Civilizational Dialogue And Mysticism: The Holy Qur'an And The Metaphysics Of Ibn Al–'Arabi

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This text explains how it is possible to reconcile the dawa with dialogue with other faiths without denying one's religious identity by recognizing the underlying common ground that is the universality of the belief in a Superior Entity and the basic universal ethic laws that are shared among all human beings.

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Civilizational Dialogue And Mysticism: The Holy Qur'an And The Metaphysics Of Ibn Al-'Arabi

Reza Shah-Kazemi

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Abstract

This incisive article begins by noting the universality that subsists in the esoteric core of all religions, but which is especially emphasised even in the exoteric aspects of Islam – the ultimate religion and final "summing up". The paper makes the claim that the extent to which the religions of the Other are given recognition in the Qur'an renders this scripture unique among the great revelations of the world. It continues by showing that this "inclusiveness" of Islam does not preclude exclusive claims that engender a religious identity for Muslims and that allow for normativity as well as *da'wa*.

This Islamic juxtaposition between *da'wa* and dialogue indicates implicitly that, rather than being seen as two contrasting or even antithetical modes of engaging with the Other, these two elements can in fact be synthesized by wisdom.

A dialogue based on wisdom would also be a form of dialogue which contrasts quite sharply with a relativistic pluralism which, by reducing all religious beliefs to a presumptuous lowest common denominator, ends up by undermining the belief in the normativity of religion. The kind of *da'wa*–as–dialogue that is proposed in this article charts a middle path, avoiding two extremes: a fundamentalist type of *da'wa* which alienates the Other on account of its blatant exclusivity, and a pluralistic mode of dialogue which corrodes the Self on account of its thinly veiled assault on normativity.

Keywords: Civilizational dialogue, Islamic mysticism, Qur'anic universality, Ibn al–'Arabi, interfaith dialogue, Transcendent Unity of Religions, religious pluralism.

'Civilized Dialogue' And The Holy Qur'an

The notion of 'civilizational dialogue' has been proposed in recent years as an antidote to the poison disseminated by the sensational prophecy of 'the clash of civilizations' made by Samuel Huntington. What is meant by a dialogue between civilizations is of course simply 'civilized dialogue', that is, a mode of dialogue between individuals of different cultures and religions which seeks to accept the Other within a civilized framework; a mode of dialogue which respects diversity and difference, and upholds the rights of all individuals and groups to express their beliefs and to practise their faith without hindrance.

In the Holy Qur'an one finds a clear enunciation of the manner in which civilized dialogue should take place in a context of religious diversity; it does so in several verses, some of the most important of which we shall cite here as the essential background against which one should view the metaphysical perspectives on the Other opened up by Ibn al–'Arabi, verses to which we will return in the course of

presenting these perspectives:

- ***"For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you*** [***He hath made you as you are***]***. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed"*** (***5:48***)***.***

- ***"O mankind, truly We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another"*** (***49:13***)***.***

- ***"And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colours. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know"*** (***30:22***)***.***

- ***"Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans – whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds – surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve"*** (***2:62***)***.***

- ***"Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted"*** (***2:136***)***.***

- ***"And do not hold discourse with the People of the Book except in that which is finest, save with those who do wrong. And say: We believe in that which hath been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender"*** (***29:46***)***.***

- ***"Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and hold discourse with them*** [***the People of the Book***] ***in the finest manner"*** (***16:125***)***.***

It is on the basis of such verses as these that Martin Lings asserted that, whereas the universality proper to all true religions can be found within each religion's mystical dimension, or esoteric essence, one of the distinctive features of Islam is the fact that universality is indelibly inscribed within its founding revelation – as well as within its esoteric essence. 'All mysticisms are equally universal … in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam, and therefore of Sufism, is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up.'[1]

The extent to which the religions of the Other are given recognition, and indeed reverence, in the Qur'an does indeed render this scripture unique among the great revelations of the world. It is thus a rich source for reflection upon the most appropriate way to address the various issues pertaining to dialogue with the religious Other. The Qur'anic message on religious diversity is of particular relevance at a time when various paradigms of 'pluralism' are being formulated and presented as a counter-weight to the 'clash of civilizations' scenario. In the last of the verses cited above, 16:125, 'wisdom' (*hikma*) is given as the basis upon which dialogue should be conducted.

The whole of the Qur'an, read in depth and not just on the surface, gives us a divine source of wisdom; imbibing from this source empowers and calibrates our efforts to engage in meaningful dialogue and to establish authentic modes of tolerance; it thus provides us, in the words of Tim Winter, with a 'transcendently-ordained tolerance.'[2] Wisdom is a quality and not an order: it cannot be given as a blue-print, a set of rules and regulations; it calls for human effort, a readiness to learn, it needs to be cultivated, and it emerges as the fruit of reflection and action.

As the words of verse 16:125 tell us, we need wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and we also need to know how to engage in dialogue on the basis of that which is ahsan 'finest' 'most excellent', or 'most beautiful' in our own faith, if we are to authentically invite people to the path of the Lord. In other words, we are being encouraged to use wisdom, rather than any pre-determined set of instructions, in order to discern the most appropriate manner of inviting people to the 'way of thy Lord', thus, how best to engage in *da'wa*. But we also need wisdom in order to discern that which is 'most excellent' in the faith of our interlocutors in dialogue.

This creative juxtaposition between *da'wa* and dialogue indicates implicitly that, rather than being seen as two contrasting or even antithetical modes of engaging with the Other, these two elements can in fact be synthesized by wisdom: if one's dialogue with the Other flows from the wellsprings of the wisdom of one's tradition, and if one makes an effort to understand the wisdom – that which is 'most excellent' – in the beliefs of the Other, then this kind of dialogue will constitute, in and of itself, a 'most beautiful' form of *da'wa*. For one will be making an effort to allow the wisdom of one's tradition to speak for itself; to 'bear witness' to one's faith will here imply bearing witness to the wisdom conveyed by one's faith-tradition, that very wisdom which, due to its universality and lack of prejudice, allows or compels us to recognize, affirm and engage with the wisdom contained within and expressed by other faith-traditions. For, as the

Prophet said, 'Wisdom is the lost camel (*dhalla*) of the believer: he has a right to it wherever he may find it'.[3]

If wisdom is the lost property of the believer, this means that wherever wisdom is to be found, in whatever form, in whatever religion, philosophy, spirituality or literature – that wisdom is one's own. It is thus an inestimable tool in the forging of an authentic civilization. One has to be prepared to recognize wisdom, as surely as one would recognize one's own camel, after searching for it. This translates into the attitude: whatever is wise is, by that very fact, part of my faith as a 'believer': my belief in God as the source of all wisdom allows or compels me to recognize as 'mine' whatever wisdom there is in the entirety of time and space, in all religions and cultures.

