

CHAPTER 50

SUFI COMMENTARY

Formative and Later Periods

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SUFISM: AN OVERVIEW

SUFISM (Ar., *taṣawwuf*), an ascetic-mystical movement in Islam, emerged in Iraq under the early Abbasids (the first half of the third/ninth century). Its competitors in the provinces were later subsumed under the title ‘Sufism’. By the fifth/eleventh century, Sufi leaders (*shaykhs*) had produced a substantial body of normative oral and literary lore that became the source of identity and building bricks for Sufism’s followers of the Middle Ages and beyond. With the emergence of the first Sufi ‘brotherhoods’, or ‘orders’ (*ṭuruq*; sing. *ṭarīqa*) in the sixth/twelfth century, Sufism became part and parcel of the religious, social, and political life of Islamic societies. In the modern epoch, Sufism was harshly criticized by Muslim modernists, fundamentalists, and leftists as a relic of the past, responsible for perpetuating idle superstitions, social inactivity, and senseless rituals. Nevertheless, it has managed to survive this critical onslaught and to remain relevant to the life of Muslim communities worldwide (Knysh 2010 and 2017).

ASCETIC-MYSTICAL PIETY AND THE QUR’AN

From the outset, the Qur’an was the principal source of contemplation and inspiration for every pious Muslim, whether formally Sufi or not. Many Sufi concepts and terms take their origin in the Qur’anic text, which endows them with much needed legitimacy in the eyes of both Sufis and other Muslims. At the same time, Sufi interpretations of the scripture (as well as Sufi practices, values, and beliefs) have continually been challenged

by influential representatives of the Sunnī and Shī'ī religious establishment, occasionally resulting in persecution of individual Sufi teachers (de Jong and Radtke 1999). Sufis have often been accused of overplaying allegorical-mystical aspects of the Qur'an, claiming privileged, intuitive understanding of its contents and ignoring its literal sense. To respond to their criticisms, advocates of Sufism have used carefully selected Qur'anic verses to legitimize their brand of Islamic thought and practice.

Such verses emphasize proximity and intimacy between God and his human servants (e.g. Q. 2:115, 2:186; 20:7–8, 58:7, etc.). Thus, in Q. 50:16 God's immediate presence among his faithful is forcefully brought home, as he declares himself to be nearer to his human servant than 'his jugular vein'. Intimacy between God and human beings is occasionally depicted in the Qur'an in terms of mutual love between them, as in Q. 5:54 (cf. Q. 3:31; 3:76; 3:134, 3:146; 3:148; 3:159; 5:93, etc.). Deeming themselves paragons of piety and devotion to God and true heirs of the Prophet, Sufis understood such verses primarily, if not exclusively, as referring to themselves. In shaping a distinctive mystical cosmology and metaphysics Sufi thinkers put the Qur'an to new, creative uses. Thus, the famous 'light verse' (Q. 24:35), which depicts God as a sublime and unfathomable light, is highly conducive to mystical elaborations on the theme of light and darkness and the eternal struggle between spirit and matter. According to early Sufi exegetes, God guides whom he wishes with his light (2:257). However, he has a special predilection for the pious, humble, and God-fearing individuals who devote themselves single-mindedly to worshipping him. In return, God assures them of salvation in the Hereafter (2:38; 2:262; 2:264, 3:170, etc.). Muslim ascetics and mystics have consistently identified themselves with God's 'friends' or 'God's protégés' (*awliyā'*), mentioned in 8:34; 10:62; and 45:19. In the Sufi tradition, these elect individuals are consistently depicted as guides and intercessors on behalf of ordinary believers and identified with authoritative Sufi masters (*shaykhs* or *pīrs*), both living and deceased.

The Qur'an also provides Sufis with justifications of their world-renouncing, penitent attitudes. Thus, Q. 7:172, which figures prominently in Sufi exegetical discourses, describes a pre-eternal covenant/pact (*mīthāq*) between God and his servants (Böwering 1980: 146–65). During this momentous event, the human race appeared before God as an assemblage of disembodied souls. God demanded that the souls bear witness to his absolute sovereignty (*rubūbiyya*), and they complied. However, once endowed by God with sinful and restive bodies, the majority of humans have forgotten their pledge and therefore should be constantly reminded about it by divinely commissioned messengers and prophets. The loyal servants of God recognize their bodily existence in this world as a test, so they strive to avoid its allure and return to the state of the pristine faithfulness to their Lord that they proclaimed on the day of the covenant/pact. This goal is to be achieved by minimizing the corruptive drives of the human lower soul (*nafs*) that 'prompts [believers] to evil' (*ammāra bi-sū'*; Q. 12:53). If successful, the Sufi's restive self is transformed into a soul 'at peace' (*al-muṭma'inna*; Q. 89:27) that is incapable of disobeying its Lord. The Sufi tradition offers the means to this end: an ascetic and frugal life, pious meditation, and a constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), as explicitly enjoined in

Q. 8:87, 18:24, and 33:41. Finally, the verses describing the visionary experiences of the Prophet Muḥammad (namely, Q. 17:1 and Q. 53:1–18) have motivated Sufis to try to recapture his spiritual conditions, especially since the Qur'an repeatedly encourages the faithful to imitate him (Q. 2:143; 3: 20 and 31; 33:21, etc.)

While such verses resonated well with the aspirations of early Muslim ascetics and mystics, there were also those that did not, because they prescribe moderation in worship, enjoyment of family life, and fulfilment of social responsibilities, while also discouraging the 'excesses' of Christian monasticism (Q. 4:3–4, 25–8, 127; Q. 9:31; Q. 57:27). Yet, these passages, as well as numerous injunctions against world-renouncing behaviour found in the Prophet's Sunna, could be either ignored or allegorized away, especially since some of them are inconclusive or ambiguous (e.g. Q. 5:82, which can be interpreted as both criticism and praise of Christian monks). However, eventually the weight of scriptural evidence and social pressures has forced the majority of Sufis to steer a middle course—one that allowed them to participate in social life and raise families, while also pursuing their mystical vocation. As the body of Sufi lore grew with the passage of time and Sufism had become a distinctive system of practices and teachings, there emerged a specific Sufi exegesis aimed at justifying and encouraging adherents.

