

# Translator's Introduction

The subject of *Ma'rifat ar-Rūh (Knowing the Spirit)*—the divine Spirit (*rūh*) and the process of spiritual perfection of the human soul (also one of the key meanings of *rūh* here)<sup>1</sup>—is of intimate interest to every human being. And what Ostad Elahi, its author, has to say here about that subject has rarely been presented in such clear and explicit terms. However, the technical language and formal style he used in this work reflected the complex traditions of later Islamic philosophy, spirituality, and theology familiar to his original audience of traditionally educated scholars, so that today many of his assumptions and allusions tailored to that traditionally bilingual (Persian and Arabic) scholarly audience are difficult to follow even for contemporary readers fluent in Persian. This introduction is intended to provide the considerable amount of essential contextual and background information most readers today will need to appreciate the author's universal intentions and meanings, beginning with (I) a brief overview of his life and works, moving on to outline (II) those particular assumptions and expectations of his original learned audience that need further explanation for today's readers. A final section (III) then briefly highlights some of those more original developments in spirituality, psychology, and spiritual ethics that help account for the ongoing contemporary relevance of this work, especially in the fields of comparative spirituality and philosophy, psychology, and the study of religion.

Readers who wish to move on immediately to discovering Ostad Elahi's key ideas, in his own words, should note that he has greatly facilitated their task by carefully underlining in each chapter those few short phrases (given in *italic boldface* in this translation) where he explicitly summarized the essence of his own personal understanding of this immense subject.<sup>2</sup> Most of those summary passages are in the form of highly condensed allusions that are clearly meant to be the subject of extended meditation and reflection, to be verified and illustrated above all in light of the reader's own experiences and spiritual

intelligence. Throughout this book, which the author repeatedly tells us he intentionally composed at a condensed and highly abstract level of metaphysical concision, he carefully leaves it to each reader to supply the indispensable (and necessarily highly personal) probative experiences and "spiritual phenomenology" that alone can translate these philosophical and theological concepts and symbols into actual *knowing*.

That guiding intention is explicitly signaled in the opening word of Ostad Elahi's title: *ma'rifa* is the technical term traditionally used in Islamic spirituality to specify the necessarily individual, active awareness that is the accomplished fruit of direct, personal spiritual experience and contemplation: that is, the *realized* state of actual spiritual insight and understanding, not the more abstract, conceptual forms of "knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Ostad Elahi's intention here, as he makes clear from the very start, is to awaken each reader's inner awareness and deeper understanding of that which constitutes what we really are. Reminding us of that, his first highlighted passage, at the very beginning of this book, stresses that it was composed as an answer to "the requests of those who are following a path of spiritual guidance."

### I. Ostad Elahi's Life and Works

Nūr 'Alī Elāhī—or Ostad Elahi ("Master" Elahi), the honorific by which he is most widely known today—was born on September 11, 1895 in Jeyhunabad, a village in western Iran.<sup>4</sup> The outward course of his life, as he described it in autobiographical conversations and remarks during his later years,<sup>5</sup> falls into three distinct periods: his childhood and youth, entirely devoted to traditional forms of ascetic and religious training; his active public career, for almost thirty years, as a prosecutor, magistrate, and high-ranking judge; and the period of his retirement, more openly devoted to spiritual teaching and writing (including the composition of *Knowing the Spirit*), when he became well known as a religious thinker, philosopher, and theologian, as well as a musician. Ostad Elahi's own later description of those outward events, summarized in a few of his sayings quoted further on, helps bring out the inner connections between those different periods of his life and the broader lessons he was able to draw from those very different activities and experiences.

#### *Childhood and Youth*

Ostad Elahi's father, Hajj Ni'mat Jayhunabadi (1873–1920), was a prolific writer and mystical poet, from a locally prominent family.<sup>6</sup> Among

his many writings was his major work *The Book of Kings of the Truth*,<sup>7</sup> an immense poetic compendium of traditional spiritual teachings. From early childhood on, Ostad Elahi led an ascetic, secluded life of rigorous spiritual discipline under his father's watchful supervision. He also received the general classical education of that time, with its special focus on religious and ethical instruction as the foundation of his training. It was during those formative years of his youth, completely devoted to contemplation and study, that he developed the basic foundations of his later philosophic and spiritual thinking. In his own words:

I began fasting and spiritual exercises at the age of nine, and kept them up continuously for almost twelve years, taking only a few days between the forty-day periods of spiritual retreat. Usually my evening meal to break the fast was only bread and vinegar. I almost never went out of the retreat house, and I only associated with the seven or eight dervishes who were allowed to enter it. When I finally left the retreat house at the end of those twelve years and came into contact with other people, I couldn't imagine that it was even possible for human beings to tell lies.<sup>8</sup>

The following story poignantly conveys both the special role of his father's guidance in that initial stage of his spiritual discipline and the lasting lessons that he was able to draw from that intense period of spiritual training:

