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Appreciating Knots: An Islamic Approach to Religious Diversity

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

As an Islamicist who has frequently taught courses that deal with the beliefs and practices of various religions, I have often been faced with the problem of conflicting truth claims. In trying to find a way to give all sides their due, I have drawn from the resources of my own speciality, paying special attention to the teachings of the most widely influential Muslim thinker of the past seven hundred years, Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), known to his followers as al-Shaykh al-Akbar, 'The greatest master'. Although usually called a 'Sufi', this should not suggest that he is peripheral to the Islamic tradition. Quite the contrary, the epithet implies that he embodies Islamic faith and practice to their fullest. In what follows I try to bring out certain features of his perspective that have an immediate and obvious relevance to the theological issues which arise because of religious diversity. What makes this approach 'Islamic' is the sources of its basic ideas. The adjective does not imply any privileged status for the religion established by the Qur'ān.

THE FIRST SHAHADAH

Islamic thought begins with what can be known for certain. This can only be the reality of God, as expressed in the first Shahadah, the 'witnessing': '[There is] no god but God' (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*). In general, this certainly is seen as outweighing every other consideration, not least the claims of the ego to objective knowledge. Only the Real is clear and certain; everything else is vague, opaque, and unreal.

Ibn al-'Arabī, like most Muslim thinkers, considers the first Shahadah a self-evident principle of universal validity. It is the fundamental message of the 'one hundred twenty-four thousand' prophets from Adam down to Muhammad. Its recognition and acceptance belong to the innate disposition or original nature (*fīra*) of human beings. The primary function of the prophets is to 'remind' (*dhikr*, *tadhkir*) people of the first Shahadah, since

it is simply what they already know. In contrast, the particular teachings of each prophet vary with time and place. Hence, the second Shahadah – the statement 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God' – needs to be discussed with reference to a particular historical context.

The significance of the first Shahadah starts becoming clear as soon as we try to understand what the word 'God' means – a question that is discussed, naturally enough, in all branches of Islamic theology (by which I mean not only Kalām, but also theoretical Sufism and philosophy). Briefly, the word God (*Allāh*) refers to what is truly real; hence the synonym *al-haqq*, the Real, and, less commonly, *al-haqīqa*, the Reality.

God has many qualities or attributes – often referred to as the 'ninety-nine names'. Whatever knowledge, power, life, mercy, and other divine qualities are found in the cosmos (*al-ālam*, defined as 'everything other than God'), these are, to use the Qur'ānic expression, 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God. By definition such cosmic qualities are weak and mixed with their opposites. Absolute and unmixed qualities belong to God alone, since nothing else is truly and completely real. 'There is no god but God' means that 'Nothing is truly real but the Real'.

Knowledge is a divine quality like others, which is to say that it cannot be found in pure form outside the Real. As the often cited maxim puts it, 'None knows God but God'. This does not imply that human beings know nothing of God, simply that their knowledge remains imperfect. They can and do have knowledge of God, but only to the extent that he chooses to reveal himself. They encompass nothing of his knowledge save such as he wills' (Qur'ān 2:254).

God cannot be known as he knows himself, but only to the extent that he displays his own qualities in the cosmos, thereby making himself known through lesser realities. All things in the universe – all the signs – say something about the qualities of the Real through their modes of existence. But inasmuch as God is unknowable, nothing can properly be said about him. We simply know that we do not know. Ibn al-'Arabī often refers to this unknowable God as the 'Essence' (*dhāt*), while he calls God inasmuch as he can be known the 'Divinity' (*alāhūyya*).

Ibn al-'Arabī typically discusses the knowable God from two basic points of view. The first affirms that the Real is other than and different from all created things. The second recognizes a certain likeness and similarity-between-God-and-creation. The first point of view, often called *tanzīh* or the 'assertion of incomparability', plays a predominant role in the science of Kalām. The second, frequently called *tashbīh* or the 'assertion of similarity', is often stressed by Sufi authorities.³ For Ibn al-'Arabī, to discuss either *tanzīh* or *tashbīh* in isolation from the other leads to an imbalanced under-

standing of reality. Accurate knowledge of things demands that God be declared both incomparable and similar at one and the same time. But the Real in itself – the Essence – remains undisclosed and inexpressible.

GODS OF BELIEF

Ibn al-'Arabī's worldview builds on a long tradition of theological and philosophical discussion of *wujūd*, a term that is usually translated as 'existence' or 'being', but which means literally 'finding' or 'that which is found'.³ He employs a large number of arguments and analogies to bring home the implications of the first Shahadah for understanding *wujūd*. His basic point is simply that 'There is nothing real but *wujūd*'. Hence everything other than *wujūd* (the Real in itself) is neither completely real nor completely unreal, but stands in an intermediate domain, a *barzakh* or 'isthmus'. The universal isthmus or 'Supreme Barzakh' is then the whole cosmos; on one side stands the ocean of the Real, utterly unknowable in itself. On the other side stands the ocean of nonexistence, also unknowable, since there is nothing to be known. In between is found everything that can be known or experienced, the whole cosmos in all its unimaginable temporal and spatial expanse.

