

THE CHALLENGES OF REALIZATION IN A GLOBAL CIVILIZATION

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Abstract

The contemporary historical situation suggests fascinating parallels with that period of the 13th/7th century when the massive destruction of the Mongol invasions opened the way for popular new forms of Islamic life and practice that eventually spread Islam throughout Asia. Today, as in earlier periods of dramatic upheaval, we can witness those processes of inspiration and awakening that give rise to the spiritual pathways of future centuries, through each soul's gradual discovery of its unique challenges and demands of *ih̄sān*.

One way of describing this transformation, to use the Qur'anic language adapted by Ibn 'Arabi, is in terms of the process of spiritual realization (*tab̄qīq*) by which people discover their guiding inner relationship to those divine qualities or "Names" that eventually come to define the meaning and purpose of their lives. Through our lifelong movement of service (*ib̄āda*) to the "Lord" (*rabb*) constituted by each divine Name, the transformation of the soul follows a familiar, naturally ascending trajectory. It begins with a curiosity drawing us toward some particular dimension of the Real (*al-Haqq*); then a compelling striving leading to heightened discipline and awareness; and ultimately to the creative manifestation of that devotion through the appropriate means of teaching, communication, and new communities of fellow-seekers—the Qur'anic "*servants of the All-Merciful*"—that slowly emerge from this shared spiritual work of devotion, discovery and creative response.

Here we point to some ways this process of civilizational renewal is unfolding around the world, focusing on three of the most far-reaching of those divine Names: the “servants of the All-Wise” (*al-Hakīm*), in their exploring and deciphering the infinite Signs of God’s Wisdom “on the horizons”, in all of the sciences of nature and society; to those *mubsinūn* and “servants of the Beautiful” (*al-Jamīl*) whose creative acts of beauty help awaken that love and awe which mark the beginnings of each spiritual journey; or to those “servants of the Subtly-Gracious” (*al-Latīf*) whose lives are dedicated to deepening our understanding of the presence and meaning of each of the divine Signs “in our souls,” in the emerging science of spirituality. These “servants of the all-Merciful” and their communities are themselves the first seeds of an emerging global civilization.

Introduction

...the servants of the All-Compassionate are those who walk upon the earth lightly/humbly. And when the ignorant address them (with hostility), they say: “Peace.” (Qur’an 25:63)

Since the original venue for this essay was a conference dedicated to the example and inspiration of two of the most complex and demanding thinkers of the entire Islamic tradition, Ibn ‘Arabi and Mulla Sadra, we have chosen a topic that is hopefully meaningful to a wider contemporary audience who may be relatively unfamiliar with their actual writings and historical contexts. Thus our subject here is their wider, shared methodological approach of spiritual reflection and “realization” or “actualization”—of what they themselves usually called *tabqiq*, or the unique combination of focused attentiveness and intelligence characterizing each individual effort of the *mubaqqiq*. For the universal applicability and potential appeal of that distinctive perspective combining individual spiritual experience, reflection and transforming action is almost immediately recognizable by people today from all the world’s cultures and all walks of life.

The metaphysical backdrop of that process of realization is aptly summarized in one of the Qur’anic verses (41:53) most often alluded to by

each of these two thinkers: [spoken here by the divine “We”] ... *We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, so that/ until it becomes clear to them that He (Hū, the divine Essence) is the Real (al-Haqq).*

For our purposes here, we can start with this far-reaching description of the essence and aim of the human state, in each and every individual throughout history, as the evolving mirror of the divine Essence. That is, as the ongoing intersection of the divine Self-revelation, through all the infinite forms of creation, with our own ever-deepening discovery of the Source and meaning of those Signs. Or to use Ibn ‘Arabi’s own Qur’an-based technical vocabulary, each person’s life can be described in terms of specific inner relationship of sensitivity and responsiveness to those particular divine qualities or “Names” that eventually come to define our uniquely individual reality. Each soul, through its lifelong movement of devoted service (*‘ibāda*) to the sustaining “Lord” (*rabb*) constituted by its particular guiding set of divine Names, gradually comes to follow a certain recognizable trajectory of experience, understanding, and action.

