

made things, and of a life governed by machines, that perverts the mind and kills the spirit. Infinite variety is the mark of creative genius, sameness and repetition the mark of mediocrity and decadence. The symbol of the machine is the wheel, which is also the symbol of *samsara*—of ever-recurring birth and death, of the inescapable cycle of existence. But there is another, invisible wheel which does not revolve endlessly but instead radiates, pervading every form of life. It is known as the *Dharma-Chakra*, and he who realizes it also realizes his universality and the infinite relationship of all things and forms of appearance, without denying their relative existence and value.

We live in a world of impermanence and instability because we are blinded by its fragmentary appearance — fragments to which we cling under the belief that they represent all there is, reality itself. We cling to this fragmentary world under the influence of unreasonable desires; thus blinded, we lose the great connections and inner relations which would give meaning and harmony to the flux of life. If we could see the whole picture, the totality and completeness of relationship, we would be able to view beings and things in proper perspective. Then their change or movement, which until then could only be conceived as "impermanence" (under its negative aspect of decay or destruction) would reveal a consistency of rhythm, a stability of direction, and a continuity of organic development which could restore to our world a higher order of enduring value that can ever be achieved by intellectual abstraction alone.

We accept the unity of a thing in space, although it extends in various dimensions with various aspects and properties. But we doubt a similar unity if it is extended in time (which is merely another dimension), where it likewise reveals various aspects and properties, developing according to its inherent nature.

Our intellect . . . grasps this ultimate truth about things slowly, laboriously and piecemeal. It sees but one thing (and one aspect of it at a time, and so always brings a feeling of incompleteness and limitation. But we have occasional moments of insight when something presented to our sense or imagination will form its own character, or from some exalted mood of our own, seem like a perfect and perfectly comprehended universe in miniature.
(Edgar F. Carritt, *Philosophy of Beauty from Socrates to Robert Bridges*, 1931)

This is what the great mystics of all times and the greatest artists have experienced. But while the latter could only achieve it in their most creative moments, the former due to their complete inner detachment and their fundamentally changed spiritual outlook were able to dwell more or less continuously in this state. For them, the impermanent world of ordinary mortals had disappeared — though they may live within it and extend to all living beings their loving kindness — because they have found the central harmony, and can never lose the conception of totality in that of the individual. They are the Siddhas who have achieved the magic power that transforms *samsara* into *nirvana*, the saints and sages who have attained Enlightenment. □

Belief and Transformation: The Sufi Teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi

William C. Chittick

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IN THE VIEW OF the Sufis, those Muslims that speak for Islam's interior dimension, all Islamic faith and practice is designed to transform our inward selves so that we can achieve harmony with our Divine Source. The Sufi masters have discussed the self or "soul" (*nafs*) and the various means that can bring about its transformation from a great variety of viewpoints and in voluminous detail. Within the writings of a single master it is common to encounter a wide range of explanations of these matters connected with all manner of relevant topics, such as metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, ethics, law, and social interaction. Not surprisingly, no Muslim author has written in greater detail and from a wider variety of viewpoints about achieving harmony with the Divine than the incredibly prolific Andalusian sage and Sufi, "the greatest of the masters" (Al-Shaykh al-Akbar), Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), whose *Futuhāt* alone—one of 500 works—will fill 17,000 pages in its modern edition.

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SUFIS VIEW THE KORAN, the primary source for Islamic beliefs and practices, as a guidebook setting down the path that human beings must follow to allow their hidden potential to blossom. People enter the world with a primordial simplicity of nature (*fitrah*) that predisposes them toward recognition of God's Unity (*tawhid*), the foundation upon which all Islamic beliefs are built. But they grow and develop in a manner that is largely determined by environmental and social factors. As the Prophet Muhammad said, "Every child is born with a primordial simplicity of nature, but then its parents make it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian." Transformation of the soul takes place as a matter of course, since the interior dimension of the human being is infinitely pliable and molds itself in response to whatever stimuli it meets. But Islam considers it self-evident that every path of growth and development will not necessarily lead to a full deployment of human possibilities.

In Sufism the goal of human life is a situation in which every one of the divine attributes come to be manifested within the soul in fullness and appropriate equilibrium.

