REFRAMING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE THROUGH *'ĀLAM AL-MITHĀL*: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND MYSTICAL PERSPECTIVE IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Kholid Al Walid
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
E-mail: kholid.alwalid@uinjkt.ac.id

Waode Zainab Zilullah Toresano
Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Sadra, Indonesia
E-mail: waodezainab@sadra.ac.id

Rosmaria Syafariyah Widjayanti
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
E-mail: rosmaria.widjayanti@uinjkt.ac.id

Nurul Ain Norman
International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC-IIUM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: nurnorman!@iium.edu.my

Abstract: This paper investigates the philosophical and mystical concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* (The Imaginal World) in Islamic thought as an alternative framework for understanding religious experience. Despite the acknowledgement of its importance, contemporary discourse has yet to undertake a systematic philosophical inquiry into how *'Ālam al-Mithāl*, as a spiritual epistemology, provides rational grounds for affirming the objective reality and transformative capacity of religious experiences, surpassing interpretations that reduce such experiences to merely subjective or psychological interpretations. This research addresses this gap by analyzing how Mullā Sadrā's ontological principle of *Aṣālat al-wujūd* (fundamentality of existence) and epistemological principle of *Ittiḥād al-'Aqil wa al-Ma'qūl* (union of the intellect and the intelligible) substantiate the objective reality of experiences within *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. The study further examines the essential role of *ta'wīl* (esoteric

interpretation) in unveiling the deeper meanings of symbolic encounters in this realm. By integrating these philosophical principles, the paper demonstrates how *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* offers a rigorous framework for validating religious experiences as genuine perceptual events within an objective, intermediate reality. This framework challenges reductionist modern paradigms and highlights the imaginal realm's significance in self-realization and the acquisition of divine knowledge.

Keywords: *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* (The Imaginal World); Religious Experience; Ibn ʿArabī; Mullā Ṣadrā; Spiritual Epistemology.

Introduction

The interpretation and validation of religious experiences emerge as complex phenomena in contemporary interdisciplinary discourse. Ghorbani and Watson emphasize how religious interpretations can lead to various mental health outcomes, with individuals reporting feelings of awe and peace during mystical experiences. Such findings suggest that religious experience may bolster psychological well-being.[1] This notion aligns with the cognitive science perspective that imagination plays a significant role in shaping religious experiences, suggesting that individuals engage religiously through cognitive frameworks that intertwine cultural background and personal meaning.[2] Moreover, the interpretation of

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[1] Nima Ghorbani and P. J. Watson, "Mysticism and Self-Determination in Iran: Multidimensional Complexity of Relationships with Basic Need Satisfaction and Mindfulness," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2009): 75–90, https://doi.org/10.1163/157361209X371500. Ann Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, no. 3 (2020): 669–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619895047. Larkin Elderon Kao, John R. Peteet, and Christopher C. H. Cook, "Spirituality and Mental Health," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2020): 42–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2020.1726048. Samuli Kangaslampi, "Association between Mystical-Type Experiences under Psychedelics and Improvements in Well-Being or Mental Health – A Comprehensive Review of the Evidence," *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 18–28, https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2023.00243. David Bryce Yaden et al., "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2017): 143–60, https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102.
[2] Valerie van Mulukom and Martin Lang, "Religious Experiences Are Interpreted through Priors from Cultural Frameworks Supported by Imaginative Capacity Rather Than Special Cognition," *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 7, no. 1 (2019): 39–53.

these experiences varies significantly within clinical contexts. Ouwehand et al. demonstrate that individuals experiencing bipolar disorder (BD) often interpret religious or spiritual experiences through the dual lens of genuine spirituality and mental health pathology, where their interpretations hinge upon their current mood states.[3] This complexity indicates a critical interplay between subjective experience and psychological conditions, suggesting that researchers must engage with these experiences beyond traditional psychiatric frameworks that may reduce them to mere delusions.[4] In this context, the metaphysical concept in classical Islamic philosophy, 'Ālam al-Mithāl (The Imaginal World), becomes relevant as an alternative framework.

'Ālam al-Mithāl is identified as the primary locus for diverse religious and spiritual experiences, including the symbolic encounters, visions, and prophetic dreams that mark an individual's spiritual journey. This realm serves as the intermediary space where such spiritual phenomena, including direct interactions like prophetic dreams, are understood to occur. The interpretation of these experiences, deeply influenced by individual worldviews and cultural backgrounds, can be complex; misinterpretations may lead to doctrinal misunderstandings or crises of faith. The phenomenological

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[3] Eva Ouwehand et al., "'The Awful Rowing toward God': Interpretation of Religious Experiences by Individuals with Bipolar Disorder," *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 4 (2019): 437–462; Eva Ouwehand, Hetty Zock, and Hanneke Muthert, "Religious or Spiritual Experiences and Bipolar Disorder: A Case Study from the Perspective of Dialogical Self Theory," *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 527.

