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Siḥr and Rūḥāniyya: Magic in Islamic Metaphysics

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

E04 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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The boundaries of permissibility between theology, philosophy, and practice

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut
Inner transformation · An authorial essay

Epigraph

> *“Whoever knows himself knows his Lord.”*

The archive identifies this as a saying widely circulated in Sufi tradition and developed into an ontological principle in interpretations of Ibn ʿArabī. Its status as an authentic hadith is disputed.

What This Article Is About

In discussions of Islam, “magic” is often reduced to a binary prohibition: siḥr means recourse to jinn and a pact with Iblis, while everything else is either piety or error. The essay argues that this simplification obscures a complex history of arguments about causality, subtle substances, and the boundaries of knowledge.

Between Ashʿarite occasionalism and the ontology associated with Mullā Ṣadrā lies a varied intellectual landscape: from astral sīmiyāʾ to the science of letters associated with *Shams al-maʿārif*, from the alchemy of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān to Ibn ʿArabī's unveiling. The article traces how different philosophical schools and mystical traditions drew boundaries between forbidden sorcery and practices they considered legitimate. Its typology concerns competing accounts of reality, not a simple opposition between superstition and reason. It is an archival interpretation, not a ruling on what Islam permits.

I. Siḥr as a Category of Fiqh: Jinn, Agreements, and Prohibition

The source presents siḥr in Islamic jurisprudence through the origin of a claimed power and the nature of relations with nonhuman agents, rather than supernatural effectiveness alone. It invokes Qur'an 2:102, with Hārūt and Mārūt and the separation of husband and wife, reading the passage as a concern with harmful division rather than merely extraordinary intervention.

The archive associates hadith accounts with fallen angels and dealings with devils, connecting the danger to *shirk*, assigning divine authority to another. Its broad characterization is inherited and requires source-specific checking. The Qur'anic story of Pharaoh's magicians supplies

another distinction: *muʿjiza*, a prophetic miracle confirming a mission, is attributed to divine will, whereas siḥr is presented as a learned practice involving subordinate spiritual agents. The essay contrasts this with *karāmāt*, gifts associated with saints, which it describes as neither learned nor reproducible at the practitioner's command.

It then sketches differences among legal schools. The source says Hanafis allow Qur'anic *ruqya* subject to conditions concerning obscure amulets, describes Malikis as stricter toward talismans, and attributes to Shafiis a distinction between belief and action in siḥr, with tolerance for certain acts absent a pact with jinn. These specific legal-school assertions are not verified here and must not be reused as authoritative rulings. The authors use them to argue that “magic” is also a legal classification connected with theories of causation, rather than a single self-evident category.

II. Rūḥāniyya and Souls: Metaphysics in Falsafa

The essay defines rūḥāniyya as a form of metaphysical influence understood as permissible within certain philosophical accounts. It places this within a Neoplatonic cosmos where heavenly bodies affect the sublunary world through subtle intermediaries, without demonic mediation. That is the article's historical framing, not a generally accepted religious license or a modern physical account.

Al-Fārābī (870–950), in the work commonly called *The Virtuous City* and his engagement with Aristotle, is described as developing a hierarchy of intellects. The Active Intellect, *al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*, appears as a giver of forms, *wāhib al-ṣuwar*. The source also speaks of celestial spheres radiating spiritual bodies that affect matter; this characterization requires checking against the relevant texts.

Ibn Sīnā, Avicenna (980–1037), is presented through *The Book of Healing* and *Pointers and Reminders*. The article connects the soul's faculties, imagination, and a world of images with the possibility of influence without physical compulsion. It calls this “natural magic.” Its terminology concerning imagination and estimation is inherited rather than freshly resolved.

The proposed contrast is that rūḥāniyya works through a universal medium, compared with Ibn ʿArabī's “Breath of the All-Merciful,” while siḥr requires a particular relationship with individual jinn. Al-Kindī (801–873), through the Latin *De radiis*, is invoked as treating astral influence as an ordered natural process rather than an arbitrary spirit's will. The essay sees this as opening a place for a “science of subtle things,” a study of hidden properties, *khawāṣṣ*, within rational cosmology. It connects that strand of falsafa with the development of sīmiyāʾ.

