

# ESOTERIC HERMENEUTIC OF IBN 'AJIBA

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## ABSTRACT

In the *Tafsīr* (of Ibn 'Ajība), an interesting parallel is drawn between the incredulous attitude of the *kuffār* in the Quran and that of the exoteric towards some of the doctrinal tenets of Sufism.

*Kufr*<sup>184</sup> It is one of those notions that in the Muslim conscience, encompasses much of what is odious in the character and conduct of a human being. And of all the “negative” ethico-religious values in the Qur’ān, it is the most pivotal. This paper will explore the hermeneutical reading of a 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Moroccan Sufi into this key notion. Ahmad Ibn ‘Ajība<sup>185</sup> (1746-1809) is the author of *al-Babr al-Madād fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Majīd*, an exegesis of the Qur’ān (tafsīr) that combines commentary on the scripture’s literal, exoteric meaning as well as on its symbolic, esoteric significance. Ibn ‘Ajība’s exoteric treatment of *kufr* stays within the bounds of the “moderate” Ash‘arite framework. The object of the present inquiry is to assess the exegete’s esoteric interpretation of the critical notion that is *kufr*. When handling the latter concept, antecedent Sufi exegetes often moved to the level of the soul, stressing the correspondences between the unbelievers in the larger universe and the demons lurking within the inner world of the human soul. However, Ibn ‘Ajība often departs from this approach, taking the Qur’ānic context as an opportunity to exhort Sufi values to a larger mainstream audience, and leverages the moral weight of the notion to remonstrate against the iniquities of anti-Sufi jurists. In Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic of *kufr*, less emphasis is placed on articulating principles of Sufi psychology and more on advancing

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<sup>184</sup> Usually translated as ‘disbelief’ or ‘unbelief’, in the Qur’ān it refers to the people who reject the message of the Prophets, including Muhammad. At the most elemental level, the root KFR (ك ف ر) is tied to the idea of ‘covering’, ‘covering up’, or ‘stifling’. Anathema to all that is upright. On a popular level, a *kāfir* (unbeliever) has come to stand for the religious “other”.

<sup>185</sup> His full name: Abā al-‘Abbās Ahmad Ibn Muhammad Ibn ‘Ajība al-Hasani.

social, reformist objectives and consolidating Sufism's socio-cultural stature in the Islamic community.

Ibn 'Ajība's is not a well-studied figure in Western scholarship,<sup>186</sup> still less has his *Tafsīr*<sup>187</sup> received the attention it deserves. Among his Sufi counterparts in the Maghreb, he is one of the few to have bequeathed a large body of writings. His numerous metaphysical treatises, commentaries and his exegesis are crucial for gaining insight into North African Sufism in light of the laconic nature of the literature in this area<sup>188</sup>. His *Tafsīr* in particular is regarded, by the few scholars who have studied it in depth, to be a highly independent, original work<sup>189</sup> and not merely a collage of the past eleven centuries of hermeneutic heritage. Even if Ibn 'Ajība does draw upon numerous sources<sup>190</sup> for both the exoteric and the esoteric side of his

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<sup>186</sup> Michon's work (*Mi'raj*) is the only comprehensive study in European language devoted to Ibn 'Ajība. It covers Ibn 'Ajība's *Mi'raj* and includes a brief survey of some of his other works. See Jean-Louis Michon, *Le Soufi Marocain Ahmad Ibn 'Ajība et son Mi'raj*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin., Paris, 1990.

<sup>187</sup> Fitzgerald is coming out with a translation of (esoteric section) of Ibn 'Ajība's commentary on Sura ar-Rahman, al-Waqi'ah and al-Hadid. In Arabic, a thorough overview of *al-Bahr al-Madīd* has recently been published. See *Ash-Shaykh Ahmad Ibn 'Ajība wa Manhajuh fi at-Tafsīr*, ed. Hassan 'Azzouzi, Wizarat al-'Awqāf wa ash-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyah, Morocco, 2001.

<sup>188</sup> Some of Ibn 'Ajība's most famous works include:

*Al-Bahr al-Madī fi tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Majīd* (The Immense Ocean: Exegesis of the Glorious Qur'an).

*Sharh al-Fātiha*, an extended commentary on the opening chapter of the Qur'an.

*Īqāz al-himam fi sharh al-Hikam*, a commentary on the aphorisms of Ibn 'Atā' Allah al-Iskandarī.

*Mi'raj at-Tashānnuf ilā Haqā'iq at-Tasānnuf*, a lexicon of Sufic terminology. Translated into French with extensive footnotes by Jean-Louis Michon, *Le Soufi Marocain Ahmad Ibn 'Ajība et son Mi'raj*.

<sup>189</sup> See 'Azzouzi, *Ash-Shaykh Ahmad Ibn 'Ajība wa Manhajuh fi at-Tafsīr*, p. 435, vol. 2.

<sup>190</sup> His sources include the Qur'ānic commentaries of at-Tustari, at-Tabari, ath-Tha'labi, al-Qushayri, az-Zamakhshari, Ibn 'Atiyyah, al-Baydāwi, Ibn Jazi and al-Fāsi. In the esoteric commentary Ibn 'Ajība also draws heavily upon the tafsīr of al-Qushayri and al-Baqli. The latter is mysteriously refereed to by Ibn 'Ajība as al-Wartajabi, and only recently has Alan

commentary, he does not hesitate to challenge even the most esteemed of figures of Qur'ānic exegesis<sup>191</sup>.

Structurally speaking, Ibn 'Ajība's multivolume exegesis is a running commentary comprising the exoteric and the esoteric in equal amounts. Typically, a group of consecutive verses will be selected based on a context and a theme which the author deems is their common denominator. Ibn 'Ajība will then comment on this cluster of verses from the point of view of the exoteric sciences. This is then followed up by the spiritual allusion— called *ishāra* (pl. *ishārāt*), which is Ibn 'Ajība commentary on the esoteric significance of the verse(s) in question.<sup>192</sup> It is these *ishārāt* which can be mined for Ibn 'Ajība's esoteric hermeneutic of *kufr*. In the Qur'ān, the word *kufr*— especially in its passive participle form as *kāfir* (unbeliever, pl. *kāfirūn*)—obviously occurs within specific contexts. For example, the root word is seldom found in verses dealing with God's Essence and His Attributes— verses which often constitute the springboard for Ibn 'Ajība's deeper metaphysical articulations/discussions. Where *kufr* can be found in abundance, however, is in the verses that deal with reckoning, reward and punishment, or the narrative-historical verses of past unbelievers, or verses which juxtapose the inner condition of the believers with those of the deviants. In trying to understand why Ibn 'Ajība consistently returns to the themes which he does, it is important to realize the extent to which the textual basis, or the raw material that is the Qur'ān, prompts him to do so. The particular esoteric exegesis that will emerge in this study is no doubt directly linked with the cardinal status the *kufr* occupies in the realm of Islamic ethics, and also with the heavy moral undertones which are an inevitable feature of most of the verses wherein *kufr* is couched.

### **Spiritual Wandering, Proselytizing, and the New Sufi Movement**

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Godlas discovered that passages in al-Bahr attributed to “al-Wartajabi” are in reality drawn from “Arā'is al-Bayān...”, al-Baqli's esoteric commentary on the Qur'ān .

