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Sufi Qurʾān Commentaries, Genealogy and Originality

Universal Mercy as a Case Study

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Abstract

This article reflects on some methodological issues in the study of tafsīr, taking the dissemination of the ideas of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) on the non-perpetuity of the chastisement of Hell in Sufi tafsīr as a case study. I show that Ibn ʿArabī's ideas on the issue were hardly adopted by later Sufi commentators on the Qurʾān. I investigate whether just as its exoteric counterpart, and despite the claim of Sufi tafsīr being rooted in 'experience' and thus being more 'original', Sufi tafsīr is 'genealogical' and is thus more conservative in its content. Although the Sufi genre of tafsīr generally seems more willing to include Sufi sayings and ideas from outside the boundaries of the genre, this does not make it adaptive of the non-mainstream ideas of Ibn ʿArabī on Hell proposed outside the genre. This brings up some considerations on the use and usability of tafsīr as a source of intellectual history.

Keywords

Hell – Ibn ʿArabī – *ishārī tafsīr* – mercy – Qurʾān commentaries – salvation – Sufism

1 *Tafsīr* as a Source for Intellectual History?

As pointed out by Görke and Pink, the study of *tafsīr* has seen a remarkable bloom in recent years, to the extent that one can now legitimately speak of a discipline of *tafsīr* studies within Islamic Studies.¹ Works of *tafsīr* are not

1 "Today, a field of *tafsīr* studies in the proper sense has emerged, as an area of research separate from Qurʾānic studies; moreover, this field has significantly expanded the focus of scholarly interest in Muslim exegetical activities." Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, eds.,

only studied as a literary genre in itself, they are also increasingly used as a source for intellectual history, recognizing their potential for reconstructing the *Weltanschauung* of the author through them. McAuliffe has, rather ambitiously, claimed that it “may validly be treated as a window looking into the Islamic *Weltanschauung* of any given generation,”² thus seeming to suggest that through works of *tafsîr* one can learn a lot more than only the particular views of one specific author. More modest and feasible claims are made by Bauer that “at its essence, *tafsîr* is each scholar’s attempt to relate his world to the world of the Qur’ân; it is his attempt to relate his intellectual, political and social contexts to the Qur’ân’s text,”³ and by Rippin that by taking the specific historical and intellectual circumstances in consideration, a history of ‘reader reaction’ to the Qur’ân can be reconstructed.⁴ They thus focus more on the individual author and his hermeneutical frame.

So generally, there is a sense of optimism on *tafsîr* as a source for intellectual history. However, questions can be raised on how representative a work of *tafsîr* is for the full scope of ideas in a specific era. In recent scholarship attention has been drawn to the ‘genealogical’ character of the genre of *tafsîr*. If a commentator wants to bring in something of his own, a new idea or thought, it “may only be validly expressed against the backdrop of the consensually accepted tradition, the manner in which it legitimately connects with that tradition and grows from it being clearly displayed.”⁵ This genealogical character makes, so is claimed, the *tafsîr* tradition conservative in nature, and not too eager to adopt new ideas.⁶ In effect this means that an exegete will mostly cite from other works of *tafsîr* to make his point, and will hardly ever include relevant discussions taking place outside the scope of the genre, for example in treatises on *fiqh*, *kalâm*, or Sufi handbooks. *Tafsîr* is, so is stated, “an independent genre with an independent history of common links, common scholarly

Tafsîr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2. Besides this recently edited volume another recent volume testifies of this interest in the study of *tafsîr* as a genre, and as a source for intellectual history. Karen Bauer, ed., *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qur’anic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Both works contain useful introductions that give a good overview of the state of the art in the field.

2 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27.

3 Bauer, *Aims, Methods and Contexts*, 8.

4 Andrew Rippin, *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’ân* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 3–4.

5 McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians*, 291.

6 Saleh, *Formation*, 9.

ancestors, and so forth.”⁷ This raises the question whether a work of *tafsīr* gives an accurate and complete image of the *Geist* of a certain period, and whether it suffices as a source for intellectual history.

In the case of Sufi commentaries on the Qur’ān a side note should be made to this notion of *tafsīr* as genealogical. Whether Sufi Qur’ān commentaries are genealogical like their conventional counterparts still has to be investigated. Sufi *tafsīr* is often associated with the notion of experience, which leads to more subjective understandings of the Qur’ān, dependent on the spiritual state of the commentator.⁸ In the case of Sufi hermeneutics of the Qur’ān this ‘experiential’ reading of the Qur’ān is mainly expressed by the term *ishāra* (allusion) to denote its hermeneutical method. This term suggests a more subjective understanding of the Qur’ān, an interpretation of the meaning by associating key words from the Qur’ānic text with ideas and concepts from Sufism that the text of the Qur’ān supposedly alludes to. The question is to which extent the genre of Sufi *tafsīr* carries the same genealogical characteristics as other more conventional genres of *tafsīr*, or whether Sufi readings of the Qur’ān indeed result in more subjective and ‘original’ commentaries on the Qur’ānic text. The question should also be raised whether Sufi Qur’ān commentators mostly relied on earlier *tafsīr* sources, or whether they were more inclined to include references to texts from outside the formal boundaries of the genre than normally is the case in the genre of *tafsīr*.

By taking the dissemination of the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) on the non-perpetuity of the chastisement of Hell in Sufi commentaries as a case study, the following questions will be addressed in this article. How do ideas formulated outside the boundaries of the genre of *tafsīr* affect the genre?⁹ Do

7 Rebecca Sauer, “Tafsīr between Law and Exegesis: The Case of Q. 49:9,” in *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, eds. Görke and Pink, 225.

8 For example, Annabel Keeler strongly emphasizes the experiential component of Sufi readings of the Qur’ān, which according to her “results in a diversity that mirrors the degree and variety of mystical experience of each and every commentator.” Annabel Keeler, “Sūfi *tafsīr* as a Mirror: al-Qushayrī the *Murshid* in his *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006): 2.

