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The Image of Guidance: The Akbarian View of Sadr al-Din Qunawi

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First of all, I should like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to the organisers of this important congress for their kind invitation to speak on one of the great figures of mysticism, whose legacy is still relatively unknown and hidden in the modern world. I hope that this conference and others to come will begin to restore this great man to his rightful place in the world of mystical thought.

It is a true privilege to be here to honour one of Konya's luminaries, Sadr al-din Qunawi, or to give him his full name, Abu al-Ma'ali Muhammad b. Ishaq b. Muhammad b. Yusuf b. 'Ali al- Qunawi, son of the vizier Majd al-din Ishaq who served the Seljuk sultans here in Konya. Known apparently in his own lifetime as al-shaykh al-kabir, 'the great shaykh',¹ Qunawi wrote major works of mysticism which became a source of huge inspiration to the Ottoman elite, and many were copied on the instructions of Fatih Sultan Mehmet II. His students included a generation of spiritual men who would become great writers in their own right, such as Sa'id al-din Farghani, Fakhr al-din 'Iraqi and Mu'ayyad al-din Jandi. Above all, of course, Qunawi was the stepson, disciple and heir of Ibn 'Arabi, the one who transmitted his teachings to the next generation, the one who provided the keys for reading Ibn 'Arabi's books (and consequently, in the eyes of later masters, those of Rumi), the one who safeguarded his precious library for future generations to benefit from.

But here I do not want to consider Qunawi in a historical light, and I shall leave the consideration of his physical legacy in manuscripts and books for another article. The only point I wish to make here, which is relevant to the subject of this paper, is that the honorific titles bestowed upon him by those who knew him directly are exceptional, even by the standards of 13th-century Konya: "leader of the leaders of the knowers of God in all the worlds, most perfect of the heirs of the prophets and messengers" as one manuscript puts it.² This firstly affirms Qunawi as the premier spiritual master of his time, a brilliant era that included Mevlâna Jalal al-din Rumi. However, one should remember that while this view of Qunawi as "leader of the leaders of the knowers of God" is one expressed by his students, who were no doubt quite partisan, at the same time they and he himself considered Rumi to be the "master of Muhammadian (or mystical) poverty".³ The phrase "most perfect of the heirs of the prophets and messengers" also situates him within the line of Ibn 'Arabi, indeed as the akbarian heir par excellence: while the conception of the saint as heir of the prophet is here given a clear emphasis, this

1 It should be noted that there is no evidence this was done to contrast him with his master Ibn 'Arabi (who would later be known as al-shaykh al-akbar, the greatest master). Rather, it seems likely this was to enhance Qunawi's status at the time in Konya with regard to other teachers, including Rumi.

2 *Imâm al-a'imma al-âlimin billâh fi al-âlamîn, akmal waratha al-anbiya' wa al-mursalin* (Miftâh al-ghayb, Yusuf Aga 4865, 672H). This wording, which was chosen during his lifetime, is not uncommon among his direct students.

3 Quoted in Jami's *Nafâhât al-uns* (Tehran, 1373), entry 495.

vast inheritance is nowhere better exposed than when Qunawi notes in his *Nafâhât* that his request to Ibn ‘Arabi to be given “full realisation of how you [i.e. Ibn ‘Arabi] witnessed the essential revelation which is constant and everlasting” was granted. This, he specifies, means “the essential revelation after which the complete people have no veil”.⁴

Today my focus will be on the last book he wrote: his commentary on 40 hadith, *Sharh al-arba’in*, of which he was able to complete only 29 hadith commentaries before his death in 673/1274. As a hadith scholar Qunawi was considered paramount in his day, “the King of Traditionalists” as Aflaki called him⁵. In this respect he was faithfully following in the footsteps of his master Ibn ‘Arabi, who was himself a consummate muhaddith and had also compiled several works of hadith. However, there is also a marked difference: Ibn ‘Arabi never wrote a formal commentary on hadith - in his *Mishkât al-anwâr*, for example, he gathered 101 hadith qudsi in 2 sections of 40 plus an extra 21, without further elaboration, as a way of adhering to the advice of the Prophet himself that “whoever safeguards for my community 40 hadith of which they stand in need, God shall put him down as learned and knowing.”⁶ Qunawi also quotes this hadith (with a slight variation) as his justification for compiling his own collection. However, well aware of other authors’ compilations, he seems to have chosen to add a commentary on 40 hadith specifically to show how akbarian thinking explains the inner meanings of the prophetic tradition. This is borne out by the very first lines of the introduction to the work, written in an elegant Arabic rhyming prose (*saj’*) that echoes his master:

“Praise be to God who adorned the heaven of the Hanifian Way (*al-milla al-hanifiyya*) with the stars of the rulings of divine law and religious ordinances and counsels, and thus guided the one whose heart (chest) was opened up for true submission (*islâm*), and who was liberated from the calamities of doubt and the veils of darkness, who beautified the deepest interiors with the shining lights of faith (*imân*), who made visible on the dawning horizons of that heaven the moons of right guidance to direct the people of the degrees of right action (*ihsân*)...”⁷

From the outset of this densely allusive passage Qunawi establishes the Prophet Muhammad as one who is guided by the divinely-inspired Abrahamic faith, as the restorer of the true monotheism of Abraham, who is known in the Quran as *hanif* (a word variously translated into English as true believer or orthodox, but which really means one who inclines, *hanafa*, to the true God, away from anything other). Muhammad is thus primarily the *mahdi*, the one guided by God – it is only through his being divinely guided that he can be the guide or director to others.

