

Remarks concerning the spiritual Hermeneutics of Al-Amîr ‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Jazâ’irî

At the turn of the century the periodical *Al-Manâr* started to publish on its pages the first instalments of a *tafsîr* (interpretation of the Qur’ân) by Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, compiled (and later to be completed) by his Syrian disciple Shaykh Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ. This *tafsîr* became since known as *Tafsîr al-Manâr*. Breaking with a tradition of an exclusive circle of exegetical scholarship and discipline-specific epistemology sacred scripture was offered here to a lay scholarship in digestible bits. To accommodate the eternal message of Islam to the concerns of the day it was written in the vernacular and could, thereby, address a lay audience. At the heart of this break lay a new way of thinking which held that the meanings of the Qur’ân were open to any public readership on the condition that it is familiar with ‘media’ Arabic, that is, has a fuzzy knowledge of early Islamic history and epistemology and an even fuzzier knowledge of later historical periods and Islamic juristic knowledge. It, furthermore, had to be able to follow the rational arguments put forward by ‘Abduh and Ridâ to authenticate their interpretations. Within a century, through the demise of the traditional methods for the dissemination of religious knowledge, through the ever-growing accessibility of ever-cheaper publications of Qur’ân *tafsîrs* and pocket-book Qur’ân editions with

their multi-functional indices and glossaries, and through online websites offering more and facile explanation, Qur'ân *tafsîr* has become the staple fodder of all factions from which they seek to find justification for their beliefs, biases, and actions. This is particularly so with the growing appeal of the neo-Salafi literalist call to go back to the pure original sources of the Qur'ân and to a limited number of historically accredited hadith corpus, the *Sunnah akîdah*, as the only legitimate and authentic sources of religious knowledge, which goes hand in hand with the marginalization and the discrediting of traditional religious scholarship and its various interpretative communities.

The reformers' departure from those whom they identified as the culprits for the decline of Islam and the Muslim nations, namely, the ulama, the scholars of the outward sciences like jurisprudence, the sufi shaykhs, transmitters of the knowledge of the heart, and non-Arabic infiltrators breaking up the Arab-centric coherence of the message of Islam, lead to the search for an Islam that would be suitable for modern times: One that would be simple, unified, standardised, unambiguous, containable, and accessible to all alike. To realize this, it was seen as necessary to hold on to language-based literal interpretations of the Qur'ân. Almost all of the Qur'ân *tafsîrs* that have been written in the last century, together with the translations that catered to an increasingly globalised Salafi Islam, share the above features, with very minor differences in their interpretations. The reformers dream of a definitive understanding of Allah's speech seems finally realisable.

At the same time, there was and is a dire lack in contemporary scholarship of a critical appreciation of the assumptions that underlie such a trend. Where are the expressions of surprise over the fact that the meanings of sacred texts can be harnessed and indexed and footnoted and offered once and for all for a mass audience without any regard for the semiotic historicity of those who are producing those meanings. Yet what seems missing most of all is a sense of

the enormity of the undertaking, of the potential *fitna* expressed in a claim to know the definitive version of Allah’s meaning.¹

There are, however, a few rare exceptions. One of these is the Amîr ‘Abd al-Qâdir. Reading the signs of the times and recognizing the serious implications of a seemingly simple call to go back to the ‘pure’ sources, he left his contemporaries in his *Kitâb al-Mawâqif* a precious legacy of subtle and explicit allusions to hermeneutical principles to remind us of what was forsaken in the name of ‘reform’ and ‘progress’.²

In a sense, one may describe ‘Abd al-Qâdir’s *Kitâb al-Mawâqif*³ as a commentary of the Qur’ân and sacred sayings uttered by the Prophet Muhammad. Its hermeneutical peculiarity, however, lies in the fact that it does not fit into the classical Islamic scheme of types