[4] Eva Ouwehand et al., "Revelation, Delusion or Disillusion: Subjective Interpretation of Religious and Spiritual Experiences in Bipolar Disorder," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 6 (2014): 615–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2013.874410. Elizabeth Pienkos et al., "Hallucinations Beyond Voices: A Conceptual Review of the Phenomenology of Altered Perception in Psychosis," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2019): 67-77, https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sby057. Evan J. Kyzar and George H. Denfield, "Taking Subjectivity Seriously: Towards a Unification of Phenomenology, Psychiatry, and Neuroscience," *Molecular Psychiatry* 28, no. 1 (2023): 10–16, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-022-01891-2; Michael F. Mascolo, "Beyond Objectivity and Subjectivity: The Intersubjective Foundations of Psychological Science," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 50, no. 4 (2016): 543–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-016-9357-3. Eva Ouwehand et al., "Revelation, Delusion or Disillusion: Subjective Interpretation of Religious and Spiritual Experiences in Bipolar Disorder," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 17, no. 6 (2014): 615–628.

studies of Mircea Eliade also note the perception of sacred space and time through distinctive symbolic experiences, a concept that resonates with the function of *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl*.[5] Given the symbolic density of experiences within this imaginal world, *taʾwīl* (esoteric interpretation) is deemed essential. Henry Corbin, for instance, emphasized that *taʾwīl*, requiring pure intuition and a sound metaphysical basis, is crucial for unveiling the deeper realities embedded in these symbols, cautioning against interpretations that could lead to error.[6] This parallels Carl Gustav Jung's concept of active imagination as a tool for accessing archetypal manifestations in the collective unconscious.[7] Furthermore, scholars like William Chittick have explored how *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* enables Sufis to perceive and understand spiritual reality through divine revelation, thereby enriching their religious lives.[8] Frithjof Schuon elaborated on the epistemological dimensions, describing revelation as an "objectivization of the Intellect" where esoteric statements function as symbols of higher truths.[9]

Despite the depth of traditional discourse, a significant research gap remains concerning a systematic philosophical examination of how *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl*, as a spiritual epistemology, can provide rational evidence for the objective reality and transformative capacity of religious experiences. While its importance is acknowledged, contemporary discourse has not fully explored how this concept can effectively counter purely subjective, psychological, or pathological interpretations of such profound human spiritual journeys. There is a particular need to analyze how the metaphysical framework of *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* offers a strong basis for understanding the objectivity of religious and spiritual experiences, moving beyond mere phenomenological description to assert its epistemological validity.

Accordingly, this research aims to analyze how the concept of *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* can provide a deep and philosophically grounded understanding of religious experience, specifically addressing its role

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[5] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 69–70.

[6] Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation* (London: KPI, 1986), 103–109.

[7] Carl G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 123–129.

[8] William Chittick, ed., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 180–185.

[9] Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 1998), 131–132.

as evidence for the objectivity of such experiences. The study seeks to examine the human spiritual journey through this lens of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*, investigating how its embedded spiritual epistemology offers a new perspective on the transformative capacity of religious experience and substantiates its objective reality.

This study is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on spiritual epistemology by offering a nuanced perspective on interpreting symbolic experiences within the framework of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. It aims to strengthen the philosophical foundations for understanding religious experiences, particularly within Islamic thought, and to provide a counter-narrative to purely reductionist views, thereby highlighting the significance of the imaginal realm in the journey toward self-realization and divine knowledge.

The Concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*

'Ālam al-Mithāl is the realm that lies between the realm of *Jabarūt,* the realm of *Mulk,* and the realm of *Shahādah. 'Ālam al-Mithāl* is a spiritual realm in terms of the existence of perceptible shapes and sizes, is similar to corporeal substance, and, on the other hand, in terms of the emanation of light, is similar to immaterial substance. *'Ālam al-Mithāl* in terms of its separation from matter is a spiritual, scientific realm, and in terms of the existence of size and shape is similar to the realm that has the law of occurrence and destruction (*al-Kawn wa al-fasād*).[10]

The idea of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* had already been initiated by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arābī, but Peripatetic philosophers generally rejected this idea because, for Peripatetic philosophers, there is no in-between realm in human beings. The human being is a combination of matter and spirit, leaving no room for an in-between realm.[11] Mullā Ṣadrā surpassed Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arābī in systematizing and developing this principle; it was in Mullā

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[10] In discussion concerning the material world, the concepts of occurrence and destruction (*kawn*) and destruction (*fasād*) are fundamental to understanding the nature of change. Within Islamic philosophy, particularly in the works of al-Fārābī, the theory of *al-Kawn wa al-Fasād,* posits a distinct perspective on the causal relations between entities. This theory argues that the occurrence of one entity after the destruction of another and vice versa does not inherently establish a direct causal connection between them. For more details see: al-Fārābī, *al-Kawn wa al-Fasād*.

[11] Malikheh Sobiri, "Ālam Mithāl va Tajarrud Khiyāl," *Kherad Nāmeh Ṣadrā* 12 (1419): 72.

Sadrā's hands that the rational argument for the existence of nature was presented.

