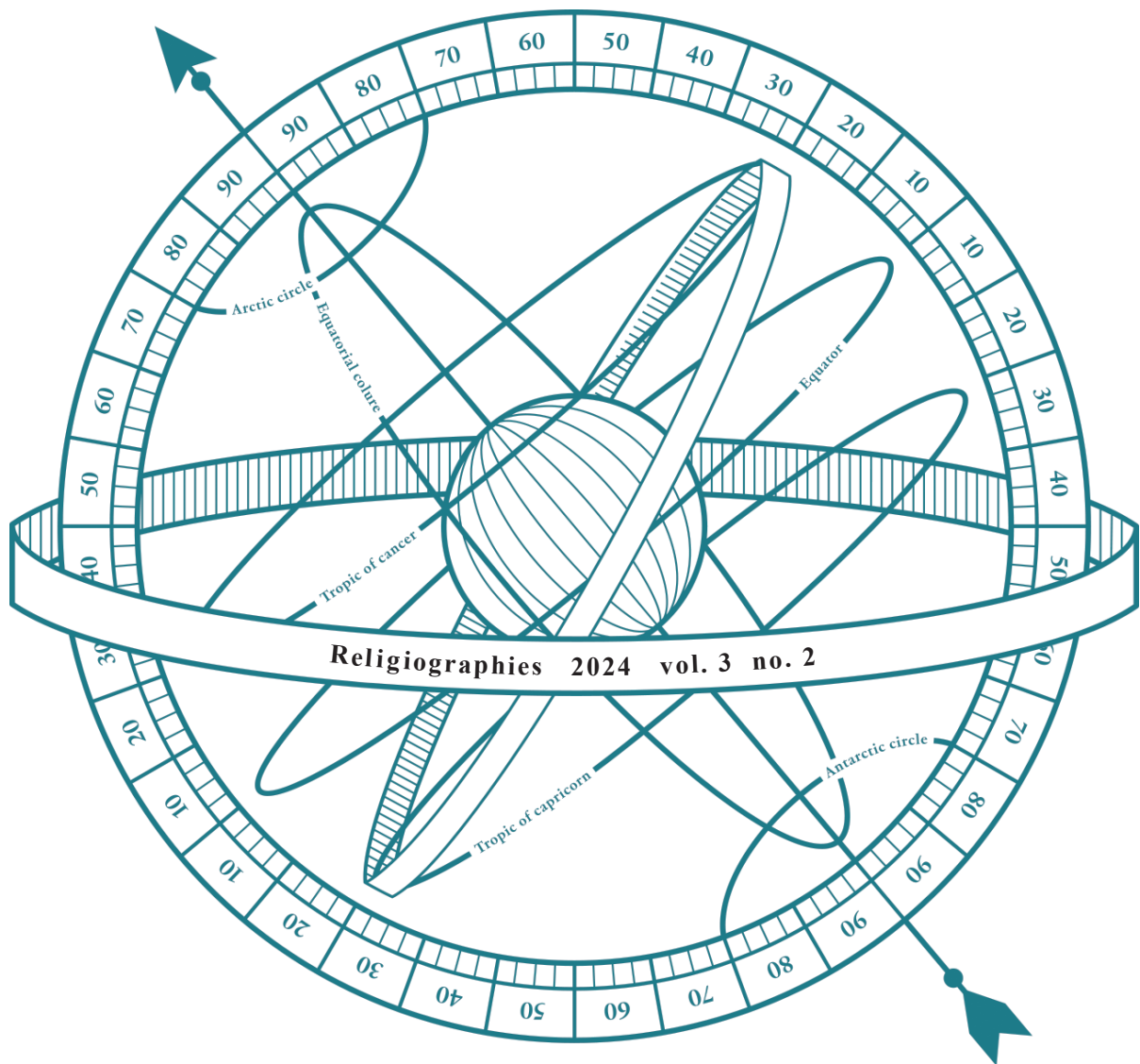


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# Re-Spiritualising the World: Ibn ‘Arabi in the Thought of Faouzi Skali

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the Moroccan Sufi Faouzi Skali, who has contributed greatly to making Sufism accessible to Sufis and non-Sufis alike, especially in France, since the 1980s. Ibn ‘Arabi is a central reference in his numerous books, seminars, and lectures. But Skali also stands in the francophone tradition of intellectual engagement with Sufism and draws on Ibn ‘Arabi in many places via French-speaking authors such as Titus Burckhardt and, mainly, Henry Corbin. By outlining and contrasting the perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabi, Corbin, and Skali, this article demonstrates how Skali reduces the complex theories of the thirteenth and twentieth centuries to a few elements and integrates them into his introductions to Sufism, which are aimed at a wider audience. We will argue that Skali primarily uses the reception of Corbin to integrate the concepts of an intermediate world (*‘ālam al-mithāl*) and a spiritual ethic (*futuwwa*) into his contemporary programme for re-spiritualising materialised and secular societies.



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## Introduction

Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) is one of the most widely received Sufis in Europe and is particularly discussed among francophone Sufi enthusiasts and Sufis in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Key figures such as René Guénon (1886–1951), Henry Corbin (1903–1978), and Michel Vâlsan (1907–1974) widely disseminated their ideas and in doing so prepared the ground for diverse historical, intellectual, and spiritually motivated engagements with the great Andalusian mystic of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries.

One contemporary Sufi who is firmly anchored in this tradition of French intellectual Sufism and who integrates many of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas into his public dissemination and popularisation of Sufism is the Moroccan Faouzi Skali (born 1953 in Fez), whose ideas will be the focus of this article.

Skali is famous for co-founding the Festival of World Sacred Music (*Festival des Musiques Sacrées du Monde*) in 1994 in Fez, as well as founding the Fez Sufi Culture Festival (*Festival de Fès de la Culture Soufie*) in 2007. He has also spread his vision of Sufism through numerous publications, seminars, and other appearances or events among francophone circles in Morocco and France, and is among the most influential present-day Sufi teachers in France and francophone Europe in general.

His work is not a detailed academic or independent contribution to Ibn ‘Arabi. Rather, Skali simplifies and integrates Ibn ‘Arabi, as well as modern receptions of the latter, into his explanations and dissemination of Sufism for a broader public. This article shows how Skali reduces the complexity of Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective and its recent reception (mainly through Corbin) and then embeds some of their key aspects in a contemporary spiritual programme that is typically characterised by its contribution to individual and collective concerns.

This article juxtaposes the theory of two concepts in Ibn ‘Arabi, Corbin, and Skali: an intermediate world or world of images (*‘alam al-mithāl*) and “spiritual chivalry” (*futuwwa*). In doing so, it shows the scholars’ respective emphases and characteristics, and demonstrates how Skali incorporates Corbin’s perspective to underpin his own agenda of re-spiritualising contemporary societies. The concepts of *‘alam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* are the focus of this article because they are deployed by Skali in service of this highly spiritual programme.

