

SUFİ TAFSİR

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The academic study of Islamic mysticism, although over two centuries old, is still inchoate.¹ To be sure, there have in recent years been many groundbreaking developments that allow us to better understand various aspects of the Sufi tradition. As the wider field of religious studies increasingly bears upon the narrower field of Islamic Studies, countless new methods and theories are being brought to the forefront of the discussion. This gives the current study of Sufism a more textured feel. However, by the same token, it points up what large gaps there still are in even a basic presentation of the Sufi tradition and those figures, ideas, and institutions that we normally place within it.²

After Paul Nwyia's fundamental insights on the rootedness of the Sufi worldview in the Qur'an replaced the more outdated (and at times hostile) views on the "heterodox" origins of the Sufi tradition,³ modern scholarship has borne witness to a number of studies on what can be called "Sufi Qur'anic exegesis" (*tafsīr al-ṣūfī*),⁴ also dubbed "allusive exegesis" (*al-tafsīr bi l-ishāra*), and the individual authors who make up this enterprise.⁵ And, if we are willing to extend the label of Sufi *tafsīr* to approaches that are spiritually and philosophically oriented, our reading list becomes even greater.⁶

It is safe to say that the study of Sufi *tafsīr* is flourishing, with a number of other studies on individual Sufi exegetes currently in the works.⁷ Yet it is also clear that by Sufi "approaches" to the Qur'an, we need not only consider writings that narrowly fit into the rubric of what we can call *tafsīr*, however vaguely defined. Many influential Sufis in the Islamic tradition did not leave behind works that would be considered a Sufi Qur'an commentary, but nevertheless their writings function as esoteric commentaries on the Qur'an. This point is rightfully highlighted by Annabel Keeler and Sajjad Rizvi in their coedited volume, *The Spirit and the Letter*, which covers not only conventional esoteric commentaries within the wider framework of *tafsīr* but also essays on esoteric commentaries that are not usually classified under the rubric of *tafsīr*.

What makes these latter kinds of works particularly important for those interested in Sufi *tafsīr* is that they may have had, historically speaking, a greater impact on the Sufi tradition than some of the better known Sufi Qur'an commentaries proper. Let us take, for example, the work of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), widely recognized as the most influential and prolific thinker in the Sufi tradition. Although he appears to have completed a massive Qur'anic commentary,⁸ which is now lost, his magnum opus *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*) is itself a full-fledged running esoteric commentary upon the Qur'an.⁹ In fact, as Michel Chodkiewicz and Abdel Baki Meftah have demonstrated, the structure of some major parts of the *Futūḥāt* is itself based on the structure of the Qur'an, and this phenomenon is also found in his influential work *Fūṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (*The Ringstones of Wisdom*).¹⁰ These two works by Ibn 'Arabī are not Sufi *tafsīrs* as such, and yet the abundance

of Qur'anic interpretations within them have left an indelible mark upon later Sufism and Islamic philosophy.¹¹

With these preliminary remarks in mind, my investigation of Sufi *tafsīr* is guided by two questions: (1) what are the hermeneutical principles of Sufi *tafsīr*, and (2) how can we deploy them to delineate the parameters of a genre of *tafsīr* that accounts for both Sufi and non-Sufi *tafsīr*?¹² In answering these questions, I argue that while the Qur'an and hadith constitute the foundational sources of both the Sufi and exoteric *tafsīr* tradition, the Sufi interpretive approach is embedded in the esoteric premises that are enshrined in these canonical sources of Islamic exegesis.

A Normative or Marginal Genre?

Commenting on the scholarly understanding of a genre, Walid Saleh remarks that while "there is a solid consensus among scholars as to what a genre is not," there is "very little agreement about what it is."¹³ If this holds true for the broader tradition of exoteric *tafsīr* literature, the case is even more problematic with respect to Sufi *tafsīr*. In spite of this, there exists a trend in Qur'anic Studies scholarship that considers Sufi *tafsīr* a marginal subgenre of Qur'an commentary.¹⁴ The "esoteric" character of Sufi exegesis, however esoteric may be defined and qualified, is often invoked to justify this typology. What makes a Sufi *tafsīr* work or an interpretation esoteric is a contested question, however. Scholars have yet to agree on the definition of esoteric in Islam. Until we do so, we must carefully probe into the nature of a genre before we can decide whether Sufi *tafsīr* sits on the margin or within the normative genre of Qur'an commentary.¹⁵

One way to approach this question is by bearing in mind, as one scholar rightly puts it, that "the whole Islamic esoteric tradition is essentially an esoteric commentary upon the Qur'an, which includes works written for the specific purpose of esoteric commentary to comments scattered throughout all types of Islamic esoteric works."¹⁶ For one thing, this remark entails that the frontiers of an esoteric genre of *tafsīr* go far beyond the narrow discipline of Qur'anic commentary proper. This matter is further complicated by the fact that many Sufis have authored Qur'anic commentaries that were strictly or partly exoteric.¹⁷ In this respect, then, we have good reasons to think that an esoteric *tafsīr* is not as self-contained as we may be led to believe. This would have the effect of affording Sufi *tafsīr* a more central role vis-à-vis its normativity as a Qur'anic interpretive tradition.¹⁸

