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Spiritual Poverty – Heavenly Riches: Some Reflections On faqr in the Teachings of Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī

Mânevî Yoksulluk – Göksel Zenginlikler: İbnü'l-'Arabî ve Rûmî'nin Öğretilerinde Fakr Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the notion of faqr (poverty, neediness) in the writings of two of the greatest exponents of Sufism as realisation of Truth (tahqīq), Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273). It draws on a story told by Ismâil Hakkı Bursevî regarding a meeting between Ibn ʿArabī's stepson and heir, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 672/1274), and Rūmī in Konya, and contrasts the spiritual principles of voluntary poverty with the true poverty of spirit, which all beings participate in and which is fully known and experienced in the perfect human being. It also looks at the way essential poverty is described as the fundamental underpinning of praise and the celebration of Divine bounty.

Keywords: Sufism, Ibn ʿArabī, Rūmī, Qūnawī, faqr, spiritual poverty, perfect human being, al-insān al-kāmil, Futuhat al-Makkiyya.

Özet

Bu makale, tasavvufun iki büyük muhakkiki olan Muhyiddîn İbnü'l-'Arabî (ö. 638/1240) ile Mevlânâ Celâleddîn-i Rûmî'nin (ö. 672/1273) eserlerinde *fakr* (mânevî yokluk, Allah'a muhtaç olma) kavramına yönelik bir inceleme niteliğindedir. İsmâil Hakkı Bursevî'nin, İbnü'l-'Arabî'nin üvey oğlu ve vârisi olan Sadreddîn Konevî (ö. 672/1274) ile Mevlânâ arasında Konya'da geçen bir görüşmeye dair aktardığı bir hikayeden yola çıkarak, gönüllü yoksulluğun mânevî ilkeleri ile bütün varlıkların sahip olduğu ve İnsân-ı Kâmil'de tam manasıyla açığa çıkan hakiki ruhsal yoksulluğu karşılaştırma amacını taşır. Ayrıca ontolojik yoksulluğu, ilâhî lütfa hamd ve şükrün zeminini teşekkül ettiren bir unsur olarak ele alır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, İbnü'l-'Arabî, Rûmî, Konevî, fakr, mânevî yoksulluk, insân-ı kâmil, Fütûhâtü'l-Mekkiyye.

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"Poverty is my glory (al-faqr fakhrī)"[1]

O You to whom belongs absolute Richness beyond need, whilst His servants possess only poverty beyond question! O You who is Rich beyond need of anything, whilst each thing is in need of Him!

(Ibn ʿArabī, Awrād)[2]

Introduction

I should like to begin these reflections on the nature of *faqr* ('poverty, neediness') by considering the following quotation fromJalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī* :[3] "Of all the kinds of knowledge, when death comes the one to have with you is poverty." Unequivocally drawing a sharp distinction between poverty, i.e. spiritual poverty, and all other forms of knowledge, Rūmī is careful to state that poverty is nonetheless a kind of knowledge, not a material fact of external existence. This deceptively simple statement points to one of the great mysteries of human life: the paradox that what really matters in the last resort is not what we have by way of acquired knowledge, but what we do not possess, our condition of neediness, and our familiarity with and knowledge of this condition. What exactly does Rūmī mean by spiritual poverty? Considering that we cannot take anything of this world with us into the next world when we die, how will a knowledge of poverty benefit us at the point of death?

As a point of departure for this paper, we may distinguish four forms of poverty, two negative relating to sickness, which are to be eradicated, and two positive relating to health, which are to be embraced:

1. the grinding material poverty, so often man-made, that destines millions to ill-health and disease, and which the United Nations has established targets to eradicate in its extreme form;[4]

2. the psychological poverty of materialism or literalism, the worldly self-sufficiency of human pride and arrogance that masks a spiritual emptiness and neediness – both these we might call 'human poverty';

3. the outer practice of poverty or voluntary poverty, the ascetic life;

4. the inner poverty of realisation – this last is sometimes referred to as 'total poverty'.

With regard to the last two kinds of 'spiritual' poverty, I would like to begin, as Rūmī so often does, with a story – except that this story is not a fable of mythical animals or a tale of kings and courtiers, but one involving Rūmī himself and his close friend and fellow-resident of the Seljuk capital, Konya, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, the stepson and spiritual heir of Ibn ʿArabī. It is worth mentioning that the two men were almost exactly the same age[5] and seem to have had a very close relationship, fostered in part by their physical proximity as residents in Konya. It is related that one

1 A prophetic hadith, regarded as unsound by many scholars, but often cited or referred to by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī: see, for example, *Mathnawī, I: 2357; III: 3281 and 4519, and V: 673 and 715.*

2 From the Sunday morning prayer by Ibn ʿArabī in *Awrād al-usbūʿ, in Prayers for the Week: the Seven Days of the Heart*, *ed. and trans. Stephen Hirtenstein and Pablo Beneito (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2021), 34, and Arabic 7.*

3 *Mathnawī,* I: 2846, from *The Masnavi of Rūmī*, trans. Alan Williams, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020), 263.