This does not mean that one appropriates to one's own self – whether individual or social or religious – the wisdom of the Other; rather, it means that one recognizes the wisdom of the Other as being an expression of the wisdom of God, the one and only source of wisdom, however it be expressed. How, then, is it 'mine'? Insofar as one's identity is defined by one's relationship with God as the source of all truth, beauty and wisdom, one's 'self' will be, in that very measure, inextricably bound up with the wisdom one perceives, however alien be the context or culture in which it is expressed. On the specifically Islamic level, such an approach produces this attitude: that which is wise is – by its essence if not its form – 'Islamic'. It 'belongs' to us, and we identify with it. This contrasts with the prejudice: only that which is Islamic – in its form – is wise.

One should note that the universal vision of wisdom was at its strongest when Islamic civilization was at its most authentic and confident – witness the extraordinary assimilation and transformation of the various ancient forms of wisdom in the early 'Abbasid period; this was an exemplification of the calibrated appropriation and creative application of wisdom – from the intellectual legacy of the Greeks, and the Persians, Indians and Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Assyrians, etc. – on a grand, civilizational scale, transforming and enriching Muslim philosophy, science, and culture. [4]

By contrast, it is the exclusivist, prejudiced approach to wisdom that prevails today, when Islamic 'civilization' can hardly be said to exist anywhere. It would also appear to be the case that when Islamic civilization existed, *da'wa* was not invested with the emotional intensity which it has acquired in our times. Modernism – with its highly developed tools of propaganda, its tendencies of ideologization, bureaucratization, and uniformalization – has influenced Muslim thought and behaviour and made Muslim *da'wa* much more like Christian missionary movements; in traditional Islam, the *da'wa* that existed was far more low-key, personal and took the form of preaching through personal example – it is not accidental, that, as Thomas Arnold's masterly study reveals, the main 'missionaries' of traditional Islam were mystics and merchants.[5]

The emotional intensity with which *da'wa* is invested in our times would appear to be, on the one hand, a function of the very weakness of Islamic culture, a defensive reflex used to disguise one's 'civilizational' deficiencies; and on the other, it is a kind of inverted image of the missionary Christian movements to

which the Muslim world has been subjected in the past few centuries, a mimetic response to one's erstwhile colonizers.

One cannot deny, however, that *da'wa* has always played a role in Muslim culture, and that it has a role to play today. To ignore *da'wa*, within a Muslim context, is to render questionable one's credentials as a 'valid interlocutor' on behalf of Islam. But one ought to be aware of the kind of *da'wa* that is appropriate in our times, and to seek to learn from the most subtle and refined spirituality of the Islamic tradition in order to make wisdom the basis of one's *da'wa*. The kind of *da'wa* being proposed here is one which seeks to be true to the wisdom which flows from the Qur'anic message of religious diversity, a message read in depth, according to Sufi hermeneutics, and in particular the metaphysics of Ibn al–'Arabi.6

This would be a form of *da'wa* which contrasts sharply with the kind of triumphalist propaganda with which we are all too familiar in our times: a disdainful and arrogant call, issuing from harshly exclusivist attitudes which manifest the claim that 'my' religion is alone right and all others are wrong. A dialogue based on wisdom would also be a form of dialogue which contrasts quite sharply with a relativistic pluralism which, by reducing all religious beliefs to a presumptuous lowest common denominator, ends up by undermining one's belief in the normativity of one's religion – a belief which is so central to the upholding of one's faith with integrity.

The kind of *da'wa*–as–dialogue being proposed here charts a middle path, avoiding two extremes which are in fact closer to each other than is immediately obvious: a fundamentalist type of *da'wa* which alienates the Other on account of its blatant exclusivity, and a pluralistic mode of dialogue which corrodes the Self on account of its thinly veiled assault on normativity. An effective, realistic, and practical mode of dialogue must do justice both to the Self which one ostensibly represents, and to the Other with whom one is in dialogue; there has to be room for the expression of one's belief in the normativity of one's tradition – the belief that one's religion is the best religion, failing which, one would not adhere to it. The right of the Other to bear witness to his faith should, likewise, be respected.

The question might then be asked: how can these competing truth–claims be reconciled with the needs of dialogue – will the result not simply be two mutually exclusive monologues engaging in an unseemly type of competitive religion rather than respecting each other in an enriching dialogue of comparative religion? There is an existential argument one can make, whatever be the faith adhered to, on behalf of this 'exclusivist' claim, and this argument is based on the fact that religion is not simply a conceptual schema, it is a transformative power. In the 'clash' between rival religions, one is not only confronted by competing, mutually exclusive truth–claims; one is also presented with alternative paths to realization of a Reality which radically transcends all conceptually posited truths.

One's perception of the 'truths' which fashion and delineate one's path to Reality will be deepened, and the truth–claims will be correspondingly corroborated, in proportion to one's progress along that path: therefore the claim that one's religion is 'more true' than other religions is a claim about the transformative power which one has directly experienced, and it is this which bestows an existential

certainty – rather than any kind of logical infallibility – about one's claim on behalf of the spiritual power of one's religion, a degree of certainty which is absent from a purely conceptual truth-claim one might make on behalf of the dogmas of one's religion. Religion is more about realization than conceptualization; or rather, it is about an initial set of concepts which call out for spiritual action,[7] and which find their consummation in spiritual realization.[8]

The Buddhist notion of doctrine – all doctrine – as an upaya, a 'saving strategy' is an example of a wise doctrine which we might use here to help explain this point. This notion means, essentially, that all doctrines are veils which transmit some aspects of the truth while obscuring others: the communicable aspect of the truth in question is transmitted, but at the price of obscuring its incommunicable dimension, if it be taken too seriously, that is: if the communicable aspect of the truth be taken as the whole truth. The key spiritual function of doctrine is to point to a reality beyond itself, and is likened, within Buddhism, to a finger pointing at the moon: one is urged to look at the moon indicated by the finger, and not focus exclusively on the finger.[9]

This reduction of the spiritual end to the conceptual means is what fanatical dogmatism does; by contrast, a more supple approach to dogma results in seeing it as a means to an end: the dogma as theory leads to spiritual praxis, and moral transformation, thanks to which the 'eye of the heart' is opened up, enabling it to 'see' that Reality to which the dogma bears witness, but which it cannot encompass or exhaust.

In regard to the function of language in the search for truth, Rumi makes this point, which resonates with the idea of an upaya, and which highlights the need for spiritual action as an accompaniment to doctrinal learning:

'Someone asked: Then what is the use of expressions and words?

The Master [*i.e. Rumi*] *answered: The use of words is that they set you searching and excite you, not that the object of the quest should be attained through words. If that were the case, there would be no need for so much striving and self-naughting. Words are as when you see afar off something moving; you run in the wake of it in order to see it, it is not the case that you see it through its movement. Human speech too is inwardly the same; it excites you to seek the meaning, even though you do not see it in reality.'*

Rumi then reinforces the point, stressing the incommensurability between the kind of learning that comes through reading, on the one hand, and the understanding that arises from the spiritual discipline of self-transcendence, on the other:

'Someone was saying: I have studied so many sciences and mastered so many ideas, yet it is still not known to me what that essence in man is that will remain forever, and I have not discovered it.