Another way of grappling with genre as a conceptual construct is to consider what genre theorists have to say about its nature.¹⁹ According to A. Devitt, a genre is conventionally defined as "a classification system of texts based on shared formal characteristics."²⁰ This conception, A. Bawarshi further explains, tends to "fixate on genres as relatively static objects to be taught and acquired as part of disciplinary and professional enculturation."²¹ Against this pervasive way of thinking about genre, however, Devitt suggests that "genres are defined less by their formal conventions than by their purposes, participants, and subjects: by their rhetorical actions."²² In short, the key insight we can take from genre experts is that "genres" are fluid constructs that cannot be readily distilled from one another.²³ In light of these observations, we need to entertain a more dynamic definition of Sufi *tafsīr*, one in which the exoteric and esoteric meanings of scripture form an integral part of its interpretive horizons. In so doing, we will be less disposed to place Sufi *tafsīr* on the "margin" of a so-called "normative" genre of *tafsīr*, which is misleadingly identified in Qur'anic Studies with the exoteric *tafsīr* literature. As we have pointed out, many Sufi exegetes included in their *tafsīrs* extensive discussions of the exoteric meanings of the Qur'an. The same is true of non-Sufi exegetes like Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 606/1209) and Abū Ishāq al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) who incorporated Sufi interpretations into their respective *tafsīrs*.²⁴

With that said, we cannot play down the fundamental differences between the Sufi and the strictly exoteric tradition of Qur'an commentary. The Sufi interpretive method is rooted in the esoteric premises of the Qur'an and Sunna, namely, the hierarchical ontology of scripture, and the initiatic regimens

that came down from the Prophet to successive generations of Sufi masters. Considering the scope of Sufi *tafsīr* is perhaps a more meaningful way to understand its relation to the exoteric interpretive tradition. Thus if the literal word of Scripture determines the scope of exoteric exegesis proper, the integrity of the letter is instrumental in the Sufi interpretive framework. If, however, the esoteric scope of the Word is what fundamentally motivates the enterprise of Sufi hermeneutics, it is not so for the exoteric exegetical approach. All this goes to show that a “genre” is not an entirely reliant construct for determining the normativity of an exegetical tradition, particularly when the presumed “norm” is shaped by commentators whose *tafsīr* incorporated both exoteric and esoteric interpretations.

Qur’anic Foundations

Like most other currents of Qur’anic exegesis in the Islamic tradition, Sufis ground their scriptural approach in the Qur’an itself and the hadith (Prophetic traditions). A key feature of their interpretive framework is the belief that the Qur’an, as the verbatim Word of God, is infinite in scope and depth, a premise inferred from the following verses: “Say, if the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it” (Q 18:109),²⁵ and “if all the trees on the earth were pens, the sea, with seven more seas to replenish it (were ink), the Words of God would not be exhausted” (Q 31:27).²⁶

Notwithstanding the variety of Sufi interpretations on these verses, the esoteric commentary of ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1300/1883) on Q 18:109 – as developed in his metaphysical summa *Kitāb al-mawāqif* (*The Book of Spiritual Waystations*) – exemplifies a classical Sufi account of the high ontology of scripture. The following passage is most telling in this regard:

[His Speech] has no finitude because It does not enter into existence in its entirety; for, if it did, it would necessarily be finite. But [His speech] is not confined [*munḥasar*], in contrast with the sea, which is confined insofar as it enters into existence [*wujūd*]. For whatever enters into existence is finite [*mutanāhī*]. Hence, if the finite “sea were ink for the infinite Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent and exhausted before the Words of my Lord are spent,” for God’s Words are infinite; “even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it” that is, “even if We brought about another sea like it.”²⁷

Jazā’irī’s commentary proceeds from a basic ontological division: finitude and infinitude. From these two principles, he develops a higher ontology of the Divine Word that can be summed up as follows: insofar as God’s words (qua His speech) are qualified by His eternity, they are coeternal with Him and are therefore infinite; however, insofar as the “sea” is qualified by “[contingent] existence” (*wujūd*), it is co-contingent with *wujūd* and necessarily qualified by finitude.²⁸ Thus the infinity of God’s words cannot be embraced by the finite sea, but the finite sea can be embraced by the infinity of God’s words.

If God’s Word is eternal, as standard Sufi theology maintains, it follows that the content of the Qur’an is infinite and is not therefore reducible to its spatiotemporal form qua a written and recited “codex” (*muṣṣaf*). In the Sufi interpretive scheme, the eternal content of the Divine Word generates an infinite plenitude of meanings.²⁹ Accordingly, the meanings of the revealed text are perpetually unfolding before the interpretive eye of the Sufi, with each meaning revealing a new aspect of the Divine Word.³⁰

Inspired by this rich ontology of Scripture, another major Sufi author, Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), writes:

The aspects (*wujūh*) of understanding [the Qur’an] cannot be confined because the aspects of the Word are inexhaustible, for God says: “Say, if the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent” (Q 18:109). Within

each Word of God in the Qur'an are His Words, which would not be spent, even if "the sea would be spent."³¹

This passage foregrounds the higher ontology of the Qur'an as expressed by al-Jazā'irī centuries later, which has always been central to the Sufi *tafsīr* tradition. For Suhrawardī, the inexhaustible aspects of the Divine Word are concordant with the inexhaustible interpretations of the Divine Word. In other words, if God's Word is coeternal with His knowledge, the "sea" of finite interpretations "would be spent" before the content of His eternal knowledge would be spent.³²