What, then, is Islam's understanding of the path we must follow in order to be fully human? Briefly: God created human beings in His own image, which means that He placed within each and every one of them all His own "names" (*asma*) or "attributes" (*sifat*). "He taught Adam the names, all of them," says the Koran (2:31), in a verse whose implications have been discussed by

countless Muslim thinkers over the centuries. In their view, such Koranic passages do not imply that God is an "anthropomorphic" being, since anthropomorphism begins with a conception of man or the *anthropos* upon which it bases its conception of God. Rather, the Koran depicts human beings as "theomorphic," since it begins every discussion with God, the one, unquestionable Truth and Reality. To understand the nature of man, we must know something about the nature of God.

Human theomorphism is at first hidden within the soul's primordial simplicity. Growth and development mark a process whereby the divine attributes latent within the soul gradually come into view. Life, Knowledge, Will, Power, Speech, Generosity, Justice—these are the "seven leaders" (*al-a'immat al-sab'ah*), the seven primary divine attributes that bring the world and everything within it into existence. But it is immediately apparent that they do not manifest themselves equally in every kind of being or in every individual among the different kinds. Hence, for example, none of these attributes can be seen in an active form in the mineral kingdom, as life makes its appearance to our sense organs only at the level of the plants. Animals possess the rudiments of knowledge, will, power, and speech, but only human beings can bring into full flowering these four attributes, not to speak of generosity and justice. The goal of human life is seen to be a situation in which every one of the "ninety-nine" divine attributes—not only these seven—come to be manifested within the soul in fullness and appropriate equilibrium.

When a person reaches the spiritual "station" (*maqam*) where the divine image, latent within the soul, displays itself through a full flowering of each divine attribute, he or she is said to have attained "perfection" (*kamal*). This term does not imply some sort of static finality, but rather a dynamic actuality married to the Fullness of Being which is God Himself. The "Perfect Man"

(*insan kamil*) is that human being, male or female, who participates with total presence and undistracted awareness in God's Self-Revelation (*tajalli*), which is the process through which the cosmos is reborn at every instant. Just as God's activity is continual and ever-renewed, so the Perfect Man enjoys a new growth and a more complete knowledge of Being at each moment. In Ibn al-'Arabi's own words,

The Perfect Man is God's deputy in His Self-Manifestation to the creatures; in this station he acquires knowledge of Him according to the perfection which his theomorphism demands The Perfect Man's unveiling (*Kashf*) is the most complete form of knowledge. For just as God's Self-Revelation never repeats itself—since the Self-Revealer is Unique (and hence each instance of Self-Revelation reflects that uniqueness)—so also the Perfect Man consciously and constantly undergoes transformations in his states, thoughts, acts, and innermost secrets. (III 282.19).¹

Though perfection is the ideal human situation, it is rarely reached in this life. But those who strive to the extent of their abilities and capacities to manifest the divine attributes latent within their own souls are given the promise in the Koran that they will reach "felicity" (*sa'adah*), which is defined as happiness and wholeness in the stages of existence that follow upon life in the material world. That is why the "Inhabitants of the Garden"—to use the Koranic expression—experience what the Perfect Men have tasted already in this life: God's constant and ever-renewed Self-Revelation. At every instant God removes a new veil, at every moment He displays His Face in greater beauty and glory. Paradise lasts forever because the Unique Beloved never repeats His endless Self-Display, nor can the finite ever encompass the Infinite. God draws the creature into greater and greater vision, knowledge, awareness, and

bliss. These, according to the Sufi understanding are the Koranic "fountains and hours," the rivers of milk, honey, water, and wine flowing into the Garden.

At every instant the Inhabitants of the Garden experience a renewed creation and a new bliss—hence they never suffer boredom. With every glance they cast toward their kingdoms, they perceive things and forms they had never seen before and thus they increase in delight. (III 280.27)

But felicity is not something we can count upon. The fact that human beings partake of the divine attribute of freedom means that a certain degree of free will enters into the very definition of what it means to be human. Hence we are "forced"—by the very fact that we are free—to play a role in the extent to which the divine attributes latent within our theomorphic natures come to be actualized in our own souls. If we grow in the direction of disequilibrium and disharmony—that is, if we develop some of the divine attributes to the detriment of others—we may end up by forfeiting all possibility of felicity and fall into its opposite, called "wretchedness" (*shaqa'*) in the technical terminology of the Koran and the Sufis. Perhaps it goes without saying that the "happiness" and "misery" that we experience in this life have no necessary connection with our states in the next world. Sufis often tell parables about those who have chosen to lie at ease in the garden (of worldly delights) instead of jumping into the fire (of suffering and spiritual travail) only to discover too late that appearances here are invariably deceptive.