The Master answered: If that had been knowable by means of words only, you would not have needed

to pass away from self and to suffer such pains. It is necessary to endure so much for yourself not to remain, so that you may know that thing which will remain.'[10]

Similarly, another great Persian poet 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492), who masterfully synthesised the esoteric teachings of the school of *wahdat al-wujud* in his masterpiece, Lawa'ih, expresses succinctly the transcendence of this higher wisdom, in terms of which thought – all thought, including the mentally posited conceptions of the dogmas of religion – is not just surpassed, it is even rendered 'evil':

'O heart, how long searching for perfection in school?

How long perfecting the rules of philosophy and geometry?

Any thought other than God's remembrance is evil suggestion.'[11]

It is this perspective which enables one to reconcile competing truth claims within a unique Reality which transcends all such claims, that Reality to which the 'truths' bear witness, to which they lead, and from which they receive all their value. The following words of the Qur'an bear witness to the unique Reality from which all religions derive:

***"Our God and your God is One"* (*29:46*).**

As for leading back to the same Reality:

***"For each of you We have established a Law and a Path"* (*5:48*).**

If the paths revealed by God are different and divergent, then they cannot but be accompanied by divergent truth-claims, that is, claims pertaining to ways of conceiving and realizing the truth; but insofar as this truth is but the conceptual expression of an ultimate Reality, and insofar as this Reality is posited as the alpha and omega of all things, the divergent conceptual claims to truth converge on a unique Reality – that of God, the ultimate truth, the ultimate Reality – both truth and reality being in fact synthesised in the Arabic name of God, al-Haqq, 'The Real/The True'. If the source and the summit of the divergent paths is a single, unique Reality, it is this oneness of the Real which must take ontological precedence over the competing 'epistemological' claims to truth. In other words, Being precedes thought; thought is consummated in Being.[12] The mutually exclusive truth claims, in their purely conceptual form, might be seen as so many unavoidable shadows cast by the divinely-willed diversity of religious paths; these diverse paths, in turn, can be envisaged as so many 'lights' emanating from the one and only Light, this unique Light being refracted into different colours by the prism of relativity, and these differently coloured lights then crystallising in the forms of the various religions, according to this symbolism.[13]

Red, blue and green lights remain lights even while of necessity excluding each other: no light can be identified with another, except insofar as each is identified with light as such, and not as such and such a light. Here, the Essence of the Real, or the Absolute, is represented by light as such, and the religions

can be seen as colours adding to that light something of their own relativity, even while being the vehicles of that light. As will be seen below, this means of reconciling outwardly divergent religious forms within a unitive spiritual essence evokes Ibn al–'Arabi's image of the cup being coloured by the drink it contains. The water – standing here for the Absolute – within the cup – the particular religion – becomes 'coloured' by the colour of the cup; but this is so only extrinsically, and from the human point of view; for intrinsically, and from the divine point of view – sub specie aeternitatis – the water remains colourless.

Returning to the idea of *da'wa*–as–dialogue, in the Christian context, those most opposed to the reductionistic tendencies of the kind of pluralism associated with John Hick argue forcefully that a Christian has both the right and the duty to 'bear witness' to his faith: to some degree at least, and in some manner, implicit or explicit, it becomes one's duty to invite others to study and investigate the wisdom that is available within one's own faith. As mentioned above, this is a crucial prerequisite for anyone who wishes to engage in dialogue on behalf of a particular faith: to represent that faith must mean to 're–present' it, to present its wisdom, beauty – but also, its normativity, failing which one will not be seen as a 'valid interlocutor' within the tradition one seeks to represent.

It might be objected here: it is impossible to meet every type of criterion which the different schools of thought within any given religious tradition may propose for one to be deemed a 'valid interlocutor' on behalf of that faith. Whilst this is true, it is nonetheless worth making the effort to reduce as far as possible the basis upon which one's credentials as a valid interlocutor would be rejected by one's co–religionists. And one of the main bases for this rejection is, without doubt, the perception that those engaged in dialogue are so intent on reaching out to the Other that they do not sufficiently respect the integrity of the Self – that is, they inadequately uphold the normativity of the tradition ostensibly being represented in dialogue. This is a factor which cannot be ignored if one is concerned with a dialogue that aims to be effective, not just in the debating halls of academia, but also in the wider world, wherein the overwhelming majority of believers within the various religions believe deeply in the normativity of their particular religion.

How, then, can the Muslim engaged in dialogue cultivate that wisdom which perceives the truth, the holiness, and the beauty that is contained within the religions of the Other, whilst simultaneously upholding the normativity of his faith, and the specificity of his identity? [14] The perception of the validity of other, alien forms of religious belief acquires a particular acuteness in the light of the following saying of the Prophet – which exists in slightly different variants, in the most canonical of hadith collections – and which concerns the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter. The Muslims are confronted by a theophany of their Lord, whom they do not recognize: 'I am your Lord', He says to them. 'We seek refuge in God from you,' they reply, 'we do not associate anything with our Lord'. Then God asks them: 'Is there any sign (aya) between you and Him by means of which you might recognize Him?' They reply in the affirmative, and then 'all is revealed', and they all try to prostrate to Him. Finally, as regards this part of the scene, 'He transforms Himself into the form in which they saw Him the first time,[15] and He says: "I am your Lord", and they reply: "You are our Lord!".'[16]

How, then, is one to recognize the divine 'face' in the traditions of the Other; how does one recognize this 'lost camel' – the wisdom contained within the religions of the Other? For this wisdom may well be expressed in forms of divine self-manifestation which are not only alien, but, in addition, so unlike one's own received wisdom that one takes refuge from them in one's own 'God'. If believers on the Day of Judgement are unable to recognize God in anything other than the forms of their own beliefs, through the blinkers of their own prejudices, how can believers, here and now, ensure that they do not fall into this same trap?

Evidently, prejudice is one of the main obstacles in the path of any dialogue which aims at discovering the wisdom of the Other; however, one of the principal problems arising out of the removal of prejudice towards the Other is the weakening of the identity of the Self.[17] How can we reach out to the Other in an unprejudiced manner, without this absence of prejudice diluting or subverting our own sense of identity? Or again: How can we be universalist in our spiritual vision, without sacrificing the specificity of our faith and praxis?

It is our contention here that in the Islamic tradition, the Sufi school of thought associated with Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, known in Sufism as 'the greatest shaykh' (al-Shaykh al-Akbar)[18] can be of considerable value in helping to cultivate the wisdom which synthesizes the two principles in question here: an unprejudiced, universalist, supra-confessional view of spirituality, on the one hand; and a normative approach to the specificity and particularity of one's own faith, praxis, and identity on the other. It is possible to arrive at an inclusive perspective, one which, however paradoxically, includes exclusivism; this is a perspective which transcends the false dichotomy, so often encountered in our times, between a fanatical exclusivism which disdains all but one's own faith, and a relativistic inclusivism which fatally undermines the integrity of one's own faith.

