SULAMI’S TREATISE ON THE SCIENCE OF THE LETTERS
(‘ILM AL-ḤURÛF)

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The Science of the Letters (‘ilm al-ḥurûf) in Sufism

The terms, “Sufism” and “the Science of the Letters” (‘ilm al-ḥurûf) mentioned together frequently awaken associations with the most widely known work on magic in Islam, Shams al-maʿārif wa-latāʾif al-‘awārif (“The Brilliance of Knowledge and the Subtleties of its Gift”) of Abū l-ʿAbbās Ahmad b. ‘Ali al-Būnī (d. 622/1225).1 The author was a native of the town of Bone (i.e., ‘Annāba) on the Mediterranean coast between Algiers and Tunis, an old Phoenician settlement that became known as the Roman city of Hippo, the bishopric of Saint Augustine (395–430), which passed into the hands of the Muslim conquerors in the beginning of the second/eighth century.2 The Shams al-maʿārif exists in three versions, a short one, the oldest (dated 618/1221), a middle-sized one, and a long one.3 The work may be best understood as a kind of encyclopedia of magical practices popularly known in North Africa,4 that relies on superstitions and insights into the supernatural world, covering a medley of topics, such

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1 Where the spelling of Arabic and Persian terms or place names is included in English dictionaries, I have adopted standard American usage. The exceptions to this rule are “Qurʾān” and “Qurʾānic” for Koran and Koranic. Personal names are written in long form when they appear for the first time in the text, thereafter they are quoted in their short form with the definite article “al-” dropped whenever I refer to personal names denoting descent or origin (nība).
3 G. Marcais (1960: 1, 511–2).
4 The Arabic text is extant in a great number of manuscripts, see GAL I, 497; GALS I, 910. The short version (al-ṣughrā) appeared in lithographs, Bombay 1237; 1296; 1298; and Cairo 1291; and was printed in Cairo 1319 and 1322; the middle-size version (al-wustā) is extant in MS. Ahlwardt 4125; and the long version (al-kubrā) appeared in lithograph in Bombay 1296 and was printed in 4 volumes in Cairo 1905 (al-Maṭba‘a al-Ḥusaynīyya); see also, T. Fahd (1966: 230–4).
as directions for the use of amulets, magical use of letters and numbers, letter-squares, qur'anic verses and names of God. The author of the work is known as a Sufi (al-Ṣūfī) who was given the honorific name of Muḥyī l-Dīn, a name he shares with his famous contemporary Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240). The latter also employs “the science of the letters” at the very heart of his magnum opus, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (“The Meccan Revelations”), a huge encyclopedia that offers a highly intellectual synthesis of mystico-philosophical Sufism.7

Having worked on it for some thirty years, Ibn al-ʿArabī divides his work into six voluminous parts (faṣl), each subdivided into sections (juzʿ) or chapters (bāb). The prologue, chapter 1, begins with a reflection on the reality of being (al-ḥaqīqa l-wujūdiyya), the Logos and its manifestations (al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya) and the origin of the world (nashʿat al-kawn), followed by an epistle to his master and shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Mahdawī of Tunis, disciple of Abū Madyan (d. 594/1197). Chapter 2 outlines the six parts of his work (al-maʿārif, al-muʿāmalāt, al-aḥwāl, al-manāzil, al-munāzalāt, and al-maqāmāt). Chapter 3 offers the actual introduction (muqaddimah al-kitāb), where he presents his theory on the nature of knowledge and its modes, prophetical, mystical, philosophical and theological, the latter of which he criticizes severely. He ends this chapter with three types of the profession of faith, that of the ordinary believers, based on the teachings of Qurʾān and Sunna, that of the theologians, derived from intellectual reflection on the data of faith, and that of the philosophers rooted exclusively in rational reflection. Chapter 4 then details his own profession of faith, a declaration that is both mystical and metaphysical and is based, in theory and practice, on his religion, “the essential adoration” (al-ʿibāda al-dhātiyya) uniting his own being with the absolute ground of existence (wujūd).

Upon this mystical and metaphysical core idea, Ibn al-ʿArabī develops his hermeneutical method of “the science of the letters” (ʿilm al-ḥurūf), beginning in the second half of chapter 4 and ending with chapter 7. His in-depth study of the letters of the alphabet provides a key to his whole work, examining them against the background of his autobiographical experience and finding in them the building blocks of his spiritual metaphysics. Interpreting the letters one by one in chapter 6, he presents an idiosyncratic order of the alphabet that reminds the reader of his Fuṣūṣ

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7 Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (1329) and (1392/1972ff); see also, W. C. Chittick (1995: “Ebn al-ʿArabī”).