III. Sīmiyāʾ and Kīmiyāʾ: Occult Sciences as a Physics of the Subtle

The archive presents sīmiyāʾ, associated with images and correspondences, and kīmiyāʾ, alchemy, as parts of historical natural philosophy rather than categories judged by modern scientific criteria. They concerned transformation through properties believed to be hidden in nature.

The Jābirian alchemical corpus, attributed to Jābir ibn Ḥayyān and placed here in the eighth century, is described as combining Greek cosmology with Qur'anic imagery, a balance of elements, *mīzān*, and theories of generation, *takwīn*. The authors credit al-Kindī with distinguishing artificial and natural magic through relations between celestial and earthly forms.

Ibn Umayl, in the tenth-century work the archive calls *The Silvery Water*, is described as using Hermetic symbols to encode processes rather than merely mystify them. The source invokes prime matter, *hayūlā*, and a universal solvent as examples of a nature conceived to contain hidden laws. It associates Ibn Rushd with rational explanations requiring insight, *baṣīra*, rather than ordinary sensation alone. These specific attributions and the claim of encoded physical-chemical procedures remain unverified.

In the essay's contrast, an effect produced through subtle natural bodies is classified as natural philosophy, while an effect attributed to commanding a jinn is classified as sorcery. It links this distinction with the later Latin *magia naturalis* and *magia daemoniaca*. The proposed line of influence is an inherited historical claim, not a newly established genealogy.

IV. Ibn ʿArabī and Unity of Being: Ontology as “Higher Magic”

For Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), in the article's interpretation, what it calls magic ceases to be an external technique and becomes a way of perceiving being. *Waḥdat al-wujūd*, unity of being, places the practitioner before a single ultimate Agent.

Through *The Bezels of Wisdom*, the essay introduces the Seal of Sainthood and the *quṭb*, the spiritual pole. Such a figure does not independently manufacture miracles, but recognizes divine causality throughout existence. The Breath of the All-Merciful is read not merely as an intermediary but as the very being of things. “Magic,” in this interpretive vocabulary, becomes *kashf*, unveiling.

The critique associated with Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) shows the dispute's stakes: he accused followers of collapsing the Creator–creation distinction through claims of union. The essay argues that Ibn ʿArabī's own distinction remains: the practitioner of siḥr treats secondary

causes as independently real, whereas the complete human being recognizes that there is no power or strength except through God.

The source interprets that formula as an ontological claim rather than a protective utterance. Sufi metaphysics, in its reading, absorbs “magic” into *tawḥīd*, leaving no independent power of intervention. Action is understood as *tajallī*, manifestation of a divine name, rather than the isolated will of an individual. This vocabulary describes the authors' account of a debated intellectual tradition.

V. Suhrawardī's Illuminationism: Light and Angelic Metaphysics

Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191), in *The Philosophy of Illumination*, is presented as developing an account of the imaginal realm, *ʿālam al-mithāl*, and angelic lights. Access to it is understood within that philosophy as a form of knowledge.

The essay contrasts Peripatetic discursive investigation, *baḥth*, with illuminative knowledge through immediate contemplation. It relates the Active Intellect to the Holy Spirit, *rūḥ al-qudus*, as mediator between divine light and the elemental world. What the article calls magic becomes a study of correspondences between heavenly and earthly hierarchies, requiring purification of inward vision.

Henry Corbin (1903–1978), through *History of Islamic Philosophy*, is invoked as reading this as metaphysical experience rather than abstract speculation alone. The essay contrasts recourse to luminous beings with siḥr involving hidden names of jinn.

The practitioner becomes a “bearer of light,” seeking connection, *ittiṣāl*, rather than compulsion, *taskhīr*. Sīmiyāʾ is then interpreted as illumination: action through images becomes recollection of the soul's relation to an archetypal world rather than manipulation. These are philosophical descriptions, not verified claims that such entities can be contacted.

VI. Mullā Ṣadrā: Being in Motion and the Transformation of the Soul

Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, Mullā Ṣadrā (1571–1640), develops substantial motion, *al-ḥaraka al-jawhariyya*, in *The Four Journeys*. In the essay's account, the soul continually changes in its very mode of being and passes through an intermediate realm, *barzakh*.

This makes what the authors call spiritual alchemy a process of development: the soul is bodily in its origin and spiritual in its fulfillment. The imaginal realm is not a static storehouse of archetypes, but a domain in which inward states take form, *tajassum*.

