

## Relatively hidden

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The following remarks are related to a project financed by the Austrian Fund for Scientific Research (FWF). The main goal of that project was to study the dialect of the Marāzīg in Southern Tunisia. At the same time the project aimed at documenting "popular religious" beliefs, and thus, among other things, interviews were conducted with various specialists who formed part of what one might broadly term the "religious field": legal scholars, healers etc. I wish to state at the beginning that the following remarks are by no means the result of systematic research. Rather, they are a by-product stemming from the analysis of the aforementioned interviews. Nor do they cover *everything* the informants said (nothing could be further from the truth). Nevertheless, I thought that the facts which shall be presented in the following do represent something like a possibility to raise a few questions as to the position of our informants vis-à-vis the dominant symbolic universe forged by the legal scholars.

The notion of "field" shall be used here because it is worthwhile remembering that the aforementioned specialists are not "just there", but rather *objectively related* to other religious specialists. If one talks about religious specialists, it is important to further ask what turns such specialists into specialists. Since not all of them are of one and the same kind, there obviously cannot be one single answer to this question. Now, it is quite clear what competences turn a legal scholar into a legal scholar. As for the other specialists, their reputation must rest upon something else (which, of course, does not necessarily imply contradiction). As far as our informants were concerned, their reputation was due to relations with occult and supernatural forces or beings (*dj̄nūn*, *ṣālḥīn*). *Without* such relations, they would not have been specialists *at all*. In short, if the legal scholars have a history of learning, they, in turn, have a history of more or less spectacular dealings with supernatural beings.

In Islamic terms to talk about the "unseen world", the "supernatural", the "ineffable" etc. is to talk about *al-ghayb*. As is very well known, *al-ghayb* is a highly complex topic, and I therefore will restrict myself to a number of points of direct bearing on what concerns us here. First, I shall refer to some basic facts concerning the notion of *al-ghayb* itself. Second, I shall talk about what some of the informants said. How did the informants refer to such basic facts?

The Qur'ān itself is considered a "partial communication of *al-ghayb*"<sup>1</sup>, and as such informs about a number of articles of faith inaccessible to independent human reasoning: the day of

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<sup>1</sup> *EF*<sup>2</sup> s.v. *al-ghayb*

doom, hellfire, paradise, angels, *djinn* etc. All of these belong to the sphere of *īmān* "belief", which is, infact, defined as *taṣdīq bi-l-ghayb* "the holding true of *al-ghayb*". Further, the Qur'ān repeatedly states that God alone knows *al-ghayb*, and that (=Q 72/26-27): "[...] He does not reveal His secrets to any, Except to him whom He chooses as a messenger [...]". Mostly there is no further specification as to what is meant by *al-ghayb*. But there is at least one exception, that is Q 31/34: "Surely Allah is He with Whom is the knowledge of the hour, and He sends down the rain and He knows what is in the wombs; and no one knows what he shall earn on the morrow; and no one knows in what land he shall die; surely Allah is Knowing, Aware."<sup>2</sup> The five points mentioned in this verse are, according to a famous Prophetic tradition, the *mafātīḥ al-ghayb*.<sup>3</sup> These five points manifestly refer to the knowledge of *future events*. (That *'ilm al-ghayb*, among other things, has this quality of a knowledge of future events is reflected by a host of documents which currently circulate in the world wide web and which, for example, link speculations in the sphere of stock exchange to the pretension to know *al-ghayb*).

As far as the Prophetic traditions are concerned, there are at least three *ḥadīth* which are important for the topic of *al-ghayb*. They all have to do with the thematic complex of *ru'yā* "vision" or "dream". First, *ru'yā* is said to be the "forty-sixth part of prophecy".<sup>4</sup> This suggests some connection with divine revelation.<sup>5</sup> Second, there is the Prophetic tradition which speaks of the so-called "glad tidings" (*mubashshirāt*): "[Muḥammad said:] Nothing has remained of Prophecy except for the "glad tidings". They said: And what are the "glad tidings"? He said: *ar-ru'yā aṣ-ṣāliḥa*." And, third, there is the Prophetic tradition which says that whoever sees Muḥammad in his dream truly sees him since the devil doesn't take his form (*fa-inna sh-shayṭāna lā yatamaththal bī/yatarā'ā bī/yatakawwanunī*).<sup>6</sup>

