

Some Methodological Considerations for Extracting Spiritual Topics from Islamic Philosophy*

Reza Akbari¹

Submitted: 2023.05.25 | Accepted: 2023.07.11

Abstract

Travelling to different periods of Islamic philosophy, with contemporary questions, allows us to reconstruct the web of spiritual topics in Islamic philosophy. This work, calling for a joint effort and focusing on modern spirituality and Islamic philosophy, requires methodological instructions to improve the results. Having a comprehensive understanding of contemporary spirituality and using interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary research method are two primary guidelines since both serve to classify questions, which is essential for a fruitful discussion. The unification of philosophical schools in the Islamic tradition, the negligence of the entanglement of philosophy with interpretation, theology, and mysticism, and verbal similitude, which traces the connection between the new era and the old only through the path of similar words, are the most important things to avoid. The inclusion of several contemporary problems in one traditional topic, the spread of one new problem in several traditional topics, the historical development of problems, and the high capacity of metaphors and allegories in Islamic philosophy—including “bird,” “light,” and “mirror”—need to be considered to conceptualize and extract propositions related to spirituality from Islamic philosophy.

Keywords: spirituality, Islamic philosophy, metaphor, Mullā Ṣadrā, Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī

1. Professor, Department of Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran (r.akbari@isu.ac.ir)

* A Persian version of this article appeared in *'Eslām wa Moṭāle'āt-e Ma'naviyyat* (Islam and Researches about Spirituality) some months ago: https://jsr.isca.ac.ir/article_73854.html

1. Introduction

While spirituality has become more prevalent nowadays, we should not discount past historical periods. Spirituality, instead, should be seen as a renewed focus on values and beliefs that have been around for centuries. There are studies on spirituality in old civilizations and past eras (see. Viglas 2005). These studies allow us to relate to Islamic philosophy and extract its spiritual topics. However, we need methodological guidelines. There are things we should avoid and things we should do. We should first learn about the contemporary atmosphere of spiritual discussion.

2. Spirituality in the Contemporary Era

Western countries have given special attention to spirituality since the middle of the 20th century. During the research conducted by Paul Ray for 14 years in the United States, it was found that at least 25 percent of American adults are somehow inclined towards mysticism (Ray & Anderson 2001). The results of a random sample of one hundred English students revealed that two-thirds reported experiencing some sort of supernatural event, and one-fourth described this event as an awareness of God's presence (Hay 1979).

A number of factors have contributed to the level of attention paid to spirituality, including multiculturalism as a result of migration from different countries with different religious and cultural backgrounds, and as a result of technological advances such as internet, the mistrust of modern achievements, and the re-appreciation of historical treasures especially religious ones.

Contemporary spirituality takes many forms. What I call it God-based spirituality advocates that we give up all religions and focus on God as the creator and ultimate end of the universe. Multi-religious spirituality embraces fragments of different religions and provides ideas and solutions to meet contemporary humanity's needs. Using a naturalistic view of man, ethical-based spirituality seeks to establish a moral life for humankind to bring spirituality into people's lives (for example, see. Harris 2014). Each of these models places more emphasis on different aspects of human life. The importance of divine law and rituals is very prominent in religious spirituality, for example. Conversely, the pursuit of unity with nature is an aspect that is rarely found in this type of spirituality. The existence of different spiritual models has led to discussions and sometimes conflicts in the current era. Consequently, terms such as "pseudo-spirituality" and "spiritual abuse" were introduced.

Research in spirituality shares borders with other fields that should not be overlooked. Many topics addressed in today's *meaning of life* discussions or the past's *purpose of life* discussions are similar to spiritual issues (see. Peterson &

Webb 2006). Similarly, we can refer to the efforts made in psychology (e.g., Nelson 2009). So, in studying spirituality, it is essential to remember that it is an interdisciplinary subject and that psychology, sociology, literature, philosophy, theology, ethics, medicine, and scriptural literature must also be considered.

