

TRANSCENDING THE FORMS FROM WITHIN: The Mystical Interpretation of Fasting in Sufism, with special reference to Ibn ‘Arabi

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Introduction and Theoretical Considerations

I take the expression that makes up the title of my paper from Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998). He emphasized in many places and many contexts in his writings that although one of the essential characteristics of spirituality or esoterism is that it goes beyond the external forms, this takes place only through understanding the deeper meaning of the forms and having lived them through and through⁽¹⁾. Huston Smith, in his introduction to one of Schuon’s works, has explained this further by saying that “forms are transcended by fathoming their depths and discerning their universal content, not by circumventing them. One might regard them as doorways to be entered or rather as windows, for the esoteric does not leave them behind but continues to look through them toward the Absolute”⁽²⁾. This concept of form-transcending is an important way to understand the work of important Muslim mystics who have attempted to relate the formal rites prescribed by the Shari‘ah with the mystical insights in different ways and at various levels.

This paper⁽³⁾ is indebted to Schuon's thought in another way as well. It presupposes and applies Schuon's tripartite understanding of human nature. According to Schuon, human nature consists of intelligence, sentiment and will. Each of these prerogatives is extended in practical terms respectively by discernment (*connaissance*), love (*l'amour*) and activity (*l'action*)⁽⁴⁾. In his book *L'Oeil du Coeur*⁽⁵⁾

Schuon has discussed this ternary in the context of *Iman*, *Islam* and *Ihsan* that are given as constituent elements of Religion in the hadith Jibreel⁽⁶⁾. However, the correspondence that he makes between latter three ternaries is not a neat one-to-one correspondence.

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Whereas both *connaissance* and *amour* correspond to *ihsan*, *l'action* is said to correspond to *Iman* and *Islam*. This last correspondence, by the way, makes perfect sense if one has in mind the identification of faith as a sort of interior action made by al-Shatibi⁽⁷⁾. Thus both theology and Law treat rituals only as *activities* whether by outer bodily organs or by the inner ones and thus address respectively and only human reason and human will. When we talk of transcending the legalistic forms we simply mean a journey from the plane of the Will/activity to that of Intellect which is concerned more with the discernment of real from illusory and important from unimportant. By saying that *connaissance est en effet un imân vivifié*, however, Schuon implies that the tripartite division is not mutually exclusive.

This paper proposes to investigate how the rite of fasting had been understood symbolically by the most influential of all Muslim mystics, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi vis. a vis. a few of his distinguished spiritual predecessors.

Historical overview: from al-Makki to Ibn 'Arabi

Many Sufis had something to say about the importance of rituals in their spiritual writings. We find a few passages in Abu Talib al-Makki's (d. 386/996) *Qut al-Qulub*. However, in these passages the author intends merely to explain the significance (*fadhl*) of fasting and other prescribed rituals for a spiritual seeker. However, we do find him telling us that the reason for specifying fasting in the hadith *fasting is for me*, is that in fasting there is one of the character traits of *samdaniyyah*. He then talks about "fasting of the select" (*sawm al-khusus*) which consists, in his view, in safeguarding six organs, namely, eyes, ears, tongue, heart, hands and feet, that is to say, preventing one's heart from lowly resolves and worldly thoughts, hearing, sight and tongue from overstepping the bounds (*hudud*)⁽⁸⁾. Ordinary fasting concerns itself only with abstaining from eating or drinking or having recourse to sexual relations. The "fasting of the select" apparently takes into account the whole of human person, body and heart. Al-Makki says, " the case of someone who fasts by abstaining from eating but disobeys (God) by all the organs is like someone who instead of washing each organ thrice in ablution just sponges thrice and says his prayers, he although has the advantage of resemblance in number but he has omitted an obligation so his prayer is thrown back to him"⁽⁹⁾.