One example of how divine attributes may grow up in the soul in an improper balance will have to suffice. According to the Koran, God is "Proud, Overbearing" (59:23), two names which enter into the category of "Names of Majesty" as opposed to "Names of Beauty". In following the "Straight Path" (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) that

leads to human perfection, the individual will find that "pride" and "overbearingness" develop within himself to a certain degree, but they will be counterbalanced by attributes such as wisdom and justice that bring about the correct attitude of "servanthood" (*ubudiyyah*) appropriate to our created nature. But if a person becomes proud and overbearing without the counterbalancing qualities of soul, he will fall into an imbalance of the type associated in the Koran with Pharaoh. "God sets a seal upon every heart that is proud, overbearing" says the Koran (40:35), and the result is spiritual blindness and ultimate wretchedness.

Our "beliefs" play a fundamental role in determining the way in which the divine attributes come to manifest themselves in our souls and activities.

The Sufis view the station of human perfection attained by the Perfect Man as an equilibrium (*i'tidal*) of every divine attribute and hence, as the full manifestation of God Himself within His image. God does not appear in the Perfect Men in the guise of a single name, such as the Merciful, the Forgiving, the Wrathful, the Proud, the Life-Giver, or the Slayer: He appears in the guise of all His names in the manner demanded by His own Being, Reality Itself. But in "imperfect men" and in creatures other than human beings, God never manifests Himself as "God," rather as this name or that. Ibn al-'Arabi's disciple al-Qunawi (d. 1274) calls the station of human perfection and equilibrium the "Point at the Center of the Circle," since the Perfect Man stands equidistant from all attributes, all realities, all creatures, all phenomena. He is free of

limitation and definition, since no reality or name designates him better than any other. Like God Himself he is totally unknown in his essence, yet manifest and active in all things.

How is it possible to achieve the proper harmony of attributes that human perfection demands? Every seeker on the path of self-realization faces this fundamental question. In providing their answers, the Sufi masters have devoted their attention not only to questions of practice or method, but also to the matter of teachings or doctrine. In their view, our "beliefs" (*i'tiqadat*)—a term they use to embrace the whole range of our ideas, theories, doctrines, and dogmas—play a fundamental role in determining the way in which the divine attributes come to manifest themselves in our souls and activities. Beliefs shape our lives and our deaths. Ideas mold the trajectory of our inner transformations even more radically than practice since, as the Prophet reported, "Practices produce effects in accordance with your intentions."

The "Return to God" or eschatology (*ma'ad*) is one on the three principles of Islam, after Divine Unity and Prophecy. The Koran tells us over and over that everything that has come from God—i.e., all the worlds and everything within them—must return to God; no scripture pays as much attention to the delights and terrors of the afterlife. The Koran mentions, for example, eight levels of paradise and seven of hell, referring to their inhabitants by names such as "Companions of the Right Hand" and "Companions of the Left Hand" or "felicitous" and "wretched." In studying and commenting upon this Koranic picture, the Sufis have amplified and refined it in order to show how it includes allusions to every conceivable mode of equilibrium and disequilibrium, perfection and imperfection, actualization of the divine image and failure to actualize it in a balanced way. Ibn al-'Arabi talks about the 5,105 degrees of Paradise, twelve of which belong exclusively to Muslims (*Futuhat* I 319.19). In his view

each level or degree of the posthumous worlds encompasses a broad range of human development. For him it is obvious that followers of different religions experience different things at death, even if all of them should have attained to perfection and felicity, since this station possesses an infinite number of degrees and kinds. The Sufis even maintain that the posthumous state of each individual will be unique, since each represents a unique image of the Unique and Infinite God.

Few people doubt that each person's perception of reality differs at least slightly from that of others. Even persons of similar cultural backgrounds may differ profoundly in psychological makeup, perceptual capacity, intellectual ability, and aesthetic sensitivity, all of which represent important dimensions of the soul. The Sufi eschatological teachings hold that if this is true in the present world of concretions and sedimentations, where the spiritual essences are largely veiled from sight, it is even more true in the subtle, "imaginal" realm that is experienced after death, where the essences assume a far wider variety of forms.²

Our ideas about what a human being can become will determine the trajectory of our own development in both this world and the next.