This process of naturally unfolding spiritual realization (*tabqīq*)—which outwardly seems to start at different times and to proceed at very different paces—normally begins with the awakening (which can be triggered by all sorts of experiences and situations) of a mysteriously compelling sense of curiosity. Then that initial wonder draws us toward the distinctive “Signs” or manifestations of certain particular dimensions of the Real (*al-Haqq*). Eventually, given sufficient attention to those guiding Signs and the gradual discovery of their deeper significance in life, that initial curiosity begins to develop into a compelling striving for understanding and proper responsiveness to those unfolding Signs. And over time, that striving gives rise to heightened discipline and awareness in relation to all the effective manifestations of that particular divine quality. Finally, at the culminating stage of this process, the *mubtaqqīq* (the person who has fully realized the expressions of this particular divine reality) naturally moves on toward the wider *creative expression* of that inner devotion. This last stage may involve the development of new means of teaching and communication about these particular Names and Signs; or it may find its practical expression in the formation of new communities of fellow-seekers which gradually coalesce from this shared spiritual work of devotion, discovery and creative response.

In reality, as Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings constantly remind us, the particular constellation of Names and qualities realized within each individual’s lifetime are necessarily complex, highly particular, and often seriously shifting in their

actual inner or outer manifestations. For the purposes of this brief public exposition, we will sharply simplify that all-inclusive phenomenological and spiritual perspective in order to focus on three very broad sets of those divine “servants,” three groups whose distinctive modes of realization and service are quite visible “*wherever you-all turn...*” (2:117).

To begin with, our purpose in singling out these three broad sets of *mubaqqiqūn* or “realizers” is simply to highlight the fact that such souls are always active and present all around us, whatever the particular cultures and religions we may happen to identify as our own. Secondly, the restriction of our consideration to these three particular broad categories of “divine servants” or realizers is somewhat arbitrary. My only excuse for this artificially limited focus on these particular illustrations—having spent most of my adult life in university settings—is that these three broad categories of *mubaqqiqūn* are the ones I have had the best opportunity to know and observe, both in real life and in the contexts of my scholarly research. And since those universities were almost all initially created precisely in order to nurture and support these distinctive tasks of spiritual realization (whatever else they may have become in the past century), they still do provide a very helpful locale for observing the unfolding development of individual vocations within each of these three broad forms of realization. Finally, the particular identifying tags given to each of these three groups here are simply my own suggestive approximations for the purposes of this essay—inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi’s language and perspectives, but certainly not quoted from him.

The Servants of the All-Wise (*‘ibād al-Hakīm*):

Following the order of our opening Qur’anic verse (41:53), we may begin with those people particularly devoted to deciphering the meanings of some of the particular divine Signs of God’s Wisdom and Order “*on the horizons.*” That is to say, whose lives are focused on deepening their appreciation and understanding of the divine Signs within some particular domain of the natural and social worlds. Now what is immediately obvious when we consider the relative attention and resources devoted to this vast “external” realm of the divine Signs, comparing our own age with that of Ibn ‘Arabi (or even the later period of Mulla Sadra), is a dramatic, truly global shift in both emphasis and organization. For in fact vigorously

active, global communities of accomplished *mubaqqiqūn* do exist today focusing on virtually every conceivable area of those external “horizons.” And those specialized seekers, in most of those domains, benefit from well-developed systems of support, initiation, training and discipline that are open to all those with the necessary vocations and abilities. As a result, the disciplined dedication of all these individuals devoted to realizing some highly specialized manifestation of this divine Name (*al-Hakīm*, “the All-Wise” Orderer of creation) is something that by now people everywhere tend to take almost for granted. Just as many people in Ibn ‘Arabi’s time (and at least in much of the wider Muslim and Christian worlds for several centuries afterwards) once apparently took for granted the remarkable spiritual accomplishments and explorations of the divine Friends (*awliyā’ Allāh*) and all those other servants of God particularly devoted to exploring and assimilating the realm of the divine Signs “*in their souls*.”