<sup>191</sup> Esoteric: Ibn Arabi? Exoteric: Baydaoui

<sup>192</sup> The style of Ibn 'Ajība's Tafsīr, especially the spiritual allusions, is known as *saj'*, an ornate prose that is rhymed and unmetred. In the Arab-Islamic world, this style is often used orally to deliver sermons as during the Friday prayer.

Ibn ‘Ajība’s esoteric commentary on the concept of *kufr* can be fruitfully related to the exegete’s life. Ibn ‘Ajība’s initiation into Sufism occurred at a relatively late age of forty-six, at the hands of Sheikh al-Būzīdi and Sheikh ad-Darqāwi. At that point, Ibn ‘Ajība was already an eminent scholar of the exoteric sciences,<sup>193</sup> having spent decades of his life studying and teaching in the field. The Shadhiliyya-Darqāwiyya order which he joined practiced “moderate” Sufism, modeled on its founder Sheikh ash-Shādhili and the Junayd school; and like many manifestations of Sufism in the Maghreb region, the order had an openly proselytizing agenda and sought to propagate the basic principles of Sufism to as wide an audience as possible. Ibn ‘Ajība’s Sheikh was enthusiastic about the range of audiences that Ibn ‘Ajība could potentially reach given his credentials as a religious scholar.<sup>194</sup> Although there weren’t any political ambitions involved, the Shādhili-Darqāwi phenomenon was certainly, in part, a socio-religious movement aimed at bringing about moral reform in society, and a renewed vigor in the intellectual and religious domain<sup>195</sup>.

Early in his career as a Sufi, Ibn ‘Ajība set off on proselytizing forays into the countryside of the Rif mountains in the North of Morocco. “Once I entered upon the way of the Sufis” says Ibn ‘Ajība, “and as soon as the shaykh [al-Būzīdi] authorized me to preach the remembrance of God to men, I began to circulate among them in the hamlets and the tribes, teaching religion to them and showing them the way to God.”<sup>196</sup> By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, these people to whom Ibn ‘Ajība was preaching, had been Muslim for the good part of a millennium. Evidently, Ibn ‘Ajība perceived a profound lacuna in his countrymen’s practice and understanding of the Islamic religion. In his

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<sup>193</sup> Because of similar career paths, Ibn ‘Ajība is often likened to al-Ghazālī.

<sup>194</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība says in his autobiography: “Among the favors that God has bestowed upon us is that of having brought together in us exoteric and esoteric knowledge. For, praised may He be, I am someone who takes from both sides...like the horseman who has the choice of becoming a pedestrian.” See Jean-Louis Michon *The Autobiography (Fabrasa) of a Moroccan Soufi: Ahmad Ibn ‘Ajiba (1747-1809)*, p. 124, Fons Vitae. Louisville, KY, 1999.

<sup>195</sup> For an interpretation of the Shadhili-Darqāwi movement as led by Ibn ‘Ajība and Muhammad al-Harrāq see ‘Abd al-Majīd as-Saghīr’s *Iskālīyyat Islāh al-Fīkr as-Sūfi fi al-Qarnayn 18/19*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Dār al-‘Āfāq al-Jadīda. Morocco, 1994.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125.

autobiography, Ibn ‘Ajība relates how, during his travels,<sup>197</sup> whole villages would sometimes take initiation. Ibn ‘Ajība expresses enthusiasm when his spiritual campaigns met with success: “The people came to God’s religion in mass<sup>198</sup> ...The entire crowd was metamorphosed by the remembrance of God: the townspeople were putting rosaries around their necks...Religion was brought to life through divine permission; God’s name— praise be to Him!— was repeated everywhere.”<sup>199</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība looks back on his career with the hope that he was “...among those who, through God, renewed religion in this century.”<sup>200</sup>

The initial alacrity with which Ibn ‘Ajība set about “renewing God’s religion” is mirrored by the moralizing, inward-looking character of many passages of his *Tafsīr*. This is true even when the Qur’ān counsels the people of the other Abrahamic faiths:

Say: “O followers of the Bible! You have no valid ground for your beliefs unless you [truly] observe the Torah and the Gospel, and all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer!” [5:68]

Ibn ‘Ajība turns the principles of this argument back towards the Islamic community, saying in the corresponding *ishārah*: “That which has been said to the people of the Book is also said, by way of allusion, to this Mohammedan community”. Ibn ‘Ajība takes every opportunity to urge self-examination. Even “...the best community that has been brought forth for [the good of] humankind...”<sup>201</sup> is, evidently, susceptible to the entropic

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<sup>197</sup> The purpose of which was also to strengthen the spiritual health of a new disciple (*faqīr*) on the path. See *Autobiography*, p. 84.

<sup>198</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība’s triumphant joy when his efforts were met with success mirrors the spirit of Sūra al-Fath (110) in the Qur’ān: When God’s succour comes, and victory and thou seest people enter God’s religion in hosts, extol thy Sustainer’s limitless glory, and praise Him, and seek His forgiveness: for behold, He is ever an acceptor of repentance. (110:1-3, Asad’s online translation)

<sup>199</sup> See *Autobiography*, p. 85.

<sup>200</sup> See *Autobiography*, p. 124. In this connection, the Prophet Muhammad once said: “Verily God will send to this community at the head of every hundred years a person who will renew for it its religion.” Sunan Abī Dāwūd, hadīth #4291, p. 106-107, Vol. 4. Dār al-Hadīth. Cairo, 1988.

<sup>201</sup> Qur’ān 3:110. Muhammad Asad trans.

principle. And there is no doubt that he considered himself to be at the vanguard of a reformist, revivalist movement aiming at treating the myriad psycho-spiritual ills that Muslims were perceived as having succumbed to. The antidote, according to Ibn ‘Ajība, is to be found in the balance between outward application of religious directives (*sharī‘ah*) and inward realization of the Truth (*haqīqa*). And this medicine is only administered by the doctors of the inward, who are the spiritual heirs of the Prophet and are licensed to impart spiritual education that is as effective as it would be were it received directly from Muhammad.<sup>202</sup>

### **Breathing New Life into the Understanding of Islam**

Ibn ‘Ajība takes the opening verses of Sura Ibrāhīm as an opportunity to provide an expanded reformulation of Islam and what it means to be an adherent of the religion brought by Muhammad:

*Alif. Lām. Rā.* A DIVINE WRIT [is this – a revelation] which We have bestowed upon thee from on high in order that thou might bring forth all mankind, by their Sustainer’s leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light: onto the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due [14:2] to God, unto whom all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, belongs. But woe unto those who deny the truth: for suffering severe [14:3] awaits those who choose the life of this world as the sole object of their love, preferring it to [all thought of] the life to come, and who turn others away from the path of God and try to make it appear crooked. Such as these have indeed gone far astray!<sup>203</sup>

The “spiritual allusion” corresponding to these verses is dedicated to bringing out what Ibn ‘Ajība deems are the full implications of the Islamic message, step by step, to their ultimate conclusion:

The Prophet, in fact, has brought his community out of multiple [deep] darknesse<sup>s</sup> into numerous ‘lights’; first: [from] the deep darkness of unbelief (*kufr*) and idolatry (*shirk*) to the light of faith (*imān*) and

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<sup>202</sup> See for example Tafsīr, p. 153-154, vol. 5, where Ibn ‘Ajība articulates these ideals. He also makes overt mention of the “Shādhili” *ṭarīqa*– a rare occurrence in the Tafsīr– as a desirable option for aspirants.