The practitioner is a traveler, *sālik*, moving from matter toward form and intellect. The article contrasts this with trying to bind a jinn for coercive purposes. In its interpretation of *tajallī*, reality reveals itself and the task is to accord with that movement, not outwit the cosmos.

The essay contrasts this with Ashʿarite occasionalism: where the latter emphasizes divine creation at every moment, Ṣadrian being is presented as an act of self-disclosure in which human imagination, *khayāl*, participates through images without matter. The article therefore uses “magic” as a figurative name for the fuller actualization of human being, not as an independently tested technique.

VII. Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites: Causality and the Boundaries of Miracle

The essay makes arguments over causation, *sababiyya*, central to whether a “natural magic” could be conceived at all. It characterizes Ashʿarite thought through divine freedom to depart from habitual order, and Muʿtazilite thought through rational explanation. These are broad contrasts, not complete descriptions of either school.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, whose death the archive dates to 936, and later figures including al-Ghazālī are connected with *ʿāda*, customary order. In this account, God may depart from that order in relation to a prophet or saint. The article calls this a theological ground for extraordinary saintly gifts, rather than an independent breach of nature by human power.

In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) challenges necessary causal connection. The archive conveys the point as: fire does not burn by an independent essence, but by God's will. It reads this as allowing a saint to be associated with an extraordinary event without necessarily being categorized as a sorcerer.

The source contrasts Muʿtazilite approaches that reject talismans and astrology or accept only an account construed as natural knowledge. It then names Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064) and *al-Fiṣal*, claiming that he criticized *jafr*, letter-based prediction, while some Sufi Ashʿarites treated it as a calculation of divine manifestations. Those positions need individual textual verification.

Its concluding contrast is deliberately sharp: one intellectual world can imagine a “righteous magician,” another a learned philosopher. This is the authors' typology, not a reliable rule for assigning every historical person or practice to a school.

VIII. From al-Būnī to Sufi Orders: Practitioners and Places

The social range described extends from learned occultists to healing shaykhs. The science of sacred letters can connect them, while institutions of spiritual authority distinguish them.

Aḥmad al-Būnī, who died in 1225, is associated with *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā*. The archive places him near the beginnings of *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters, involving the Arabic alphabet's numerical values, *abjad*, and correspondences with Qur'anic texts and astral schemes. It locates transmission in Fez and Cairo, near the boundaries of accepted jurisprudence. Attribution and textual transmission of the work remain matters requiring historical care.

Alongside this, the essay describes *ṭarīqas*, Sufi orders, in which relations with subtle realities may be understood within a pupil's education under a guide. It gives a Sudanese example distinguishing possession associated with *zār* from spirits described as managed by a shaykh in healing contexts.

The archive also describes Moroccan and Algerian practices combining invocations, *awrād*, with local spiritual understandings, and Salafi criticism of such combinations as siḥr. These are broad inherited observations, not a current survey of communities.

Authorization, *ijāza*, becomes central to the article's typology: a person authorized within a chain of transmission, *silsila*, may be recognized within saintly authority, while a self-taught practitioner may attract suspicion. The essay's geographic sketch names Shiraz and Isfahan for Persian Illuminationism, Fez and Marrakesh for North African rūḥāniyya, and Sufi orders from the Caucasus to Senegal.

IX. The Ethics of Intervention: Intention, Necessity, and Limits

The article presents intention, *niyya*, and necessity, *ḍarūra*, as central ethical distinctions. It argues that some interventions are defended as responses to need or acts of mercy, while domination remains a different purpose. This description is not a ruling that intention alone makes a disputed practice permissible.

It attributes to al-Ghazālī's *Revival of the Religious Sciences* a hierarchy beginning with Qur'anic recitation, then intelligible amulets, then obscure writing regarded as doubtful. That specific hierarchy requires textual checking. The essay's broader criterion is *tawḥīd*: attributing independent power to a text differs from treating it as a means, *sabab*, under divine will.

The Sufi dimension adds presence of heart, *ḥuḍūr*. The source describes distracted action as ineffective or dangerous through susceptibility to *waswasa*, intrusive whispering. This is a religious interpretation, not a clinical account of intrusive thoughts.

It contrasts a “servant of the Qur'an,” who turns toward transformation of the soul, with a “sorcerer of the Qur'an,” who seeks to manipulate objects. In its language, the boundary is between acting for God and acting for worldly domination, not simply between science and

superstition. Even a practice considered legitimate may become a source of spiritual pride. The authors describe some Sufi judgments of such pride as more serious than ordinary sorcery.