At a deeper level, of course, Ibn ‘Arabi would be the first to remind us that such single-minded devotion to realizing only one (or even any partial set) of the divine Names is a kind of unintentional, but still dangerously restrictive “idolatry”—however understandable such a restriction of our focused devotion and realization might be, given the limited human capacities and circumstances within which we must work. But that sort of narrow restriction of one’s chosen field of realization poses a profound spiritual challenge—as both our philosophical masters here were well aware—which is shared by exclusivist devotees of every divine Name, and which surely also has its own providential purposes and underpinnings.

The Servants of the Subtly-Gracious (*‘ibād al-Latif*):

Simply for the purposes of this essay, we may speak here of the “servants of the Subtly-Gracious” as all those whose lives are particularly dedicated to deciphering and deepening our understanding of the presence and meaning of the divine Signs “*in [our] souls*” (41:53 again). This is the immense, truly infinite domain of spiritual realities in which Ibn ‘Arabi’s prolific works, drawing on so many earlier traditions of spiritual research and practical accomplishment (as illustrated, for example, in the massive concluding chapter 560 of his *Futūbāt*) still provide one of the most extensive and inclusive “phenomenologies of the spirit” ever produced. (Those writings also provided much of the underlying inspiration for many

of Mulla Sadra's own distinctive metaphysical principles, which he expressed for the most part within the inherited framework of the Avicennan philosophical tradition). Because of the intimacy and inherent individuality of these divine Signs "in the souls," the practical pursuit of the processes of realization relating to the Spirit has often been restricted—perhaps with a particular intensity within Islamic tradition—to the unrecorded, highly individualized personal relations between spiritual guides and their students and disciples. The remarkable worldwide interest in Ibn 'Arabi's writings today, of course, lies precisely in their thoroughgoing exception to that predominately oral historical tradition, since they provide such richly detailed and anecdotally revealing accounts of virtually every stage and dimension of the spiritual Path.

For Ibn 'Arabi's own unique writings continue to offer (like the Qur'an, hadith and traditions of the *awliya'* that are their constant inspiration) a remarkable treasury of practical, doctrinal, and pedagogical tools and reminders of the intrinsic human universality of the Signs of the Real "in the souls." Indeed it was exactly this vividly demonstrated and directly verifiable appeal to the universal human accessibility of the Real (*al-Haqq*) which so quickly made his works the indispensable companion (and theological justification) for the wider processes of creative innovation and localized cultural adaptation of spiritual teaching that accompanied the rapid spread of Islam as a world religion and as a remarkably diverse civilization in the centuries immediately following the Mongol invasion. In fact, as we have often pointed out in other more detailed studies, it is that same characteristic approach of practically and intellectually rigorous spiritual realization—combining careful inner attentiveness and corresponding intellectual apprehension—which underlies the recently expanding modern global appeal of Ibn 'Arabi's writings and insights. For the very diverse audiences who have turned to his works in recent years—psychologists and other spiritual practitioners, artist-creators in every medium, theologians and philosophers of religion, and socio-political or religious reformers—are precisely the contemporary equivalents of his wide spectrum of Muslim audiences and effective, lastingly influential interpreters in earlier centuries.

This phenomenon is hardly surprising. For today—just as was happening throughout the Muslim world amidst the turmoil of the 13th century (CE)—we live in a world where the expression and perception of this realm of the divine "Signs in the souls" is being transformed by at least

three new globalizing conditions for spiritual life. What is perhaps most striking about these three interrelated transformations is the way that they are already relatively “invisible” and taken for granted by those who have grown up among them, being new and surprising only to those of us old enough to remember a very different world still marked by relatively separate and distinct religious and spiritual traditions and civilizations.