Ordinarily during my childhood I was always involved in spiritual exercises. Only occasionally did we have a few days' break between two forty-day periods of spiritual retreat and fasting. During one of those periods of spiritual retreat, someone brought me two strings of delicious dried figs. I set them aside specially for myself, and each night I broke my fast in a state of intense desire for those figs; after breaking the fast I would take great pleasure in eating a few of them, until the forty days were over. On the last night of the retreat I had a dream in which I saw each person's spiritual exercises being recorded. I saw my own as a wall that I had built with beautiful bricks, except that a corner of each brick was broken off and incomplete. . . . The next day my mother, as she usually did, asked my father's permission to prepare an offering meal. "No," my father

replied, "because this person's spiritual exercise is imperfect, he'll have to perform another forty days of fasting and retreat, as a fine, so that his mind won't be filled with figs." The point of this is that the essential condition for spiritual exercise and fasting is not just doing without food. Rather, the person traveling the spiritual path must always have their attention on the Source and must cut their attachments to everything else. Otherwise, there are plenty of people who go without eating something. (AH, 1877)

Ostad Elahi's lifelong devotion to spiritual music, and in particular his mastery of the *tanbūr* (a lutelike stringed instrument especially used for gatherings of religious music and prayer), also date from his early childhood: "There are two things to which I've always unsparingly given my time: one is the *tanbūr* and the other is traveling the spiritual Path."<sup>9</sup> The following story illustrates not only the role of music already in Ostad Elahi's childhood, but also the special inner affinity with nature and other creatures which was a distinctive trait of his character throughout his life:

When I was a child, they brought me a partridge one day. That partridge loved the sound of the *tanbūr*. As soon as I picked up my instrument, the bird would sit right next to me. And once I started playing she would become intoxicated by the music and begin to sing, gripping my hand and pecking at it with her beak; that state of drunkenness made her completely wild. At night, the partridge slept on a shelf in my room. Early one morning, when I wanted to go back to sleep, she began to sing. I grumbled at her to be quiet; and immediately she lowered her head sadly and stopped singing. From that day on, whenever the partridge woke up in the early morning, she would stand at the foot of my bed and pull softly on the covers, cooing softly. If I didn't react, after two or three tries she understood that I was still sleeping and went away. But if I said to her "Mmmh, what a pretty voice!" she would begin to sing. (AH, vol. 2, 162)

While the outward course of Ostad Elahi's life was eventually to take him away from this purely contemplative, traditional way of life, he always continued to acknowledge the foundational role of this early period of spiritual discipline and retreat and his father's guidance during that time:

My mother was anxious about my worldly education, and she always used to ask my father: "So when is he going to do his studies?" My father replied: "As long as his domineering self (*nafs*) hasn't awakened, let him complete his spiritual training, so that it won't be able to have an effect on him. After that he'll study." Things turned out exactly as my father had predicted. I began my spiritual training when I was nine, and that course of spiritual discipline lasted for twelve years. After that I began to study, and desires and passions no longer had any effect on me. (AH, 1964)

### *Professional Life and Judicial Career*

Some ten years after his father's death in 1920, Ostad Elahi left his spiritual retreat and eventually settled in Tehran, where he worked in the Registry Office and began to study civil law. This radical change of life was a sharp break with the local tradition, which would have destined him to an entirely contemplative way of life. This change of life, as he later explained, was necessary for him in order to deepen his thinking and to test his ethical and religious principles in the face of all the difficult demands of social and professional life.

God made me enter the public administration and government work despite my own aversion for that. He made me become a judge by force and gave me difficult judicial assignments. But afterwards I discovered that in each of those posts were concealed thousands of points of wisdom, such that even a multitude of philosophers and sages gathered together couldn't have designed such plans. (AH, 1966)

In 1933, Ostad Elahi successfully completed his studies at the national school for judicial officials. His professional abilities and sense of equity and good judgment were quickly recognized, so that he was invariably entrusted with responsibility for the most difficult assignments. A number of dramatic incidents came to demonstrate the truth of his later observation, "When I was a judge I was always prepared to be permanently dismissed rather than hand down a single judgment contrary to what was right and just" (AH, 2037). For almost thirty years he was appointed to positions of increasing responsibility throughout the country, sometimes as public prosecutor or examining magistrate, and eventually as an associate justice and then president of the Court of Appeals.

Throughout this period of his career as a magistrate, Ostad Elahi continued to devote a great deal of time to his personal studies and research, especially in the areas of philosophy and theology. Although we know little about the unfolding course of his thought during those years, it is clear that this period was extremely productive and filled with all sorts of experiences that richly nourished his studies and helped him to elaborate his later works. One of the stories he later recounted from that period vividly illustrates the broader spiritual lessons he drew from the experiences of that time:

During the time I was an investigative magistrate in Shiraz, I hadn't brought my family along with me. I rented part of a house; the owner occupied one side of the house, and I lived on the other side. One night a special spiritual state came over me, and I wanted to pass the night in solitude and seclusion, concentrating on prayer and meditation and my own spiritual state. The owner of the house had invited lots of people, and it was getting noisy. . . . I shut my door and opened my window facing the street, but there were two porters just outside beneath the window, who were busy discussing their problems. So I closed the window and went up on the roof, but there were already two women up there talking. I had to climb down, and I went off to visit a local saint's shrine. The guardian of that shrine was an upright and respected dervish. "I'm going into your room and I want to concentrate on my spiritual state," I told him. "Please don't let anyone come in and disturb my retreat." He agreed, so I went on into his room, still wanting to devote myself to that spiritual state. Just at that moment two women came up and began to joke around with that guardian, who was more than a hundred years old. I was at the end of my rope. I came out of the room and asked them to leave the dervish alone, but it turned out they wanted to chat with me too! In short, that special state of mine disappeared; and no matter what I did I wasn't able to concentrate. "O Lord," I said, "so you're still testing me? Well by God, it's up to You. Thy will be done!"

