Ibn Arabi Thoughts in the Practice of Ordinary Muslims:
From the "Ethical Interpretation" and "Practical Application" Perspective of İsmail Hakkı Bursevi

Idiris Danismaz*

Introduction

Although the Ibn Arabi School is often called "Akbariyya", a Sufi order-like name derived from Ibn Arabi's honorific Sufi master-like title "shaikh al-akbar" (the big master), the intellectual lineage of Arabi Thoughts never took the form of a classical Sufi order (Ar. ṭarīqa). Rather, the tradition survived through interpretation of Ibn Arabi's books by the followers of the Ibn Arabi School.

In most mystical traditions, the development of different sets of practices is a natural occurrence [Jones 1993: 7]. Similarly, in Ibn Arabi Thoughts, one would expect a kind of guidance for actual practice to have developed. However, as the accumulated intellectual understanding that was handed down from master to disciple was often kept secret among a very limited number of Sufis, it was cut off from ordinary spiritual practice. Therefore, the practical aspect of Ibn Arabi Thoughts remained hidden as written instructions in Ibn Arabi's original books *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom) and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations). The first comprehensive scholarly attempt to unveil that practical aspect was conducted by Chittick [1989]. In the Introduction to his voluminous work on the practical aspect of mystical thought in Ibn Arabi's masterpiece *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Chittick, after careful analysis of research conducted by pioneers of Ibn Arabi study such as Izutsu and Corbin, points out that study of the practical aspect of Ibn Arabi Thoughts is lacking [Chittick 1989: XIV–XIX].

A review of Chittick's book, however, reveals that Chittick limits the meaning of "practical" solely to the spiritual changes in a Sufi himself, and to the phenomenon of the mystical experience of a Sufi; he does not address or explore the practical advice that might be given by an enlightened Sufi to the ordinary people around him, including advice that could be applied in their religious life. Chittick uses as his source material the direct text of *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and the first commentaries on it, material that was secretly read and interpreted among a small number of Sufis. Based on this, he tries to envision the mystical journey of a Sufi that leads to "waḥdat al-wujūd" (unity of being) and the spiritual changes in a mystic's personal religious life, by focusing on the application of the mystic knowledge that is supposedly gained through such a journey to certain theological or religious matters.

　* Assistant Professor, Organization for Advanced Research and Education, Doshisha University (Kyoto, Japan)

Chittick seems to consider this application "practical".

Spiritual "states (Ar. ḥālāt)" associated with different spiritual "stations (Ar. maqāmāt)", and the manifestations of progress in a mystic's own religious life, are explained well by Chittick. In the chapter titled "Soteriology", for example, he shows how hidden reality is unveiled by examining the mystical journey of a Sufi through the world of imagination. Spiritual "states", he explains, are mystical experiences or tastes that may change from one spiritual step to another along the path of a mystic's experience, while "stations" are permanent and stable spiritual properties that remain with the mystic, based on the theory of "waḥdat al-wujūd" [Chittick 1989: 263–70].[1]

As the example above show, Chittick's understanding of the "practical" aspect of Ibn Arabi Thoughts is primarily related to how mystical experiences like "the unity of being" can be realized or practiced. This is not surprising, given the source material he focused on: Ibn Arabi's original book and interpretations done by the earliest commentators. But there is another practical aspect of Ibn Arabi Thoughts that does not come into prominence in Chittick's work: the practice of Sufi mystics sharing their experiences and beliefs with non-Sufis, in a way that allows or even encourages ordinary Muslims to apply Sufi ideas in their everyday lives.

Before stating the research question of this paper, which seeks to explore practical aspects of Ibn Arabi Thoughts that are not covered by Chittick, it is worthy to respond preemptively to possible criticism of the assertion that Chittick's perception of the practical aspect of Ibn Arabi Thoughts is insufficient to paint a full picture of the practical aspect in the Ibn Arabi School.

