using recondite scriptural language, symbolism, and inside allusions from earlier spiritual writers) that it can readily appear – when viewed from outside its original context in the actual process of spiritual guidance and direction – as a kind of moral sermonizing, popular apologetic (e.g., Ghazali’s famous *Ihya’*), or superficial sets of formal prescriptions and externalized group regulations (i.e., *adab* in the least spiritual sense of that term).

Now what normally sets apart Ibn 'Arabi's practical spiritual writings, at all levels, from these familiar early Sufi literary genres is his consistent focus – more or less elaborately developed, depending on the case – on going beyond initially familiar formulae or outward prescriptions to illuminating the interplay of universal metaphysical principles and concrete spiritual practices and prescriptions. The Shaykh's typical

19. This distinctive focus and intention of the *Futūḥāt* is dramatically
familiar scriptural/archetypal allusions and justifications, taken together with the profound metaphysical contextualization and clear indication of the ultimate goals underlying and orienting the particular practices or experiences in question, helps to highlight the deeper spiritual context of the essential aims, supporting or restrictive conditions, and operative functions of spiritual and religious practices that were most commonly presented without such a careful phenomenological explanation of their ultimate goals and limiting conditions—since all that indispensable qualification was left in earlier practice to the experienced insight of each living teacher and master. Thus today, the growing contemporary appeal of this distinctive practical dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings clearly mirrors his earlier widespread historical role as a quietly authoritative ‘shaykh for shaykhs’.

Today, however, when people in many parts of the world are increasingly pursuing spiritual and contemplative practices in and thoroughly illustrated in the long concluding chapter 560 of the work (‘A Testament of Philosophical and Revealed Advice Useful to the Beginning Seeker and One Who Has Arrived [at the Spiritual Goal]’), often published separately as a substantial book in itself. That lengthy conclusion might at first appear as a voluminous, almost random collection covering the full spectrum of familiar moral and religious teachings known to Ibn ‘Arabi’s culture, were it not that all the preceding chapters of the Futuhat provide essential illumination as to the deeper meanings and metaphysical contexts of the teachings in question—hence the final part of its title.

This characteristic aim and approach of the Futuhat is particularly clear when we compare the relatively external, sometimes almost conventionally social treatment of the spiritual stations in Qushayri’s classic Risala with Ibn ‘Arabi’s corresponding discussions of those same themes throughout the second major division (fasl al-mu‘amalat, chapters 74–189) of his Meccan Illuminations. See M. Chodkiewicz, Mi‘rāj al-kalima: from the Risāla Qushayriyya to the Futuhat al-Makkīyya, translated in JMIAS, XXXV (2009).

See the beautiful recent illustration of this phenomenon in Turkey in Victoria Rowe Holbrook’s revealing two-part study, Ibn ‘Arabi and Ottoman Dervish Traditions: The Melāmī Supra-Order, in JMIAS, IX (1991) and XII (1992), as well as M. Chodkiewicz’s study of the earlier ‘Akbari’ initiatic path (n. 15 above).
conjunction with active life 'in the world', and in ways openly (or surreptitiously) blending practical insights and methods from various spiritual traditions, rather than in more isolated institutional settings restricted to a single tradition, this further explanatory and contextual dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's practical spiritual writings clearly has a much wider and specific appeal. For it immediately opens providential doors for the effective transmission, sharing, and creative appropriation of related or complementary methods and practical insights both to and from other ambient spiritual traditions.

In light of that remarkable process of practical spiritual creativity and experimentation so visibly unfolding all around us today, it is again worth noting that many recent historical studies indicate that this sort of creative, exploratory blending and adaptation of practical spiritual methods and approaches from Islamic and other traditions – with a central clarifying role for the metaphysical insights of Ibn 'Arabi – was a recurrent feature of cultural and religious life throughout the cosmopolitan centres of post-Mongol Islamic civilization, at least from the Balkans through South Asia and on to China and Southeast Asia.

22. While these familiar wider social and cultural processes of experimentation and cultural adaptation were until recently associated (at least in terms of media attention and wider public visibility) with the impact and reception of non-Christian spiritual traditions in historically Christian cultures in the West, it is quite clear that in recent decades the same processes are increasingly engaging educated and cosmopolitan groups globally, and from one end of the Muslim world to the other. See the illuminating case studies collected in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, ed. M. van Bruinessen and J.D. Howell (London, I.B. Tauris, 2007), particularly those focusing on educated urban audiences in contemporary Indonesia and Morocco.

23. Even a simple bibliography of the range of relevant studies and recent research here would now amount to a (much-needed) book. Here it should suffice to mention a handful of the most dramatic and accessible recent translations and related contextual studies illustrating this phenomenon. See, for example, Manjhan, *Madhumālatī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, trans. S. Weightman and A. Behl, with S.M. Pandey (Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000); Sachiko Murata (and W. Chittick), *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yu's Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih's Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* (Albany, SUNY Press,
Earlier scholars and orientalists, beginning with the earliest stages of the European encounter with Islamicate civilization, frequently noted the way that the dominant themes of the Akbari ‘School of Ibn ‘Arabi’ – usually centring on the commentary tradition surrounding his *Fusūs al-Hikam*, and exemplified in such familiar (albeit highly problematic) formulae as the ‘Unicity of Being’ (*wahdat al-wujūd*) – seemed to pervade later discussions of many of the classics of the Islamic humanities and Sufism (such as the long commentaries on the poetic masterpieces of Rumi and Hafiz), as well as the writings of many other theological and philosophical figures from this later pre-colonial period. Indeed, given the omnipresence of the Shaykh’s ideas and concerns in Islamic learning throughout that pre-colonial period, it is often difficult to separate Ibn ‘Arabi’s possible role in inspiring creative artistic works – such as most notably the remarkable role that key eschatological sections of the *Futūhāt* have been shown to play in the design, planning, and ornamentation of the Taj Mahal\(^\text{24}\) – from the more demonstrable use of his writings and ideas in theologically justifying and philosophically explaining the spiritual and religious authenticity and centrality of these newly created Islamic humanities in post-Mongol religious life and expression, throughout the vernacular languages and new cultural contexts of the rapidly expanding Muslim world, especially in Asia and Eastern Europe.