Meanwhile, Jalāluddin Astiyānī defines *'Ālam al-Mithāl* as follows:

> *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is a transcendent spiritual realm that manifests in the substance of light or luminousness which from the physical side has a physical form that can be perceived, has size, is similar to the physical substance that exists in the material realm and from the transcendence side is free from movement, change, occurrence and destruction. It is similar to the realms of intellect that originate from the spiritual substance and the pure intellect, as well as the high spirits and great letters.[12]

In this case, Ibn 'Arabī in his major work, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*, explains that *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is the intermediate world between the physical realm (*'ālam al-shahadah*) and spiritual realm (*'ālam al-ghayb*). This realm is not a material world but has an objective existence that allows humans to access spiritual forms through active imagination.[13] In this context, Henry Corbin emphasizes that experiences in *'Ālam al-Mithāl* are not subjective delusions, but objective experiences that can only be accessed through creative imagination. Corbin relates this to spiritual vision, which is a transcendental experience that is beyond physical perception.[14]

In the imaginal world (*'Ālam al-Mithāl*), there are various perceptions and the emergence of various imaginal objects that become human perceptions. Hence, for Mullā Sadrā, various forms of vision occur in this realm, whether when Gabriel describes his figure as *Diḥya al-Kalbī* or melodious voices. Various supernatural forms can be understood through this realm, which then creates material forms

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[12] Jalaluddin Ashtiyani, *Risaleh Nuriyeh Dar Alame Mithāl* (Tehran: Sozmon Tablighate Islomi, 1372), 45. The original text is as follows:

عالم مثالی عبارت است از عالمی روحانی و مجرد و موجود از جوهری نوری یا نورانی که از لحاظ جسمیت و تجسم یعنی جسم بودن و محسوس و متقدر بودن شبیه جواهر جسمانی موجود در عالم ماده و از حیث تجرد و براءت از قبول حرکت و اباء از تغیر و کون و فساد شبیه است به عوالم عقلانی از جواهر مجرده و عقول مطهره و ارواح عالیه و حروف عالیات.

[13] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 18–25.

[14] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 162–168.

so that various beauties emerge, whether through melodious musical rhythms, beautiful paintings, or poetic words.

'Ālam al-Mithāl is essentially the realm of imagery for the spiritual realm when it descends to the material realm; all forms of ideas or principles of knowledge first form an image in this realm in a series of forms, so that all forms that exist in this material realm have their image in *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. Qayṣarī illustrates that all meanings, both in the ascending curve (*Qaws al-Su'ūd*) and in the descending curve (*Qaws al-Nuzūl*),[15] have imaginal forms and are in accordance with their perfection, because *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is the place of manifestation of all essence. Therefore, every essence of the name Zahir has an existence in that realm as well as the essence of the realm of the spirit or the realm of the intellect."[16]

Mullā Sadrā explicitly states his belief in the existence of this realm: "I am one of those who are convinced that the realm of ideas as a pillar of philosophy really exists, as has been achieved by those who have intuition, and as Suhrawardī has said."[17]

To prove his belief, Mullā Ṣadrā puts forward several arguments[18] as follows:

First, the forms that one witnesses in dreams and everything that one mentally witnesses, or if one imagines something, then all these forms are *wujūd*. It is impossible for the corpus of these forms to be the brain, which is part of the material body, because the body has physical properties (such as place, space, quantity, etc.) that these imaginative forms do not have. In addition, the intuitive intellect has proven the impossibility of something large being inside something as small as the brain. Nevertheless, these forms exist with a different existence from physical forms.

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[15] The *'Urafa'* divide the two parts of the rotation of existence into descending and ascending. The descending one is called *Qaws al-Nuzūl*, which is related to theodicy; the universe that originates from the immaterial, imaginal, and material; while the ascending one is called *Qaws al-Su'ūd*, which is related to eschatology, the universe that originates from the material, *barzakh* to the afterlife.

[16] Dāwud Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Qom: Instisyarat Bidor, 1363), 63.

[17] Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah fī al-Asfār al-'Aqliyyah al-Arba'ah*, Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002), 302. The original text is as follows:

''اعلم أنا ممن يؤمن بوجود العالم الغير المقدارى هو كما ذهب إليه أساطين الحكمة و أئمة الكشف حسبما حرّره وقرّره صاحب الإشراق.''

[18] Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah*, 1: 302–306.

Second, if imaginative forms were to reside in a particular part of the brain or sense organ, as most philosophers understand them to be, then they would take up a particular place that no other form could occupy. Moreover, this would also be impossible because the forms would require a certain space. In fact, reality proves that a person can remember many jobs, witness different climates, cities, and their wonders; yet the forms of these objects remain in the person's memory and imagination. Through intuition, it can also be known that the pneuma of the brain cannot possibly contain the aforementioned forms. Besides, if all the forms were in one corpus, the imagination would be similar to a sheet containing sketches of all the forms overlapping each other so that one form cannot be distinguished from another. However, it is clear that imagination is not like that; it can distinguish one form from another without mixing. Therefore, we know that the imaginative forms do not occupy space in the brain's pneuma, but they come into existence because of the soul in its imaginative power, which is definitely not material.

Third, if the imaginative faculty is a material body, then it must have a material existence. In this situation, if one imagines an existence and the imagination is actualized in that existence, then this imagination would require the integration of both existences in the same matter, a situation that is not possible.

Fourth, if the imaginative faculty were a material body, then it would have the same nature as the other parts of the material body; it would decay and wear out or increase and decrease due to the presence or absence of food. In this case, the imaginative forms would also undergo the same process as their base, the imaginative faculty.