Upholding the integrity of one's faith is difficult if not impossible without a definitive, clearly delineated identity, which in its very specificity and particularity cannot but exclude elements of the Other on the plane of religious form; by 'religious form' is meant not just legal and ritual forms but also conceptual and doctrinal forms. However, all such forms are radically transcended, objectively, by the divine essence of the religions; and all the modes of identity commensurate with these forms are just as radically dissolved, subjectively, within the consciousness of one whose soul has been effaced within that essence. These are natural corollaries of Ibn al-'Arabi's complex and challenging perspective on the dynamics of religious consciousness.

This metaphysical – or supra-confessional – perspective of Ibn al-'Arabi should be seen as a kind of interpretive prolongation of the spiritual trajectories opened up by the Qur'an, and not simply as the product of his own speculative genius, however undeniable that genius is. Within this perspective there is a clearly defined relationship between form and essence; as will be demonstrated below, his elaboration on this basic distinction flows from the clear distinction established in the Qur'an between the essence of religion – which is unique – and its forms – which are diverse. Verses such as the following

should be borne in mind:

- ***"He hath ordained for you of the religion* (*min al-din*) *that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee* [*Muhammad*]*, and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein …"* (*42:13*).**

- ***"Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted"* (*3:84*).**

- ***"Naught is said unto thee* [*Muhammad*] *but what was said unto the Messengers before thee"* (*41:43*).**

It is that essential religion (al-din) which was conveyed to all the Messengers, whence the lack of differentiation between them on the highest level: the Muslim is not permitted to make an essential distinction between any of them:

***"We make no distinction between any of them"* (*3:84; 2:136; 2:285; 4:152*).**

Understanding this distinction between the essence of religion and its forms is crucial for those engaged in dialogue; a correct understanding of this fundamental distinction enables one to engage in dialogue with wisdom, and on the basis of a principled universality; this, in contrast to an unprincipled or rootless syncretism, and in contrast to a well-meaning but ultimately corrosive relativistic pluralism.

Syncretistic universalism stems from a sentimental and superficial assimilation of the sacred; it thus has no intellectual or metaphysical principle which can discern authentic religion from spurious cults, on the one hand, and, on the other, maintain a total commitment to one's own religion whilst opening up to the religions of the Other. In syncretism, indiscriminate openness to all sacred forms in general – or what are deemed to be such – cannot but entail a disintegration of the specific form of one's own religion. Principled universality, by contrast, leads to an intensification of commitment to one's own religion; the sense of the sacred and the need to follow the path delineated by one's own religion not only coexist, but each may be said to be a sine qua non for the transformative power of other. For effective access to the sacred is granted, not by an abstract, purely discursive conception of the sacred in general, but by entering into the concrete, specific forms of the sacred which are bestowed by the grace inherent within

one's own sacred tradition.

From this spiritual process of plumbing the depths of the sacred emerges the comprehension that there is no access to the essence of the sacred, above all religious forms, except by means of those authentic formal manifestations of the Essence: the divinely revealed religions. Such a perspective flows naturally from reflection upon the meaning of the verses from the Qur'an cited above, and in particular:

"For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [***He hath made you as you are***]. ***So vie with one another in good works ..."*** (***5:48***).

This minimal definition of authenticity – 'true' religion being that which is divinely revealed – derives from Ibn al–'Arabi's criterion, which will be elaborated upon below. We are using this criterion to distinguish true from false religion, in the full knowledge that authenticity or orthodoxy as defined within each true religion will have its own distinctive and irreducible criteria. In this connection it is worth noting that there was never any central ecclesiastical authority in Islam, comparable to the Church in Christianity, charged with the duty of dogmatically imposing 'infallible' doctrine. According to a well–known saying in Islam: 'The divergences of the learned (*al–'ulama'*) are a mercy'.[19]

This saying can be seen as manifesting the ecumenical spirit proper to Islam; orthodoxy qua doctrinal form has a wide compass, its essence being the attestation of the oneness of God and of Muhammad as His messenger, these comprising the shahadatayn, or 'dual testimony'. Accordingly, in Islamic civilization, a wide variety of theological doctrine, philosophical speculation, mystical inspiration and metaphysical exposition was acceptable so long as the Shari'a, the Sacred Law, was upheld. We might speculate here that the principle of the saying quoted above can also, by transposition, be applied to the religions themselves: the divergences of the religions constitute a 'mercy'. This mercy is expressed in the divine will for religion to be characterised by a diversity of paths: Had God willed, He could have made you one community.

The capacity to recognise other religions as valid, without detriment to the commitment to one's own religion, evidently requires a certain spiritual suppleness; minimally, it requires a sense of the sacred and an inkling of the universality of revelation; at its most profound, it is the fruit of spiritual vision. With the help of Ibn al–'Arabi's doctrine, itself evidently the fruit of just such vision,[20] we can arrive at a conception of a principled universality, that is, an awareness of the universality of religion which neither violates the principles of one's own religion, nor dilutes the content of one's own religious identity.

Universality And Identity

The relationship between the perception of religious universality and the imperatives of one's identity is brought into sharp focus by Ibn al–'Arabi in his account of his spiritual ascension (*mi'raj*), an account describing one of the spiritual peaks of his inner life.[21] In this spiritual ascent – distinguished from that of

the Prophet, which was both bodily and spiritual – he rises up to a spiritual degree which is revealed as his own deepest essence. But one can hardly speak of personal pronouns such as 'his' at this level of spiritual experience: whatever belongs to him, whatever pertains to 'his' identity, is dissolved in the very process of the ascent itself.

At the climax of this ascent, he exclaims: *'Enough, enough! My bodily elements are filled up, and my place cannot contain me!', and then tells us: 'God removed from me my contingent dimension. Thus I attained in this nocturnal journey the inner realities of all the Names and I saw them returning to One Subject and One Entity: that Subject was what I witnessed and that Entity was my Being. For my voyage was only in myself and pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure "servant" without a trace of lordship in me at all.'*[22]

It is of note that immediately following this extraordinary revelation of the deepest reality of 'his' selfhood within the divine reality, Ibn al–'Arabi should proclaim, not the secret of oneness with God, or his 'Lordship' in the manner of a Hallaj who ecstatically declared *ana al–haqq* (I am the Truth), but the very opposite: he came to know through this journey that he was a pure servant (*'abd*), without any trace of lordship (*rububiyya*). The highest realization is accompanied by the deepest humility. Self–effacement, rather than self–glorification, is the fruit of this degree of spiritual station, the very opposite to what one might have imagined. It is the essence or *sirr* – 'secret' or 'mystery' – of consciousness within the soul of the saint that, alone, can grasp the truth that it is not conditioned by the soul. The consciousness within the soul knows that it is not of the soul – this being one of the reasons why this inmost degree of consciousness is referred to as a 'secret': its immanent, divine identity is veiled from the soul of which it is the conscious centre. Herein lies one of the meanings of the Sufi saying: the Sufi is in the world but not of it.