Qunawi is also here directly employing typically akbarian terminology and outlook: he refers to the three tenets of *islâm*, *imân* and *ihsân*, which were the subject of Gabriel’s famous questioning of the Prophet, but were also discussed in detail in Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Mawâqi’ al-nujûm*, where the imagery of stars,

4 *Al-Nafahât al-ilâhiya*, p. 125–26

5 See Aflaki, *The Feats of the Knowers of God* (Leiden, 2002), trans. O’Kane, p.193.

6 See *Divine Sayings*, text and translation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Mishkât al-anwâr* (Oxford, 2004), p.23.

7 *Sharh al-arba’in hadithan*, Arabic text by Hasan Yilmaz (Istanbul, 1990), p.1.

moon and heaven is also used to distinguish different degrees or levels. In addition, Qunawi couples islâm to the cleansing of Muhammad's chest ("whose chest was opened up for submission"), when his heart was taken out and washed by angels to cleanse it of the blood-clot of human deviation; thus he situates islâm at its highest degree, not as formal practice or creed but as something entirely intrinsic to human reality. By describing imân as illuminating the inmost parts of the soul and ihsân as the pure actions which flow from being rightly guided, Qunawi also makes an implicit reference to the Quranic verse "We shall show them Our Signs upon the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that He is the Real"⁸. In short, Qunawi is describing the Prophet as the full exemplar and manifestation of the Complete Human Being, created in the Divine Image, simultaneously the most perfect servant of God and the place where God can manifest Himself most completely. Thus Muhammad is guided by not attributing anything to himself, by being surrendered to God, and he is the guide because it is through him that the Divine Qualities and Names find their fullest expression.

This particular hadith collection, all of which come from Qunawi's rich experience of being personally taught by muhaddiths, is unusual, as our author explains: "Then God opened up my chest for the bringing out of a collection of prophetic hadith that originate from the station of synthesised speech (jawâmi' al-kalim), and He unveiled their mysteries which include gems of wisdom..."⁹

It is in the 22nd hadith of the collection that Qunawi is most explicit about the Prophet as the reality of guidance. Here he cites the tradition recorded by Ibn Mas'ud that the Prophet said: "Whoever sees me in a dream has really seen me. For the Satan cannot impersonate me." He gives three other versions of the hadith for clarity and comprehensiveness: "the Satan cannot represent himself in my form"; "the Satan cannot make himself into me"; and finally whoever sees me has seen the Truth (haqq), for the Satan cannot present himself as me".¹⁰

There is not time to deal with all the aspects of Qunawi's commentary here, as his treatment is lengthy and includes a full discussion of the realm of mithâl or the imaginal world. Qunawi starts his discussion with an illuminating framework: "Know that the Prophet manifested with all the properties of the Names and Qualities of God, both in their manifestation in the servant and in their spiritual realisation (takhalluqan wa tahaquqan)." Immediately the frame of reference is again akbarian: both takhalluq and tahaquq and their complement ta'alluq (connection) were the basis of Ibn 'Arabi's exposition of the Divine Names¹¹. But the focus is on the Prophet as the place where all the Divine Names and Qualities are in full expression. He is simultaneously one who has realised the human divine image, i.e. the Complete or Perfect Man (al-insân al-kâmil), and the fullest manifestation of that principle. This being the prerequisite for someone who acts as messenger and director to the Truth, then the primary quality that is visible to others in such a person must be guidance. Quoting the

8 Q.41:53.

9 Sharh, p.3.

10 Sharh, p.122ff.

11 See Kashf al-ma'nâ 'an asma' Allâh al-husnâ, ed. and tr. Pablo Beneito (Murcia, 1997), where each Divine Name is treated under three headings, ta'alluq, tahaquq and takhalluq.

Quranic verse “Indeed you shall guide to a straight path”¹², Qunawi adds:

“He is the image of the name Guide, and the place of manifestation of the quality of guidance, while the Satan is the place of manifestation of the name Misleader and appears with the quality of misleading... The Satan in fact is the opposite of the Prophet, on him be peace. And opposites cannot be united, nor can one of them appear in the form of the other. God created the Prophet for guidance.”