This takes us slightly deeper than the legalistic treatment of fasting, yet we still remain on the plain of activity concerned with commission or omission. With Imam Muhammad Al-Ghazali (d.1111) we begin to see the signs of real mystical treatment of this particular ritualistic form. To Al-Makki's *sawm al-khusus* Ghazali adds fasting of the select of the select, (*sawm khusus al-khusus*)⁽¹⁰⁾. Whereas Makki had included safeguarding all other bodily organs in the fasting of select, Al-Ghazali reserves the safeguarding of heart and mind in the third category that he introduces. Hence it might seem that his innovation here is only the introduction of another category and not of any new content. However, it is significant that he makes explicit his understanding of “the spirit of fasting and its mystery” by saying that these are “weakening of those faculties which are Satan’s means in making one return to evil”⁽¹¹⁾. Al-Ghazali is more explicit than al-Makki as far as the legal and spiritual treatment of fasting is concerned. He tries to explain why it is that the jurists consider ordinary fasting valid even if the agent does not care about the inner meaning of the rite by saying that the jurists have in purview only what is possible for the masses who are normally heedless and immersed in the world⁽¹²⁾. As far as the “‘Ulama’ of the Other-World” are concerned, they understand that the purpose of fasting is nothing less than “assumption of the divine character-traits,” (*al-takhalluq biakhlaq Allah*) through first attaining a similitude to angelic nature by having subdued all that is carnal in human nature. Taking his lead from Al-Makki, without referring to him, here he points out that it is the divine quality of *samadaniyyah* (an abstract noun extracted from the divine name *Al-Samad*, which is to be appropriated through the practice of fasting)⁽¹³⁾. However, he gives us no further explanation in *Ihya* regarding the meaning of this quality. When we turn to his *Al-Maqasad* for commentary on the divine name al-Samad and its ethical implications, we only learn that he understands by that someone upon whom everyone and everything depends⁽¹⁴⁾. He does not say anything on the ethics of this name, unlike he does in case of other ones.

Although this is an advance upon treatment of fasting by al-Makki, it still remains at the level of *praxis* which corresponds to the plane of Will rather than that of Intellect. We still find nothing as far as considering fasting as a symbol pointing to realities pertaining to a higher ontological level. This we find, perhaps for the first time in the history of Islamic thought in the work of great Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabi (d.1240).

Ibn Arabi's mystical interpretation of Fasting

Without naming Al-Ghazali on the point Ibn ‘Arabi says a few words about *al-samadaniyyah*. One might take these words to be a gloss on the former’s statement. According to him, this divine quality signifies, not the dependence of everyone upon God, but God’s absolute independence. This character trait is assumed, although in a relative manner, by the fasting Muslim since he or she becomes or tries to become independent of food and some other things upon which he or she always depends. We also find Ibn ‘Arabi referring to “Abu Talib al-Makki, one of the masters of taste” as source of the spiritual interpretation of a prophetic tradition.

Like Al-Ghazali, Ibn ‘Arabi also provides a tripartite division of the levels of fasting: *sawm al-zahir* or *sawm al-‘aamm*, *sawm al-Nafs* and finally *sawm al-qalb*. The first level is fasting that fulfills all conditions required by *fiqh*, the second is the soul stops commanding the organs what is not wholesome and the final level is emptying the heart for divine descent into it. Perhaps it is with this type of fasting in mind that Ibn ‘Arabi says in the inaugurating verse, addressing his Soul, “observe a fasting from the world and don’t break your fast, no one is worthy of breaking (this fast with) except the God of the creatures.” The emptying of heart for the divine descent is nothing less than sanctity itself, as per Schuonian definition: *Le saint, c’est le vide qui se fait pour le passage de Dieu*; A saint is a void open for the passage of God⁽¹⁵⁾.