4 The United Nations completed its review of the so-called Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), and countries of the world set a target of halving poverty by the year 2015, has since been revised to an aim of reducing extreme poverty to less than 3% by 2030. The extreme poverty figure dropped from 43% of the world's people in 1990 to 21% in 2010, and continued downwards up to the COVID pandemic.

5 Rūmī's dates are given as 6 Rabiʿ I 604–5 Jumada II 672/30 September 1207–17 December 1273; Qūnawī's as 22 Jumada II 605–13 Muḥarram 673/1 January 1209–19 July 1274.

day Rūmī and Qūnawī were sitting together. Qūnawī turned to Rūmī and said: "For us it is to live like a king (*sulṭān*) during the day and to sleep at night like a poor man (*faqīr*)." Immediately Rūmī retorted: "And for us it is to live like a poor man during the day and to sleep at night like a king."[6]

This zen-like story is related by the great 18th-century Celvetī shaykh, Ismāil Hakki Bursevī (d. 1137/1725), who then comments that if one wants to understand something of what they were talking about, one should look at their tombs. Situated within an ornate shrine at the end of the main street of Konya, the tomb of Rūmī became a major centre of pilgrimage within a few generations of Rūmī's death, 'the Kaʿba of lovers' as the calligraphy at the entrance proclaims,[7] maintained by generous gifts from princes and pious endowments, while at the other end of town, in a quiet side-street off the Meram road, stands a small, modest stone grave, the resting-place of Qūnawī, topped by an octagonal wooden *kumbet* frame – it is open to the sky (as specified in his will), and adjoins a mosque which used to be the house in which he lived and which contained his magnificent library[8] – even with the recent refurbishments by the town council, it remains a humble tomb, though one much venerated historically as can be seen in the fact that it used to be surrounded by a huge cemetery containing the graves of innumerable famous men. The contrast between the two tombs could hardly be more stark: the sultan and the faqir at night indeed.

This polarisation is also reflected in the way they lived their outer daily lives. Above the doorway to Qūnawī's tomb there is a couplet in Arabic which depicts his worldly position: "Your morning is coupled to glory and country; your door ever-open to people in need",[9] referring to the high rank that Qūnawī enjoyed at the Seljuk court as Shaykh al-Islām as well as to his famed generosity to the poor. Qūnawī had been brought up within a rich and privileged family, his father having served as adviser to two Seljuk sultans, and following a most intense spiritual training under his two masters, Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabī and Awhad al-Dīn Kirmānī, he led an aristocratic life-style in Konya, complete with servants, eunuchs and porters if the hagiographies are to be believed. Naturally for some people, especially those who came from humbler origins, this appeared to conflict with the idea of a proper spiritual master. For example, a rich merchant from Tabriz is reported to have visited Qūnawī's house, and wondered if he had been brought to the right place as it seemed like the palace of a king – he appears to have been unmoved by the response from Qūnawī's servants that their master was unharmed by such possessions since he possessed a perfected soul. Rūmī, whom the merchant subsequently visited, provided him with the more typical picture of a true holy man, someone who has given up all the privileges of birth and worldly wealth and devotes his time to the worship of God.[10]

6 Ismāil Hakki Bursevī, *Kitāb Tamām al-fayḍ fī bāb al-rijāl,* ed. Ramazan Mawsili and Ali Namli (Damascus: Dār Nīnawā, 1432/2011), 2/31. My great thanks to Prof. Mustafa Tahrali for drawing my attention to this passage many years ago and for providing the reference.

7 The Persian poem hanging in the entry cubicle (said to be composed by ʿAbd al-Raḥman Jāmī) reads: *kaʿbat al-ʿushshāq bāshad in maqām / har ki nāqiṣ āmad injā shud tamām* – "This shrine is the Kaʿba of lovers; all who come here lacking find completion." (cited by Franklin Lewis in *Rūmī, Past and Present, East and West*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 430).

8 For details of this library and what it contained, see Stephen Hirtenstein and Julian Cook, "Malik MS 4263 Part 2: The Library List of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society 67, 1 (2020), 59–111.*

9 It reads: *sabāhuka maqrūnun bi-ʿizzi wa-dawlati / wa-bābuka maftūhun li-ahl al-hawāʾij.*

10 Aḥmad Aflākī, *Manāqib al-ʿārifīn*, *(Ankara: Turk*

This was quite clearly a contentious issue between followers of Rūmī and followers of Qūnawī, since it resurfaces in another story in which Qūnawī is being censured by one of Rūmī's disciples for having so much wealth, while Rūmī is praised for having a mere half dinar. Rūmī's recorded response is interesting: "This is because the Shaykh [Ṣadr al-Dīn] has more expenses than I do. Many travellers depend on his care, while no-one is dependent on me. Even that half dinar should be given to him."[11] Again the contrast between these two spiritual masters is striking, the faqir and the king during the day. But is this all there is to be gleaned from Rūmī and Qūnawī's conversation? Or is there a more interior meaning of poverty which is being hinted at? The theme of poverty surfaces time and again in Ibn ʿArabī's and Rūmī's writings, and unsurprisingly as it is one of the commonest topics in spiritual life.