Mullā Ṣadrā mentions that *'Ālam al-Mithāl* in terms of its position is either on the ascending curve or the descending curve. On the ascending curve is none other than the beyond, which is the place of existence for the soul after its separation from the body, while *'Ālam al-Mithāl* on the descending curve is the realm that lies between the spiritual and material realms. The depiction of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* on the descending curve is as described at the beginning of the explanation, starting from the creation of the spiritual form of the last

intellect, and to arrive at the material world, there must be an intermediate dimension that bridges the two.[19]

The description of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is often compared to Plato's world of ideas since Plato's world of ideas is the world of all intellectual forms,[20] which is spiritual. The error in this view is due to the association of non-material forms that occur between the two, which are in fact very different, because, in Mullā S̱adrā's view, *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is a separate reality with all its characteristics as well as a real corpus for imaginal forms. Therefore, later scholars referred to the mini-realm as *al-Mithāl al-Mua'alaqah*, in distinction to Plato's world of ideas.[21]

We can compare Mullā Sadrā's concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* with Ibn Arabi's *'Ālam al-Mithāl* because of its equal position and characteristics; in fact, Mullā Sadrā's concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is a systematization of Ibn Arabi's *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. We can find such equivalence in all its aspects, including in the categorization made by Mullā Sadrā.

In this context, Mullā S̱adrā, like Ibn Arabi, divides *'Ālam al-Mithāl* into two parts, absolute *'Ālam al-Mithāl* or Separate Imaginal world (*Mithāl al-Mutlaq aw Munfaṣil*) and non-Absolute *'Ālam al-Mithāl* or Connected Imaginal world (*Mithāl al-Muqayyad aw Muttaṣil*). Absolute and Separate *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is the independent and essential *'Ālam al-Mithāl*, which is the form of everything that manifests in one and the same condition between spiritual subtlety and material density. Whereas non-Absolute or Connected *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is *'Ālam al-Mithāl* that is not separate from one's soul, and displays various forms derived from *'Ālam al-Mithāl* Absolute or Separate.[22]

Mullā Sadrā's attempt to put forward the idea of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* as part of the principles of his philosophy is to prove the truth of a form of spiritual witnessing that is not simply the result of imagery that occurs in the cerebral pneuma as Ibn Sīnā understood it.[23] Mullā

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[19] Ibid., Vol. 3, 412.

[20] Kholid Al Walid, *Tasawuf Mulla Sadra* (Bandung: Muthahari Press, 2005).

[21] Sobiri, "Ālam Mithāl va Tajarrud Khiyāl."

[22] There are numerous conceptual affinities between the concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* as developed by Mullā S̱adrā and that of Ibn 'Arabī, as discussed by Sobiri in, "Ālam Mithāl va Tajarrud Khiyāl."

[23] Latimah Peerwani, "Mulla Shadra on Imaginative Perception and Imaginal World," *Transcendent Philosophy Journal* 1, no. 2 (2000).

Ṣadrā himself experienced many spiritual revelations that may have prompted him to explain this principle of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. As described earlier, the proof of the existence of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is closely related to the concept of epistemology developed by Mullā Ṣadrā as well as Mullā Ṣadrā's efforts to explain the form of the body after death and the separation of the soul from the material body. Clearly, this principle is closely related to Mullā Ṣadrā's view of eschatology.

Philosophical Basis *'Ālam al-Mithāl*
1. Ontological Basis

Aṣālat al-wujūd (The fundamentality of Existence) is a theory stating that existence is the source of all effects and the fundamental reality.[24] When a person thinks about an entity, two concepts are formed in his mind: its quiddity (*māhiyyah*) through the question, what is it? and its existence (*wujūd*) through the question, does it exist? In this regard, the principle of *aṣālat al-wujūd* (the fundamentality of existence) is a fundamental principle in Ṣadrā's view.[25] The principle of *aṣālat al-wujūd* states that the foundation of the external reality is wujūd. This shows that "*wujūd*" in Ṣadrā's view is not merely a concept, but wujūd is the essence of all existing reality.

On that account, existence is fundamental.[26] *Wujūd* gives the principle of identity *māhiyyah* by removing it from the indifferent state of existence and nothingness (*ḥadd al-istiwā'*) to the position (*marḥalah*) of *wujūd* so that *māhiyyah* is real. Hence, although it is in the mental reality, *māhiyyah* is still in between nothingness and *wujūd* (*ḥadd al-istiwā'*), in the external reality, it is certain that *wujūd* is more fundamental than *māhiyyah* because *māhiyyah* is illusory without being attributed to *wujūd*.[27]

Moreover, another ontological basis is the principle of "Gradation of Existence" (*tashkīk al-wujūd*), which is an essential principle in Sadrā's philosophy as a consequence of the principle of

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[24] Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Nihāyat al-Ḥikmah* (Qom: Muassasat Nashr al-Islāmī, 1424), 11.

[25] The background to the debate on *aṣālat al-wujūd* and *aṣālat al-māhiyyah* stems from the fundamental question: Which one is the fundamental reality, *māhiyyah* or *wujūd*? and which of them (*māhiyyah* dan *wujūd*) is the source of effects?

