An essential translator: Perceptions and interpretations: Ibn 'Arabi in the Islamic world today

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An Essential Translator

Perceptions and Interpretations: Ibn 'Arabi in the Islamic world today

Interview with Prof. James Morris, Institute of Islamic Studies, Exeter University, UK

JM: Recently, I have been traveling all over the world talking about Ibn 'Arabi in different settings...It seems relevant to talk about the reasons for the interest in Ibn 'Arabi right now in the Islamic world, because professionally, that is where I have most contact...and most of those cases overlap with audiences in the West. I think probably for the readers of the newsletter who aren't from the Islamic world it might be interesting to run through the peculiar ways in which he interests people: it is notable how the recent surge in interest regarding Ibn 'Arabi and his importance within Islamic countries really is a re-discovery...

Q: What do you mean by 're-discovery'?  
JM: Well, in the past Ibn 'Arabi would have been studied in the madrasa system, or in the Sufi tariqah (the Sufi ways) and so forth, but now something entirely new is happening - and that's why it is important to note the central practical role of translation into Western languages. I'm not saying that people do not study Ibn 'Arabi in the traditional ways and traditional schools any longer, but in many cases those systems are both breaking down from within and also losing their wider sociological importance. The study of Ibn 'Arabi presupposes a deep mastery of classical Arabic and the Koran, and this is not something that modern educational systems are very good at in the Islamic world today. People don't want to sit down and study him for a decade - in the past that was often a presupposition for appreciating his writings.

I want to underline this question of translation because I don't think that most translators into, say, French or English, are always aware of how wide the range of audiences is, potentially, for their translations, and that the world is becoming aware of Ibn 'Arabi through this new vehicle of translations and studies in Western languages. So a circle is emerging - Chodkiewicz has talked about it in terms of the 'sun rising in the West...'  

Q: It makes one think of the way Aristotle came to the West  
JM: Yes. From Spain! I think that's important for two reasons: it really puts a heavy responsibility on people who study and write about Ibn 'Arabi, in terms of what they select and choose to translate, and also the way that they actually translate it. There are two big dangers. One is of either choosing or translating things that are so surgically technical that people are turned off to Ibn 'Arabi - and there are many different ways this can be done! It isn't just a matter of the quality of translation, but if you're trying to communicate an unfamiliar symbolism of alchemy or astrology or the science of letters or whatever, the audiences that are going to be able to follow a careful and exact translation of such things are very limited. An example could be Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of one of the central families of symbols, which are the Divine Names. There are many aspects to this subject which appear rather inaccessible to people; it is not according to the way most people perceive spiritual life today, regardless of whether they are Muslims or not. So that an over-technical choice or selection can be one problem. The other problem can be people who are writing about Ibn 'Arabi or translating just for a particular Muslim audience. Here the focus can sometimes be so narrow that people can't see the universality in the points that are being made. I don't mean to find fault with anyone who does one or the other, but as a teacher and someone who has to lecture and talk to people in very different audiences all the time, it becomes apparent what big dangers those things are. If you try and reach the largest possible audience and be as clear as possible, that usually means that every audience can understand you. If you're writing for your fellow Sufis in a Sufi tariqa, then clarity and simplicity are less important, but it also means that a text translated for that audience is just not going to communicate outside of that context.

Q: There must be similar considerations as apply to translating the Koran?  
JM: Yes, because translating Ibn 'Arabi is tied to key words from the Koran.

Q: Could you suggest a solution to this problem?  
JM: Well, I think every translator wrestles with these things. I would agree with Bill Chittick, who often leaves key Arabic terms untranslated and has people get used to them - then you don't have to say 'this means ten different things!' And that is happening anyway, and not just with regard to Islamic religious terms, but also Buddhist and Hindu and others, as a kind of world culture develops. People today can talk about 'Karma' or 'Bodhisattvas' in a kind of down to earth way, without it sounding like you're showing off or being purposely incomprehensible. That, I think, is something that carries over to all these audiences.