Just as the first Shahadah announces that the cosmos in its entirety is a *barzakh* or intermediate domain, so also it announces that each thing, event, and object of knowledge found in the cosmos is a *barzakh* between other things, events, and objects of knowledge. Nothing is fully itself, since each thing stands halfway between the Real and nothingness. Hence nothing can be known exclusively in terms of itself; but only in terms of its relationships with the Real and with other things. Ibn al-'Arabī highlights this view of reality with the expression 'he/not he' or 'it/not it' (*huwa lā huwa*): Everything in the universe is both itself and not itself, existent and nonexistent, real and unreal, God and not-God.

Ibn al-'Arabī uses the terms 'imagination' (*khayāl*) and 'image' (*mithāl*) to stress the vague and ambiguous qualities of all experienced reality. Since everything is a *barzakh*, there are no completely distinct and discrete qualities or things. He frequently cites the example of dream images to bring this home. The exact status of cosmic things, like things of the dream realm, is always vague and open to question. Inasmuch as the Real is incomparable with everything else, it is the one and only reality, so the things of the universe have no reality and do not really exist. Inasmuch as the Real is similar to all things, its attributes and reality are present within them to some degree. Without its reality, all things would be devoid of the specific

qualities that make them what they are. There would be no life, no knowledge, no power, no desire – in short, no reality, no existence, no cosmos.

One of Ibn al-'Arabī's best known analogies for explaining the nature of cosmic reality is the 'Breath of the All-merciful' (*nafas al-rāḥmān*). God discloses himself by speaking, and his words become articulated within the breath that carries the speech; this breath is the underlying, imperceptible *wijūd* of the universe. Each 'existent thing' (*mawjūd*) is a specific letter, differentiated from every other letter, and the letters combine to form words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books. Each thing is embedded in an indefinite web of relationships with other things, yet each is nothing but the articulated Breath. In the last analysis, there is nothing but God's Breath.

From the perspective of similarity, every created thing is an expression or a 'self-disclosure' (*ʿajālīf*) of God. But from the perspective of incomparability, God remains undisclosed and 'nondelimited' (*muṭlaq*).⁵ Delimitation (*ʿayyūd*) pertains to God's self-disclosures, which are the letters and words articulated within the All-merciful Breath. It is precisely limitations and constrictions that separate things out from nondelimited and absolute reality. When the Real discloses its qualities, the act of disclosure delimits and defines what is disclosed; when God speaks, he articulates his nondelimited awareness.

The same idea is expressed from a slightly different point of view by saying that the divine self-disclosure is colored by the receptacle. As the famous ninth-century Sufi Junayd put it, 'The water takes on the color of the cup'. Rūmī asks, 'If you pour the ocean into a jug, how much will it hold?' In short, the Real's infinity demands that each of its self-disclosures be finite and unique. As the well-known axiom puts it, 'There is no repetition in self-disclosure' (*lā takrār fī-l-ʿajālīf*).

Ibn al-'Arabī never separates the domains of ontology and epistemology. Reality is experienced by knowers, and knowledge is supported by reality. But just as experienced reality is utterly ambiguous, at once real and unreal, so also perceptions and understandings are always marked by uncertainty and intermediateness. This underlying indefiniteness of knowledge leads people to give meaning and orientation to their lives by creating gods through their own beliefs. The 'gods of belief', like all other experienced reality, dwell in the domain of He/not He.

Everything experiences the Real's self-disclosures. In the last analysis, these self-disclosures define the modes in which things exist and know. Hence each individual's experience of reality is constrained and delimited by his or her own unique experience of God. The imperfect understanding

of things that results is called *ʿitiqād*, a word that means literally 'to tie a knot', but which is the standard theological term for 'belief'.⁶

Each thing and each human being represents a unique knot or a unique word. Each displays a unique self-disclosure of the Real and a corresponding belief that is identical with no one else's belief. True, beliefs, like things in general, tend to be similar and can be put into categories. Nevertheless, no two individuals have exactly the same belief, since each individual represents a unique disclosure of reality and hence a unique perception of reality. As Ibn al-'Arabī puts it, 'The cosmos is the delimited existent and its knowledge has to be delimited like itself'.⁷

What has been said until now presents a more or less static picture of things. However, the universe and human individuals live in constant change. 'There is no repetition in self-disclosure' applies to both the spatial and the temporal configurations of reality. At each instant the Real renews the self-disclosures that make up the universe, which is to say that at each moment it reties all knots. But human beings do not play a totally passive role. Given the presence within them of a certain freedom because of a special relationship with the Real, they can exercise an effect on the direction of their changing beliefs. Every bodily and cognitive act paves the way for new perceptions of reality and transformation of the person.⁸

Each human being follows the authority of his or her own belief, giving rise to an indefinite variety of often contradictory gods. But this does not imply that these gods are false. People worship what they understand as real, and this understanding is rooted in both the self-manifesting Real and the degree to which people experience the Real. Everyone serves God on the basis of God's self-disclosures, so all beliefs are grounded in reality and are true. As Ibn al-'Arabī puts it, '*Wajūd* gives to every perception in the cosmos the knowledge of the situation of the Real in Himself. There is none but a Real and he who is correct [in his perception]'.⁹ However, all beliefs do not have the same effect on human becoming, and this provides an important criterion for distinguishing among them.