[26] Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Bidāyat al-Ḥikmah* (Qom: Muassasat al-Ma'ārif al-Islāmiyyah, 1418), 16.

[27] Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Bidāyah al-Ḥikmah*, 14.

fundamentality of existence. However, Mullā Sadrā's principle of gradation applies to *wujūd,* not *māhiyyah,* because the characteristics of *māhiyyah* are totally different from one another, so it has no aspect of similarity.

The principle arises as an answer to the question: "Do the various concepts in the mental realm also have their essence in external reality, or is plurality just a mental construct?" Then, "if the nature of reality is plural, why are there common concepts in our mental realm? Conversely, if the nature of reality is singular, why do we have many concepts in our mental world?" Regarding *wahdah* and *katsrah,* the Islamic Peripatetic philosophers state that reality is plural (*haqāi'q mutabāyinah bi tamām al-dhāt*), while Sadrā views that it is singular and gradational (*haqīqah wāhidah musyakkakah*).[28]

The principle of *tashkīk* is essentially a principle that applies to dependent wujūd (*wujūd al-rābiṭ*) or manifestation (*tajallī*) because the discussion of *tashkīk* on wujūd is explained by Mullā Ṣadrā before discussing causality. In other words, the discussion of *tashkīk* is done when the wujūd of the effect is seen as it is, without relating it to the *wujūd* of the cause. Thus, the principle of *tashkīk* only applies to manifestation, whereas *wujūd* is singular. Perhaps the following quote can demonstrate this conclusion:

> "My Lord has guided me to the straight path Tuhanku telah through *burhān nūr al-'arshī* that *mawjūd* and *wujūd* have a single essence (*al-wahdah al-shakhshiyyah*), there is no duality (*sharīk*) in their true existence. There is no duality (*thani*) in the essence of its reality (*'ayni*). In the expanse of *wujūd* (*dar al-Wujūd*), there are levels (*diyah*). Everything that appears in the realm of *wujūd* is not *al-wājib al-ma'būd* but rather they are the *mazāhir* of its essence and the *tajallī* of its attributes (the *mazāhir* and *tajallī*), which is actually the essence of its reality. This is what some of the *'urafa* said."[29]

2. Epistemological Basis

The arguments that Ṣadrā put forward in his attempt to uphold the principle of *Ittiḥād al-'Āqil wa al-Ma'qūl* are known as the argument

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[28] Ibid., 17–20.

[29] Ṣadrā, *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah*, 1: 292.

of relation (*Burhān al-Tadāyuf*). Ṣadrā relies on three main premises in this argument,[30] namely:

a. Premise I: The actual forms are established alongside with the actualization of something, which consists of actual forms that rely and do not rely on matter, space and time.

b. Premise II: The *Wujūd* of the object must be for its subject, i.e. the *wujūd* of the forms of the object is something whose wujūd is only for its subject, one single thing [not different at all].

c. Premise III: Forms that are not bound to matter and rely on the mental reality must be actual objects, whether or not there is a subject outside of them. The law of perception and the actual object being perceived cannot be completely separate because its identity is the identity of perception and its essence is not something other than an object. On this basis, the actual object is also the subject.

Based on these three premises, Ṣadrā applies "the arguments of relation" as his main arguments. In this argument, two forms that are paired must be on the same dimension. This argument states that there is no way one can imagine one side and omit the other. According to Ṣadrā, relation constitutes equality in actual or potential *wujūd*."[31] Based on this argument, according to Ṣadrā, since the object is present, the subject must be present, and there is dimensional unity in both. With the above premises, the principle of *Ittiḥād al-'Āqil wa al-Ma'qūl* is proven.[32]

In addition to the argument of relation used as arguments for the principle of *Ittiḥād al-'Āqil wa al-Ma'qūl*, there are various other arguments that Mullā Ṣadrā dan and his followers uphold,[33] including:

a. The subject's knowledge of the object is the arrival of the object or scientific form in the subject. The arrival of something is the arrival of *wujūd* and self. Therefore, knowledge is the essential identity of the object, and the necessity of the object's arrival at the subject, as well as the object's presence in the subject, is an inseparable unity, both *ḥuṣūlī* and *ḥuḍūrī*.

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[30] Kholid Al Walid, *Perjalanan Jiwa Menuju Akhirat: Filsafat Eskatologi Mulla Shadra* (Jakarta: Sadra Press, 2012), 44–46.

[31] Ibid., 57.

[32] Ibid., 56.