The Practice of Voluntary Poverty: Asceticism and Renunciation

The renunciation of worldly wealth and the practice of asceticism as a way of spiritual realisation has an ancient history. Within the Christian tradition, poverty was particularly emphasised: the first of the nine Beatitudes which Jesus enunciated in the Sermon of the Mount is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven",[12] and his clear advice to the young man of means, who had carefully followed the religious commandments, was: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."[13] While the second example appears at face value to advise the renunciation of worldly possessions, its inner meaning is the same as the focus of the first, poverty of spirit as opposed to richness of spirit – i.e. a person who ascribes everything to himself, who follows his self-love, his vanity and sense of being better than others, is rich in spirit, and therefore devoid of need. This non-neediness must be exchanged and removed, before its heavenly reality can appear. So long as we are full of selfhood, we are not empty enough to receive the gift of the spirit. To be poor in spirit is to have allowed such self-love to be stripped away and to acknowledge one's full neediness, celebrating the treasure of the Divine. It is the prerequisite of all genuine prayer. In the words of St. Paul, receiving the grace of God means "having nothing, but possessing all things."[14]

Clearly this is not simply to be read as the poverty of the natural needy state, however much this was admired and imitated as a means to realisation. Stories of those abandoning their wealth and position in search of Truth are legion: Gotama Buddha, St. Francis of Assisi, Abu Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī, to name but a few of the more prominent.[15] Ibn ʿArabī

Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1959–61), I: 96.

11 Aflākī, *Manāqib,* I: 439.

12 *Gospel of St Matthew*, V: 3. Almost the same expression is used in *Luke*, VI: 20: "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The literal translation is not "poor" but "beggars in spirit", i.e. an active condition of preparedness to receive.

13 *Matthew*, XIX: 21.

14 *II Corinthians*, VI: 10.

15 The early period of Islām evinces a dramatic tension between those with material wealth and those without, graphically illustrated in the life of Abu Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. c. 31/652), a prominent companion of the Prophet. One of the People of the Bench (*ashab al-suffa*) renowned for his austerity and frugality, Abu Dharr was highly critical of the caliph ʿUthman and his Syrian governor, Muʿawiya, for what he viewed as unacceptable behaviour (e.g. the hoarding of wealth, the prodigality, the appointment of relatives and cronies to high office). For his pains he was exiled and lived out his life on the margins. He presents the somewhat clichéd picture, albeit inspirational to generations of Sufis, of a truly religious person: living an ascetic life based on what the Prophet taught in respect of guarding against worldly attachments, encouraging voluntary poverty, being content with

also describes a time when he gave away all that he possessed to his father (since he had no spiritual master to give it to), in his desire to realise what he called "the servanthood of exclusive belonging to God."[16] To be in a state of apparent neediness for all one's outward sustenance, to be dependent upon God alone for the bread one eats and the clothes one wears and so on, is something that can provide a sense of real neediness. Voluntary poverty, divesting oneself of possessions and putting oneself into a total dependency upon God's provision for one's everyday needs, is an act of will – something one chooses to do – but also curiously, at the same time, it is a cultivation of non-neediness, of independence from all other than God. Thus voluntary poverty involves various forms of withdrawal, such as the practice of silence and seclusion, fasting and wakefulness, which break the dependencies of everyday living, and through these practices being interiorised certain forms of knowledge may be attained.[17] Abstinence, says Rūmī, "is the first principle of medicine."[18] Ascetic practice, which is a theme that runs through all spiritual teaching, and dominates much of the discourse on spirituality up to the present day, is nonetheless only a first step, however well performed. It is not to be confused with the true spiritual life, as practices can only be at best a relative and approximate version of poverty.

There is in Sufi teaching a very deep tradition and understanding of poverty. In rhyming prose al-Junayd distinguishes three groups of the faithful, and gives pride of place to poverty and love:

> The first comprises those who have chosen ritual worship and fear (al-ʿibādāt wa-l-takhawwuf); the second those who have chosen renunciation, longing and austerity (al-zuhd wa-l-shawq wa-l-taqashshuf); the third, finally, those who have chosen poverty and Sufism (al-faqr wa-l-taṣawwuf)… These have had their hearts filled with love (ḥubb) as the hearts of the [worshipping] servants have not been, and they speak of the truths of the unseen.[19]

In his comments on each group, it is clear that the first are primarily concerned with service and 'doing the right thing' and therefore their hearts are filled with fear at the possibility of falling short; the second renounce this world and all it contains in favour of the next, take their wealth from the next world, and fear punishment: "they restrain their souls and make little of their works." Only the third group drink from the cup of Love and know what it means to be "Sufi", and although he leaves it unspecified, Junayd is alluding to a clear distinction between the practice of

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little in this world and remembering the Hereafter.

16 Ibn ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 4 vols., n.d., henceforth *Fut.*), I: 196 – for translation and comment, see Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999), 53-54.

17 In his *Hilyat al-abdāl*, Ibn ʿArabī explains how each practice works at the level of the aspirant (*murīd*) and at the level of the fully realised (*muhaqqiq*). He equates each of these principles to a particular knowledge: silence leads to knowledge of God; seclusion to knowledge of the world; hunger to knowledge of Satan; and wakefulness to knowledge of self. See Ibn ʿArabī, *The Four Pillars of Spiritual Transformation, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein (Oxford: Anqa Publishing,* 2008).