First, an examination of the history of the Ibn Arabi School shows that there is another aspect of practicality that Chittick has not pointed out. It is historically known that, in the later ages, Ibn Arabi Thoughts were explained in open gatherings which non-Sufis would join along with Sufis. For instance, from the 16th century to the 18th century in Anatolia, Ibn Arabi Thoughts were explained to ordinary Muslims in public sermons at mosques in the Turkish language, as well as in Arabic or Persian, the two main languages of interpretative activities inside the School.[2] Hence, it can be said that study of interpretative activities related to Ibn Arabi Thoughts on those occasions is well worth pursuing. Explaining Ibn

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1 Another aspect of Ibn Arabi's teachings that Chittick may consider to be "practical" is their application to different topics of the Islamic sciences. For instance, in the section "Seeing Things as They Are", which is defined as an ability of "the perfect man" (al-insān al-kāmil), Chittick discusses the limits of this ability by posing the question; "Can perfect man perceive God's theophany (God's self-disclosure)?" This is a controversial topic of debate among theological schools of Islam, under the name "ru'yat Allah" (seeing God). He then answers the question by quoting from Ibn Arabi, as follows:

"He (the prefect man) does not know "how" God discloses Himself, but he sees Him doing so (disclosing Himself). He understands the truth of God's similarity with all things through a God-given vision, seeing clearly that all things are neither/nor, both/and, but never either/or" [Chittick 1989: 29].

2 This was so widespread that some Sufis were exiled or even executed by the Ottoman court due to being found guilty of spreading religiously dangerous statements based on Ibn Arabi's thoughts.

Arabi Thoughts in the public sphere before ordinary Muslims who would not understand philosophical arguments must clearly have been done for a practical purpose.

Another example of practicality can be seen how the Prophet Muhammad, the ultimate model to every Muslim, non-mystic as well as mystic, explained his own mystical experience. Interestingly, Prophet Muhammad, after returning from "isrā" and "mi'rāj"—his mystical journey from Macca to Jerusalem in one night and then ascending from Jerusalem to heaven to meet with God—brought back "ṣalāt (ritual prayer practiced 5 times a day)" as a kind of practical model that is said to transform the spiritual experiences he witnessed during his journey into sets of behaviors for Muslims to practice. Apart from the nature of "ṣalāt" as a compulsory deed, sharing with others the practical aspect of one's own mystical experience can be considered a Prophetic approach that every Muslim mystic should follow. Therefore, it can be said that, in parallel with the philosophical tradition treasured among the elite followers of Ibn Arabi School, there must also be another approach that aims to explain Ibn Arabi Thoughts to ordinary Muslims.

This paper explores the putative practical aspect of Sufism which is not addressed by Chittick, and seeks to answer the questions: "Is there any practical explanation of Sufi mystical experience that was developed for non-Sufis in the Ibn Arabi School?" and "How is this practical aspect applied in the religious realm?"

As a leading figure of the Ibn Arabi School, İsmail Hakkı Bursevi (d. 1725) was chosen for this study. Among his books, which are more than 100 in number, two major works were chosen as research material: *The Treatise of Five Divine Presences of God* (in Turkish: *Risale-i Hazarat-i Hamse-i Ilahiyye*),[3] a handwritten manuscript, and *Rūḥ al-Bayān* (The Soul of the Qur'ān),[4] a well-known Qur'ānic exegesis in the tradition of Islamic sciences.

As this study deals with handwritten manuscripts from the 18th century, it can be said to combine methodologies of history and literature. Special effort is made, however, to focus on and understand the text, rather than the context. More precisely, while the practical explanation of Ibn Arabi Thoughts formed by Bursevi is decoded from the perspective of Islamic thought, in several places help is also taken from mysticism in general, by utilizing

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3 This book itself is a commentary on definitions concerning the theory of "five divine presences of God" and the theory of "the perfect man" (al-insān al-kāmil), taken from another book titled *Kitāb al-Ta'rīfāt* (The Book of Definitions) by 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 1413). The treatise is considered to be Bursevi's most comprehensive work on Sufism in general and Ibn Arabi Thought in particular as it was his last book, written in 1725, the year he died. The treatise is yet to be published. There are two versions of it in Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi in Istanbul. For this paper, the version with the recording number of "Mihrişah Sultan 189" is used.

4 This is Bursevi's most voluminous book, around 5,000 pages long. The content, which is based on Bursevi's sermons and preaching over a 20-year period in Ulu Camii (the biggest mosque in Bursa at the time), is written in Arabic along with a partial Persian translation by the author. It is considered one of the most widely read Qur'ānic exegeses in the Muslim world. Because it is an interpretation of the Qur'ān, the book can be a useful tool for understanding the author as both theoretician and practitioner.

some established arguments and concepts in mysticism in order to more deeply understand the content of Ibn Arabi Thoughts.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the paper is divided into three sections: The Theory of "Five Divine Presences of God", "Ethical Interpretation", and "Practical Application".