1. Many scholars have noted the paucity of studies on the hermeneutics of the Qur’ân and have attempted to initiate discourse on this subject. Khaled Abou El Fadl investigates the interpretive processes revolving around the text of the Qur’ân which took place primarily in the field of jurisprudence in the pre-modern era, and the decline of such practices in the last century in his book, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: One-world, 2001); Hamid Nasr Abou Zayed calls for a rethinking of the hermeneutic tradition that evolved around the text of the Qur’ân and to shift towards the “spoken” Qur’ân in *Rethinking the Qur’ân: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: Humanistics University Press, 2004). His thesis echoes that of Gerlad L. Bruns’ examination of al-Ghazali’s journey towards the primacy of mystical experience as against the authority of established exegesis in “Sufiyya: The Mystical Hermeneutics of al-Ghazali”, in *Hermeneutics Ancient & Modern* (Michigan, Yale University Press, 1992).

2. Its title was later expanded – through an inspiration as mentioned in *Mawqif* 360– to *Kitâb al-Mawâqif fi ba’d ishârât al-qur’ân ilâ ‘l-asrâr wa ‘l-ma’ârîf* [The Book of Halts on Some of the Subtle Allusions of the Qur’ân to the Secrets and Knowledges].

3. There are several editions of *Kitâb al-Mawâqif* all of which, with the exception of the latest one edited by ‘Abd al-Baqî Muftah and published by the Foundation of Emir ‘Abd al-Qâdir in Algiers 2005, are poorly edited and with many typographical errors. I have kept all references to the number of the individual *mawqif* rather than go by the pagination of any particular edition. The only complete translation of the text is that of Michel Lagarde’s French translation published in three volumes by E.J. Brill, vol. 1, 2000, vol. 2, 2001, vol. 3, 2002.

of commentary (linguistic, circumstantial [*asbâb al-nuzûl*], etc.). It actually presents itself as a text that is itself the result of revelation. A revelation, furthermore, wherein both the originally revealed text (the Qur'ân) and its interpretation are revealed. Describing in the first *Mawqif* the modality of this kind of hermeneutics, 'Abd al-Qadir writes: Allah "takes me from my self, despite the remaining of the [external] form, and then casts on me (*yulqî ilayya*) what He wishes by alluding (*ishâra*) to a noble verse of the Qur'ân. Thereafter, He returns me to my self and I meditate on the verse with delight and satisfaction until He inspires me (*yulhimnî*) to what He meant in the verse." He states that he had received over half of the Qur'ânic verses in this fashion (*yastazhir*, literally being the place for the appearance of these verses) and in a footnote added by one of the disciples of 'Abd al-Qâdir and the scribe of the manuscript he indicates that his wish to have the whole Qur'ân verses revealed to him in this fashion was granted him before his death. However, only the parts he had been spiritually permitted to communicate appear in the text of a seemingly random collage of 372 *mawâqif* of varying lengths, styles, and content. The *mawâqif* are neither ordered following the sequence of the Surahs or verses of the Qur'ân nor in the historical order in which they occurred to 'Abd al-Qadir; some of the verses occur several times in different *mawâqif* and with different interpretations depending on the meanings 'given' to him on these occasions. Like the Surahs in the *kitâb marqûm*, that is to say the Qur'ân, the *mawâqif* are only given numbers and no thematic headings – a detail that those readers who rely on translations of the text miss since almost all translations introduce thematic headings.

I. Allah's Speech

Certainly, the Qur'ân poses a serious challenge to any attempt to interpret it. Since the third century of Islam the issue of the nature of this text has been debated by Muslim theologians and made into

a subject of contention: To what extent does the written text as held by the book covers relate to its divine author? ‘Abd al-Qâdir sees that the Qur’ân, which has been revealed by a creature (Gabriel) to a creature (Muhammad) and a *muhdith* (created being) to another *muhdith* (created being), partakes as *Kalâm Allâh* (Allah’s Speech) in all of Allah’s divine nature, eternal and uncreated. He bases his certainty on the authority of its divine author Himself – *bi’l-tafhîm ar-rabânî* (through divine instruction) – who ascribes this particular divine status to this particular text specifically – in distinction from other revelations to Prophet Muhammad, like *ahadîth qudsiyyah*, which were not granted the same status as the Qur’ân – and, more importantly, not based on any human reasoning which tries to find a *munâsabah* (affinity or correspondence) between what manifests as words written and recited by human agency and their *ma’nâ an-nafsî al-qâ’im bi’l-dhât* (the meaning it-self which subsists in the supreme Essence) of its authorship.⁴