[33] Ibid., 56–57.

b. It is impossible for one wujūd to enter into another different *wujūd* because it would cause something to be 'one' and 'plural' simultaneously. Logically, this is not possible as it would lead to *Ijtimāʿ al-Naqiḏlayn* (the union of two contradictory things).

c. If the object is not unified in the subject, then what is it covered with? Is it something separate from its form that encompasses its form? It is certainly not possible.

d. If what comes into the subject is not the object's essence, then the subject has no knowledge of the object at all, but of another, different object.

e. Knowledge is immaterial. If perception occurs on a material object, then the knowledge of this material object is not on the object. That means the knowledge does not correspond to the object at all and has no knowledge of the object.

f. The subject knows its own essence, so it is simultaneously an object. Thus, he becomes a subject and, at the same time, an object, and the process of perception also occurs within him.

g. God has knowledge of himself, and his knowledge is his essence. The process is certainly within him. God is a simple Wujūd that is not composed of anything other than himself. Hence, *Ittiḥād al-ʿĀqil wa al-Maʿqūl* occurs within God.[34]

For Ṣadrā, all intellectual knowledge occurs through union with the active intellect. "Active intellect" as 'intellect', which creates all forms of matter, and it is with this nature that the human soul is united when the subject becomes the recipient of intellectual knowledge. In philosophy, this principle becomes an important part of resolving the subjectivity and objectivity of knowledge.[35]

The Relation between *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* and Spiritual Epistemology
1. *ʿĀlam al-Mithāl* as the Basis to Understand Religious Epistemology

ʿĀlam al-Mithāl is a very important concept in Islamic philosophy and mysticism, particularly in the thought of Suhrawardī, Ibn ʿArabī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. Henry Corbin asserts that Islamic Philosophy, especially that of Persian origin, maintains the objective

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 58.

existence of this *‘Ālam al-Mithāl*.[36] Meanwhile, according to al-Ghazālī, invisible forces, positive and negative, inspire and interact with humans on a subtle level. The key to understanding this notion is an inner acceptance of the influence that exists from a hierarchical structure emanating from God all the way down to the human soul. In this context, a religious experience or imagination is not only regarded as a faculty of the soul but also as an external element emanating from God.[37]

Ibn ‘Arabī explored *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* through his mystical experiences. *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* in his view is a world of active imagination where events and presences can be perceived directly without the involvement of the senses. *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* is a realm of symbols and symbolic knowledge, in which prophetic inspiration and theophanic vision have a significant role.[38] In the framework of spiritual epistemology, knowledge is not only acquired through empirical or rational experience, but also through spiritual experience and active imagination.[39]

This suggests that experiences that occur in *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* are closely related to the experiences of the soul, both intellectual and spiritual. In other words, *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* is a bridge between the physical and metaphysical worlds, creating a space for spiritual experiences and knowledge that transcend the limits of sensory perception. The spiritual epistemology that emerges from this concept emphasizes the importance of active imagination and religious experience in acquiring deep knowledge.

In the epistemological framework, the concept of *Ittiḥād al-‘Āqil wa al-Ma‘qūl* proposed by Mullā Ṣadrā is closely related to religious or spiritual experience, especially in the understanding that knowledge gained in spiritual experience is an inseparable unity between the subject (*al- Āqil*) and the object (*al-Ma‘qūl*). In the context of religious experience, the subject feels connected to God, not separate. In addition, the subjects feel that they get God's knowledge and are united with Him.

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[36] Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 156.

[37] Joel Richmond, "Al-Ghazālī on Experiential Knowing and Imaginal Mediation," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 33, no. 1 (2022): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2022.2025562.

[38] Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 175.

[39] Ibid., 189.

Ṣadrā asserts that knowledge cannot be understood as a separation between the knower and the known. Knowledge is not simply a mental representation of an external object, but rather an experience that is interwoven between subject and object. In a religious context, this reflects a spiritual experience where the subject (soul) unites with the object (God or higher reality).[40]

Furthermore, the argument of relation applied by Ṣadrā indicates that knowledge, subject, and object need to be connected in the same dimension.[41] In religious experience, the subject has to raise the spiritual station in order to merge with God as the Supreme object. On that basis, it is possible that there is a distortion of meaning in interpreting the 'knowledge' gained from spiritual experience because the relation is in a different dimension, despite experiencing unification.

Moreover, religious experience in the human spiritual journey is actually an existential experience (*wujūd*). It refers to an experience transcending the material world and reaching out to the higher *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. The experience is not only knowledge of God, but also a direct experience of His presence. As such, religious experiences have the potential to transform the subject who experiences such knowledge. In other words, the knowledge acquired in a religious experience can change the 'self' of the knower.

2. The Role of Symbols in Revealing Transcendent Reality

In the study of religious experience, symbolism in this experience gives esoteric meaning to religious practices. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *William James* thinks that mystical experiences often involve symbolic visions or feelings of divine presence. This is in line with the idea of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*, where symbolism is used to articulate what cannot be expressed literally.[42]

At any religion's core is the individual's encounter with the Divine. The emphasis on the personal spiritual experience would help Humanist and Universalist discourses on religion to lay the foundations for fruitful interfaith interactions, and reformulate

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[40] Kholid Al Walid and Bil Hamdi, "Analisis Spiritual Atheism dalam Tinjauan Filsafat Jiwa Mulla Sadra," *Tajdid: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 22, no. 2 (2023): 298–330. https://doi.org/10.30631/tjd.v22i2.375.

[41] Al Walid, *Perjalanan Jiwa*, 56–57.