Q: Where in the world have you been speaking?  
JM: Well, I think the newsletter does a good job of reporting these things. Among the most memorable ones, just this last year, was the conference in Kyoto, devoted to the influences of Ibn 'Arabi in Asia, although many of the speakers talked about 'the Far West', so that the circle has become complete in some ways. One thing which emerged was the use of Ibn 'Arabi as part of a foundation for a science of spirituality that brings together different religious traditions. While in Japan, I went to visit a former student, a Japanese student from Oberlin, who lived near Izutsu once was in the Tokyo area. He was translating for two visiting American psychologists who were Jerrah sheikhs from California who are working on transpersonal psychology. They were applying Ibn 'Arabi's and other Sufis' ideas about transpersonal psychology in their talks to a Japanese audience. He knew the Sufi context that they were taking things from, but he was having to create and form a new Japanese language to get the ideas across, because many of the ideas centred on 'self-disclosure' which is not a favourite habit of the culture of which he was a part. Here is a widely experienced student, wrestling to...
translate Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas from the American translation into a new Japanese context. So, while we were studying the historical transmission eastward from Spain and Turkey and Syria into Eastern Islamic worlds, we were also experiencing Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence today coming to Japan from California, which I found particularly interesting.

Another interesting example from Japan is the recent film ‘After Life’, which is such a quintessential presentation of so many of the key ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi, because it speaks the universal language of the symbols that Ibn ‘Arabi works with.

Then I could mention the recent conference in Bosnia, and also three upcoming conferences; one in Murcia which is primarily for scholars on Islamic Law; one in Rabat on ‘Ibn ‘Arabi Today’, and one in Isfahan, at the end of April 2002. Interest in Ibn ‘Arabi is just about everywhere in the world today; England, Berkeley, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Q. Could you talk a little about Bosnia?

JM: My latest book ‘Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation’ is based on my lectures there last May. It centres around Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas as a response to certain tasks that everyone faces in forging a new world civilisation, and discusses ways in which Islamic thought can be adapted as part of a global community including the Islamic world. The central talk I gave on Ibn ‘Arabi was about his ideas of the Imamate and the Mahdi – basically, how he says that each of us is an ‘imam’ in respect of the responsibilities we take on in life, and that the ‘rightly guided one’ is in fact each individual person to the extent that they actually listen and carry out the revelation. A pretty radical idea really – at least I thought so! There are certain parts of the Islamic world where, although I have textual support for this, I would be worried saying such things. When arriving in Bosnia, I did not know that I would be giving this talk at the local school for imams, the Islamic Theology Faculty in Sarajevo, attended among others by the Grand Mufti. Now it is probably important to point out that the Grand Mufti was a disciple of Fazlur Rahman, so he is a man committed to reform and adapting Islam to the modern world. Anyway, at the end of my talk he got up and said that his students really should read a lot more of Ibn ‘Arabi, and that he had much to teach us. This, for Bosnia, was not so surprising, as I discovered, because scholars, such as Oliver Leaman, Denis Gril and Bill Chittick, among others, have been and are invited again this year to talk about Ibn ‘Arabi. So there is an ongoing interest there, and it really matched up with their own more cosmopolitan traditions coming from the Ottoman Empire, where Ibn ‘Arabi was seen as the key interpreter of the Islamic tradition, and was seen as somebody who would be studied by the Ulema, by the learned. Unlike so much of the Islamic world today, where religious education has been taken over by Ibn Taymiyya...

Q: This comes as a nice antidote for what we hear about Bosnia being a hotbed of recruitment for al Qaida and things like that...

JM: And the professors there are busy translating, again often from Western texts back into Bosnian – such as Reshid Hafizovic who spoke in Oxford at the symposium last year, who has just finished work on a four-volume book by Corbin, and is also the translator of the Fusus al Hikam into Bosnian.