In the following, we will first briefly outline the reception of Ibn ‘Arabi in France and situate Skali’s life and work within this context. Next follows a discussion of the general significance of Ibn ‘Arabi in Skali’s teachings. Then the concepts of *‘alam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* are presented. Concerning these two concepts, we will summarise both Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding and that of other Sufi contemporaries. The reception by Corbin is then outlined, and finally Skali’s view is described so that the differences and parallels with Corbin become evident, thereby proving his proximity to Corbin in terms of content and agenda.

## Importance of Ibn ‘Arabi in French-Speaking Europe

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans and non-Europe-

ans from Paris, Cairo, various cities in Italy, and the northern Algerian city of Mostaganem participated in a lively international exchange on Sufism. ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Illaysh (1845–1922), head of the Egyptian Shadhiliyya ‘Arabiyya, played a key role in the dialogue with European converts, particularly discussing the legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917) was a convert to Islam and Sufism who was introduced to the work of Ibn ‘Arabi by ‘Illaysh. He went on to present Ibn ‘Arabi to an Italian and then a French intellectual public through articles in the short-lived journal, *Il Convito*, and later in the equally short-lived journal of René Guénon (1886–1951), *La Gnose*. His texts were subsequently republished in Guénon’s more widely read journal, *Etudes traditionnelles*. Aguéli also founded the Société Al-Akbariyya in Paris, which was dedicated to the study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work.<sup>2</sup>

Guénon was an influential occultist, metaphysician, and later Sufi, whom Mark Sedgwick identified as the central figure in a “traditionalist” school of thought that was developing at the time. Guénon defended a decidedly anti-modernist point of view and integrated Western occultist and metaphysical ideas as well as elements from Sufi and Hindu traditions into his thinking. Above all, he argued that one must be anchored in an authentic religious tradition in order to gain access to a primordial truth, and he instrumentalised Sufism as this kind of tradition and as a bastion against modernity.

Guénon had presumably come across Sufism and Ibn ‘Arabi via Aguéli and had integrated concepts of the latter into his thinking without, however, dealing with Ibn ‘Arabi more closely.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he was an important starting point for the spread of Ibn ‘Arabi in the following decades. Guénon had some influential Sufi followers who founded or frequented branches of Sufi lineages (tariqas), and who at the same time engaged intellectually with Sufism. These Sufis, such as Frithjof Schuon, Michel Vâlsan, Titus Burckhardt, Maurice Gloton, Charles-André Gilis, and Michel Chodkiewicz, studied Ibn ‘Arabi more intensively. However, they merged their reception of his thought with central perspectives of Guénon and popularised their own views through numerous translations and publications both in anglophone regions (Schuon) and especially in French-speaking Europe (Vâlsan, Burckhardt, Gilis, Gloton, Chodkiewicz).<sup>4</sup> Their works deal with diverse topics such as number mysticism, Jesus in Islam, spiritual authority, and facets of Islamic law, among others. They also all combine their own spiritual interests with the reception of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas in these areas to varying degrees.

A new generation of French-speaking scholars continues to publish on Ibn ‘Arabi in academic circles. They produce translations and research that is often, but not always, strictly academic and can still be described as “spiritually relevant research.”<sup>5</sup>

While Islamologists in the narrower sense have been absent from the dissemination of Ibn ‘Arabi so far, Corbin stands out as one such dedicated scholar of Islam, who successfully disseminated Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought in twentieth-century France and beyond. Corbin was also a philosopher and Protestant theologian, as well as an important member of the Eranos circle who did not follow in Guénon’s footsteps. As far as his works on Islam are concerned, he was primarily interested

1 Meir Hatina, “Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement, and Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007): 390–404.

2 Mark Sedgwick, “Politics, Painting, and Esotericism,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 5–8; Viveca Wessel, “Ivan Aguéli’s life and work,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 17–32.

3 Mark Sedgwick, “The Significance of Ivan Aguéli for the Traditionalist Movement,” in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 165–78.

4 Among the most important Ibn ‘Arabi-related book publications by these authors (apart from their translations with introductions and articles) are: Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber, 1959); the paper collection of Michel Vâlsan, *L’islam et la fonction de René Guénon* (Paris: Editions de l’Oeuvre, 1953); Titus Burckhardt, *Clé spirituelle de l’astrologie musulmane d’après Mohyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi* (Paris: Arché, 1974); Maurice Gloton, *Jésus, le fils de Marie dans le Qur’an et selon l’enseignement d’Ibn ‘Arabi* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2006); Charles-André Gilis, *René Guénon et l’avènement du troisième sceau: Suivi de les clés des demeures spirituelles dans les “Futūḥāt” d’Ibn ‘Arabi* (Paris: Etudes traditionnelles, 1991); *Les sept étendards du califat* (Paris: Etudes traditionnelles, 1993), *La doctrine initiatique du pèlerinage à la maison d’Allah* (Paris: Les éditions de l’œuvre, 1982); and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn ‘Arabi, le livre et la loi* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992) and *Le sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabi* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1986).

5 These authors include Michel Chodkiewicz’s daughter Claude Addas, Denis Gril, Abdallah Penot, Max Giraud, Michel Vâlsan’s son Muhammad Vâlsan, Roger Deladrière, Stéphane Ruspoli, and Paul Ballanfât, some of whom are also close to the thought of Guénon.

in Shi‘i-Islamic theology and Iranian Sufism, particularly Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (1154–1191). However, he also published on Ibn ‘Arabi.

His main work on Ibn ‘Arabi, *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn ‘Arabi*, was published in 1958. Here, he tries to understand and present the complex ideas of the mystic, but also visibly brings in his own esoteric interests and theological ideas, especially that of an intuitive imagination and spirituality that allows direct access to divine truth. Corbin influenced the work of some academically engaged Sufis, again mostly characterised by Guénonism, such as Seyyid Hossein Nasr and William Chittick.

Against the background of this francophone tradition, we can situate Faouzi Skali’s reception of Ibn ‘Arabi. We will explain further how Skali receives Sufism in general and Ibn ‘Arabi in particular via parts of this tradition, integrating both Guénonist-traditionalist Ibn ‘Arabi readings and Corbin’s perspective. We will argue, however, that Skali draws particularly on Corbin’s reception to revitalise Ibn ‘Arabi’s spirituality as life-transforming, a spirituality he integrates in turn into his own spiritual programme. Below, we will introduce this programme along with his life and work.

### Life and Work of Faouzi Skali

Skali was born in 1953 in Fez, Morocco. Although his grandparents were religious scholars and Sufis, he found his own route to Sufism first by reading French thinkers during his studies in Paris, and later through his search for a Sufi shaykh in Morocco, whom he found in Hamza al-Qadiri Budshishi (1922–2017), then shaykh of the Morocco-centred Budshishiyya tariqa.<sup>6</sup>

Skali read Guénon and other authors with an affinity for Guénon, such as the traditionalist Sufis Martin Lings, Jean-Louis Michon, and Burckhardt.<sup>7</sup> He also read Corbin’s *L’imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d’Ibn ‘Arabi* (1958), which left a strong impression on him; while reading this work, according to Francesco Piraino, he declared that he had visions and dreams.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Skali studied sociology and received his doctorate in anthropology from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1990 with a thesis on Sufi lineages in Fez.<sup>9</sup> He can therefore be described as an academically trained figure who, as is common for many of the authors mentioned above, can combine spiritual interests or even experiences with academic readings.