Signs on the Horizons and Verses in the Souls

While any assessment of Sufi *tafsīr* must be prefaced by an ontology of the Divine Word, our investigation would be incomplete without discussing the preeminent place of "allusive exegesis" (*al-tafsīr al-ishārī*) in this exegetical tradition. For some Sufis, the allusive method of exegesis is used interchangeably with *ta'wīl* (lit. "to bring [a word] back to its 'origin,'" *awwala*), for both designate an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an.³³ The term "allusive" has gained wider acceptance because of its symbolic resonance with the Sufi spiritual path.³⁴ The interplay between the hermeneutic of the Word and of the soul, as Sufi exegetes have construed it, is eminently expressed for them in the following Qur'anic verse: "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their souls till it becomes clear to them that He is the Real" (Q 41:53). As we shall see, scriptural allusions reveal within the human soul the inward counterparts of the cosmic "signs" (*āyāt*) of God. Commenting on this verse, Ibn 'Arabī offers some illuminating remarks on this interface between the cosmic and microcosmic "signs" of God as follows:

The discourse of our companions in explaining His Mighty Book, "to which falsehood comes not from before it nor from behind it" (Q 41:42), is allusions (*ishārāt*), though it is truth and a commentary (*sharḥ*) upon its beneficial meanings. They refer all its [i.e., scripture's] meanings back to their own souls while upholding its general [meaning] and the mode in which it was sent down, as known to the people of this language to whom it was revealed. Hence God combined the two modes [of exegesis] in them, as He said, "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their souls" (Q 41:53), that is, "We shall show them the verses which are sent down concerning the horizons and their own souls."³⁵

For Ibn 'Arabī, Sufis use allusions when commenting upon the Qur'an in order to mirror a mode of Divine discourse that is not readily accessible to the exoteric commentators. He further adds, however, that an allusion is superimposed over the literal discourse of Scripture, inasmuch as it reveals through the letter of the Qur'an itself a higher meaning within the human soul. While couched in the plain language of the Qur'anic revelation, what Ibn 'Arabī calls "the mode in which the Qur'an was sent down," allusion corresponds to what we may provisionally term an interpretation of the spiritual "verses" of the human soul. These "verses" of the soul mirror in turn the "verses" of God "upon the Horizons," revealing thereby a deeper affinity between the macrocosmic and microcosmic "signs" of God within the sacred Text.

The significance of an allusion is thus not so much its esoteric overtone but its interpretive leap, namely, its capacity to enrich the hermeneutical scope of the plain discourse of the Qur'anic revelation. The stated leap from the letter to its allusive implication within the human soul is dismissed by exoteric exegetes for reasons that Ibn 'Arabī explains as follows:

Every revealed verse has two senses [*wajhān*]: a sense which people see *within* their souls and a sense which they see *outside* of themselves. That which they see within themselves

they call an “allusion”. . . . Our companions have chosen the term “allusion” rather than other terms for their explanations of the Book of God because of a Divine instruction of which the exoteric scholars are ignorant. This is so because an “allusion” is only posited with respect to the *intention* of the one making an allusion, not with respect to the object of the allusion.³⁶

The outward “sense” that the Sufis and the exoteric commentators “see outside of themselves” is framed against the “sense” of the same verse that the Sufis “see within their souls.” For Ibn ‘Arabī, the interface between “the two senses” of every Qur’anic verse expresses a relation of codependence, but it also reflects the internal hierarchy of the revealed Book. For this reason, Ibn ‘Arabī is adamant that the allusive “sense” of the Qur’an corresponds to an elevated but, more importantly, inspired mode of exegesis that the exoteric scholars are unaware of.

We might ask: what it is about an allusive interpretation that eludes the exoteric theologians, and what confers upon this interpretive model an “esoteric” character? Part of the answer lies in the distinction that Ibn ‘Arabī makes between the object of an allusion and the intention of the alluding agent. To this we can add that which disposes a Sufi to apprehend the allusive indications of the Qur’an within his soul, what Ibn ‘Arabī would call a person’s “preparedness” (*isti‘ādā*). As Ibn ‘Arabī affirms, the reason for the allusion is to reveal the “intention of the one who alludes,” not his intention “with respect to the object of allusion [i.e., the verse itself].” The distinction is indicative of the crucial difference between a Sufi and a non-Sufi commentary on the Qur’an. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

One of the characteristics of the exoteric scholar in defending himself is that he is ignorant of he who says, “My Lord has bestowed upon me an understanding.” He considers himself superior to the one who says this and to the true possessor of knowledge. But He who is one of the Folk of God says, “God has cast into my inmost consciousness what He meant by this rule in this verse.”³⁷

Here, Ibn ‘Arabī draws attention to the modality of Divine discourse that the Sufi apprehends within himself but that is inadmissible to the exoteric scholar. The point that he is making is better understood if we further reflect on the stated relationship between the object and the intention of an allusion. Here, the interpretive scope of the exoteric exegesis is restricted to the letter of scripture (i.e., the object of an allusion), whereas the scope of Sufi *tafsīr* includes both the letter and the meaning that God “cast into the inmost consciousness” of the exegete (i.e., the intended allusion). This explains, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s mind, why the exoteric scholar is largely dismissive of the allusive interpretations of the Folk of God. Speaking this time of the esoteric modality of revealed discourse, he explains the reason why the *ta’wīl* of the Sufis are not directly disclosed by God in the Qur’an. Consider this passage:

The jurists are ignorant of the modes in which the address of the Real descend. But in this, the folk of God follow the path of guidance, for God has the power to state explicitly the [esoteric] interpretations [*ta’awwul*] of the Folk of God in His Book, but He has not done so. On the contrary, He embedded into those Divine words, which are revealed in the language of the common people, the sciences of the meanings of the elect, which He makes His servants understand when He opens the eyes of comprehension.”³⁸