If every posthumous state is different from every other, some must be better and some worse, some more intense and some weaker, some more luminous and some darker. Perhaps the eschatological teachings of the Semitic religions as usually understood put too much emphasis upon an absolute distinction between heaven and hell, but

certainly one basic insight is incontestable: A person will experience the next stage of his existence in a manner determined by the way he lives his life in the present world, and this in turn will depend upon his beliefs. The states after death are affected not only by "works," but also, and even more so, by the realm of ideas and thoughts that bring the works into existence. Hence our beliefs about who we are, where we can go, and what we can become play a major role in determining the actual manner in which our human potential unfolds. The great Sufi poet Rumi (d. 1273) makes the point succinctly:

You are your thought, brother, the rest of you is bones and fiber.
If you think of roses, you are a rosegarden; if you think of thorns, you are fuel for the furnace.

(*Mathnawi* II 277-278).

In short, the Sufis maintain that when we speak of the soul's transformation, the goal we envisage is of the utmost importance. Our ideas about what a human being can become will determine the trajectory of our development in both this world and the next. In the Sufi view, we cannot fulfill the task of being human without opening ourselves up to the full range of divine attributes latent within us; and in order to do this, we must have a proper understanding of God. But God in His Selfhood or Essence (*dhat*) is unknowable—a teaching that Islam shares with all metaphysical traditions. Hence *guidance* is needed so that we can conceive of a goal that will allow us to develop our theomorphism to its fullest, and this guidance can only come through a "revelation" (*wahy*) from the Divine Reality whom we reflect.

In the general Islamic view, "revelation" is a message to mankind sent by God. Adam, the first man, was also the first prophet (*nabi*), or the first to bring "news" (*naba*) from the Divine Reality. Because of the general tendency of human beings to fall into forgetfulness and to neglect their responsibilities toward their Creator, God

sent a continual series of prophets, some 124,000 from Adam down to the last, Muhammad. Hence revelation, God's sending down of guidance to mankind, has been a universal phenomenon; "Every nation has its messenger" (Koran 10:47). Moreover, the message given to all nations is fundamentally the same, corresponding to the first half of the Muslim *shahadah* or testimony of faith, "There is no god but God."

According to Ibn al-'Arabi, *i'tiqad* or "belief" is an inherent trait of human beings. The Arabic term means literally the tying of a knot, and points figuratively to a strong attachment to some idea or way of looking at things. Belief is a knot tied in the human heart which determines a person's view of reality and the manner in which he leads his life. To be human is to have a perspective on self and other, even if an individual is unaware of his underlying mind-set or is unable to articulate it. Belief lies at the root of every human thought and action. In short, for Ibn al-'Arabi, "belief" is unavoidable, since it follows from human consciousness.

Belief as defined here is much wider than "faith" (*imn*), which is often called "a guiding light that God throws into the heart." The object of faith is first and foremost God, and then, as a function of faith in God, faith in the angels, the Koranic revelation in the scriptures, the prophets, and the Last Day (cf. Koran 2: 177, 4:136). Belief is a general human condition, while faith is a specific form of belief that demands acknowledging the truth of revelation and applying its precepts to our everyday activities.

If everyone has a belief, can we then say that all beliefs are true? The immediate answer to this question that would be given by most Muslim theologians is, "No; only belief in a true religion is a true belief." Ibn al-'Arabi, however, would not be so precipitous; he would most likely reply, "Yes and no, depending upon what you mean by true." If you mean by true that a

belief corresponds to some aspect of reality, then all beliefs are certainly true, since each demonstrates by its very existence that it does express a certain feature of reality, however limited and distorted that feature might be; if it did not it would not exist. Each belief represents a subjective limitation of the fabric of existence; the fact that someone holds a belief proves that it coincides in some way or another with the situation of the world, whether or not the believer's mind establishes a real contact with what lies outside of itself, for the believer's mind is itself a part of the world.

This view of belief is based on the doctrine that the cosmos in its indefinite spatial and temporal extension manifests the whole range of ontological possibilities possessed by Being. Each thing (*shay*) or entity (*'ayn*) is like a ray of color brought into existence by the prism of Infinite Possibility. Through its own specific nature—i.e., its own special limitations that distinguish it from other entities—each entity colors the Invisible Light, thereby making it visible. From one point of view an existent entity manifests the Light of Being by virtue of its very existence; from another point of view it veils or obscures this same Light by means of its own "color".