The first section presents a general definition of FDPG (five divine presences of God) and Bursevi's own understanding of FDPG as preparation for the second section, which is about the "ethical" interpretations of Ibn Arabi Thought in general and of FDPG in particular. The third section shows how these ethical interpretations are transformed into practice by matching their virtues with acceptable acts or deeds in mainstream Islamic thought.

I. The Theory of "Five Divine Presences of God"

The name of the theory "five divine presences of God" consists of two words, each of which has dual Arabic and Turkish variations with slight pronunciation differences: ḥaḍarāt (Tr. hazarât), and al-khams (Tr. Hamse). The common meaning of the first word in both languages is "to arrive" and "to be near something". In Turkish, the root of the word, "Huzur", has the additional meaning of "happiness", "peace", and "tranquility".[5] The second word, al-khams, simply means "five" in both Turkish and Ottoman Turkish.

Based on the above lexical meanings, the concept suggests that there are five presences of God, and for a being to come into existence, all five, starting from God, the first reality, should be present.

Bursevi, through translating Jurjānī's Arabic definition of FDPG into Turkish and expounding the content philologically and literally in order to make the text understood, presents his own understanding of FDPG as well as explaining alternative concepts and names for each term. Generally, he writes in an easy and understandable style, in accordance with his explicitly stated aim that the book be for ordinary people living in the western part of Anatolia ("Rumeli" in Turkish) who cannot read Arabic [Bursevi n.d. (c): 3b]. For example, he frequently uses metaphors instead of making philosophical arguments. In his explanation of the word "presence", for instance, Bursevi presents "the metaphor of king", as follows:

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5 How a word whose original meaning was "to be present" or "to arrive" came to mean "happiness" or "peace" is a subject for philologists to research. But considering the popularity of Sufism in Turkish society, the answer may lie in the influence of FDPG. The ultimate goal of FDPG is to meet with God, whom one should love more than anyone else, including oneself. The mystic philosophical meaning of "huzûr" is to be before God, but emotionally, as this means meeting with the most beloved being in existence, it is a sense of happiness or peace. Thus, "huzûr", in theory, means to be with God, but in practice it feels like joy and pleasure. Another common usage of the concept among Turkish people is to add "hazret" to God's name "Allah", as in "Hazret-i Allah", in order to imply the meaning "Allah is with us" or "We are always before Allah". Given the evolution of the meaning of this word, and the reality of its being widely used among ordinary Muslims, one can easily comprehend how successful Sufis have been in explaining Ibn Arabi Thoughts to ordinary people.

The king is a single person in the external world. However, the position of grand vizier, who is the general representative of the king, and other official royal positions under the governance of the grand vizier, are different manifestations of the kingship, which is the ultimate power in the kingdom. In the same way, the reason that different presences of God's existence are described through the concept of "hazret" (presence) is that everything in the universe appears in accordance to the relationships between them and God [Bursevi n.d. (b): 136b–137a].

In this manner, Bursevi explains the relationship between God and other beings by likening it to the relationship between king and grand vizier. More precisely, "kingship" is here used to mean that "the kingdom can exist because of kingship". In other words, the kingdom and the people are inevitable consequences of the essentiality of the king. The grand viziership, for instance, is the top governmental position that derives from the relationship between the attribute of kingship and a person in a kingdom. Similarly, each governmental rank in the kingdom can be said to be a "manifestation" of a role attributed to the king, and every position is ranked hierarchically based on respective relationships with the king.

In other words, according to Bursevi, the grand viziership is a relative title that derives from a professional relationship with the kingship of a king. He explains that if the king did not exist, the position of grand viziership would not exist. Hence, the grand vizier, viziers, and all other lower governmental officials, are each different manifestations of the kingship. All these positions can be called "presences". If seen from the perspective of the king, these presences serve the king; if seen from perspective of liegemen, they serve the grand vizier.

Targeting ordinary Muslims as readers, Bursevi gives utmost care and attention in his writings to the concept of the unity of God, who is believed to be the one, ultimate, transcendental reality, which has no equal. For example, he raises the question, "How can many different things come out of a single reality, which is God?" and answers that "all things other than Allah" (Ar. mā-siwā') are multifarious manifestations of God's attributes, not his essence (Ar. dhāt). This is based on a premise of Ibn Arabi Thoughts that states "God is one in his essence; but he has countless names (Ar. asmā') and attributes (Ar. ṣifāt)" [Bursevi n.d. (b): 137a].