While *Kalâm Allâh an-nafsî* (Allah’s speech breathed by *nafas ar-Rahmân*) is *azalî* (eternal and uncreated) what reaches us and is heard by us and understood by us are the *zilâl* (shadows) cast by His Speech and created in us by Him. One should therefore not mistake the actual *azalî* Speech that is not bound by time or space for the *ma’lûmât* (intelligibles) which appear in time and correspond to the contingencies of time and space and which ‘translate’ the eternal *irâdah* (Will) and *‘ilm* (Knowledge) to the creatures into words.⁵ Thus His immutable eternal Speech casts shadows or *kalimât* (words) that are multiple and varied, *tâmmah* (complete) and *nâqisah* (incomplete) and which are apprehended by the heart of the one inspired. Such was the case of the Prophet’s revelation and of the inspiration of his inheritors, the *awliyâ’* of the Ummah Muhammadiyyah. It is in this modality that ‘Abd al-Qâdir ‘tasted’ the Qur’ânîc *tanzîl* (descent of the divine words/ revelation) and which thereby guaranteed

4. *Mawqif* 209. ‘Abd al-Qadir alludes to the term “*muhdith*” which occurs in *Sûrat Al-Anbiyâ’*, v. 2 and *Sûrat Al-Shu‘arâ’*, v. 5.

5. *Mawqif* 209.

the purity of his sources for “shaytân cannot ‘bring down’ the words of Allah”.⁶ In this way, ‘Abd al-Qadir is reassured and reassures his “brethren” that his understanding, his revealed “*fahm jadîd*”, is safe from being distorted by the devil or the egoistic self (*nafs*).

There is an important difference between the other divine revelations, the other sacred books brought by other prophets, and that of the Qur’ân. With the exception of the Qur’ân, all holy “books” descended as pure meanings to their prophets which they expressed in turn “in their own languages like Hebrew or Aramaic” and so on. Since this process was one of “translation” their scriptures or texts were liable to corruption (while their meanings remain incorruptible and partake of the nature of their original author). The Qur’ân, though, was created in the heart and hearing of Gabriel as an Arabic composition which he in turn delivered to Prophet Muhammad as is. Since Allah was its composer and no creature translated it from its divine author, the Qur’ân is and remains incorruptible and immutable in both its form and meanings. It is this particular feature of the Qur’ân as text that keeps the possibility of new and ever-lasting meanings to manifest in this world with no limit or finiteness to them: a *fahm jadîd* of eternal immutable words.

‘Abd al-Qâdir’s hermeneutics then rests on this stable ground, where both the text and its meanings are revealed by its very Author and even though appearing within the contingencies of the times and place are not held by them nor by human will. It is what Allah has given him and taught him, according to His Will and His Knowledge as needed for the times.

But what of the prophets’ words which do not fall within the category of Allah’s speech, which are translations of the meanings of Allah’s words and are, therefore, open to corruption *in their created form*?

6. *Ibid.*

II. Prophetic speech

At no time should we forget that we have come to know Allah’s words through Prophet Muhammad. For it is only through him that we know where the Qur’ân as words begins and where it ends, and which of his words were conversations with His Lord and which were for our benefit. Whereas all of Allah’s words were and are for all of humanity for all times and situations – each to understand what Allah has made them capable of understanding – the words of all prophets appear and address peoples of their times in specific contexts for particular ends. As a doctor needs to apply his knowledge to his patients’ particular ailment and needs, so did the Prophet who is *al-hakîm al-mâhir wa’l-tabîb al-a’zam* (the dexterous sage and the greatest doctor) speak, advice, reprimand, consent, and warn each, relative to his/her needs and capabilities. Accordingly, his words vary and are multiple in their meanings. For, after all, the Prophet spoke *bi-lisân qawmihi* (lit. in the tongue of his people), at their level, in order to be understood and deliver Allah’s message to his people, and so it is not possible that he would have spoken to his people of that which they could not have understood or comprehended or that which would be have bred confusion or sickness in their hearts.⁷