- (a) The first of those conditions, particularly influencing the actual symbolic forms and expressions of individual spiritual life everywhere today, is the highly eclectic spreading of a common, globally accessible set of popular symbolic repertoires that have been drawn from a host of previously separate civilizational, cultural, and religious traditions. In other words, we witness everywhere the emerging of a host of new, *globally* shared symbolic and mythological languages. The formation of this new, highly eclectic global culture can be seen and illustrated in detail, for example, at the level of children’s stories, cartoons and fables; of music, cinema and video games; of advertising; and of shared ethical and political ideals, such as issues involving the global environment and “green” consciousness, or of the shared rights of humans and other creatures. To a great extent, of course, the divine “Signs in the souls” are necessarily encountered and expressed in the guise of such widely shared symbols drawn directly from our effective (and affective) life-worlds. As one quickly discovers in teaching students and young people around the world today, the operative symbols that they naturally use to speak of their spiritual and ethical lives—whether consciously, or in the more intimate realm of dreams and the like—tend to be drawn from this same global repertoire of shared popular symbolism, rather than from the once-familiar earlier frameworks of religious scriptures or more local folkloric and poetic traditions.
- (b) The second new global condition transforming this domain of spiritual intelligence and realization is the wide popular awareness—perhaps only implicit and inchoate at the mass level, but readily filled out by any youngster with a modicum of curiosity—of the radical *similarities* between the essential spiritual and devotional practices (e.g., forms of prayer, pilgrimage, retreat, fasting, vigil, service, vows, sacrifice, personal guidance, etc.)

across what were previously taken by many to be quite separate and irreconcilable religious and devotional traditions. In souls with a spiritual vocation and intellectual curiosity, it is difficult to separate this particular emerging awareness at the level of spiritual practices from further questioning about other claims (doctrinal, theological, eschatological, and so on) that were also assumed to sharply distinguish different historical religious traditions.

- (c) The third new factor providing a shared global context for spiritual life—at least in urban, cosmopolitan and digitally well-connected settings—is the widespread novel situation of almost immediate personal access to and choices among a highly diverse spectrum of alternative spiritual tools, disciplines, and forms of guidance. Unlike past circumstances, these multiple practical options for spiritual guidance and practice are most often quite distinct from those initially provided by each individual’s prior familial background or cultural and religious adherence. Instead, those alternative possibilities are potentially drawn from a wide range of different religious and cultural traditions, including eclectic combinations and all sorts of self-proclaimed new innovations. (A few hours searching the internet, almost anywhere today, will amply illustrate the global phenomena I am alluding to here.) Often this new, broadly shared spectrum of potential spiritual resources is connected with, or expressed in a language tied to, wider human issues of “wholistic health” or other global environmental, ethical and political concerns.

While it is certainly far too early to discern all of the practical implications (whether social, cultural, religious and ethico-political) and the eventual longer-term results of these three inter-related and still recent global transformations, one very practical consequence is already quite evident. Each person interested in exploring and appropriately responding to the necessarily individual divine “Signs in their souls” is now obliged to seek out “translators” qualified and capable of connecting those Signs to their underlying Reality and Source—and who are then able to translate as well across and between the spiritual experiences and practices of disparate individuals from dramatically different backgrounds. (And at the same time, the traditional, formerly inherited cultural resources for making those essential interpretive connections are no longer automatically or effectively accessible.) Thus the philosophical breadth, flexibility, inclusivity and proven

effectiveness of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings in that regard mean that many new audiences are increasingly likely to turn their attention to his works (or to their philosophical, conceptual expression in the writings of Mulla Sadra), especially as the process of their translation and contextualization continues to make these writers’ teachings and perspectives more widely accessible, for readers far beyond their original learned Muslim scholarly audiences.

Finally, we may also note the ongoing phenomena of convergence, within this immense domain of spiritual realization, between the approaches of those devoted to and formed by more traditional forms of spiritual practice (from very different religious traditions), on the one hand; and the corresponding interests of contemporary researchers and *mubaqqiqūn* (psychologists, biologists, medical researchers, neuroscientists, healers, ethicists, environmental activists and many others) whose specialized inquiries naturally bring them to consider those spiritual Signs from the perspective of their own guiding concerns with health, healing, ecology, and related wider social concerns. As we have suggested in other publications, one way of speaking of that visibly emerging interface of convergence—if certainly more as a hoped-for ideal than as an as yet actualized reality—is in terms of an inclusive “*science of spirituality*”: i.e., as a spiritual phenomenology coherent with scientific perspectives and explanations, while somehow adequate and sufficiently open to the full range of religious realities and experiences of the spiritual world. Here again, we can see that a philosopher-scientist like Mulla Sadra, within the limitations and concerns of his own era, to a great extent already anticipated the need for such a science of spirituality—and that he also naturally turned to Ibn ‘Arabi and his classic interpreters for much of his guiding inspiration.