It is significant in the context of forms-transcendence that Ibn ‘Arabi, in his *al-Futuh al-Makiyyah*, delves into juristic details of fasting (and other Islamic rituals) much more than either Al-Makki or Al-Ghazali. He does this almost in a manner reminiscent of Ibn Rushd’s *Bidayat al-Mujtahid*. We say “almost” since the mystical explanations for the difference of juristic opinions Ibn ‘Arabi offers are, of course, not to be expected of Ibn Rushd.

Having mentioned very briefly the three levels of understanding *fasting*, Ibn ‘Arabi begins his reflections by analysis of the Arabic verb *saama yasum* and connecting its meaning (i.e. abstention and exaltedness) with the divine Prophetic saying (*hadith Qudsi*) “Fasting is for me and I am its reward”⁽¹⁶⁾. The reason for this connection is the uniqueness and exaltedness of this form of ritual. The uniqueness of fasting makes it one

of the forms that point beyond themselves to the Uniqueness of Divine Self itself. In Ibn 'Arabi's words just as "there is nothing whatever like unto Him (Qur'an: 42:11) there is nothing like unto fasting" as far as the form of worship is concerned.

This is one of many examples where Ibn 'Arabi takes fasting as it is understood exoterically and through delving into its depths looks across it at the Divine Reality itself. In this paper I explore more of these examples, study them systematically, analyze them and thus try to make sense of the chapters on fasting in Ibn 'Arabi's *Futuhat*, where the cursory reader would find a perplexing juxtaposition of legalistic details and mystical insights.

Let us now consider some specific examples of how Ibn 'Arabi puts to practice the concept of *I'tibar* when he considers fasting.

1. The above-mentioned identification of fasting as connected to divine nature is referred to again while explain the juristic disagreement of opinion regarding the question whether it is better to fast during travel or not to fast. He says, "those who take into account that fasting is unique and that it is one of the qualities of the Real says that it is better (i.e. to fast) and those who consider it form of worship and thus a quality expressing debasement and dependence and more worthy of the servant said that not fasting is better"⁽¹⁷⁾. The importance of this instance consists in the fact that here Ibn 'Arabi seems to be implying two different perspectives from which one could look at the rite of fasting, either as divine quality or as a form of worship. Obviously the former point of view is inferred from or rather superimposed on the Prophetic words "Fasting is for me" that is to say, "as one of my qualities." This goes flatly against the common understanding according to which these words only mean that a Muslim fasts only for the sake of Allah, since no one can discover whether or not someone is really fasting. It however is one typical examples of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical hermeneutics.
2. Moon-sighting and Divine Name's Property: After mentioning the positions on this question Ibn 'Arabi identifies his own with the one that if the moon is sighted before midday it belongs to the previous night but if afternoon than fasting is to start from the next

day. "In whatever state a divine name manifests itself its property appears in the present through *tajalli* and in future through effect until the property of another divine name appears and removes the property of the former"⁽¹⁸⁾.

3. Fasting and breaking the fast on sighting the Moon alone: Opinions differ on whether one is bound to and allowed to respectively fast and break the fast on seeing the Moon for himself or should one wait till others also witness moon-sighting. "Of the theophanies in the Divine Names that the Fold of Allah witness should they dwell at their witnessing or should wait until an evidence stands for him from the Book or the Sunnah"⁽¹⁹⁾. He then proceeds to quote some Sufi sayings to the effect that mystical experiences are bound with or at least consequent upon the practice on what is there in the twin sources of Islamic tradition.
4. Ramadhan and the cosmology Divine Names: Like many other things Ibn 'Arabi also uses the ritual of fasting in the month of ramadhan with his original cosmology of Divine Names according to which nothing appears in existence until and unless it has a root in the divine side⁽²⁰⁾ in the form of a Divine quality epitomized by a divine name. Ibn Arabi's unveiling of the mystical meaning of the Fasting of Ramadhan affords him numerous keys to connect the so called divine side with its manifestation in the ritual in question. The very name of the month "Ramadhan" in Ibn 'Arabi's peculiar view one of the Names of God. Hence the very phenomenon owes itself to the property of this name. Abstinence from eating and drinking is denominated in Arabic by the word "*imsak*" and for breaking the fast we have the term "*fitr*." When he comes to the question of duration of abstinence during ramadhan Ibn 'Arabi mystifies fasting by connecting the aforementioned two terms with two divine Names that he has extracted from the verses of the Holy Quran, *al-mumsik* (35:41) and *al-fatir* (35:1): "The setting of sun is the expiry of the tenure of property of the divine name "Ramadhan (although it remains as it is, does not lose its property, for it has another effect in us and that is standing in prayer) its place is taken by the name "Fatir of heavens and Earth"... and then by the name "*mumsik*" and the name fatir