RATIONAL INVESTIGATION

God is similar inasmuch as he discloses himself through the articulations of the Breath of the All-merciful, also known as the Supreme Barzakh or Nondelimited Imagination. From the point of view of human subjectivity, God's similarity is perceived through the faculty of imagination. To speak of similarity is to speak of imagination as both the objective configuration

of reality and the subjective perception of reality. Objectively, imagination refers to the intermediate status of all things; subjectively, it refers to the perception of the images or intermediate forms that make up the cosmos, images and forms that are words articulated within the Breath of the All-merciful.

Human knowing has a second, complementary dimension known as reason (*ʿaql*). The rational faculty has the (relative)-ability to see beyond images.¹⁰ If imagination's proper function is to recognize the Real within the images of its self-disclosures, reason's function is to recognize that the images can never be the Real. As Ibn al-'Arabī frequently reminds us, reason knows innately that 'Nothing is like God' (Qur'an 42:11).

Language about the Real tends to be expressed in two fundamental modes that coincide with incomparability and similarity, or reason and imagination. The first kind of language predominates in intellectual disciplines such as theology and philosophy, the second in myth, revelation, and expressions of 'unveiling' (*kashf*, visionary perception, imaginal experience of the unseen worlds). Theology and philosophy tend to negate creaturely qualities from the Real, thereby differentiating it from experienced reality and asserting its incomparability. In contrast, myth, revelation and unveiling provide positive knowledge of the Real's qualities, thereby asserting its similarity and its presence with all things.

Ibn al-'Arabī offers this scheme, of course, as simply that — a scheme that allows us to discern between two different ontic and epistemic stresses found in the nature of things. There are no sharp dividing lines separating one side from the other. All things are *barzakh*s. Language cannot express one of the two perspectives without some input from the other. There is no pure incomparability as opposed to pure similarity. All assertions of incomparability declare God's similarity, and all assertions of similarity assert his incomparability. What differentiates Ibn al-'Arabī from most other Muslim authorities is his constant insistence that real understanding of the Real demands a delicate balance between the two perspectives.

THEOLOGY OF THE DIVINE NAMES

Most Muslim theologians attempt to bring out the implications of the divine names.¹¹ In-principle these names are infinite, since God is infinite, but theologians normally limit themselves to discussing those names that are mentioned in the Qur'an and the *hadīth*. Each name designates a mode in which the Real discloses itself, and each is different from every other. The

differentiation of the names marks the fact that, from the viewpoint of similarity, the Real discloses itself in the 'cosmos in diverse modes. But from the standpoint of incomparability, every name designates the same incomparable and unknowable Reality, since the Real in itself is utterly beyond differentiation.¹²

Each divine name points to what might be called a 'universal knotting' in Reality, because each refers to a specific quality that reverberates throughout the universe, different from all other qualities. Every quality has precise implications for the things within which it becomes manifest as well as for our understanding of the things, because each designates a specific relationship (*nisba*) between the absolutely Real and the relatively real. Muslim thinkers commonly divide the names into two categories called the names of 'beauty and majesty', or 'gentleness and severity', or 'mercy and wrath', or 'bounty and justice'. Attributes of the first kind stress God's incomparability, those of the second kind stress his similarity.

To look at reality from the position of incomparability is to stress that everything other than the Real dwells in distance, separation and otherness. God is transcendent, far, inaccessible, magnificent, majestic, severe, wrathful. He is an aloof king who does not deign to look upon the petty affairs of creatures made of dust, a strict and authoritarian father who issues commands and expects to be obeyed. To look at reality from the standpoint of similarity is to stress that all things participate in nearness, union and sameness. God is present, near, loving, forgiving, beautiful, gentle, merciful. He is a concerned and caring mother who desires to help creatures in every possible way. Similarity demands accessibility and mutual love. Ultimately nearness means sameness, since human reality, inasmuch as it is real, can only be the self-disclosure of absolute Reality.

To dwell in otherness is to live in distance, multiplicity, difference, dispersion, separation, discreteness, disequilibrium, instability and suffering. To dwell in sameness is to live in nearness, unity, union, equilibrium, balance, permanence and joy. Thus incomparability and similarity point to the two poles of our existential situation. Asserting God's incomparability grows up out of the perception of difference and unreality, while asserting his similarity grows up out of perceiving sameness and reality.