Above all, however, Skali is a public figure who has contributed considerably to the spread and public discussion of Sufism in France. Since the 1980s, he has recruited many new Sufi disciples to join the Moroccan Sufi lineage Budshishiyya in France, and he has made Sufism known and popular to a more general audience through numerous workshops, conferences, books, and articles on Sufism.<sup>10</sup> As mentioned, Skali has gained international renown through co-founding and founding the Fez Festival of Sacred Music and the Fez Sufi Culture Festival.<sup>11</sup> In addition, he is also active in Morocco with conferences and seminars on Sufism which, as they are held in French, probably attract the francophone bourgeoisies of the cities in particular.

In his publications and lectures, Skali is principally interested in

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See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the modern world: Traditionalism and the secret intellectual history of the twentieth century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 244–46.

7

This is clear from the authors that Skali quotes in his texts, but see also: Mark Sedgwick, *Against the modern world*, 244–46.

8

Francesco Piraino, “Sufi Festivals as a Social Movement: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Politics,” *Sociologica* 15, no. 3 (2021): 149.

9

Piraino, “Sufi Festivals,” 149; Raphaël Voix, “Implantation d’une confrérie marocaine en France: Mécanismes, méthodes et acteurs,” *Ateliers d’anthropologie: Laboratoire d’ethnologie et de sociologie comparative* 28 (2004): 230.

10

See Voix, “Implantation d’une confrérie marocaine en France,” 224–36. His best-known books include *La voie soufie* (1985), *Futuwah: Traité de chevalerie soufie* (1989), *Traces de lumière: Paroles initiatiques soufies* (1996), *Jésus dans la tradition soufie* (2004), *Moïse dans la tradition soufie* (2011), and *Le souvenir de l’être profond: Propos sur les enseignements d’un maître soufi, Sidi Hamza* (2012).

11

Piraino, “Sufi Festivals,” 148–49.

topics such as the constitution of the cosmos and the human being; the stages of the spiritual path; the significance of symbols and archetypes in the transmission of, and as access to, spiritual truths; the figure of Jesus in Islam; and the esoteric significance of the prophets in general, as well as behavioural norms (*futuwwa*) and, in connection with this, the development of spiritual humanism.

Piraino's article "Sufi Festivals as Social Movement: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Politics" (2022) further situates Skali in a broader network of mainly francophone Sufis who pursue overarching goals and spread them beyond the classical Sufi-tariqas. This includes promoting Sufism as a liberal, tolerant, and cosmopolitan spirituality that stands up for democracy and human rights, that rejects religious radicalism, that fights islamophobia, and that re-sacralises contemporary secularised and materialistically oriented societies.<sup>12</sup>

Skali's work can be read against the background of these agendas. We must understand this background, the context of French-intellectual engagement with Sufism, and the education levels of his intended audience, as the site on which he locates his interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi.

### Ibn 'Arabi in the Work of Faouzi Skali

Skali's reflections are based on various elder Sufis. These include, for example, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (947–1034), especially when he speaks about *futuwwa*;<sup>13</sup> the Persian 'Ala al-Dawla al-Simnani (1261–1336), mainly when he speaks about levels of spiritual realisation (*maqāmāt*) and of subtle organs in the human being (*laṭā'if*) that can recognise these different levels of realisation;<sup>14</sup> and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), quoted for example in the depiction of Jesus or Moses.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Ibn 'Arabi is the classical author to whom Skali most frequently refers—whether implicitly or explicitly—on all these topics and in numerous books and talks. Ibn 'Arabi is mainly received and quoted via authors of the twentieth century, specifically Burckhardt and Corbin.

Skali devotes a great deal of attention to the topic of Sufi cosmology. His view adopts the neoplatonic perspective of Ibn 'Arabi and many other Sufis, according to which an initial impulse set the creation of the universe in motion. Then it manifested itself successively on various invisible levels of reality, from the highest down to the material world.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of *La voie soufie*, Skali declares that he will explain the constitution of the universe according to Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*.<sup>17</sup> In his subsequent remarks he reproduces elements such as the non-manifested and unknowable divine essence as a cause of all being; the first impulse, through which the divine essence sets in motion the so-called very sacred effusion;<sup>18</sup> the Muhammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*) which is this first effusion of divine light;<sup>19</sup> the world soul (*al-naḥs al-kulliyya*), understood as a receptacle according to Burckhardt's translation,<sup>20</sup> also understood as a first archetype containing all spiritual archetypes of beings in creation;<sup>21</sup> and, last but not least, the combination of these elements with the letter mysticism of the Arabic alphabet.<sup>22</sup>

In his reception of these cosmological elements, Skali does not

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See Piraino, "Sufi Festivals," 153–60.

13

Faouzi Skali's *Futuwwah: Traité de chavellerie soufie*, traduction et introduction par Faouzi Skali (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012) is, for example, an introduction and translation of *futuwwa*-related writings of al-Sulami; see also his conference *La chevalerie spirituelle* at the opening of the *Festival soufi de Paris* in 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2Gj3dRk>, or within the three-part masterclasses in 2022: *Initiation à la Futuwwa, Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle, La spiritualité en action*, January 23, March 21, and April 18, 2021, accessible to members of the Sufi Heritage platform at: <https://sufiheritage.com>.

14

For example, in Faouzi Skali, *La voie soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 21–30, and the four-part seminar with Faouzi Skali, *Le voyage de l'âme* at the Institut des Sagesses du Monde via Zoom in Spring 2021 (accessible to registered students only).

15

For example, in Faouzi Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), 84–85, 101, 111, 117; Faouzi Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011).

16

See on the spread of Neoplatonism among Sufis: Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31–49.

17

Skali, *La voie soufie*, 15.

18

Skali, 18.

19

Skali, 27–28.

20

Skali, 25.

21

Skali, 28. The archetypes refer to the idea of platonian forms that can manifest themselves in the material world and which stem, as a translation, from both Burckhardt and Corbin.