This suffices as a base. If one now turns to writings that mention *al-ghayb* (e.g. fatwās, tracts on *bid'a* etc.) it is all too conspicuous that very often they deal with *agents* who are claiming to have a special relationship with *al-ghayb* and with specific procedures like geomancy, astrology etc. To put it differently: If one talks about *al-ghayb* one automatically talks about a "field" and a substantial number of *people* who operate within their society by virtue of some supernatural competence or something that might serve as a base to claim such a competence. If they have any significance at all, then it seems due to that relationship (and

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by M. H. Shakir

<sup>3</sup> Buḥārī, *ḥadīth* nr. 4778; 4697; 7379

<sup>4</sup> Buḥārī, *ḥadīth* nr. 6987; 6988

<sup>5</sup> Lory, p. 259

<sup>6</sup> Buḥārī, *ḥadīth* nr. 6993; 6994; 6995; 6997; Katz, p. 205 ff.

that, by the way, is illustrated by the fact that in the course of the interviews all of our informants talked about how they were drawn into that relationship and "how it all started", that is, they talked about what turned them into specialists).

Another point of considerable importance is that many of the writings that deal with such agents belong the realm of *ʿilm*, that is, they were written by legal scholars. If writings of this sort talk about such agents, then this is far from being "innocent". A lot of legal scholars were and are highly interested in seeing that relationships with the supernatural are not unfolding outside the realm of their own competence. Indeed, the sources ceaselessly ask how the commerce with the supernatural should/must look like in order to be legitimate, and Houari Touati is certainly right when he speaks of "the great question that tormented the legal scholars of strict orthodoxy" in this respect.<sup>7</sup> It comes as no surprise then to notice efforts to curb the significance of Prophetic traditions like the ones mentioned above.

So, from the point of view of such sources, *not every* commerce with *al-ghayb* is an acceptable or a legitimate one. When the authors of such writings tried to formulate and push through criteria that allowed for distinguishing an illegitimate commerce with *al-ghayb* from a legitimate one, then these criteria were (needless to say) such that they instilled respect for the stock competences forged by the collective work of the legal scholars. If one thing is all too clear, then it is this tension and the "need" of the legal scholars to check the potentially leaking legal institution and not to let too many *autonomous* centres of supernatural competence spring up and flourish. As an example one might cite a passage of al-Wansharīsī's *Mi'yār*, which speaks of geomancy, astrology etc. and where the question is raised whether one has to do here with knowledge of *al-ghayb* or not.<sup>8</sup> It is quite interesting to see how the idea that this could be the case is discarded: Apart from the fact that the Qurʾānic references presented above are all brought up, one notices another strategy, which must have been deeply reassuring for legal scholars professionally given to think of proofs, evidence, decisiveness etc.: The "knowledge of the future" elicited by such procedures is not *ʿilm* or *ʿilm qaṭʿī*, but *ẓann*. If one says "I opine", "I presume" etc. then this *must not* be mistaken for decisive knowledge devoid of speculation. In short, one has to do here with an "intellectual" argument for "intellectual" people and, what is more important, one derived from the field-specific set of competences with which no legal scholar can dispense.<sup>9</sup>

The same holds true for the complex of *ru'yā*. The aforementioned Prophetic traditions

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<sup>7</sup> Touati, p. 133-134

<sup>8</sup> For details see: Wansharīsī, Vol. 12, p. 56-57

<sup>9</sup> Mīlī, p. 72

dealing with *ru'yā* are, of course, a major threat and danger in this respect, because they at least theoretically turn every ordinary believer into a potential receptacle of divine messages.<sup>10</sup> It comes as no surprise then to find that the authors of such works are quite busy defusing every potential threat to their authority. If a believer experiences a *ru'yā*, if he hears something etc. – then all of this has to be confronted with the Qur'ān and the Sunna in order to be acceptable. If there is contradiction, then the seer or hearer has been the victim of satanical intrigues and has to discard that which implies the contradiction. For example, in the case of the Prophetic tradition that "whoever sees the Prophet Muḥammad in a dream truly sees him": What, if the content of the vision is at odds with the Book and the Prophetic traditions? What, if the Prophet suggests to the believer to indulge in something reprehensible?<sup>11</sup> Here we find rather wild solutions. As an example one might take Ibn al-Ḥādīdj's *Madkhal*, from which one learns that the believer doubtlessly and truly sees the Prophet (according to the tradition), but that the devil casts into the believer's ear words that are not the Prophet's words.<sup>12</sup>