[42] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 379–382.

theological systems, mainly the Islamic one, in order to respond positively to the challenges of globalization and the threats of both extremism and exclusivism.[43]

William Chittick elucidates characteristic terms with great care and attention on Ibn 'Arabī's perspective. In discussing the term *al-Manāẓir al-'Ulā*, which Nicholson had incorrectly rendered as the divine ideas, Chittick not only explains that the term correctly denotes the higher loci of vision, but places this more precise rendering in its proper intellectual context: As a technical term in cosmology, higher is contrasted with lower (*asfal*). The higher world is the invisible realm, inhabited by angels and spirits. The lower world is the visible realm, inhabited by bodies. Hence the lower loci of vision would be the things that we perceive with our sensory eyes, or our sight (*bashar*), while the higher loci of vision are the things we perceive through the inward, spiritual faculty called by such names as insight (*bashira*), unveiling (*kashf*), and tasting (*dhawq*).[44]

Based on *al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah*, Mullā Ṣadrā proves the existence of levels of *wujūd*, including the soul, by explaining the different levels of perception performed by the soul in accordance with the different levels of existence. Ṣadrā's concept of the soul as an immaterial substance capable of perceiving metaphysical objects or realities is in line with his theory of gradations of existence.[45] Undoubtedly, the human soul experiences and acquires knowledge in the form of symbols in *'Ālam al-Mithāl*. The symbols obtained in religious experience are related to the level of *wujūd*, so interpreting them should be adjusted to avoid misinterpretations.

Human soul in Ṣadrā's concept of *al-Ḥarakāh al-Jawhariyyah* constantly undergoes some changes from potential to actuality. This implies the perfection of human existence. In this case, the perfection of human existence affects the actuality of human reason, namely the theoretical reason (*ma'rifat al-Ḥaqq*) and practical reason (*ma'rifat al-khayr*). The actuality of theoretical reason can be described through man's immanent knowledge of himself, while the actualization of

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[43] Mustapha Tajdin, "The Possibility of Religious Experience in Islamic Theology," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation* (ISTAC) 26, no. 2 (2021): 219–240. https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v26i2.1173.

[44] William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn 'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 618.

[45] Halimatuzzahro Marzuki, "Filsafat Ketuhanan Mulla Shadra," *Sophist: Jurnal Sosial Politik Kajian Islam dan Tafsir* 4, no. 1 (2022): 42–68.

practical reason can be described through man's will to determine his way of life.[46] Therefore, although the experience of the human soul is a necessity, its experience in the form of symbols is influenced by the actualization of its soul.

3. Interpretation of Religious Experience in *'Ālam al-Mithāl* through *Ta'wīl*

One common mistake is the literal interpretation of symbolic experiences. In *'Ālam al-Mithāl* (imaginal world), spiritual experiences often come in the form of symbols that require *ta'wīl* in order to avoid being trapped in narrow or even erroneous understandings. That is because each individual has the potential to project personal desires or fears into his or her religious experience, which can lead to misinterpretation. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James emphasizes that psychological conditions can influence religious experiences, so guidance is needed to interpret experiences appropriately.[47]

In addition, in the contemporary context, religious experience in the view of neuroscience is interpreted as a symptom of nervous disorders in the brain. The neuroscience view is one of the various views that deny the reality of religious experience. Neuroscientists found that every activity can be measured through the brain through empirical research instruments. This has implications for the Prophets' experience of receiving revelation as a result of brain disorders.[48]

However, for Sufis or spiritual travelers, the experience of union or encounter with God is something that is final, while for Prophets, the experience is the beginning of an awakening in themselves towards a new life.[49] The experience of the Prophets or other people, although it is present within themselves and has the union experience, is sometimes in the form of symbols that require *ta'wīl*.

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[46] Ibrahim Kalin, *Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mulla Sadra on Existence, Intellect, and Intution* (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 89–90.

[47] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 368.

[48] Imandega Muhammad, "Realitas Jiwa sebagai Basis Onto-Epistemologi Pengalaman Religius," *Kanz Philosophia: A Journal for Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* 6, no. 2 (2020): 139–164.

[49] Murtadha Muthahari, *Revelation and Prophethood: Man and Universe* (Yogyakarta: Rausyanfikr Institute, 2015), 18.

Ta'wīl is an essential process of symbolic understanding in the Islamic mystical tradition, as outlined by Henry Corbin in his essay *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*. Corbin explains that *ta'wīl* is the transmutation of the visible into a symbol, which cannot be explained by universal logic or sensory perception. Furthermore, Corbin asserts that *ta'wīl* is the only way to reveal a deeper reality.[50]

The process of *ta'wīl* becomes important in the transition from empirical rational understanding to religious experience. Entering the world of *ta'wīl*, according to Corbin, means going beyond the literal sharī'a or religious law, and entering the realm of symbols that speak a different language with rational evidence. Corbin argues that *ta'wīl* aims to return everything to its basic principles through deep symbolic exposition.[51] In this context, Corbin distinguishes between literal meaning (*ẓāhir*) and hidden meaning (*bāṭin*). Thus, according to him, only humans who have deep intuition are able to understand the hidden meaning.[52]

Ta'wīl is not only used in spiritual experiences, but also in exploring the inner meaning of the Qur'an, not limited to the literal meaning. *Ta'wīl* method is a method developed and popularized by sufis.[53] Meanwhile, according to Ibn 'Arabī, *ta'wīl* is the key to the Unseen (*Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*), which is not known except by God; everything known by God depends on Him.[54] In other words, a sufi performs a spiritual journey (*mi'rāj*) that goes beyond the interpretation or framework of language and towards the inner meaning as the Prophet Muhammad interpreted God's revelation.[55]

In this case, Schuon explains the "revelation" in the spiritual journey (*The Path*):

> Suppose we start from the idea that intellection and concentration, or doctrine and method, are the foundations of the Path. In that case, it should be added that these two elements are valid and effective only by virtue of a traditional

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[50] Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 198.