22

Skali, *La voie soufie*, 14–20.

quote Ibn ‘Arabi in the original, but rather refers mostly to Burckhardt’s French translation of parts of the *Fusus al-Hikam* (*La Sagesse des Prophètes*, 1974, second edition). To a lesser extent, he also cites Corbin and the eighteenth-century Moroccan Sufi Ahmad ibn ‘Ajiba (1747–1809), whom Skali reads partly in the Arabic original and partly in the interpretation by Michon.<sup>23</sup>

Another topic in which Skali regularly integrates references to Ibn ‘Arabi is the prophets and especially Jesus. Here he does not approach them as historical individuals or in their role as prophets of God, but as figures whose lives esoterically embody the realisation of a certain level of reality (*maqām*), according to a neoplatonic point of view.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this understanding, prominently represented by Ibn ‘Arabi, Skali’s depiction of Jesus includes other elements, such as Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of him as the seal of saints (*khatm al-awliyā*), who will return at the end of time and re-establish the world order.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Skali presents episodes from the lives of Jesus and Moses from the perspective of various Sufis, including Ibn ‘Arabi.<sup>26</sup> In this, he rarely quotes the Arabic originals (above all *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*), relying instead on translations and substantial works by French authors such as Denis Gril or the above-mentioned Burckhardt, Chodkiewicz, Gloton, and Gilis.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of delving further into these topics, we will focus below on the two concepts of *‘ālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* which are both used for contemporary spiritual agendas. As we will show, these two concepts serve Skali’s aim of re-sacralising and thus transforming individual and collective life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

## Re-Spiritualising the World Through Ibn ‘Arabi

### ‘*Ālam al-mithāl* or World of Symbols

#### ‘*Ālam al-mithāl* in the Thought of Earlier Sufis, Including Ibn ‘Arabi

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a primary reading or analysis of the concepts in Ibn ‘Arabi. Instead, some key points for understanding *‘ālam al-mithāl* in Ibn ‘Arabi will be provided based on secondary literature by Fazlur Rahman and William Chittick, who deal with the concept in earlier Sufis.

Before Ibn ‘Arabi, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1055/56–1111) had already postulated the ontological and experienceable existence of certain religious phenomena, such as the snakes that, according to the Islamic tradition, visit an unbeliever in the grave after death. He describes these phenomena as realities which cannot be perceived by the normal senses, but by “another sense” which some people can develop.<sup>28</sup>

Suhrawardi was the first to define a separate sphere of existence and to call it *‘ālam al-mithāl*. In Suhrawardi, the concept serves as a place where imagined phenomena become reality, especially in relation to the afterlife, and where concepts, especially eschatological ones, exist ontologically.<sup>29</sup>

23

See, for example, the footnotes in Skali, *La voie soufie*, 186–92.

24

Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 9–18; Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 39; seminar *Le voyage de l’âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, January 30, 2021, via Zoom.

25

Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 24, 57.

26

Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 24, 47, 90–91, 114; Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 53, 62, 81, 83–84, 89, 125–28, 136, 170, 232.

27

Some of the works used by Skali are *La sagesse des prophètes* (2nd edition 1974) (parts of *Fuṣūṣ al-hikām*, trans. Titus Burckhardt); *Le dévoilement des effets du voyage* (1994) (*Kitāb al-isfār ‘an natā’ij al-asfār*, trans. Denis Gril); *Les illuminations de la Mecque* (1988) (*Kitāb al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Michel Chodkiewicz); *Traité de l’amour* (1986) (from the *Futūḥāt*, trans. Maurice Gloton); and *Le livre des châtions des sagesse* (1999) (from *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikām*, trans. Charles-André Gilis); see, for example, the footnotes in Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 146–54 and in Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 249–56.

28

Fazlur Rahman, “Dream, imagination and ‘ālam al-mithāl,” in *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1964): 169.

29

Rahman, “Dream, Imagination,” 169–70; Naeem S. Fuad, “The Imaginal World (‘Ālam al-Mithāl) in the Philosophy of Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī,” *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 365.

Suhrawardi's conception has many parallels with Ibn 'Arabi's. According to Rahman and Chittick, in the *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn 'Arabi explains that imagination within the physical world manifests quasi-physically within *'ālam al-mithāl*. Demons, spirits, and angels populate this world, and are just as real as hell or paradise, which manifest for the deceased exactly as they had imagined them in the physical-mental world. *'Ālam al-mithāl* is therefore, as with Suhrawardi, the location where resurrection takes place.<sup>30</sup> We should also note that, according to Chittick, Ibn 'Arabi commonly refers to this realm of imagination (*khayāl*), the spiritual and physical spheres, as *barzakh*, a term that Corbin uses only in passing in his remarks on the intermediate world, and that does not appear in Skali.<sup>31</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi also places much emphasis on the idea that the souls of especially pure people can create ideas within *'ālam al-mithāl* which in turn manifest in the physical world and are even capable of overriding its natural laws. That is how, for example, miracles can transpire through prophets and saints.<sup>32</sup> According to Rahman, Ibn 'Arabi is referring here in particular to the idea, spread among Sufis through numerous stories, that people can leave their bodies through connection with *'ālam al-mithāl* and then manifest in several places and bodies at once, because physical laws and boundaries no longer exist in that world.<sup>33</sup> Ibn 'Arabi's *'ālam al-mithāl* is therefore not simply conceptual, but a tangible reality situated between the physical and spiritual realms.

Finally, according to Rahman, *'ālam al-mithāl* in Ibn 'Arabi's and Suhrawardi's thinking fulfils the function of creating a place where the unbelievable and the phenomena that override the laws of nature can be located, and where dogmatic beliefs and eschatological concepts are validated as realities.

### *'Ālam al-mithāl in Henry Corbin*

Henry Corbin is considered an important author in popularising the conception of (creative) imagination in the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> In his famous article "Mundus Imaginalis ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal" (1964) as well and in his book *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Corbin deals extensively with the *mundus imaginabilis*, or the world of archetypes, which he equates with *'ālam al-mithāl*.<sup>35</sup> In the prologue to part two, he laments the loss of belief in an intermediate world between the physical and the spiritual, stating:

In this context of agnosticism, it will be accepted that the divinity and all forms of divinity are creations of the imagination, which is to say unreal. What sense could there still be in praying to this divinity, if not that of a desperate deception?<sup>36</sup>

In this context, Corbin assigns an important function to *'ālam al-mithāl*, which is not found in Ibn 'Arabi and must be read as an expression of Corbin's own spiritual interests and as a response to the circumstances of his time. For Corbin, *'ālam al-mithāl*, as an intermediate world between the material and the higher divine spheres, has the potential to sanctify human life and to restore not just direct access

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Rahman, "Dream, Imagination," 170–71; William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 332–39.

31

Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 258–65.

32

Chittick, 258–65.

33

Chittick, 169–73.

34

See for example Daniel Proulx, "Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera," in Riccardo Barontini and Julien Lamy, eds., *L'Histoire du concept d'imagination en France (de 1918 à nos jours)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 187.

35

Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 6.

36

Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 135. All quotes translated by the author from the French original.



to God, but also a real participation *in* God, to secularised life worlds which are devoid of this possibility. Moreover, he does not see this as a mere theoretical possibility but proposes this re-sacralisation in a concrete way.<sup>37</sup>

Corbin's perspective in *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* is two-fold. On one hand, he pursues the goal of presenting *'ālam al-mithāl* and other concepts from the thinking of Ibn 'Arabi and other early Sufis. On the other, this merges with his own conceptions of imagination, the divine, and an intermediate world, which he also developed and defended as a philosopher and theologian.