THE FIRST SUFI EXEGETICAL WORKS AND PRINCIPLES OF SUFI EXEGESIS

The earliest samples of Sufi exegesis were collected by a prolific Sufi writer from Nishapur Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) in his *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* (True realities of [Qur'an] interpretation). This work is our principal source for the earliest stages of mystical exegesis in Islam. Its major representatives, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/787), and 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) were not Sufis *stricto sensu*, since Sufism as a distinctive doctrine and practice had not yet emerged. Nevertheless, those pious individuals were 'co-opted' into Sufism by its later spokesmen, who portrayed them as Sufism's founding fathers before the name itself had come into wide circulation. Whereas their preoccupation with the spiritual and allegoric aspects of the scripture is impossible to deny, the authenticity of their exegetical logia, collected and transmitted by al-Sulamī a century and a half later, is far from obvious. The problem is particularly severe (and intriguing) in the case of the sixth Shī'ī imam Ja'far al-Šādiq, to the extent that some modern scholars attribute the exegetical material transmitted in his name to a certain 'Pseudo-Ja'far al-Šādiq', who 'flourished in fourth/tenth century' (Nguyen 2012: 94 and 182; based on Böwering 2001 and Böwering 1996). Ja'far al-Šādiq's role as a doyen of primeval esoteric-mystical exegesis is indeed difficult to ascertain, especially since his exegetical logia, as transmitted by al-Sulamī, are devoid of any distinctly Shī'ī themes (Nguyen 2012: 172, 177, 189, 196). It is, however, quite possible that elements of esoteric-mystical exegesis originated in the

pious circles associated with the imam, who is frequently quoted in the standard Sufi manual of Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), whereupon they were appropriated by two distinct traditions, Sunnī-Sufi and Shī'ī. If authentic, Ja'far al-Šādiq's statements at the beginning of al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* are probably the earliest extant articulation of the methodological principles of esoteric-mystical exegesis. They describe the Qur'an as having four levels of meaning: *'ibāra* (literal); *ishāra* (allegorical or allusive); *laṭā'if* (subtle); and *ḥaqā'iq* (real). Each of them has its own addressees, respectively: the common folk (*al-ʿawāmm*), the spiritual elite (*al-khawāṣṣ*), God's friends (*awliyā'*), and the prophets (*anbiyā'*). More commonly, Sufi commentators discern only two aspects of the Qur'an: the outward/exoteric (*zāhir*) and the hidden/esoteric (*bāṭin*), thereby subsuming the moral/ethical/legal connotations of a given verse under 'literal' and its allegorical/mystical/anagogical ones under 'hidden'/esoteric'. The former aspect is the domain of the ordinary believers, the latter of the Sufi 'friends of God' (*awliyā'*).

As demonstrated by Paul Nwyia, Ja'far's exegetical interests were worlds apart from those of his contemporary Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), who represents a more conventional approach to the Qur'an that focuses on its historical and philological aspects. For example, unlike Muqātil, Ja'far al-Šādiq shows no interest in the historical circumstances surrounding the battle of Badr, as described in the Qur'an. When it says that 'God supported him [Muḥammad] with the legions you [his followers] did not see' (Q. 9:40), [Pseudo-]Ja'far interprets the 'legions' not as 'angels' (as argued by Muqātil and other exoterically minded exegetes), but as the spiritual virtues that the Sufi wayfarer acquires on his way to God (*ṭariq*), namely, 'certitude' (*yaqīn*), 'trust in God' (*thiqa*), and submission to his will (*tawakkul*). Likewise, Ja'far interprets the Qur'anic injunction to 'purify My [God's] House (namely, the Ka'ba) for those who shall circumambulate it' (22:26) as a call upon the believer to 'purify [his] soul from any association with the disobedient ones and anything other than God'. Finally, Ja'far explains the phrase 'those who stay in front of it [the Ka'ba]' as an invitation for the ordinary believers to seek the company of 'the [divine] gnostics (*ʿārifūn*), who stand on the carpet of intimacy [with God] and service of Him'. The notion of the divinely bestowed 'gnosis', or mystical knowledge (*ma'rifa*), which Ja'far attributes to God's elect servants figures prominently in his exegesis (see e.g. his commentary on Q. 7:143; 27:34; 8:24; 7:160, etc.). In later Sufi epistemology *ma'rifa* is consistently juxtaposed with both received wisdom (*naql*) and knowledge acquired through rational contemplation (*ʿaql*). For Ja'far and later Sufi commentators, the Qur'an is the only proper means of obtaining *ma'rifa*.

The next stage of the development of Sufi exegesis, or, in Nwyia's apt phrase, *une lecture introspective du Coran*, is associated with a cohort of individuals who lived in the third/ninth to early fourth/tenth centuries. Their Sufi credentials, with a few exceptions (e.g. al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, d. c.300/910), do not raise serious doubts. At least one of them (Aḥmad ibn 'Aṭā' al-Adamī, d. 311/ 922 or 923), and possibly also Dhū 'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861), were involved in the transmission of Ja'far's exegetical *logia*, which seems to contradict Nguyen's dating of [Pseudo-]Ja'far's activities to the middle of the fourth/tenth century. The others—such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), Abū'l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), Abū'l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910),

Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932), and Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/946)—are frequently cited in Sufi literature as authoritative sources of exegetical *logia* and, in the case of al-Tustarī, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ and al-Wāsiṭī, also as authors of Qur’anic commentaries (Böwering 1987–9 and 1980). The Sufi Abū Sa‘īd al-Khargūshī of Nishapur (d. 406/1015 or 407/1016) is also credited with a mystical *tafsīr* that still awaits its researcher (Nguyen 2012: 10).

THE GROWTH OF THE SUFI EXEGETICAL TRADITION (FROM THE FIFTH/ELEVENTH TO THE SEVENTH/THIRTEENTH CENTURIES)

Al-Sulamī’s collection of Sufi exegetical statements, which played the same role with regard to Sufi *tafsīr* as al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* with regard to traditional Sunnī exegesis (Böwering 1987–9: 265), laid the foundations for the subsequent evolution of this genre of Sufi literature. With time there emerged several distinct trends within the body of Sufi exegetical works that reflected the growing internal complexity of Sufi thought in the fifth/eleventh–seventh/thirteenth centuries. One such trend can be described as ‘moderate’, that is, aimed at bringing out esoteric/mystical aspects of the Qur’anic text, while not neglecting its exoteric/literal sense. The moderate trend is represented by such Sufi luminaries as al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234).

Abū’l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī of Nishapur is famous primarily as the author of the popular tract *al-Risāla [al-Qushayriyya] fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* that combines elements of Sufi biography with those of a Sufi manual (see Knysh (trans.), *Al-Qushayri’s Epistle*, pp. xxv–xxvi). Like the *Risāla*, al-Qushayrī’s Qur’anic commentary *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* pursues a clear apologetic agenda: to advocate the teachings, values, and practices of ‘moderate’, Junayd-style Sufism. Combining elements of Sufi ‘science’, Shāfi‘ī jurisprudence, hadith scholarship, and mystical exegesis (Nguyen 2012: 3 and 16), it seeks to demonstrate their complete harmony with Sunnī Islam. Started in 437/1045 (Nguyen 2012: 1, 101, and 254), this lengthy exegetical work consistently draws parallels between the gradual progress of the reader/listener from literal to subtler meanings (*laṭā’if*) of the Qur’anic text and the stages of the Sufi’s experiential journey to God. The success of this exegetical progress, as well as that of the Sufi’s journey on the path to God, depends on the wayfarer’s ability to combine personal piety and spiritual purity with sound doctrinal convictions. Giving preference to one over the other will result in failure. Even after this felicitous combination of faith, beliefs, and practices is achieved, the mystical exegete still needs divine assistance in unravelling the deepest mysteries of the sacred text. The same applies, argues al-Qushayrī, to the Sufi wayfarer’s striving on the path to God.