As we have pointed out in earlier articles examining Ibn ‘Arabi’s wide-ranging influences on European and American


\(^{24}\) See Wayne Begley, ‘The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning’, in *The Art Bulletin*, LXI:1 (March 1979). It is noteworthy – and indicative of the wider range of influences that may never be documented – that this inspirational role is only known through the fortuitous rediscovery of some of the architect’s personal notes.
artists, poets and creative thinkers over the past century, both those earlier aspects of the Shaykh’s historical influence and appeal have continued to expand more recently in the West even outside traditionally Islamic contexts, particularly through the writing and teaching of a handful of key popular interpreters and translators – e.g., Henry Corbin and the Eranos circle, Toshihiko Izutsu, Titus Burckhardt, F. Schuon, S.H. Nasr, and many others – whose prolific writings have served to familiarize much wider circles of artists, writers, poets, psychologists (particularly Jungians), educators, and philosophers with key ideas and insights drawn from his writings.25 Here we can simply note the close parallels, for example, with the similarly problematic ‘influences’ – both direct and mediated – of Swedenborg on such diverse later creative figures like Blake, Baudelaire (and other Symbolist poets and painters), or J.F. Oberlin; or of Goethe (and through him, of Hafiz) on so many later artists, writers and religious figures from different cultures. These widespread, often complexly mediated echoes and appeals of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and ideas among contemporary artists and creative thinkers in very different intellectual domains are palpable and profound, and yet often apparent only to those who happen to know what are typically the quite private, outwardly hidden and indirect processes of transmission operating in each case.26

25. See especially ‘Ibn Arabī in the “Far West”: Visible and Invisible Influences’ (n. 2 above). The most important point elaborated in that article is that we are only able to appreciate and properly gauge the full dramatic extent of Ibn Arabī’s often profound influences on these wider contemporary intellectual, artistic and creative circles because scholars happen to have direct personal knowledge of the multiple – unrecorded and often strictly personal – channels and forms of communication involved. If subsequent generations were to judge the Shaykh’s contemporary influences here only by surviving explicit written indications of such contacts, they could detect at best only a tiny percentage of the real effective extent of these living influences.

26. This is particularly evident in the case of the multitude of contemporary Sufi teachers and shaykhs who borrow from Ibn Arabī’s works in their almost exclusively oral, and therefore historically unrecorded, forms of teaching and spiritual guidance. However, the same point is equally applicable to
A VERY PRACTICAL CONCLUSION

In the contemporary global context, this essay has moved from what we readily acknowledge as the still largely potential, as yet quite inchoate public appeals of the ideas and thought of Ibn 'Arabi – especially in the domain of current Islamic politico-religious thought – toward the already more visible and demonstrable types of audiences, interests and influences which we have outlined more fully in earlier studies. Yet one very practical and consistent thread connects each of these domains: the absolutely critical future role – in responding to any of these multiple needs and ‘appeals’ – of properly contextualized and carefully reliable translations of that vast proportion of Ibn 'Arabi's surviving works which has yet to be made available to modern audiences. Even more specifically, in each of those domains where the growing global potential appeal of the Shaykh’s ideas has yet to be transformed into more concrete, realized influences – i.e., especially the opening two sections of this essay – that essential passage from a widely felt public need to a practically effective, actualized influence undoubtedly remains dependent in the first place on the gradual translation and adequate presentation of much more extensive and representative sections of his immense masterwork, the *Meccan Illuminations* (*al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyyā*).

This is not because there are a great many unfamiliar new abstract theological or philosophical ideas and concepts – of the type historically associated, for example, with the earlier Akbari

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many well-known contemporary musicians, writers, film-makers, artists, and poets whose relationships to particular Sufi tariqas, teachers, and related literatures are normally not subjects of public knowledge and discussion.

27. General readers may be unaware that most of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works, including virtually all of his *Futūhāt*, are written in a rhetorically complex and demanding language that – for a number of reasons – is no longer really understandable today even by those literate in modern Arabic, for reasons that have been elaborated in several of our earlier studies focusing on the challenges of translation and proper contextualization and presentation. See n. 5 above for the most detailed discussion of those issues.
school centred on the interpretation of his *Fusūs al-Hikam*—that are still unknown to specialist scholars and students of the Shaykh. Rather, it is because the essentially phenomenological focus and underlying method of realization (*tahqīq*) adopted throughout Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futūhāt*—whether that work is encountered in the original Arabic or in any accurate and effective translation and commentary—simply cannot be summarized or reduced to a more immediately accessible and purely intellectual form. Instead, the study and eventual understanding of each chapter and section of the *Futūhāt* itself necessarily remains an intrinsically demanding, but always transforming, spiritual and intellectual process of realization whose peculiar demands—and eventual manifold rewards—must take Ibn ‘Arabi’s committed readers in another, necessarily more intimate and challenging direction.

28. If that were the case, incidentally, such introductory summaries or popular commentaries on the *Futūhāt* would surely have been written down and widely circulated centuries ago, given the tremendous prestige of this vast work and its author alike. They were not, and that absence is telling.