Thus, while the transmitters and scholars of hadith have preserved and studied the words of his sayings as they have heard them and limited to their *muhdith* forms, *arbâb al-qulûb*, the “folk of the heart”, know in addition – through an unveiling, *mukâshafah*⁸ – who was addressed by each hadith, at which *martabah* (level) was the addressee, and at which *maqâm* (spiritual station) he or she is. This added knowledge of the context in which the Prophet spoke

7. *Mawqif* 280.

8. *Mawqif* 211. ‘Abd al-Qadir explains what he means by this added knowledge “‘ilm” that Allah grants His servants, the ‘*ulamâ’ bi’l-lâh*: it is the knowledge by which one is made to witness ones place and ones need for Allah with every breath and ones spiritual poverty.

prevents their experiencing any confusion or difficulties that others may experience when presented with conflicting prophetic reports and disparities in the answers of the Prophet. Knowing that his answers varied in accordance with the variances in his addressees, and granted the knowledge of their contexts, the *‘ârifûn* or *ahl-al-kashf*, the folk of unveiling, know that all of the prophetic words are open to interpretation “*kulluhu yahtamil al-ta’wîl*” and, therefore, do not confuse the incorruptible meanings with the contingent forms.⁹ Those who miss the point are those who do not know their own level and think they are addressed by all speech.¹⁰

III. Determination of Allah’s Meaning

Abd al-Qâdir repeatedly points to the grave responsibility that lies in any human endeavour to claim to know the meanings of Allah’s words or to exclude other interpretations as incorrect. The Qur’ân as the ancient words (*kalam al-qadîm*) corresponds to Allah’s knowledge (*‘ilm*), i.e. it is all-encompassing *and* contingent on what is necessary, possible, and impossible.¹¹ As such Allah’s intentions expressed in His words are possibly all that can be understood by the folk of appearance (*ahl al-zâhir*) and the folk of the hidden (*ahl al-bâtin*) as well as that which both have *not* understood... and this will be so until the hour rises.¹² This understanding is essential to ‘Abd al-Qâdir. It means that no human understanding can encompass the meanings of the sacred words or impose a limitation on their meanings and even more importantly, whatever one understands must perforce veil one from the other meanings. Thus all those who claim to understand must recognise that the interpretive act circumscribes itself with every new understanding.

9. *Mawqif* 280.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Mawqif* 1, which can be considered both a second introduction to the book and central to the text as a whole.

12. *Ibid.*

If Allah’s words can encompass all meanings and human understanding cannot exhaust the meanings of the divine words, then how would it be possible to determine the meanings for any given specific occasion? One implication is certainly that no one can claim any meaning as fixed and bound for all times and occasions. ‘Abd al-Qâdir’s answer is grounded in the realization of the enormity in making any claim to understand Allah’s intentions and the incumbent humble awareness of all the possible limitations that such a claim is subject to.

One of the most dangerous assumptions is to suppose that only ‘right’ answers are delivered through its words. For, Abd al-Qâdir explains, the very nature of the sacred text includes both possibilities of guidance (*hidâyah*) and of error (*dalâl*) “*yudill bihi kathîran wa yuhdî bihi kathîran*”. This distinction is due to the fact that the Qur’ân is most often “pursed for other than itself... primarily for its pragmatic value as a guidance to what is *halâl* and *harâm*, *ahkâm* and *hudûd*, and true accounts of the early prophets and their peoples and of the day of judgement and heaven and hell”.¹³ Precisely because it is sought to settle matters that pertain to this world – contrary to other forms of worship – those who seek the meanings of the Qur’ân to serve their ends are vulnerable to the temptations of shaytân and their interpretations are tainted by their desires. The results of this can be clearly seen in the contending “seventy-three factions of Muslims” who *all* derive their justifications for oppositional views using the same divine source. Thus, the motives of the reader interfere with the reading of the text and subtlety determine the meanings. Understandably, those who claim to settle disputes by resorting to the Qur’ân should know that their claim is already biased by their attempt to have the Qur’ân serve them instead of them serving it.