All things are He/not He. To say that they are 'He' means that they are *wujūd*, which-alone-is-truly-real. To say that they are 'Not He' means that they are nonexistence, unreality (*ʿadam*). But the He takes precedence over the Not He, because the Real is, whereas the unreal is not. In other words, from the standpoint of the Real, similarity takes precedence over incomparability, because there are no 'others', there is no 'distance'. All otherness

is simply the Real's self-disclosure. However, from the standpoint of the creatures, incomparability predominates, because creatures who are centered in themselves are prevented from seeing the Real.

In all things the He is the Real, while the Not He is the unreal. Although people are real inasmuch as they manifest *wujūd*, typically they are not aware of God's presence. 'God is with you wherever you are', says the Qur'an (57:4), but, as Ibn al-'Arabī likes to remind us, this does not mean that we are with him wherever he is. Islamic teachings tend to stress incomparability, or the otherness that we experience now. But the purpose of these teachings is to establish similarity, or the sameness from which we arose and to which we will return.

Mythically, the fact that similarity and nearness take precedence over incomparability and distance is commonly expressed by the famous *hadīth*, 'God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath'. The principle of God's precedent mercy means that attributes like wrath, severity, majesty, justice and distance serve the purposes of the more fundamental attributes, which are mercy, gentleness, beauty, bounty and nearness.

The precedence of similarity has clear repercussions on the level of human understandings. As pointed out above, imagination perceives the Real in its similarity, while reason grasps the Real in its incomparability. Reason knows innately that God is not the same as the universe – the divine self-disclosures – that we perceive. Left to their rational faculties, people tend to separate the Real from the cosmos, leading to a loss of the vision of the Real's presence in all things. To the extent that incomparability is stressed, the Real is abstracted from its manifestations, resulting in the human experience of disjointedness and disconnectedness. In contrast, imagination, by perceiving God's similarity, makes possible the establishment of links and the overcoming of difference. But excessive stress on similarity leads to an identification of the Real with its diverse manifestations and a loss of the vision of unity, centrality and equilibrium.

According to Ibn al-'Arabī, reason is able to grasp the first Shahādah, which demands incomparability and difference, while imagination is needed to bridge the gap between the Real and the unreal, since it alone grasps similarity. But the fact that God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath means that his similarity and sameness are more fundamental to reality than his incomparability and difference. In other words, the divine unity precedes and determines the plurality of the divine self-disclosures, so oneness, sameness and identity are more fundamental to the nature of things. It follows that reason, which perceives difference, must in some sense be subservient to imagination, which perceives identity. If incomparability – which is understood by reason – is a necessary starting point, it has to be

oriented toward establishing the prior and more basic attribute, which is similarity, and similarity is grasped through imagination. Here we begin to see the essential role played by the second Shahādah, which makes assertions about the Real's self-disclosures and explains how people can strengthen their similarity with the Real.

THE DIVINE FORM

The most concise formulation of the Islamic view of human beings is given in the biblical saying repeated by the Prophet, 'God created the human being in his own image', or, as I prefer to translate the Arabic expression, his own 'form' (*sūra*). For Ibn al-'Arabī, the usual philosophical definition of human beings as 'rational animals' is inadequate, since configuration as God's form provides the human species with its distinguishing characteristic.

Everything in the universe is a 'sign' of God, since all things reflect the Real in some manner, on pain of nonexistence. But all things with the exception of human beings manifest some qualities of the Real rather than others. Human beings are signs of God as God, since they alone are given a share of every attribute of the Real.

Like other post-axial religions, Islam turns its attention primarily toward salvation. The most common term employed by the texts to render this idea is 'felicity' (*sā'ada*), which is frequently defined as nearness (*qurb*) to God. In the next world, felicity takes the form of paradise and the vision of God. The opposite of felicity is 'wretchedness' (*shaqā*), which is distance from God. Naturally, the Islamic intellectual tradition does not understand nearness and distance in a spatial sense; rather, to be near to God is to recognize and actualize the qualities of the Real as one's own, and to be distant is to fail to actualize the divine form. In other words, to be near is to live in the divine similarity, while to be distant means to be dominated by the attributes of incomparability. The fullness of human actuality brings all divine attributes into play – those of incomparability and majesty as well as those of similarity and beauty – but, as with God, the names of similarity take priority over the names of incomparability.

The human being begins as a potential form of God. Perfection is achieved when the potential becomes actual. In more familiar terms, this human embodiment of divine attributes is known as 'goodness' and 'virtue'. For most Muslim authorities, the science of ethics is rooted in ontology, because moral qualities can never be divorced from the qualities of the Real. To be humanly good is to participate in the divine goodness, the only

real goodness. Among God's names are generous, just, compassionate, forgiving, patient, grateful and so on. These qualities must become second nature if people are to achieve perfection. But inasmuch as these divine attributes denote that which is utterly incomparable with human beings, they remain inaccessible. They can only become human qualities to the extent that human beings participate in God's similarity. Since similarity is perceived through imagination, reason cannot be the final arbiter of human goodness. Revelation is needed to show the way to actualize the divine attributes in proper proportion (or to explain the underlying nature and purpose of ethical activity).