18 *Mathnawī*, I: 2911, from *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac & Co Ltd, 1972), 15; (Williams 270 gives I: 2924).

19 Cited by Christopher Melchert, "The Transition From Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century CE", *Studia Islāmica 83* (1996), 70; from Süleymaniye Reşid Efendi 1218/1 (fols. 4b–5a). In case one might think that only the third are worth anything, Junayd adds that for all these faithful ones (*muʾminūn), "their essential being (dhāt) adheres to their path, and their qualities (ṣifāt) are safeguarded from their deviations and imperfections due to His word Prosperous are the believers, who are humble in their prayers and who shun idle talk, and who are active in giving zakat (Q al-Muʾminūn, 23/1–4)."*

renunciation and the condition of selfless poverty.

The real knowledge of spiritual poverty, as both Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī express it, lies at the deepest level of human experience, but is not found easily:

> There is no sickness of the soul that's worse than being convinced of your own perfection, sir!
> Much blood must flow out of your heart and eyes until this smugness takes its leave of you.
> Eblis' mistake was saying 'I am better' – all creatures have this sickness in their selves.
> Though he may see himself as very broken, beneath the stream see filth and purest water.
> But when he makes you stirred up in temptation, just then the water turns a filthy colour.
> The bottom of the stream is filthy, man! – although to you the stream appears pristine.[20]

St. Francis of Assisi gives a similar analysis in his commentary on poverty of spirit:

> Many apply themselves to prayers and offices, and practise much abstinence and self-mortification – but because of a single word which seems to be hurtful to their bodies, or because of something being taken from them, they are forthwith scandalised and troubled. These are not poor in spirit; for he who is truly poor in spirit hates himself and loves those who strike him on the cheek.[21]

In other words, the real sickness is not so much one's dependence on other things but the preference for one's self over others, smugly imagining that one is without need, or perhaps even, the illusion that one has anything to call one's own.

To be in need is the primary human condition: born in utter need and dependency upon the mother and her milky sustenance, a baby exerts a remarkably powerful influence over its parents and others around them. Ibn ʿArabī attributes this reversal of the normal state of affairs to the baby's closeness to the primordial pact with God, since "the child's covenant with his Lord is recent, having been born recently, while the older person is more distant [from this contract]."[22] In other words, the saying "Indeed!" (*balā*) to God's "Am I not your Lord?" is fresher and more apparent in the child than in the adult. Gradually this power, so evident among little children, wanes and gives way to a sense of self that appears to have no need of others, an independence and self-sufficiency which adults appear to value highly. People can go to great lengths to protect this relative non-neediness, even if at root it is neither what we are essentially nor in truth what we really desire. How strange it is to be so in need of being without need...

Essential Poverty

While the natural way of life returns the human being willy-nilly to a state of utter indigence in old age ("sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything"[23]), spiritual masters have always held out the possibility of realising a far more profound sense of neediness, through which there is true fulfilment. Indeed Rūmī's *Mathnawī* contains hundreds of lines ramming home the message that such a transformation is possible and necessary for

20 *Mathnawī*, I: 3227-34, trans. Williams 297.

21 *The Admonitions*, XIV, from *The Writings of St Francis of Assisi, trans. Paschal Robinson (London: The Spectator Ltd, 1905),* https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/wosf/wosf03.htm, accessed online 3.10.22.

22 Ibn ʿArabī, *Fusūs al-ḥikam,* Chapter on Moses, ed. Mahmud Kılıç and Abdurrahim Alkış (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2016), 185.

23 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 139 ff.

human happiness, human dignity and human freedom. This neediness is not just an existential fact in the face of the Divine Existence (which might be conveniently accommodated by our notion of self), but something to be most deeply experienced, as a constant re-living of the Divine question, "Am I not your Lord?". In fact one might view it as a return to the state of neediness that appears in an infant, in which we may again hear God's question and respond in our state and acts with the affirmation "Indeed!" (*balā*).

Such an affirmation of praise is one of the meanings embodied in the Qur'ānic verse *O people, you are the poor* (*al-fuqarāʾ*) *towards Allāh; and Allāh, He is the Rich beyond need, the Most Praised* (*al-ghanī al-ḥamīd*) (Q Fāṭir, 35/15). It is precisely this verse that forms the starting point for Ibn ʿArabī's discussion in the chapter devoted to *faqr* in the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and he immediately elevates poverty to its highest level, as the principle underlying the manifestation of God through His Names (in sharp contrast to the way that al-Qushayrī presents it in his *Risāla*, where poverty in this world is a central feature).[24] What is also interesting in his discussion is how he presents poverty as essentially universal and vast, precisely because it is the counterpoint to all the Divine Names, rather than a state of privation or narrowness as it is often discussed in Sufi texts. He observes that just as God is independent and praised through His Names, so are we poor and needy towards His Names.[25]