<sup>203</sup> Qur;ān 14:1-3.

submission (*islām*), then from the deep darkness of ignorance (*jahl*) and [blind] imitation (*taqlīd*) to the light of knowledge (*‘ilm*) and ascertainment (*taḥqīq*), then from the deep darkness of [many a] sin (*dhunūb*) and transgression (*ma‘āsī*) to the light of repentance (*tawbah*) and uprightness (*istiqāmah*), then from the deep darkness of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) and spiritual inertia (*bitālah*) in to the light of vigilance (*al-yaqāzā*) and the exertion of effort (*al-mujāhadah*), then from the deep darkness of [preoccupation with] worldly desires (*buḥūẓ*) and carnal pleasures (*shahawāt*) to the light of asceticism (*ẓuhd*) and purity (*‘iffah*), then from the deep darkness of perceiving [only] the secondary causes (*ru’yat al-‘asbāb*) and sticking with [the soul’s baser] habits (*nūqūf ma‘a al-‘awā’id*) to the light of witnessing the Originator (*shubūḍ al-musabbib*) and the breaking of [the soul’s baser] habits (*kharq al-‘awā’id*), then from the deep darkness of sticking with the [bestowed] charisms (*karāmāt*) and the sweetness of [performing] acts of obedience (*balāwat at-tā‘āt*) to the light of [the direct] witnessing [of the] the Worshipped (*shubūḍ al-ma’būd*), and from the deep darkness of sticking with perception of the corporeal world (*his al-akwān aḥ-ḥabirah*) to the witnessing of the secret, esoteric meanings (*asrār al-m‘ānī al-bātinah*)...<sup>204</sup>

Ibn ‘Ajība’s graduated continuum represents the levels of the Sufī spiritual path and the concomitant pitfalls that must be avoided at each step. The passage might even be described as a double-helix spiral as it were: one “strand” is a rising echelon of virtues or spiritual stations, which becomes progressively lofty; and running parallel to it, is a “graduated” sequence of sins, ranging from the “great” sins of *kufr* (disbelief) and *shirk* (polytheism) to more “inward”, subtler forms of sin. But Ibn ‘Ajība presents the spiritual path as part and parcel of Islam as a whole— the entire echelon which he describes is none other than the exegete’s re-definition of the “light” which the Prophet’s Islamic Message is supposed to lead to. Most of the virtues listed by Ibn ‘Ajība in the above passage encapsulate the Sufī doctrine as well as, *grosso modo*, *Ihsān*, the third and the highest degree of the Islamic religion.<sup>205</sup> Thus at least in one aspect, the objective of Ibn ‘Ajība’s *ishāra* is to stress the

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<sup>204</sup> Tafsīr p. 354, vol. 3.

<sup>205</sup> See the opening hadīth of Muslim’s *Saḥīḥ* where the Prophet defines *ihsān* as “worshipping God as if you saw Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you!”.

need for excellence and sincerity in one's religious faith. *Ihsān*, which captures the spirit of Sufi practice, is inculcated, not as a luxury, but as the necessary capstone to any faith that aspires to be truly whole.

In the above passage the significance of the Qur'ānic *al-kaḥfīrīn* (the unbelievers) is left implicit. The disbelievers who are warned in the Qur'ānic text are those who "...deny the truth." So although Ibn 'Ajība never comments upon the term *kaḥfīrīn* directly<sup>206</sup> in the *ishārah*, the notion is implicitly brought to bear by the exegete's interpretation of what it is that must not be denied— namely the Prophet's message. Thus, by redefining Islam in terms of Sufic doctrine, Ibn 'Ajība actually allows the Qur'ān to articulate his own understanding of the implications of *kuḥfr*. *Kuḥfr* implicitly connotes the condition of stagnating in, or else completely denying the existence of, the path that leads out of the deep darkness(es) into the light(s). Seen from this angle, Ibn 'Ajība's redefining of Islam in terms of a spiritual continuum has the power to disabuse the self-assured Muslim of the notion that adherence to the religion of Islam is fulfilled merely through the testament of faith and one's outward compliance with religious law; Islam and Imān might represent light compared with the darkness of unbelief and idolatry, but the inner forgetfulness and stagnation of an even outwardly conforming Muslim can also be seen as darkness if compared with the light of spiritual vigilance and the virtue of self-domination. Thus, while the passage can be construed as a recapitulation for those already travelling the spiritual path, the words of Ibn 'Ajība are clearly also addressed, in an urgent but non-condemnatory manner, to a larger mainstream audience that is perceived to be stuck on the lower rungs of the ladder.

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<sup>206</sup> In the spiritual allusions of his Tafsīr, Ibn 'Ajība does not provide a word-by-word esoteric commentary on the Qur'ānic verses— even if this is the methodology in the attendant exoteric treatment of the verse(s). Thus, not every mention of the root *kuḥfr* in the Qur'ān will necessarily elicit a direct esoteric interpretation on the exegete's part. Ibn 'Ajība's method in the *ishārah* is bringing what he perceives as the general esoteric theme of the verse(s) to the surface. Therefore, the task at hand is to examine the spectrum of esoteric themes elaborated upon by Ibn 'Ajība on the basis of Qur'ānic verses wherein the notion of *kuḥfr* is one of the pivotal concepts.



Jean-Louis Michon, the author of one of the few scholarly works on Ibn ‘Ajība, explains that whereas the writings of such mystics as Ibn al-‘Arīf<sup>207</sup> can be addressed exclusively to those who have already reached the supreme station of union, Ibn ‘Ajība is keen to cater to a wider audience, namely those that are seen as stuck on the lower rungs of the spiritual echelon. This is especially true for his *tafsīr*, where even the “spiritual allusions” are charitable to the uninitiated. Presenting intuitive ideas couched in relatively non-cryptic language, Ibn ‘Ajība reaches out not only to the beginner on the path but also to the aspirant (*murīd*) who has yet to formally embark on the mystical journey<sup>208</sup>. This stands in contradistinction to the “apophatic” view of Ibn ‘Arīf which holds that, save for the individual’s complete annihilation in the Divine, virtues such as ‘repentance’ or ‘vigilance’— since they involve effort, sentiment and will— are incompatible with true union. Ibn ‘Ajība’s doctrine also incorporates the principles of such a purely transcendental view, especially in relation to the latter stages of the mystical path. In general, however, Ibn ‘Ajība “...abstains from underlining how one’s participation in the lower degrees can amount to a deficiency. Ibn ‘Ajība is content with presenting [such degrees] as one stage of an overall process, leaving it to the reader to surmise what he would be lacking were he to stop midway. His point of view is truly ‘initiativ’: it is that of a master-educator who is habituated with receiving souls at the beginning of the path and leading them towards that which they are capable of attaining, without forcing their [natural] capacities.”<sup>209</sup>

### ***Kufr* as Denial of the Sufic Field of Knowledge**

According to Ibn ‘Ajība’s definition of Sufism<sup>210</sup> in his *Mi‘rāj*: “Its beginning is science/knowledge (*‘ilm*), its middle is action (*a‘māl*) and its end

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<sup>207</sup> In the prolegomena to his translation of Ibn ‘Ajība’s *Mi‘rāj*, Michon compares Ibn ‘Ajība’s method to that of Ibn al-‘Arīf in his *Mabāsīn al-Majālīs*, p.147

<sup>208</sup> The editor of al-Bahr al-Madīd’s 1955-1956 Cairo edition declared Ibn ‘Ajība’s work to be characterized by “...clarity of expression, a facility in the way it allows itself to be understood...[Ibn ‘Ajība] was given [by God] the ability to express Sufi wisdom and allusions through such a form that the comprehension of it is rendered difficult for no one...” cited in Jean-Louis Michon, *Le Soufi Marocain Ibn ‘Ajība et son Mi‘rāj*, p. 275.