But maybe we could talk about audiences now – who wants to know about Ibn ‘Arabi, who is seeking him out. Looking at the Islamic world, one could identify a key audience to be Muslims living in the West. In places like Exeter University or any major University in the Western World, increasingly, people who are coming to study Islamic Studies are Muslims trying to figure out what Islam means in a variety of new cultural settings, so you don’t get the people who have already settled that question in various ideologies, but you do get a lot of seeking students.

One group, which is according to Ibn ‘Arabi’s original audience, are travelers or seekers - he calls them ‘al quawm’ - these people are everywhere, and they find Ibn ‘Arabi for all sorts of reasons. Some come to study in an academic setting, and some do so elsewhere. So one is trying to translate the aspects of his work that appeal to those kinds of audiences, which are its practical orientation and practical spiritual life, and that is a very vigorous audience. Really it is pointless with that kind of audience to distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslim, for what these people are interested in is practical spiritual guidance and clarification, and the particular religious setting is less important. Just as there are a lot of people who are interested in Jewish mysticism, or Buddhist esotericism, without becoming Jews or Buddhists, so there is a large audience...
interested in Ibn 'Arabi, and it certainly overlaps between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The second group, which has been most influential in the past in the Islamic world, and is now coming back – this group I would like to call the ‘creators’, are namely people who are considering the challenges of education in the Islamic communities in the West, where there are basically no ‘traditional’ Islamic educational forms available. One could identify several key subjects, central to both traditional Islamic cultures and to Ibn ‘Arabi, and here one finds a natural correspondence between Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching and people looking to develop new forms of educational or cultural institutions. First there is the focus on Beauty, which includes the Arts as the impulse of spiritual formation; then the focus on Nature; and finally the spiritual dimension of human beings, which if you are used to reading Ibn ‘Arabi, seems so obvious. But it is pretty clear that our educational systems do not usually focus on that. And as Muslims wrestle with what kind of education they should create for their children, some people do come to study Ibn ‘Arabi from that point of view. I think this is an area which is going to become more and more important.

To give an example, I and some other Ibn ‘Arabi scholars work with a group called the Book Foundation, which is trying to set up new Islamic curricula in English, focusing on aspects of the Koran which are central to Ibn ‘Arabi. This kind of creative use of Ibn ‘Arabi is pretty essential, and is one reason why it became so important historically in the Islamic World: In other words poets and writers and artists used Ibn ‘Arabi to explain to people what they were doing, and it provided some kind of framework of justification.

And in places like Bosnia, Indonesia and Malaysia people are faced with the similar challenges as the people in the West that we just mentioned. They have to create new artistic and other educational institutions, and in this context, rediscover their own resources. In these settings it is realistic to rediscover and recreate - you don’t need to create from scratch. At the same time there is not a lot of religious support for creativity there. Here one shades into what is so fundamental to Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence in the modern Islamic world, a theological justification for what needs to be done. This is often not allowed for or considered important in the dominant ideologies; which might seem completely irrelevant to people here, but it is very important to people there.

Take the example of Turkey – there is a gulf between people who consider themselves ‘modernised’, the new intellectuals, and the many people who have an interest in religion and the traditions of their own culture, but in a way which now often appears as a new ideology. It is indispensable for people to create new kinds of communication to bridge that gap. Artists such as Orhan Pamuk can reach audiences and get things across in ways which the political ideologies of the Islamist parties do not achieve. And my impression is that each Muslim country has a different ‘equation’, so to speak, for reviving traditional spiritual vehicles – Bosnia, North Africa, Central Arab lands, Indonesia and Iran...

I am most interested in the next phase of this, when young people discover these things by whatever means, and then go off to study them, and in the process rediscover aspects of their own tradition - clearly in Bosnia that process is much more advanced then in some other Islamic countries. The professors in academia there and people in the local Sufi tariqas live in very different social worlds, but they both have borrowed my translations to retranslate for their specific local needs. The influence of the Ottoman tradition is very obvious in the Bosnian Sufi tekkes. There are a lot of young people interested in these things and that is very encouraging. It makes me very happy to see a lot of young faces, and not just old grey beards...and one of the most impressive things is the multiplicity of languages everyone takes for granted – French, German, English, Persian, Russian etc. Arabic probably least, it is used mainly by the learned scholars, who speak all the other languages anyway.