Spirituality has shifted from individual to social life. As a result, along with individual values, social values have become increasingly relevant. A few examples of attention to spirituality's social dimensions are education (Wright 2000), nursing (Westera 2016), and urban life (Sheldrake 2014; 2013). Using a contemporary lens, this type of research allows for a dialogue with tradition. The intellectual effects of such a conversation are numerous. In addition, guidelines are necessary to reach valuable findings and avoid errors that can negatively impact researchers.

3. Classifying the Questions

A productive dialogue with tradition requires appropriate questions, and the key is to organize spirituality issues. Spirituality encompasses both individual and social lives. Thus, spiritual issues can be classified as individual and social. It is also possible to categorize spirituality topics in terms of human relationships. As a result, they can be classified according to human relationships with themselves, God, nature, others, existence, etc.

The second condition for a successful conversation with tradition is clarifying its purpose. We need to know what we want from this conversation. Do we want to create a comprehensive spiritual system regarding Islamic philosophy, or are we merely extracting a few of the more significant topics? In the first case, broad-ranging knowledge of spiritual issues is required, while in the second, a deep understanding of specific topics is needed. To address spiritual issues both on the surface and in depth, Muslim philosophers must collaborate. This implies that Muslim philosophers representing different schools of thought participate in this collaboration based on an open exchange of ideas.

4. Avoiding a Category Mistake

It is not uncommon for individuals to consolidate diverse ways of thinking within a particular historical tradition or geographical area, despite the significant differences between them. Philosophical terms such as Oriental philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Western philosophy, continental philosophy, and analytical philosophy represent examples of this integration. While putting different schools of thought in one bag with one title is acceptable for superficial conversations, it is a methodological mistake at deeper levels of knowledge. Each term refers to diverse philosophical schools of thought, which should be distin-

guished and discussed separately. Merging them into one overarching term can obscure the nuances and distinctions between them and lead to incorrect assumptions and oversimplifications. Anyone who has studied analytical philosophy knows that philosophers such as Ayer, Wittgenstein, Quine, and Plantinga vary. Continental philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger differ considerably in their philosophical views.

Having this insight is crucial when dealing with Islamic philosophy. Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical systems differ significantly despite similarities. Let me give an example. In Islamic philosophy, the concept of God plays a crucial role in establishing a system of spirituality. Ibn Sīnā introduces God under the titles of *Wajib al-Wujūd* and the *First Origin*. In Suhrawardī's philosophical system, God is the highest light in the world. According to Mullā Ṣadrā, God is the highest existence and the basis for all beings in the world. Overlooking the different images of God presented by each of these philosophers will deprive us of different readings of spirituality in these systems of philosophy. A deeper look may lead us to speak not of a "system of spirituality," but of "systems of spirituality" in Islamic philosophy.

5. Avoiding a Local Perspective

The local perspective can prevent us from analyzing spirituality within Islamic philosophy. There can be no independent development of a philosophical system. Is it possible to consider Avicenna separately from theology, Aristotelian philosophy, or mysticism? Given the fact that Suhrawardī's works were primarily critical of Avicenna's philosophy, can someone imagine neglecting his knowledge of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy or his commentators? It is also impossible to understand Suhrawardī without reference to ancient Iranian philosophers. Mullā Ṣadrā should receive more attention. In addition to Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī, he draws inspiration from theologians, mystics, jurists, and Quranic commentators. Besides, he wrote commentaries on Suhrawardī and Avicenna's works and Imami Hadith. In many ways, he inherits previous thinkers.

Accordingly, a deep knowledge of a philosophical tradition is necessary for extracting spiritual topics. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to understand the connection between that particular tradition and other areas of expertise. Let me give an example. When Suhrawardī talks about angels like Khordād or Mordād (Suhrawardī 1998, 2: 157), what exactly does he mean? Does the multiplicity of these angels mean that God has entrusted them with distinct responsibilities? If this is the case, why does the universe have such a requirement from Suhrawardī's point of view? What effects will it have on human life? A person unfamiliar with the ancient Iranian intellectual tradition will have no chance of answering such questions.