The particular dynamics of being within the ontology of Ibn al–'Arabi helps us to understand why specificity and self–effacement should be the natural expressions of universality and self–realization; these dynamics also help us to see the intimate relationship between the deconstruction of identity and the perception of the universality of religion, as well as the necessity for the reconstruction or restitution of identity within a specific religious matrix.

These 'religious' corollaries of Being will be explored later in this section. For the moment, attention is to be focused on the fact that at the very summit of this spiritual ascent to ultimate reality and self–realization, Ibn al–'Arabi receives from that Reality the verse of the Qur'an (cited above):

***"Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted"* (*3:84*).**

He then adds these words: 'Henceforth I knew that I am the totality of those (prophets) who were

mentioned to me (in this verse)'; and also: 'He gave me all the Signs in this Sign'.[23]

Since the word for 'sign' is the same as that for 'verse' (*aya*), this can also be taken to mean that all revealed verses are implicitly contained in this verse which establishes the universality and unity of the essence of the religious message, despite the outward differentiation of its formal expression. This last point is clearly implied in another account of a spiritual ascent, in which Ibn al–'Arabi encountered the Prophet amidst a group of other prophets and is asked by him: 'What was it that made you consider us as many?'

To which Ibn al–'Arabi replies: 'Precisely (the different scriptures and teachings) we took (from you)'.[24]

Heavily implied in the Prophet's rhetorical question is the intrinsic unity of all the revelations. This principle is expressed in the following verse of the Qur'an (cited above), which Ibn al–'Arabi quotes and then comments upon:

***"He hath ordained for you of the religion that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee* [*Muhammad*]*, and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein"* (*42:13*).**

Then he quotes from another verse, mentioning further prophets, and concluding:

***"Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance"* (*6:90*).**

He comments as follows:

*This is the path that brings together every prophet and messenger. It is the performance of religion, scattering not concerning it and coming together in it. It is that concerning which Bukhari wrote a chapter entitled, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religions of the prophets is one". He brought the article which makes the word "religion" definite, because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it ... As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each one of the messengers. He said, "**For each of you We have established a Law and a Path. Had God willed, He could have made you one community**" (**5:48**). If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse, just as they are not diverse in the fact that you have been commanded to come together and to perform them.*[25]

One sees clearly that Ibn al–'Arabi is suggesting here a distinction between religion as such, on the one hand, and such and such a religion, on the other; it is religion as such that warrants the definite article (*al–din*). But such and such a religion, far from being marginalised in this perspective, is endowed with an imperatively binding nature by virtue of the absoluteness of its own essence, that is, by virtue of being not other than religion as such. For, on the one hand, religion as such, al–din, is the inner substance and inalienable reality of such and such a religion; and on the other, it is impossible to practise religion as

such without adhering to such and such a religion. Apprehending the universal essence of religion, far from precluding particularity and exclusivity of formal adherence, in fact requires this adherence: to attain the essence one must grasp, in depth, the form by which the essence reveals itself. This is why, in the passage quoted above, Ibn al–'Arabi continues by stressing the specific path proper to the final Prophet. It is that path 'for which he was singled out to the exclusion of everyone else. It is the Koran, God's firm cord and all–comprehensive Law. This is indicated in His words,

"This is My straight path, so follow it, and follow not diverse paths, lest they scatter you from its road" **(*6:153*)'.**[26]

This 'straight path' both excludes and includes all other paths: excludes by way of specific beliefs and practices, and includes by virtue of the single Essence to which the path leads, and from which it began. But one cannot reach the end of the path without traversing its specific trajectory, without keeping within its boundaries, and thus making sure that one does not stray into other paths:

***"And each one has a direction* (*wijha*) *toward which he turns. So vie with one another in good works …"* (*2:148*).**

One is instructed to turn towards one's particular goal, in a particular direction, and this is despite the fact that the Qur'an tells us that

***"Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God"* (*2:115*).**

The ubiquity of the divine Face, then, does not imply that, in one's formal worship, the direction in which one turns to pray is of no consequence. For the Qur'an also says:

***"Turn your face toward the sacred mosque, and wherever you may be, turn your faces toward it* [*when you pray*]*"* (*2:144*).**

For Ibn al–'Arabi, such combinations of principial universality and practical specificity are paradoxical expressions of a principle that goes to the very heart of his ontology, his understanding of the nature of reality: for 'part of the perfection or completeness of Being is the existence of imperfection, or incompleteness within it (من كمال الوجود وجود النقص فيه)' – failing which Being would be incomplete by virtue of the absence of incompleteness within it.[27]

This is an example of the bringing together of opposites (*jam' bayn al–dhiddayn*) which is emphasised repeatedly in the writings of Ibn al–'Arabi, pertaining to the paradoxes required on the level of language, if one is to do justice to the complexities of existence. Just as completeness requires and is not contradicted by incompleteness, so the incomparability (*tanzih*) of God requires and is not contradicted by comparability (*tashbih*), universality requires and is not contradicted by particularity, inclusivity requires and is not contradicted by exclusivity, and nondelimitation (*itlaq*) requires and is not contradicted by delimitation (*taqyid*).

Returning to the direction in which one must pray: on the one hand, the instruction to turn in a specific direction 'does not eliminate the property of God's Face being wherever you turn.' On the other, the fact that God is there wherever one turns nonetheless implies the bestowal of a specific 'felicity' (*sa'ada*) as the consequence of turning in a particular direction for prayer. 'Hence for you He combined delimitation and nondelimitation, just as for Himself He combined incomparability and similarity. He said; ***"Nothing is like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing"*** (***42:11***).'[28]

Nothing is like Him: this denial of similarity, this expression of pure tanzih or transcendence, is immediately followed by an apparent contradiction of this very incomparability, for 'He is the Hearing, the Seeing'. As human beings also hear and see, this statement inescapably entails establishing modes of similarity or comparability between man and God. Ibn al-'Arabi, however, does not allow the mind to be restricted by this conceptual antimony, but rather takes advantage of the appearance of contradiction, using it as a platform from which to rise to an intuitive synthesis between these two opposing principles: the divine incomparability is perfect only when it is not conditioned by the very fact of being unconditioned by similarity, and vice versa. The divine non-delimitation is only properly grasped in the light of delimitation, and vice versa. This paradox is powerfully delivered in the following passage:

He is not declared incomparable in any manner that will remove Him from similarity, nor is He declared similar in any manner that would remove Him from incomparability. So do not declare Him nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished then He is delimited by His non-delimitation. And if He is delimited by His non-delimitation, then He is not He.[29]

Without possessing or manifesting an aspect of finitude, God cannot be regarded as infinite; without assuming a mode of delimitation He cannot be nondelimited; without the relative, He cannot be Absolute. Without the innumerable manifestations of these apparent contradictions of His own uniqueness, without such multiplicity within unity, and unity within multiplicity, 'He is not He'. The very infinitude of the inner richness of unicity overflows as the outward deployment of inexhaustible self-disclosures; this process is described as the *tajalli* or *zuhur* (theophanic revelation/manifestation). It is a process wherein no repetition is possible (*la takrar fi al-tajalli*); each phenomenon is unique in time, space and quality. In this complex and subtle conception of *wujud*, there is no contradiction between asserting the uniqueness of each phenomenon – each distinct locus for the manifestation of Being, each *mazhar* for the *zuhur* or *tajalli* of the one and only Reality – and the all-encompassing unity of being which transcends all phenomena. Multiplicity is comprised within unity, and unity is displayed by multiplicity.