As discussed earlier, a scriptural allusion is what the Sufis “refer back to their own souls” and “see within themselves.” This is the sense in which the terms *ta’wīl* and *ishāra* are both understood in the Sufi interpretive tradition. To be sure, these esoteric meanings are not explicitly spelled out in

the Qur'an, as Ibn 'Arabī reckons, but they are nonetheless divinely disclosed to the spiritual elect through “the language of the common people” – i.e., the literal words of revelation. Unlike the exoteric interpretation of the sacred Book, which in principle is accessible to anyone who is sufficiently proficient in Arabic, the esoteric comprehension of the Qur'an is ultimately inspired by God. This interpretive scheme safeguards the integrity of the literal text of Scripture while making a strong case for the virtual inherence of esoteric meanings in it.

Those Firmly Rooted in Knowledge

While the term *ishāra* is not expressly used in the Qur'an to designate an esoteric mode of interpretation, the term *ta'wīl* is explicitly mentioned in a key verse, the interpretation of which has been intensively disputed among the Sufis and the exoteric commentators. The verse states:

It is He Who sent down the Book upon thee; therein are univocal verses [*muḥkam*], they are the Mother of the Book, and others are symbolic [*mutashābih*]. As for those whose hearts are given to swerving, they follow that of it which is symbolic, seeking temptation and seeking its interpretation [*ta'wīl*]. And none knows its interpretation [*ta'wīl*] save God and those firmly rooted in knowledge, they say, “We believe in it; all is from our Lord.”

(Q 3:7)

The verse enumerates two types of Qur'anic verses, the “univocal” (*muḥkam*) and “symbolic” (*mutashābih*), each of which has its corresponding mode of interpretation. Both the exoteric and Sufi exegetes seem to agree that the “univocal” verses are clear from their literal words, leaving no room for further interpretation, while the *mutashābih* verses pose some interpretive challenges.³⁹ The disagreement is whether the *mutashābih* verses are beyond human interpretation, as the exoteric theologians claim, or they indeed are accessible to the spiritual elite, as Sufis contend. Significantly, the verse employs the term *ta'wīl* to describe the interpretation of the *mutashābih* verses – a term, we should note, that has assumed different meanings and applications for different schools of Qur'anic exegesis.⁴⁰

The initial point of divergence, however, is of a syntactical nature. By reading a possible full stop after “none knows its interpretation [*ta'wīl*] save God,” the exoteric exegetes refuted the possibility of anyone else knowing the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābih* verses. By omitting the stop, the Sufis reckoned otherwise.⁴¹ This seemingly trivial feature of punctuation had far-reaching significance for the enterprise of *tafsīr* in the mainstream Qur'anic exegetical tradition. For the exoteric commentators, the full stop entailed that the interpretation of the *mutashābih* verses is restricted to God alone, precluding thereby the Prophet and any other community of interpreters from knowing the meanings of these verses. Conversely, it implied that the Prophet and his community can only interpret the “univocal” verses.

By reading the verse without a full stop (after “save God”), which is equally admitted, the Sufis claimed that a distinguished community of interpreters, namely “those firmly rooted in knowledge,” know the *ta'wīl* of the *mutashābih* verses with God. To suggest otherwise would imply that the Prophet, his distinguished Companions, and everyone else in his community possess the same knowledge of the Qur'an and thereby share the same spiritual distinction – a grave assertion that no exoteric theologian would make. To add further weight to their interpretative scheme, however, many Sufi commentators, past and present, resorted to a key hadith in which a hierarchy of meanings permeates the Qur'anic discourse and determines in turn the hierarchy among communities of interpreters.

Prophetic Foundations

Notwithstanding the lingering dispute over Q 3:7, the mere indication of a symbolic order of scriptural meaning leaves the interpretive door wide open for Sufis to explore other canonical sources to justify the existence of an esoteric dimension in the Qur'an. By far, the most widely quoted hadith of the Prophet that Sufi exegetes cite to corroborate their view that the Qur'anic revelation is hierarchically structured is narrated by Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652) as follows: "the Qur'an has a back [*ẓahr*] and a belly [*baṭn*], a boundary [*ḥadd*], and the boundary has a point of elevation [*maṭla'*]." ⁴² The "back" (*ẓahr*) and "belly" (*baṭn*) of the Qur'an, as Sufis have understood this hadith, are identified respectively with the "exoteric/outer" (*zāhir*) and "esoteric/inner" (*bāṭin*), or literal and spiritual, content of scripture respectively. This fundamental division not only reflects the "univocal" (*muḥkam*) and "symbolic" (*mutashābih*) dyad in the aforementioned Qur'anic verse (Q 3:7), it plays a critical role in Sufi discussions of the prophetic foundations of Sufi esoteric exegesis.