Now, what did our informants say about *al-ghayb*? Needless to say, there were important differences between the informants. One talked more than the other; one was a reader and another was not, etc. Nevertheless they had something in common. The most salient feature of what they said was that they distinguished between *two kinds* of *al-ghayb*.

What about the first kind? If one falls back on the most detailed information given, then this sort of *al-ghayb* comprises: the "hour" (this alludes to both the day of doom and the individual hour of death), *rizq*, "the pregnant woman", "angels and *djinn*", "plants", "rain" and generally everything that was going to befall a person in his or her life. Apart from the point of "angels and *djinn*", there can be no doubt that the examples given by the informant are more or less congruent with Q 31/34 (although the informant never explicitly alluded to the Qur'ān). If one tries to elicit what all these have in common, then it is obvious that they all refer to facts and future events beyond the possibilities of human calculation: At the time of conception no one knows if the child is going to be a girl or a boy. No one can count the plants on the surface of the earth and so forth. The informant explicitly stated that every allusion to events and facts of this sort had to be regarded as a conjecture (*iḥtimāl*).

It is possible to turn to the second kind of *al-ghayb* now. What about this kind? First of all, if

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<sup>10</sup> Lory, p. 260

<sup>11</sup> Lory, p. 263

<sup>12</sup> Ḥādīdj, vol. 4, p. 288

one sticks to what the informants said, they felt such a strong difference between the two kinds of *al-ghayb* that they made this difference explicit by further qualifying this second kind of *al-ghayb*. One of the informants called it *ghayb al-muḥdath*. The crucial point here is that: "One has to do with *al-ghayb* here, but this is something that has already happened". One of the examples given by the informant is the following: "Somewhere far away it is raining, but we don't notice that over here. Or someone from your country calls you – who you are here at the moment – and informs you about heavy snowfalls there, which you don't notice here." I think this allows us to state that this second kind of *al-ghayb* comprises everything which is "unseen" or "hidden" in a *relative* sense. It expresses that omnipresence is impossible<sup>13</sup>; it expresses the simultaneousness of different experiences and so forth. In short, one has to do here with things that are "hidden" *for someone*, but certainly *not* "hidden" in an *absolute*<sup>14</sup> sense. Another informant expressed the same idea when he insisted that one was dealing here with a *ḥāẓa sayra* "something going on right now", "something taking place already", "something which already is a reality". One deals here with things "hidden" *in this world*.

It is worth mentioning that all informants emphasized the important role being played by occult and supernatural beings like the *djinn* in this connection. It is them with their own whole range of discreet means to accomplish and effect things who are in a position to furnish information about this second kind of *al-ghayb*. As one informant put it: "This is something like, for example, a *shaykh rūḥānī* who tells you: 'There is a caravan moving at such and such a place', or, 'There is a broken car at such and such a place'. This is all real and happening. There is no talking about "tomorrow" or "after tomorrow" here. No. Everything is happening right now, but this is far away from you, and you would never know about it if it was not for the sheer velocity of the *djinn* who pass this information on to you." The informants agreed on the necessity of some *supernatural aid* in this respect: "You can find something out about this kind of *al-ghayb*, if God has given you companions from the *djinn* who are capable of passing

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<sup>13</sup> One is well advised to bear in mind that maybe one has to do here also with access to a kind of knowledge which is eminently "private", that is, maybe one *must not* be in certain places. Compare e.g. Hilton-Simpson: "Other occasions on which human beings seem especially susceptible to possession by spirits, usually harmless if exorcised in time, are the periodical fetes held in honour of the memory of some long since departed Marabout or Moslem saint. On such occasions persons of either sex, upon hearing the sound of the drums and hautboys which accompany the ceremony, work themselves up into a state of religious ecstasy. They become temporarily so demented as to lick hot iron, cut and stab themselves with knives, shriek, dance, prophesy, and *disclose the deepest secrets of their neighbours, secrets which, it is believed, could only have been made known to them by some supernatural agency.*" (my emphasis)