The Servants of the Beautiful (*‘ibād al-Jamīl*)

In one of the most widespread and influential hadith, the famous “Hadith of Gabriel,” the process of “recognizing-and-doing what is beautiful-and-good” (*ibṣān*) is presented as the ultimate purpose of human existence and as the culminating practical expression of the foundations of spiritual devotion and faith shared by all the manifold divine revelations. In response to Gabriel’s question about the meaning of *ibṣān*, the Prophet then responds that it is “to worship-and-serve God *as though you see Him*;

and if you do not see Him, still He sees you.”¹ This remarkable hadith is a salutary reminder, in the context of this essay, that the effective bridging between the divine Signs encountered and discovered “on the horizons” and those experienced “in the souls”—and in the spiritual and practical translation of both those kinds of Signs back to their source and intended meaning in the Real—is inseparable from that Love which flows from our discovery and response to the dimensions of divine Beauty inherent in all creation. Or in the words of another equally familiar and influential hadith: “He is Beautiful, and He *loves* beauty.”

If I have included in this essay this third and immensely varied group of “realizers” (*mubaqqiqūn*), it is because, whether we look at the world around us today, or in the times of Ibn ‘Arabi and Mulla Sadra, it is precisely these *mubsinūn* and “servants of the Beautiful” (*al-Jamīl*) whose creative acts of beauty actually help to awaken in most people (and which then continue to nourish) that love, wonder, and marveling reflection on God’s Signs which mark the conscious beginnings of each person’s spiritual journey. In Rumi’s repeated formula, those artists are the ones who open up for each of us that “Real-seeing eye” (*cheshm-i Haqq-bin*: the Qur’anic *basīra*) which is necessarily our constant companion on each of these particular pathways of devotion. If we need any reminding, it was not the greatest Muslim philosophers and theologians like Ibn ‘Arabi and Mulla Sadra who actually created the astonishingly diverse and innovative Islamic humanities that so rapidly spread following the Mongol devastations, but rather creative artistic figures (themselves often outstanding religious scholars) like Rumi, ‘Iraqi, Hafiz, Jami, and a host of other poetic and musical interpreters whose popularly appealing works of art and lastingly influential creations, across so many new languages and cultures, actually sowed the seeds of that suddenly expanding Islamic civilization.

The Servants of the All-Compassionate (‘ibād al-Rahmān):

In the vast majority of cases, there is still a great distance separating each of these relatively common pathways of realization and apprehension of the divine Signs from the state of those rare and mysterious “servants

¹ Or in another possible reading of the same Arabic phrase: “and if *you* are not, you do see Him, and He sees you.” The spiritual path of each human soul lies between those two readings.

of the All-Compassionate” who are themselves, in so many pervasive ways, among the deepest and most influential of the “Signs of God.” Indeed these rare “instruments of divine Compassion” (*rāhimūn*), if we may judge by the longer account of them at this sole passage in the Qur’an (25:63 and the following verses) and other indications concerning them in the hadith, are virtually identical with those divinely missioned “Friends” and “purely devoted Servants” of God whose unique and critically important spiritual states, qualities and functions are described more frequently throughout the Qur’an. So if we have singled out these special transforming figures here, it is because of the two spiritual qualities mentioned at the very beginning of their description, attributes which are clearly shared to some extent with those much larger groups of “realizers” who follow the pathways of realization (*taḥqīq*) with regard to any of the Signs of the Real (whether “on the horizons” or “in their souls”). The first of these distinctive qualities is their deep inner humility and self-effacement, since they are so constantly aware of Who actually bestows the illuminated awareness of the Source and individual specificity of each divine Sign. The second of those shared qualities is their inner equilibrium and self-possession, manifested in their remarkable refusal, even in the face of direct provocation and hostility, to fall into the natural egoistic pitfalls of quarreling and polemics. Instead they simply point to that ineffable divine Peace (*salām*) which flows from the spiritually inspired understanding and proper response to each of life’s ongoing divine lessons.