9 The definition and boundaries of *tafsīr* are subject of an ongoing discussion. For an overview of these discussions see Görke and Pink, *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, 3–7. In this article, the definition of Norman Calder is the point of departure, with his first and third characteristic as the point of gravity. The definition formulated by Calder is not uncontested, but has become a shared point of reference for scholars of *tafsīr*, and it has become a sort of ‘tradition’ to at least mention it. According to Calder, a work of *tafsīr* has three formal characteristics. The most fundamental he considers the presence of the complete canonical text of the Qur’ān, segmented for purposes of comment and dealt with in canonical order. The second is that it names authorities and offers polyvalent readings. The third is that it can be described as a measuring of the Qur’ānic text against instrumental (i.e. orthography, lexis, syntax,

new ideas formulated outside the formal boundaries of the genre disseminate in *tafsîr* works as well and do they become part of the tradition? If not, is *tafsîr* then still suitable as a source for intellectual history? Can the claim be upheld that *tafsîr* functions as a 'window' to the intellectual tradition, culture and mentality of a certain period and region? Is it workable for a researcher of Islamic intellectual history to only focus on *tafsîr*? And does the methodology of focusing on a comparative reading of commentaries on one particular Qur'anic verse or passage, or a specific set of them—a methodology often followed in *tafsîr* studies¹⁰—give a fair assessment of the ideas of a specific author on an issue? Is it enough to focus on only one verse or passage in one's comparative analysis of the stance of several authors, or is one then missing out on too many other crucial passages to come to a proper appreciation of the view of a specific author? Following a popular, but contested classification of five periods in the history of Sufi *tafsîr*, these questions will be answered by taking one *tafsîr* as a sample for each period and thus taking a bird's eye view of

rhetoric, symbol/allegory) and ideological structures (i.e. prophetic history, theology, eschatology, law, *taṣawwuf*). A work that does not have these three characteristics he considers to be outside the scope of the genre. With regards to the works discussed in this article only the second characteristic is not always equally present. See Norman Calder, "Tafsîr from Ṭabarî to Ibn Kathîr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ân*, eds. Gerald R. Hawting & Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 101–40.

- 10 This method can be found as early as 1975 in Jane Smith's study of the explanation of the term *islâm* in a sequence of *Qur'ân commentaries*, but particularly seems to have become common practice after the appearance of McAuliffe's *Qur'anic Christians* in 1993. Jane I. Smith, *An historical and semantic study of the term "islâm" as seen in a sequence of Qur'ân commentaries* (Missoula: Harvard Theological Review, 1975); McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*. Cf. Johanna Pink, "Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qur'anic Exegesis: Qur'anic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and their Interpretation of Q5:51," *Die Welt des Islams* 50 (2010): 3–59; Johanna Pink, "The Fig, the Olive and the Cycles of Prophethood: Q95:1–3 and the Image of History in Early 20th-Century Qur'anic Exegesis," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, eds. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 317–38; Karen Bauer, "'Traditional' Exegeses of Q4:34," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): 129–42; Karen Bauer, "The Male is Not Like the Female (Q3:36): The Question of Gender Egalitarianism in the Qur'ân," *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (2009): 637–54; Rebecca Sauer, "Tafsîr between Law and Exegesis: The Case of Q49:9 (the Rebellion Verse/*âyat al-baghy*)," in *Tafsîr and Islamic Intellectual History*, eds. Görke and Pink, 223–50; Kathrin Klausing, "Two Twentieth-century Exegetes between Traditional Scholarship and Modern Thought: Gender Concepts in the *Tafsîrs* of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'î and al-Ṭāhir Ibn 'Āshūr," in *Tafsîr and Islamic Intellectual History*, eds. Görke and Pink, 419–40; Annabel Keeler, "Towards a Prophetology of Love: The Figure of Jacob in Sufi Commentaries on *Sūrat Yūsuf*," in *The Spirit and the Letter: Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur'ân*, eds. Annabel Keeler and Sajjad Rizvi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

the development of the commentary on the particular verse through the centuries. For the pre-Ibn 'Arabī periods, these are al-Sulamī (i: formative period) and al-Qushayrī (ii: classical period), for the post-Ibn 'Arabī periods al-Qāshānī (iii: rise of the *Sufi* schools), al-Burṣawī (iv: vernacularization) and Ibn 'Ajība (v: 'decline').¹¹ Also the commentary of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, a contemporary of Ibn 'Arabī, will be analyzed.

2 Ibn 'Arabī's Hermeneutics of Mercy and Q7:156

In the report on his fieldwork in Mecca, the Dutch Islamicist Snouck Hurgronje describes a lecture of a local professor on the Muslim hereafter that he attended. In the lecture, the professor mocked the vision of what Snouck Hurgronje calls "some tolerant mystics of older times," who made the claim that Hell would eventually change into a pleasant place due to the mercy of God. The professor ended his exercise with the remark that "we will no longer waste our time by listening to the defenders of unbelief."¹² These are most probably allusions to Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and the adherents of his school, often considered unbelievers especially because of the much debated doctrine of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*).¹³ Ibn 'Arabī did indeed defend the idea that punishment in Hell was not eternal, based on a radical (in its literal sense, from the Latin *radix*, root) understanding of the mercy of God. He considers this mercy to be an ontological mercy: all existence is an emanation and expression of God's merciful essence. Since the Qur'ān states that the mercy of God encompasses all things (Q7:156) and God has prescribed Mercy for

11 Alan Godlas, "Šūfism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 351–60; Gerhard Böwering, "The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles Adams*, eds. Wael Hallaq & Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 42–3. Jamal Elias is very critical of this periodization, arguing that "it follows one of the more common and less imaginative systems of dividing Islamic history," and that "such periodisations do not derive from developments within Šūfi *tafsīr* works or from the writing of *tafsīr* themselves, nor on visible systematic changes in the way in which Šūfi thinkers and writers commented on the Qur'an." One of the things he takes issue with is the term 'decline', which is an outdated idea of late premodern Islamic intellectual history. Jamal Elias, "Šūfi *tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12 (2010): 43–5.

12 Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the 19th Century: Daily Life, Customs and Learning. The Moslems of the East-Indian Archipelago*, trans. J.H. Monahan (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 212–13.

13 For an overview of the polemics on Ibn 'Arabī see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: the Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

Himself (Q6:12), even the inhabitants of Hell will eventually experience some form of pleasure and mercy from God:

How could there be everlasting wretchedness? Far be it from God that His wrath should take precedence over His mercy ... or that he should make the embrace of His mercy specific after He had called it general!¹⁴

The basis of Ibn 'Arabî's argument lies in Q7:156:

"And ordain good things for us in this world and in the world to come. We turn to you." He said, "I bring My punishment on whomever I will. And My mercy encompasses all things. So I shall ordain it for those who guard themselves and give the zakât, and those who believe in Our signs."