Al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* describes the exegete’s progressive immersion into the innermost meaning of the scripture as a movement, first, from the intellect to the

heart, then to the spirit (*al-rūḥ*), then to the innermost secret (*al-sirr*) and, finally, to the secret of secrets (*sirr al-sirr*) of the Qur'an. Al-Qushayrī's approach to the Qur'an is marked by his meticulous attention to every detail of the Qur'anic word, from an entire verse to every single letter in it. Typical in this regard is his interpretation of the *basmala*, in which each letter of this phrase is endowed with an allegorical/esoteric meaning: the *bā'* stands for God's gentleness (*birr*) toward his 'saintly friends' (*awliyā'*); the *sīn*—for the secret (*sirr*) that he conveys to his chosen ones (*aṣfiyā'*); the *mīm*—for his bestowal of grace (*minna*) upon those who seek intimacy with him (*ahl wilayātihi*).

While such Kabbalistic speculations are not unique to al-Qushayrī, there is one feature that sets his *Laṭā'if* apart from them. For al-Qushayrī, the *basmala* is not a simple repetition of the same set of allegorical/esoteric meanings, because, in his view, the divine word allows no repetition. Rather, its meaning changes depending on the major themes contained in the particular suras that the *basmala* introduces. Thus, in discussing the symbolism of the *basmala* of Q. 7, al-Qushayrī implicitly links it to the themes of submission (*islām*), humility, and reverence required of the true believer as opposed to the rebellious behaviour of Iblīs, both of which are discussed in this sura (e.g. Q. 7:11–15, 31–3, 35–6, 39–40, etc.). Al-Qushayrī's interpretation of the *basmala* of sura 15 (*al-Hijr*) is quite different. The omission of the letter *alif* in the *basmala* of that sura without any rationally justifiable reason, either grammatical or morphological, according to al-Qushayrī, symbolizes God's arbitrary 'elevation' of Adam (despite his 'base' nature) and the concomitant 'humiliation' of the angels (despite their elevated status), as described in the main body of the sura in question.

Preoccupied as he is with the esoteric and symbolic aspects of the Qur'anic text, al-Qushayrī pays little heed to its historical and legal references, treating them primarily as windows onto Sufism's ideas and values. Thus, in discussing the spoils of war (*ghanīma*) mentioned in Q. 8:41 al-Qushayrī argues: '*Jihād* can be of two types: the external one [waged] against the infidels and the internal one [waged] against [one's] soul and Satan. In the same way as the lesser *jihād* involves [the seizure of] spoils of war after victory, the greater *jihad*, too, has the spoils of war of its own, that is, taking possession of his soul by the servant of God after it has been held hostage by its two enemies—passions and Satan.' A similar parallel is drawn between ordinary fasting, which involves abstention from food, sex, and drink, and the spiritual abstention of the Sufi from the allure of mundane life.

Despite its overall 'moderate' character, al-Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* is not devoid of the visionary and ecstatic elements found in more 'bold' Sufi commentaries. These 'bolder' aspects of al-Qushayrī's exegesis can be characterized as 'unitive', namely, alluding to the possibility of an ecstatic union between God and his chosen servants. As an example one can cite his interpretation of Q. 7:143, in which Moses requests that God appear to him only to be humbled by the sight of a mountain crumbling to dust, after God has shown himself to it. In the course of this fateful encounter, Moses' very personality is 'erased' in an act of [self-]annihilation in God (*fanā'*). In al-Qushayrī's words, 'Moses came to God as [only] those passionately longing and madly in love could. Moses came without Moses. Moses came, yet nothing of Moses was left to Moses. Thousands of

men have traversed great distances, yet no one remembers them, while that Moses made [only] a few steps and [school]children will be reciting until the Day of Judgment: “When Moses came . . .” Such ecstatic and potentially controversial passages notwithstanding, al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* can still be classified as ‘moderate’ in as much as the exegete strove to achieve a delicate balance between daring flights of mystical imagination and respect for the letter of the revelation, or, in the Sufi parlance, between the external law (Sharī‘a) of Islam and its esoteric aspect, or ‘true reality’ (*ḥaqīqa*). Overall, al-Qushayrī’s exegetical works (for his *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* see Nguyen 2012: 101–10) bear an eloquent testimony to his triple credentials: as a Sufi master, a Shāfi‘ī *faqīh* and an Ash‘arī theologian (Nguyen 2012: 257–8).

Another example of ‘moderate’ Sufi *tafsīr* is *al-Kashf wa’l-bayān ‘an tafsīr al-Qur’ān* by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035). Drawing heavily on al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr*, al-Tha‘labī meshes its Sufi exegetical *logia* with conventional exegetical materials culled from hadith as well as discussions of philological and legal intricacies of the Qur’anic text (Saleh 2004). Al-Tha‘labī’s work formed the foundation of the famous commentary *Ma‘ālim al-tanzīl fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* by al-Ḥusayn al-Baghawī (*Tafsīr al-Baghawī*). Born in 438/1046 in Afghanistan, al-Baghawī distinguished himself primarily as a Shāfi‘ī jurist and *muḥaddith*, whose thematically arranged collection of prophetic reports titled *Maṣābīḥ al-sunna* has become a standard work of this genre. Although al-Baghawī was not a fully-fledged Sufi, he led an ascetic and pious way of life and avoided contacts with temporal authorities. His *tafsīr* is marked by a meticulous concern for the exegetical materials going back to the Prophet and his companions (*al-tafsīr bi’l-ma’thūr*) that he cites frequently throughout his work. Seeking comprehensiveness, al-Baghawī avails himself of diverse sources: from the leading Arab grammarians to the Shi‘ī imams and legal scholars. To the same end, he quotes such proto-Sufi and Sufi figures as Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. 160/777), Fuḍayl ibn ‘Iyād (d. 188/803), al-Tustarī and al-Junayd (d. 298/910), whose exegetical *logia* may have reached him via al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* and al-Tha‘labī’s *al-Kashf wa’l-bayān*. Al-Baghawī’s use of this material was probably dictated by his drive to furnish the entire range of possible interpretations of the sacred text without privileging anyone of them. Since, by his age, Sufism had established itself as a legitimate strain of Islamic theory and practice, he felt obligated to include Sufi views of the Qur’an into his *tafsīr* without necessarily sharing or condoning them. The same trend can be observed in many later exegetical works, such as *Lubāb al-ta’wīl* by ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Baghdādī, better known as ‘al-Khāzin’ (d. 741/1341). The presence of Sufi elements in non-Sufi *tafsīrs* is indicative of the exegetes’ desire for comprehensiveness—a trend that has gradually led to the blurring of the borderline between ‘Sufi’ and ‘non-Sufi’ exegesis and the inclusion of Sufi exegetical *logia* into conventional commentaries by both Sunnī and Shi‘ī authors.