<sup>209</sup> *Le Soufi Marocain Ahmad Ibn ‘Ajība et son Mi‘rāj*, p. 147.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* p. 179.

is divine gift (*mawhiba*).” This explains why “knowledge” and “ascertainment” appear so early in Ibn ‘Ajība’s continuum. In the *Tafsīr*, an interesting parallel is drawn between the incredulous attitude of the *kuffār* in the Qur’ān and that of exoterists towards some of the doctrinal tenets of Sufism. Such comparisons are based on what Ibn ‘Ajība deems is their common denominator: rational scepticism— and this is one of the main semantic facets that is connected with the Qur’ānic notion of *kufṛ*.<sup>211</sup>

Why [how could we be resurrected] after we have died and become mere dust? Such a return seems far-fetched indeed! [50:3]

After putting these words in the mouths of *kuffār*, the Qur’ān replies:

How can you refuse to acknowledge God, seeing that you were lifeless and He gave you life, and that He will cause you to die and then will bring you again to life, whereupon unto Him you will be brought back? [2:28].

In the spiritual allusion corresponding to these verses, Ibn ‘Ajība simply paraphrases the words of the scripture, such that the disbelief of the *kuffār* of the cosmic resurrection is transposed onto the disbelief of exoteric-minded Muslims regarding the resurrection of the soul:

How can you deny (*tankurūn*)<sup>212</sup> the manifestation of the light of the Truth in the cosmos, [how can you, furthermore] distance yourselves from the Presence of direct vision and gnosis, [especially since] you were dead— [in a state of] forgetfulness and woefully veiled [from Him], whereby He revived you into [a state] of wakefulness and [the momentum] of return [to Him], then He causes you to die to yourselves [such that] you came to see nothing but Him, then He resurrects you to [a state whereby you] witness His [immanent signs]...<sup>213</sup>

According to Ibn ‘Ajība’s logic, to claim that mystical illumination is a myth is to deny the doctrine of God’s Immanence, His self-proclaimed

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<sup>211</sup> For a full discussion of the various semantic shades of *kufṛ*, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, McGill-Queen’s University Press. 2002, Montreal, Chap. VII, “The Inner Structure of the Concept of *Kufṛ*”.

<sup>212</sup> Instead of using the Qur’ānic expression *kaifa takfurūn*, Ibn ‘Ajība uses the term *kaifa tankurūn*.

<sup>213</sup> *Tafsīr*, pp. 70-71, Vol. 1.

quality as ‘the Outward’ (*aẓ-ẓāhir*).<sup>214</sup> The parallel that is drawn here— between the unbelievers’ disavowal of the doctrine of resurrection, and the misgivings of some Muslims with respect to the Sufi theory of spiritual awakening— is itself suggestive of the forceful manner by which Ibn ‘Ajība sets about defending the teachings of Sufism. What Ibn ‘Ajība also finds reprehensible, for instance, is the conceit that is at the origin of some people’s incredulous denial of sainthood. He argues that the existence of people who deem improbable the existence of sainthood is akin to the incredulousness of Satan at Adam’s superiority as a being made from clay,<sup>215</sup> or the incredulousness of the unbelievers at the possibility of Prophecy emanating from humankind.<sup>216</sup>

According to Ibn ‘Ajība, denying the wondrous station of gnosis can also stem from simple fear and ignorance:

If the folk of [spiritual distinction] were to appear in the midst of the masses, exhibiting mysterious states and bearing knowledge [of inspirational origin], possessing Divine secrets and illuminating mantras, [the masses] would stand stupefied and perplexed of their case, fearing for their security; and if [from the mouths of saints] they were to hear mystical knowledge (*‘ulum laduniyya*) and Divine secrets (*asrār rabbaniyya*) they would run away, putting their fingers in their ears...<sup>217</sup>

Elsewhere Ibn ‘Ajība also leverages the connotation of the ‘unbeliever’ (*kāfir*) as he who denies or disavows the signs of God:

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<sup>214</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība concludes his *ishāra* with a famous Sufi aphorism which asserts God’s Absolute Transcendence and implies, ipso facto, His Immanence: “[In the beginning] there was God and there was naught besides Him, and He is now just as He was then.” See *al-Babr al-Madīd*, p.71 vol. 1. God’s Absoluteness necessitates that the world itself be a manifestation of His Being. Although Ibn ‘Ajība does not set out to explicitly promulgate Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine, the latter subtly undergirds the metaphysical discussions in the *Tafsīr*. See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un Ocean Sans Rivage*, Editions du Seuil, 1992 Evreu., p. 31.

<sup>215</sup> Ibn ‘Ajība uses the expression *al-kehusūsiyya* which literally translates as ‘particularity’. The term denotes ‘sainthood’ and ‘the condition of being spiritually distinguished, eminent and elite’.

<sup>216</sup> See for example *Tafsīr* p. 183-184 vol. 7.

<sup>217</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 64, vol. 1.

If the folk [who are] ignorant and veiled (*ahl al-ghaflah wa al-hijāb*) were to see a sign— indicating that the sun of gnosis (*shams al-‘iyān*) has risen in the [soul of] the special beloved servant (*al-‘abd al-makhsūs*)— they would turn away in denial.<sup>218</sup>

Ibn ‘Ajība makes good use of the sense of *kufr* as ‘the act of covering up’, saying that those who deny or reject sainthood are effectively “covering up the truth with creation” (*satarū al-haq bi al-khalq*);<sup>219</sup> in other words they perceive only the material manifestation of what is a reality of a higher order. “They are veiled— by the [corporeality of] the created realm— from witnessing the [spiritual reality] of the truth.”<sup>220</sup> (*ubtujibū bi al-khalq ‘an shubūd al-haq*) In such contexts, Ibn ‘Ajība makes use of the notion of *kufr*<sup>221</sup> in its aspect of ‘denial’, ‘covering up’, ‘refusing to acknowledge’<sup>222</sup> the truth of Sufi gnosis, or simply the inability to see or know reality.<sup>223</sup>

### Combating Spiritual Inertia

Ibn ‘Ajība’s esoteric deployment of *kufr* does not always address people who harbour intellectual objections to Sufi doctrine. The problem, according to the exegete, is often related to the ‘will’ and a lack of ‘action’, rather than to ‘intelligence’ or lack of ‘knowledge’. This principle of “action”, let it be recalled, corresponds to the “middle” of Sufism according to Ibn ‘Ajība’s definition. As a result, the exegete’s *ishārat* often evince a concern with spiritual under-achievement, the under-utilization of one’s capacities. This was a major theme in the Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary on Sūra Ibrāhīm, quoted above (spiritual vigilance and exertion of effort). Similarly, it is further developed in the esoteric interpretation of the following verses from Sūra Yā-Sīn which also feature stark doctrinal contrasts:

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<sup>218</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 253, vol. 7.

