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Translating Esotericism: Arabic

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A cosmos rife with hidden power

Rather than searching for precise equivalents for the terms *esoteric* and *occult* in premodern Arabic, it is arguably more useful to consider ways that Islamic scripture describes a cosmos rife with hidden forces and entities and thus helps provide a conceptual framework for the diverse wealth of *esoteric/occult* discourses that flourished in Arabic-Islamicate thought. Per the opening lines of the Qur'an, *God* (Allāh, lit. "the god") is "Lord of the worlds" (*rabb al-ʿālamīn*),[1] a title that has licensed theologians, philosophers, Sufi thinkers, and others to posit diverse multiworld cosmologies populated with all manner of spiritual beings, particularly as various pre-Islamic cosmological discourses were brought into Arabic.[2]

The Qur'an also makes repeated references to *al-ghayb*, "the Unseen," a term that can connote divine Mystery in an abstract sense but also a cosmic realm hidden from ordinary human perception that encompasses the deep past and future, the world of the angels, paradise and hell, etc.[3] Elements of it are said to be revealed by God in the Qur'an and by the Prophet Muḥammad in his statements and actions recorded in the Hadith. Earlier prophets, the Shiʿi Imams, and the Sufi saints are also sometimes credited with knowledge of the Unseen.

In a related vein, there emerges from the qur'anic hermeneutics of Shiʿi and Sufi thinkers the conceptual pair *al-ẓāhir* and *al-bāṭin*. *Al-ẓāhir* is the exterior,

1. Q 1:2
2. De Boer and Gardet, "Ālam."
3. Q 13:9, 6:59; MacDonald and Gardet, "Al-Ghayb."

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apparent, exoteric meaning of a verse or word, while *al-bāṭin* is its interior, hidden, esoteric meaning. It is related by ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib — the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law who is counted as the first Shiʿi Imam and revered by many Sufis as a saint and transmitter of the Prophet's secret inner teachings — that a word can be interpreted in seven, or even seventy, ways. Indeed, exegetes often speak of multiple layers of hidden meaning, such as the *bāṭin al-bāṭin*, "the interior of the interior." Ismaʿili Shiʿi thinkers posit innumerable such layers of meaning, as do some Sufi thinkers of the mature period, most famously Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240).[4] These concepts are not necessarily confined to qur'anic hermeneutics, and some thinkers extend them to all manner of religious texts and rituals. Even the manifest world *qua* text can be subject to such interpretations, as in notions that the Qur'an (the "book of God"), the "book of the world," and the "book of the self" (i.e., the *soul*) are corresponding texts whose multiple layers of meaning resonate ceaselessly with one another.[5] Such hermeneutical approaches were not without Muslim critics, especially when perceived to be taken too far. Thus, for example, the theologian and Sufi al-Ghazālī's critique of Ismaʿili thought refers to the Ismaʿilis disparagingly as *al-bāṭinīyah*, "the people of the inner meaning," implying that they disregard the plain meanings of scripture altogether in favor of the hidden meanings they claim to detect.[6]

Liana Saif has compellingly proposed that the term *bātinīyah* (as an asbtract noun) can serve as a native equivalent to the term "esotericism" as the latter has come to be used in "Western Esoteric Studies" scholarship, i.e., as an umbrella category for a wide variety of "occult," "magical," and, perhaps, "mystical" discourses.[7] This may generate more problems than it solves, given that much which could be called "*bāṭinī*" arguably has little to do with things "magical" or "occult," and *vice-versa*; however, an adequate discussion of the conceptualization of "Islamic esotericism" as a field of study would require far more space than is available here.

4. Poonawala, "al-Ẓāhir wa-'l-Bāṭin."
5. Chittick, "On the Cosmology of Dhikr," 51ff.
6. Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍa'iḥ al-bāṭinīyah*, passim.
7. Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?," 18–25.

God and other entities

The absolute oneness (*tawḥīd*) of *God* is the central tenet of Islamic theology. While God is one, He has many names, often referred to as the ninety-nine "beautiful names" (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*), each of which denotes some essence, attribute, or action of God, e.g. the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), the All-Knowing (*al-ʿAlīm*), the Creator (*al-Khāliq*), the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*).[8] This diversity of names is important in some occult discourses as different names are associated with different types of divine influence, the planets and signs, the Arabic letters, etc.