As he explains, the Prophet can only appear with the attribute of guidance, so it is impossible for the Satan to mimic this in any way. The form of the Prophet is thus protected from error or deviation (*ma’şûm*). However, Qunawi does add the important proviso that anyone who sees a different form to the one the Prophet had in his physical life has actually not seen him – for example, as someone very tall or very short, fair-haired or old etc. While the historical Prophet is buried in Medina, his spiritual form is capable of manifesting to the believer across time and space, in the realm of *mithâl*, i.e. dreams or visions. To clarify how the Prophet or the image of the Guide might appear, Qunawi goes on to describe three very interesting dreams, two of which were told to him by Ibn ‘Arabi and one which he experienced himself: in each case the Prophet appears in an apparently negative light, eg as dead and covered in a shroud like a corpse, or as delivering a slap on the face. Qunawi gives the interpretation of each dream to show how the prophetic guidance is manifesting. Here let us just consider the dream he himself had:

“On the night that Baghdad was taken [by the Mongols], in the early morning I dreamt that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was covered in a winding sheet, lying on a bier, with crowds of people all around him. His head was uncovered, and his hair almost touching the ground. I asked someone what they were doing, and he told me: ‘We’re going to carry him off and bury him.’ Then it came to me that the Prophet (SA) was not actually dead, and I said to them: ‘But his face doesn’t look like the face of a dead man – wait a moment until the truth of the matter has been established.’ Then I went close to his mouth and nose, and found he was still breathing faintly. So I made them aware of this and prevented them from carrying out what they had intended. I woke up in a state of great distress and alarm...”

As Qunawi explains, he came to understand that the dream concerned the catastrophe that had afflicted Baghdad on February 10, 1258, when the city surrendered to the Mongols. It was a huge psychological blow to Islam, from which it never recovered according to some: the greatest intellectual centre of its day was obliterated in a week of massacre, looting, rape and destruction. Qunawi states that he himself independently verified that the time of his dream coincided exactly with the taking of Baghdad¹³. The identification of the Prophet with the *Dâr al-Islâm* is clear, but what Qunawi does

¹² Q.42:52.

¹³ He states that he was careful to check the timing without letting anyone know about his dream until after the news had been confirmed (a necessary precaution in the time before TV and telephones!).

not mention is the fact that this disaster was not to be seen as terminal: he knew the Prophet was not dead and he prevented people burying him. The dream is above all a message of hope in a time of great despair. The import of the dream as an example, however, is that as Qunawi puts it, “anyone who dreams of the Prophet, on him be peace, in his original form and is informed of something, indeed has been informed truly.”

Dreams, as we know from modern psychology, reflect the state of the dreamer. But Qunawi holds out a much grander possibility: that the dream has an objective import due to the purity of the human subject who receives it. This of course can be seen in prophetic dreams such as Abraham’s vision of himself sacrificing his son, but it equally may apply to anyone who reaches the degree of humanity (*insân*). He speaks of how a dream may impress itself upon the imaginative faculty without any interference from the psychic level. He describes how this may not only be something that occurs occasionally in the state of sleep, but as a constant awakened state, where the human becomes the divine epitome represented by the Prophet, where the human realises his true condition at the centre of the circle of all things and conditions, as the Exact Middle (*haqq al-wasaoe*) in the station of no station¹⁴:

For these people, he says, “God is inherently present in their hearts, so nothing comes to their hearts from their souls which has been engraved upon the soul previously or for the first time, except but rarely, accidentally, fleetingly. Rather perhaps, nothing from the unseen high world, as well as what is above that, is engraved in their soul due to a total lack of attribute or any kind of inclination away from the central point of equilibrium, and a sound counterbalancing in the presence of complementary opposition (*muhâdhât*), and facing the presence of Truth or the degrees of the spirits.”

Here the human being is liberated from any limitations, bonds or constraints that could define sheer receptivity to the Divine. There is no deviating from the human as image of the Divine, no falling away into a lesser than total degree, no partiality for one aspect over another. In our modern world where writers and film-makers provide ever-changing images of goodness, as benign witches take the place of angels and animals become heroes, it is heartening to see that the human image still retains its primary focus of true virtue¹⁵. But what Sadr al-din Qunawi points us to is the infinitely more heroic and precise picture of the human, an actualisation of all the Divine Names and Qualities in their plenitude and a total realisation of servanthood and non-ability before Divine Guidance.

The emphasis on guidance and our constant need for it is most marked in both Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings and in Qunawi’s. For example, Ibn ‘Arabi ends his 37-volume *Futûhât* with a series of prayers that culminate in the following: “O God, cause our hearts to be attached to You; make us of those who entrust every affair to You; embrace us with the Mercy which is Yours and which is in Your hands; make us guided and guiding (*hâdiyyin mahdiyyin*), and do not make us misguided or misguiding.”¹⁶

¹⁴ See Chittick, ‘The Central Point’, *JMIAS XXXV* (Oxford, 2004), pp.25-45.

¹⁵ As shown, for example, in the Harry Potter books and Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*.

¹⁶ *Fut.*IV.553

Compare this with the glorification with which Qunawi ends his commentary on the 22nd hadith: “And we would not have been guided, were it not for God guiding us – glory to Him, there is no god but He, the All-Knowing, the All-Powerful, the Giver of munificence, the constant Benefactor (subhânahu lâ ilâha illâ huwa al-’alîm al-qadîr al-mun’im al-muhsin).”¹⁷

The epitome of this guidance is the Prophet himself, may God bless him and give him peace.

¹⁷ Sharḥ, p.150.