remains governing the sick, the traveler, the suckling mother and the pregnant women"⁽²¹⁾.

5. The identification of Ramadhan as one of divine names also finds mystical application in Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the fasting of traveler which he does not consider to be a virtuous act. This issue provides him with an opportunity to delve into influence of divine names on the traveler upon the path, "The wayfarer (*salik*) is the traveler in the stations with the Divine Names so the divine name "Ramadhan" does not require him to preserve either obligatory or supererogatory fasting, this is why the Prophet has said that it is not one of virtues to fast while traveling"⁽²²⁾.
6. In the light of his understanding of the nature of fasting Ibn 'Arabi mentions some deeper mystical reasons for prohibiting eating, drinking and conjugal relations. Since the essence of fasting consists in its being an "omission" *tark* and eating being a positive quality contradicts it, is prohibited. As for indulging in conjugal relation (*jima'*) it is prohibited since by its very nature it contradicts the sawms's quality of uniqueness which demands solitude, "it is named *jima'* for the union (*ijtima'*) of spouses"⁽²³⁾. In this instance we simply have an attempt of explaining a religious rite with reference to some metaphysical or at any rate deeper meaning. This deeper meaning happens to be Ibn 'Arabi's suggestion that the essential nature of Fasting is omission that is to say that it is a privative or negative rite, so commission being contrary to the spirit of fasting is prohibited.
7. One interesting instance of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical interpretation of fasting-ritual is in connection with his commentary on the word *al-fajr* (dawn) in the Qur'anic verse, "... and eat and drink until you can discern the white streak of dawn against the blackness of night..." (II: 187). This particular instance is interesting in view of the fact that here Ibn 'Arabi seems to be coming back to the formal legalistic understanding after having transcended it to its mystical meaning. That is to say, he gives here his philosophico-mystical understanding *as a reason for* his juristic stance on the disagreement of opinion that surrounded the Qur'anic words in question. The "dawn" might be "red" or "white," the former being

the earlier than the latter. Ibn 'Arabi posits a spectrum of colors extending on the one end from black to white on the end and all other colors not only stretching between these two poles but also "generating from a mixture of whiteness and blackness"⁽²⁴⁾. Let us mention in passing that this arrangement of extreme poles and intermediary reality is important structural principles of Ibn 'Arabi's ontology, the more basic paradigm of which is the polarity of Wujud and 'Adam which is mediated by relative reality of the created realm. Be that as it may, Ibn 'Arabi prefers to understand "white" dawn instead of read one since the former is simpler and purer than the latter according to his mystical colour-theory.

8. Coming to the juristic disagreement over whether swallowing something which is not food (like a pebble etc.) violates the fast or not. Ibn 'Arabi explains this disagreement with reference to participation of the folk of rational thought (philosophers) with the mystics (*Ahl Allah*) as far as the latter's faith-based knowledge of unveiling and the former's attainment through reflection is concerned. So those who neglect the common result insist on the difference in ways of attainment, do not consider swallowing of non-food items as amounting to violating the fasting. Ibn 'Arabi says that the *i'tibar* of those who do so is their identification of both reflection and faith based knowledge⁽²⁵⁾.