Concretely, Corbin explains and adopts various aspects found in Ibn 'Arabi. This includes seeing *'ālam-al-mithāl* as a world into which a few pure souls project their ideas to make them realities *sui generis* there,<sup>38</sup> or as a plane through which objects can be removed and made to manifest in different places.<sup>39</sup> For Corbin too, *'ālam al-mithāl* is a realm that exists ontologically between the spiritual and tangible worlds;<sup>40</sup> it is populated by demons, angels, heavens, hells, and many other objects and beings that function as archetypes for humans.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, Corbin repeatedly expounds the cosmological conditions of *'ālam al-mithāl* in Ibn 'Arabi, and refers to the entire creation (meaning all realms, from the spiritual to the material) as a product of divine imagination or *theophany*.<sup>42</sup> In explaining the creative power of divine imagination, Corbin refers to concepts of early Sufis such as the heart being the seat of so-called subtle spiritual organs (*laṭā'if*) in human beings—as postulated especially by the Kubrawi Sufis of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>43</sup> The heart contains the creative capacity of imagination, while this self-same capacity *is* the divine imagination which created the world. He then continues to say that in this way, human beings participate in creation and that their creation is not their own as humans, but is rather divine creation, which continues to take place at every moment. In other words, imagination is *really creative*, i.e., it produces realities, and this production takes place in the realm of *'ālam al-mithāl*.<sup>44</sup> Corbin further describes *'ālam al-mithāl* as both the possibility and the prerequisite for human ascension towards God.<sup>45</sup> In addition, it is the world where divine prayer meets human prayer, allowing both to know themselves as being one and the same.<sup>46</sup>

However, this conceptualisation of divine imagination and creative power as well as of *'ālam al-mithāl* is not merely a reproduction of early Sufi theories. It is also a product of Corbin's own spiritual perspectives, on which he expands in his philosophical works. In *Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera*, Daniel Proulx has also shown that Corbin's conceptions of a *mundus imaginalis* and *imaginatio* are further rooted in a Western history of ideas and concretely influenced by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), even if he uses these terms differently, and by the philosopher and historian Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) in particular.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, we should mention that Corbin intensively studied Iranian Islam and Sufism, and he integrates considerations from his engagement with Shi'i authors and concepts into his explanation of *'ālam al-mithāl*. These include, for example, the twelfth (hidden) Imam as inhabiting this intermediate world,<sup>48</sup> and a Shi'i version of *ta'wīl* as a specific way of interpreting the Qur'an. He explains this as a way of

37  
See for example Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 15–16.

38  
Corbin, 136.

39  
Corbin, 177–78.

40  
Corbin, 6.

41  
This shines through in most chapters; see, for example, Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, i.e., Introduction, I, II, 3–5, Première Partie 1–6, Deuxième Partie IV, 12–13.

42  
Corbin, 137–40.

43  
The Kubrawiyya is a Sufi tariqa founded in the twelfth century by Najm al-Din al-Kubra in Central Asia. Well-known representatives are Najm al-Din Daya Razi (1177–1256) and 'Ala al-Dawla Simnani.

44  
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 161–77.

45  
Corbin, 152–53.

46  
Corbin, 140–41.

47  
Proulx, *Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera*, 187–95.

48  
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 65.

“reading” the perceptible material world as “symbolical,” thus transforming the tangible into symbols within the symbolic world of *‘ālam al-mithāl*.<sup>49</sup>

### *‘Ālam al-mithāl in Faouzi Skali*

Corbin’s presentation is that of an academic and consequently contains detailed and referenced historical outlines and philosophical reflections. Skali, on the other hand, intends to spread knowledge about Sufism among a broader public, albeit a public that is assumed to be well-educated. Accordingly, while he draws on this academic literature, he chooses a few aspects of *‘ālam al-mithāl* that are relevant to him and presents them in simpler language and in less detail.

Skali’s vision of *‘ālam al-mithāl*, which he also calls the world of symbols, is primarily embedded in his descriptions of the human path of spiritual development, and he primarily talks about it in his seminars and lectures.<sup>50</sup> The following analysis is mainly based on a YouTube video entitled “Le monde imaginal face à la crise du sens,” which is explicitly dedicated to a detailed discussion of *‘ālam al-mithāl* and the underlying cosmology.<sup>51</sup>

As oral statements, Skali’s lectures on *‘ālam al-mithāl* contain hardly any references. He nevertheless generally quotes Ibn ‘Arabi when he explains this intermediary world and discusses aspects found within it. Meanwhile his definitional framework is characterised by Corbin’s reception.

Like Ibn ‘Arabi and Corbin, Skali assumes a neoplatonic cosmology with various levels of reality (*maqāmāt*), and he defines *‘ālam al-mithāl* as a real, intermediate world situated between the material and the spiritual realms. Ibn ‘Arabi tends to refer to the middle level of reality between the higher and the lower spheres as *‘ālam al-jabarūt*.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, Skali takes up Corbin’s perspective and denotes *‘ālam al-mithāl* as this level in the middle, where communication between these higher and deeper realms is possible.<sup>53</sup>

Some metaphysical and structural aspects of *‘ālam al-mithāl* found in Ibn ‘Arabi and Corbin are not addressed by Skali in the material accessible to us. These aspects include, for example, *‘ālam al-mithāl* as a place of resurrection, or where imagined versions of heaven and hell are concretely realised, or as a place through which saints can manifest their physical appearances or other objects in various places of the material world.<sup>54</sup> Instead, Skali limits his explanations to describing the nature of divine creative imagination and the role of *‘ālam al-mithāl* in this. As outlined above, these are also central to Corbin, and Skali places these aspects at the service of his theory of and demand for the re-sacralisation of human life.

Like Corbin, Skali laments that contact with the intermediate world has been lost in modern times, where only the belief in the perceptible and the divine worlds persist. Belief in the higher spheres without one’s own direct access via the mediating spheres is tantamount to a faith that has degenerated into a one-sided hope in God. Hence, Skali explains, human life has become devoid of meaning and has lost contact with life’s mystery.<sup>55</sup>

Skali then describes the cosmos in terms that resemble Corbin’s

49

Corbin, *L’imagination créatrice*, 13–14.

50

For example, in *Le voyage de l’âme* at the Institut des Sagesse du Monde via Zoom in Spring 2021 or in his seminar *Imagination créatrice et cheminement spirituel*, at the same institute.

51

This video is part of Skali’s Seminar *Imagination créatrice et cheminement spirituel* and was made public on YouTube in 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QodEnO-B8Q0>). Two other seminar cycles addressing *‘ālam al-mithāl* have been included in this analysis.

52

Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 260.

53

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, seminar *Le voyage de l’âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, and part 3: *Les fruits du voyage*, February 13 and March 6, 2021, via Zoom. We should note, however, that Skali also refers to the intermediate world in some places as *‘ālam al-malakūt*, as did some earlier Sufis. In the passages on *‘ālam al-malakūt*, Skali is specifically based on Al-Simnani, whom he probably also refers to via Corbin (see Ricarda Stegmann, *Transmitting the Untransmittable: Sufism in Europe today* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming]).