As another example, let's look at Mullā Ṣadrā's views on Quranic interpretation. Here, he is influenced by Ibn 'Arabī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in many cases (for example, see. Thobūt 2003). In *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, Mullā Ṣadrā emphasizes Quranic verses to explain God, the soul, and the afterlife (Mullā Ṣadrā 1989). Therefore, considering Mullā Ṣadrā's interpretation of the Quran is essential for a deeper understanding of his philosophical beliefs. Similarly, a comprehensive knowledge of his Quranic interpretation requires consideration of his philosophical beliefs. In a sense, we are going through a cycle of understanding. This is also true of his mystical views on Quranic interpretation. A prominent example is his denial of death. He views death as a superficial expression of entering a higher realm of existence. Considering both his mystical and philosophical principles, one can understand why he interprets Quranic verses on death and life after death the way he does.

6. Avoiding Verbal Similarities and Differences

Looking at spiritual glossaries, we find that they collect terms from Eastern and Abrahamic religions, cultural beliefs of ethnic groups, historical findings, etc. Each term carries a meaning related to a particular religion, culture, or civilization. Here, the similarities and differences are noticeable. Aside from the terms, it is necessary to consider the ideas conveyed.

Consider "ma'navīyyat" in Persian. This word is derived from "ma'navī," which is derived from "ma'nā." Considering "spirituality" and "ma'navīyyat" as synonyms in English and Persian means ambiguity. Some scholars have pointed out this ambiguity (Izadpanah & Shakrenjad, 2014). "ma'nā" has many Persian usages. Attempting to locate spiritual issues in Islamic philosophy by emphasizing "ma'nā" will be in vain. However, I do not claim that searching for spiritual topics using "ma'nā" or "ma'navī" does not provide any results. Using these terms in a book such as *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, a text rich with spirituality-related content, would yield only limited results.

Words related to knowledge are another example. Knowledge and consciousness are integral parts of today's spirituality. In Arabic, in which most works of Islamic philosophy are written, many words are related to knowledge and consciousness. Knowledge (al-'ilm), intellectual knowledge (al-'aql), metnal existence (al-wujūd al-dhihnī), perceptual form (al-ṣūrah al-idrākīyyah), perception (idrāk), consciousness (shu'ūr), remembering (dhikr), reminding (tadhakkur), understanding (fiqh), wisdom (ḥikmah), certainty (yaqīn), acumen (fitnah), discernment (firāsah), and perspicacity (kiyāsah) are just some words related to knowledge in the Islamic tradition (for example, see. Soltanian *et al* 2017). As a result, capturing this part of spiritual issues only with one or two keywords such as wisdom or knowledge would be simplistic.

Here is another example. One of the terms related to spirituality is “hymn,” usually regarded as a spiritual or religious hymn. It may lead to prayer or social prayer when we use this term. Although prayer plays a significant role in extracting spirituality issues from Islamic philosophy, we should also consider the concept of “song” discussed in Muslim philosophers’ works. For example, Mullā Şadrā speaks of ‘Anqā’ (Simorgh), which mystics say exists. Besides listing many attributes of ‘Anqā, he asserts that this bird’s sound influences all music:

Delightful songs, strange hymns, melodious organs, and other things are derived from the sound of this bird, which has a noble nature and a blessed name (Mullā Şadrā 1976, 359).

The connection between music and spirituality within Islamic philosophy can lead to innovative thinking. Such a view of music will naturally lead people to certain types of music. It will create a bridge between music and its spiritual message, allowing for more creative expression.

Consider animism. This word connects us with soul, spirit, or similar. In Mullā Şadrā’s philosophy, all things, including living beings, plants, and inanimate entities, have a soul, spirit, or life force. Mullā Şadrā’s philosophy raises many topics under the “consciousness of beings.” According to him, the Quran teaches that all creatures possess consciousness (Mullā Şadrā 1981, 1: 118). In his philosophy, concepts such as existence, consciousness, and life are equivalent. Therefore, every being is a level of existence, life, and consciousness.