On the other hand, renowned Sufi masters produced quite conventional exegetical works that are practically devoid of esoteric elements. As an example, one can cite *Nughbat al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān* by the renowned Sufi scholar ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), which is sometimes classified under the rubric of ‘moderate’ Sufi exegesis (e.g. Böwering 1987–9: 257). This exegetical opus, which remains in manuscript (see

Düzenli 1994), furnishes a rather pedestrian, non-mystical commentary that is firmly grounded in the type of philological and situational exegesis represented in the standard Sunnī commentaries upon which al-Suhrawardī relied heavily (Ohlander 2008: 49, 143, and 250).

Our survey of ‘moderate’ Sufi exegesis would be incomplete without mentioning the Persian *tafsīr* by Rashīd al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maybudī (d. 530/1135). Entitled *Kashf al-asrār*, it is based on the Qur’ān commentary of the renowned Ḥanbalī mystic ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089), as the author explicitly states in the introduction (Keeler 2006: 40). Born in a family renowned for its learning and piety in a town of Maybud (the province of Yazd in Iran), al-Maybudī combined the traditional education of a Shāfi‘ī jurist and *muḥaddith* with a strong inclination to contemplative mysticism and asceticism (Keeler 2006:14–15). As the other ‘moderate’ Sufi commentaries discussed above, al-Maybudī’s *Kashf al-asrār* provides conventional historical, philological, and legal exegesis alongside Sufi ‘allusions’ (*ishārāt*) and ‘subtleties’ (*laṭā’if*). The commentator describes his method as consisting of three ‘stages’ (sing. *navbat*). The first involves a translation of selected Qur’ānic verses from Arabic into ‘literal Persian’ (*fārsī-ya zāhir*); the second, a conventional historical, philological, and juridical commentary in Persian; while the third explores the mystical aspects of the revelation. The last ‘stage’, as mentioned, draws heavily on al-Anṣārī’s mystical commentary, which, in its turn, is based on al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr* and the [proto-]Sufi authorities cited therein. It also makes use of the ideas of al-Qushayrī’s *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* that is ‘sometimes quoted word for word in Arabic, and at other times rendered in Persian’ (Keeler 2006: 22). As befits a ‘moderate’ commentator, al-Maybudī avoids interpretations that may contradict the literal meaning of the Qur’ānic text. His treatment of controversial issues, especially anthropomorphic features of God, the provenance of good and evil, and divine pre-determination of all events, is that of a middle-of-the-way Ash‘arī theologian (Keeler 2006: 15). In this respect, al-Maybudī follows in the footsteps of his eminent predecessor al-Qushayrī.

Al-Maybudī explains the necessity of a mystical or esoteric *tafsīr* by the presence in the Qur’ān of the ‘obscure’ or ‘ambiguous’ verses (*mutashābihāt*) alongside ‘clear’ or ‘unequivocal’ ones (*muḥkamāt*) (see Q. 3:7). The meaning of the former belongs to God alone (Keeler 2006: 42). This is not to say that the spiritual elite (*al-khāṣṣa*) of the Muslim community should not try to penetrate the mysteries of the *mutashābihāt*. On the contrary, the Sufi ‘gnostics’ (*‘arifān*), according to al-Maybudī, ‘are given illuminative vision (*dīda-yi mukashāfa’i*) so that every veil between their hearts and the truth is lifted’ (Keeler 2006: 49; cf. 44). They alone are capable of extracting (*istinbāt*) the hidden aspect of the revelation through exegetical unveiling (*ta’vīl kashfī*) granted to them by God. One of the most original aspects of al-Maybudī’s exegetical method lies in his explanation of the universal functions of the ‘ambiguous verses’, as summarized by Annabel Keeler: (1) They challenge human beings to use their rational and spiritual faculties, thus separating them from animals; (2) They distinguish the learned (or spiritual) elite from the mass of ordinary believers; (3) They make ‘wise men’ aware of their weakness as they seek, in vain, to reach the depths of the divine word; (4) They cause interpreters

to obtain a spiritual realization of the true reality (*ḥaqīqat*) instead of simply practising the outward law (*Sharīʿa*); (5) They guard the divine mystery that surpasses human understanding and requires that God's servants accept it unconditionally and unquestionably (Keeler 2006: 43–4). The keynotes of al-Maybudī's approach to the Qur'an, especially his constant references to the 'ambiguous' versus 'unequivocal' verses, are characteristic of Sufi exegesis as a whole.

A unique vision of the Qur'anic revelation is found in the *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* (Jewels of the Qur'an) by the renowned Sunnī theologian and Shāfiʿī jurist Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Although not exegetical in the conventional sense of the word, it explores the numerous layers of meaning embedded in Qur'anic chapters and verses. As with al-Maybudī, who had probably drawn on al-Ghazālī's ideas (Keeler 2006: 45–8), the latter considers the most elusive and subtle aspects of the revelation to be the exclusive domain of Sufi gnostics (*ʿarīfūn*). He discerns several types of Qur'anic verses based on their contents and establishes a hierarchy whose ranks correspond to various types of precious stones, pearls, and rare substances. Thus, the knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of God is symbolized by the red sulphur (the precious substance which, according to medieval alchemy, could transform base metals into gold). The knowledge that Sufi gnostics have of God's essence, attributes, and actions is likened to three types of corundum. Below this realm of the supreme knowledge lies the knowledge of the path, that is, the verses of the Qur'an that elucidate the major stages of the believer's progress to God. Al-Ghazālī depicts this progress by using the common Sufi imagery of 'polishing the mirror of the heart'. This 'polishing' actualizes the divine nature (*lāhūt*) that, according to some Sufis, is inherent in every human being. Al-Ghazālī describes the Qur'anic verses pertaining to the knowledge of the mystical path as 'shining pearls'. The fourth type of knowledge corresponds to the verses that refer to the condition of humans after they have finally met God, that is, the resurrection, reckoning, reward and punishment, the beatific vision of God in the afterlife, and so on. This category, which al-Ghazālī likens to 'green emeralds', comprises one-third of the Qur'anic suras. The fifth category of verses describes the condition of 'those who have traversed [the path to God]', on the one hand, and 'those who have denied God and deviated from His path', on the other. Al-Ghazālī compares these verses to grey ambergris and fresh, blooming aloe-wood. The sixth group of verses contains 'the arguments of the infidels against the truth and clear explanation of their humiliation by obvious proofs'. Al-Ghazālī calls such verses the 'greatest antidote' (*al-tiryāq al-akbar*). The final category of verses again refers to the stages of human beings' journey to God and the management of its 'vehicle', the human body, with special reference to what constitutes its lawful means of sustenance and procreation. This type of verses is described as the 'strongest musk'. Upon establishing the types of knowledge and thematic categories of Qur'anic verses associated with them, al-Ghazālī proceeds to classify the 'outward' and 'inward' sciences associated with the Qur'an. To the former belongs (a) the art of Qur'an recitation represented by its readers and reciters; (b) the science of the Qur'anic language and grammar which al-Ghazālī attributes to philologists and grammarians; and (c) the science of the 'outward exegesis' (*al-tafsīr*