Some Preliminary Practical Conclusions (*tanbihāt*):

Keeping in mind those two essential qualities of all true servants of the Real, we may conclude by noting a few key qualities and potentials of these *mubaqqiqūn*, wherever they may be found. To begin with, there is a powerful inner affinity between the “servants” of each divine Name, a spiritual connection of purpose and perspective, which potentially unites those devotees across all the usual boundaries of cultures, languages and ethnicities—perhaps even of time and distance. As that reality is expressed in the words of another celebrated hadith: “The spirits are armies drawn up in ranks: those who recognize each other are in harmony/love with one another....”

Thus the process of realization naturally tends to bring together those who are following these pathways in some sort of cooperating

“teams” or mutually supportive communities, whether informal or more institutionalized, and whether at a local level or across much greater distances. Today that natural spiritual process of coalescence and cooperation may be most obviously and publicly visible, all across the world, in some of the natural and human sciences. But in the past it happened at least as suddenly and pervasively, after the 13th century, in a very different area of realization. There we witness the rapid emergence, across most of Africa and Asia, of a vast range of extraordinarily diverse spiritual brotherhoods and tariqas, each with its own distinctive, locally adapted devotional emphases, practical methodologies, and traditions. And simultaneously, we are struck by the even more pervasive development of popular religious rituals and localized institutions (shrines, festivals, and rites of pilgrimage and devotion) centering on the spiritual presence and influences of the “Friends of God” (the *awliyā’ Allah*).

Secondly, cooperation leads toward communion. In other words, the collaboration and mutual support often needed to successfully pursue these different pathways of divine realization—whatever their particular focus and initial starting point in each case—already presupposes a deeply shared, ontologically grounded purpose and vision. And that shared process of inquiry necessarily culminates in the discovery of a common constructive basis of understanding, in a shared experience of the Real (*al-Haqq*). For that shared revelatory experience of Being (in Arabic *wujūd*: literally the “ecstatic finding” of the divine Real), in every domain and circumstance, is radically different from the familiar outward socio-political processes of argument, persuasion, agreement, belief, or coercion.

Thirdly, communion leads toward communication. As Ibn ‘Arabi constantly reminds his readers and students, the actual experience of the Real, in every domain, is memorably transforming and profoundly enlivening. It calls out to be shared. There are dozens of pertinent Qur’anic verses about this dimension of realization, but perhaps the simplest and most inclusive reminder of this imperative, which he alludes to throughout his writings, is the remarkable divine Saying: “*I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. Therefore I created creation/people (al-khalq), so that I might be known.*” For “communication,” within this context of realization, has the very specific sense of actually showing or revealing—in Qur’anic language, inwardly “reminding” the soul (*dhikr*) of—the particular “face” or Name of the Real that is actually in question.

Finally, effective spiritual communication requires creative imagination. And that creativity, in reality, has its own very practical pre-conditions of individual freedom, experimentation, spontaneity, and innovation. Indeed the irreducible uniqueness and inherent value of each individual soul and its own unique “Signs” is at the very heart of the process of realization, in all its forms. So it is surely no accident that those particular spiritual and political pre-conditions for realization were so constantly highlighted in Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive understanding of revelation, prophecy and sainthood—and likewise in Mulla Sadra’s own forceful philosophical reiteration of those principles later in Safavid Iran.

This last imperative also explains the determinant role in the ongoing elaboration of a truly global Islamic civilization of the illuminating acts of beauty and beneficence (*ih̄sān*) of all the “servants of the Beautiful.” Nothing could be more poignantly open-ended—or more profoundly challenging—than the simple phrase “as though” in the Prophet’s own explanation of *ih̄sān* as the culminating expression of all divine Religion: “to worship/serve God *as though* you see Him....” ❖