> And this is why He mentioned the Name [Allāh] which unites [all] the Divine Names... the doorway of poverty and neediness is never crammed due to its vast breadth and the universality of its authority. Neediness is a quality that is avoided,[26] and yet nobody can be free of it, for it is in every needy one in accordance with their reality bestows. It is the sweetest thing obtained by the knower (ʿārif) since it brings him to arrive at the Real and the Real welcomes him.[27]

Ibn ʿArabī notes that this neediness is the principle of all asking in prayer, and then cites the well-known response when Abu Yazīd prayerfully asked God: "With what can I come close to You?", which was: "You come close to Me with that which does not belong to Me: lowliness and neediness (*al-dhilla wa-l-iftiqār*)." He defines the poor one (*faqīr*) as: "one who is in need of everything, but nothing is in need of him – this is the pure servant according to those who realise the Truth (*muḥaqqiqūn*)." Later in the chapter he also observes that the person in the station of essential poverty has no particular need to ask God to fulfil, since he has realised that neediness is essential and "poverty towards Allāh is the root." He also points out that it is different to all other qualities in that it belongs to everything in its state of nonexistence, which "needs" or asks to be made existent, as well as in its state of existence, which "needs" to be continued in existence.

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24 See al-Qushayrī, *Epistle on Sufism,* trans. Alexander Knysh (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007), 280–88. Like Junayd, he also links faqr to taṣawwuf (288–292).

25 This neediness towards each of the Names is spelt out in his *Kashf al-maʿnā,* in which he views each Name through the lens of *taʿalluq* (dependency, neediness for the Name), *taḥaqquq* (realisation of the Name in Him) and *takhalluq* (adoption, assuming the characteristics of the Name): each *taʿalluq* section begins with the words *iftiqāru-ka ilay-Hi* ("You are in need of Him for…").

26 Ar: *mahjūran*, a Qur'ānic term meaning "to be shunned", as in the verse (25: 30): "And the messenger says, 'My Lord, my people have taken this Qurʾān as something to be shunned.'" Although this is the traditional translation and understanding, we may perhaps also understand this verse, following Ibn ʿArabī's allusion, as saying: "My people have taken [hold of] this Qurʾān in/through their state of neediness."

27 *Fut*. II: 263, chapter 162 *fi maʿrifat al-faqr wa asrāri-hi.*

This condition of need (*faqr*), therefore, "is the most universal of stations as a property, but what is to be acquired of this quality as a specific attribution, is that one is needy towards Allāh, not to other than Him."

So while essential poverty is an ontological fact in the face of God, what we may call true poverty is a realisation of the inner nature of the human being, and of all beings, in relation to God. Even though realisation is a divine gift or something "acquired", it needs to be desired and acknowledged in a way that is different to abstinence. As Rūmī puts it in his *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīz,* "Abstinence was saying, 'I understand the secrets through Him'; Poverty was saying, 'I am without heart and turban through Him.'"[28] Here we should emphasise that this meaning of poverty should not be confused with terms denoting humility or submissiveness, such as *khāshiʿ* (Q al-Muʾminūn, 23/1–2, "*Prosperous are the believers, who are humble in their prayers*") or *tawāḍuʿ* (as in the hadith: "*none humbles himself before God but that God raises him*") or *taḍarruʿ* (Q al-Aʿrāf, 7/205, "*Remember your Lord in your soul, humbly and in fear...*"). While these might be described as states of submissiveness of the heart or the result of God's act of revelation, true poverty is grounded in the reality of being. It is this that led Abdullah Bosnevī (d. 1054/1644), the great Akbarian commentator on the *Fuṣūṣ*, to describe the true servant as "one who is realised with total poverty in their essential being (*al-faqr al-kullī al-dhātī*), which is required in beginningless eternity by the Universal Revelation of Being."[29]

In his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, in the chapter on the wisdom of Joseph, Ibn ʿArabī summarises his teaching on total poverty through the imagery of the shadow and its total dependence on the person who casts it:

> The Real only brought the shadows into existence and created them in prostration, inclining to the right and to the left,[30] as indications to you of what you are and what He is. [This is] so that you may be aware of who you are, of your relationship to Him and of His relationship to you, and so that you may know in what way or by which divine reality that which is 'other than God' is qualified by total poverty[31] towards God and by relative poverty because of the need of some parts for others. And also so that you may know in what way or by what reality the Real is qualified by [infinite] Richness above human beings and as being independent of the universes,[32] and how the world is qualified by independence, or rather by the independence of some of its parts from others in one respect, which is the same as them being in need of others [in another respect].[33]

28 *Mystical Poems of Rūmī 2, 270,* trans. Arthur Arberry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 56.

29 Abdullah Bosnevī, *K. Tajallī al-nūr al-mubīn (Istanbul: S*üleymaniye Kütüphane, Carullah 2129/6, fol. 50b), edition and translation by Stephen Hirtenstein (forthcoming).

30 Referring to Q. 16: 48 "Have they not looked at all things God has created, whose shadows fall to the right and to the left, prostrating themselves to God and being lowly?" We may note that a shadow extends to the west at sunrise and to the east at sunset.

