

# An Interview with Abdel Baki Meftah, Algerian Master of Akbarian Teachings

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*This interview seeks to introduce English-speaking audiences to the life and work of Abdel Baki Meftah, a major contemporary interpreter of Ibn ‘Arabi and his school. To date, he has published nearly thirty books in Arabic on Ibn ‘Arabi, which include expositions of his life, in-depth studies of particular themes and concepts in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, commentaries upon some of Ibn ‘Arabi’s key works, and a four-volume compilation and discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufi readings of verses from the Quran. In addition to writing more than ten other books on Sufi concepts, important Sufi orders and practices, and the thought of Amir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri, Meftah has also translated into Arabic ten of René Guénon’s writings and compiled two collections of his essays. The interview, which is presented here in condensed form, was conducted in Arabic by Hany Ibrahim and Mohammed Rustom in August 2021 and translated into English by Omar Edaibat.*



**Could you please tell us about your early life, your studies, and the teachers who influenced you? Also, when and where did you come to discover Ibn ‘Arabi?**

This *faqir* was born on April 9, 1952 in Guemar, a small town located in the province of Wadi Souf which is in the south-eastern desert of Algeria. It is there that I received my early training in the Quran in addition to completing my elementary and middle school education. My secondary schooling was at the Teachers’ Training College in Constantine. My university education was at the University of Algiers, where I majored in physics, graduating in 1975, and was then enlisted with the national military service for two years. I subsequently taught physics, chemistry, and mathematics at the Algerian Petroleum Institute in the town of Hassi Messaoud for six years. For

the following twenty years, I served as a secondary school teacher in Guemar, and then took early retirement.

With respect to Sufism, my family's ancestors were historically affiliated with the Qadiri Order/Path (*tariqa*). However, my great-great-grandfather took the Sufi Path from Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (d.1815)<sup>1</sup> in 1806. He was one of his earliest disciples in addition to nine others from our hometown, and the shaykh authorized them to construct a Sufi lodge (*zawiya*) there, which was built in 1809. This was the first known Tijani Sufi lodge in the world. This Sufi lodge has remained a centre of daily circles of *dhikr*, in addition to hosting other spiritual, scholarly, and social activities. Thus, since the time of my great-great-grandfather, my family has inherited the Tijani rites, and all my family today are actively engaged in and committed to its litanies and practices. I continue to live next to the Tijani Sufi lodge, where I attend its gatherings of *dhikr*.

As a young boy, I was able to explore the most important works of the Tijani Path, especially the *Jawahir al-ma'ani*, *al-Jami'*, and *al-Rimah*. I found frequent quotations by Ibn 'Arabi in *Mizab al-rahma*, and my father, himself an imam and a man of knowledge, was an admirer of the shaykh and was well-read in his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*. One day he told me that the library of the Tijani Sufi lodge next to our home contained one of the earliest published copies of the *Futuhat* in four large volumes. Upon hearing this, I borrowed it and read it, one volume at a time. I must have been around fourteen or fifteen years old at that time. Around then, I also read the *Kitab al-Mawaqif* (*The Book of Haltings*) by Amir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri (d.1883) and found it to be an extension of Ibn 'Arabi's knowledge as laid out in the *Futuhat* and the *Fusus al-hikam*. Among other works in Sufism, I also read the writings of the 'Alawi-Darqawi Order.

As I continued my secondary school education in Constantine and then undergraduate studies in Algiers, I read many other Sufi works, such as the writings of al-Ghazali, al-Sha'rani, and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili. I also read many other classics of the tradition, including other texts by Ibn 'Arabi, Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, and the major figures of the school of Ibn 'Arabi. In fact, I still keep abreast of any new studies

1. Death dates in this interview are only provided for individuals who lived between the 19th and 21st centuries.

that come out which relate to members of this school, as well as new editions of their writings.

**When and how did you come to take the Sufi Path, and what role did Ibn ‘Arabi play in your spiritual journey?**

On account of my upbringing and being raised in a family immersed in Sufism, I knew that the first step to being engaged in the more practical dimension of spiritual wayfaring, which can never be satisfied by merely tending to the theoretical domain and reading books, is to be initiated into the Sufi Path by a living master (*shaykh*), an authorized spiritual educator who has obtained a clear and forthright sanction from the Muhammadan Presence to guide disciples. Thus, from my childhood, I searched for such a master in all the local Sufi orders that were known to us in Algeria (and whose Sufi lodges are quite abundant). I was able to find the object of my desire in Shaykh Muhammad Bilqa’id al-Tilimsani (d.1998), who was the master of the Hibriyya-Darqawiyya-Shadhiliyya Order. He was also the one who reinforced my earlier connection with Ibn ‘Arabi. I took the Path from Shaykh Muhammad Bilqa’id in 1973 when I was still an undergraduate student. He was initiated into the Sufi Path by Muhammad al-Hibri (d.1939), who received the Path from his father al-Hajj Muhammad al-Hibri (d.1899).