ALL AND NOTHING

The Real possesses fully and absolutely every real quality. To the extent that things are real, they manifest the Real's attributes. From this point of view, all reality found in the unreal things of the cosmos is God's reality. In other words, God is 'all', but not in a pantheistic sense, since the divine incomparability and independence mean that God remains infinitely beyond every limitation that defines the things. When God is viewed as the All, human perfection is viewed as the full actualization of the qualities of the Real. In Qur'anic language, those perfect human beings who manifest the qualities of the Real are called God's vicegerents or representatives (*khalifa*).

But God is not only all, he is also 'nothing'. In other words, viewed in respect of incomparability, the Real is no thing as opposed to any other thing, because the Real transcends all things and all attributes. If God were forgiving in any limiting sense, he could not be vengeful. If he were merciful and only merciful, he could not be wrathful. But since he possesses all qualities, he is not defined by any of them to the exclusion of any other. Hence he has no defining reality other than to-be-Reality as such, without delimitation by any specific quality. Reality as such is not a thing as opposed to other things or an attribute as opposed to other attributes, but the source of all things and all attributes. Hence the Real is nothing, no thing.

When the full actualization of the divine form is viewed in relation to God as incomparable, it demands the achievement of human incomparability. In other words, people need to abandon their own individual identities, the specific knottings that make them what they are. Each thing imposes restrictions and constraints upon reality by being what it is. No created thing can give up what it is without ceasing to be what it is, with the single

exception of human beings. They alone become what they are by giving up what they seem to be.

All things other than human beings are defined by their specific attributes. Human beings are defined by being the form of God. God's form, like God himself, represents no specific attributes, since it is the self-disclosure of all divine attributes. The true meaning of existing as something other than a human being is to be defined by limitations, but the true meaning of existing as a human being is to abandon all limitations. Nonhuman things have no choice but to remain what they are, but human beings can be truly human only by choosing to become nothing.¹³ In Qur'anic language, this utter human nothingness is known as being God's servant or slave (*abd*).

Being a servant (nothing) precedes being a vicegerent (everything).¹⁴ In order to be everything, human beings must abandon their own limitations, which are their own attributes. They must empty themselves of qualities by ascribing all reality to its owner - the Real. To be a servant is to live the reality of God's incomparability, the fact that God alone is real and nothing else has any reality. Servants actualize utter emptiness, poverty and non-existence. In contrast, to be a vicegerent is to embody the reality of God's similarity. Once human beings have been emptied of their own limitations, God-discloses himself fully within them, because they alone are made in his form.

Ibn al-'Arabī often refers to the realization of full human perfection as the 'station of no station' (*maqām lā maqām*), because the human being who actualizes the divine form ceases to be this or that and stands with the Real. The perfected human being is 'no thing', just as God is no thing. As Ibn al-'Arabī puts it, 'The most all-inclusive specification is that a person not be distinguished by a station whereby he is distinguished'.¹⁵

PROPHECY AND GUIDANCE

God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath. In other words, his similarity is more fundamental than his incomparability, even though, from the point of view of human limitations, we begin with the perception of incomparability. The priority of mercy that is woven into the nature of disclosed reality demands that God's activity be oriented toward the good of all things. *Wajūd* must predominate over nonexistence. In human terms, this priority of the Real over the unreal demands that God be concerned for human felicity. Felicity means not only that people should gain nearness to

God (or become more deeply rooted in *wujūd*), but also that they should dwell in their proper situations, without which they can only be miserable. In this sense of the word, all things have their own felicities. For a thing to be happy is for it to be allowed to be what it truly is.

Human beings stand apart from other creatures inasmuch as their full felicity is not achieved through being but through not-being. Their felicity demands giving up the limitations and constraints that make them this or that. But this freedom from constraint can only be reached freely. God cannot impose freedom, because imposition contradicts freedom. Nor can he impose happiness without depriving people of their humanity, because full human perfection demands standing in the station of no station, not the station of happiness. But God is motivated by his dominant attributes — mercy, compassion, love, gentleness — so his goal is to provide human beings the best means to actualize fullness and freedom. More specifically, the Islamic tradition recognizes that God discloses himself in keeping with his name 'Guide' (*al-hādī*) to show people the way to reach felicity, and this he does by sending prophets.

Muslim thinkers, with the exception of some philosophers, do not think it possible for people to attain felicity without prophetic guidance. Although reason allows people to distinguish between truth and falsehood, this is not sufficient for salvation, because certain necessary forms of knowledge remain inaccessible without divine intervention, such as the means to reach felicity and avoid wretchedness. This knowledge provided by revelation is oriented toward the overcoming of difference, so it is rooted in God's similarity.¹⁶ Hence it takes mythical form and is readily grasped by imagination, which perceives God in terms of similar attributes.