31 Ar: al-faqr al-kullī.

32 Ar: *bi-l-ghinā ʿalā al-nās wa-ghanī ʿan al-ʿālamīn*. The unusual phrasing of this sentence reflects a distinction found in the Quran, which stresses God's independence of the universes (or all created beings) (Q 3: 97, 29: 6) and human poverty (*faqr*) in relation to God's Richness (Q 35: 15, 37: 38).

33 The Arabic could also be read in completely the opposite sense as: ".... which is not the same as them being in need of others." This can be interpreted in various ways: for example, water in its frozen state has no need of the sun but in its liquid state does need the warmth of the sun; a shadow depends for its existence on one particular person and is simultaneously independent of any other person.

The Image of Blackness

One of the great images for this total poverty is blackness, understood as lack of light or black light. In the case of Ibn ʿArabī, he speaks of a vision in which

> I entered a darkness and I was told: 'Cast off your clothes and throw away the water and the stones, for you have found [what you were looking for].' I discarded everything I had with me, without seeing where, and I remained [just as I am]. Then He said to me: 'Do you see how excellent this darkness is, how intense its brightness and how clear its light! This darkness is the place from where the lights rise… from this darkness I have brought you into being, to it I make you return and I shall not remove you from it.' Then He showed me an opening like the eye of a needle. I went out towards it and I saw a beautiful radiance and a dazzling light. He said to me: 'Have you seen how intense is the darkness of this light? Stretch out your hand and you will not see it.' I stretched it out and indeed, I did not see it. He said to me: 'This is My Light, in which none but Me can see himself.'[34]

Such a vision of darkness is also described by the 15th-century Akbarian author Shams al-Dīn al-Lāhījī (d. ca. 900/1494), who is reported to have only worn black: "I saw that black light was invading the entire universe. Heaven and earth and everything that was there had wholly become black light, and I was totally absorbed in this light, losing consciousness. Then I came back to myself."[35]

The same theme is taken up and amplified when Ibn ʿArabī discusses the distinctive attribute of one who truly knows (*ʿārif*). He cites the saying of one of his predecessors: "The one who knows has a blackened face in this world and the hereafter", and then explains:

> What he meant by the expression 'the blackened face' is the complete dedication of all his moments, whether in this world or in the hereafter, to the theophanies that the Real manifests to him. According to us, when He reveals Himself to him, the human being sees nothing but himself and his own abode in the mirror of the Real. He is a created being, and given that the created (kawn) is darkness compared to the light of the Real, the human being cannot contemplate anything but his own darkness. The face of a thing is its reality (ḥaqīqa) and its essential being (dhāt).[36]

As this passage makes clear, for the one who knows, the world is the place of Divine Manifestation and Revelation. In illuminating things, the light of God shows them as they are. A person may be said to have reached "enlightenment" according to whatever aspect is illuminated, and this constitutes a heavenly state of happiness, where we see ourselves as having white faces. As Ibn ʿArabī puts it, "Those who are blessed have a white face in this world and the hereafter, for they are the mirror of the Real, whose darkness is obliterated by the light of His Truth." However, the inner face or deeper reality of this is blackness or "poverty".

Neediness and Liberality

At the same time, it is important to clarify what is meant by the adjective *ghanī*, which

34 Ibn ʿArabī, *Mashāhid al-asrār al-qudsiyya: Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries,* trans. Pablo Beneito and Cecilia Twinch (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2001), 33–34.

35 Cited by Henry Corbin in *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978), 112.

36 *Fut.* I: 181.

I have translated as "rich beyond need". It appears very commonly in the Qur'ānic phrase *ghanī ʿan al-ʿālamīn*, which is often translated as "independent of the worlds". However, it does not simply mean "independent", with all the connotations of disinterest that word might have, any more than *faqīr* means "dependent". The imagery suggests a person who possesses unlimited wealth and riches, so much so that they have no need of anyone else to fulfill their desires except in the sense of their wish to shower others with this bounty. Those "others" are in need of receiving the rich one's gifts, hence "poor" in relation to their beneficence. There is, then, an aspect of being *ghanī* that involves giving liberally, as is suggested by the famous hadith qudsi, "I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known…", which is why Ibn ʿArabī specifically describes the Name *al-ghanī* as mentioned in Q 35: 15 (where it is linked with *al-ḥamīd*) as a quality for which He is to be praised.[37] As Ibn ʿArabī writes at the end of his chapter on *faqr*,

> I saw Him, glorified and exalted is He, in a dream, and He said to me: 'Make Me your Trustee (wakīl) in [all] your affairs', so I took Him as my guardian and trustee. And all I saw was pure protection (ʿiṣma) – all praise to Allāh for that! God made us one of the poor towards Him through Him, and when poverty towards Him is through Him, it is the same as riches (ghinā), for He is the Rich and through Him you are needy, so you are rich through Him beyond need of the worlds. So know that![38]