‘Abd al-Qâdir distinguishes the knowers of Allah, the *‘ârifûn*, who know Allah both in His immanence and transcendence through

13. *Mawqif* 41 referring to verse 98 from Sûrat al-Nahl which tells believers to seek refuge in Allah from shaytân when reciting/reading the Qur’ân.

his Prophet and not through their reason and who accept all of what Allah has sent through his Prophets, from the above mentioned self-serving way of reading: Only the realised Gnostic, *al-‘ârîf al-kâmil*, recites the Qur’ân in such a way that “it discloses to him the secrets, sciences, and knowledges (*ma‘ârîf*)”. For he seeks Allah’s pleasure and not his own.¹⁴

IV. Reprehensible ta’wil

‘Abd al-Qâdir goes on further in his criticism of the current trends in Qur’anic hermeneutics which have affected the scholars of the day. Unable and unwilling to accept the implications of some of the literal meanings of the sacred words or sceptic of their *zâhir* (apparent) meanings, often supposedly on “rational ground”, religious scholars prefer instead the metaphorical interpretations (*ta’awîl*). Elaborating on the traditional distinction between the two main types of verses of the Qu’ran, the clear (*muhkamât*) one and the ambiguous (*mutashâbihât*) one, ‘Abd al-Qadir turns the tables on the detractors of Sufism who say that the Sufis mainly rely on the *mutashâbihât* verses in their interpretations.

There are, according to him, four types of interpreters: those who follow what the messengers have brought forth; those who imitate them; those who follow their reason/opinion; and those who imitate them. Those who accept the meanings given by the Messengers of Allah and do not defy their authority, like the Sufis, read the Qur’ân with three lights: the “light of their penetrating faith” and the “light of their acquiescent reason” and a third light which is born from their coming together and is neither identical to nor different from each, a *barzakh* between both lights of revelation and reason.¹⁵ Allah unveils for such believers the place of all things and their proper contexts so that “what appeared to be discordant is found to be har-

14. *Mawqif* 41.

15. *Mawqif* 106.

monious” and “the whole Qur’ân becomes for them *muhkam* and a remedy (*shifâ’*) and mercy (*rahmah*)”.¹⁶ Not only do they understand the verses according to their literal meaning but also with something more, something beyond, a *fahm jadîd*. Those ‘*ârifûn bi-llâh* (knowers of Allah), who know Allah through His transcendence and His immanence as His prophets have brought forth, are not said to have committed what the Amir ‘Abd al-Qâdir calls “the reprehensible *ta’wîl*”, since they do not reject His words in any respect and aspect but hold on to what they had been given, as it was given.¹⁷

The sacred words confuse and mystify only those who rely on their “limited” reason to understand the meanings of their Lord’s speech and are sceptic of what the Qur’ân and Prophet of Allah have brought; unable to accept the authority of the Prophet, they try to “interpret” and determine the meanings according to *their* understanding so that these meanings become more palatable to their minds.¹⁸ Ironically, the more they doubt the literal meanings of the words the more the verses become impenetrable to them and more of doubt grows in their hearts. They are those for whom the Qur’ân increases their ailment and increases them in errors. For them all of the Qur’ân verses become *mutashâbihât*, confounding and perplexing.