This verse is part of a larger narrative on Moses and the people of Israel in the chapter *al-A'raf* (The Heights). After Moses has recovered from his anger over the worship of a calf as a false god and has picked up the tablets that he threw down in anger, he chooses seventy men who did not worship the calf from his people for an appointment with God, in which they can apologize for the grave mistake of their people. However, God hits them with a trembling, upon which Moses supplicates to his Lord, asking for forgiveness and asking why they are punished for the deeds of the foolish among their people. The beginning of Q7:156 is the end of Moses' supplication. The remaining part of the verse and the verse after it are an answer from God to this supplication.¹⁵

14 Ibn 'Arabî, *al-Futûḥât al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dâr Şâdir, 1969), III, 466. Translation from Muhammad H. Khalil, "Muslim Scholarly Discussions on Salvation and the Fate of 'Others'" (University of Michigan PhD dissertation, 2007), 88. For a more detailed description of the ideas of Ibn 'Arabî on this particular matter see William C. Chittick, "Ibn al-'Arabî's Hermeneutics of Mercy," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Stephen T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153–68; Samuela Pagani, "Ibn 'Arabî, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and the Political Functions of Punishment in the Islamic Hell," in *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions*, ed. Christian Lange (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 175–207; Muhammad H. Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a broader assessment of questions of salvation in Islamic thought see Muhammad H. Khalil, ed., *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation and the Fate of Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jon Hoover, "Withholding Judgment on Islamic Universalism: Ibn al-Wazîr (d. 840/1436) on the Duration and Purose of Hell-Fire," in *Locating Hell*, ed. Lange, 208–37.

15 Q7:148–57; Jalâl al-Dîn al-Maḥallî and Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî, *Tafsîr al-imâmayn al-Jalâlayn* (Damascus: Maṭba'a al-Shurbajî, 2003), 169–70.

Conventional exegetes of the Qurʾān have deliberated on the seemingly all-encompassing nature of God's mercy mentioned in this verse, and have generally tended to read the part *So I shall ordain it* as a curtailment of God's mercy, binding it to specific conditions. Already Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), one of the oldest sources of early *tafsīr* literature available, mentions an unattributed story of Iblīs claiming that he is part of *all things* as well, and thus eligible for God's mercy. Muqātil states that the following part of the verse, *I shall ordain it for those who guard themselves*, refutes the claim of Iblīs and excludes him from this mercy. He mentions the Jews making a similar claim to God's mercy, stating that they in fact *guard themselves and give the zakāt* as well. According to him the rest of the verse, *and those who believe in Our verses*, makes it clear that the Jews are excluded from this mercy alongside Iblīs, and that only the community of Muhammad, who believe the revelation to be true, is alluded to.¹⁶

In his encyclopedic *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl ay al-qurʾān*, which has been paradigmatic for most of the Sunni *tafsīr* tradition following it, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) mentions that three opinions can be found among Qurʾān commentators. The first opinion is that although it is stated in a general sense, its meaning is specific: only the believers of the community of Muhammad are entitled to receive God's mercy. In this context, he mentions the same story as Muqātil on Iblīs and the Jews in several reports, attributing it through chains of narration to, among others, Ibn ʿAbbās and al-Qatāda:

When this verse was descended, Iblīs was insolent towards it and said: "I am a thing" (*anā shayʾ*). So God the Exalted dismissed him from that by His saying *I shall ordain it* etc.¹⁷

This story keeps appearing in subsequent commentaries. It plays a role in Sufi commentaries as well, be it in another form, as we will see later on. The second opinion mentioned by al-Ṭabarī is that God's mercy is general in this world, and specific in the next world. In this world, it is both for the pious and the insolent, on the Day of Resurrection it is only for those wary of God. A third opinion states that God's mercy is general, and that [the possibility of] repentance (*tawba*) is implied by it. The mercy of God is that He granted the people of Moses repentance.¹⁸ These three opinions dominate most of the traditional

16 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿamma li'l-kitāb, 1983), II, 96–7.

17 Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl ay al-qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2008), XIII, 157.

18 Ibid., XIII, 156–60.

tafsîr-literature coming after al-Ṭabarî, and none of the later well-known commentators even seems to play with the idea that non-Muslims could be entitled to God's mercy in the eschatological sense.

Commenting on Q7:156, Ibn 'Arabî distinguishes two forms of mercy: a necessary mercy (*rahma wājiba*) and a gratuitous mercy (*rahma imtināniyya*). The gratuitous mercy is a grace for all that exists, a general mercy through which everything that exists lives and gets its sustenance. It is a mercy that, because of its all-encompassing nature, manifests itself in every place, in accordance with the specificities of that place. It thus also manifests in the Fire, be it in another way than in the Garden. The angels of punishment, who also are a part of *all things*, and thus encompassed by God's mercy as everything else, are not able to resist this mercy. They feel compassion for the people of the Fire and will intercede with God for those who have to remain in the Fire for eternity.¹⁹ God will accept this mediation, and they will receive His mercy while remaining in Hell:

The decree upon them becomes the mercy that encompasses all things, and in Hell the grace of the one with a cold constitution and the one with a hot constitution is given to them. Because the grace of the one with a cold constitution is through the presence of the fire, and the grace of the one with a hot constitution is through the presence of the bitter cold (*al-zamharîr*). Hell remains in its extremely hot and bitter cold form, and its people remain in it in a state of grace by its extreme heat and cold.²⁰

The other form, the necessary mercy, is a specific kind of mercy which God has obliged Himself to grant to the people who possess the characteristics specified in the rest of the verse: those who give the *zakāt*, are wary of God and believe in the signs of their Lord. This way Ibn 'Arabî does away with the apparent ambiguity in the verse: the all-encompassing mercy of God is not curtailed

19 Muḥammad Ghurāb, *Al-Rahma min al-rahmān fī tafsîr wa-ishārāt al-qur'ān* (Damascus: Maṭba'a Zayd ibn Thābit, 1989), II, 178–81; Chittick, "Hermeneutics of Mercy," 157–9. To retrieve the sayings of Ibn 'Arabî on Q7:156, I have used the work of Muḥammad Ghurāb, which has ordered sayings of Ibn 'Arabî on Qur'anic verses from his entire oeuvre in the form of a work of *tafsîr*. This work thus was very beneficial to locate all relevant sayings of Ibn 'Arabî on Q7:156. It should be emphasized however, that this work is not an original work of *tafsîr* by Ibn 'Arabî, and that it should as such be considered a secondary source based on several non-*tafsîr* works of Ibn 'Arabî. The work of Ghurāb unfortunately lacks a proper critical apparatus: he does not mention from which works he retrieved the specific passages. This has made it difficult to trace these sayings back to their original places in his oeuvre.

20 Ibid., II, 178.

by the specification mentioned in the verse, but this specification is an extra kind of mercy co-existing with the all-encompassing mercy mentioned.²¹ Both kinds of mercy are related with the two names of God mentioned twice in the opening chapter of the Qurʾān, Surah *al-Fātiha*: *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*. In conventional exegesis, the general trend is to consider both names an expression of a different form of mercy: the first is an absolute mercy for all creation, pertaining to this world, while the second is volitional, only reserved for the believers in the hereafter.²² Ibn ʿArabī differs with other commentators in that for him the gratuitous mercy is not only reserved for this-worldly existence: it pertains to the hereafter as well.