Later on, in the spiritual world, they told me that the aim of all this was to prevent me from secluding myself, because I'd recently been a little too withdrawn, and that I

ought to participate in social occasions in accordance with my profession. It's not right to try to withdraw from society. Instead you must go out into society while still staying true to your self. . . . To be in society and still remain moral, that's what counts. (AH, 1924)

Throughout this period, spiritual music continued to have a very important place in Ostad Elahi's life. He was soon acknowledged by musical specialists to be a great virtuoso of the *tanbūr*, and he enriched its repertoire by composing many original musical pieces of his own. This musical practice and creation was always integrally connected with his wider spiritual life, as one can see in such remarks as the following: "I'm always thinking of my master. In music, whenever I play a piece or a melody I've learned from someone, I say a prayer for that person if they're still alive; and if they're dead, I ask God's mercy for them" (AH, 1950).

In his lessons and oral teachings given later in life, Ostad Elahi often illustrated his points with anecdotes drawn from this period, in a way that suggests how he was able to discover profound spiritual lessons in the "ordinary" encounters and incidents each day brings. As he once put it, "It is in everyday life that I've learned the most lessons about the underlying order of the universe. This world becomes a place for spiritual edification once we discover how to draw those lessons from it—even from the flight of a mosquito." The following memorable story is a typical example:

One day, during the time I was head of the court in Jahrom, I was outside of town when I saw a very beautiful orchard and fields out in the middle of the desert. I asked whose it was, and they told me: "It belongs to a person who started out with absolutely nothing and has now come to this point. One day he was passing by there when he noticed some moisture under the rocks on the surface. He dug down a little deeper with his walking stick and saw that the wetness increased. With a great deal of toil and trouble he constructed an irrigation tunnel, and now he's been busy with that for some twenty years." Later I met that man, and I was very friendly and encouraging with him. As he described himself: "When I first came here I was alone and without any money. I had just enough to buy a bucket and a shovel, but with a lot of hard work I was able to channel the water, and now I've reached this point." All those

orchards and fields he had were the result of this principle of persistence and perseverance. (AH, 1936)

Another similar personal story, from somewhat later in his life, also illustrates the sense of humor that was always one of his distinctive traits of character:

Last night I woke up at midnight as usual for my nightly prayers and devotions. But because I was feeling slightly ill I acted a bit lazy and said to myself: "I'll pray tomorrow morning," and I went back to sleep. Of course the next morning I performed my prayers, and then I began to do my exercises. Now I had never dropped one of the exercise weights before, but one of those weights slipped out of my hand and fell right on my toes. It hurt for an hour. God had reprimanded me to exactly the same extent as I'd been lazy with Him—there was something almost comical about it! I was extremely happy about that incident, and I bowed down to God in gratitude on the spot. "Now I know that You love me," I told him, "and that You're always watching over me. Otherwise I might have been lazy other nights as well." (AH, 2002)

One final incident dating from this period strikingly underlines yet another key aspect of Ostad Elahi's character that is evident in all of his teaching, which was his own rigorous insistence on actually *living*, practicing and clearly demonstrating through one's own life and actions the abstract principles of spiritual and religious truth. A student of his noted that one day while Ostad Elahi was explaining that we should not reject other religions and faiths, he added by way of illustration:

One time in Kermanshah, while I was out walking with a group of friends, we passed by a place where some Jews were praying. To the bewilderment of my companions, I went in and began to pray along with them. At first those in the synagogue thought I was trying to make fun of them; but when they understood that that wasn't the case, they were very pleased. We should never miss an occasion to pray under the pretext that it would involve praying with Jews, Christians, Muslims, or any others. (AH, vol. 2, 43)

*The Final Period: Writing and Teaching*

Ostad Elahi retired from the judiciary in 1957, and only after that did he really begin to discuss more publicly his own way of thinking. During this period he published two major scholarly works, *Knowing the Spirit (Ma'rifat ar-Rūh)* and *Burhān al-Haqq (Demonstration of the Truth)*, which were authoritative statements in their respective fields, as well as an extensive commentary on his father's immense spiritual epic.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, he began to develop much more fully the practical spiritual dimension of his teaching through the oral teachings and instruction that he shared with a few friends and students who gathered with him at his home until the end of his life, in 1974. Two lengthy volumes of Ostad Elahi's sayings and spiritual teachings—including all the anecdotes cited previously—have so far been published on the basis of notes written down by his students during that period.<sup>11</sup>

Those collected sayings bear the marks of profound spiritual inspiration, while they also reveal a penetrating understanding of human nature, a constant concern for intelligibility, and the sensitive use of immense learning in the service of a creative and original way of thinking. The following concluding remarks, from the last years of Ostad Elahi's life, beautifully highlight the source and intentions of his later spiritual teaching and the way all his instruction continued to be drawn from his own experience and practice:

I have not passed over any subject in silence: all that is needed is a grasp of the question and the aspiration (to understand). And that aspiration comes from the angelic *spirit*. In these things I say to you my purpose is not to recount stories, but to give you sound advice. I am not able to tell someone something until after I've put it into practice and tried it out for myself. As for the points that I do mention, I won't express anything until I have completely investigated it to such a degree that no one could object to it, whether in this world or the next. I have spoken with each person to the extent that they could understand. But I've still not told anyone all there is in my heart. (AH, 2074)

These are the things that I'll always love, that will please me and make my spirit rejoice even if I'm no longer in this world: to see those close to me wholeheartedly united and

working together, not squabbling and thinking of themselves; to see them striving to do what is good and to serve others, always eager to act humanely, for the sake of others, and truly to care for them. (AH, 2026)

*Ostad Elahi's Published Works: The Place of Knowing the Spirit*

Ostad Elahi continued to write on many subjects throughout his life, as evidenced by the many unpublished notebooks and manuscripts included in the exposition at the Sorbonne organized in celebration of the centennial of his birth in 1995.<sup>12</sup> However, it was only after his retirement from the judiciary that he began to publish his works, beginning with the elaborate theological discussions of *Burhān al-Haqq* (*Demonstration of the Truth*) in 1963, which was greatly expanded in later editions; his commentary on his father's vast spiritual poem, the *Shāhnāmeḥ-ye Haqīqat*, in 1966 (*Haqq al-Haqā'iq*); and finally the relatively much shorter volume of *Ma'rifat ar-Rūh* (*Knowing the Spirit*), in 1969.

*Burhān al-Haqq* is a highly complex theological and spiritual work, dedicated to showing the inner concordance and common spiritual aims shared by the Qur'an, the teachings of the Shiite Imams, and original teachings and practices of the spiritual order of the "people of the Truth" (*Ahl-i Haqq*), the dominant popular spiritual tradition in Ostad Elahi's native region of western Iran, whose teachings and legends (originally transmitted in a rare regional Kurdish dialect) had earlier been recorded in Persian verse in his father's immense *Book of Kings of the Truth*.<sup>13</sup> Ostad Elahi's procedure in *Burhān al-Haqq* resembles that of *Knowing the Spirit* insofar as he constantly juxtaposes the relevant scriptural verses of the Qur'an with the traditional Shiite teachings (and those of the great saints of the *Ahl-i Haqq*) in order to evoke in his readers an awareness of the vast range of deeper shared spiritual truths underlying each of those traditions. The same metaphysical issues central to *Knowing the Spirit* are often discussed there, but usually in more traditional symbolic and religious language; the explicitly universal philosophical terminology and arguments adopted here are not so much in evidence in that earlier volume.

However, the essential bridge between *Burhān al-Haqq* and *Knowing the Spirit*—and in a way, to the more accessible and wide-ranging oral spiritual discussions of that same period later revealed in detail in *Athār al-Haqq*—was Ostad Elahi's constant concern with responding to the spiritual questions and requests for guidance that he increasingly received from people in all walks of life, not only Iranians, but

now expanding to include famous scholars, musicians, students, and seekers who came to visit him from throughout Europe and America.<sup>14</sup> Thus the very genesis of *Knowing the Spirit*, as he points out in his introduction to this work, had to do with key questions first put to him about our knowledge and awareness of the "Spirit" by readers of *Burhān al-Haqq*. As a result of such questions, within a few years he began to add to his subsequent editions of *Burhān al-Haqq* (roughly two hundred pages in the original version) much longer appendixes" of more than four hundred additional pages, recording his responses to the very diverse spiritual questions of this multitude of inquiring visitors; many of those questions and responses extend far beyond the more limited, original theological contexts of that book.<sup>15</sup> As such, this first revealing summary of his actual personal efforts of teaching and guidance, in its later editions, was already almost as long as the more extensive verbatim collections of his oral teachings recorded in the later volumes of *Athār al-Haqq*.

## II. Historical Contexts: The Audience, Language, and Structure of *Ma'rifat ar-Rūh*

As we have just pointed out, there is a marked contrast between the complex language and traditional forms of Ostad Elahi's published writings from the final period of his life (including *Knowing the Spirit*) and the simple, direct, highly anecdotal Persian of his oral teachings from that same time, collected and recorded in the volumes of *Athār al-Haqq*: for the most part, those oral teachings are quite readily understandable to readers today even in translation, with only minimal explanation of certain unfamiliar contexts and situations. Those two very different forms of written and oral expression were not due simply to different audiences and levels of education—since many of Ostad Elahi's interlocutors in the spiritual discussions recorded in *Athār al-Haqq* were themselves highly educated readers of *Knowing the Spirit* and other works like it—but rather to a complex set of long-standing cultural codes regarding the proper forms of educated *writing* (and likewise of *reading*), as distinguished from the more intimate realm of private oral discussion, which had been shared for centuries by writers and educated readers throughout the Islamic world. This section is intended to introduce as simply as possible some of those key traditional assumptions in ways that will help today's readers to better appreciate the meanings and intentions of *Knowing the Spirit*, beginning with some very general points and proceeding to more specific philosophical and theological background.