Interpretation

The chapter on the mysteries of fasting contains more than eighty subsections and it would be useless to continue multiplying specific instances. The eight examples given above pretty much illustrate the structure of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical treatment not only of the rite of fasting but also of other Muslim rites such as five daily prayers, paying alms (*zakaah*) and pilgrimage to Makkah. Let us now attempt, to analyze and interpret the few examples of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical treatment of the rite of fasting and cast a look at them in the light of our theoretical framework that we introduced from Schuon. It would be instructive to dwell at the last mentioned two cases and attempt to understand the nature of transition from jurisprudential plane to that of mysticism in them. We can then proceed to previously mentioned cases. Now, to be more precise, the questions that concerns us at the present juncture are these: What relationship exists between two types of dawn and Ibn 'Arabi's colour

theory? How to understand the relationship, in the latter instance between food/non-food items and the one between faith and reflection based knowledge of God? It is of utmost importance to understand the notion of I'tibar since it is by using this term that Ibn 'Arabi signals the transition from jurisprudence to mysticism. This term accordingly is the key to understanding the relationship between form and meaning in his thought. Now in a short work attributed to Ibn 'Arabi we find the following definition of this notion:

"هو مأخوذ من العبور ، وهو حقيقة العبور من عالم الشهادة إلى عالم الغيب بالشاهد على الغائب بواسطة القياس العقلي" (26).

"I'tibar is derived from *'ubur* (crossing over) and it consists in crossing over from the visible realm to the invisible realm through intellectual analogy." In *al-Futuhāt*, he tells us about the related word *'ibarah* (*utterance*) that it is a bridge that we cross to get to the intended meaning (*al-ma'na al-maqsud*) unlike *isharah* which is a direct pointing towards reality exemplified by *wahy* or revelation. Now in the case under discussion it appears reasonable to say that Ibn 'Arabi is taking the point of juristic disagreement as a metaphor for a mystical disagreement. This transition is based on an apparent similarity between two. It might be said that the juristic disagreement in question is being taken as a *symbol* for a deeper disagreement about identical mystical knowledge attained through different ways. Of course this similitude or parable does have an objective clue or what is known in Arabic rhetoric as point of resemblance (*wajh al-shabah*). That is to say in both cases different ways are leading to same result, in the former case entry of some stuff into stomach and in the latter case same type of knowledge is being attained through different manners. So in this particular case the relation between juristic discussion and mystical interpretation is more literary than real. It is the mystical reader of jurisprudence who is shifting his mind from one plane to another. The mystical explanation is never before the jurists themselves.

The same symbolic relationship explained here also applies to the second and third instances where Ibn 'Arabi is connecting moon-sighting with effects of divine names. When we come to the mystical interpretation of disagreement about the real meaning of "dawn" in a particular Qur'anic verse, it seems possible to offer a more objective interpretation. The relationship between the spectrum of colors and that of night, red and white dawn is not a simple matter of similitude or analogy but seems to be

that of ontological dependence. Here we have a clear example of going beyond the juristic treatment of ritual to a particular view of the nature of reality, i.e. how things really are. It is only in such examples that it becomes clear how Ibn 'Arabi connects the plane of human will or activity to that of intellect or understanding.