Numerous intelligent nonhumans populate Islamic thought and culture, residing in this world or ones adjacent to it. A hierarchy of *angels* (*malāʾikah*, s. *malak*) serves God with complete obedience. There are several named angels, many familiar from Jewish tradition and others not. Gabriel (Jibrīl) and Michael (Mīkāʾīl), for example, appear in the Qurʾan by name, while numerous others populate the Hadith, theological and Sufi sources, and popular culture, e.g. Isrāfīl, whose trumpet will signal the end of days, and ʿAzrāʾīl (sometimes ʿUzrāʾīl and other variants), the angel of death.[9] Angels are mighty but inferior to humans in important respects; God's commanding the hosts of heaven to bow to the newly fashioned Adam — and Iblīs' refusal to do so — are key elements of Qurʾanic anthropogony. Sufi thinkers sometimes emphasize the superiority of humans on the grounds that they have the potential to know all the names of God while angels will only ever be apprised of the divine names relevant to their assigned duties. Angels also feature prominently in occult texts, where they correspond to the planets, elements, humors, etc. Indeed, the occult forces associated with asterisms, metals, letters of the alphabet, and so on are sometimes characterized as being angels in and of themselves.

In cosmology, the angelic realm is sometimes called *al-malakūt*, its paired other being *al-mulk* (lit. "the kingdom"), the manifest world. A third term,

8. Akkach, "Beautiful Names of God."
9. Reynolds, "Angels."

al-jabarūt is often used for the world or plane "above" *al-malakūt* that is closer to the divine, though some authors reverse this hierarchy. Used together, *al-malakūt wa-al-jabarūt* can denote the *spirit world* in a broad sense.[10]

Iblīs (perhaps from Gr. *diabolos*) is somewhat cognate to the Jewish/Christian *Satan* in his role as an enemy to humans and a leader astray, though he ultimately serves God in doing so. The question of whether Iblīs is a "fallen" angel is a vexed one; Muslim theologians generally reject the concept of fallen angels, and some instead describe Iblīs as a *jinn* who had formerly served God so well that he had been promoted to a station among the angels.[11] Some Sufis defend Iblīs as a most excellent servant of God due to his refusal to bow before anyone but God, even at the price of his fall, though this idea is highly controversial.[12] The Qur'an and Hadith frequently mention *devils* (*shayāṭīn*) as well as angels, though this term can refer to evil humans as well as evil spirits. Iblīs and the devils are not fully cognate to *demons* in Christianity in that they are not fallen angels, do not rule in Hell (*Jahannam*, which is instead ruled on God's behalf by the angel Mālik) or form an infernal hierarchy mirroring that of God and the angels. There are, however, traditions of four or seven *jinn* kings of the world that are parallel in certain respects to the demon kings of the European grimoire tradition.[13]

The *jinn* are intelligent creatures possessed of free will who were created prior to humanity. Though often described as "spirits," they are arguably better conceived of as subtle material beings. They are made of "smokeless fire" or fire and air rather than the earth and water of Adam.[14] While extremely long-lived, they are mortal. They engage in marriage, have children, and are organized into tribes. Like humans, they can be good and evil and are affiliated with various religious communities; that is, there are *jinn* who are Muslims, Christians, Jews, pagans,

10. De Boer and Gardet, "ʿĀlam."
11. Wensinck and Gardet, "Iblīs."
12. For a concise overview of Sufi satanology, see Lumbard, *Aḥmad Al-Ghazālī*, 109–12.
13. Carboni, "Book of Surprises," 27–28.
14. Q 15:26–27, 55:15.

etc. They are usually invisible but can take a variety of visible forms, appearing as serpents or other beasts, a person with cloven feet, a whirlwind, etc. Muslim jurists generally discourage interacting with the *jinn* as physically and spiritually dangerous, though discussions of the permissibility of marriages between humans and *jinn* are to be found in the juristic literature.[15] Anthropologically speaking, the somewhat loosely defined concept of the *jinn* has served an important function in the spread of Islam to new cultural settings by helping to assimilate local spirit discourses; that is, local spirits or gods can easily be reconceptualized as *jinn* and thus find a place in Muslim cosmologies. Modern Muslim spirit possession cults such as Gnawa and Zar, which incorporate elements of indigenous African religions, are striking examples of such processes of adaptation.