From his approach of explaining the relationship between Allah and "all things other than Allah" as different presences in FDPG, it can be said that Bursevi wants ordinary people to understand this theory as an ethic or moral attitude towards the reality of God, rather than comprehending it as an ontological or epistemological reality. Bursevi does not clearly state in this treatise whether he personally believes FDPG to be an ontological or epistemological realty; instead, he seems to put more importance on how ordinary people can benefit from

FDPG practically in their religious and spiritual lives. How the theory can be explained is dealt with in the following two subsections.

II. "Ethical Interpretation"

To begin with, when a body of mystical thought is intended to be practiced by others, there are certain requirements: it must be understandable from a common perspective, extendible to ordinary people's lives, and justifiable in terms of common moral values [Jones 1993: 187 –189]. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges for a mystic when explaining his mystical experience is how to match lofty mystical thoughts with ordinary people's daily lives. Let us examine how Bursevi's way of explaining his mystic thoughts satisfies these requirements.

In order to realize general understandability, Bursevi uses metaphors made up from things or practices that ordinary Muslims would come across in their everyday life. By doing this, he not only makes sophisticated thoughts like FDPG easy to understand, he also presents a kind of moral justification and creates a practical linkage between theory and daily life. The following is an example of that approach.

> Writing "Greetings are sent to your presence" (in Turkish, "huzurlarına selâm olunur") in the salutation of a letter is good etiquette. "Presence", here, refers to the person who is present [Bursevi n.d. (b): 136a].

In this example, Bursevi uses a custom of the Turkish people when they exchange letters to explain Sufi thought. In letter exchanging at that time, "huzûr", which is the Turkish pronunciation of the Arabic word "ḥuḍūr" (the root of "ḥaḍra"), meaning "presence", was written instead of the receiver's name. In order to give this word that meaning, the sender omitted his own presence by using the passive form, writing "greetings are sent" rather than "I send my greetings". Thus it appears that greetings are sent to the imaginary setting that is "huzûr" (presence), instead of to the receiver directly. Here, the space where sender and receiver are supposed to be together is mentioned, but the person to whom the space is attributed is indicated indirectly. This was considered to be proper letter-writing etiquette, in order to show one's respect to another person whose position was higher than one's own.

Bursevi's basic approach is to interpret mystic thoughts in terms of ordinary people's daily habits. In doing this he implies that the relationship between God and his servants should be like the ethical relationship between people exchanging letters. Similarly, God's servants should bear in mind that they are always before God and show respect to Him, even though they cannot witness God with their eyes.

A similar tendency can be seen in Bursevi's Qur'ānic exegesis. Bursevi, in his comments

regarding the dog of "Companions of the cave"[6] (a.k.a. "The story of seven sleepers"), attempts to interpret the descriptions pertaining to the dog from an ethical viewpoint. This type of interpretation is different from those commentators of the Qur'ān such as Ismāʿīl ibn Kathīr (d. 1301) and al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 1209), who emphasize the canonical aspects of the dog. Ibn Kathīr, for example, interprets the part depicting the dog sitting outside the cave while the companions are sleeping inside as an appropriate situation for the dog, as dogs are not clean.[7] Similarly, al-Fakhr al-Rāzī uses this scene as an opportunity to make the point that one should not sit like dog while praying, because it is not a good style of sitting.[8]

By contrast, Bursevi, emphasizes the pure existence of the dog, based on the idea in Ibn Arabi Thought that "everything is a manifestation (Ar. "Tajallī", or "taẓāhur") of God's attributes (Ar. ṣifāt), and since God has no bad attributes, nothing in existence is essentially bad". Accordingly, Bursevi offers positive comments about the dog, writing, for example, that this dog is one of those animals that will enter paradise as it continued to protect the cave until it died. He praises dogs so much that he even claims that "a good dog in your house is better than an untrustworthy neighbor" [Bursevi n.d. (a) Vol.5: 226–27].

III. "Practical Application"

Bursevi's way of dealing with Sufi thought can be described as "practical" as well. This is seen in two ways.

The first way has to do with Bursevi's style of argument. Instead of using philosophical arguments, he likes to utilize aspects of or practices from the everyday life of the people as metaphors (for example the king and grand vizier, or letter etiquette) in order to explain very refined and advanced Sufi thought. The second way is by showing how to apply Sufi thought in normal daily life, or in other words, showing how it can be related to practical aspects of a religious life.