A similar fourfold account of scripture is attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), arguably the most venerated figure after the Prophet in the Sufi and Shi'i esoteric traditions, who proclaimed that:

There is no verse of the Qur'an that does not have four meanings [*ma'ānī*]: an outer [*zāhir*] and an inner [*bāṭin*] meaning, a legislative ruling [*ḥadd*], comprising of what is permissible and forbidden, and a point of elevation [*maṭla'*], which is what God intends for a servant to understand. ⁴³

A third and final statement is ascribed to Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), the most important early source for esoteric Qur'anic exegesis, who said that "the Qur'an is comprised of formal expressions [*ibāra*], allusions [*ishāra*], subtleties [*laṭā'if*] and realities [*ḥaqā'iq*]." The "formal expression," he explains, "corresponds to the literal meaning, as intended for the common people [*āmma*]; the "allusions" are intended for the elite [*khawāss*]; the "subtleties" are intended for the saints [*awliyā*]; and the "realities" are understood by the prophets [*anbiyā*]." ⁴⁴

Apart from the *zāhir* and the *ḥadd*, Sufi *tafsīr* is largely geared toward the *bāṭin* and *maṭla'*, or *ishāra* and *laṭā'if*. Unlike the *zāhir* of the Qur'an, however, the interpretation of the inner meanings is not necessarily contingent on formal training in the transmitted tradition of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr bi l-ma'thūr*), though many Sufis considered such a training necessary and highly beneficial. ⁴⁵ As most Sufis contend, a God-inspired interpretation is ultimately the fruit of spiritual practices that are instituted in the Qur'an and transmitted by the Prophet to qualified members of the Muslim community. ⁴⁶

This interpretive approach, however, did not go unchallenged by some exoteric theologians who accused the Sufis of engaging in "opinion-based exegesis" (*tafsīr bi l-ra'y*) and of undermining the primacy of the "transmitted exegesis" (*tafsīr bi l-ma'thūr*). ⁴⁷ Against this charge, the Sufis professed their commitment to the transmitted method of *tafsīr* and unanimously rejected any interpretation that contradicts the literal meaning of Scripture. Unlike certain trends of Isma'ili exegesis, which both the Sufis and mainstream Qur'an commentators hold in contempt for abrogating the literal meaning of the Qur'an, the Sufis are adamant that their spiritual interpretations do not invalidate the literal meaning of the sacred text.

The function and scope of the letter is therefore at the heart of this debate. In fact, the tension between Sufis and some exoteric theologians is primarily centered on the semantic boundary and interpretive breadth of the Qur'anic "letter." In other words, how far can the letter of the Qur'an be stretched without sacrificing its semantic integrity?

Effectively, if the letter is instrumental in Sufi *tafsīr*, it is prescriptive and directive in exoteric *tafsīr*. While some theologians have questioned the loyalty of the Sufis to the letter of the Qur'an,

others, such as the prominent Ash‘arī theologian and critic of Ibn‘Arabi, Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 793/1390), defended the Sufis against these unfounded charges. What’s more, as explained soon, al-Taftāzānī is wont to stress the fundamental distinction between the objectionable exegesis of the Ismailis, dubbed the “esotericists” (*bāṭiniyya*) and the sound exegesis of the Sufis. He writes:

The heretics were called esotericists [*bāṭiniyya*] for claiming that the [scriptural] texts are other than what their outward meanings [*ẓāhir*] denote; instead they express meanings that are known to no one save the [esoteric] teacher [*mu‘allim*]. What they intend by this is the abrogation of the Law [*sharī‘a*] altogether. As for what some of the [spiritual] verifiers (i.e., Sufis) have stated, namely, that the scriptural texts must be read outwardly, but that they nonetheless contain subtle allusions [*ishārāt*] concerning certain truths that are unveiled to those masters of spiritual wayfaring [*arbāb al-sulūk*] and which are concordant with the outward meaning of the text, this approach is the hallmark of faith and the utmost degree of gnosis [*irfān*].⁴⁸

Coming from a theologian who was known for his stringent criticism of Ibn‘Arabī and his school, al-Taftāzānī’s endorsement of Sufi *tafsīr* is quite telling. Above all, it suggests that the parameters of Sufi *tafsīr* should not be judged by any exegetical norm save the norm of scripture itself. The most crucial criterion that any Qur’anic commentary must conform to, as he previously states, is the integrity of the literal word of scripture. This is what differentiates, for al-Taftāzānī, Sufi from Isma‘ili exegesis. The allusions of the Sufis, which are the fruit of an intensive spiritual discipline, are “concordant with the outward meaning of scripture,” while Isma‘ili exegesis maintains that the esoteric meaning of the Qur’an, which is only known to the esoteric guide, is altogether other than its literal meanings.⁴⁹ Put in these terms, al-Taftāzānī is setting the parameters of a normative Sunni exegesis within Scripture itself, rather than framing the norm against a subgenre of exegesis. The allusive interpretations of the Sufis are ultimately judged against the letter of Scripture first and embedded thereafter in the spiritual foundations of the Sufi path.

Concluding Remarks

By illustrating how the Sufi exegetical tradition is thoroughly embedded in the Qur’an and the hadith, our aim was not only to show that Sufi *tafsīr* is as legitimate as the mainstream *tafsīr* tradition but to argue that it is as normative as the latter. After all, it should be kept in mind that many of the great Sufi Qur’anic exegetes were themselves exceptionally well trained in the more exoteric forms of Islamic theology and Qur’anic exegesis.

Like their exoteric counterparts, Sufis rely on the Qur’an and hadith to develop a transcendental ontology of the Divine Word, the implication of which informs every other consideration pertaining to the hierarchical and esoteric content of the Qur’anic revelation. While Sufis insist on the inspirational source of their “allusive” interpretations of the Qur’an, they have an unrelenting commitment to the letter of scripture. Unlike the exoteric exegetes, however, the letter is intended to reveal the inner “signs” of Scripture within the human soul. This interpretive perspective is envisaged as a hermeneutical reflection, one in which the literal and spiritual meanings of the Qur’an mirror one another. In the final analysis, in Sufi *tafsīr* it is not a matter of leaping from the letter of the Divine Word into its spirit but rather of plunging past the surface of the letter into that infinite expanse that the Sufis refer to as “an Ocean without a shore.”