[51] Ibid., 210.

[52] Ibid., 223.

[53] Nasaruddin Umar, "Konstruksi Takwil dalam Tafsir Sufi dan Syi'ah: Sebuah Studi Perbandingan," *Studi al-Qur'an* 2, no. 1 (2007): 39.

[54] Kautsar Azhari Noer, "Hermeneutik Sufi: Sebuah Kajian atas Pandangan Ibn Arabi tentang Takwil al-Qur'an," *Kanz Philosophia: A Journal for Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* 2, no. 2 (2012): 309–328.

[55] Mukti Ali, *Islam Mazhab Cinta: Cara Sufi Memandang Dunia* (Bandung: Mizan, 2015), 122.

guarantee, a "seal" coming from Heaven. Intellection has the need for tradition, of a revelation fixed in time and adapted to society. In other words, the importance of orthodoxy, of tradition, of Revelation is that the means of realizing the Absolute must come "objectively" from the Absolute; knowledge cannot spring up "subjectively" except within the framework of an "objective" divine formulation of knowledge.[56]

The framework of *'Ālam al-Mithāl*, grounded in Ṣadrā's principle of *Ittiḥād Ittiḥād al-'Āqil wa al-Ma'qūl* and interpreted through the hermeneutical method of *ta'wīl*, offers a philosophically coherent and spiritually nuanced epistemology. This framework affirms the ontological status of religious experiences by situating them as genuine perceptual events within an intermediate ontological domain, thus countering modern reductionist paradigms that often dismiss such experiences as mere neural anomalies or psychological constructs. This concept holds profound relevance for contemporary debates. For instance, within the context of cognitive science of religion, scholars such as Valerie van Mulukom have emphasized that imaginative capacity is central to cultural-religious frameworks.[57] The theory of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* enriches this by arguing that imagination is both constructive and perceptive—an idea that challenges the often-unexamined naturalistic assumptions in the field.

Furthermore, recent interdisciplinary research combining neurocognitive data and phenomenology explores the structure of mystical consciousness and finds echoes in the descriptions of the imaginal realm.[58] The framework of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* offers a valuable

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[56] Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 157.

[57] Valerie van Mulukom and Martin Lang, "Religious Experiences Are Interpreted through Priors from Cultural Frameworks Supported by Imaginative Capacity Rather Than Special Cognition," *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 7, no. 1 (2019): 39–53, https://doi.org/10.1558/jcsr.19803. Mascolo, "Beyond Objectivity and Subjectivity": 543–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-016-9357-3.

[58] Brian L. Lancaster, "Hermeneutic Neurophenomenology in the Science-Religion Dialogue: Analysis of States of Consciousness in the Zohar," *Religions* 6, no. 1 (2015): 146–71, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6010146; Maxwell J. D. Ramstead et al., "From Generative Models to Generative Passages: A Computational Approach to (Neuro) Phenomenology," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 13, no. 4 (2022): 829–57, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-021-00604-y; Charlotte Martial et al., "Neurophenomenology of Near-Death Experience Memory in Hypnotic Recall: A within-Subject EEG Study," *Scientific Reports* 9, no. 1 (2019): 14047, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-50601-6.

metaphysical model for interpreting the complex data of contemporary religious phenomena—from the visionary encounters reported in palliative care to the transformative states achieved in contemplative traditions. It provides a language and a conceptual structure to treat these experiences not as pathological or epiphenomenal, but as potentially meaningful encounters with a non-corporeal dimension of reality, demanding an interpretive lens that is as philosophically rigorous as it is spiritually insightful.

Concluding Remarks

The concept of *'Ālam al-Mithāl* (imaginal world), especially as described by Mullā Sadrā and Ibn 'Arabī, provides an understanding of the intermediary world between physical and spiritual reality. In this context, *'Ālam al-Mithāl* bridges physical and spiritual reality, enabling experience and knowledge through symbolism. This encompasses an understanding of spiritual epistemology in Islamic mysticism that emphasizes deep interpretation through the process of *ta'wīl*.

Mullā Sadrā asserts the existence of this realm based on ontological and epistemological bases that suggest that spiritual experience is not only limited to the material realm, but also involves active imagination and intuition. In this context, the principle of *ta'wīl* becomes essential as it helps individuals understand the symbolism in religious experiences and provides access to deeper meanings.

The connection between *'Ālam al-Mithāl* and spiritual epistemology suggests that knowledge can be acquired not only through empirical and rational experience, but also through religious or spiritual experience. Thus, *'Ālam al-Mithāl* is not only a transcendental space, but it is also linked to an immanent space when the individual who undergoes the spiritual experience performs a process of *ta'wīl* on the symbols he witnesses or experiences.

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