<sup>219</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 58-59, vol. 8.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> For a full discussion of the various semantic shades of *kufr*, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, McGill-Queen’s University Press. 2002, Montreal, Chap. VII ‘The Inner Structure of the Concept of *Kufr*’.

<sup>222</sup> See also *Tafsīr*, p. 259, vol. 7.

<sup>223</sup> See for example *Tafsīr*, p. 57, vol. 8.

Did I not enjoin on you, O you children of Adam, that you should not worship Satan— since, verily, he is your open foe—and that you should worship Me [alone]? This would have been a straight way! And [as for Satan—] he had already led astray a great many of you: could you not, then, use your reason? This, then, is the hell of which you were warned again and again: endure it today as an outcome of your persistent denial of the truth! (36:60-64)<sup>224</sup>

These verses prompt Ibn ‘Ajība to urge spiritual struggle in even bolder terms: “Whosoever” warns Ibn ‘Ajība “inclines towards worldly desires (حظوظه) and carnal pleasures (مناه *munāh*), unable to wage war against his caprice (*mujābadat hawāh*)— such that he is veiled from God at the moment of his death— [such a person] shall eventually be subject to a similar reprimand.”<sup>225</sup> Previously, in his commentary on Sūra Ibrāhīm, Ibn ‘Ajība had brought out the not-so-black-and-white subtleties that are involved in the “light” of Islam. In this instance, the exegete re-examines another seemingly obvious principle: Satan-worship. Ibn ‘Ajība resurrects the notion to practical relevance by casting it in the context of spiritual struggle. In other words, the basic practices of Sufi spirituality are rendered mandatory. They are vital to the religious life to the degree that Satan-worship is contrary to it. In this instance, it is again clear that Ibn ‘Ajība is speaking to a wider audience: The term “whosoever” (*kullu man*) certainly includes more than just initiated disciples. Ibn ‘Ajība is arguably addressing a particular audience who, while standing outside of the fold of Sufism, is “searching” and is inherently receptive to the message of “moderate” Sufism. Surely Ibn ‘Ajība is trying to reach those who are able to intuit the value of inner struggle against the *nafs*, those who realize the dangerous attraction of certain worldly pleasures, which, even if not bearing the official seal of prohibition, can foster the attachment of the heart and are thus inherently unfavourable to closeness to God. It must be primarily for the benefit of this audience that Ibn ‘Ajība holds out the salvific alternative by delineating the “straight way” (الصراف) (المستقيم) as “the path of spiritual education (طريق التربية), which leads to the

<sup>224</sup> Qur’ān 36:60-64 trans. Muhammad Asad.

<sup>225</sup> *Tafsīr*, p.156-157 vol. 6.

Divine Presence, [that path] that the friends of God and the gnostics have set about charting.”<sup>226</sup>

In the same *ishāra*, Ibn ‘Ajība’s continues paraphrasing the words of the scripture:

It shall be said [to these people] this is the fire of separation (نار القطيعة) of which you were warned, if you remain the slaves of your worldly pleasures and your quest for power (رئاستكم), endure it today for your denial (*bi kufrikum*) of the path of spiritual education (طريق التربية)...<sup>227</sup>

The passage certainly has the power to shock consciences– even if the notion of hellfire is mitigated in that it is more of a spiritual state and not a physical inferno. Ibn ‘Ajība’s deployment of *kufri* is forceful yet delicate, especially when it comes to the consequences of *kufri*. These types of verses in the Qur’ān– dealing with issues of judgment at the moment of man’s final encounter with God– are occasions for Ibn ‘Ajība to drive home Sufism’s basic directive: Die before you die, shed the heavy vestiges of your ego.

What is also significant in the above passage is that the underlying sin, or the root malady, which Ibn ‘Ajība identifies is the *inability* to wage war against caprice, or the inability, as he says, “...to dedicate [oneself] to the remembrance of God.”<sup>228</sup> This is connected with the general “spiritual inertia” that was mentioned earlier– the deep darkness of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) and spiritual inertia (*bitālah*) from Sūra Ibrāhīm. It encompasses a whole variety of psycho-spiritual obstacles such as lukewarmness, torpor, hesitancy. The pattern reveals a hermeneutic modality where *kufri* becomes an allusion to passivity or disinclination towards Sufism that is borne of indolence. Further on, in the same *ishārah*, and continuing the style of esoteric paraphrasing of the Qur’ān, Ibn ‘Ajība says that the physical organs of these people shall bear witness against them “regarding their wont of curtailing” (*bi-mā kānū yaksibūn min at-taqīr*).<sup>229</sup> *Taqīr* can arguably be

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<sup>226</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 157, vol. 6.

<sup>227</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 157, vol. 6.

<sup>228</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 157, vol. 6.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid*.

translated as curtailing, the tendency to take shortcuts, or a retrenchment of sorts. Thus, Ibn ‘Ajība ends up linking the idea of *kufr* directly with a weakness of will. This esoteric hermeneutic of *kufr* is not strongly supported by even the multi-dimensional semantic root. *Kufr* is, to be sure, associated with a whole host of negative ethical values but is not known, however, to be related in any specific way to apathy per se. Perhaps Ibn ‘Ajība is implying that, due to one’s weakness of will— perhaps trepidation— a person can “cover up” or “stifle” one’s own highest spiritual aspirations.<sup>230</sup> At any rate, Ibn ‘Ajība’s main point would seem to be that avoiding the rigors of spiritual travail, failing to struggle against the caprice of the lower self, amounts to exiling oneself from the Presence of God.

### Defending the Socio-Cultural Space of Sufism

Presently, we come to a bolder hermeneutic of *kufr* which aims at defending and standing one’s ground against the opponents of Sufism and the persecutors of Sufi orders. If the above examples from Ibn ‘Ajība’s *Tafsīr* were aimed at instilling Sufi principles in a “passive” non-Sufi audience, the following hermeneutic of *kufr* aims at defending Sufism from active hostility. The turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw rising tensions between the jurists (*fuqahā’*) and the Sufis, or what could be abstracted as the exoteric and the esoteric poles of Islam<sup>231</sup>. The Darqāwi order, and in particular the up-and-coming Tetuan<sup>232</sup> wing which Ibn ‘Ajība represented, drew the ire of the religious authorities. As its numbers grew, Ibn ‘Ajība’s group was aggressively persecuted by an alliance of *fuqahā’* and men of political power<sup>233</sup> that saw in

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<sup>230</sup> This is reminiscent of ‘Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds* where he describes in poetic verse some of the psycho-spiritual barriers that typically bar the way for beginners on the path.

<sup>231</sup> For a detailed account of how this tension affected Ibn ‘Ajība in particular see ‘Azzouzi pp. 36-47 and Saghīr pp. 55-95.

<sup>232</sup> A town in the North of Morocco, which at the time was growing into a major intellectual and cultural center. Ibn ‘Ajība spent his life in and around Tetuan.