In Ibn al-'Arabī's view, the knowledge of the ends of things and of the means to reach felicity is the essence of the knowledge brought by the prophets. When Muslims say, 'Muhammad is the messenger of God', they are accepting the Qur'ān's teachings on these points and making possible their own return to God by the specific path established by Muhammad. In contrast, the first Shahadah — which demands recognizing the reality of the Real — is, as we saw, innate to human reason, and the prophets' function is not to provide it but simply to remind people that they already possess it. The specifically prophetic and eschatological knowledge pertains more to myth and the imaginal realm than to rational discourse, more to similarity than to incomparability.

Revelation can be defined as God's self-disclosure out of mercy and gentleness with a view toward guidance. It delineates and describes Reality in modes that are capable of being grasped by beings tied in knots. It brings about the possibility of dissolving difference, delimitation and otherness. It

is dominated by attributes of similarity, that is, the precedent attributes of the Real. It is an active expression of nearness, configuring a pattern oriented toward felicity within the world's existential ambiguity. It ties knots that are conducive to ultimate happiness. And it provides the means to untie the knots that prevent people from being all and nothing.

IMPLICATIONS OF GUIDANCE

Generally speaking, expressions of Islamic religiosity focus on the implications of God as Guide, not God as God. Only certain forms of Sufism and philosophy make knowledge of the (relatively) unqualified Real a goal of human life. Otherwise, the demands of general human welfare take precedence over the need for some people to achieve the station of no station. In other words, the vast majority of expressions of Islam make no attempt to take into account the naked, unqualified truth of the first Shahadah. Rather, the religious teachings focus on the second Shahadah and color the first Shahadah appropriately.

For Muslims, guidance takes the concrete form of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet. Though other modes of guidance — other revealed religions — are affirmed in the Qur'ān and generally recognized, these are never stressed and usually explained away. In effect, 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God' becomes an absolute point of reference, determining how 'There is no god but God' will be interpreted. And this is not a position to be condemned, since it is demanded precisely by the implications of God as Guide for this specific community.

The stress of the Islamic community on a specific self-revelation of the Guide brings into existence its hard edges. God's guidance provides a (relative) divine justification for focusing on a single manifestation of the Real and ignoring others. But to make absolute claims for a revelation that by nature can only be one of many brings about a certain imbalance. It skews reality in a way analogous to what happens when the ego lays claim to uniqueness and fails to 'love its neighbor as itself.'¹⁷

The divine quality of guidance orients human beings towards mercy, compassion, harmony, love and unity. On its outer fringes, guidance is concerned with regulating activity. Regulated activity demands difference and conflict with unregulated activity, or with activity regulated by other self-revelation of the Guide. In its more inner realms, however, guidance brings about conformity with the predominate qualities of the Real, and hence it correlates with peace, love and harmony. The internal logic of Islam fosters a movement from the outside to the inside, from dispersion to

unity, from separation to union, from wrath to mercy, from disdain to love. The demands of externality, which correlates with incomparability and distance, are relativized by the demands of the precedent divine attributes, which correlate with the internal, the similar, the near.

Guidance leads to the center, the Real. Those human beings who have actualized all the Real's attributes in perfect harmony and equilibrium stand in the station of no station, since no attribute dominates over any other. As Ibn al-'Arabi's disciple Qūnawī puts it, they are 'the point at the center of the circle of existence'. The perfect human being, having actualized the divine form, puts all things in their proper places and recognizes the legitimacy of everything that exists. At the same time, such a person observes the rights of the individual divine names. He or she gives God as Guide his due. This means that a perfect human embodiment of the Real will recognize both the necessity of evil for the equilibrium of reality as a whole and the need to avoid it for the sake of human felicity. 'Muhammad is the messenger of God' retains all its rights, even though, when seen from the point of view of 'There is no god but God', it has specific implications that do not coincide with a broader-based view of Reality.¹⁹

Fully actualized human beings, free of all limitations, choose freely to enter back into limitation and expression with a view toward guidance. Though they stand in no station, they adopt the station of guidance for the good of those who need it. This is simply the implication of the nature of things, since God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath, oneness overcomes manyness, guidance is more real than error, and compassionate human beings give of themselves in order to deliver lost souls from ignorance and suffering.

APPRECIATING KNOTS

Any methodology can be nothing but a knot in terms of which reality is construed. In the name of objectivity or other norms certain assumptions are made about experienced reality. Ibn al-'Arabi's approach provides a predisposition toward the study of religion that is also a knot, no doubt, but by recognizing the existence of knots and appreciating their value, and by acknowledging the position (perhaps never attainable) of untying all knots, it may provide certain insights unavailable to other points of view.

By taking Ibn al-'Arabi's standpoint, one is predisposed to deal with religious diversity as follows: Religion appears among human beings because the Real as Guide desires to bring about human wholeness and felicity. But manifestations of the Guide can never embrace the total truth,

the Real as such, which lies beyond expression and form. Hence each religion has its own specific mode of expression that is necessarily different from other modes of expression.