Among the many stories in the *Mathnawī* which illustrate this is the tale of the caliph who was so generous that he surpassed the legendary Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī in liberality ("as need had targeted his door and gate, his fame for giving spread across the world"[39]) and how a poor Bedouin is tormented by his wife to do something about the poverty and hardship they find themselves in. On her advice (after a few pages of typical marital argument!) he decides to visit the sultan: he takes the most precious gift he can find as an offering, a jug of precious (but brackish) water from the desert, thinking the sultan will need it and hoping for his favour in order to relieve their hardship. At the end of his long journey, he is graciously received by the sultan's courtiers, who hide their amusement and treat him with utmost respect, conveying his jug to the king. The king, touched by the sincerity of the Bedouin, fills his pitcher with gold in return, and has a boat made ready to take him back to the desert via the Tigris. This demonstration of sheer munificence, in which the king shows he has absolutely no need for a jar of desert water, puts the poor Bedouin to shame, leaving Rūmī to exclaim: "If he had seen a trickle of God's Tigris, he would have totally destroyed the jar."[40] The imagery is explained by Rūmī throughout the 700 or so verses devoted to the story: the Bedouin is reason, his wife the soul, the sultan the divine self-evidently and his courtiers those who are close to Him, i.e. the saints. In Rūmī's characteristic style of shifting imagery, the material story provides a means for expounding several teachings at once: firstly, the recognition of our inner poverty, our emptiness, with the twin reactions of resignation and acceptance (the rational Bedouin) and yearning to transform this neediness into something worth-

37 *Fut*. II: 264.

38 Ibid.

39 *Mathnawī,* I: 2255 ff. The same story is related in *Jawāmiʿ al-hikāyāt* by ʿAwfi, in terms of a Bedouin who was used to briny water from the desert, came across a stagnant pool and brought a skin filled with its water as his precious gift to the Caliph Måmun in Kufa. See Nicholson, commentary on Book I, 147-8. Might this mention of Hatim al-Tåi be some kind of allusion to Ibn ʿArabī, who was descended from him?

40 *Mathnawī, I: 2877, trans. Williams 266.*

while (the soul-wife); in the second stage of journeying to find the king, bemoaning one's fate is rejected in favour of the importance of directed action, albeit misconceived (bringing the jar of water); the final stage of receiving inordinate wealth demonstrates the real bounty on offer to humanity from the side of Reality. "Everything in the universe is a jug, filled to the brim with wisdom and beauty; it is a droplet of His Beauty's Tigris, so full it cannot be kept under the surface"; "we are the jar, the king and Bedouin; we are *at variance and perverted from it* (Q al-Dhāriyāt, 51/7)";[41] in other words, we behave as if at variance with our own true nature and perverted from our own truth. Yet always Rūmī stresses that the way out is emptiness, poverty and need ("the lack of livelihood propelled that Bedouin towards that court, and riches came his way.")

At the heart of the story we find three "didactic" lines, which may be said to summarise his view of poverty:

> One kind of charity brings beggars forth; the other kind bestows excesses on them.
> So mendicants reflect God's bounteousness, and those with God are consummate in bounty.
> Apart from these two, all are dead indeed – a picture on a veil, not of His court.[42]

Ismāil Ankaravī, the great commentator on the Mathnawī, here uses Akbarian language to explain that the first bounty of "bringing forth beggars" is the *jūd-i* or *fayd-i aqdas*, the Most Holy Effusion in which the possibilities of being are recognised and established within the Divine Knowledge as His infinite Realities, and the second of "bestowing excesses" is the *jūd-i* or *fayd-i muqaddas*, the Holy Effusion in which the possibilities are actualised as givers and receivers. To be brought forth as a beggar, then, is a recognition of one's poverty and a realisation of need at the level of "Am I not your Lord?", and this constitutes the first divine gift, the gift of the possibility of request. The actual giving and receiving of gifts in response to the request is the second act of divine giving, an act of doubled generosity. In addition, Rūmī speaks of a divine seeking, since "Bounty is in need of beggars." and "The Generosity of the generous person is in love with the beggar." The beggar, the poor in spirit, which is the human reality, is needed by the One who is Rich beyond need, which is God, for otherwise how can He show His Bounty? Thus "one kind of charity brings beggars forth…"

Every act of giving may be said to display two levels of need: the need of the giver to give and the need of the receiver to be given; when the giver and receiver are one, then there is also the need for this very possibility of giving to manifest, so that the process of giving and receiving can be realised. This penetrating insight is also shared by Ibn ʿArabī who speaks of it as the "knowledge of poverty toward God through God" and as the need of the Divine Names to manifest their effects in us, which is even greater than our need for them.[43] This reciprocity has many ramifications and is much discussed in Ibn ʿArabī's writing: with regard to a shaykh who is fully realised (*muhaqqiq*), for example, "When he sees that the disciples have

41 *Mathnawī,* I: 2915, trans. Williams 269.

42 *Mathnawī*, I: 2761-3, trans. Williams 256. Nicholson (p. 150) translates as: "In one case, his (the giver's) bounty makes the beggar manifest, whilst in the other case he bestows on the beggars more (than they need). Beggars, then, are the mirror of God's bounty, and they that are with God are the Absolute Bounty."