‘Abd al-Qâdir refers here to the verses of *tashbîh* or immanence which mention Allah’s Face, Hands, Throne, His ascension and descent, and so on. It is these references to the immanence of Allah in opposition to his transcendence (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay’an*) that the rationalists/reformers of all couleurs find the hardest to accept as being literally true. Rather than hold on to the literal meanings,

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Mawqif* 200.

18. *Mawqif* 358: “the rationalists, from amongst the philosophers or theologians, are those whose beliefs limit Al-Haqq to their understanding (i.e. tailor Allah to their thoughts) and deny that He is other than what accords with their own conviction ... it is they who call each other kafir and curse each other whether they are from the different Muslim factions or from other beliefs and religions”.

they resort to a reprehensible form of *ta'wîl*, says Abd al-Qâdir, which conveniently allows them to sidestep these problematic verses and retain the semblance of rationality. He identifies four types of Qur'ân interpreters who try to mask their 'disbelief' through a false hermeneutic¹⁹:

Those who interpret are of several types: those who say that the prophets are the most knowledgeable of Allah from amongst all of humanity and thus have had to lower the level of their speech in accordance to the level of peoples' understanding and not to convey matters as they truly are. That is impossible. Those have given the lie, in a polite form, to Allah and His messengers in what He has informed about Himself. As one would say if one were polite to another whose account the former does not accept to be so; such a [polite] one would not say: you have lied, rather: Sir, you have spoken correctly, but matters are not really so. In reality he does not believe [him] and calls him a liar and an ignorant one.

Another type says that what is intended with this speech is only such and such and not what the commoners would normally understand, and this meaning can be found in the Arabic language that the Prophet spoke. Such interpreters control Allah by referencing the linguistic meanings. Those have only worshipped the god which their reason has harnessed, encompassed and restrained. Another type has claimed to believe in the phrase as it has come [to them] without their understanding what it means... this [claim] leaves them in the [legal] category of those who have not heard of it and thus they remain with what their reason has established for them as impossible to understand. Such have retorted to

19. *Mawqif* 358.

Allah with an elegant turn of phrase. Another type has claimed to believe in those words in so far as what Allah and His Prophet know. Those have [actually] said that Allah has spoken uselessly since He has spoken to them what we cannot understand. All of them [the above types of interpreters] are *Muslims* [emphasis mine]. The one who attributes the last saying to the *as-salaf as-sâlih* has lied. The righteous salaf have said: Al-Haqq has only addressed us with what we know and understand, however, since we are ignorant of His Essence we are therefore ignorant of how these matters relate to His Essence. Similarly, one cannot claim that the *tâ’ifah al-‘aliyya*, i.e. the Sufi Masters, has committed *ta’wîl* when they say concerning His words “to what I have created with My Hands” (*Sûrat Sâd*, v.75) that what is meant by the two hands are the names of Majesty and Beauty and other like-sayings, because – we are saying – the *tâ’ifah al-‘aliyya* is taught by Allah; He is their teacher as He says: “Be fearful of Allah and Allah will teach you” (*Sûrat Al-Baqarah*, v. 282), and: “We have taught him a knowledge from Us” (*Sûrat al-Kahf*, v. 66). So they have not made such statements from themselves or their own deductions; it is Allah who interprets and reveals to them His intended meaning.²⁰

Thus the danger comes for Islam from within Islam on Muslim turf: contending Muslims claiming to legitimize their interpretations and understanding of Allah’s meanings over and above everyone else. ‘Abd al-Qâdir exposes their very interpretation as testimony to their disbelief and rejection of a god that does not confirm to their ideas of what a transcendent god should be like. The neo-Salafi reform movement initiated by Muhammad ‘Abduh sought in hu-

20. All of the passages are my translations.

man reason the tool by which to draw the lines of and for Allah. No wonder then that the real enemy to the emerging neo-salafism qua reform movement was not the Western rational sciences that had won the wars against religion in the West, but rather the great Sufi Masters, *al-tâ'ifa al-'âliyyah*, who in affirming that reason was insufficient to determine god's meanings and that only the submission of human will to the guidance of the Prophets and sincere belief in their immanent and transcendent God could open their hearts to the incorruptible meanings of Allah's Speech exposed their subterfuge. But how to write for such purposes in such difficult times?