3 Pre-Ibn ʿArabī Sufi *tafsīr* and the Hermeneutics of Mercy

From existing studies, it does not become clear whether Ibn ʿArabī's ideas on the hereafter are entirely original, or whether he builds them on ideas already existing before his time. An analysis of the commentary on the verses he uses in his argument in pre-Ibn ʿArabī Sufi *tafsīr* may elucidate this.

The oldest surviving collection of Sufi sayings on Qurʾānic verses, compiled in the form of a *tafsīr*, is *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr* by Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī al-Nisabūrī (d. 412/1021), an avid student of *ḥadīth* who spent most of his life in Nishapur, the intellectual centre of that time, and famous for its tradition of *tafsīr*.²³ This work is considered a landmark in the development of the genre of Sufi *tafsīr*, comparable to al-Ṭabarī in its impact on later *tafsīr* literature.²⁴ Through al-Sulamī's work, we have knowledge of the (alleged) sayings on Qurʾānic verses from the first centuries of Sufism, uniting different trends existing up till then. Al-Sulamī mostly cites sayings of Sufi

21 Ibid., II, 178–9.

22 Sajjad Rizvi, "The Existential Breath of *al-raḥmān* and the Munificent Grace of *al-raḥīm*: The *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiha* of Jāmī and the School of Ibn ʿArabī," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 8 no.1 (2005): 68.

23 Walid Saleh therefore even speaks of "the Nishapuri school of *tafsīr*." Walid Saleh, "The Last of the Nishapuri School of Tafsīr: al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) and his Significance in the History of Qurʾānic Exegesis," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126, no. 2 (2006): 225–6. For a list of Qurʾān commentaries composed in Nishapur and the region of Khurāsān see Claude Gilliot, "L'exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan," *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 129–64.

24 Gerhard Böwering, "The Qurʾan Commentary of al-Sulamī," in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, eds. Wael Hallaq and Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 56.

masters, and doesn't really elaborate on the material himself.²⁵ In his commentary on Q7:156 he mentions the viewpoint of some of his predecessors:

Al-Kattānī said, God's mercy be upon him: "It encompasses everything, but He especially favoured it upon the Prophets, with His saying, Exalted is He: {I shall ordain it for those who are wary [of God]}, and who is capable of rectifying his wariness of God falls under the condition of the verse."

One of them said: "He attributed the punishment by the attribute of specificity (*ṣifat al-khuṣūṣ*), associated with will (*al-mashī'a*), and He generalized mercy, that it encompasses everything."²⁶

Although not exactly the same and less elaborate, and not mentioning anything on the fate of non-Muslims in the hereafter, one can find an embryonic form of Ibn 'Arabī's argument in the second saying. Though punishment is something specific and connected to the will of God, mercy is something that is general, its existence apparently not dependent on a particular will of God. His mercy is ontological: it is just the way He *is*. The saying of al-Kattānī (d. 322/934), a companion of Junayd and Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz from Baghdad, shows that already before al-Sulamī the idea existed that God's mercy indeed encompasses everything, and that the second part of the verse is not a curtailment of this mercy, but rather an extension: there is a general mercy which everything that exists receives by default, and there is a special mercy, only granted to a special group with exceptional qualities, in this case the prophets and those able to rectify their wariness of God.²⁷

The argument mentioned by al-Sulamī can be found in *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* ("Subtleties of the Allusions") as well, the *tafsīr* of al-Sulamī's Nishapuri student al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), albeit in an extended and "Ash'arized" form. Al-Qushayrī's *tafsīr* contains a fair amount of Sufi commentary, but it is integrated in a comprehensive Sunni view consisting of elements of Shāfi'ism, Ash'arism and Sufism, commenting on issues of *fiqh*, *kalām* and philology,

25 Böwering, "Commentary of al-Sulamī," 49–50.

26 Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid 'Umrān (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2001), I, 245.

27 On Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Ja'far al-Kattānī see the entry in Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Kitāb tabaqāt al-sufiyya*, ed. Johan Pedersen (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 386–91. Cf. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism: al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya fī 'ilm al-tasawwuf*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 64.

using *ḥadīth* and poetry as well.²⁸ For al-Qushayrī it was no problem to include elements from outside the *tafsīr* tradition in his commentary, for example secular love poetry, to address the theme of divine love.

His argument has clearly taken a theological turn: it is not only the Sufi speaking here, but also the Ash'arī-theologian. Making a distinction between attributes of essence (*ṣifa dhātiyya*) and action (*ṣifa fi'līyya*), al-Qushayrī makes the same point as the anonymous quote in al-Sulamī's commentary, meanwhile demonstrating the compliance of the precepts of Ash'arī theology with the Sufi allusions. God's mercy is not something 'willed' by Him through His particular will (*irāda* or *mashī'a*), an attribute of action, but it is part of His essence: He simply *is* merciful. Punishment however is something He wills, and, in compliance with Ash'arī doctrine, He can bring it to whomever He wills and also withhold it from whomever He wills, at his own discretion, irrespective of whether a person deserves retribution or not. He can thus also choose *not* to punish someone who actually deserves it, and let His ontological mercy precede over His particular punishment:

He said, {I bring My punishment on whomever I will}. In this is a subtlety, as He did not say: "I do not exclude anyone from My punishment." Instead He associated it with will (*mashī'a*). There is also an allusion in it, that His acts, Exalted is He, are not motivated by the acquired acts (*aksāb*) of the creature, as He did not say: "I bring My punishment on the transgressors," but He said: {on whomever I will}. So if He has the will not to bring it on anyone, then He can do so.

Subsequently, when He ended with Mercy, He said: {My mercy encompasses all things}. He didn't associate it with will, as he said on the punishment, because it is the essence of the will and because it [mercy] is pre-eternal (*qadīma*), and will is not associated with the pre-eternal (*al-qadīm*). So since punishment is of the attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-af'āl*), He associated it with will, in contrast to mercy, because it is from the attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*).²⁹

Concluding we can state that traces of the idea of ontological mercy, and God's merciful Essence can be found in pre-Ibn 'Arabī Sufi *tafsīr*, but that it has not been 'radicalized' to the extent that this mercy also applies to the eternally

28 Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar: Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256–7.

29 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (Cairo: Al-Ha'ya al-miṣriyya al-amma li'l-ta'lif wa'l-nashr, 1981), I, 575–7.

wretched in the hereafter. However, it is not specifically mentioned that it does *not* pertain to them either, as is so clearly done since the inception of exoteric exegesis. This is an interesting discrepancy, which is open for speculation.