And the last point I wanted to mention, which has come out strongly since September 11th – quite honestly, Ibn ‘Arabi provides the only effective antidote to Salafi ideas in those parts of the Islamic world where the obsession with tradition dominates the public discourse. Ibn ‘Arabi is integrally rooted in the Koran and the Hadith. Now often public discourse in certain Muslim countries demands that whatever you say be rooted at least outwardly in the Koran and Hadith, and Ibn ‘Arabi is clearly far more deeply rooted in Koran and Hadith than many of the ideologies that are popular in these places. So in any of these countries, if someone wants to have an Islamic political ideology which allows for democracy, he can turn to Ibn ‘Arabi for help.

Generally, Muslims haven’t had to create theologies to support their understanding of Islam – especially in Sunni Islam, which has been very tolerant of many variants. This is no longer the case in many countries now. Anyone who wants to defend some of the basic rights of human life can turn to Ibn ‘Arabi. Four points come to mind in particular:

One is the sanctity of all human beings: i.e. human beings per se are a sacred reality, not human beings of this or that social group. That is one of these points that many people here take for granted and which is essentially rooted in the Koran, but you only have to pick up a newspaper to see that it is not taken for granted in certain ideological contexts, any more than in places where Marxism or Fascism were once the dominant ideologies in the West.

The second point is the necessity and the human duty of cooperation. There is a wonderful section in the Koran saying that people have to communicate what the Haqq, (the Truth and the duties of Truth), engages them in, and to cooperate in realising that. And that it takes perseverance to make those things real. So the necessity of cooperation bridges both intra-Muslim differences and inter-religious differences. This is such a relevant point as it applies to different sects within a religion and to different religious groups.

The third point is what I would call absolute ‘individualism’, not individualism in a political ideology, but the sanctity of every individual’s spiritual life and experience. People talk about ‘human rights’, but that very often gets translated as collective rights and collective ideology. What Ibn ‘Arabi - and the Koran - stress is absolute individual human rights and responsibilities, and that is a much deeper and more subtle foundation for democracy than any belief of this or that declaration of the rights of man. People argue for the rights of women or the rights of this group or...
that group, but if one can grasp that each human being as a human being has fundamental human rights, that is the teaching of the Koran and that is something that Ibn ‘Arabi comes back to again and again.

And finally the flip side of this on the social level is the necessity of diversity and creativity. Again, we might take diversity and creativity for granted, but in fact the worst enemy of any totalitarian ideology is diversity and creativity, because they deny the totalitarian claims of every ideology. So, although these themes have always been central to the Islamic tradition, in some places they are now threatened by current ideologies. Muslims who value those things are forced to turn to the Koran and specifically to Ibn ‘Arabi’s understandings of the Koran, if they are to be heard and to have a lasting influence. This is a desperate need, and one which may explain the profusion of Ibn ‘Arabi conferences now turning up in Muslim countries.

Q: So, would you say that Ibn ‘Arabi is the valid interpreter for Islam in the modern/current situation?

JM: I wouldn’t want to use the term ‘modern’ exclusively, because he is fundamentally rooted in a tradition that is timeless, and that is what people are desperately looking for in the current circumstances. The fact that they’re looking there doesn’t guarantee some kind of victory. I believe the initial impact of Ibn ‘Arabi and his ideas will not be seen politically because creation always starts at the individual or small group level.

Q: Can you give any specific Koranic examples which would illustrate this in relation to the current situation in the world.

JM: Well, take a look at my new book. It’s going to be republished with corrections later this year, in the UK.