al-zāhir) of the Qur'an which its practitioners, the '*ulamā*', consider to be the consummate knowledge available to human beings. Although al-Ghazālī recognizes the need for these 'outward' sciences of the Qur'an, he denies that they represent the ultimate human understanding of the divine word. In his view, this honour belongs to the 'sciences of the kernels of the Qur'an' ('*ulūm al-lubāb*') as opposed to what he labels as its outer 'shell' (*ṣadaf*). The knowledge of the Qur'an's 'kernel' belongs exclusively to Sufi gnostics ('*ārifūn*').

Al-Ghazālī then proceeds to lay down his exegetical method. He describes it as gaining insight into the allegorical and symbolic meaning of the divine revelation. Inscribed on the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*; based on Q. 22:70 and 85:22), it can be accessed by some divinely chosen individuals in their sleep. As any knowledge received in a dream, it requires interpretation. In al-Ghazālī's own words, 'The interpretation of the Qur'an (*ta'wīl*) occupies the place of the interpretation of dreams (*ta'bīr*). Therefore, the exegete's task is to 'comprehend the hidden connection between the visible world and the invisible' in the same way as the interpreter of dreams interprets somebody's dream or vision. This idea is brought home in the following programmatic statement: 'Understand that so long as you are in this-worldly life you are sleeping, and you will wake up only after death at which time you will be able to see the manifest truth face to face. Before that time it is impossible for you to comprehend the [true] realities [of being], except when they are couched in the form of imagination-inspiring symbols'.

To gain the knowledge of the true reality of God's word one must, according to al-Ghazālī, renounce this world and focus one's thoughts on God and the afterlife. Those who seek 'the vanities of this world, eating what is unlawful and following [their] carnal desires' are barred from a proper understanding of the Qur'an. Their corrupt and sinful natures inevitably distort their perception of its true meaning. They see nothing in the Qur'an but contradiction and incongruence. In al-Ghazālī's view, the realization of the Qur'anic allegories and symbols by different people corresponds to their level of spiritual and intellectual purity. In commenting on the special virtue of the *Fātiḥa* (Q. 1), which many exegetes consider to be the key to paradise, al-Ghazālī argues that whereas an ordinary believer imagines paradise to be a place to satisfy his/her desires for food, drink, and sex, the perfected Sufi gnostic sees it as a realm of refined spiritual pleasures and 'pays no heed to the paradise of the fools'.

This idea is reiterated in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*—a deeply mystical reflection on the epistemic and ontological implications of the 'light verse' (Q. 29:35): 'The [Sufi] gnostics ascend from the foothill of metaphor (*majāz*) to the way-station of the true reality (*ḥaqīqa*). When they complete their ascension, they witness directly that there is nothing in existence except God Most High.' Therefore, for the Sufi gnostics, the Qur'anic phrase 'Everything perishes save His face' (Q. 28:88) means that 'Everything except God, when considered from the viewpoint of its essence, is but pure nonexistence ('*adam maḥd*'), because, in essence, God is the only true reality of the entire universe (al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt*, 58). This daring and controversial idea prefigures the monistic/unitive metaphysics of Ibn [al-]Arabī (d. 638/1240) and his followers, who have made extensive use of exegesis to explicate and justify their esoteric cosmology and epistemology.

THE BLOSSOM OF ECSTATIC/ ESOTERIC EXEGESIS

The writings of Persian Sufis Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Daylamī (d. 593/1197) and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) constitute a distinctive trend in Sufi exegesis that is characterized by ‘intense visions and powerful ecstasies interpreted in terms of a Qur’ānically based metaphysics’ (Ernst 1996: ix). The prevalence of such elements in the exegetical works of these two Sufis is taken by Gerhard Böwering as evidence of their more ‘esoteric’ character compared to that of their ‘moderate’ counterparts discussed above (Böwering 1987–9: 257). However, this distinction is more a matter of emphasis than of quality. The borderline between ‘esoteric/ecstatic’ and ‘moderately mystical’ types of exegesis is blurry and easily crossed.

Al-Daylamī, a little known, but original and prolific author, composed a mystical commentary entitled *Taṣdīq al-ma‘ārif* (occasionally referred to as *Futūḥ al-raḥmān fī ishārāt al-Qur‘ān*) as well as a series of mystical treatises describing his auditory and visionary experiences (Alexandrin 2012: 216–18). Al-Daylamī’s works creatively combine early Sufi exegetical logia borrowed from al-Sulamī’s *Ḥaqā’iq al-tafsīr*, which constitute about half of al-Daylamī’s *Taṣdīq al-ma‘ārif*, with the author’s own elaborations. His exegesis reflects his overwhelming preoccupation with ‘the visionary world of the mystic’, which ‘is seen as totally real and fully identical with the spiritual world of the invisible realm’ (Böwering 1987–9: 270). Böwering describes al-Daylamī’s method as one of ‘a continuous yet eclectic commentary on selected Koranic verses from all suras presented in sequence’ (1987–9: 270). A striking characteristic of al-Daylamī’s method is his consistent use of the Qur’an as the ‘touchstone’ to verify the authenticity of his mystical experiences and cosmological visions (Alexandrin 2012: 226). In the process of his personal engagement with the Qur’an, which often occurs in his dreams, the exegete avails himself of the verses that are commonly used by Sufis to validate their ideas and behaviour, namely, the ‘light verse’ (24:35), the verse of the ‘night of [the Prophet’s] ascension’ (17:1), or the entire text of *Sūrat Yāsīn* (36) (Alexandrin 2012: 223–4). al-Daylamī’s meditation on these and other Qur’anic passages, either in his wakeful states or in his dreams, allows him glimpses of the world of the spirits (*‘ālam al-arwāḥ*) and even of the afterlife (Alexandrin 2012: 220, 226). His experiential exegesis prefigures ‘the ideas that emerged in the Kobrawi school’ [of Sufism] (Böwering n.d.), whose exegetical production will be discussed further on.