Shaykh Muhammad Bilqa’id was also the master of the famous Egyptian scholar Muhammad Mitwalli al-Sha’rawi (d.1998), who headed al-Azhar’s Egyptian delegation in Algeria during the sixties and early seventies. Having been initiated into Sufism by Shaykh Bilqa’id in the late 1960s, he entered into spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) in 1972, invoking the Divine Name Allah.

**The Sufi Path of course necessitates that there be an authentic chain of transmission (*sanad*) that connects travellers on the Path back to the Path’s founding master, and which ultimately goes back to the Prophet himself. Is there such a chain of transmission that leads back to Ibn ‘Arabi? And if such a lineage exists, what is it?**

In a sense, yes. There are in fact numerous chains of transmission, which some of the following scholars have noted:

1. Shaykh Abu l-Wafa’ al-Taftazani (d.1984): in his study entitled ‘al-Tariqa al-Akbariyya’, published in *al-Kitab al-tadhkari* (ed. Ibrahim

Madkur), he mentions some of the notable masters of the Akbarian lineage and its chains of transmission.

2. The famous Moroccan Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hayy al-Kattani (d.1962): in his rich work entitled *Fahras al-faharis*, he cites chains of transmission from the ‘*Uqud al-asanid* of Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad Amin al-Safarjalani al-Dimashqi, and the *Bayt al-siddiq* by Shaykh Muhammad Tawfiq al-Bakri, who was Chief Master of Sufi Orders in Egypt in the early 1890s.<sup>2</sup>
3. Osman Yahia (d.1997): in the introduction to his *Histoire et classification de l’œuvre d’Ibn ‘Arabi*.
4. Sayyid Ayman Hamdi, one of the Akbarian masters in Egypt today: in his book on the topic entitled *al-Tariqa al-akbariyya*, published several years ago.

I believe that these chains of transmission primarily pertain to works that are ascribed to Ibn ‘Arabi, the most significant being the *Futuhat*, while other chains of transmission pertain to Ibn ‘Arabi’s well-known litanies, supplications, and prayers upon the Prophet, such as *al-Dawr al-a‘la*, *Awrad ayyam wa-layali al-usbu‘*, *Tawajjuh al-huruf*, and *al-Salat al-akbariyya*, among others. However, the accuracy of each of these works and their ascription to the shaykh need to be authenticated, for it is known that hundreds of treatises and texts that are published or in manuscript form have been wrongly ascribed to him.

What I see is that Ibn ‘Arabi’s spiritual path and method of training cannot be restricted to the usual Sufi lineages (*silsilas*), even if their chains of transmission are authenticated. This is because Ibn ‘Arabi’s provisions that come from the Presence of Ahmad are far too expansive to be restricted to a particular Sufi Path. Indeed, his reach is much more universal. Among those who belong to a living Sufi Path, he chooses those who, in the presence of their living masters, have the preparedness for spiritual knowledge. In some instances, this selection may even apply to those outside the conventional Sufi Paths. Specifically, this selection pertains to those whose spiritual training consists of invoking the Supreme Name Allah, since Ibn

2. The Chief Master of Sufi Orders (*Shaykh mashayikh al-turuq al-sufiyya*) is a state-sanctioned position designating the chief overseer of organized Sufism in Egypt.

‘Arabi’s method of spiritual training revolves around this Name, as can be gleaned from his numerous writings.

**When it comes to expounding the profound meanings to be found in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, your books have been most beneficial for contemporary readers. Which of your publications would you consider to be the most important for students and researchers of Ibn ‘Arabi?**

I think that the first work I would recommend is the one entitled *Khatm al-Qur’an: Muhyi l-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (The Seal of the Quran: Ibn ‘Arabi)*, which is now under the title *Sirat al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyi l-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (A Biography of Ibn ‘Arabi)*. This work is helpful in acquainting the reader with his biography and clarifying that he was not, as many believe to be the case, the architect of the philosophical doctrine of the ‘oneness of being’ (*wahdat al-wujud*) or of any other intellectual theory; rather, he was a complete (*kamil*) Muhammadan inheritor, and his every living breath was drawn from the Quran. God elected him for the rank of the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship (*walaya*), as he explains in a couplet that is written on the wall of the entrance to his noble shrine in Damascus:

For every age, there is one who takes up the Seal,  
And for the rest of the ages, I am that one.

Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi was the only person to have replied to al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi’s challenge when he exhaustively responded in Chapter 73 of the *Futuh* to all of Tirmidhi’s questions posed in his *Khatm al-awliya’ (The Seal of the Friends of God)*, leaving no more to be said. The annals of Sufism are witness to the fact that no other person came after Ibn ‘Arabi who could offer explications of spiritual realities that surpass the bounties bestowed upon him, although some of the sages have helped to further articulate and outline aspects of his more general statements. After familiarizing oneself with the biography, it would be preferable to read the works in which I attempt to clarify the hidden Quranic keys to Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, such as *al-Maraji’ al-Qur’aniyya li-abwab al-Futuh al-Makkiyya (The Quranic Sources for the Chapters of the Futuh)*.

**Those familiar with your writings have noted your strong focus and preoccupation with numerology. Given your background as a teacher of mathematics and Sufi metaphysics, could you comment on the importance and significance of numbers for the comprehension and appreciation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings?**

The Quranic bases for the science of numerology are verses such as ‘And He keeps a numbered count of all things’ (Q.72:28), and ‘Naught is there, but that its treasures lie with Us, and We do not send it down, save in a known measure’ (Q.15:21).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, all the acts and rites of the sacred law are ruled numerically due to the wisdom and the mysteries associated with them, and Ibn ‘Arabi has shared some glimpses of these in the chapters on the acts of worship in the first section of the *Futuhat* (Chapters 68–72), in addition to other books. At the same time, throughout Ibn ‘Arabi’s literary corpus there are hundreds of instances in which he applies numbers and their relationships to the letters and the Divine Names, articulating their mysteries and symbolic significance. He also devoted specific works to this topic, as well as a large and profound chapter of the *Futuhat*, namely Chapter 2. Ibn ‘Arabi deliberately placed this chapter close to the beginning of the *Futuhat* to ensure the vital necessity of assimilating these teachings for whoever seeks to access Akbarian wisdom.

In addition to citing the view of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi to the effect that the knowledge of numerology is reserved for a select number of God’s Friends, Ibn ‘Arabi articulates the importance of this knowledge in Chapters 20, 26, and 198 of the *Futuhat*, as well as in some of his answers to al-Tirmidhi’s questions in Chapter 73 (questions 39–42). In Chapter 109, for example, he states that the number of stations and mysteries of every Divine Name are proportionate to the sum of the numerical value of its letters. The shaykh states this in Chapter 109 because the number 109 itself has a basic and far-reaching significance in the world of letters and their numerical values, some of which has been explained in my book *al-Sharh al-Qur’ani li-Kitab al-Tajalliyyat li-Ibn ‘Arabi* (A Quranic Explanation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Kitab al-Tajalliyyat*).

3. Translations from the Quran are taken from Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: 2015).

As for the claim in the question that there is a ‘strong focus’ on numerology in my writings, it is a bit of an exaggeration, for I have only highlighted a few aspects of Ibn ‘Arabi’s knowledge of this science, particularly in my most recent book, *Mafatih ‘ilm asrar al-huruf ‘inda Ibn ‘Arabi wa-‘lam al-sufiyya* (*Keys to the Mysteries of Letterism in Ibn ‘Arabi and the Luminaries of Sufism*), and in the final section of my book, *al-Mafatih al-wujudiyya wa l-Qur’aniyya li-Fusus al-hikam* (*Ontological and Quranic Keys to the Fusus al-hikam*).

**Many years ago, you pointed out to us that to properly comprehend the *Futuhāt* one must be very intimate with the Quran. Could you explain this point further?**

This statement applies to the majority of the shaykh’s works, indeed, to all of them, as he himself has explicitly stated in many of his writings. In Chapter 366 of the *Futuhāt* (which is related to *Surat al-Kahf*, the eighteenth *sura* of the Quran), he famously stated that everything he has written comes from the sacred presence of the Quran and its infinite treasures. To be sure, my books on Ibn ‘Arabi amount to nothing more than expositions of the Quranic roots underlying his worldview.

**Among your valuable writings is a work in four volumes that contains expositions of and helpful insights into Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufi commentaries upon verses from the Quran. Could you describe the structure and arrangement of this book?**

In this work I attempted to put together an exposition of the shaykh’s explanations of Quranic verses as culled from his writings, particularly the *Futuhāt*, and especially Sections 4–6, which relate to esoteric exegeses of the Quran. I organized the book following Ibn ‘Arabi’s arrangement of the chapters in the fourth section of the *Futuhāt*, wherein each chapter is dedicated to a specific Quranic *sura*, beginning with the Quran’s last *sura* and ending with its first. It should here be noted that in the first printed edition of this book there are numerous typographical errors (the same is true of my other works).

Among your publications are several valuable works on René Guénon (d.1951), including translations of many of his books into Arabic. Could you discuss Guénon's significance for contemporary readers of Ibn 'Arabi in particular, and the Sufi tradition in general?