54

The link that Corbin establishes between a symbolic reading of the universe and the Shi’i *ta’wīl*, as well as other Shi’i elements in Corbin’s reception, are also logically not taken up by Skali, who stands in a Sunni frame of reference.

55

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*.

perspective in order to explain how human life can be reinscribed in the divine and become meaningful again. In concrete terms, the cosmos is a divine vision in Skali's view, and the world (including human beings) is a product of infinite creative power striving to realise its vision.<sup>56</sup> Skali emphasises that the polished heart, in human beings who are conscious of themselves, can receive or access divine creative imagination. They thereby become creators themselves, co-creating creation, which is renewed in every moment (and in this way the human being no longer creates as a human being, but as the divine).<sup>57</sup>

Reception of the divine message happens, as in Corbin, on the level of the world of symbols.<sup>58</sup> Skali declares that this world expresses itself in symbols and myths (in which he shows a special interest), which humans can only intuitively understand at the level of the heart, and concretely through one of the so-called *laṭā'if* (the *laṭīfa sirriyya*), as part of the heart.

Moreover, the higher worlds communicate with the lower through the world of symbols, and Sufis with higher spiritual knowledge always speak and transmit this divine knowledge in the language of the symbols they receive (and respectively create).<sup>59</sup> Skali describes how this kind of access to the divine fills human life with meaning again, and he speaks repeatedly of a pure or authentic way of being that thus becomes possible.<sup>60</sup>

To summarise, Skali receives key points of Ibn 'Arabi's *'ālam al-mithāl* via the reading of Corbin. However, he omits central aspects of both their perspectives on this concept and limits himself to the element of access to, and communication with, the divine via the symbols located in and transmitted by *'ālam al-mithāl*. He uses this as an important element of his aforementioned spiritual agenda to show people in secularised contexts an approach to re-sacralising their lives. Below, we will outline his understanding of *futuwwa*, which has a similar aim.

## ***Futuwwa***

### *Historical futuwwa and Ibn 'Arabi's Perspective*

*Futuwwa*, translatable as “young-manliness,” derives from the Arabic term for young man (*fatā*) and generally refers to the virtues and qualities that a young man should possess.<sup>61</sup> As a social phenomenon, *futuwwa* usually alludes to military and civil male societies or associations, such as merchant or craft guilds with their initiatory character and rules of conduct. These groups developed in various Islamic countries from the tenth century and were widespread throughout the Islamic world until the early twentieth century, especially in regions such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia. Their character and social standing varied greatly by era and location.<sup>62</sup>

Many Sufis have also been concerned with *futuwwa* and have dedicated treatises to this topic. The tenth-century Persian Sufi scholar al-Sulami was one of the first to write extensively about *futuwwa* as a norm for a Sufi's behaviour in his *Kitab al-Futuwwa*.<sup>63</sup> However, most of the arguments by Sufis appear later, especially the thirteenth century.<sup>64</sup> Ibn 'Arabi deals extensively with the *futuwwa* in three chapters of the *Futuhat*,<sup>65</sup> where he defines the term in both a general and

56

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; see also Skali, *La voie soufie*, 33–38. The archetypes refer to the idea of platonic forms which can manifest themselves in the material world, as Skali explains in *Le monde imaginal* and which stem, as a translation, from both Burckhardt and Corbin. However, it was of course Corbin who established a more detailed theory of archetypes as having a real existence and cosmological function, thereby developing the foundations for a theory of characters and psychological dispositions. See James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A brief account; Together with a complete checklist of works* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1988), 3–4.

57

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*. This description is found in very similar words in Corbin, as shown above. With the idea of the polished heart, Skali alludes to a widespread Sufi concept of the heart which becomes a mirror of the divine when it is polished, purified, or developed.

58

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, seminar *Le voyage de l'âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, part 3: *Les fruits du voyage*; Skali, *La voie soufie*, 30.

59

Skali, *La voie soufie*, 57, 140–43.

60

Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, *Le chemin du cœur*. Skali is at the centre of the Eranos circle's thinking here. This understanding of symbols and myths as carriers of a spiritual truth that can be deciphered through an intuitive knowledge corresponds to the core interests and theories of religion for which not only Corbin, but the great figures of the Eranos circle in general, became famous; see Stephen M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

61

Robert Irvin, “‘Futuwwa’: Chivalry and Gangsterism in Medieval Cairo,” *Muqarnas* 21 (2004): 161.

62

Irvin, “‘Futuwwa,’” 93.

63

Irvin, 161.

64

Mehran Afshari, “Sufism, *Futuwwa*, and professional guilds,” in *Handbook of Sufi Studies*, vol. 1, *Sufi Institutions*, ed. Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 95.

65

Mukhtar H. Ali, “Futuwwa as the Noblest Character Traits (Makārim al-Akhlāq) in Anṣārī's Manāzil al-Sā'irīn with al-Kāshānī's Commentary,” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, no. 1/2 (2020): 45.

specific sense. In the general sense, like many other Sufis, Ibn 'Arabi understands *futuwwa* as the highest morality and the realisation of noble character traits (*makārim al-akhlāq*) that humans must develop to progress on their spiritual path.<sup>66</sup> However, for Ibn 'Arabi, attaining the noble character traits is situated on one of the higher, although not the highest, spiritual station (*maqām*). *Futuwwa* is a stage that must be attained and then surpassed on the way to the highest levels of closeness to God.<sup>67</sup>

In the specific sense, Ibn 'Arabi defines *futuwwa* as the ethical perfection that is first and foremost embodied by God<sup>68</sup> and that Muhammad incarnated on earth. Muhammad was thus the perfect *fatā*,<sup>69</sup> and *futuwwa* took on the function of a spiritual pole (*quṭb*) when Muhammad died and the line of prophets ended. In this way, the cosmos could continue to turn and all knowledge could be passed on through *futuwwa*, as Laila Khalifa explained.<sup>70</sup>

At this point, a complex theory unfolds in Ibn 'Arabi, linking *futuwwa* to prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and God's vicegerency on earth (*niyāba*). He introduces Abraham as the incarnation of the exoteric pole of *futuwwa* and Jesus as the esoteric pole, saying that the exoteric pole displays values directed towards others (such as forgiveness and courage) while the esoteric pole is directed towards itself (characterised by values such as abstinence, asceticism, devotion, etc.).<sup>71</sup> Human seekers orient themselves towards these poles and models in order to attain *futuwwa* within themselves. To do so, they need both inner strength (*quwwa*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) of how to develop and master these character traits; they are also characterised by serving others more than themselves.<sup>72</sup>

### *Futuwwa in Corbin*

Henry Corbin published on *futuwwa* in his detailed introduction to the *Traité des Compagnons-Chevaliers. Rasail-e Javanmardan. Recueil de sept Fotowwat-Nāmeḥ*, edited by Morteza Sarraf,<sup>73</sup> as well as in parts of his *En Islam Iranien*.<sup>74</sup> As with *'ālam al-mithāl*, Corbin provides historical depictions of how *futuwwa* has been understood by various authors,<sup>75</sup> but also unfolds his own complex theory on the topic<sup>76</sup> and clearly addresses a highly specialist audience.