In addition to angels and *jinn*, authors frequently use the term *spirits* (*arwāḥ*, sing. *rūḥ*) to refer to various kinds of subtle entities, good, evil, or otherwise. A related term that figures prominently in occult texts is *rūḥānīyah*, which sometimes refers to impersonal occult forces but at other times to entities endowed with agency and capable of communication, often conceived of as angels.[16] This term arises most frequently in the context of *astral magic*, e.g. the recipes in *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (*Picatrix*) for binding the *ruḥānīyah* of a planet/decan in a *talisman* (*ṭilsam*), as well as in some "lettrist" sources (see below).

Magic, sorcery, and miracles

The term most commonly glossed as *magic* is *siḥr*, from the verb *saḥara*: "to turn, enchant, bewitch." In the Qur'an and Hadith it usually carries a sharply negative connotation and is arguably best translated as *sorcery*. The locus classicus is Q 2:102, in which it is said that *siḥr* was taught to humans in Babylon by the angels Hārūt and Mārūt, but as a "trial" for humanity rather than an art God wished them to practice, as doing so results in damnation. The only example

15. Lebling, *Legends*, 7–24.
16. Chodkiewicz, "Rūḥāniyya."

of *siḥr* given in that pericope is its use to cause a rift between a man and his wife. Elsewhere in the Qurʾan we encounter Pharaoh's "sorcerers" — *saḥarah*, s. *sāḥir*, i.e., those who do *siḥr* — in their contest with Moses (Mūsā), as well as a prayer for protection against the women who blow/spit on knots (*naffāthāt al-ʿuqad*), whom the exegetical tradition identifies as Arabian female folk-magic practitioners (*naffāthāt* is a feminine plural). The Qurʾanic association of *siḥr* with Babylon and Egypt links it to the pagan past of the region, a trope some occultophobic Muslim thinkers carry forward in associating *siḥr* with the grave sin of polytheism (*shirk*), such as in the writings of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), and many modern Salafi authors.

Importantly, there is a degree of ambiguity in the Qurʾan regarding apparent similarities between *siḥr* and miracles. When Moses displays his miraculously glowing white hand, the Egyptians identify him as a "learned sorcerer" (*sāḥir ʿalīm*),[17] and he outdoes Pharaoh's sorcerers by transforming his staff into a mighty serpent that swallows up the smaller, false snakes his opponents produce.[18] The prophet-king Solomon (Sulaymān), too, performs miracles that would otherwise seem to be powerful magical acts: speaking to animals, commanding the *jinn* to transport Bilqīs/Sheba's throne through the air, and so on.[19] Solomon's name is defended against charges of doing *siḥr* in the aforementioned Q 2:102: "It was not Solomon who disbelieved [by doing magic]," asserts the text, "but rather the devils (*shayāṭīn*) disbelieved, teaching people *siḥr* ..." The Prophet Muḥammad, too, is accused of being a sorcerer, a soothsayer (*kāhin*), and a jinn-possessed poet (*shāʿir majnūn*) by those who would deny his prophethood,[20] charges that make sense only in light of a surface similarity between the feats of prophets and magical practitioners.

That miracles and sorcery can appear identical, and indeed are similar in certain respects, is embraced by theologians of the Ashʿārī school, who argue

17. Q 7:108–9.
18. Q 7:117.
19. Q 27:15–44.
20. Q 37:36.

that prophetic miracles (*muʿjizāt*), saintly marvels (*karāmāt*), and feats of *siḥr* are all instances of the disruption of the customary/natural order (*ikhtirāq al-ʿādah*). All such acts ultimately require divine permission, though they differ fundamentally in their licitness and spiritual significance.[21] While the term *siḥr* carries negative connotations in scripture, it was sometimes used neutrally by Muslim thinkers, most famously the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ), who celebrate it as a form of natural knowledge.[22] Various terms were used to denote what modern readers might identify as acts of *magic*, e.g. *ʿaml* (working), or *taṣarruf* (artifice or cunning, but often with the implication of praeternatural efficacy). Similarly, most "magical" practices/discourses went by names other than *siḥr*, e.g., *sīmiyāʾ* and *nīranj*. The latter are both sometimes translated as "white" or "natural" magic, but the original words' meanings are so varied at the hands of different authors that such translations — which also carry significant European Christian moral and cosmological baggage — are hardly reliable.