<sup>233</sup> Some of the pressure put on Ibn ‘Ajība and the Darqāwi *tariqah* came from another Sūfi order, namely, the Raissūni order based in the town of Chefchāouen. This order enjoyed an elite social status and wielded significant political clout. It placed a great deal of emphasis on biological descent from Prophet Muhammad. See for instance *Tafsīr* p. 208, vol. 2, where Ibn ‘Ajība asserts that the fiercest antagonists of Sufi *fuqarā’* are those who hail from prestigious families whose lineages include either prominent scholars or *shurafā’*— descendents of the Prophet.

the growing movement a threat to its authority. Propaganda disseminated in the urban areas was aimed at turning the public against the order. A number of them, including Ibn ‘Ajība himself, were arrested and tried<sup>234</sup> on charges of excessive intermixing of genders. Known members of the Tetuan branch, including Ibn ‘Ajība himself, were imprisoned, albeit only for a few days. They were freed after having been forced to abjure their Sufism in theory and to desist, in practice, from its rituals. In a departure from Hallāj-type heroics, Ibn ‘Ajība evinced a high degree of pragmatism when he and his followers outwardly agreed to renounce Sufism but continued their practices in secret. By retreating to the countryside and adopting a low profile in the following years until the air had settled, Ibn ‘Ajība lived to fight another day.

Years later, when writing his *Tafsīr*, Ibn ‘Ajība would return to this issue and reassert the righteousness of the Sufi worldview. Evidently, Ibn ‘Ajība’s handling of the trial episode was out of pragmatism and not defeatism.<sup>235</sup> Considered in the light of the many pressures put on Ibn ‘Ajība as a result of his Sufi convictions, especially the incident of his imprisonment and trial, his commentary on *Sūra al-Kāfirūn* can be understood as exegesis:

If the masses were to ask the *murīd* to [renounce his ways] and revert to worldly preoccupations, let him say: O you who disbelieve in the path of divestiture (*tariq at-tajrīd*), which brings about [the realization] of Unity (*at-tawhīd*) and Oneness (*at-tafrīd*)<sup>236</sup>, I do not worship that which you worship in the way of the world and its pleasures...nor do you worship that which I worship in the way of making the truth one (*ifrād al-haq*) through love and worship...unto you your religion, based as it is on oft-failing secondary causes (*ta‘ab al-‘asbāb*), and unto me my religion based on the attachment to the Causer of causes (*musabbib al-‘asbāb*), or unto you your

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<sup>234</sup> Saghīr makes a comparison with the trial of Aristotle on charges of corrupting the youth. The main charges brought against Ibn ‘Ajība and his *tariqab* included the unorthodoxy of the practice of wearing ragged clothes, the hanging of large rosaries around their necks, the inclusion of women in their spiritual gatherings.

<sup>235</sup> The cellmates of Ibn ‘Ajība and his followers reportedly asked for initiation; spiritual sessions were held in the prison.

<sup>236</sup> In a regular class lecture at George Washington University, S.H. Nasr identified the French word “esseulement” (lit. ‘to make alone’) as the closest counterpart of the term *tafrīd* in a European Language.



religion, plagued by the whisperings [of the devil] (*al-wasāwis*), perils (*al-keḥawātir*), and illusions (*awḥām*), and unto me my religion— pure, perspicuous— informed by certitude (*al-yaqīn*), or: unto you your religion, based on deductive [logic] (*al-istidlāl*), and unto me my religion, based on direct vision (*al-ʿiyān*)...<sup>237</sup>

The *ishārah* expresses in a decisive way the idea that there a huge chasm separates the Sufi understanding and practice of Islam from that of the ‘commoners’. This is achieved by transposing the Sufi worldview onto the fundamental dichotomy *muʾminīn/kaḥfīrūn* (believers/disbelievers). In Sūra al-Kāfirūn, this moral dichotomy is at its most unequivocal: just as there could have been no question of the Prophet reverting to the polytheism of the Meccans, it is out of the question that the *murīd* should ever forsake his superior religious orientation for the “hallowed” practice of Islam of the *aʿwām* that considers only the outward aspect of things. The passage reveals a deep concern about disciples who are young on the path, being intimidated, discouraged from, or talked out of their mystical quest for perfection. It is also part of Ibn ʿAjība’s attempt at nurturing a renewed confidence-assurance in the Sufi community and consolidating the socio-cultural space that it occupies within the Islamic ʿUmmah.

The method of transposing the plight of the prophets upon that of Sufi masters is frequently used by Ibn ʿAjība. This is to be expected since, for Ibn ʿAjība: “The masters of [spiritual] education (*mashayikh at-tarbiyah*) are the vicegerents of the Messenger (*keḥulafāʾ ar-Rasūl*).”<sup>238</sup> In the following spiritual allusion, for instance, the exegete draws a direct parallel between the naysayers of the Prophet and the sceptics and persecutors of Sufi saints:

That which has been said regarding the deniers of the [specificity?] of Prophethood, has also been said with respect to the deniers of the [specificity] of sainthood if they set about harming them, meaning: that those who gave the lie to the saints of times past— what befell them has befell them, be it outward abasement, or inward banishment. And you, O deniers of [the saints] of your age are [no different].”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 364, vol. 8.

<sup>238</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 143, vol. 7.

<sup>239</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 263, vol. 7.

The above passage is part of Ibn ‘Ajība’s esoteric commentary on the latter verses of al-Qamar, a chapter almost entirely consisting of a series of concise recapitulations of the stories of the past unbelieving communities—the people of Noah, the tribe of ‘Ād, the tribe of Thamūd, the people of Lot and the Pharaoh. The narrative passages give an account of the coming of prophets bearing messages of reform from heaven in the face of moral degeneration. The denouement of these stories is always the same, the communities involved typically fail to heed the warning of the messengers (*kathabat*)— the latter often becoming the subject of physical persecution— and finally comes the Divine punishment. Sūra al-Qamar is said to have been revealed in order to provide comfort to the Prophet Muhammad during some of the worst times of persecution; and the cyclical pattern of degeneration and destruction is fundamental to the Islamic view of human history. Throughout the esoteric part of his commentary on al-Qamar, Ibn ‘Ajība consistently relates the *kuffār* of the literal text with those who persecute Sufi saints, thus integrating the plight of Sufis within the Islamic cosmology of history.

In the end, the persecutors of saints and the antagonists of Sufism shall be defeated:

...in the sorry state of exile you shall remain, for if the unbelievers (الكفار) have been denied entry into the paradise of sensory pleasures (جنة الزخارف ; lit. the paradise of golden ornaments), you shall be barred from the paradise of gnosis (جنة المعارف), with [the concomitant] chagrin of the veil (غم الحجاب) and the abased state of exile (ذل البعد) from the Holy Presence (الحضرة القدسية), verily the criminals— that is, the folk [who engage in] defamation and censure— are in a state of ignorance regarding the way that leads to God, they are [engulfed] by the flames of separation, [and on] the day when, in this life, they are be dragged on their faces, they shall be abandoned [to a state of mindless preoccupation] with the ever-changing fortunes and pleasures [of the world]. Then in the next life [they shall be abandoned] in the flames of distance and separation...<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> *Tafsīr*, p. 263, vol. 7.