Corbin's version is only briefly touched on here because, while Skali refers to it in some places, their perspectives differ on this point more than they do on *'ālam al-mithāl*. This is no doubt also because Corbin, as an Iranist and scholar of Shi'i Islam, deals primarily with Shi'i interpretations of *futuwwa*, which Skali, as a Sunni author speaking to a Muslim-Sunni or non-Islamic audience, does not adopt.

Concretely, Corbin describes *futuwwa* as a phenomenon which is tied to Sufism,<sup>77</sup> but which is mainly Shi'i by nature.<sup>78</sup> He regularly refers to Ibn 'Arabi, but also to various Persian Shi'i authors, including Shi'i interpreters of Ibn 'Arabi, who write on spiritual knighthood in treatises dedicated to *futuwwa*, the so-called *futuwwa-nāma*.<sup>79</sup> Corbin embeds his interpretation of *futuwwa* in a comprehensive Shi'i cosmology of cycles. In contrast to Ibn 'Arabi, he describes a decidedly Shi'i guardianship (*walāya*) of God: after the last prophet, 'Ali as the first imam is the perfect *fatā* and *quṭb* of *futuwwa*; meanwhile, the

66

Ali, "Futuwwa," 11, 17–18; Laila Khalifa, *Ibn Arabi: L'initiation à la Futuwwa* (Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2001), 161–63.

67

Ali, "Futuwwa," 58–59.

68

Khalifa, *Ibn Arabi*, 190–91.

69

Khalifa, 197.

70

Khalifa, 200.

71

Khalifa, 204–47.

72

Khalifa, 185–99. Zargar furthermore claims that Ibn 'Arabi's general treatises on *futuwwa* fulfilled an important socio-political function: the degenerating (non-Sufi) *futuwwa* of the time, with their outlaw morality and tendency to disregard social norms, had become a social and political danger that politicians and the religious sought to control. Ibn 'Arabi's theory contributes to this aim by detaching this (non-Sufi) *futuwwa* ideal of a free and indomitable personality from the practice of transgressing social norms and by integrating it into Sufi theology. The heroic freedom to ignore social rules is thus transformed into the more socially conformist profile of fearlessly defying lower personal and group tendencies such as robbery and greed; as well as into living the freedom to obey the higher religious norms without expecting recognition, Zargar, *A Daring Obedience*, 55–62.

73

Henry Corbin, "Introduction analytique," in *Traité des Compagnons-Chevaliers: Rasail-e Javanmardan; Recueil de sept "Fotowwat-Nāmeḥ"*, ed. Morteza Sarraf (Tehran: Imprimerie Taban, 1973), 5–102; Mark Sedgwick, "Politics, Painting, and Esotericism," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 5–8.

74

Especially in Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1972).

75

Especially in Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–102.

76

Mainly in Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:390–460.

77

Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 8.

78

Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:410.

twelfth imam, who (according to the Twelver Shi‘i view) did not die but was raptured and has been hidden ever since, will act as the seal (closure) of *futuwwa* at the end of time.<sup>80</sup>

At the same time, Corbin understands *futuwwa* as a spiritual chivalry whose secret knowledge unites all Abrahamic traditions. One main interest of his is to prove that this secret knowledge— notions of closeness and the representativeness of God—held by the respective spiritual elites can be found in all these traditions and especially in Shi‘i Islam and Christianity.<sup>81</sup>

### *Futuwwa in Skali*

Skali has been engaged with *futuwwa* since the end of the 1980s. He has mainly dealt with the topic in *Futuwah. Traité de chevalerie soufie* (1989) but also more recently at Sufi festivals and in masterclasses.<sup>82</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi is a central reference in Skali’s older and newer reflections on *futuwwa*. His book provides a translation of al-Sulami’s *futuwwa*-related writings, but Skali sees Ibn ‘Arabi’s thoughts on the topic as a valuable comment on al-Sulami.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, in his long introduction to al-Sulami’s translation, he introduces Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective on *futuwwa*<sup>84</sup> and regularly quotes the latter in the remaining pages of the same introduction,<sup>85</sup> as well as in his oral lectures.

Skali has also read texts by Corbin on *futuwwa*, repeatedly quoting the latter’s comments on this topic in his masterclass and book.<sup>86</sup> However, while Corbin builds his own complex theology, Skali’s explanations are once again simpler and part of introductory lessons on Sufism that can be understood by an educated but lay audience. Skali makes complex *futuwwa* theories publicly available in simpler language and ties in a spiritual message.

In his reflections on *futuwwa*, Skali provides a short introduction on its history as a social phenomenon and embeds his explanation of the spiritual dimension in general introductions to Sufi concepts. For example, he explains what the Sufi saints (*awliyā*) are and in what states of closeness to God they can be. He also describes how Sufis distinguish between different levels of spiritual realisation (*maqāmāt*), and that there are various types and branches of knowledge in Islam. He then builds on these explanations to establish the significance of *futuwwa* as a spiritual reality.<sup>87</sup>

Like Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis, Skali firstly defines *futuwwa* as the totality of the *makārim al-akhlāq*.<sup>88</sup> For Skali, too, the unfolding of these noble character traits is the sign of attaining a certain, but not the highest, *maqām*,<sup>89</sup> at which a person is characterised by great humbleness, generosity, or by renouncing revenge when wronged.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, Skali refers to Ibn ‘Arabi’s specific use of the term and describes Muhammad, other prophets, and saints as bearers of *futuwwa*, which is defined as a spiritual reality. He explicitly cites Ibn ‘Arabi when introducing the Malamatis as the highest realisers of *futuwwa*, as they have walked the path to God up to the highest *maqām* and then brought the achieved knowledge back into the world of multiplicity.<sup>91</sup>

In terms of determining the spiritual dimension of *futuwwa*, Skali refers to Corbin when he says, “Futuwah is the marrow of Shari‘a, of Tariqa (path) and Haqiqa (truth).”<sup>92</sup> Continuing with the reference to

79

Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–102.

80

Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:415, 430–36; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 9, 29, 31.

81

This is the aim of the part on spiritual chivalry in Corbin’s *En Islam iranien*, 4:390–460.

82

For example at the Sufi Festival in Paris in 2018, lecture available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2Gj3dRk&t=88s> or during three masterclasses dedicated to *futuwwa* on the Moroccan-based platform Sufi Heritage, available for registered students at: <https://sufiheritage.com>.

83

Faouzi Skali, *Futuwah: Traité de chevalerie soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 9.

84

Skali, *Futuwah*, esp. 37–39.

85

Skali, esp. 7–44.

86

Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*, March 21, 2021; Skali, *Futuwah*, 30, 36.

87

See Skali in the masterclasses and in *Futuwah*, 7–44.