Just to go back to one key point discussed in the book: The emerging ‘science of spirituality’. Here, Ibn ‘Arabi can be seen to be a precursor to what is happening right now – we can see religious studies, different aspects of science, biology, physics etc, and different therapies, different studies of human nature are all coming together, because of the essential spiritual dimension common to them all. They begin to come together in a way that requires a kind of modern version of what Ibn ‘Arabi did – a modern version in a modern context. Ibn ‘Arabi provides a framework for all these apparently different enquiries, and can act as interpreter for them all. But an essential part of that is not just the metaphysics but also the practice and realisation. Here I think the translation of the Futuhât is absolutely essential, because it is the single most comprehensive study of spiritual practice and its phenomenology that I know of in the Islamic context, and just invaluable in that regard. We need to work and translate as much as possible of the Futuhât as soon as possible. Just as the Zohar became a culmination of that deeper penetration of the Torah in the Jewish tradition, the Futuhât and the Fusûs together – and I do think they need to be taken together - provide that with regard to the Islamic tradition.

Interviewer: I was in Istanbul a few days after September 11th, watching on CNN an interview between Larry King and Prince Hasan, the Uncle of the King of Jordan, who is asked what he thinks Islam has to offer in the wake of September 11th. And Prince Hasan quotes Ibn ‘Arabi’s poem from the Tarjuman al Ashwaq: ‘My heart has become capable of all forms...’ as being, in his opinion, a supreme example of the tolerance essential to the meaning of Islam. Perhaps a ‘new’ Islam can come about if what is clothed in the religious form becomes understood, not as a religious form but as man’s heritage, if the Koran is understood as the revelation of what man is at the essential level.’

JM: Ibn ‘Arabi is an essential ‘translator’ in both directions, the translation down from the Koran and Hadith into culture, but also how people have to turn back to Ibn ‘Arabi. This suggests that his claim to be ‘the Seal of the Saints’ has a great deal of ongoing evidence, because he has the keys to such different traditions, which open many doors, - they have to go to Ibn ‘Arabi, so to speak, and say: ‘please will you give me a key!’

Q: If you were an Arab in an Arabic speaking country, how accessible would Ibn ‘Arabi be to you?

JM: Look, in the rest of the world, translating the Koran into the cultural forms necessitates a mediator both to continue the process of ‘translation’ and also to keep a sense of the connection back to the Koran and Hadith. For Arab speakers and in Arab cultures there is a great connection already with the Koran, but - and this is difficult to explain - there is also a barrier of tradition: what people see and understand as ‘tradition’ often stops them seeing the Koran and Hadith freshly. This is a familiar problem in all traditions, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist: it can be hard to see what Jesus was saying, when it is embedded in 20 centuries of interpretation, wars, dogma etc... And there Ibn ‘Arabi can be very helpful in ‘deconstructing’ the tradition, taking it apart so you get back to the original sources. It’s a very intellectual task, and requires a high level of mastery of the language.

The most important contribution Ibn ‘Arabi is making in this present time is that he so clearly brings out the question of the assumption that there is or should be a single monolithic understanding. In response to that he says: ‘here – look, you can understand it in all these different ways, and you have a religious obligation to understand it in all these different ways. If you try and impose one interpretation over all the others then you are actually violating the most fundamental religious duties people have...’ I think that it is beginning to dawn on people, that this notion that Islam means all people must act and think alike simply does not hold true. And to question this idea you must go back to the original sources, and only well-trained intellectuals can do this. This is a very different enterprise from the artistic and experiential appropriation of Ibn ‘Arabi. This intellectual, almost ‘theological’ use of Ibn ‘Arabi is a university-level kind of enterprise, but more or less essential.

One last point: There are very different Ibn ‘Arabis that speak to different groups – that has always been the case. Since September 11th governments in the West have woken up the fact that in sponsoring education in the less developed world, education in the arts and humanities is just as important as that in science and engineering. For example, the new British Council initiative ‘Connecting Futures’, focuses on building more bridges with key Muslim countries, and it is at least a sign that an appreciation is growing that the arts and religion don’t just take care of themselves. Rulers of the past knew this well, and sponsored their theologians and artists and poets generously.