Notes

- 1 For a far-ranging survey of the study of Sufism in the modern academy, see Khalil and Sheikh, “Sufism in Western Historiography: A Brief Overview,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 1 (2016): 194–217.

- 2 With respect to these “gaps” in our knowledge of the Sufi tradition, we still lack, inter alia, even elementary discussions and explanations of the nature, content, and influence of a variety of major Sufi texts and their commentary traditions (where applicable). A step in that direction is under way, namely, the forthcoming *Guide to Sufi Literature* (eds. Rustom and Lombard), which covers some 80 different premodern Sufi texts written in seven different languages and spanning over a millennium.
- 3 For a comprehensive account of the Qur’anic foundations of the Sufi tradition, see P. Nwya, *Exégèse Coranique et Langage Mystique: Nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulman* (Paris and Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1970). See also Louis Massignon, *Essai sur Les origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique Musulmane* (Paris: Cerf, 1999).
- 4 For a historical survey of Sufi Qur’anic exegesis, see A. Habil, “Traditional Esoteric Commentaries,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. S.H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Gerhard Bowering, “The Scriptural ‘Senses’ in Medieval Sufi Qur’an Exegesis,” in *With Reverence to the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 346–365. Alexander D. Knysh, “Sufism and the Qur’ān,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Kristin Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’ān in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006); A. Godlas, “Sūfism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009); M. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (New York: Paulist, 1996), chapter 2; W. Chittick, “Quran and Sufism,” in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lombard, and Mohammed Rustom (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 1737–1749. See also T. Mayer, “Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary,” in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lombard, and Mohammed Rustom (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 1819–1855.
- 5 For book-length studies (in European languages) that are exclusively devoted to individual Sufi tafṣīrs, as well as English translations of some of these tafṣīrs, see G. Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur’ānic Hermeneutics of the Sūfi Sahl at-Tustarī* (Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1980); Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, April 2017); J. Elias, *Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of ‘Alā’ ad-Dawla as-Simnānī* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); R. Gramlich, *Abu l-‘Abbās b. ‘Atā’: Sufi und Koranleger* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995); Annabel Keeler, *Sūfi Hermeneutics: The Qur’an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006; partial tr. Chittick, *Unveiling of the Mysteries*); P. Lory, *Les Commentaires ésotériques du Coran d’après ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī* (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1980); M. Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar: Abū’l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012) (Qushayrī, d. 465/1072; partial tr. Sands, *Subtle Allusions*); Laury Silvers, *Soaring Minaret: Abu Bakr al-Wāṣiṭī and the Rise of Baghdadī Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010). A very helpful study that brings together the views of different Sufi Qur’anic exegetes on a theme of particular importance for Sufism, namely the Moses–Khidr encounter (see Q 18:66–82) is H. Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Quranic Story of Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model for Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013).
- 6 For a survey of “esoteric” exegesis in Shi‘ism and Islamic philosophy, see the editors’ “Introduction” to *The Spirit and the Letter: Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretation of the Quran*, ed. Annabel Keeler and Sajjad Rizvi (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2016), 1–21. See also Toby Mayer, “Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary,” 1819–1855, and his “Introduction” to *Shahrastānī’s Esoteric Commentary on the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2009); see also Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012) and the forthcoming study on Ibn Sīnā’s Qur’anic commentary by Jonathan Dubé, *Turning to the Real: Ibn Sīnā’s Interpretation of the Qur’an* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, in press).
- 7 I have in mind a number of doctoral dissertations in progress, such as Hamilton Cook’s (Emory) study of Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī Burūsawī’s (d. 1137/1725) politicization of the *insān al-kāmil* doctrine, which substantially engages with his Sufi Qur’an commentary *Rūḥ al-bayān* (*The Spirit of Elucidation*); Omneya Ayad’s (Exeter) investigation into Ahmad ibn ‘Ajība’s (d. 1224/1809) *al-Baḥr al-maḍīd* (*The Vast Ocean*), and my forthcoming dissertation (University of Toronto) on the Sufi tafṣīr of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, as found in his *Kitāb al-mawāqif* (*The Book of Spiritual Waystations*) – *Kitāb al-mawāqif fi ba’d ishārāt al-qur’ān ilā l-asrār wa l-ma’ārif*, 3 vols., ed. Bakri ‘Alā al-Dīn (Damascus: Ninawi li l-Ṭaba’a wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzī’, 2014). See also Pieter Coppens, “God in This World and the Otherworld: Crossing Boundaries in Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’ān” (PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2015).