This ontological perspective is to be applied on the plane of religion: there is no contradiction between asserting the uniqueness of a particular religion, on the one hand, and affirming the all-encompassing principle of religion which transcends the forms assumed by religion, on the other. The transcendence in question leaves intact the formal differences of the religions; for, these differences, defining the uniqueness of each religion, are by that very token irreducible; the formal differences can only be

transcended in spiritual realization of the Essence, or at least, an intuition of this Essence. They cannot be abolished on their own level in a pseudo-esoteric quest for the supra-formal essence. For these differences are divinely willed; religious diversity expresses a particular mode of divine wisdom, which man must grasp if he is to do justice both to the formless Essence of religion, and the irreducible uniqueness of each religious form.

Ibn al-'Arabi's conception of al-din, or religion as such, a religious essence that at once transcends and abides at the heart of all religions is in complete accord with the Qur'anic perspective on religious diversity; it helps one to see that an orientation towards this quintessential religion does not in the least imply a blurring of the boundaries between religions on the plane of their formal diversity. For one does not so much conceptually posit as spiritually intuit this essence of religion – in other words, one sees this 'heart' of religion with one's own 'heart', rather than one's mind:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith. (*emphasis added*)30

The defining spirit of principled universality thus pertains to inner vision and does not translate into any modification of one's outer practice. It is on the basis of this religion of love, perceived by spiritual intuition, not formulated by rational speculation, that Ibn al-'Arabi can issue the following warning to narrow-minded exclusivists:

*Beware of being bound up by a particular creed and rejecting others as unbelief! If you do that you will fail to obtain a great benefit. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of the reality. Try to make yourself a Prime Matter for all forms of religious belief. God is greater and wider than to be confined to one particular creed to the exclusion of others. For He says: **"To whichever direction you turn, there surely is the Face of God"** (**2:115**).*31

One should note that this counsel resonates with a Qur'anic warning to the same effect. This verse comes just before 2:115, quoted in the previous citation from Ibn al-'Arabi. Here, the attitude of religious exclusivism is censured, and the Muslim is told to transcend the level of inter-confessional polemics and focus on the essential pre-requisites of salvation: not belonging to such and such a religion, but submitting to God through one's religion, and manifesting the sincerity of that submission through virtue:

"And they say: None entereth Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires. Say: Bring your proof if ye are truthful" (**2:111**).

"Nay, but whosoever surrendereth his purpose to God while being virtuous, his reward is with his

Lord; and there shall be no fear upon them, neither shall they grieve" **(*2:112*).**

The Qur'an excludes this kind of chauvinistic exclusivism by virtue of an implicit, and occasionally explicit, inclusivism; but it also includes its own mode of exclusivism, both implicitly and explicitly, in affirming the need to follow the particular religion of Islam. The Akbari principle of paradoxical synthesis of two apparently contradictory principles can clearly be seen at this level of revelation, and is indeed the ultimate source of Ibn al–'Arabi's elaborate metaphysics.

In keeping with the spirit of this metaphysical perspective, one must assert: it is only on the basis of the vision of the religion of love that one can be 'liberated' from the limitations of one's own faith, for then, the escape is upwards, towards the essence of one's own, and every, faith; any attempt to loosen the bonds of one's own belief system, in the absence of this upwardly and inwardly essentialising movement of consciousness, is tantamount to simply dissolving the roots of one's religious identity, and leaving nothing in its place on the level where one cannot do without a sense of identity, that is, the human personality. The consciousness which is alone capable of transcending the formal limitations of religion is supra–personal: it has nothing to do with the empirical ego.

In passing, one might note that it is this dissolution which postmodern deconstruction engenders, deliberately or otherwise; one aspires to be liberated from the 'constructions' of belief, language, history, tradition, etc. by systematic demolition of these elements. But, in stark contrast to the spiritual 'deconstruction' of an Ibn al–'Arabi, there is no reconstruction of thought, belief and identity on a higher plane of being.[32]

Here it would be appropriate to return to the spiritual ascent, or *mi'raj* of Ibn al–'Arabi mentioned earlier. It is important to note that in the course of this ascent, he undergoes a process of dissolution by means of which he is divested of various aspects of his being, such that he becomes aware that 'his' consciousness is no longer 'his', and the Real is realized as the essence of all consciousness and being. The degrees leading up to this unitive state are given in a description of the 'journey' of the saints to God, within God. In this journey the composite nature of the saint is 'dissolved', first through being shown by God the different elements of which his nature is composed, and the respective domains to which they belong; he then abandons each element to its appropriate domain:

[*T*]*he form of his leaving it behind is that God sends a barrier between that person and that part of himself he left behind in that sort of world, so that he is not aware of it. But he still has the awareness of what remains with him, until eventually he remains with the divine Mystery* (*sirr*)*, which is the "specific aspect" extending from God to him. So when he alone remains, then God removes from him the barrier of the veil and he remains with God, just as everything else in him remained with* (*the world*) *corresponding to it*.[33]

The constitutive elements of human nature are 'dissolved' (or deconstructed) through being absorbed by those dimensions of cosmic existence to which they belong. Consciousness becomes rarified, purified

and disentangled from matter and its subtle prolongations. As seen above, the 'culminating revelation' coming just before the experience of extinctive union, was given in relation to the essence of all religions. Just as this realization of the essence of all religions does not entail any diminution of adherence to the form of one's own religion, likewise, as regards consciousness as such, the realization of the essence of the Real in no way entails any diminution of one's slavehood before the Real: 'The slave remains always the slave', according to a saying often repeated in Ibn al–Arabi's works. The ego remains always the ego, and this level of personal specificity cannot but entail what Ibn al–'Arabi refers to as '*ubudiyya,* slavehood.