In this spiritual allusion Ibn ‘Ajība quite explicitly traces the shift from the literal notion of *kufr* to the esoteric one. And many of the elements that make up the semantic structure of *kufr* survive this transition without losing too much of their recognizable face value. In other words, the classic negative qualities of the *kaḥfīr*– rebelliousness, insolence, conceitedness and contentiousness– are easily, and without stretching the allegory too far, applied to those who reject and persecute Sufis.<sup>241</sup>

Evidently, the punishment that awaits the persecutors of Sufis, according to Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic, is similar to that which awaits the “passive” disbelievers. In fact, Ibn ‘Ajība seldom differentiates explicitly between those who actively harass Sufis and those who are merely lukewarm to Sufism due to spiritual passivity or ignorance.<sup>242</sup> However, it is clear that in the spiritual allusions such as the one above, the elements of conceit and contentiousness are dominant in the Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic of *kufr*– whereas in other cases it is a matter of “*taqsīr*”, indifference, or ignorance. We are thus closer to the classic semantic realm of the term *kufr*, and many of the semantic shades of the literal term *kufr* are evident in Ibn ‘Ajība’s esoteric rendition. The aspect of conceit, contentiousness and sheer spite dovetail nicely with the array of semantic shades of *kufr* that Izutsu has delineated in his work on the “ethico-religious concepts” in the Qur’ān.<sup>243</sup> What Ibn ‘Ajība does, therefore, is to make the negativity of the *kufr* notion serve the cause of pressured Sufis like himself, turning the most reprehensible attitudes of the Qur’ān’s *kuḥfār* against the persecutors of Sufism in a sort of moralizing manner.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> See also *Tafsīr*, p. 58, vol. 8.

<sup>242</sup> The distinct hermeneutic of *kufr* pertaining to these two groups is often merged as one, even if they have been isolated from each other for the sake of clarity in this paper. The two are nevertheless closely related since “passive” unbelief against, or ignorance of, Sufism by the masses can– and in Ibn ‘Ajība’s time often was–stirred up, by the *fuqahā’*, into more “active” aggression. Conversely, the *fuqahā’*’s “active” persecution of Sufis can stem from arrogance or from a fear of losing their authority and influence, and thus, essentially, from a “passive” sort of *ghaflah* and preoccupation with worldly desires.

<sup>243</sup> See Izutsu 142, 154.

<sup>244</sup> See also Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary on verses 11, 12 of Sūra al-Baqarah, Vol.1, p. 58-60, where he writes about those who “...set about obstructing the Way of God and giving the lie to the friends of God...[who] spoil the hearts of [God’s] believers, turning them back from the way of love, barring them from God’s Presence, and preventing them from

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to assess where Ibn ‘Ajība stands on that “moderate-esoteric” scale by which certain Sufi exegetes have been judged.<sup>245</sup> For on the one hand, his *tafsīr* is by and large a “moderate” exposition of Junayd-style Sufism— it is even critical of the excesses of certain Sufi trends and the degeneration in the rituals of certain Sufi orders— on the other hand, it is highly reprimanding of the arrogance, narrowness and literalism of the exoteric jurists. What is certain is that, while Ibn ‘Ajība’s stance vis-à-vis the tyranny of the exoteric authorities is forceful and unapologetic, it is not gratuitous vitriol. Rather, it stems from a pragmatic, if urgent, need to defend the ‘space’ of Sufism and uphold the right of its practitioners to pursue the spiritual life. Nor does Ibn ‘Ajība denigrate the important role played by legal scholars in the economy of religious life of the Muslim. Let it be recalled that Ibn ‘Ajība was an accomplished jurist in his own right. In his *Tafsīr*, when Ibn ‘Ajība mentions the ‘doctors of the outward’ and the ‘doctors of the inward’ side by side, it is not always with a view towards proclaiming the righteousness of one over the other, but sometimes to emphasize the complimentary roles which the two play in the service of the Muslim community.<sup>246</sup>

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beholding [God’s] Essence and His Qualities, closing the door in the face of [God’s] confidants, and dashing their hopes that there exists such a thing as spiritual education...”

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the extent to which Ibn ‘Ajība was successful in ameliorating the condition of Sufis as a result of such moral/ethical arguments. In all likelihood, such passages were more successful in providing a measure of comfort (*tasliya*) to *fūqarā’*— perhaps drawing the sympathy of a neutral jury of onlookers from among the masses— rather than being realistic attempts to alter the behavior of the most intransigent, anti-Sufi *fūqabā’*.

<sup>245</sup> For example, al-Baqli’s *tafsīr*, *‘Arā’is al-Bayān*, is considered to be ‘esoteric’ due to the bold and unapologetic manner in which it articulates Sufi teachings. Al-Qushayri’s *tafsīr* is deemed ‘moderate’ because of the apologetic agenda it pursues, and the dearth of “ecstatic”, mystical passages that cross the line of orthodoxy. Ibn ‘Ajība’s *tafsīr* also stays within the bounds of mainstream, Junayd-style Sufism, but can he rightly be said to lack “audacity”, or can his *Tafsīr* be called “apologetic”, when he reprobates the religious powers to be with such aplomb? However, since he is not seeking to denigrate the jurist’s role and its essence, and given that his overriding objective is to bring about a balanced realignment between exoteric and esoteric influence, could his ardent calls to a middle ground qualify him as an “extreme centrist”?

<sup>246</sup> See *Tafsīr*, p. 159, Vol. 1.

## Concluding Remarks

Thus far, an examination of Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic of *kufr*, along with the contexts which surround the notion in the Qur’ān, reveals the exegete’s attempt at reaching out to an audience that stands outside the fold of Sufism looking in. Large sections of spiritual allusions, including the ones surveyed here, exhibit a largely intelligible language and express relatively intuitive ideas, which make them all the more accessible to such an audience. They contain an exhortative quality in line with Michon’s characterization of Ibn ‘Ajība’s doctrine as “initiatic”. However, since these same “spiritual allusions” also cater to more advanced and established audiences, the multilayered spectrum of audiences that Ibn ‘Ajība targets stands at odds with some of the exegete’s own statements. Consider the following instruction that is included in the introduction to the grand *Tafsīr*:

Know that the Qur’an has an exoteric sense for the exoterists as well as an esoteric sense for the esoterists. The exegesis of the esoterists can only be appreciated by esoterists: only they can grasp the esoteric meaning and only they can appreciate its taste.” (Michon 108, re-translated)

Similarly, one might wonder how Ibn ‘Ajība’s “mass-initiations” during the years of “spiritual travel” (*ṣiyāba*) can be reconciled with the famous Sufi ternary— masses (*‘awām*) – elect (*ḵhawās*) – elect of the elect (*ḵhawās al-ḵhawās*)— a hierarchical view of human beings’ spiritual abilities which Ibn ‘Ajība frequently invokes in his *ishārāt*<sup>247</sup> This also seems contradictory to Ibn ‘Ajība’s initiatic methods. However, if Ibn ‘Ajība believed that differences in spiritual aptitude among human beings were real, and rather “in the nature of things”, he must have also envisaged the possibility for some degree of mobility between the spiritual “castes”.<sup>248</sup> We know that the Shādhili-Darqāwi Sufi order believed in the need for a deep spiritual awakening and a deep moral reform in society.<sup>249</sup> But concomitant to this there also needs to be the conviction that an unacceptably large number of

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<sup>247</sup> See for example Vol. 7, p. 69.