- 8 As indicated by Meftah and Chodkiewicz, Ibn 'Arabi states in his *Fihrist* (i.e., *Fihrist mu'allaqāt al-shaykh al-akbar*, RG172) that he authored a Qur'an commentary, in 64 volumes, entitled *al-Jam' wa l-tafsīl fī asrār ma'ānī l-tanzīl* (*The Synthesis and Exposition Concerning the Arcana of the Revealed Meanings*), which appeared to be lost. See Chodkiewicz, *Un Océan sans Rivage: Ibn Arabi, Le Livre et La Loi* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992), 166, note 37; also noted by Meftah in his annotated edition, with introduction and commentary on Ibn 'Arabi's *Ishārāt al-qur'ān fī 'ālam al-insān* (Damascus: Dār al-Ninawi li l-Dirāsāt wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzī', 2016), 21.
- 9 Ibn 'Arabi also penned a partial commentary upon the Qur'an that runs to Q 2:253 but that is as yet unedited: http://archive.ibnarabisociety.org/archive_reports/works_pdf_alpha/268.pdf#page=1&pagemode=none&toolbar=1&navpanes=0. Also extant is his commentary on a selection of Qur'anic verses, currently being edited by Denis Gril: http://archive.ibnarabisociety.org/archive_reports/works_pdf_alpha/303.pdf#page=1&pagemode=none&toolbar=1&navpanes=0.
- 10 Chodkiewicz, *Un Océan sans Rivage*, chapters 2–5. See also Meftah, *Ḥaqā'iq al-qur'ān 'inda Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī* (Amman: 'Ālam al-Kutub al-Ḥadīth, 2016). See also Denis McAuley, *Ibn 'Arabī's Mystical Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 3.
- 11 See Chittick, "The School of Ibn 'Arabī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 510–523; Chodkiewicz, *Un Océan sans Rivage*, chapter 1; Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, chapters 1 and 6–7.
- 12 The boundaries between "genres" of *tafsīr* and the parameters that define each genre of *tafsīr* remain a very vexing issue over which scholars are divided. See Karen Bauer, "Justifying the Genre: A Study of Introductions to Classical Works of *Tafsīr*," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur'anic Exegesis (2nd/8th–9th/15th centuries)*, ed. Karen Bauer (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), 39–67. For an extensive discussion of this question, see "Introduction," in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. Andreas Gorke and Johanna Pink (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), 1–23. The notion of Sufi *tafsīr* as a genre sufficient unto itself is called into question in J. Elias, "Sufi *Tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010): 41–42. See our engagement with his argument later in the chapter.
- 13 Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 16.
- 14 This label is used by nearly all scholars to distinguish Sufi *tafsīr* from the exoteric Sunni *tafsīr* tradition. See the introduction to *The Spirit and the Letter* for a discussion of this question and the reasons that the editors cite for classifying certain trends of exegesis, notably, Sufi, as an esoteric genre of *tafsīr*. As previously indicated, J. Elias is perhaps the only exception to this rule.
- 15 For a critical analysis of the notion of "esoteric" and its exegetical and epistemological connotation within the field of Islamic Studies, see F. Hamza, "Locating the 'Esoteric' in Islamic Studies," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid Saleh (Leiden, Brill: 2016), 355–366.
- 16 Habil, "Traditional Esoteric Commentaries," 24.
- 17 Prominent examples include the *tafsīr* of Sahl al-Tustarī, Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tha'libī (d. 866/1461–2), Ibn 'Ajība, to name but a few.
- 18 The main objections that J. Elias raised in his piece, "'Sufi *Tafsīr* Reconsidered," against a genre-based conception of Sufi *tafsīr* pertain to the hierarchical framework (multifaceted content of the Quran) and hermeneutical division (*ẓāhir*–*bāṭin*) that, he argues, Sufi and non-Sufis posit in their respective exegetical approach. On this score, he contends that Sufi *tafsīr* is no different from other traditions of exegesis and should therefore not be classified as esoteric *per se*. His objection would be justified if we completely overlook the the fundamental difference between a Sufi and a non-Sufi understanding of the hierarchical character of the Qur'an and the spiritual method that Sufis conform to in order to uncover the inner meanings of Scripture. At the core, this is what distinguishes a Sufi exegesis from other genres of exegesis. What makes a commentary or a doctrine esoteric or exoteric can sometimes be elusive, but to suggest that these conceptual terms have no epistemological bearing on Sufi and non-Sufi approaches to scriptural commentary is even more misleading.
- 19 An extensive discussion of this and other cognate questions are discussed by A. Gorke and J. Pink in their introduction to *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, especially 3–11.
- 20 A.J. Devitt, *Writing Genres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 6.
- 21 Anis Bawarshi, "Beyond the Genre Fixation: A Translingual Perspective on Genre," *College English* 78, no. 3 (2016): 244.
- 22 Amy J. Devitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre," *College English* 62, no. 6 (2000): 698.
- 23 Gorke and Pink (*Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, 4–8) list a few possible categories: an inclusive approach – a tradition of *tafsīr* that includes all genres of exegesis, partial and complete, cross-disciplinary,

