

# Knowing the Spirit



OSTAD ELAHI

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY JAMES WINSTON MORRIS

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James Winston Morris

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

*Knowing the Spirit*, like the rest of Ostad Elahi's writings and teaching, is intended as a kind of bridge: a bridge meant to be open and accessible to each reader, but in ways necessarily reflecting their own particular experience and understanding. One could describe this type of writing in the same terms that the author himself uses here to describe each soul's actual experience of the spiritual world: "it is like a mirror: everyone sees their own form in it." The introduction and notes accompanying this translation are designed to help restore that original directness of expression and accessibility for today's readers in English, who necessarily approach this book from a very different cultural background.

Historically, *Knowing the Spirit* can be seen as a bridge between the intellect and spiritual experience (*'aql* and *kashf*), between the learned philosophical and metaphysical traditions of Iran and the complex forms of spiritual practice, contemplation, and guidance traditionally associated with Sufism and the wider expressions of Islamic spirituality.

At the same time, given worldwide transformations in the actual conditions of religious and spiritual life, changes that were especially dramatic during Ostad Elahi's own lifetime (1895–1974), this book also provides us with a remarkable bridge between the world's major religions, in that it constantly points to the fundamental, shared human realities and dimensions of experience underlying the often puzzling symbolic presentations of eschatology and metaphysical teaching within each of those traditions. As such, like the rest of Ostad Elahi's teaching, it suggests a way leading toward the gradual emergence of what has recently been called the nascent "science of spirituality."

Finally, and most intimately, the author's guiding metaphysical vision of human destiny, of the true universality of the processes of spiritual realization, offers a helpful bridge toward the actual ongoing tasks of spiritual intelligence, toward the unfolding interplay of experience and understanding within each reader's own path of spiritual perfection.

Special thanks are due first of all to those many friends, colleagues and former students who have patiently read through and helped clarify earlier drafts of this translation and introduction, including most recently my editor at State University of New York Press, Nancy Ellegate. At the same time, the essential understanding and presentation of this volume were based on years of study of related traditions of Islamic thought and spirituality, especially the writings of Ibn 'Arabi, Mulla Sadra, and the great Persian mystical poets. Since it would take many pages to list all the scholars and colleagues who have aided those supporting studies, I can only acknowledge here by name those first, now-departed teachers who so memorably started me on that long path: S. J. Ashtiyani, Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutzu, and Annemarie Schimmel.

The final completion of this project was greatly facilitated by a study leave from the University of Exeter, and I am particularly grateful to the Fondation Ostad Elahi (together with its President, Dr. Bahram Elahi) for granting the translation rights for *Ma'rifat ar-Rūh*. As with all of my work, this book would not have reached completion without the editorial vigilance, encouragement, and constant support of my wife Corey.

—James Winston Morris

# 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)