43 *Fut.* IV: 81. See William Chittick, Self-Disclosure of God (Albany NY: State University of New York, 1998), 33. It is one of the implications of the Divine saying "O David, My yearning for them is even greater than their yearning for Me", which is cited in the Chapter of Muhammad in Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam.

need of him because of what he has from God, he thanks God for that, since God has made the disciples poor towards him such that through their poverty towards him they make firm his poverty toward God."[44] Gone is the danger of a misplaced independence and self-glorification by virtue of being a knowledgeable master. The one who is truly realised in God knows that he never leaves his essential poverty towards Him, and sees all that he apparently has as belonging to God. To be depended upon by others in this case strengthens his dependence on God. The dialectic is clear: to be rich through God implies being poor and needy towards Him.[45] In this light Rūmī's response that "many travellers depend on his (Ṣadr al-Dīn's) care while no-one is dependent on me" can be seen as much more than a simple accident of wealth or generosity: it is praise of such service towards God and inherent poverty before Him.

In his *Discourses* Rūmī speaks again of the Divine requirement to manifest, when someone (unnamed) speaks about what at first seems like a curious male fantasy: the innumerable gorgeous women of Khwarizm and how no man in that country is a lover, since as soon as their heart fixes on one woman, another more beautiful appears to ravish them. Rūmī's response to such bewilderment is succinct and elevates the discourse to the meaning of love and the demands of Beauty:

> If there are no lovers in Khwarizm, yet Khwarizm must have its lovers, seeing that there are countless beauties in that land. That Khwarizm is poverty, wherein are countless mystical beauties and spiritual forms. Each one you alight upon and are fixed on, another shows its face so that you forget the former one, and so on ad infinitum. So let us be lovers of true poverty, wherein such beauties are to be found.[46]

This constant witnessing of the Divine manifestations of Beauty by virtue of realisation of true poverty is a hallmark teaching of both Rūmī and Qūnawī. It is the meaning of the first Beatitude quoted earlier: "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This kingdom is not a possession like others, but a witnessing of Truth, of "countless mystical beauties" descending into the vision of the lover-gnostic. Those who have realised their essential poverty towards God know themselves to be helpless always, poor and utterly incapable, whether they appear in incapacity or capacity, since He is the One who acts towards them or through them.[47]

Poverty and Bounty

In returning to our story of day and night and king and *faqir*, we may see how two apparently opposed points of view are summarised in Rūmī's statement "mendicants reflect God's bounteousness, and those with God are consummate in bounty." To reflect is to have nothing in and of oneself, like a mirror which only shows the image of the person who looks into it; to be consummate in bounty is to possess all things through Him and to be a mercy to the worlds. Both sides exist within human perfection: being rich as His representative (*khalīfa*) by virtue of His manifestation through us, and being poor as His servant (*ʿabd*) by virtue of our manifestation through Him. In the first case He is

44 *Fut. III:* 19, quoted in William Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge (Albany NY: State University of New York, 1989), 273.

45 See *Fut*. II: 263-64, where Ibn ʿArabī remarks that being poor towards God is a higher degree than being rich through Him, and is an essential quality, which is never removed. "He is the Rich beyond need, and you are poor/needy through Him, so that you are rich through Him beyond need of the universes."

46 *Discourses of Rūmī,* trans. Arthur Arberry (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993) 167.

47 See Rūmī, *Discourses, 25.*

manifest as rich and we are hidden as poor; in the second, we are manifest as poor and needy, and He is hidden as rich. Bearing in mind that the day is a symbol of the manifest, the exterior, and the night a symbol of the non-manifest, the interior, we can view the conversation of the two Konyan masters as an example of this dual mirror-principle: the one a king by the daytime of manifestation and a beggar in the night of the interior, the other a manifest beggar and a hidden king.

In today's world, no-one doubts the importance of striving to eradicate material poverty. Hand in hand with that effort should also come the other fruit of a genuinely human vision: a celebration of Divine Bounty through realisation, a recognition that spiritual principles govern all spheres of life, and a deep awareness that wherever there is inner need, there is also that which can satisfy need. As Rūmī so graphically expresses it, "We sought everywhere Solomon's ring, peace be upon him; we found it in poverty."[48]

I would like to end with some lines from two poems by Ibn ʿArabī that contrast poverty, not with riches (*ghinā*), but with Divine Bounty (*jūd*), the very principle of existence (*wujūd* = *w-jūd*).

> If there were no [original] Love (ḥubb), constantly loving friendship (widād) would not be known;
>
> if there were no poverty, the Bounteous One (jawād) would not be worshipped…[49]

In the second poem, the connection between *faqr* and the fullest acceptance of God's Bounty, which is expressed in the creative act is most striking:

Bounty (jūd) is proper for Him, and
poverty is proper for us,
so be through Him – do not be except
for Him and for us.
There is nothing in existence apart
from poverty, and
it doesn't have an opposite that
could be called riches.
Where is wealth and independence when
I essentially accept whatever
He desires to bring into being, and
created existence is from me?[50]

48 Ibid. 137.

49 *Dīwān Ibn al-ʿArabī*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Manṣūb (Damascus: Dār Nīnawā, 1442/2021), 1: 498, from the section on *al-widād* in chapter 558 in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (4: 260). For the connection of the Name Wadūd to the idea of circularity that springs from Love, see Pablo Beneito and Stephen Hirtenstein, *Patterns of Contemplation* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2021), 96–100.

50 Ibid. 2: 421.

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