88

Skali, Masterclass part 1: *Initiation à la Futuwwa*, January 23, 2021.

89

Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*; see also Skali, *Futuwah*, 39.

90

Skali, Masterclass part 2, March 21, 2021.

91

Skali, *Futuwah*, 37–39.

92

Skali, 36.

Corbin, he goes on to define *futuwwa* as the essence or highest degree of initiation as well as the orientation for the spiritual pilgrim.<sup>93</sup> Apart from readers basically understanding it, however, the concept of *futuwwa* as a mainly Shi‘i phenomenon and its integration into a Shi‘i cosmology (as we find in Corbin) does not appear in Skali, as might be expected. Skali does not mention ‘Ali or the hidden imam as bearers of *futuwwa* and he does not quote the Shi‘i commentators. Instead, Skali cites some classical Sunnis, such as Hasan al-Basri (652–728), Abu Hafs al-Nisaburi (died in 877–79), and Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (died in 910), which allows him to anchor *futuwwa* in early Sufism. He even more frequently cites verses from the Qur’an and hadiths that explain the values of *fatā*, thereby legitimising *futuwwa* as a theme at the core of Islam itself.<sup>94</sup>

Building on this spiritual conceptualisation, Skali regularly emphasises *futuwwa* as an inner force, which, as we argue, serves to underpin his interest in developing a spiritual and societally transformative humanism.

In his opening to the Sufi festival in Paris in 2018, Skali presented *futuwwa* as a force of the soul that helps to counterbalance the negative tendencies of the ego (*nafs*):

All these values [of *futuwwa*] are ways of finding antidotes to our ego (*al-nafs*). Since the ego, by definition, is to have as much as possible, it is greed, it is cupidity. Developing this generosity through the power of the soul is therefore a form of antidote to the ego.<sup>95</sup>

He also continues to emphasise an aspect highlighted by Corbin,<sup>96</sup> namely that *futuwwa* does not refer to physical, but to spiritual youthfulness, which is independent from physical age:

We must approach the youth of our soul. The soul that worships its Lord is in a state of perpetual youth. You can be 90 or 100 years old but still have a soul that lives in eternal youth.<sup>97</sup>

Ultimately, Skali sees in this development of one’s own spirituality the potential for social change:

It is this strength of soul that is capable of changing certain rules of social life and social behaviour. In other words, to go beyond simple accounting, simple reciprocity, to be in the spirit of giving, of compassion, of love that expects nothing in return, that free love.<sup>98</sup>

As concrete examples, he mentions companies in which people are exploited. By realising *futuwwa* values, he argues, people could achieve a deep change in this environment, as well as in schools and education. Based on the principles of *futuwwa*, Skali explains, a spiritual humanism could emerge which would permeate professional activities and be more efficient than secular Western humanism.<sup>99</sup> This is reminiscent of Corbin’s citations of the Persian *futuwwa-nāma*, in which *futuwwa* ethics are said to be capable of transforming every human action in

93

Skali, 36; see Skali, *Futuwwah*, 7–44 and Masterclasses; Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4:413–14; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 40–41.

94

This is the case in Skali’s Masterclasses and in his introduction in *Futuwwah*, 7–44.

95

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2G-j3dRk>, all quotes are translated by the author from their French original.

96

Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4:411; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–6.

97

Skali, Masterclass part 1: *Initiation à la Futuwwa*; see also Skali, *Futuwwah*, 29.

98

Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*.

99

Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*.

general and artisan guilds in particular.<sup>100</sup>

In summary, Skali presents basic elements from the *futuwwa* doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi and other Sufis, while also incorporating Corbin's perspective. However, he simplifies or omits the more complex details from Ibn 'Arabi and the Shi'i elements from Corbin, ultimately putting a simpler description of *futuwwa* as spiritual ethics and a spiritual force at the service of humanising professional and educational environments through spiritualisation.

### Conclusion

Publishing on Ibn 'Arabi is an important part of a specifically French Sufi tradition that goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Skali positions himself within this tradition by receiving and explaining elements of Ibn 'Arabi, often via followers of Guénon such as Burckhardt in particular, and finally via Corbin.

In describing the thought of Faouzi Skali, this article has focused on a public figure who does not analyse Ibn 'Arabi's teachings in detail but integrates them into his own theological perspectives, as can be said of many of the traditionalist Sufis, as well as Corbin. Instead, we have chosen to show how this contemporary Sufi simplifies the complex doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi to introduce Sufism to an interested public.

Skali adopts the main features of Ibn 'Arabi's concepts such as *'ālam al-mithāl* as a real, existing, intermediate world populated by beings that can be experienced spiritually and intuitively, and the *futuwwa* as the totality of noble character traits and as a spiritual reality that has been achieved and exemplified by the prophets and saints.

We can also see that many of Skali's statements, even if they are present in Ibn 'Arabi, are received via Corbin, and correspond with his emphases, especially in the case of *'ālam al-mithāl*. For example, Skali reproduces Corbin's talk of *imagination créatrice* and the human (-divine) co-creation of a constantly renewing cosmos. In the case of the *futuwwa*, Skali's references to Corbin are more selective and primarily composed of adopting Corbin's definition of *futuwwa* as the highest degree of initiation and the essence of shari'a, tariqa, and *haqīqa*. The second primary element entails focusing on *futuwwa* as the youthful power of the soul, independent of physical age.

We argue that Skali uses this recent reception of Ibn 'Arabi through Corbin because Corbin's work has a similar objective to re-sacralise history as well as current life worlds. Thus Skali adapts Ibn 'Arabi's concepts to suit agendas of the twentieth century. However, while Corbin undertakes an extensive academic-intellectual consideration of various aspects of *'ālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa*, Skali only selects some basic features and omits more detailed metaphysical aspects. As a Sunni Sufi, speaking predominantly to a Sunni or non-Muslim audience, he also excludes Corbin's reading of the Shi'i commentary tradition, and anchors the concepts more firmly in Sunni thinkers, and in the Qur'an and sunna themselves.

Thus Skali brings no new aspects or insights of a theological nature. Interestingly, though, he embeds some main features of *'ālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* in the trend of contemporary spiritualities in the West, which increasingly emphasise their contribution to collective

societal problems and derive their legitimacy from offering engagement with these concerns.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, Skali's embedding of Ibn 'Arabi's perspective as well as of Corbin's interpretation must be contextualised more specifically in the above-mentioned Sufi movement, in which, according to Piraino, francophone Sufis in particular want to promote Sufism as a liberal and open spirituality which, moreover, offers a transformative response to secularised and materialistic contexts. Skali uses Ibn 'Arabi's *'ālam al-mithāl* to show how individual life can be re-sacralised, and uses *futuwwa* to show how collective life can be transformed through re-spiritualisation. Thus, parts of the great Andalusian Sufi mystic's theory are embedded into a contemporary spiritual programme for social transformation which is formulated in a simpler language and opened to a broader audience.

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See Ricarda Stegmann, *Transmitting the Untransmittable: Sufi Teachings in Europe Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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