Conclusion

Our brief historical overview of the mystical treatment of the rite of fasting presented in the beginning of this paper showed that such treatment does not originate with Ibn 'Arabi. We noted how in a rudimentary form it is to be found in at least two Sufi authorities who predate Ibn 'Arabi, first Abu Talib al-Makki and second, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. Ibn 'Arabi however gives the most extensive mystical commentary on fasting which is presented as part of his explanation of the mysteries of all Islamic form of rites. The very inclusion of these discussions as part of his encyclopedic *Futuhat al-Makiyyah* is itself an evidence that in Ibn 'Arabi we indeed have a model of "transcending the ritualistic forms from within." He uses the hermeneutical notion of *I'tibar* as a signpost for highlighting his transition to the deeper mystical meaning of the specific juristic issue under discussion. The actual nature of his relating the juristic and mystical realms, as our analysis and interpretation has shown, cannot be simplified but is complex and multifarious. In some cases he simply takes some exoteric points as symbols for constructing similitude with deeper and higher realities. In some other cases, by introducing the mystical dimensions, he only seeks to explain, in more or less rational manner, why a specific prohibition is entailed by the rite in question. However, in majority of cases he is trying to connect the external juristic realm with the internal metaphysical realm with the help of a relation which is based on his metaphysics or the view of how things are in themselves. We find him, also in most of the cases, turning first from jurisprudential dispute to mystical underpinnings and coming back once again from where he started in order to look at the dispute in new mystical light. Whether or not one agrees with his mystical insight, one at least has to admit that Ibn 'Arabi places his mystical insight at the service of showing that the apparently exclusivity disputes might be understood to be result of having different perspectives at the same reality.

References

- ¹ "Orthodoxy and Intellectuality," in *Stations of Wisdom* (Blumington: World Wisdom), p 4.
- ² See Smith's preface to Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religion* (Wheaton, IL.: Quest Books, 1993), p. xxv.
- ³ In its original form, this paper was presented at 1st International Ramadan Symposium in Istanbul in July 2012.
- ⁴ This anthropological ternary is presented in many of Schuon's writings. The current formulation is from his essay "Outline of a Spiritual Anthropology," in *From Divine to Human: Survey of Metaphysics and Epistemology*. (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1974) pp. 91-94.
- ⁵ Muslim, *Sahih, Kitab al-Iman, Bab bayan al-iman wa'l-Islam wa'l-Ihsan*.
- ⁷ *Al-Muwafaqat fi Usul al-Shari'ah*, ed. Abdullah Daraz, 2vols (Beirut: Daral-Kitab al-Arabi, 2003), I: 46.
- ⁸ *Qut al-Qulub*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), p.73.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ¹⁰ *Ihya 'Ulum al-Din*, (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), vol. 1. p. 234.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 236. This point has been well incorporated by Schuon himself and his main intellectual predecessor within the traditionalist school of thought René Guénon. See the latter's *Introduction to the Study of Oriental Doctrines* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011), chapter 17, pp. 373-377.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* This is a reference to Al-Ghazali's celebrated doctrine of ethics of divine names according to which we are advised to adopt the character traits signified by the Divine Attributes as part of our moral self. We have studied this doctrine in relation to the contribution of Ibn 'Arabi in a previous paper, "Ibn

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- 'Arabi's contribution to the Ethics of Divine Names," in *Islamic Studies* (Islamabad, Pakistan), vol. XLIII (2004), pp. 5-39.
- ¹⁴ *Al-Maqsad al-Asna*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur'an, n.d.), p. 119.
- ¹⁵ Frithjof Schuon, "Complexité de la notion de Charité," in his *Stations de la sagesse* (Paris: L'Hartmann, 2011), 121.
- ¹⁶ Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih, Kitab al-Sawm, Bab Fadhl al-Sawm*. One must note here that Ibn 'Arabi is manipulating the ambiguity of the word *ujzi* which he reads as *ujza*.
- ¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhāt Makkiyyah*, 4 volumes, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, n.d.), I: 613.
- ¹⁸ Ibn 'Arabi, *Futuhāt Makkiyyah*, I: 607
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid. II: 508.
- ²¹ *Futuhāt*, I: 608.
- ²² *Futuhāt*, I:612
- ²³ *Futuhāt*, I:609
- ²⁴ *Futuhāt*, I: 608.
- ²⁵ Ibid. I:609. Here Ibn 'Arabi also touches upon the issue of whether or not penetration of something in an internal human organ other than stomach, such as brain violates fast. Here he connects with the agent's being in a divine presence from where he descends to the imaginal presence.