Sufism

Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is often glossed as "Islamic *mysticism*," though this is problematic. Academic definitions of *mysticism* often stress themes of ineffability and experiential knowledge, themes that certainly are invoked in many Sufi discourses, along with related topics such as disciplining the *soul*/lower-self/ego (*nafs*) in order to allow the *spirit* (*rūḥ*) to ascend to reunion with the divine. Sufism cannot be reduced to such themes, however, as it is also deeply concerned with issues of human spiritual hierarchies, sainthood, and the miraculous/marvelous powers of the saints. Another reason is because Sufi masters and, later in Sufism's development, institutionalized Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*, sing. *ṭarīqah*), were powerful sociopolitical actors that transformed the face of Islamdom in ways incomparable to Christian "mystics." Indeed, the term *wilāyah* (sometimes

21. Al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-bayān,* passim.
22. Brethren of Purity, *On Magic*, 11–18.

walāyah) — "friendship [with God], sanctity, sainthood" — denotes sacred power stemming from a close relationship to God and implies bringing that power to bear upon the world. The saints are "God's friends" (*awliyā' Allāh*) and thus are possessed of the ability to intercede with God in matters of the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*) as well as marvelous powers for acting on the herebelow (*al-dunyā*): healing the sick, ensuring agricultural productivity, defeating foreign invaders and corrupt rulers, etc., as recounted in innumerable hagiographical texts.[23]

Sufi thinkers offer a rich variety of terms relating to ideas of *gnōsis*; that is, non-ordinary or non-discursive ways of knowing. Islamic thought generally holds that *revelation* (*waḥy, tanzīl*) ceased with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, but Sufis attribute various quasi-prophetic capabilities to their saints and masters. *Ma'rifah*, for example, one of many common Arabic words for "knowing," connotes in Sufi usage experiential knowledge achievable only through spiritual practice rather than oral instruction or book-learning. Similarly, Sufi figures often claim to have attained *kashf*, "unveiling," on some matter, a special insight gained by piercing the veils of the Unseen (*al-ghayb*), or to have received such knowledge through *ilhām* (inspiration) or a *ru'yā* (*vision*). Various Sufi thinkers (and non-Sufi philosophers) theorize the *imagination*/imaginative faculty (*khayāl*, *wahm*) as an organ for perceiving spiritual realities through visionary means, some going so far as to posit an imaginal plane or world (*'ālam al-khayāl*, *'ālam al-mithāl*), often in connection with Neoplatonic-inspired notions of the world-soul and theories of hylomorphism.[24]

Sufi masters and saints are often associated with the occult sciences. The aforementioned 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, for example, is reputed to be a master of many occult arts, including *alchemy* (*al-kīmiyah*) and the political-eschatological prognosticative discourse known as *jafr*.[25] The early Nubian Sufi figure Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 859 or 862) is said to have studied alchemy before coming

23. Radtke et al., "Walī."
24. van Lit, *World of Image*, passim.
25. Gardiner, "Jafr."

to Sufism, and alchemy remains a recurrent topic for Sufi thinkers, whether as a metaphor for spiritual transformation or an actual praxis.[26] Even relatively conservative Sufi thinkers are sometimes associated with occult discourses, such as the famous Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), to whom numerous treatises on the Kabbalah-like science of letters and names are ascribed pseudepigraphically.

The relationship between Sufism and the occult sciences grows closer as time goes on, the two becoming particularly intertwined from roughly the twelfth century onward. This can be seen in the literature as occult discourses that, in the classical Islamic period, had largely been based on Hellenistic sources, increasingly draw on Sufi modes of authority and praeternatural power in later periods. The science of physiognomy (*firāsah*), for example, takes on a distinctly Sufi character in some (but not all) late-medieval and early modern sources, moving from a rational science based on external characteristics to a kind of clairvoyance said to be possessed by Sufi masters. Alchemical texts, too, take on an increasingly Sufi character, such as in the writings of Aydamir al-Jildakī (fl. fourteenth c.). The ultimate Sufi occult discourse, arguably, is the science of letters and names (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf wa-al-asmāʾ*), a.k.a. "lettrism," which deals in the cosmogonic powers of the Arabic alphabet and the divine names and combines elements of *astrology* (*ʿilm aḥkām al-nujūm*) and talismanry with Neoplatonism-influenced cosmological discourses. The massive popularity of lettrism in the Islamic world of the fourteenth century onward helped enshrine the image of Sufis as proficient in the occult arts.

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26. Mojaddedi, "Dhū l-nūn al-Miṣrī."

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