V. Erecting walls over buried treasures²¹

“These are spiritual inspirations, and divine revelations of granted knowledges (*'ulûm wahbiyya*) and hidden secrets (*asrâr ghaybiyya*) from beyond the norms of intellects (*tawr al-'uqûl*); beyond the kinds of acquired [knowledges] and deliberated thinking over a book; I have recorded them for our brothers who believe in our signs (*Sûrat al-An'âm*, v. 54; *Sûrat Al-A'râf*, v. 156),²² who, if unable to reach to pluck their fruits, leave them [hidden] in their secured places until such a time that they reach their maturity and excavate their own treasures (*Sûrat al-Kahf*, v. 82).²³ I have not written them for

21. *Mawqif* 248, sub-heading: Erecting a wall so as to extract treasures and Secrets (*Iqâmat jidâr li-ikhrâj kunûz wa asrâr*).

22. But what does such a “revealed” text on the meanings of the Qur'ân look like? The allegoric *maqâma*-like introduction to the *Kitâb al-Mawâqif* alludes to what it might look like. Already in the first passage embedded Qur'anic allusions and phrases are discernible to the careful eye. Both the words and the meanings refer to the Qur'anic passages and context by which they can be fully understood: they are the keys to interpret the interpretations of 'Abd al-Qadir's *Kitâb al-Mawâqif*.

23. This verse refers to the story of Khidr whose inspired (*laddûnî*) knowledge allows him to seemingly act against the prescriptions of the law (represented by the Prophet Moses) and repair the garden wall so that the buried treasure under

him – who would say that these are old lies and legends of the ancient ones (*Sûrat al-Ahqâf*, v.11) and imposes constraints on Allah (*Sûrat al-Furqân*, v. 22) saying [in scorn]: “Are those the ones that Allah has graced from amongst us?” (*Sûrat al-An‘âm*, v. 53) – [such are those] who belong to the scholars of the outward inscription (*rasm*) and who are satisfied to remain with merely the epithets of knowledge. Those we leave behind together with that which Allah has ordained for them (*Sûrat al-Zukhruf*, v. 32). If they were to take fault with us and show an animosity toward us (*Sûrat al-Zumûr*, v. 31; *Sûrat al-Mâ’ida* v. 54), we would recite (*Sûrat al-Ahqâf*, v. 11): “And if the ignorant ones address them, they reply: ‘*salâman*’” (*Sûrat al-Furqân*, v. 63). We turn towards them deaf ears and blind eyes and say to them: “We believe in what has been brought down to us and what has been brought down to you and our god and your god is one and the same and to Him we submit (*muslimân*)” (*Sûrat al-‘Ankabût*, v. 46); We do not argue with them, but rather have compassion for them and ask forgiveness for them and excuse them for their denial of our [special] knowledge. For we have come to them with matters that are different from what they have received from their earlier teachers and what they have heard from their forefathers (*Sûrat al-Mu’minûn*, v. 68). For the matter is grave and the situation is calamitous, and the intellect is binding and imitation is an affliction; [in such times] there is no protection except for him upon whom my Lord has mercy (*Sûrat Hûd*, v. 43).²⁴

it remains hidden till its rightful owners, the young orphans, mature enough to claim it for themselves.

24. The opening passage of the Introduction.

In such times, how will these brethren find their treasures that are hidden under the restored walls? What and who will guide them? What will uncover that which is hidden?

‘Abd al-Qâdir does not offer any fully formulated methods for uncovering these treasures that are the *fahm jadîd* of eternal speech. He gives instead hints (*ishârât*) as to what it might take to uncover something which we should not shy from calling a new hermeneutics.