In other words, in this process of spiritual ascent there is both *tahlil* and *tarkib*, dissolution and reconstitution, dissolution of all elements pertaining to the ego, and then reconstitution of this same ego, but on a higher plane: that of a conscious realization of one's actual nothingness. The higher the plane reached by essentialized consciousness, the deeper one's awareness of one's slavehood. In contrast to deconstruction, this dismantling of specificity and identity in the movement towards universality and transcendent Selfhood is accompanied by a return to specific identity, which is now vibrant with the spirit of the ultimate Self: the individual sees the Face of God everywhere, because of the very completeness of his self–effacement; and, on the plane of religion, the specific form of his religion resonates with the universality proper to its essence. One grasps religion as such within such and such a religion; the absolute, nondelimited essence of religion is revealed by and within the relative, delimited religion, just as the Self of the Real (*nafs al–Haqq*) subsists as the ultimate reality within the soul of the individual, who now comes to understand that he is both 'He' and 'not He'. Each religion is both a form, outwardly, and the Essence, inwardly; just as man is 'the transient, the eternal'.[34]

The religion of love, or the religion of the 'heart', thus re–affirms and does not undermine one's particular religion, or any other revealed religion; rather, this conception of 'the religion' or religion as such presupposes formal religious diversity, regarding it not as a regrettable differentiation but a divinely willed necessity. The infinite forms of existence are integrated, 'made one', according to the unitive principle of tawhid, in the very bosom, and not despite, this infinite unfolding of Being; we observe an analogous synthesis between multiplicity and unity on the level of religious phenomena: the dazzling diversity of religious forms manifest the principle of inexhaustible infinitude, just as the degree proper to 'the religion', or religion as such, is the expression, in religious mode, of the principle of absolute oneness. This synthesis between infinity and oneness on the religious plane implies, then, both diversity of revealed forms, and the uniqueness of each specific revealed form. Each revealed religion is totally unique – totally 'itself' – while at the same time being an expression of a single, all–encompassing principle, that of Revelation, a principle within which all religions are integrated, or 'made one', in the rigorously metaphysical sense of tawhid.

To conclude: It is clear that for Ibn al–'Arabi the unity of religions lies in the unity of Revelation, and that this position is rooted in the message of the Qur'an:

"Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted" **(*2:136*).**

The following verse might well be read as an allusion to the mystery of this unity of the celestial cause and the diversity of terrestrial effects:

"And in the earth are neighbouring tracts, and gardens of vines, and fields sown, and palms in pairs, and palms single, watered with one water. And we have made some of them to excel others in fruit. Surely herein are signs for a people who understand" **(*13:4*).**

The 'water' of Revelation is simultaneously one in its substance and multiple in its forms. In terms of the image of the water and the cup, briefly alluded to above: the cup might be seen to symbolize the form taken by Revelation, while water stands for the Essence of Revelation. Water, in itself, is undifferentiated and unique, whilst undergoing an apparent change of form and colour by virtue of the accidental shape and colour of the receptacles into which it is poured. The receptacles, the forms of Revelation, are fashioned according to the specificities of the human communities to which the specific revealed message is addressed:

"And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make the message clear for them" **(*14:4*).**

Just as human communities differ, so must the 'language' of the 'message' sent to them: the cups cannot but differ. However, the one who knows 'water' as it is in itself, that is, essence of that which is revealed, and not just its forms, will recognize this 'water' in receptacles other than his own, and will be able to judge all such receptacles according to their content, rather than be misled into judging the content according to the accidental properties of the container.

To accept God fully, therefore, means to accept His presence and reality in all forms of His Self-disclosure, all forms of revelation, all beliefs stemming from those revelations; while to limit Him to one's own particular form of belief is tantamount to denying Him: 'He who delimits Him denies Him in other than his own delimitation ... But he who frees Him from every delimitation never denies Him. On the contrary, he acknowledges Him in every form within which He undergoes self- transmutation ...'[35]

Nonetheless, the ordinary believer who may thus 'deny' God by adhering exclusively to his own belief is not punished because of this implicit denial: since God is Himself 'the root of every diversity in beliefs', it follows that 'everyone will end up with mercy'.[36] Also, in terms of the water/cup image: the water in the cup, however delimited it may be by the container, remains water nonetheless, hence the ordinary believer benefits from his possession of the truth; even if this truth be limited by the particularities of his own conception, it adequately conveys the nature of That which is conceived, but which cannot be attained by concepts alone. Thus one returns to the principle that all 'religions' are true by virtue of the

absoluteness of their content, while each is relative due to the particular nature of its form.

Each particular religion vehicles the Absolute, even while being distinct from It: the absoluteness of a religion resides in its supra-formal, transcendent essence, while, in its formal aspect, the same religion is necessarily relative; and this amounts to saying, on the one hand, that no one religion can lay claim, on the level of form, to absolute truth, to the exclusion of other religions, and on the other hand, that each religion is true by virtue of the absoluteness of its origin and of its essence.

One continues to conform to the dictates of one's own religion, and does so, moreover, with a totality that is commensurate with the absoluteness inherent in the religion;37 and at the same time one is aware of the presence of the Absolute in all those religions that have issued from a Divine Revelation, this awareness being the concomitant of one's recognition of the formal and thus relative aspect of one's own religion; and this recognition, in turn, arises in proportion to one's ability to plumb the metaphysical implications of the first testimony of Islam, 'There is no god but God': only the Absolute is absolute.

This kind of approach to the question of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue ensures that the formal integrity and distinctness of each faith will be respected, and at the same time establishes the proper level at which we can say that all religions are one. It is not on the level of forms that they are one; rather, they are one in God as their source, and they are as one in respect of the substance of their imperative to man: namely to submit to the Divinely Revealed Law and Way.

Principles such as these, expounded with subtlety and depth in the metaphysical perspective of Ibn al-'Arabi, can help greatly in avoiding both the pitfalls of bridge-building between faiths and cultures, on the one hand, and the dangers of religious nationalism, on the other: that is, it can help to prevent a fragmentary sense of the sacred from arbitrarily or indiscriminately assimilating 'religious' forms out of sentimental desire; and, inversely, it can help prevent an over-zealous sense of orthodoxy from summarily anathematising alien religious forms out of dogmatic rigidity. Such a perspective shows that there is no incompatibility between fidelity to one's particular faith and a universal sense of the sacred.

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1. M. Lings, What is Sufism (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp.22-23. For further discussion of this theme, see our The Other in the Light of the One – The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006).

2. Tim Winter, 'Islam and the Threat of Europe' in World Faiths Encounter, no.29, 2001, p.11.

3. This saying complements other well-known sayings of the Prophet concerning the need to search for knowledge from the cradle to the grave, even if the knowledge be in China, etc. See al-Ghazzali's collection of such sayings, together with Qur'anic verses and sayings of the sages, in his Kitab al-'ilm, the first book of his monumental Ihya 'ulum al-din ('Enlivening of the sciences of religion') translated by N.A. Faris as The Book of Knowledge (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1966).

4. See the masterful work by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Science and Civilization in Islam (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1987, 'Introduction', pp.21-40.