- formal and informal; a self-identified genre: an exegete explicitly defines his exegetical approach and his membership within a defined tradition of *tafsīr*; an essentialist genre of *tafsīr*, limited to a timeline and a number of mainstream commentators, as proposed by Norman Calder, “*Tafsīr* from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham” in *Approaches to the Qurʾān*, ed. Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London, Routledge, 1993), 101–140; a genealogical tradition of exegesis, as proposed by Saleh, *Formation*, 14–16; a methodological categorization of *tafsīr*: namely *tafsīr bi l-maʿthūr* (“transmitted exegesis”) versus *tafsīr bi l-raʾy* (“exegesis based on opinion”).
- 24 For Abū Ishāq al-Thaʿlabī’s appropriation of the Sufi interpretations of Sulamī’s *Haqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, see Saleh, *Formation*, 151–153. Al-Rāzī’s voluminous *tafsīr*, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (*Keys to the Unseen*) is a particularly eclectic genre of *tafsīr*, which includes the esoteric interpretations not only of the Sufis but also of other theological and philosophical schools. For more, see T. Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qurʾanic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.
 - 25 Translations from the Qurʾān, with minor amendments, are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).
 - 26 See, for instance, the Sufi commentary of Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234) on Qurʾān 18:109 in Sara Sviri, “On Istīnbat, Mystical Listening and Sufi Exegesis,” in *The Spirit and the Letter*, 70–71. For Ibn ʿArabī’s metaphysical commentary on this verse, see W. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn ʿArabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 70–71. For Rūzbihān Baqlī’s (d. 606/1209) commentary on Q 31:27, see Toby Mayer, “Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary,” in *The Study Quran*, 1819–1855. Cf. ʿAyn al-Qudāt’s commentary on the same verse in Rustom, “From Black Words to White Parchment: The Qurʾanic Vision of ʿAyn al-Qudāt,” in *The Routledge Sufi Handbook*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Routledge, forthcoming).
 - 27 ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī, *Kitāb al-mawāqif*, 72–73.
 - 28 For an extensive discussion of the nature and eternity of God’s speech, see al-Ghazālī’s *Moderation in Belief* (*al-Iqtisād fī l-ʾiṭiqād*), translated, with interpretive essay and notes, by Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 143–155. See also Ibn ʿArabī’s account of God’s eternal speech in W. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 34–36.
 - 29 See ʿAbd al-Qādir’s extensive treatment of the eternality of God’s Speech in the 209th *mawqif* of his *Kitāb al-mawāqif*, 391–399.
 - 30 See Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī’s (d. 1934) brief account of the relationship between the metaphysical nature of God’s Speech and its scriptural expressions as a Qurʾanic “codex” (*muṣḥaf*) in Khalid Williams, *The Qurʾān and the Prophet in the Writings of Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 2013), 99.
 - 31 Abū l-Najīb al-Suhrawardī, *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif* (Cairo: Dār al-Muqaṭṭam, 2009), 38.
 - 32 ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī expresses the same idea as follows: “since the objects [of God’s] knowledge are infinite, His speech is equally infinite” (*lā nihāya lahu*). See his metaphysical commentary on this verse in *Mawqif* 28, 72–73.
 - 33 See Ibn ʿArabī’s discussion of *taʾwīl* later in the chapter.
 - 34 In this interpretive perspective, the “allusions” of the Qurʾān evoke more intimately the truths and realities that the spiritual wayfarer discerns within her own inward quest for God.
 - 35 Translation taken, with minor amendments, from William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 247.
 - 36 Ibid., 247 (with minor amendments).
 - 37 Ibid., 249 (with minor amendments).
 - 38 Ibid., 247 (with minor amendments).
 - 39 For an elaborate discussion of *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses, see Caner Dagli, “Commentary on *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān*,” in *The Study Quran*, 126–187, 129–130.
 - 40 A very compelling discussion of Ibn Barrajjān’s atypical interpretation of the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* is found in Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus*, 226–230.
 - 41 See Mayer, “Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Quranic Commentary,” 1662–1665; Sahl al-Tustarī’s *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, partial trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, April 2011), 41.
 - 42 Translation (slightly modified) is taken from Böwering, “The Four ‘Senses’ of Scripture,” 351. This hadith, with slight variations, appears in the *tafsīr* of nearly every Sufi commentator from the classical to the modern period. For an elaborate discussion of this hadith by Sahl al-Tustarī, whose mystical exegesis on the Quran – *Tafsīr al-quran al-ʿaẓīm* (*the Commentary on the Mighty Qurʾān*) – is widely regarded as the first proto-Sufi commentary on the Quran, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence*. See also *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, partial trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler, especially section V of the introduction (Tustarī’s Approach to Qurʾān Interpretation), xxv.

- 43 Translation cited – with slight modification – in G. 352. Also discussed in K. Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an*.
- 44 Translation cited – with slight modification – from “Sufi *Tafsīr* Reconsidered,” 41–42.
- 45 Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar*, 127–128.
- 46 The various spiritual practices, notably, the purification of the soul, which are, according to all Sufis, an indispensable condition for uncovering the inner meanings of the Qur'an, are inspired by verses such as this: “Truly it is a Noble Quran, in a Book concealed. None touch it, save those made pure” (Q 56:78–80).
- 47 Unlike transmitted exegesis, which is based on a chain of transmission (*isnād*) going back to the Prophet and his distinguished companions, opinion-based exegesis is typically understood as an arbitrary and subjective interpretation of the Qur'an, which is strongly condemned by the traditional exegetical establishment. See Sands, *Sufi Commentaries*, chapter 5, for a discussion of the main criticism that Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) leveled against certain trends and premises of Sufi *tafsīr*.
- 48 Cited in Meftah, *Ishārāt al-qur'ān fi 'ālam al-insān*, 18.
- 49 Sufi commentators agree on two fundamental principles: (1) their interpretations of the Qur'an are God inspired and therefore not the fruit of reasoning and reflection, and (2) their interpretations are the fruit of various initiatic practices (i.e., spiritual purification, attentive listening, retreats, and so forth). For further discussion on the spiritual exercises that inform the Sufi interpretive method, see *The Spirit and the Letter*, 11; Sara Sviri, “On Istibāt, Mystical Listening and Sufi Exegesis”; T. Richard, “Qūnawī's Scriptural Hermeneutics,” in *The Spirit and the Letter*, 300; Khalid Williams, *The Qur'an and the Prophet in the Writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawī*, 2–3.

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