X. What This Means in Practice

For a contemporary reader, the article argues against the idea of a neutral technique detached from assumptions about causality. Ruqya, meditation, and work understood as involving subtle aspects of the soul each sit within an account of reality.

Within the essay's Ashʿarite model, effects are attributed directly to God and a practitioner's authority rests in transmission rather than personal power. Within its philosophical or Ṣadrian model, the practitioner seeks knowledge of an ordered cosmos, not piety alone. The requirement for a silsila in some Sufi settings is therefore read as more than bureaucracy: authorization belongs to how that tradition understands transmission.

The source compares approaching a text such as *Shams al-maʿārif* without guidance to handling a complex technical system without preparation, and predicts uncertain effects on the psyche. This is its account of traditional concerns, not evidence that a book has an independently harmful supernatural force.

Its final move is philosophical: rather than a single prohibition, it proposes a demand to replace coercive technique with an understanding of being. The practitioner becomes a witness to unity rather than a producer of wonders. That is this essay's synthesis; it does not override actual religious disagreements or supply personal religious, legal, or medical advice.

Key Quotation

> *“He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden; and He knows all things.”*
>
> *— Qur'an, al-Ḥadīd 57:3, translated here from the archive's Russian wording.*

The essay relates this verse to Ibn ʿArabī's discussion of proximity and distance, manifestation and concealment. The verse and the subsequent interpretation are distinct.

Connections Between Traditions

These are the authors' proposed comparisons, not equivalences established by this translation:

• **Sīmiyāʾ ↔ theurgy ↔ sādhana:** ritual efficacy compared through cosmic sympathy in Iamblichus, celestial correspondences in al-Kindī, and subtle-body transformation in Tantra. The author groups these as sacred techniques without reducing them to demonology.

• **Waḥdat al-wujūd ↔ Advaita Vedanta:** multiplicity related to a single reality, while the essay acknowledges different accounts of transcendence and resemblance, *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. Its presentation of radical Advaita is itself simplified.

• **Ishrāq ↔ gnosis:** knowledge through divine light compared with late-antique illumination and Platonic inheritances.

• **Kashf ↔ apokalypsis:** unveiling and disclosure compared across Sufi and Greek-Christian vocabularies, distinguished from prophetic *waḥy*.

• **Siḥr ↔ māyā:** the appearance of what is not as it seems, while the essay distinguishes a morally and legally classified act from a category of metaphysical ignorance. These concepts are not interchangeable.

• **The Breath of the All-Merciful ↔ pneuma:** a comparison of media of cosmic relation and manifestation. The archive's designation of the former as directly "Qur'anic" needs source-specific care; the developed metaphysical terminology and Qur'anic wording are not automatically identical.

Sources Listed in the Archive

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Tags

Siḥr, rūḥāniyya, sīmiyāʾ, kīmiyāʾ, Sufism, falsafa, Illuminationism, Ṣadrian philosophy, Ashʿarites, Muʿtazilites, al-Būnī, Ibn ʿArabī, Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā, al-Ghazālī, al-Kindī, jafr, science of letters, kashf, unity of being, Breath of the All-Merciful, imaginal realm, jinn, devils, karāmāt, muʿjiza, ruqya, amulets, silsila, ijāza, fiqh, sharia, ṭarīqa, quṭb, walī, fanāʾ, tajallī, imagination, insight, ittiṣāl.

About the Authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He is responsible for strategy, topic selection, editorial tone, and final editing. He explores inner transformation, comparisons among traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a coauthor of United Wisdom. She works to test ideas in practice and keep the writing connected with actual life, observing how principles of unity and mutual understanding operate between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.

Archival editorial note. The source's fine-grained legal-school rulings, universal definition of rūḥāniyya as permissible, several philosophical attributions, and sharp Ashʿarite/Muʿtazilite contrast require specialist source review. They have been preserved as the essay's claims, not issued as legal or theological determinations. Religious descriptions of causality and spiritual beings are not scientific findings. Bibliographic entries and URLs are inherited, not newly checked. The authorial typology does not represent a consensus of Muslim traditions.

References Inherited from the Archive

These links preserve the archive’s reference record; their contents were not newly checked for this translation.

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