What is "true" is not that which corresponds to Reality, but that which is adequate to bring about human perfection.

In the human realm, this way of looking at things means that each individual represents a unique ontological possibility of Unlimited Being; each is like a snowflake singled out from the infinite possibilities of crystalization possessed by primordial

vapor; and so also each individual's knowledge displays a unique perception of this same Reality. In explaining these points, Ibn al-'Arabi often quotes the famous saying of the Sufi Junayd (d. 910), who, when asked about knowledge and the knower, replied: "The water takes on the color of its container." In other words, human beliefs are determined by the ontological possibilities that make up the individual. Just as each individual is a unique knot tied on Unlimited Reality, so his belief represents a unique knot tied in Unlimited Consciousness. In Ibn al-'Arabi's words,

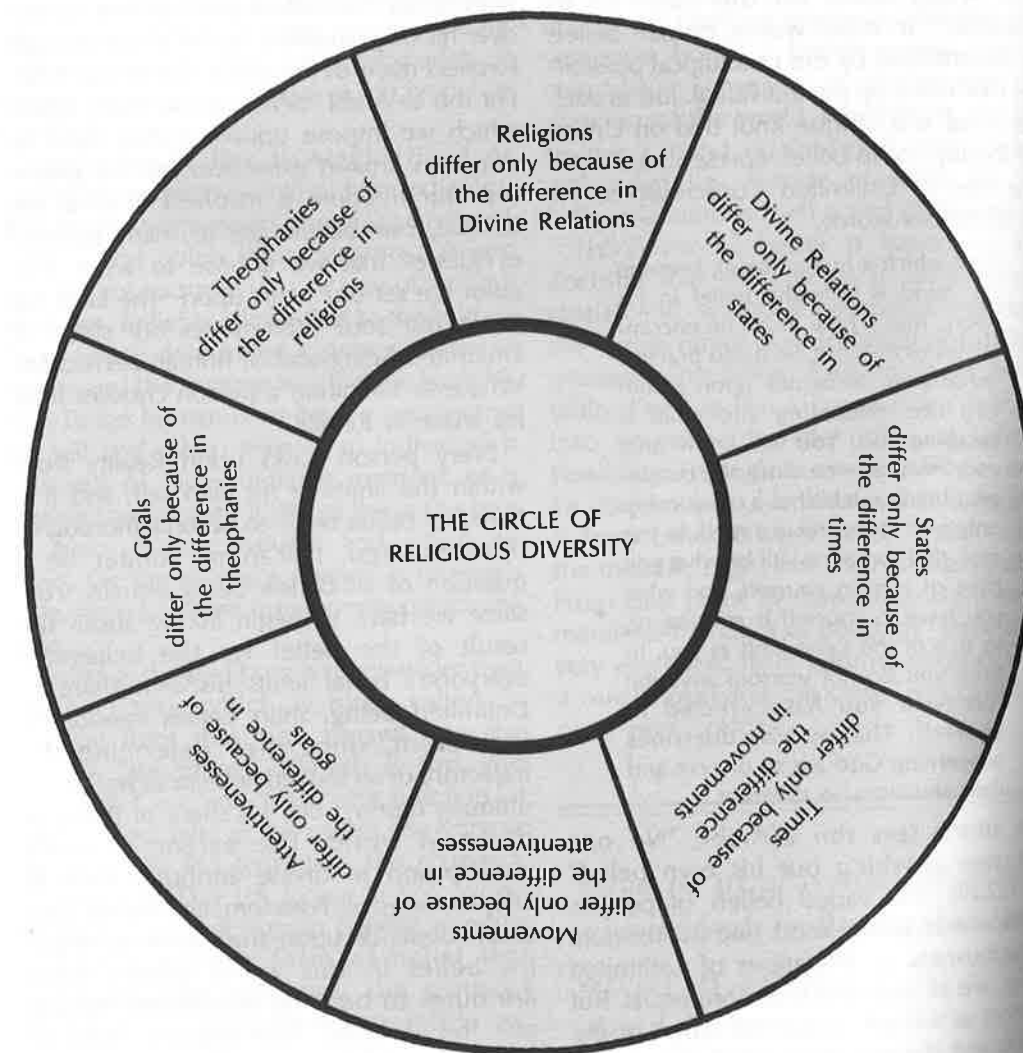
That which a human being keeps in his mind is only the belief in his heart; that is how much he encompasses of his Lord. So if you practice meditation, recognize upon whom you are meditating and what is escaping you. You will know only your own essence, since the contingent being establishes a relationship only with someone like itself. In this case, that someone will be what you have of Him in yourself, and what you have in yourself is contingent, so it is of the same kind as you. In truth you do not worship anything but what you have erected in yourself. That is why doctrines concerning God are so diverse and their situations so different.