5. See Thomas Arnold, The Preaching of Islam (London: Luzac, 1935).

6. See for a more extended discussion of Ibn al–'Arabi's principles of exegesis, in the context of Sufi and postmodern hermeneutics, The Other in the Light of the One, chapter 1, 'The Hermenutics of Suspicion or of Sufism?', pp. 1–73. See also our forthcoming paper, 'Beyond Polemics and Pluralism: The Universal Message of the Qur'an', delivered at the conference: 'Al–Azhar and the West – Bridges of Dialogue', Cairo, 5 January, 2009.

7. 'Knowledge calls out for action', says Imam 'Ali; 'if it is answered [it is of avail], otherwise it departs.' Cited in the compilation by 'Abd al–Wahid Amidi, Ghurar al–hikam wa durar al–kalim (given together with the Persian translation, under the title, Guftar–i Amir al–mu'minin 'Ali, by Sayyid Husayn Shaykhul–Islami) (Qom: Intisharat–i Ansariyan, 2000), vol.2, p.993, no.21.

8. In the words of Frithjof Schuon: 'The true and complete understanding of an idea goes far beyond the first apprehension of the idea by the intelligence, although more often than not this apprehension is taken for understanding itself. While it is true that the immediate evidence conveyed to us by any particular idea is, on its own level, a real understanding, there can be no question of its embracing the whole extent of the idea since it is primarily the sign of an aptitude to understand that idea in its completeness. Any truth can in fact be understood at different levels and according to different "conceptual dimensions", that is to say according to an indefinite number of modalities which correspond to all the possible aspects, likewise indefinite in number, of the truth in question. This way of regarding ideas accordingly leads to the question of spiritual realization, the doctrinal expressions of which clearly illustrate the "dimensional indefinity" of theoretical conceptions.' The Transcendent Unity of Religions (Tr. Peter Townsend) (London: Faber and Faber, 1953) p.17.

9. Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, Essays in Zen Buddhism (New York: Grover Press, 1961) p. 19.

10. The Discourses of Rumi (Fihi ma fihi) (tr. A.J. Arberry), (London: John Murray, 1961), p.202.

11. This is from William Chittick's translation of the Lawa'ih, in Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light, Sachiko Murata (Albany: SUNY, 2000), p.138.

12. This is the very opposite of the Cartesian axiom: 'I think, therefore I am'. Here, thought trumps being, individual conceptualisation precedes universal reality. Subjectivism, individualism, rationalism – all are contained in this error, and reinforce its basic tendency, which is to reverse the traditional, normal subordination of human thought to divine Reality.

13. Schuon refers to the distinction between metaphysics and ordinary religious knowledge in terms of uncoloured light, and particular colours: 'If an example may be drawn from the sensory sphere to illustrate the difference between metaphysical and religious knowledge, it may be said that the former, which can be called "esoteric" when it is manifested through a religious symbolism, is conscious of the colourless essence of light and of its character of pure luminosity; a given religious belief, on the other hand, will assert that light is red and not green, whereas another belief will assert the opposite; both will be right in so far as they distinguish light from darkness but not in so far as they identify it with a particular colour.' Transcendent Unity, p.10.

14. This is one of the central questions which we posed and tried to answer in The Other in the Light of the One, pp.117–139; 185–209; 234–266.

15. The wording here is extremely important: wa qad tahawwala fi suratihi allati ra'uhu fiha awwal marra.

16. This version of the saying comes in the Sahih Muslim (Cairo: Isa al–Babi al–Halabi, n.d.), chapter entitled Ma'rifa tariq al–ru'ya ('knowledge of the way of vision'), vol. 1, p. 94.

17. Self is given in capitals only as a parallel to the use of the capital O for 'Other'; what is meant here is the empirical self, the individual as such, and its communitarian extension, and not the universal Selfhood of the Real (nafs al–haqq, as Ibn al–'Arabi calls it), at once transcendent and immanent.

18. For the most comprehensive biography of this seminal figure, see Claude Addas, Quest for the Red Sulphur (Tr. Peter Kingsley) (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); for a concise overview of Ibn al–'Arabi's thought, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Three Muslim Sages (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1988 repr), ch. 3, 'Ibn 'Arabi and the Sufis', pp. 83–121.

19. Ikhtilaf al–'ulama' rahma. This is often cited as a hadith, but is more authoritatively ascribed to al–Shafi'i.

20. Ibn al–'Arabi claims that everything he wrote was contained in his first vision of the 'glory of His Face'; all his discourse is 'only the differentiation of the all–inclusive reality which was contained in that look at the One Reality.' Sufi Path, op. cit., p.xiv.

21. The following pages contain reflections on material which can be found elaborated in greater detail in our Paths to

Transcendence – According to Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi and Meister Eckhart (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), pp.69–129.

22. James Morris, 'Ibn al–'Arabi's Spiritual Ascension', in M. Chodkiewicz (ed.), Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), p.380. One is reminded by the words 'my place cannot contain me' of Rumi's lines: 'What is to be done, O Muslims? For I do not recognise myself? I am not Christian, nor Jew; not Zoroastrian, nor Muslim.' This is a succinct expression of the transcendence of all religious identity in the bosom of the unitive state, which is alluded to later in the poem:
'I have put duality aside ... One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.
He is the First, He is the Last, He is the Outward, He is the Inward'. [paraphrasing 57:2]. Selected Poems from the Divan–i Shamsi Tabriz (Ed. And Tr. R.A. Nicholson [translation modified]) (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), pp.125, 127.

23. Quoted in J.W.Morris, 'Ibn al–'Arabi's Ascension', p.379.

24. Quoted in J.W. Morris, 'The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn al–'Arabi and the Mi'raj', Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol.108, 1988, p.75.

25. Cited in William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge – Ibn al–'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany: SUNY, 1989) p.303 (translation modified).

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., p. 296.

28. Sufi Path, op. cit., p.11.

29. Ibid., p.112.

30. The Tarjuman al–Ashwaq – A Collection of Mystical Odes (tr. R.A. Nicholson) (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p.52.

31. Cited by Toshihiko Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism – A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1983), p.254. With modifications, see note 15 above.

32. Some have tried to see similarities between this type of spiritual self–denouement and postmodern deconstructionism. See our The Other in the Light of the One, pp.23–58, for a presentation of the irreconcilable differences between the two approaches to reality.

33. James W. Morris, 'Ibn al–'Arabi's Spiritual Ascension', p.362.

34. This is from Ibn al–'Arabi's Fusus al–hikam, translated by R. Austin as Bezels of Wisdom (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p.51.

35. The reference here is to God's capacity to transform Himself in keeping with the 'signs' by which the believers can recognise Him, as expressed in the hadith cited earlier in this article, and which Ibn al–'Arabi cites several times in his works. Sufi Path, pp.339–340.

36. Sufi Path, p.338.

37. And, as seen earlier, one can conform to one's religion in the sincere belief that it is the best religion, without this detracting from the universality of one's perspective.

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