Somewhat better known is the commentary of al-Daylamī’s younger contemporary Rūzbihān [al-]Baqlī al-Shirāzī entitled *‘Arā’is al-bayān fī ḥaqā’iq al-Qur‘ān*. This lengthy opus reflects Rūzbihān’s propensity to visions, dreams, powerful emotional raptures, and ecstatic utterances that have ‘earned him the sobriquet “Doctor Ecstasticus” (*shaykh-i shaṭṭāḥ*)’ (Ernst 1996). Like al-Daylamī’s *Taṣdīq al-ma‘ārif*, *‘Arā’is al-bayān* is composed in Arabic and consists almost equally of earlier exegetical material—mostly borrowed from al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī—as well as of the author’s own glosses.

Rūzbihān's uses of the Qur'an are much bolder than those of the Sufi exegetes already described. Not only does he constantly invoke the sacred text in describing his direct encounters with God, but he also claims to have symbolically 'eaten' it, along with the texts of the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospel (Ernst 1996: 51). One can hardly be any 'bolder' than this. According to Carl Ernst, Rūzbihān's claims emphasize his 'complete internalization' of the divine inspiration inherent in these scriptures. The Qur'an and its imagery figure prominently in Rūzbihān's ecstatic visions. In one poignant passage he compares his condition in the presence of God with that of Zulaykha in the presence of Joseph (Q. 12:22–32). Couched in a Qur'anic idiom, such expressions of love and intimacy between God and his mystical lover constitute the hallmark of Rūzbihān's entire mystical worldview. Ernst suggests that the very title of Rūzbihān's commentary—'*Arā'is al-bayān* (The brides of explanation)—'invokes the unveiling of the bride in a loving encounter as the model of initiation into the esoteric knowledge of God' (Ernst 1996: 71). Rūzbihān's visionary and ecstatic experiences, inspired in part by those of his controversial predecessor al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), are virtually permeated by Qur'anic language and imagery. As with early Sufi masters, for Rūzbihān, the Qur'an becomes a powerful means of transforming his personhood and preparing it for the ultimate [re-]unification with the Divine already in this life.

IBN [AL-]ʿARABĪ AND THE KUBRAWĪ TRADITION

According to Böwering's classification (1980: 257), the subsequent stage in the development of Sufi exegesis was dominated by two major traditions: that of Ibn [al-]ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and his followers and that of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221) and the Kubrawī school of Sufism.

Ibn [al-]ʿArabī drew on the rich tradition of Maghribi and Andalusī mysticism represented by Ibn Masarra al-Jabalī (d. 319/931), Ibn Barrajan (d. 536/1141), Ibn al-ʿArīf (d. 536/1141), Ibn Qasī (546/1151), and Abū Madyan (d. 594/1197) (Gril 2000: 521–2). Ibn Barrajan deserves special notice as the author of several exegetical works (Casewit 2017). As with earlier Sufi exegetes, Ibn Barrajan envisions the realization of the Qur'anic message by the mystic as his progressive immersion into its mysteries. This immersion results in what the Andalusī Sufi master calls 'the superior reading' (*al-tilāwa al-ʿulyā*) of the Qur'an. In the process, the personality of the mystic is transformed by the encounter with the divine word as he passes from its literal message (*ʿibāra*; *iʿtibār*) to the ultimate truth to which it alludes (*al-maʿbūr ilayhi*), or, in other words, from a literal perception of the sacred text to an interior, intuitive grasp of both its inner reality and of divine self-disclosures in the letters and sounds of the scripture (Gril 2000: 516; cf. McAuley 2012: 65; Casewit 2017: 145–6).

In the process of 'reciting' (*dhikr*) and contemplating the Qur'an the mystic acquires a veridical insight that allows him to reach the very kernel of the revelation. As a result, he

is transformed into the ‘universal servant’ (*al-‘abd al-kullī*), whose recitation of the sacred text is twice as effective as the recitation of the ordinary believer, or the ‘partial servant’ (*al-‘abd al-juz’ī*). Ibn Barrajān’s exegesis displays the following features that set it apart from the mainstream interpretive tradition whose elements are also present in his work: (1) the insistence on constant recollection or recitation (*dhikr*) as a means of achieving a total and undivided concentration on the sacred text; (2) the awareness of the subtle correspondences between the phenomena of the physical universe and the ‘signs’ (*āyāt*) of the scripture; (3) the belief that the heart of the ‘universal servant’ is capable of encompassing the totality of existence in the same way as it is contained in the ‘Guarded Tablet’ mentioned in the Qur’an (85:22); and (4) the notion that the divine word constitutes the innermost reality of human nature, which makes it possible for the servant of God to achieve a cognitive and experiential union with his/her Creator (Gril 2000: 520–1). Ibn Barrajān restricts this superior realization of the divine word and divinely created world (*i’tibār*) to a small group of divinely elected individuals, whom he identifies as ‘the veracious ones’ (*ṣiddīqūn*) or those firmly rooted in knowledge, mentioned in the Qur’an, 4:162 (Casewit 2017: 266–75). His ideas were taken up and brought to fruition in the monistic/unitive metaphysics of Ibn [al-]‘Arabī and his school.

Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s relations with the Qur’an are rich and variegated. He claims to have composed a multi-volume Qur’anic commentary entitled *al-Jāmi‘ wa’l-taḥṣīl fī asrār ma‘ānī ’l-tanzīl*, which seems to have been lost. However, his entire corpus of writings, including his influential masterpieces—*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*—can be seen as running commentaries on the foundational texts of Islam—the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet. Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s attitude to the Qur’an should be considered within the overall context of his world-outlook, according to which the true realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) of God and the universe are concealed from ordinary human beings behind a veil of distorting appearances. God discloses these hidden realities to ‘the people of the true reality’ (*ahl al-ḥaqīqa*) or ‘divine gnostics’ (*‘ārifūn*) by granting them a spiritual awakening and a revelatory insight, or ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*). These divinely given senses allow the *‘ārifūn* to decipher the true meaning of the symbols that constitute both the Qur’anic text and the empirical universe. In sum, for Ibn [al-]‘Arabī and his fellow ‘gnostics’, both the Qur’an and the universe are but God’s ‘writings’—assemblages of symbols concealing the ultimate realities of existence that, in the final account, take their origin in, and are somehow identical with, the only Real One (*al-ḥaqq*).

Because Ibn [al-]‘Arabī considered himself to be the greatest ‘gnostic’ (*‘ārif*) of his age (and possibly of all times) and the spiritual ‘pole’ (*quṭb*) of the universe, he saw no reason to legitimize his understanding of the scripture, or—in his own words, of the scripture’s ‘spirit’ (*rūḥ*)—by citing any prior exegetical authority. He believed that his insights were bestowed upon him directly by God (Nettler 2003: 29). This belief underlies Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s commentaries on selected Qur’anic suras included in his poetic collection (*Dīwān*, 136–79). Ibn [al-]‘Arabī presents himself as a simple transmitter of the divinely induced insights that unveil the spiritual ‘quintessence’ (*rūḥ*) of the suras. The insights are a product of the ‘mystical moment’ (*wārid al-waqt*) in which the interpreter

happens to find himself; he himself adds nothing to what has come to him from the divine source (Bachmann 2000: 503). Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s exegetical use of poetry—an art associated with pre-Islamic paganism—and his occasional imitation of the metre and rhythm of Qur’anic chapters no doubt has raised many scholarly eyebrows both during his lifetime and after his death (McAuley 2012: 160–99). At the same time, his claim to be a simple mouthpiece of divinely induced insights has effectively absolved him of the necessity to justify his exegetical method or to comply with the conventions of an ordinary exegesis.