The Guide establishes religion with a specific purpose: to allow human beings to overcome distance and establish nearness, or to move from disequilibrium to harmony, from the many to the One, from the unreal to the Real, from dispersion to Unity. The goal is felicity, which is inseparable from harmony with the attributes of the Real.

The form that guidance takes in a specific religion will be determined by the cultural and linguistic receptacle as much as by the specific self-disclosure of the Guide (the prophet, avatar, Buddha, sage, etc.) that initiates the religion. In the last analysis, these two sides of reality are inseparable: the cultural and linguistic receptacles, like the revelation, are self-disclosures of the Real. 'The water assumes the color of its cup', but the cup itself is nothing but frozen water.

Each religion explains in its own terms what a true human being is, and each differentiates between what human beings are and what they should be.¹⁹ The description of the present situation correlates with the expression of incomparability, distance, and difference; human beings dwell in imperfection and suffering, because they are somehow cut off from the Real. The description of what they should be correlates with the expression of similarity: human beings must establish harmony with the precedent attributes of the Real.

In concrete terms, this means that each religion has a variety of means to transform thought, activity, attitudes and whatever it is that makes up a human being. Revelation overthrows or revalorizes the pre-existent gods of belief by providing new perspectives on reality and dissolving knots. Nevertheless, it establishes gods of belief that help people orient themselves toward felicity. But felicity itself is open-ended, which is to say that there is no limit to what it implies. As full images of the Real, human beings can eliminate — with the Real's guidance — all the constraints and knots that make them this and not that.

In short, one has to recognize and appreciate both the perspective of eliminating all gods and knots and that of affirming all gods and knots. I know of no advice to the scholar of religion that surpasses the following words of Ibn al-'Arabi:

Beware of becoming delimited by a specific knotting and disbelief-ing in everything else, lest great good escape you. . . . Be in yourself a hyle for the forms of all beliefs, for God is wider and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting rather than another.²⁰

Notes

1. On the frequently misunderstood role of Sufism in Islam, see my *Faith and Practice of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). Some people may object to my choice of Ibn al-'Arabi because 'He is not a real Muslim', or, as others will tell us - in order to maintain proper academic distance - he has been considered an unbeliever and worse by many Muslim authorities ever since his own times. But such reactions to Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings are only to be expected from spokespeople for the type of rigid exclusivism that needs to be left behind before it will be possible to recognize the validity of other perspectives - not only in other traditions, but also in one's own. Ibn al-'Arabi, it needs to be stressed to such critics, bases his writings on an incredibly careful scrutiny of the Qur'an and the *hadith* - a much more careful scrutiny, in fact, than that provided by the authorities in Kalām, who give far more credence to the claims of 'reason' in the Greek sense and who are often called (in a totally misleading fashion) the representatives of Islamic 'orthodoxy'.
2. For a clear statement of these three fundamental perspectives concerning God - (1) the Essence as unknowable and (2) the Divinity as (a) incomparable and (b) similar - see Ibn al-'Arabi's *Fuṭūḥāt II* 257-22, translated in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) p. 172b. Sometimes *tanẓīh* and *taḥṣīn* are rendered as 'transcendence' and 'immanence', but the latter two words have different semantic fields and carry too much baggage in Western thought to be helpful. The two perspectives have clear analogies with the negative and positive theologies of the Christian tradition, and Ibn al-'Arabi sometimes calls them the paths of negation (*naṣf*) and affirmation (*iḥbāt*). For Ibn al-'Arabi's concept of *wujūd*, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, chaps 5-8. Henceforth cited as SPK.
3. For a detailed discussion of his ideas on imagination, see SPK, especially chaps 7-8.
4. Strictly speaking there are two levels of nondelimitation. At the higher level, the Essence is nondelimited with a nondelimitation that is in no sense opposed to delimitation. At the lower level, the divine attribute of nondelimitation is considered the opposite of the delimitation that God assumes in his similarity or self-disclosure. See SPK, pp. 109-12 and S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) pp. 49-50, 92.
5. I distinguish between belief and faith. The term belief (*ʿiqāda*), especially in Ibn al-'Arabi's perspective, can refer to any cognitive or psychological orientation, while the term faith (*īmān*) means belief in the message of a prophet and commitment to it by observing the practical instructions of the message (cf. SPK, p. 335).
6. *Fuṭūḥāt III* 160.17 (SPK, p. 188a); cf. SPK, pp. 336ff.
7. Cf. SPK, pp. 153-154.
8. *Fuṭūḥāt II* 183.34; cf. SPK, p. 181a.
9. In other words, we can set up a meaningful opposition between reason and imagination for purposes of discussion, even though reason cannot escape completely from imagination's hold. As Ibn al-'Arabi remarks (SPK,