Indeed the most important assumption to keep in mind when reading this work can be stated very simply. Ostad Elahi implicitly expected his words to be read and reread slowly, reflectively, and repeatedly. And above all, he expected his ideal intended readers—who, he constantly reminds us, should be both “learned *and* spiritually insightful”—to provide their own indispensable reflections, applications, and experiential illustrations for each of the essential points summarized in his argument.<sup>16</sup> Only through such careful and actively participatory reading can his readers come to make the absolutely fundamental connections between the author's individual concepts and their own range of related spiritual experience, and thereby begin to perceive and explore the implications of each point and its essential interconnections with other observations developed elsewhere in this text. It is important to underline how radically this foundational assumption about the critical *active* role of the careful and properly qualified reader—once taken for granted by spiritual writers and readers in every civilization—contrasts with the basic rules and wider expectations of expository writing taken for granted in much of the world today: that is, with the familiar injunction to “keep it simple,” begin with what is easiest for one's readers, identify carefully and explicitly each progressive stage of one's argument, always give memorable illustrations, and so on.

In the case of *Knowing the Spirit*, there is an especially clear connection between these basic wider assumptions of traditional esoteric writing and the particularly sensitive subject of Ostad Elahi's work: that is, the actual process of human spiritual perfection and destiny within its widest possible metaphysical context. That is because of two quite separate, but equally compelling, sets of considerations that still remain highly visible and problematic even today. First, for centuries, the official theological representatives of each of the Abrahamic religious traditions have usually carefully avoided serious *public* discussion of many of the most universal, phenomenological dimensions of spiritual life relating to the survival and gradual perfection of the human spirit—most obviously because such candidly descriptive spiritual discussions can so easily be seen as potentially undermining the central insistence, within each of those traditions, on the absolute importance of the responsible ethical actions and decisions of each moral actor here and now, within this immediate lifetime.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, the actual situation in less public and politically sensitive contexts, especially within the disciplines of actual spiritual practice of each tradition, has always been far more complex and more accurately informed by the wider range of relevant spiritual experience. Second,

whenever one approaches this problem (i.e., of the wider process of spiritual perfection) instead from the perspective of each *individual's* own limited set of relevant experiences and realizations, it is equally evident that all sorts of dangerous misunderstandings can immediately arise on the basis of each person's necessarily limited range of experience, partial views, common misinterpretations, the difficulty of fitting their individual experiences into larger perspectives of understanding (or belief), and so on. Almost all the distinctive features of Ostad Elahi's style of writing in *Knowing the Spirit* can be understood as a self-conscious, remarkably effective effort to deal with both of those twin dangers.

Finally, applying this basic principle of careful, actively participatory reading does partly presuppose some familiarity with the traditional fields of Islamic philosophy and theology (and related Arabic-language religious learning) that were central to the "general education" of the educated, literate classes in Iran during Ostad Elahi's youth—and indeed still are widely familiar in many circles, to a remarkable extent, down to our own day.<sup>18</sup> The following three sections introduce a few of the basic features of almost all writing within those traditions, which today's readers need to be aware of in order to appreciate the structure, aims, and distinctive rhetoric of *Knowing the Spirit*.

*The "Three Sources": Rational Argument, Religious Tradition, and Spiritual Experience*

One of the first things a reader must notice when first approaching *Knowing the Spirit* is the constant juxtaposition of philosophical arguments and reasoning; supporting passages from the Qur'an and reported sayings of earlier Islamic religious figures;<sup>19</sup> and—although this third aspect may be less obvious in the early chapters—allusions to the relevant range of actual human spiritual experience. At least since the time of the highly influential Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1640/1050),<sup>20</sup> it has been traditional for educated writers on all philosophical and related religious subjects, whether in Arabic or highly Arabicized Persian prose, to present their arguments and positions using supporting elements drawn from these same three foundational sources of rational argument (*'aql*), traditional religious sources (*naql*), and spiritual intuition (or "unveiling" and "direct personal witnessing": *kashf*, *shuhūd*). However, given the universality of this common scholastic literary tradition, it cannot be too strongly stressed that the recurrent references to these three different kinds of sources and discourse do not in any way represent a single outlook or approach. On

the contrary, this agreed-upon language and style of presentation has normally been used for centuries to articulate and express every conceivable sort of philosophical and theological (and political) position, method, and approach.<sup>21</sup> For example, radically authoritarian and exclusivist theologians would nonetheless cite in their support the arguments of prestigious philosophers and verses of the great mystical poets; while strictly rationalist, even positivist philosophers would likewise articulate their positions using Qur'anic verses, sacred traditions, and ostensibly theological reasoning. Thus, within that shared range of literary background and vocabulary, educated readers were quickly trained to follow very carefully the *particular* arrangement and interconnection of arguments in the work at hand and especially to focus attentively on what was omitted (among a spectrum of possible counterarguments, refutations, etc.) and more subtly alluded to, as well as on what was openly cited and asserted.<sup>22</sup>