In short, says Ibn al-'Arabi, "No one ever sees anything but his own belief" (III 132.29). The varied beliefs of people, in respect of being knots tied in Absolute Consciousness or limitations of Unlimited Being, are all true and therefore equal. But as soon as we ask about the scope of the belief, and the extent to which it provides an adequate representation of Reality, beliefs can no longer be equal, even if all are true. Though "The water takes on the color of its container," there will not only be containers of every conceivable hue, there will also be some that are more or less transparent. Ibn al-'Arabi identifies this "transparency" with human perfection and makes it the goal of human life.

To elaborate on the analogy of colors, we can say that each individual represents not a single color but the whole spectrum, since each is created in the image of all the divine attributes. By being so-and-so in such-and-such a place, an individual manifests certain hues rather than others and has little control over his own situation. But he is free enough to select many of the colors that he manifests. For Ibn al-'Arabi "beliefs are so many colors which we impose upon colorless light by our own limited existences; to the extent that our freedom is involved in what we believe, our beliefs are so many colored eyeglasses that we choose to wear. The color we set our heart upon—the knot we tie in our soul—determines our share of Unlimited Being and of human perfection. Whatever limitation a person chooses fixes his share in Reality.

Every person looks upon Reality from within the limits of his own self, and it is here that beliefs begin to become thoroughly differentiated. It can no longer be a question of all beliefs being equally true, since we have to begin asking about the result of the belief for the believer. If everyone's belief limits his own share of Unlimited Being, then beliefs cannot be indifferent, since they determine the trajectory of an individual's life as well as his ultimate destiny, i.e., his share of Being in the next world. The extent of man's participation in divine attributes such as Life, Knowledge, Freedom, and Power after death depends upon the extent to which his belief in this world allows these attributes to become actualized. Hence, says Ibn al-'Arabi, "The beautiful vision in the next world depends upon beliefs in this world" (II 85.1).

To refer back to our earlier question—"Can we say that all beliefs are true?"—we can guess that Ibn al-'Arabi would reply something like this: All are true in respect to being valid limitations of Unlimited Being, but all are not equal in the degree to which they allow for the needs of human felicity, i.e., the unfolding of human



Ibn al-Arabi's explanation of his diagram can be summarized as follows:
 "Religions differ only because of the difference in Divine Relations." It is clear that different religions bring different prescriptions, for "To every one of you We have appointed a law and a way" (Koran 5:48). So God's relation to one prophet is different from His relation to another prophet. If the relation were one in every respect, the religions would be one in every respect.

"Divine Relations differ only because of the difference in states." The states are the situations of the creatures. One is sick and calls out, "Oh Healer!", another is drowning and calls out "Oh Helper!" Each creature has a specific state at each moment.

"States differ only because of the difference in times." A creature's state is one thing in spring, another in summer, still another in autumn.

"Times differ only because of the difference in movements." The movements of the spheres bring about night and day as well as the determination of years, months, and seasons.

"Movements differ only because of the differences in attentivenesses." God turns His "attentiveness" (*tawajjuh*) toward a creature by bringing it into existence, for He says, "Our only word when We desire something is to say to it 'Be!' and it is" (Koran 16:40). If the attentivenesses were all one, there would be no difference in movement. Hence the attentiveness which moves the sun is different from that which moves the moon. God says, "Each planet swims in a sphere" (Koran 36:40); so each movement has a specific attentiveness in respect of God's Name, "He who desires."

"Attentivenesses differ only because of the differences in goals." If the attentiveness directed towards the sun's movement had the same goal as the attentiveness directed toward the moon's movement, the effects would be the same in both cases, but in fact they are different. In the same way God's attentiveness through the attribute of Wrath toward x is different from His attentiveness through Mercy toward y, since His goal in the first case is chastisement and in the second the bestowal of bliss.