4 Ibn 'Arabī's Contemporary: Rūzbihān al-Baqlī al-Shīrāzī (d. 606/1209)

The ideas on Hell expressed in *'Arā'is al-bayān fī ḥaqā'iq al-qur'ān*, the Qur'ān commentary of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī is a special case in point, worthy of a closer look beyond the boundaries of the commentary on Q7:156. It is unclear whether there has been a direct influence between Rūzbihān and Ibn 'Arabī. It is unlikely that they have met or were aware of each other's writings. The more remarkable is it that Rūzbihān, although formulating it differently, hints to quite similar ideas on God's mercy in Hell as Ibn 'Arabī. Perhaps these ideas were more widespread in Sufi circles in this particular era, and were taught in oral networks of which we have no textual evidence. In *'Arā'is al-bayān* we witness a genuine interest in the topic of Hell in a rather optimistic way, diminishing the crudeness of punishment. In a number of commentaries on verses that deal with the punishment of Hell, Rūzbihān seems to make a case for leniency in that punishment, and the kindness and mercy of God being stronger than His wrath. Even for unbelievers a kind of relief in Hell is anticipated, and there is a hint to the possibility of eventual salvation.

Commenting on Q11:107, *abiding therein as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except what your Lord wills*, Rūzbihān states that although it is not part of the creed of *ahl al-sunna* that non-Muslims will eventually be saved from Hell when the heavens and the earth cease to exist, it is a thing hoped for because of the generosity (*karam*) and kindness (*lutf*) of God.³⁰ When God wants to bring them into the Garden, He throws them into the sea of the living (*baḥr al-ḥayawān*), and from there brings them into the Garden with the believers.³¹

30 Ibid., II, 136. This verse has more often been used as a proof of the idea that Hell is not eternal. For the theme of salvation of non-Muslims see Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

31 The sea of life seems to be a variant reading of the more common concept of the 'river of life' (*nahr al-ḥayawān* or *nahr al-ḥayyāt*). This concept is mentioned in eschatological *aḥādīth*, and refers to a river in which the inhabitants of Hell are washed clean from the black marks of the burning in Hell before they enter Paradise. Cf. Lange, *Justice and Punishment*, 147.

At another place Rūzbihān claims that Hell has a passionate longing for God, just as the Garden has a passionate longing for Him.³² When God realizes the passionate longing of Hell for Him, He will manifest His greatness (*‘aẓama*) upon it, compared to which Hell becomes like ‘nothing in something’ (*lā shay’ fī shay’*). First Hell will be a place of sighing and sobbing, but it eventually will change into a watering place and sweet smelling plant (*wird wa-rayḥān*), by the effect of the blessing of His appearance to it.³³

The unbelievers in Hell experience a mild form of kindness and generosity from God in the thought of Rūzbihān. In a lengthy commentary on Q7:50, in which the inhabitants of the Fire call upon the inhabitants of the Garden to pour some water over them, he states:

It is from the kindness and generosity of God upon His creation that He lifts the veil from the Garden for the people of the Fire so that they can bear the pains of the punishment by seeing the Gardens and their inhabitants, and this is from His hidden kindnesses.³⁴

He compares the state of the people in the Fire on the moment of the lifting of the veil to a passionate lover (*‘āshiq*) who is surrounded by snow, but does not feel the bitter cold because he is too overwhelmed by the sweetness of looking to the face of his beloved. He compares this to the female companions of Yūsuf, who did not feel pain when cutting their hands, because they were too occupied with witnessing the beauty of Yūsuf. To make his point even stronger, he speaks about a *shaykh* proceeding to the night prayer who sees two lovers speaking in the snow. When he proceeds to the dawn prayer later in the morning, they are standing in the snow to their waists without even noticing the cold and the passing of time. The *shaykh* then falls down losing his consciousness. When he stands up again, he rips his dress apart and exclaims:

These two persons in their passionate love and witnessing did not know the difference between the dawn and the dark night, and did not notice the pains of the snow in the cold, and I claim to have love for the Creator of creation, while I am heedless of this attribute.³⁵

32 See Q50:30, *The day that God says to Jahannam “Are you filled” and Jahannam answers “Is there more?”*

33 Al-Baqlī, *Arā’is al-bayān*, III, 336. These are ideas that are also expressed by Ibn ‘Arabī.

34 Ibid., I, 438.

35 Ibid., I, 439.

5 Post-Ibn 'Arabî Sufi *tafsîr*

Considering the deep impact of Ibn 'Arabî on the development of Sufi thought, one would expect his specific idea of mercy in Hell to disseminate into the works of *tafsîr* of authors influenced by his thought. We will now analyze if, and if so how, these ideas disseminated into later Sufi works of *tafsîr*, and if not, why not.

5.1 *The tafsîr of al-Qāshānî (d. 730/1329)*

There is only limited biographical information available on 'Abd al-Razzāq Kamāl al-Dīn b. Abu 'l-Ghanā'im al-Qāshānî. He had direct knowledge of the works of Ibn 'Arabî and was an adherent of his school of thought, creatively elaborating on his thought, and a productive author himself. He wrote a commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. His *tafsîr* has for a long time even been falsely attributed to Ibn 'Arabî.³⁶ In his *tafsîr* he does not quote other commentators or canonical texts. It only contains short glosses on the Qur'ānic text, seemingly representing his own ideas.

Al-Qāshānî takes the explanation of the verse in a different direction than his predecessors. According to him, the punishment is a form of mercy. This punishment is not for the unbelievers however—he does not even mention them—but for an elect group among the believers who have attained a unique position of providence from God (*ahl al-'ināya*). He understands the punishment to be the longing for God caused by the heavy pain of being separated from Him. Commenting on Q7:156, he states that there is a very sweet mercy in this punishment of God:

{And My Mercy encompasses all things} it is not specifically for one person or one thing. In this punishment is a mercy which utmost degree is not reached, and which extent is not measured, from the mercy of the sweetness of reaching [God], about which He said: *No one knows what comfort of the eye has been hidden for him* [Q32:17], by His being Sweet in a way that is incomparable with any sweetness (...). And [I swear] upon

36 *El2*, s.v. 'Abd al-Razzāq Kamāl al-Dīn b. Abu 'l-Ghanā'im al-Qāshānî, 1, 88–90 (D.B. MacDonald). For an assessment of the commentary of al-Qāshānî in relation to eschatology see Pierre Lory, *Les Commentaires ésotériques du Coran d'après 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānî* (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1980), 107–21; Pierre Lory, "Eschatology and Hermeneutics in Kāshānî's *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*," in *The Spirit and the Letter*, eds. Keeler and Rizvi, 325–43.