Ostad Elahi was an accomplished master of this traditional type of writing, trained from his youth in all the related religious and philosophical disciplines and literatures, and his normal expository procedure throughout *Knowing the Spirit*—even in the highly original chapter 7 at the heart of this work—is always the same. As such, the intended significance and distinctive innovative features of his approach would be immediately apparent to all his original readers versed in this tradition. That is, he typically begins with universal rational arguments, normally drawn from the repertoire of earlier Islamic philosophers; then he offers relatively subtle, but non-explicit allusions to the relevant spiritual phenomena; and eventually he concludes—above all in the latter half of chapter 7 here—with more explicit references to the mature fruit of his own direct spiritual observations, although still phrased in a relatively abstract metaphysical (rather than autobiographical or poetic) language.<sup>23</sup> Throughout this work it is important to note that the relevant scriptural sources, whether Qur'anic verses or teachings of the Shiite Imams, are provided at each stage as an ongoing additional support for these other, more explicitly universal forms of argument, and not as the sole or self-sufficient evidence.<sup>24</sup> Given this distinctive procedure, Ostad Elahi's original readers would immediately recognize the roots of his particular approach, with its distinctive emphasis on the development of his readers' *spiritual intelligence*—that is, on the rational, implicitly universal philosophical articulation of the distinctively spiritual dimensions of human being—as reflecting the philosophical school of Mulla Sadra, with its distinctive blending of Avicennan philosophical language with the unique spiritual and metaphysical issues and methods of the great figures and traditions of earlier Islamic "practical spirituality."<sup>25</sup>

However, those traditionally educated readers who did recognize the echoes of Mulla Sadra's language and thought in *Knowing the Spirit* would also immediately recognize, once they reached chapter 7, the relative novelty and originality of Ostad Elahi's far more explicit discussion of the different modalities of the process of spiritual perfection. This is especially the case with those particular modalities (especially the fourth item here) that would openly allow for the theologically sensitive notion of the possible "return" of imperfect human spirits to successive bodily forms on earth: here Ostad Elahi openly evokes a central, but intimately personal, dimension of human spiritual experience that even the famously outspoken Sufi poets had most often dealt with (in their *writing*, that is) only by way of allusion and symbolic expressions. At this point, confronted with the unexpectedly open and challenging evocation of actual spiritual experience and observations throughout chapter 7, thoughtful and probing readers from within this tradition would naturally return to explore the more subtle hints and allusions to that previously unsuspected dimension of spiritual reality that are in fact scattered throughout the opening chapters—and hopefully, to a deeper reconsideration of all the relevant, perhaps previously neglected, elements of their own spiritual experience. That is when the real process of reading and reflection would actually begin.

In this respect, it is particularly important to stress that *all* the formally eschatological sections of Ostad Elahi's book (chapters 3–8), regarding the "Return" and the destiny and perfection of the human spirit, are equally phrased in the form of an ostensibly third-person, external account of the proponents of various radically different understandings of this metaphysical process. This is not just a traditional literary form or a transparent device for masking the author's own opinions.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, it is—to adapt his own central image from chapter 5—a very carefully constructed mirror to "capture the conscience" of each individual reader, to oblige each of us to reflect far more deeply and conscientiously about the actual grounds and deeper implications of our own spiritual understanding, beliefs, and experiences concerning this immensely important subject.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Allusion and Realization*

*Knowing the Spirit* is, as its author often reminds us, an extremely concise, summary treatment of what is in reality an unimaginably immense and complex subject, both existentially and philosophically. For each reader, the indispensable active connection between its formal arguments and familiar scriptural attestations and their eventual existential elaboration and illustration necessarily passes by way of

allusion (*ishāra*). And few dimensions of this tradition are more difficult to explain<sup>28</sup> to new readers coming from outside the tradition, since what constitutes an effective allusion is so often dependent on the readers' prior acquaintance with the familiar norms of the disciplines and language of the tradition in question, and on their resulting implicit expectations. Incidentally, there is nothing particularly esoteric or mysterious about this *process* of allusion: we are all intimately familiar with the multitude of ways that our everyday appreciation of what we consider "good" poetry, music, or film (or even advertising!), for example, is normally dependent on our ability to recognize what is genuinely original and meaningful, and effectively "novel," in relation to earlier works of the same genre—and which thereby stands out in contrast to the great mass of essentially repetitive, unoriginal imitations. In the case of Ostad Elahi's work, the relevant background assumed on the part of his original readers includes not only an informed acquaintance with the extensive earlier learned traditions of Islamic philosophy and theology, but also with the near-universal popular background of Persian spiritual *poetry*.<sup>29</sup> That immense tradition of spiritual teaching—itsself thoroughly grounded in the teachings and symbolic vocabulary of the Qur'an and hadith—also deals constantly with the central metaphysical and eschatological subjects of *Knowing the Spirit*.<sup>30</sup>

Since a detailed explanation of the allusions in this work would require a commentary much longer than the translated text itself, a few basic examples will have to suffice. To begin with, certainly the best starting point, as already mentioned, is to start by concentrating on the connections between those short key passages (given in ***bold italics*** here) that Ostad Elahi himself highlighted as an explicit key to the intentions of this entire work.<sup>31</sup> Second, those particular passages, whether longer or short, that initially appear to be somehow inconsequential or logically disconnected from the overall flow of their surrounding context and argument are almost always intentionally significant spiritual allusions that would immediately have stood out as such for the original audiences of *Knowing the Spirit*. In chapter 1, for example, during the succession of standard philosophical proofs for the existence (and Attributes) of God, the fourth argument—from "human beings' inability (to comprehend or explain) certain things that happen to themselves. It includes such things as the sudden appearance of certain events that are extraordinary and supranatural, whose reality cannot be denied"—suddenly confronts the reader with an infinitely rich and open-ended domain of relevant spiritual experience, opening up perspectives that are quite indispensable for any

well-grounded understanding of the remaining eschatological chapters of this work.