I discovered Guénon's writings when I was a university student, so at around the age of twenty. At that time, I endeavoured to purchase and read all of his books. I also read the writings of those influenced by him, particularly the distinguished authorities and scholars Michel Valsan (d.1974), Titus Burckhardt (d.1984), Frithjof Schuon (d.1998), Martin Lings (d.2005), Jean-Louis Michon (d.2013), and their students.

I was quite amazed by the breadth of Guénon's outward and inward knowledge and his penetrating insights, the universality of his perception, its comprehensive anchoring in metaphysics, and his tasting (*dhawq*) of these realities. Just as I believe that the greatest unveiler of spiritual realities after the Prophets is Ibn 'Arabi, so too do I think that the greatest spiritual figure to have come from the west is René Guénon. Indeed, his explication of metaphysical doctrines perfectly accords with Ibn 'Arabi's perspective, which is not surprising, since there is only one Reality.

Among Guénon's writings, those that I found to be most beneficial were *The Crisis of the Modern World* and *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, both of which I have translated into Arabic. I started translating Guénon's works at the request of his son 'Abd al-Wahid, who lives in Cairo and who was initiated into Sufism by Shaykh 'Abd al-Latif Bilqa'id, the son of my master Muhammad Bilqa'id.

I also authored a concise book on Guénon that was published in Algeria several years ago: *Shahid al-haqiqa: al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, René Guénon (Witness to Reality: Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya, René Guénon)*. In addition to providing very brief synopses of each of his works, in this book I communicate what three highly influential scholars and authorities in both traditional Islamic knowledge and the modern sciences have written about him. These authorities are the Egyptian Grand Mufti 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud (d.1978), the encyclopaedic scholar and luminary of Afghan origin Najm Oud Dine Bammate (d.1985), and the contemporary Iranian scholar and Sufi philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr.



As I explain in my book, anyone who carefully investigates the major intellectual movements and diverse spiritual orientations in the modern western world will find that Guénon has exercised a most profound influence upon the major cultural circles and elites of the 20th and 21st centuries, including sincere seekers after the truth. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration on my part to state that Guénon is a pivotal figure for the spiritual and intellectual development of the western world in the 20th century. His writings and their influence upon the spiritual and intellectual scene in the western world led to a tremendous shift, allowing it to rise beyond the darkness of its materialism, scientism, and pettiness and into the light of greater openness towards the universal spiritual heritage of the world's diverse nations and religions. Needless to say, many have followed Guénon in his embrace of Islam and adoption of a Sunni Sufi spiritual Path; and those who did not have nevertheless been influenced by him in returning to belief in God, His Messengers, the revelations that were sent to them, and the need to uphold their religious heritage, all the while viewing Islam in a reverential light.

**You have written valuable expositions of some very well-known prayers upon the Prophet. What compelled you to write on this topic?**

I have authored two works concerning the Muhammadan Presence. The first of these is a book entitled *al-Kawkab al-durri fi sharh al-salat 'ala al-Nabi al-ummi* (*The Shining Star: An Explanation of the Prayer upon the Prophet*), and the second is *al-Kamalat al-Muhammadiyya wa l-insan al-kamil fi ru'yat Ibn 'Arabi* (*Muhammadan Perfection and the Perfect Man in the Vision of Ibn 'Arabi*). What compelled me to write these works is the simple fact that travelling the spiritual Path in Islam is centred around becoming fully realized in the Muhammadan Presence, and the differences in degree that are found among the Friends of God relate directly to their different shares of this realization. In Chapter 540 of the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi says that his vision of God had come to him through the Muhammadan form, which is the most complete kind of vision that a person can obtain. He then encourages people to seek this vision through investigating the *Futuhat* and through oral transmission.

**As we reach the end of this interview, could you please offer words of counsel for lovers of Ibn ‘Arabi?**

There are certain conditions in terms of knowledge and spiritual maturity that must be met before one can step into Ibn ‘Arabi’s world. And, while the theoretical domain of Sufism is certainly important for the shaykh and many of the realized Sufi masters, an exclusive focus on it may well veil a seeker from the Goal. This is because beneficial knowledge, according to the masters, entails action. Without action, one does not have true knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In the beginning, practical realization can only be obtained through spiritual wayfaring under the guidance of a living master firmly rooted on the Path. The upshot of this discussion is to be found in Ibn ‘Arabi’s own words, where he says that people will be brought before God on the Day of Resurrection not in accordance with their theoretical knowledge of God and the spiritual Path, but rather in accordance with their realized knowledge of Him.

4. For a lucid exposition of this point with respect to Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, see William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, eds. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: 2012), Chapter 10.