7. One Traditional Topic as a Container for Several Modern Problems

The development of human knowledge is gradual. Today, what was once a single discipline has grown into a macro discipline with thousands upon thousands of branches. Problems once raised in one discipline are now examined from various angles and in different fields. Considering this point in the context of spiritual topics allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the potential for many new issues within traditional topics in Islamic philosophy. We should treat some traditional topics as macro topics, if we look at Islamic philosophy through the lens of the contemporary period. The issue of God's attributes can, for example, be utilized as a means of examining many noteworthy issues such as God’s love for the world, God’s love for all creatures, God’s presence throughout the universe and at every moment, the mutual relationship between man and God, the role of all creatures as signs and mirrors of God, the permanent connection of the earth and the heavens, the sanctity of all creatures, etc. Each of these issues may serve as a starting point for others.

As another example, let us look at life after death, a vital part of traditional Islamic philosophy. When viewed through the lens of the contemporary era, this topic appears as a macro topic encompassing a variety of spiritual subjects: a wise and just design of the world, the existence of individual conscience as the just judge of each person's actions, the existence of intellectual pleasures and sufferings that are superior to sensual pleasures and pains, the ability to communicate with angels or demons, the importance of morality, etc. Any of these topics can lead to new ones.

8. The Spread of one Modern Problem on Several Traditional Topics

As various contemporary problems can be found within one traditional topic, so can one modern problem be spread across several traditional topics. Science's history supports the fact that one modern problem can be incorporated into various traditional ones. The old disciplines examined that issue in detail from a variety of perspectives. Now these partial views have been compiled to provide a comprehensive analysis.

It is important to keep this point in mind when extracting spiritual topics from Islamic philosophy. Consider "inner peace," a very effective spiritual topic. Islamic philosophy does not have a separate term for this concept. Despite this, there are several topics, which if studied separately and then considered in an integrated manner, can give us an understanding of inner peace in Islamic philosophy. For example, topics related to the absolute poorness of creatures to God, Qadā' and Qadar (destiny and fate), God's benevolence, the necessity of man's effort to resemble God, and the creation of man in the image of God are among the topics in which different aspects of "inner peace" can be uncovered. Looking at these topics, it is possible to present "inner peace" from an Islamic philosophy's point of view in the framework of one modern problem.

9. The Historical Development of Issues

In addition to having a sharp eye on the apparent similarities and differences between Islamic philosophy and the modern world, we also need the same precision when studying the historical development of Islamic philosophy. If we are lured by superficial similarities and differences in our intellectual possessions, we misrepresent some of their aspects.

Take, for example, Ibn Sīnā talking about divine richness. Mullā Ṣadrā also speaks about divine richness. As a result, many of Mullā Ṣadrā's pure ideas are hidden from us when we remain focused on the words of these two philosophers and ignore the network that Mullā Ṣadrā has established around divine richness. Mullā Ṣadrā says human existence is equivalent to being indigent to

God. This view is more profound than Ibn Sīnā's, which considers human indigence to God as one characteristic among many others.

By combining the theories of Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā under the title of "belief" in life after death, we will lose the details of each theory and their significance for spirituality. According to Suhrawardī, luminous ghosts exist after death and are entities that enter the spiritual realm after death. Ibn Sīnā's theory allows us to discuss the relationship between man and the intellectual world. As per Mullā Ṣadrā, each individual's soul has its world after separation from the body. Their perspectives on the world after death differ. Suhrawardī describes this world as a luminous place where human ghosts reside; Mullā Ṣadrā describes this world as a manifestation of one's existence; and Ibn Sīnā describes it as an intellectual world without physical characteristics.

I do not intend to judge the accuracy or inaccuracy of these philosophers' ideas about life after death. Instead, I want to show how methodological carelessness can lead to overlooking the philosophical heritage of a tradition.