For Ibn [al-]‘Arabī, poetry becomes a perfect vehicle for illuminating multiple senses of the Qur’anic verses. Moreover, because of the kindred nature of poetic inspiration and prophetic revelation, for the multiple layers of the Qur’anic meaning to be expressed or at least alluded to, one simply has no choice but to resort to poetry (McAuley 2012: 62). At the same time, Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s ‘daring interpretative flights’ are always restrained by his ‘rigorous commitment to the Qur’an as God’s literal word’ (McAuley 2012: 62).

Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s exegesis operates on three distinct levels: the metaphysical and cosmological; the analogical (built around implicit or explicit correspondences between the universe and the human organism); and the existential-experiential that rests on his supersensory perception of the underlying unity of God, man, and the universe (Gril 1990: 180). In the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s controversial meditation on the phenomenon of prophethood and his use of the Qur’an is particularly daring. He consistently uses its verses as show-windows for his monistic (unitive) metaphysics (Nettler 2003: 13–14). This kind of monistic commentary of the Qur’an ‘may be considered an Islamic religious *genre* in its own right’ that Ronald Nettler describes as ‘Sufi metaphysical story-telling’ (2003: 14).

As an example of Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s daring exegesis one can cite his rendition of the story of Aaron, Moses, and the golden calf (Q. 7:148–55 and Q. 20:85–94). Contrary to the literal meaning of the Qur’anic narrative, Ibn [al-]‘Arabī portrays Aaron and the worshippers of the golden calf as being innocent of idolatry. Unlike Moses, who exemplifies a conventional vision of monotheism, they realize that God can be worshipped in everything, because every object, including the golden calf, is but ‘a site of divine self-manifestation (*ba‘ḍ al-majāli al-ilāhiyya*)’ (Ibn [al-]‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 192; Nettler 2003: 53). In Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s audacious interpretation, the original Qur’anic condemnation of idolatry is inverted: the idolaters become ‘gnostics’, who ‘*know the full truth*’ concerning idolatry, but are honor-bound not to disclose this truth, even to the prophets, the apostles and their heirs, for these all have their divinely-appointed roles in curbing idolatry and promoting the worship of God *in their time and their situation*’ (Nettler 2003: 67). The ultimate truth, however, is that God inheres in all things and thus can be worshipped in any object or site. In this exegetical gloss, and throughout the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s monistic (unitive) vision of God and the world is illustrated by Qur’anic accounts of prophetic missions from Adam to Muḥammad. In Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s understanding, his exegesis is not just *his* personal vision, but, in fact, *the true and unadulterated* meaning of the divine word (Nettler 2003: 94).

The keynotes of Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s monistic (unitive) doctrine were taken up and elaborated by his foremost disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274). His exegetical work, *Ījāz al-bayān fī ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, is a lengthy disquisition on the metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological implications of the first sura that, according to al-Qūnawī, captures the very gist of the divine revelation. The author’s indebtedness to Ibn [al-]‘Arabī is obvious from the outset, when he states that ‘God has made the primeval macrocosm (*al-‘ālam al-kabīr*)—from the viewpoint of its [outward] form—a book carrying the images of the divine names... and he [God] has made the perfect man—who is but a microcosm (*al-‘ālam al-saghīr*)—an intermediate book, from the viewpoint of [its] form, that combines in itself the presence of the names and the presence of the named [i.e. God]’ (al-Qūnawī, *al-Tafsīr*, 98).

Al-Qūnawī identifies five levels (or realms) of existence that correspond to the five senses of the divine word. His description of the hierarchies of the divine names and their ontological counterparts (or realms of existence) is the most salient feature of his highly recondite mystical commentary that can be seen as a fitting tribute to Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s monistic (unitive) vision of existence.

In ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. c.730–6/1329–35), a native of the Iranian province of Jibāl, we find another exponent of Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual and intellectual legacy. Al-Qāshānī’s main achievement lies in his ability to present Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s ambiguous ideas in a lucid form that could easily be understood by everyone interested in the subject. Al-Qāshānī excelled in this task to such an extent that his mystical commentary, originally entitled *Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, was for several centuries treated as a work of Ibn [al-]‘Arabī himself (see e.g. McAuley 2012: 65, nn. 33 and 34). Its latest edition, published in Beirut in 1968, still carries Ibn [al-]‘Arabī’s name (henceforth al-Qāshānī/Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tafsīr*).

A systematic thinker, al-Qāshānī provides a self-reflective exposition of his exegetical method in the introduction to his commentary. Citing the famous prophetic hadith, according to which each Qur’anic verse has two aspects—the ‘outward’ (*ẓahr*) and the ‘inward’ (*baṭn*)—al-Qāshānī identifies the explication of the former as *tafsīr* and of the latter as *ta’wīl* (lit. ‘tracing something back to its origin’; al-Qāshānī/Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tafsīr*, 1:4). He defines his own exegetical method as *ta’wīl*. This choice of the term may indicate that, by al-Qāshānī’s time, the *tafsīr/ta’wīl* dichotomy had become widespread, at least in Sufi circles. This is not to say that it has been universally accepted, though: such eminent exegetes as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Bayḍawī (d. c.719/1319) applied the word *ta’wīl* to their quite conventional commentaries. Likewise, the famous Indian reformer Shāh Wālī Allāh (d. 1176/1762) considered *ta’wīl* to be a regular historic and contextual commentary (Baljon 1986: 141).