It becomes also clearer why ‘Abd al-Qâdir who wrote towards the end of the nineteenth century and witnessed the gatherings of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî with their young disciples in which they sought, under the auspices of their supportive colonial powers, to form a definitive “original” Islam, went in his writings another way. The Emir followed the example of Khidr, the “Green Man”. According to his interpretation of a passage from Sûrat al-Kahf, v. 82, this figure whom Moses asked to be his teacher, saved the inheritance of small orphans by letting “the wall fall in ruins over the buried treasures *so that they may be found* by him who has exerted himself and faced his own tombstone may find it” (*da’ al-jidâr yanqadd ‘alâ al-kinz, hattâ lâ yastakhrijahu illa man at‘aba nafsah wa ‘âyana ramsah*).²⁵

The allegoric nature of the introduction to the text of *Kitâb al-Mawâqif* may just be such a ruined “wall” that covers and veils the treasures of its author so that they are passed on to other generations. The *shibh-maqâmah*, which belongs to a literary genre that straddles prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction, speaks of a spiritual gathering of the people of the night ‘*musâmarâ*’, meaning the Sufi Masters, and of their perilous quest for the beloved ‘*anqâ’ mughrib*, the veiled unveiled, existing non-existing Reality. ‘Abd al-Qâdir’s attainment of his own quest of the famed phoenix (‘*anqâ’*’) allows him to become a place for the reception of Qur’ânic verses and some of their meanings, according to the will of Allah and His beloved

25. *Mawqif* 30.

Prophet.²⁶ The introduction also determines who is the intended audience for this book on the secrets of the Qur’ân and the required *adab* (etiquette) with which they should read a text that is inspired.

VI. The key to the lock

Deeply buried in the end of his *Kitâb al-Mawâqif*, in *mawqif* 358, ‘Abd al-Qâdir finds it important to recount to his brethren the good tidings he had received in a dream which came to him when he started to interpret the difficult passages of “The Wisdom of the Heart in the Word of Shu‘ayb”, from Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s *Bezels of Wisdom*: “I saw myself standing in front of a house whose door was fastened with an iron lock which had no key. I turned the lock with a few movements (*tahrikât*) which unfastened the lock. I entered [through the door] and inside the house found the key [to the lock]. I held it in my hand and wondered at that [matter]. I interpreted the house to be the Bezel of Shu‘ayb and that it was closed indicated that none of those who had attempted to speak about had really accessed its meanings. My finding the key inside it signified that I had been given permission to enter this house which is the Bezel of Shu‘ayb [on the Wisdom of the Heart]”.²⁷

The dream is certainly important for us in our attempt to determine the principles of a hermeneutics of the sacred words of the Qur’ân. The text is closed and guarded by an iron lock, which for our purposes here would be the *muhdith* or created words that resemble our mundane human speech. However, what unlocks the lock is not of the same nature as the lock or the key: the *tahrikât* or movements do not causally correspond to the unlocking or breaking

26. Though extremely important for understanding the text and holding key clues on how to read it, this introduction has been curiously neglected by translators and scholars of *Kitâb al-Mawâqif*. One can only suppose that the allegorical and poetic nature of its text did exactly what ‘Abd al-Qadir may have intended it to do: “to erect a wall [over the treasure] ... so that only those who have reached their level of [spiritual] maturity can extract their treasures”.

27. *Mawqif* 358.

of the lock.²⁸ To put it mildly, the unlocking of the meanings of the divine words does not belong to the world of causality: there is nothing that would necessarily tie the movements of the interpreter to the unfastening of the lock. Thus the opening of the text is not up to the determination of the one who attempts it. It would seem to be rather the *realization*, the “motioning” of one’s inadequacies and limitations of the mind, that is to say, one’s spiritual poverty, which allows the lock to open for one. The function of the key that is found inside the house is not to unlock what is locked but rather to reassure one of what has been granted. The proof that ‘Abd al-Qâdir finds inside the Wisdom of the Heart serves to reassure him that he was meant to receive it and that its treasures were meant for him. He leaves them buried for us to find.

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28. *Tahrîkât* here might be an allusion to the motions of prayer.