<sup>14</sup> Compare the expression *ghayb mutlaq*.

these informations on to you." It is important to remember that more or less passing remarks like the one that "there was no talking about future events" can by no means be properly understood if one disregards the religious texts we looked at above (that is, the Qur'ānic verses and the Prophetical traditions that basically reject the idea of a knowledge of future events). On the contrary, the informants' expositions strongly suggest that they were avoiding conflict with such basic tenets of faith.<sup>15</sup>

Now that the two kinds of *al-ghayb* have been presented, something should be said about the different *modes* of how – according to our informants – one may gain access to them.

As to the first kind of *al-ghayb*, access to bits and pieces of it may be gained through a *ru'yā*. The basic necessity for such a *ru'yā* to happen at all was "purity of the heart" (*ṣafīyat al-qalb*) and a devout life. Such a *ru'yā*, of course, does not imply "God-like" knowledge of *al-ghayb*, but, as one informant put it, such knowledge was "a tiny bit of a tiny bit", the important point being that this partial access (even to future events) was strictly limited to the *pious* who were "a small minority".

As to the second kind of *al-ghayb*, that is *ghayb al-muḥdath*, different kinds of "exercises" (*riyāḍāt*) might supply those who perform them with the aid of occult beings like the *djinn*: "Such *riyāḍāt* might bring you servants from the *djinn* who inform you about what has happened somewhere whilst it was too far away for you to have any chance to know about it. But these do *not* know what is going to happen in the *future*. If someone informs you that this or that was *going* to happen, then these are mere *takahhunāt* and not knowledge proper (*‘ilm ṣaḥīḥ*)." The informant suggested that such exercises were certainly not able to provide access to the first kind of *al-ghayb*.

I am not at all sure what final conclusions to draw from the material gathered, and I think that a lot more research has to be conducted to give a satisfying answer to the questions that pose themselves in this context. Nevertheless, it seems possible to call attention to an important point: I am quite convinced that the information given by our informants is able to show that whoever talks about specific concepts like the one of *al-ghayb* automatically sees himself/herself drawn into the language and the corpus of knowledge of a specific group. As far as this knowledge – that of the legal scholars – is concerned, one has to do here with

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, one finds many strategies to avoid conflict in this respect: Khalil Zamiti, for example, called to attention that sometimes agents simply pass over in silence the fact of divination they are associated with: "Ainsi, lorsqu'on demande aux deux officiants de citer leurs attributions et ceux de leur grand-père, ils énumèrent l'ensemble de leurs pratiques mais n'énoncent jamais, sur le mode explicite, le fait divinatoire et le prophétisme." (For details see Zamiti, p. 58 ff.)

knowledge of a highly *systematic* character; a knowledge not anyone can handle "properly". On the contrary, whoever wishes to handle such knowledge "properly" has to take part in the respective field that produced such knowledge, and it is only by reason of this participation that everything indispensable to stand one's ground here can be acquired at all. I am inclined to think that our informants were highly interesting in this respect, and this is all the more so if one concentrates on the differences between them. Some of them knew sufficiently much to be able to produce something that contained everything necessary to superficially appear as belonging to the sphere of "knowledge proper" (*‘ilm ṣaḥīḥ*) – Qur’ānic verses etc. Others were not knowledgeable enough in this respect. I would like to end with a pretty sad incident of direct bearing on this: When we asked one of our informants about the concept of *al-ghayb*, he suddenly *apologized* for "not knowing enough". I could not think of a more biting and sadder reminder that, confronted with the dominant symbolic language, the informants were left with only two choices, either to fall back on a broken<sup>16</sup> version of this language (a language which was not entirely theirs) or to keep – *silent*.

#### Literature:

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<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to describe the expositions of especially one informant here, which were almost interlarded with (partly uncorrect) Qur’ānic references, quasi-theological explanations etc. – all of this strongly suggests that this informant was "doing things with words", that is, he was trying to prove his familiarity with the sphere of "knowledge proper".