<sup>248</sup> For on the one hand, there is always the possibility of the advanced Sufi losing his way. On the other, and more relevantly to the present argument, even the members of the “vulgar masses” (*‘awām*) could potentially be the seat of the Divine.

<sup>249</sup> See Saghir’s *Islāh*, pp. 11-53.

people from amongst the masses (*‘awām*) were living below their spiritual potential, that their spiritual potentiality in society had not been actualized either because of lukewarm attitudes, ignorance or simply the lack of a viable Sufi order through which to make their spirituality operative. This would explain the urgency of Shadhili-Darqawi proselytizing, and, in Ibn ‘Ajība’s exegesis, why every opportunity is seized to reach out and exhort action from this “under-achieving” demographic of potential aspirants.<sup>250</sup>

There is another point that needs to be considered in the light of Ibn ‘Ajība’s hermeneutic of *kufr*. Like many earlier Sufis, in particular al-Ghazālī, Ibn ‘Ajība conceived the Qur’ān as a descent of the Divine reality in the corporeal world wherein it is grasped by the human intellect, first in its outward (*aḡ-Zāhir*) form, then in its profound, inner nature (*al-Bātin*). Esoteric Qur’ānic commentary, also known as *ta’wīl*, is the art of following the outward meaning of the “word” of God to its subtle, immaterial reality. Since, however, the esoteric plane of reality is itself commonly divided into the domain of the “soul” and that of the “spirit”, Sufi *ta’wīl* often operates on three planes.<sup>251</sup> Taking the case of *kufr*, for instance, a good number of early Sufi commentators have tended to deploy the notion in the context of macrocosmic-microcosmic correspondences. *Kuffār*, for instance, is projected inward onto the human soul such that it becomes the personification of that element in man which “commands [him] to evil” (*an-nafs al-‘ammāra bi as-sū*).<sup>252</sup> Utilizing the cosmic images in the Qur’ān to set up such an allegory helps shed light on the psychic topography, rendering the perils and the challenges of the spiritual journey more immediate, and elucidating the dynamics of spiritual metamorphosis.

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<sup>250</sup> The aforementioned passage from Ibn ‘Ajība’s introduction therefore seems to be intended primarily for the eyes of the literalists and the fundamentalist exoterists as a pre-emptive defence against any hostile reactions that his esoteric commentary might incite. That potential aspirants might be discouraged seems to be an unwanted but unavoidable consequence, which is, at any rate, amply compensated for by the intelligibility and intuitiveness of the *tafsīr*’s “spiritual allusions”.

<sup>251</sup> In theory, *ta’wīl* can operate on as many levels as one distinguishes levels of Reality, or degrees of universal manifestation.

<sup>252</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi even stretches the literal meaning so far that *kuffār* becomes the allegory of the saints who have achieved complete annihilation in God.

With Ibn ‘Ajība, the notion of *kufr* is handled in a far more ‘concrete’ manner. For instance, when he appropriates the moral dimension of the notion in order to reproach the persecutors of Sufism, there is no real shift from the material world— and the literal meaning of the Qur’ānic text— to the subtler realm of the soul; the ongoing vendetta between jurists and Sufis has little to do with the cosmology of the soul according to Sufi mysticism. And yet such criticisms of the *fuqahā’* by Ibn ‘Ajība occur in sections which the exegete himself has labelled as “spiritual allusion” (*ishāra*). So the question is, can such *ishārāt*— where, for instance, the prophet-unbeliever dichotomy is transposed onto that of the *faqīr-faqīh*— be considered a true esoteric *ta’wīl*? Or is it a case of exegesis, where the exegete is harnessing the agency of the Qur’ān as an aid for a struggle that is of a socio-cultural character?

Considering that Ibn ‘Ajība does indeed delve into very subtle and metaphysical symbolism very frequently elsewhere in his exegesis, there can be no question of Ibn ‘Ajība being simply ignorant of, or unskilled in, such a hermeneutical method. Even with respect to the notion of *kufr* itself, Ibn ‘Ajība will occasionally interpret the notion along the lines of the macro-microcosmic consonances scheme.<sup>253</sup> One telling clue to the question of why Ibn ‘Ajība lays as much emphasis as he does on the more “concrete” hermeneutic can be found in his commentary on the verses of Sūra al-Qamar, a portion of which was discussed above. Just as the Qur’ān describes the *kuḥfār* who disobeyed their respective prophets, Ibn ‘Ajība consistently likens the *kuḥfār*’s wickedness with that of the literalists who adopt a hostile stance against Sufism. However, and in the very same *ishāra*, Ibn ‘Ajība will sometimes append a quote from Al-Qushayri— whose exegesis *Latā’if al-Ishārāt* is the source that is most widely referenced in the esoteric sections of *al-Bahr*. Ibn ‘Ajība will allow al-Qushayri to flesh out the allegory based on the macro-microcosmic correspondences.<sup>254</sup> The fact that Ibn ‘Ajība himself

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<sup>253</sup> See for example *Tafsīr*, p. 146, Vol. 7.

<sup>254</sup> See for example *Tafsīr* p. 256, Vol. 7. In the *ishāra* pertaining to the Qur’ānic précis of the story of Noah (54:9-17) and how his community was punished as a result of their *kufr*, Ibn ‘Ajība says: “[these verses] contain a measure of comfort to those friends of God who have been harmed, [they epitomize the manner in which] supplications against the tyrant are answered...but al-Qushayri has exposed [another] allusion that has to do with the heart [in its war against] the legions of the [carnal] soul, [namely] caprice, [attachment to] the world, and all manner of vices...”.

often favours the more socio-cultural interpretation over the psycho-spiritual can be best understood, once again, in light of his life and his particular method. The hermeneutic modality that has been studied in this paper represents a deliberate attempt on Ibn ‘Ajība’s part to take full advantage of certain Qur’ānic verses that have a strong moralizing character. For it is these types of verses which, finally, have the greatest potential to serve Ibn ‘Ajība’s larger objectives and visions for society.

In conclusion, the examination of Ibn ‘Ajība’s esoteric treatment of Qur’ānic verses which include the root *k-f-r* (ك ف ر) reveals the exegete’s attempt to combat a spiritual inertia as part of his larger efforts to exhort and reach out to an audience deemed to be falling short of its spiritual potential. Ibn ‘Ajība also harnesses the power of the notion of *kufr* to buttress the doctrinal tenets of Sufism. Finally, the moral and ethical components of *kufr* are also leveraged by Ibn ‘Ajība so as to remonstrate more forcefully against the deniers and harassers of Sufis. Of course, Ibn ‘Ajība is entitled to an individual style that emphasizes some points over others. Evidently, he emphasizes issues which he deems are more immediate or urgently required given the social and political conditions around him, even if this is done at the expense of passing up an opportunity to delve into a deeper metaphysical level. Taken as a whole, however, his *Tafsīr* touches upon a wide range of topics in depth and also reaches out to a wide range of audience. And while the particular angles of exegesis which have emerged in this study are useful for understanding either the nature of Moroccan Sufism in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, or the trends in Qur’ānic esoteric exegesis during the latter stages of its evolution, or the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric poles of Islam, they can by no means account for the total content and the objectives of the veritable “ocean” that is Ibn ‘Ajība’s *Al-Babr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur’an al-Majīd*.

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See also *Tafsīr* p. 259, Vol.7.



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