my life, this punishment is more esteemed than red sulphur (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*). And concerning mercy, no one is devoid from a fortune of it.³⁷

5.2 Q7:156 in Burṣawī's Rūḥ al-Bayān

Al-Burṣawī (d. 1127/1698) and his *Rūḥ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-qurʾān* are yet another personality and *tafsīr* that are in need of thorough research: there is not a single in-depth study on this work and author available in Western literature yet. Al-Burṣawī, a resident of the Ottoman empire and member of the Jilvatiyya Sufi order, had a great interest in Persian literature and wrote many commentaries on Persian works, among which is Rūmī's *al-Mathnawī*. He was a very productive author and preacher.³⁸ He had direct and extensive knowledge of the works of Ibn ʿArabī, and like al-Qāshānī wrote a commentary on his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.³⁹ His *tafsīr* contains a Persian translation of the Qurʾānic text and is a not strictly divided mixture of conventional and Sufi exegesis, eclectic in its style. It is considered to be influenced by the thought of Ibn ʿArabī, and contains a lot of Persian Sufi poetry, as well as quotes from the works of Sufi masters like Samʿānī (d. 534/1140), al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111) and the *tafsīr* of the Kubrawiyya Sufi order, *al-Taʾwīlāt al-Najmīyya*.⁴⁰ Apparently it was no problem for him to refer to non-*tafsīr* works in the *ishārī* parts of his commentary: also works from outside the boundaries of the genre were suitable for him to illuminate the possible inward meanings of the Qurʾānic text.

Commenting on Q7:156, al-Burṣawī surprisingly does not show himself from his esoteric and eclectic side and remains within the paradigm already set forth by the early exoteric exegetes mentioned earlier. The mercy of God is for both Muslims and non-Muslims in this world, but restricted for Muslims in the hereafter:

{And My Mercy} [Persian translation] And My mercy, its description is the following: {encompasses} in this world its meaning is [Persian translation] encompasses {everything} the believer and the unbeliever, the legally capable and other than him, from everything that exists. And there is not any Muslim and not any unbeliever on whom the traces of

37 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿArabī* (Beirut: Dār ṣādir, 2002), I, 205. Even this recent edition still considers Ibn ʿArabī to be the author of al-Qāshānī's *tafsīr*.

38 Feras Hamza, Sajjad Rizvi, and Farhana Mayer eds., *An Anthology of Qurʾānic Commentaries, Volume I: On the Nature of the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–6.

39 Michel Chodkiewicz, "Quelques remarques sur la diffusion de l'enseignement d'Ibn ʿArabī," in *Modes de transmission de la culture religieuse en Islam*, ed. Hassan Elboudrari (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1993), 211.

40 Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer, *Anthology*, 46.

His mercy and His blessing in this world does not show, by it they make a living, and by it they are transformed, but it is singled out for the believers in the next world, as the Exalted said: {I shall ordain it} i.e. consolidate it and specify it in the next world {for those who guard themselves} [from] unbelief and acts of disobedience {and give the *zakāt*} He specifically mentioned it because it was very troublesome for them [the Jews] {And those who in our Revelations} all of them {believe} an enduring belief, and do not deny anything of it.⁴¹

After this quite straight forward passage, which is nothing more than a summarized repetition of long existing material, al-Burṣawī also mentions the Ibn 'Abbās tradition on Iblis and the Jews (adding the Christians to them as well), excluding them from God's mercy, that is referred to in practically every exoteric exegesis.⁴² In this particular verse, though not representative for the work as a whole, the genealogical nature of the tradition shows quite nicely.

Although references to Ibn 'Arabī's works in other places in his *tafsīr* are numerous, he does not mention him in the particular verses related to his theory on mercy in the hereafter. This may be called quite remarkable. Taking into consideration his thorough knowledge of Ibn 'Arabī, as well as of other Persian authors influenced by his thought, one may expect that these ideas must have been known to him. It may allude to the fact that even for al-Burṣawī this doctrine went too far. More research is needed on the other works of al-Burṣawī, especially his commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, to investigate how he comments on relevant passages to the subject in that work, and how this possibly contrasts with his statements made in his *tafsīr*. Given the fact that he did not eschew to use non-*tafsīr* works of both Ibn 'Arabī and in general as sources for his *tafsīr*, the argument that it is because of the genealogical nature of the tradition does not hold in this case.

5.3 Q7:156 in Ibn 'Ajība's al-Baḥr al-Madīd

An important, and—again—little researched, *Sufi* commentary on the Qur'ān is *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-qur'ān al-majīd* by the Moroccan scholar and Shādhilī-Darqawī master Aḥmad b. 'Ajība (d. 1224/1809).⁴³ It hails from the

41 Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī al-Burṣawī, *Rūh al-bayān fī ḥaqā'iq al-qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2003), III, 266.

42 Ibid., III, 266.

43 This work has long not been available in print in its complete form, until it was first fully published in Cairo in 1955. Michon only touches upon it very lightly in his monograph on Ibn 'Ajība: Jean-Louis Michon, *Le Soufi Marocain Aḥmad ibn 'Ajība et son mi'rāj: glossaire de la mystique musulmane* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1973). Part of it has recently been translated into

fifth period added by Godlas in his periodization, the period that Böwering considered a period of decline.⁴⁴ Ibn 'Ajība was a scholar in both the outward and inward sciences of Islam, who integrated them both in his *tafsīr*. Whether he had first-hand knowledge of the works of Ibn 'Arabī is subject of scholarly debate. It has been pointed out that although he himself neither claims spiritual descent from Ibn 'Arabī, nor uses his technical vocabulary or even mentions him, his ideas and concepts are still very much implicitly present in his works.⁴⁵ Although it is doubtful whether he knew Ibn 'Arabī's works first hand, it is certain that he had knowledge of the works of Farghānī's *Muntahā al-madārik*, that contains a methodical outline of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings, as well as knowledge of al-Jīlī's *al-Insān al-kāmil*, a key work in the school of Ibn 'Arabī.⁴⁶ It is also possible that he deliberately did not mention Ibn 'Arabī's ideas specifically, given the controversy over his ideas.⁴⁷

Ibn 'Ajība starts his commentary on the verse with an exoteric explanation of the verse. He states, perfectly in line with the exoteric tradition, that there is a difference between the all-encompassing nature of God in this world and in the next world. In this world it is a general mercy for both believers and unbelievers, while in the next world it is especially for the believers. He places the verse within the broader context of the story of Moses, and considers the Jews to be the specific group addressed in this verse. God tells them that He does not ordain His mercy for them, but only for the community of Muhammad, which is meant with *those who are wary of God and give the zakāt; who believe in Our Revelations*. It is because of these qualities that "God especially endowed them with this mercy, and made them victorious over all communities, and elevated their religion over all religions, and made possible for them which he has not made possible for anyone beside them."⁴⁸