11. p. 339a), 'The locus of beliefs is the imagination. . . . Man never stays safe from imagination. . . . The rational faculty cannot escape his humanity'. The divine names are one of the areas of Islamic studies most neglected by modern scholarship. Cf. D. Gimaret's ground-breaking work, *Les noms divins en Islam: Exégèse lexicographique et théologique* (Paris: les Editions du Cerf, 1988).
12. Cf. SPK, 'The Two Denotations of the Names', pp. 36-7.
13. For Muslim thinkers, a person's failure to make this choice or to succeed in making a certain progress toward the goal explains 'transmigration' (*tanāsūt*) in the world that follows this world. By failing to give up the limitations that define them as this or that, people doom themselves to remaining this or that in the next world. They assume forms appropriate to the character traits and divine attributes that dominate over them. Myth expresses this assumption of forms in appropriate language; hence it tells us that people become pigs, dogs, devils and so on. Cf. Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, pp. 277ff.; Chittick, 'Your Sight Today is Piercing', Death and the Afterlife in Islam', in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, edited by H. Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992) pp. 125-39.
14. In the daily prayers recited by all Muslims, the Prophet is referred to as 'God's servant and messenger', indicating in the order of the words that servanthood precedes vicegerency. In human terms the point is self-evident. No king appoints a rebel as his ambassador.
15. SPK, pp. 377a-b. On the station of no station, cf. SPK, pp. 375-9.
16. 'This is why Ibn al-'Arabi remarks that if the expression of religious truths had been left in the hands of the Kalām authorities, who base their teachings on reason, no one would ever have loved God, and hence difference and distinction could not be overcome: 'By God, were it not for the Shari'a brought by the divine report-giving, no one would know God! If we had remained with our rational proofs - which, in the opinion of the rational thinkers, establish knowledge of God's Essence, showing that 'He is not like this' and 'not like that' - no created thing would ever have loved God. But the tongues of the religions give a divine report saying: 'He is like this' and 'He is like that.' . . . He made us love Him through these positive attributes. (*Fuṭūḥāt II* 326.12; SPK, pp. 180a-b).
17. To be more specific, the relatively exclusive focus of most Muslims on the self-revelation of the Guide through the Qur'an leads to the widely held belief that religions such as Christianity and Judaism have become distorted by their followers. But such beliefs concerning other religions are not incumbent upon Muslims, since the Qur'an remains ambiguous on these points, and no central authority has ever established an 'orthodox' position. Concerning belief, the Qur'an is fully explicit only on the fundamental contents of the creed - God, the angels, the prophets, the scriptures, the Last Day and the measuring-out-of-good-and-evil. - When it comes to how these are to be understood, there have always been differences of interpretation. I maintain that Ibn al-'Arabi's position on the relativity of the various revelations is fully in accordance with Qur'anic teachings, whether or not other Muslims interpret the holy Book in the same way.
18. The Misguides (*al-muḍlīf*), for example, is one of the wrathful divine names, and it has rights that contradict those of the Guide. For Ibn al-'Arabi's school,

any theodicy has to take into account the human implications of such wrathful names. For some of the implications of God as Misguider, see Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, chap. 3.

19. It is possible that the present human situation be viewed as ideal – as in some pre-axial religions – but to say this is to recognize that it must be preserved and maintained, which is to come back to saying that it is not completely ideal (or else it would be permanent and we would not have to worry). Or, to say that the present situation is ideal may mean that it has to be recognized as such – and many post-axial expressions of religion take this position – in which case the recognition is all important.

20. *Fusus al-hikam* 113 (SPK, pp. 355a–b). Compare Ibn al-'Arabi's remarks in *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* II 85.11 (SPK, p. 355b): 'He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.'

2

A Religious Understanding of Religion: a Model of the Relationship between Traditions

JOHN HICK

A large part of the academic study of religion consists in its objective investigation of a range of forms of human thought and behavior. This deals with the history of religions; with the interactions between religions, societies and cultures in the past and present; with the historical and literary analyses of religious texts; with the sociology of religious practices and organizations; with the psychology of religious experience and belief. And all such study is, in principle, entirely independent of the question whether or not there is any transcendent Reality of limitless value such as religious people affirm when they speak of God, *Brahman*, the *dharmakāya*, the Tao, and so on.¹

The objective study of religion is thus a branch of anthropology in the broadest sense of that term, and is as such of profound interest and importance as a contribution to the study of humankind.

But distinctively religious ideas and practices differ from others in referring intentionally beyond humankind and beyond our natural environment. There is accordingly a fundamental difference between non-religious understandings of religion as a human phenomenon, and religious understandings of it as our response to the Transcendent.² The relationship between these two points of view is asymmetrical. A non-religious study of the religious aspects of human life cannot refer to the Transcendent, although it must of course refer to human ideas of and beliefs in a transcendent Reality. On the other hand, a religious understanding of religion must, as part of its essential discourse, refer to the Transcendent, although it can also, and indeed certainly should, be interested in the human character and material conditions of the response, in its varying forms, to the supposed transcendent Reality itself – or herself or himself.

If we set aside any naturalistic prejudice, we must acknowledge that religious understandings are intrinsically as legitimate as non-religious