In the introduction to his commentary al-Qāshānī describes his personal relationship with the Qur’an that finely captures the general Sufi attitude to the divine word:

For a long time I made the recitation (*tilāwa*) of the Qur’ān my habit and custom and meditated on its meaning with the [full] strength of my faith. Yet, in spite of my assiduousness in reciting its passages (*awrād*), my chest was constrained, my soul

troubled and my heart remained closed to it. However, my Lord did not divert me from this recitation until I had grown accustomed and habituated to it so as to begin tasting the sweetness of its cup and its drink. It was then that I felt invigorated, my breast opened up, my conscience expanded, my heart was at ease, and my innermost self was liberated... Then there appeared to me from behind the veil the meanings of every verse that my tongue is incapable of describing, no capacity able to determine and count, and no power can resist. (al-Qāshānī/Ibn ʿArabī, *Tafsīr*, 1:4)

Unlike the authors of ‘moderate’ Sufi commentaries discussed above, al-Qāshānī consciously neglects those passages of the Qurʾān that, in his view, are not susceptible to esoteric interpretation (*kull mā lā yaqbal al-taʾwīl ʿindī aw lā yaḥtāj ilayhi*). With five centuries of Sufi exegesis behind him, al-Qāshānī no longer feels obligated to pay tribute to the trivia of the conventional *tafsīr*, focusing instead only on those aspects of the sacred text that resonate with his mystical states and world of ideas. Even such favourite ‘Sufi’ verses as Q. 7:172 and Q. 85:22 are passed over in silence, possibly because al-Qāshānī believed that their interpretive potential had been exhausted by his predecessors (Lory 1980: 31). Addressed to his fellow Sufis, ‘the people of [supersensory] unveiling’ (*ahl al-kashf*), al-Qāshānī’s exegesis brims with Sufi terminology and thematic keynotes borrowed from Ibn [al-]ʿArabī’s monistic (unitive) metaphysics. In many cases, this terminology is left unexplained, presupposing its prior knowledge by the initiated reader (Lory 1980:30). Al-Qāshānī is completely at home with all of major exegetical topoi articulated by his predecessors: the monistic metaphysics with its tripartite division of existence into the empirical realm (*ʿālam al-shahāda*), the intermediate realm of divine power (*al-jabarūt*), and the purely spiritual realm of divine sovereignty (*al-malakūt*); the conceptual parallelism between the universe (the macrocosm) and its human counterpart (the microcosm); the major stages and spiritual states of the mystic’s progress to God; the symbolism of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and numerology, and so on.

As a typical example of his method one can cite his glosses on Q. 17:1 (the Qurʾānic verses are italicized): ‘*Glory be to Him, who carried His servant*, that is—He who purified him from material attributes and deficiencies associated with [his] created nature by the tongue of the spiritual state of disengagement [from the created world] (*al-tajarrud*) and perfection at the station of [absolute] servanthood... *by night*, that is, in the darkness of bodily coverings and natural attachments, for the ascension and rise cannot occur except by means of a body; *from the Holy Mosque*, that is, from the station of the heart that is protected from being circumambulated by the polytheism of carnal drives...’ (al-Qāshānī/Ibn ʿArabī, *Tafsīr*, 1:705).

In this passage and throughout, correspondences between Qurʾānic images and Sufi psychology, epistemology, and ontology are consistently pursued, leaving little room for the ambiguity of reference and referent (as well as the general opacity of discourse) that characterizes the works of Ibn [al-]ʿArabī himself. Thus, in al-Qāshānī’s commentary the esoteric exegesis of the previous centuries receives a succinct, systematic and lucid articulation (Lory 1980: 31). The exegetical method harking back to Ibn [al-]ʿArabī and his predecessors is now routinized. Its subsequent [re-]appropriation by such later Sufis

as Badr al-Dīn Simawī (d. 820/1420), Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī (d. 1137/1725), Shāh Wālī Allāh (d. 1176/1762), and Ibn ʿAjība (d. 1224/1809), to name but a few, demonstrates a remarkable continuity that some observers may construe as a lack of originality or even outright stagnation. In the case of the last two authors, mystical exegesis is offered alongside other types of commentary, of which Ibn ʿAjība, for example, cites as many as eleven in his *al-Baḥr al-madīd* (1:129–31).

The tradition of Qurʾān interpretation associated with the Central Asian Sufi master Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221) and his followers Dāya [al-]Rāzī (d. 654/1256) and ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336) is sometimes treated as a separate school of Sufi exegesis (e.g. Böwering 1980: 257). However, this perception has more to do with two distinct spiritual and intellectual lineages (Akbarian—associated with Ibn [al-]ʿArabī, and Kubrawī—stretching back to Najm al-Dīn Kubrā) than with any substantive differences in their approaches to the Qurʾān.

The Kubrawī tradition is represented by the collective exegetical work that was started by Kubrā himself, continued by Dāya [al-]Rāzī, and completed by al-Simnānī, although ‘it is possible that there are two different continuations to Kubrā’s commentary, one by al-Simnānī and the other by Dāya’ (Elias 1996: 205). In any event, this commentary remains unpublished and our knowledge of its content is derived from a study of al-Simnānī’s oeuvre by Jamal Elias (1996: 107–10).

Like his predecessors, al-Simnānī discerns ‘four levels of meaning [of the Qurʾān] corresponding to four levels of existence’ (Elias 1996: 108). Its exoteric dimension relates to the realm of ‘humanity’ (*nāsūt*); its esoteric dimension to the realm of divine sovereignty (*malakūt*); its limit (*ḥadd*) to the realm of divine omnipotence (*jabarūt*); and its point of ascent (*maṭlaʿ* or *muṭṭalaʿ*; cf. the Greek *anagoge*) to the realm of divinity (*lāhūt*) (Elias 1996: 108). These realms, in turn, correspond to the four levels of the human understanding of the Qurʾān—that of the ordinary believer (*muslim*), who relies upon his faculty of hearing; that of the faithful one (*muʾmin*), who receives divine inspiration; that of the perfected one (*muḥsin*), who should not disclose his understanding of the Qurʾān to anyone, except with the divine permission (*idhn*). The ultimate realization of the Qurʾānic meaning is granted to the [divine] witness (*shāhid*); he should keep it secret at all times, because, if disclosed to the uninitiated, it may plunge them into confusion, disquiet, or even sedition (Elias 1996: 108).

God’s purpose in sending down the revelation is to cleanse the hearts and souls of human beings from mundane distractions and thereby to lead them to salvation. To this end, God has supplied his human servants with ‘subtle centers’ (*laṭāʾif*) embedded in their bodies. They alert the faithful to God’s immediate presence, thereby directing them to ‘a complete revelation of the true nature of reality’ (Elias 1996: 85). The familiar Sufi notion of the deeper meaning of the Qurʾān granted by God to his chosen folk (*awliyāʾ Allāh*; ʿarīfūn; *ḥukamāʾ*; *al-khāṣṣa*, etc.) is once again brought home forcefully and unequivocally.

Finally, mention should be made of the exegesis that combines mystical epistemology and metaphysics with Shīʿī theology. The main representatives of this Sufi-Shīʿī

exegetical synthesis are Iranian thinkers Ḥaydar-i Āmulī (d. after 787/1385) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640) and their followers. To this exegetical tradition belongs an extremely rare mystical commentary on the Qur'an by a female scholar from Iran named Nuṣrat bint Muḥammad Amīn, better known as Bānū-yi Iṣfahānī (d. 1403/1982) (Iyāzī, *al-Mufasssīrūn*, 310–15 and 629–33; Āmulī, *Jāmi' al-asrār*; Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asrār al-āyāt*; Amīn, *Tafsīr-i makhzan*). This tradition requires a separate study.

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