Yet another illustration is Ostad Elahi's recurrent emphasis, throughout the initial philosophical sections of this work, on the considerations of divine *Justice* and *Wisdom* underlying the observed lawful regularity of the causal orders of being. Such vague philosophic expressions may at first seem like pious theological formulae, but they take on a much larger and unavoidably *existential* and practical (not just abstract theological) significance once the author has more openly reminded us—especially in chapter 7—of their implication in the alternative understandings of human beings' larger eschatological situation and destiny.<sup>32</sup> One final, and at least equally important, illustration is Ostad Elahi's brief analogy, near the end of chapter 3, of the process of spiritual perfection to the gradual, slowly cumulative process of human *education*. That is an allusion whose endless practical consequences and implications continue to unfold throughout every stage of the spiritual path, in ways comparable to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

In general—and this may be the most practically useful and reassuring rule of thumb for readers new to this tradition—it is not really possible to be “mistaken” about any particular passage that seems to be a significant hint or allusion, however subtle or mysterious that initial intuition may be to us. That is to say, in a work of such extreme concision and density of expression, anything that momentarily obliges us to begin the real work of *active* reading—to question our assumptions, explore and revisit our intuitions, discover unexpected meanings and perspectives, or to probe for appropriate illustrations and implications: those are precisely the passages that deserve our closest attention and ongoing, probing reflection.

*The Basic Structure of Knowing the Spirit: The Origination and the Return*

The overall structure and order of treatment of the topics in this work, as both Ostad Elahi and his original readers were well aware, was taken over from a familiar, long-standing philosophical tradition going back to the famous Persian philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037), who systematically established the basic parallelism between traditional philosophical topics and Islamic theological issues and symbolism that has typified virtually all the subsequent schools of eastern Islamic philosophy and theology.<sup>33</sup> Within that wider metaphysical framework, *Knowing the Spirit* even more closely follows the

highly abridged format and the distinctive philosophical content of a famous short eschatological treatise by Mulla Sadra, *The Wisdom of the Throne*.<sup>34</sup> Sadra's influential treatise summarizes the same initial ontological principles—above all, his distinctive vision of the universal “transubstantial movement” (*haraka jawhariyya*) of all creatures in their ultimate metaphysical “Return” to their divine Source of being (see chapters 1–3 in *Knowing the Spirit*)—while treating in the same order each of these alternative theological and philosophical understandings of the human spirit's perfection and Return. Sadra's work likewise culminates in an explicit emphasis on the indispensable role of the intermediate spiritual realm (the *barzakh*: chapter 7 here) in accounting for the wider, ongoing human process of spiritual perfection and in reconciling the different scriptural and theological allusions to that universal process of Return. As we have already noted, the parallels between the structure and progression of *Knowing the Spirit* and Sadra's earlier eschatological conceptions—more fully developed in his famous *Asfār (Book of the Four Spiritual Journeys)*—are so extensive that most of Ostad Elahi's original scholarly Persian readers would, at first reading, naturally observe that it is above all in the later sections of chapter 7 that he most openly expresses what are undeniably his own most original ideas and understandings. Or in other words, it is there (in chapter 7) that Ostad Elahi pointedly makes much more explicit and unambiguous these larger eschatological perspectives—above all, concerning the successive terrestrial lives of individual human spirits—that had prudently been phrased only as conceivable, implicit interpretive possibilities within the explicit metaphysical framework of Sadra's eschatological thought.

In addition, for readers approaching *Knowing the Spirit* without great familiarity with the Qur'an, it is also helpful to know that the parallelisms constantly assumed here between cosmological and eschatological themes—between symbolic accounts of the stages and creative processes of divine Self-manifestation, on the one hand, and the even more detailed symbolic descriptions of the spirit's process of purification, perfection, and ongoing Return—are absolutely central and explicit in the Qur'an, in ways that often make that revelation far more directly comparable with scriptures of eastern religions than with the Bible as it is commonly read and understood today.<sup>35</sup> Not only are at least half the verses of the Qur'an explicitly connected with these intimately interrelated cosmological and eschatological processes,<sup>36</sup> but the remainder of the more practically oriented verses are only ultimately meaningful in relation to an adequate understanding of that wider metaphysical framework.<sup>37</sup> As such,

Ostad Elahi's work was composed—and originally intended to be read—against the widely accessible backdrop of centuries of highly developed traditions of both “theoretical” (i.e., philosophic and theological) and more practical spiritual approaches to the interpretation, understanding, and application of those central scriptural sources. So at the very least, new readers need to be aware that the elaborate equivalence assumed throughout *Knowing the Spirit* between, on the one hand, scriptural symbolism and theological discourse, and on the other hand the corresponding language and structures of earlier philosophy (i.e., ontology and epistemology) and paths of spiritual realization, does not originate with Ostad Elahi himself, but forms a familiar, integral part of wide-ranging literary and cultural traditions constantly shared by the author and his original learned audience.