For example, Bursevi takes the question, "If God is the ultimate creator, can God create another god like himself?" and replies to it using a premise from FDPG: "Everything comes into existence in compliance with its model, which is found in a higher presence. As God is the highest presence, He does not create any other god. Otherwise, it would violate his existence, as essentially one" [Bursevi n.d. (b): 141a].

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6 This is a chapter in the Qur'ān which tells the story of a group of youths who flee their hometown because of their faith and take shelter in a cave along with their dog, where they fall asleep for some 300 years. The story provides interesting details about what they do after waking up from their long sleep until they sleep again, this time forever.

7 "The dog laid its paws in front of the cave. Because angels don't enter into a place where a dog exists. The reason why a dog is mentioned in this verse is because of its baraka and companionship with the youth" [Ibn Kathīr 2000 Vol. IX: 115].

8 "You might not want to sit like that dog during prayer. It is that sitting style which is described in this verse" [Rāzī 1981 Vol. XI: 102].

Another example of practical application, in contrast to the dismissive judgment of other Qur'ān commentators about the dog being dirty, etc., is Bursevi's practical advice derived from the essentiality of dogs and based on his ethical interpretation of the dog as one of the companions of the cave. Bursevi writes:

> The dog has ten characteristics that a Muslim should have as well. A dog is always hungry. Hunger is necessary for everybody. Fullness of stomach is not good in the religious life ... A dog doesn't have a place where it settles down. Being homeless is one of the characteristics of those people who leave everything to Allah (Ar. mutawakkil) (…) [Bursevi n.d. (a): 226–27].

As can be seen in the above quotation, and in other places in his books,[9] Bursevi, after matching his mystic thoughts with commonly accepted virtues or manners, based on premises in Ibn Arabi Thoughts in general and FDPG in particular, shares some practical advice that can be applied in religious life.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show how Ibn Arabi Thoughts have been explained practically in the Ibn Arabi School, with special reference to interpretations found in İsmail Hakkı Bursevi's *The Treatise of Five Divine Presences of God* and *Rūḥ al-Bayān*. From the results of this study, the following points can be made as a conclusion.

The first has to do with the way Bursevi deals with controversial aspects of Ibn Arabi Thoughts. Bursevi claims that the universe and all existence are different manifestations of God's names and attributes. But as his audience is ordinary Muslims, not elites, he tries to avoid some pitfalls that might lead to misunderstanding, such as the question of whether unity of God is ontological or not. He does this by making a clear distinction between God, the creator, and his creatures. Instead of stepping into philosophical arguments that would confuse or be of little interest to ordinary Muslims, he proposes an alternative understanding about the oneness of God and others, which can be called "ethical interpretation".

The second point is about this ethical interpretation. In his approach, Bursevi tends to use various metaphors like "the metaphor of the king" and "greeting etiquette in letters", which are based on customs from the everyday life of ordinary Muslims at that time, in order to make it easy for non-Sufi Muslims to understand Sufi beliefs. This kind of explanation typically includes some ethical judgment or advice, such as praising the habit of greeting in letters as good manners. Another reason why we prefer to call this style of interpretation

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9 Similar ways of interpretation can be seen in many places of both books. Some examples are: Bursevi n.d. (b): 140a; Bursevi n.d. (a): V.5: 230, 232, 266-67, 273, 275, 283, 285-86, 292, 296.

"ethical" is that the judgment or advice is often related to types of behaviors or attitudes that are different from the religious matters that Islamic theology or jurisprudence deal with. Normally, in the Islamic sciences, religious acts are classified into different groups, such as obligations, prohibitions, encouraged deeds, permissible acts, prohibitions, and disliked deeds. Any deeds or acts that are not included in those categories become optional. Bursevi chooses metaphors or examples from the so-called optional category of deeds to explain his mystic thoughts. This allows him to extract inferences from his interpretation, or positive examples per se, that are consistent with the common sense of ordinary Muslims, without violating any established religious commandments. Thus, this whole process can suitably be called "ethical" in the sense of admiration and affirmation.

The final point is related to where these ethical inferences are put into practice. After matching his mystical thoughts with common understanding about ethically accepted values, Bursevi provides some practical instructions about how non-Sufi Muslims can apply the ethical ideas and advice in their ordinary religious life. This approach is different from that of Chittick, whose focus is on how Sufi theory can be used to achieve the same mystical experience that was achieved by the original Sufis who formed the theory.

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