This exoteric explanation is given in the form of an explanatory gloss on the Qur'ānic text, without citing authorities in the field of *tafsīr* or quoting *ḥadīth*

English: Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk & Michael Abderrahman Fitzgerald, *The Immense Ocean: al-Baḥr al-Madīd* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2009). There's only one thorough study of the complete work, only available in Turkish: Mahmut Ay, *Kur'ān'ın Tasavvufî Yorumu: İbn Acîbe'nin el-Baḥr'u'l-Medid Adlı Tefsiri*, (Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2011). His ideas on eschatology have recently been discussed in Mahmut Ay, "The Sufi Hermeneutics of Ibn 'Ajība (d. 1224/1809): A Study of Some Eschatological Verses of the Qur'an," in *The Spirit and the Letter*, eds. Keeler and Rizvi, 415–41.

44 Godlas, "Şūfism," 360.

45 Chodkiewicz, "Quelques remarques," 217–18.

46 EI2, s.v. 'Abd al-Karīm Kūṭb al-Dīn b. Ibrāhīm al-Djīlī, I, 71 (H. Ritter).

47 Michon, *Soufi Marocain*, 9–15.

48 Aḥmad ibn 'Ajība, *al-Baḥr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-qur'ān al-majīd* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 2010), II, 400.

or *āthār*. His esoteric explanation of the verse is clearly separated from the exoteric and is introduced by the marker *ishāra*. Subsequently he quotes an exact citation of the argument on the ontological nature of God's mercy mentioned by al-Qushayrī in his Qur'ān commentary *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*. Ibn 'Ajība relates it to a story which is very similar to the narrations mentioned by Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī on the response of Iblīs to this verse. Ibn 'Ajība attributes it to Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) in a slightly different form. In the story Iblīs becomes visible to Sahl, and laughs. Sahl is surprised to find Iblīs laughing, while he, according to him, has no hope on the Mercy of God. Iblīs points Sahl to God's words *And My Mercy encompasses all things* and makes the witty remark that he in fact is a "thing". First Sahl is silenced for a moment, but then he reminds Iblīs of the rest of the verse, *I shall ordain it [My mercy] for those who are wary of God*, which seems to be a curtailment of the all-encompassing nature of God's Mercy. But Iblīs is not so easy to refute, and comes up with a clever argument, in the style of the theologian, by which Sahl is refuted:

Wariness of God is the act of the servant, while mercy is the attribute of the Lord, and the attribute of God does not change by the act of the servant.⁴⁹

The story of Sahl can neither be found in the *tafsīr* attributed to Sahl, nor is it mentioned in any of the commentaries Ibn 'Ajība draws upon. It seems to only appear in his *tafsīr* for the first time in the context of this verse. Interestingly, the story of Sahl does appear in a more extended version in Ibn 'Arabī's reflections on the verse, the only time Ibn 'Arabī mentions a source by name, which will be quoted at full length here:

Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh said: "I met Iblīs. I recognized him and he recognized that I recognized him. A discussion came about between us. He spoke to me and I spoke to him. The speech between us elevated and the dispute became long, so that I stood up and he stood up, and I became heated and he became heated. One of the last things he said to me was: 'O Sahl, God, Mighty and Exalted is He, says: {And My mercy encompasses every thing}, and he made it general. And it is not hidden for you that I am a thing, without a doubt, because the word "every" necessitates encompassment and generality, and "thing" renounces denials. So, His mercy has encompassed me.'" Sahl said: "By God, he had silenced me and confused me with the delicateness of his argument. The example of this

49 Ibid., II, 403–4.

verse made him triumphant, and he understood from it what we did not understand, and knew from it what we did not know. I stayed heated and thinking deeply, and recited the verse in myself. And when I came to His saying, Exalted is He: {I shall ordain it} and the rest of the verse, I became happy and imagined that I triumphed with a proof. I showed him that by which his back would be broken, and said to him: 'O cursed one, God has curtailed it by specific characteristics which take it away from that generality, He said: {I shall ordain it}.' Iblīs smiled and said: 'O Sahl, I did not presume that ignorance would reach you to such an extent, and I did not presume that you are here. Do you not know, o Sahl, that curtailment is your attribute, not His attribute?' Sahl said: "I returned to myself and choked by my saliva, and the water came into my throat. And by God, I did not find an answer, and I did not block any door in his approach. And I knew that he desired something, and by God, I don't know what there is after this."⁵⁰

This shows that this tradition was at least known by the time of Ibn 'Arabī and had a place within his tradition. It may be a worthwhile enterprise to analyze when this tradition came about, and by whom and in which context it was introduced. It shows a striking similarity, be it with a reversed conclusion on the all-encompassing nature of the mercy of God, with the remark attributed to Ibn 'Abbās that is often mentioned in exoteric commentaries. It is probable that the early mystics, after hearing this tradition, had the wish to reverse the conclusion to make it fit in their conception of God's mercy, giving it legitimacy by projecting it back on an illustrious figure as Sahl, using a visionary experience as a for Sufis valid epistemological counterweight to the narration. The fact that Iblīs behaves like a *mutakallim* when outsmarting the pious Sufi may teach us something on the attitude towards *kalām* in the milieu in which the tradition came about.

After this Iblīs-tradition, Ibn 'Ajība adds his own remark in which he criticizes Iblīs:

The answer is that Iblīs came from the viewpoint of distinctive perception (*farq*). Had he looked at the whole (*jam'*), he would have found mercy as His attribute, and wariness of God as His act, and His act changing His attribute, and everything stemming from Him and going towards Him. And God the Exalted knows better.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ghurāb, *Al-Raḥma min al-raḥmān*, II, 180–1.

⁵¹ Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr al-madīd*, II, 403.

This is where the genealogical nature of the genre becomes apparent in the work of Ibn 'Ajība: it is only after quoting al-Qushayrī and an existing tradition attributed to Sahl, that he introduces a new idea of his own. Of course criticizing Iblīs as an authority is a bit easier to justify than criticizing one of the major masters.