Likewise, even the most “secular” modern reader needs to recognize the fundamental religious significance—and hence the heightened politico-theological sensitivity—of those alternative conceptions of human destiny and realization that Ostad Elahi passes in review in chapters 3 through 8 here. The answers that one eventually gives to these outwardly abstract and highly metaphysical questions in fact have unavoidable implications for central practical questions of right action, authority, guidance, and the wider ethical aims and reference points for each person's life in their wider community, not just for individual spiritual practice. To take one closely—perhaps inextricably—connected area of spiritual life that is scarcely even mentioned in *Knowing the Spirit*, all of Ostad Elahi's original readers would be profoundly aware that the existence of the “intermediate,” spiritual world of the *barzakh* (developed here in chapters 5 and 7) is not simply related to the different eschatological possibilities and perspectives evoked in this short work. Throughout earlier Islamic spiritual traditions (and their parallels in other religions), that spiritual realm is universally understood as providing the metaphysical locus and theoretical underpinning for the immensely complex phenomenology of spiritual guidance and direction—that is, for the ongoing, invisible roles of the pleroma of higher spirits (the messengers, prophets, “friends of God,” Imams, saints, and so on) in all the familiar spiritual realities and processes of prayer, dreams, guidance, intercession, communication, and the like that constitute the actual spiritual lives of human beings in every time and place.<sup>38</sup> Ostad Elahi does not have to mention explicitly that this immense, universal domain of human beings' actual spiritual life and practice is in reality absolutely inseparable from that larger eschatological “journey of spiritual perfection” (*sayr-i takāmul*) that forms the constant unifying theme of *Knowing the Spirit*.

Yet again, he leaves it to each of his readers to develop that practically indispensable connection.

### III. The Contemporary Significance of *Knowing the Spirit*

Given what has just been explained about the compressed and intentionally allusive language and structure of *Knowing the Spirit*, one could readily describe the contemporary relevance of this work in the same terms Ostad Elahi applies here to each person's experience of the spiritual world (the *barzakh*) in chapter 5: it is "like a mirror: everyone sees their own form in it." Having admitted that, it may still be helpful to briefly mention—since any elaboration would quickly become a book in itself—a few of the salient issues and approaches taken up in this work that are likely to attract increasing attention in the future.<sup>39</sup>

To begin with, in an unavoidably global civilization marked by the constant collision and often the overt conflict of a multitude of once-separate cultural and spiritual traditions—a kind of increasingly chaotic dramatization of the tower of Babel—the distinctive phenomenologically based approach of spiritual research (*tahqīq*) or spiritual intelligence exemplified in *Knowing the Spirit*, along with Ostad Elahi's other writings, offers a remarkable potential for arriving at genuine understanding and creative, mutually cooperative responses to unavoidable human challenges, while respecting the inevitable diversity of spiritual perceptions and realizations. The consistently irenic approach that he applies here to the perennially disputed questions of eschatology and human destiny is potentially applicable to a much wider range of pervasive religious and cultural controversies.<sup>40</sup>

That is to say, rather than attempting to prove or impose a single "true" conception in this heatedly controversial domain—and thereby disprove and dismiss all other differing views—Ostad Elahi always begins, as in so many ways he also ends, with the actual irreducible phenomena: with a carefully nourished respect for the entire perennial range of individual spiritual experiences in this domain.<sup>41</sup> It is only on the basis of those common human realities—and always subject to further experiential testing and verification in that realm—that he gradually develops a series of wider metaphysical hypotheses, pointedly phrased in explicitly universal, rational terms, that can potentially account for the full spectrum of relevant experiences. Students of religion interested in the actual phenomenology of spiritual experience today—as well as the earlier beliefs and theologies of the different historical traditions—will of course be struck by the extraordinarily close convergence of Ostad Elahi's observations and four "modalities"

of the process of spiritual development in chapter 7 here, at so many points, with the increasingly detailed range of relevant spiritual phenomena being brought forward in the burgeoning contemporary literatures on near-death experiences, hypnotic regression, and a wide range of practical therapeutic disciplines.<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, Ostad Elahi's ideas in *Knowing the Spirit*—especially his central conception of the ongoing transubstantial movement (*haraka jawhariyya*) of all of creation through that journey of spiritual perfection (*sayr-i takāmul*) constituting the cosmic process of Return—constantly refer to and help explain our common human experience of the central spiritual role of our intuitions regarding the wider *natural* world, a fundamental dimension of spirituality far too often neglected, at least in recent times, by many official representatives of the Abrahamic traditions, if not in the foundational scriptures themselves. Once again, this is an immense phenomenological field of spiritual experience and education commonly shared by all of humanity, in ways directly related to Ostad Elahi's distinctive approach of "spiritual research" whose prospects and promises were previously highlighted here.

Finally, Ostad Elahi's stress on the central role of the spiritual realm (the *barzakh*) in the ongoing process of spiritual perfection—which has close parallels in the spiritual teachings and practices of each of the world religious traditions—is a perspective whose "proof" and concrete reality is to be found, as he constantly illustrates throughout the thousands of anecdotes contained in *Athār al-Haqq*, precisely in the ongoing individual phenomena of the actual interrelations of the earthly and spiritual realms, including all the infinite personal manifestations of the spiritual pedagogy and guidance of those central spiritual figures (including, in the tradition he refers to here, the prophets and all the "Friends of God") whose realities are discovered in the course of each individual's unique spiritual practice and destiny. Here again, Ostad Elahi points to the ways the actual, endlessly diverse phenomena of our spiritual lives, when properly understood and appreciated, can become *complementary* revelations, guideposts, and invaluable lessons—rather than imagined "idols" of polemic opposition—along our intersecting paths to the common goal of spiritual perfection.