10. Metaphorical Treatises

Muslim philosophers' metaphorical treatises focus more on humans' actions than their thoughts. Because they pay attention to human beings as agents, they can provide the most insight into spiritual issues. These treatises depict human life as a being with a time course. They portray humans as birds, children, strangers, trapped individuals, etc.

Avicenna and Suhrawardī were well aware of the power of narration. It is often difficult to effectively communicate theoretical concepts to an audience, especially the general public, through a tasteless language. Therefore, they used stories, metaphors, and analogies to make complex ideas more accessible and understandable. This allowed them to reach a wider audience and make their theories easier to comprehend. Even though these philosophers lived in the ancient period, they appeared to know recent scientific achievements concerning metaphors. It is as if they knew that a human being, who is like a child at the beginning of the spiritual-intellectual journey, needs a storyteller to "awaken his inner forces and make him indirectly aware of the obstacles, contradictions, as well as his possibilities and talents, to make the child think deeply and search for the values and issues of life from a human perspective" (Nikouei & Babashakouri 2014, 169).

Treatises such as *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqqān* (written by Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Ṭufayl), *Risālah al-Ṭayr*, *Salāmān wa Absāl*, and *Qiṣṣah al-Ghurbah al-Gharbīyyah* are among the treatises that deal with human life and human relationships with nature, cognitive faculties, God, angels, by using an allegorical, metaphorical language. These works provide fresh perspectives to the reader.

As an example of the power of metaphor in Muslim philosophers' stories, let us look at *Risālah al-Ṭayr*.

Perhaps it can be said that Ibn Sīnā employed more than a hundred symbols in this treatise, explicitly and implicitly. For example, we can refer to these things: trap, trapper, string, food, group of birds, trapper's whistle, clean desert, bird's foot, bird's head, bird's wing, movement without awareness, getting used to the trap, the narrowness of the cage, getting used to the narrowness of the cage, way, abode, moving in a group, mountain, relieving fatigue, constant movement, king [...] (Mokhles *et al* 2016, 106)

Each symbol refers to a situation in human life, from which many points about spirituality can be extracted.

Qiṣṣah al-Ghurbah al-Gharbīyyah can also be analyzed in this context. From the perspective of Jungian archetypes, Hoseini and Javadi Torshizi (2010) have analyzed this story and its symbols. In their analysis, they have identified archetypal situations such as seeking, traveling, crossing water, rebirth, and moving toward unity. They have also shown archetypal characters like the shadow, Anima, and the sage.

From a metaphoric or narrative perspective, numerous symbols, situations, and characters can be obtained, which can then be analyzed metaphorically or narratively in subsequent layers. At a glance, we encounter a multitude of symbols: the land beyond the river, brother, coastal birds, the village of Qiravān, 'Āṣim, Hādī the son of Khayr from Yemen, the chain, the well, darkness, the opening, cuckoos, branches of trees, light, west, east, fragrance, ants homestead, ship, land trip, sea trip, etc. By examining these symbols from a spiritual perspective, many valuable resources will be available.

11. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide some preliminary methodological considerations in exploring a spirituality system derived from Islamic philosophy. I understand that this effort is brief and preliminary. The process of creating a new piece of work is similar to starting a journey with no knowledge of how the journey will unfold and requires small steps in the beginning.

Hopefully, the initial steps taken in this article will encourage researchers, especially methodological experts, to provide a more methodical model or models for extracting spirituality topics. This will strengthen the field of spirituality within Islamic philosophy.

Although the content presented in this article is focused on extracting spirituality issues from Islamic philosophy, some methodological points can be used to extract spirituality issues from other areas of religious knowledge such as interpretation (Tafsīr), jurisprudence (Fiqh), Ḥadīth, history, etc.