After this, Ibn 'Ajība continues with a literal quotation of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's (d. 606/1209) *Arā'is al-bayān*, in which he explains how the different kinds of being, inanimate, animal and rational, are drowning in different, hierarchically related seas of mercy, related to different kinds of attributes of God:

The inanimate beings are drowning in the light of His actions, this is the Mercy of actions (*al-raḥma al-fi'liya*). The animals are drowning in the light of His attributes, this is the Attributive Mercy (*al-raḥma al-ṣifātiya*). The rational ones from the *jinn*, mankind and the angels are drowning in the light of His essence, and this is the Ever-existent, Essential mercy (*al-raḥma al-qadīma al-dhātīya*).⁵²

After once again placing himself in a longer genealogical tradition of ishārī commentary in this way, he again adds some of his own thoughts on the matter. These thoughts show some similarity with Ibn 'Arabī's idea of two forms of mercy: a general one and a special one. Based on Rūzbihān's saying, he concludes that the mercy that encompasses all things is a general mercy, of which no created being is deprived in both this world and the next world. Although cryptic, it is as if he tries to say that God's mercy is larger than his wrath:

As regards this world, all of creation is granted mercy as a gift (*'iḡād*) and as a supply (*imdād*). And as regards the next world, there is no punishment except for God being more severe than it in His omnipotence. And the mercy which is ordained for those wary of God is a special kind of mercy. What is in *al-Qūt*⁵³ points to this, on His saying: {I shall ordain My Mercy for those who are wary of God}, he said: "Its meaning is the best quality of mercy and its purity, not all of it." There is no end to mercy, because it is an attribute of the One providing mercy, who has no limits, and because he excludes nothing from His mercy, as He also does not exclude anything from His wisdom and omnipotence.⁵⁴

52 Ibid., II, 403.

53 Meant is *Qūt al-Qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī.

54 Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr al-madīd*, II, 404.

Although not explicit, a hint to the idea of Ibn 'Arabī can be found in this passage, at least recognizing that a form of mercy exists in the punishment of Hell. Remarkable though, is that right after this esoteric quote, he quotes an exoteric commentary by al-Suyūṭī, stating that God's mercy in the next world is only for the believers. It is as if he seems to realize that he has uttered something controversial, and tries to safeguard himself by making such a statement directly afterwards. Another quote of and elaboration on a saying of Rūzbihān on Q6:129 shows the same ambiguity:

"The Fire is commanded to consume them and to annihilate them. Subsequently He creates them anew, and it is expected from the generosity and kindness of God to make them enter the Garden after that." He said: "This is hoped for, it is not a doctrine of faith of the People of the Sunna." And al-Tha'ālābī refuted this saying which al-Wartajabī⁵⁵ told, but the outlook of the people of the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) is not understood in its fineness by the people of the outer meaning (*ẓāhir*).⁵⁶

He seems to play with the idea of a non-perpetual punishment, and to consider it as something only the Sufis with their inner knowledge understand.

On just one place in the entire *tafsīr* Ibn 'Ajība explicitly mentions the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī on the non-perpetuity of punishment in Hell. Commenting on Q43:74, *The evildoers they remain in Hell*, he states:

Concerning the people of *shirk*, the Muslims have agreed about their perpetuity [in Hell], except for what Ibn al-'Arabī al-Ḥatīmī and al-Jīlī stand alone with. They transmitted a narration that the Fire will disintegrate, and that its place will bring forth watercress, and its guarding angels (*zabāniya*) will move to the treasuring of the Garden. This is from the viewpoint of the noble nature and all-encompassing character of mercy which is not hindered, and from the point of view of the outer meanings of texts displayed, and from the inner meaning of the will (*mashī'a*) that God the Exalted has specified.

Al-Jīlī has also transmitted in his book *al-Insān al-Kāmil* that some of the people of the Fire are more worthy in God's perception than some of the people of the Garden. The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) the Exalted manifests Himself to them in the abode of wretchedness (*dār al-shaqā'*). He also transmitted that to some of the people of the Fire the Garden is shown,

55 Rūzbihān is referred to by this name in the commentary of Ibn 'Ajība.

56 Ibn 'Ajība, *Al-Baḥr al-madīd*, II, 404.

and they disdain it. And that some of the people of the Fire enjoy it as someone who has an itch. [...] These are strange sayings, and God knows best whether they are correct.⁵⁷

From this passage one can at least conclude that Ibn 'Ajība had knowledge of these theories. Whether he had direct access to these works does not become clear from this passage. Interesting is that he does not outright condemn these sayings, or does not try to refute them, but merely says that they are strange and God knows best. He seems to want to leave it ambiguous.

6 Conclusion

Let us now return to the questions raised in the introduction. Concerning the question whether *ishārī tafsīr* is genealogical just as its exoteric counterpart, or whether it has a higher degree of originality we cannot give a conclusive answer: most commentaries contain a strong genealogical element, in only one it is apparently absent (Qāshānī) in this particular passage. It is safe to conclude however that although a genealogical element is definitely at work in these commentaries, this has not stifled the adoption of new ideas and perspectives on the verse: genealogy and originality are not mutually exclusive categories. There is plenty of room for the individual author to add his own ideas, not hindered by earlier different opinions. Even in the works with a stronger presence of genealogy the authors are not at all afraid to raise their own voice and add their own insights based on the method of allusion (*ishāra*).

Also, no conclusive answer can be given to the question whether and how new ideas formulated outside the formal boundaries of the genre disseminate in *tafsīr* works. There are significant differences between the commentaries. Although the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī did not determine or influence the understanding of later commentators of the verse, it goes too far to conclude that the commentaries were not open to ideas formulated outside the genre. After all, the commentaries of al-Burṣawī and Ibn 'Ajība do mention non-*tafsīr* works in their commentaries, they are not excluded per se and even quote Ibn 'Arabī on other places in their works. It is more likely that the specific idea of Ibn 'Arabī on mercy in Hell could not count on the sympathy of the authors, as Ibn 'Ajība's negative comment on Ibn 'Arabī and al-Jīlī on this point clearly shows.

Concluding, another methodological point should be raised. In this article, we have largely focussed on the commentary on one verse for diachronic

⁵⁷ Ibid., v, 270–71.

comparison. When focusing on only one verse, one takes the risk of missing out on essential information for one's research. The case of the *tafsīr* of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī and Ibn 'Ajība shows that a broader reading of the *tafsīr* may be potentially more rewarding than taking only one verse or passage as a sample to draw conclusions on the whole *tafsīr*. Considering the vast extent of *tafsīr* literature this may be a serious obstacle for comparative research over longer time spans. Thus, *tafsīr* is certainly still suitable as a source for intellectual history, but there are certainly pitfalls in research when *only* focusing on *tafsīr* to understand the history of a certain idea. The claim of McAuliffe mentioned in the introduction that *tafsīr* functions as a 'window' to the intellectual tradition, culture and mentality of a certain period and region may be a bit too strong. It may be safer to stick with the more modest statements of Bauer and Rippin.