This article raises an important point. Issues that appear to be new are not necessarily new. Forgotten issues like spirituality are frequently re-favored and considered novel after years of neglect. Cultural and intellectual traditions, including Islam, have a lot to offer in this regard, and Islamic philosophy is one of them. Consequently, old topics should not be regarded as expired. Such a view leads to negative prejudice against valuable assets that one civilization or culture has gradually accumulated. It is not implied that all civilizations or cultural achievements are positive. Although dark elements can be present in a civilization or culture, this should not diminish the beauty of other parts.

References

- Harris, Sam. 2014. *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*. Simon and Schuster.
- Hay, David. 1979. "Religious Experience Amongst a Group of Post-Graduate Students: A Qualitative study." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18(2): 164-182. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1385938>
- Hoseini, M., & P. Javadi Torshizi. 2010. "Archetypes in Sohrevardī's *Ghessat al-Ghorbat al-Gharbiya*." *Mystical Literature*, 2(2): 49-72. <https://doi.org/10.22051/jml.2014.113> (in Persian)
- Ibn Sīnā, Ḥossein. 1985. *Al-Najāh min al-Gharq fī Baḥr al-Dalālāt*. Edited and prefaced by Mohammad Taghi Danesh Pajoh. Tehran: Tehran University Press. (In Arabic)
- Izadpanah, A., & A. Shakernejad. 2014. "The Necessity of a Civilizational Perspective on the Notion of Spirituality." *Naqd Va Nazar* 19(75): 123-153. (In Persian)
- Mokhles, Saham, Reza Akbari, Rasoul Sharabini, and Gita Moghimi. 2016. "Risalat al-Tayr: The Symbolic Metanarrative of the Meaning of Life." *Avecinnian Philosophy Journal* 20(56): 103-118. <https://doi.org/10.30497/ap.2016.61502> (In Persian)
- Mullā Ṣadrā. 1976. *Al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ād*. Edited by Seyed Jalal al-Din Ashttiyani. Tehran. (In Arabic)
- Mullā Ṣadrā. 1981. *Al-Ḥikma al-Muta'ālīya fī al-Asfār al-'aqliyya al-'arba'ah*, 3rd ed. Beirut. (In Arabic)
- Mullā Ṣadrā. 1984. *Mafātiḥ al-Ghayb*. Edited by M. Khajavi. Tehran: Cultural Research Institute. (In Arabic)
- Nelson, James M. 2009. *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*. Springer.
- Nikouei, A., & S. Babashakouri. 2014. "Re-Reading of Children's Tales based on Schema Component in Cognitive Theory." *Iranian Children's Literature Studies* 4(2): 149-174. <https://doi.org/10.22099/jcls.2014.1145>

- Peterson, Mark, and Dave Webb. 2006. "Religion and Spirituality in Quality of Life Studies." *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 1(1): 107-116.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-006-9006-y>.
- Ray, P. H., & S. R. Anderson. 2001. *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*. Three Rivers Press.
- Sheldrake, Philip. 2013. *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. John Wiley & Sons.
- Sheldrake, Philip. 2014. *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Soltanian, K., R. Akbari, M. H. Mahdavinejad, and A. Parsa. 2017. "Fakhr Razi's Approach to the Semantic Analysis of 'Knowledge' and Related Words in Religious Text." *Philosophy of Religion*, 14(1): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jpht.2017.62416> (In Persian)
- Suhrawardī, Shihāb ad-Dīn Yahyā. 1998. "*Ḥikmah al-Ishrāq*." In *Collected Works of Sheikh Ishraq*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Henry Corbin. Tehran: Publications of the Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies (In Arabic)
- Thobūt, Akbar. 2003. "Tafsīr-e Mullā Ṣadrā (Mullā Ṣadrā's Quranic Interpretation)." In *Great Islamic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, pp. 717-720. Tehran: The Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia. (In Persian)
- Viglas, Katelis. 2005. "Mysticism and Rational Spirituality—When Theology Meets Philosophy in Byzantium." *European Journal of Science and Theology* 1: 5-9.
- Westera, Doreen A. 2016. *Spirituality in Nursing Practice*. Springer.
- Wright, Andrew. 2000. *Spirituality and Education*. Routledge.