"Goals differ only because of the difference in theophanies." If theophanies—the self-manifestations of God through which the cosmos comes into existence—always took on a single form, they could not have more than a single goal. But goals differ, so a different theophany is directed at each. Moreover, the infinite Divine Expanse demands that theophanies never repeat themselves.

"Theophanies differ only because of the difference in religions." The religions are ways that take to God, and they differ among themselves. Hence the theophanies to the followers of the religions differ. That is why, as the Prophet said, on the Day of Resurrection each group will deny God if He appears to it in a theophanic form that contradicts its belief.

perfection. Hence a second question is of fundamental importance: Which belief or beliefs lead to felicity?

In answering this question, Ibn al-'Arabi—in keeping with the Koranic teachings—makes no exclusive claim to felicity for some believers rather than others. On the contrary, the fact that he sees each individual human being as a unique ontological possibility with its own specific belief corresponding to its own reality means that he perceives revelation as the divine answer to the tremendous variety of specific forms assumed by human beliefs. Hence there is a diversity of divine revelations to coincide with the variety of limitations represented by the individual existents. In order for the divine Light to be comprehended by the darkness, or by the diverse hues which are the limited perceptions and understandings of human beings, it must take on various colors and shades.

Once we realize that God has "sent no messenger save the tongue of his people" (Koran 14:4), we come to understand that He does not make Himself known to us—when He desires that we should know Him—except in the way that we are, not in the way in which His Essence would demand. (III 409.15)

Since God's Essence demands Unlimitedness, He cannot ask us, who are limited existents, to know Him in that respect. Rather, He speaks to us within the context of our own limitations. Moreover, although each human being represents a unique possibility of existence and knowledge, various human types exist, and God takes these into account in revelation.

The purpose of revelation is to guide human beings to perfection, i.e., to the actualization of the divine attributes in the image of which man was created. In order to take on the characteristics of pure Light (i.e., to realize his theomorphism), a person must acquire the properties of all colors. What might be called the primary colors of existence are the divine attributes of Mercy

(which Ibn al-'Arabi identifies with Being), Knowledge (Consciousness), and Will (Freedom, or Bliss, or Love). The door to the actualization of these attributes is opened by means of other attributes which bring about revelation, in particular, Guidance and Beneficence. In other words, in order to reach the colorless Light represented by the harmonious combination of Mercy, Knowledge, and Will, a person must pass through the door which the Light itself designates in respect of the fact that Light is, by definition, Guidance and Beneficence. Since the seeker does not fully know what he is striving to achieve until he achieves it, and since he is separated from Light by the very fact of being a limited color, Light itself must delineate the path of effort and acquisition. For Ibn al-'Arabi, this explains, for example, why Muslims are directed to pray for both Guidance and Beneficence in each cycle of the daily canonical prayers: "Guide us on the Straight Path, the path of those who receive Thy Beneficence, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray" (Koran 1: 5-9). This prayer—within the context of the faith, practice, and sincerity that it demands—provides a means designated by God to bring about the actualization of pure light. Moreover, says Ibn al-'Arabi, the Straight Path mentioned here is the path brought by each of the prophets; failure to follow it will cut a person off from Guidance and Beneficence and bar him from attaining to his own theomorphic nature.⁴

The perfect sage needs to adopt each belief, but without being limited by it.

But if the full perfection of human nature can only be realized through revelation,

revelation must still be manifested in diverse forms. This is proven first of all by the scriptural statements affirming human and religious diversity, and it is corroborated by the nature of existence itself. The Unique Reality establishes a unique relationship with each entity and with each human individual and likewise with each of the 124,000 prophets that were sent from the time of Adam down to Muhammad. Ibn al-'Arabi even provides a diagram to illustrate the manner in which the very nature of existence demands religious diversity (I 265-266).

In short, in answering the question, "Which belief or beliefs lead to felicity?", Ibn al-'Arabi would say, "Those beliefs lead to felicity that conform to divine revelation." Hence he warns us to examine our own beliefs carefully to make sure that they conform to the revealed texts: "The intelligent person is he who abandons what he has in himself concerning God for that which has come from God concerning God" (IV 279.16). In other words, "It is incumbent upon you to practice the worship of God set down by revelation and established by tradition (*al-sam'*)" (III 311.23). There is no other road to human perfection and its concordant felicity.

If we return now to the question, "Are all beliefs true?", the answer becomes: yes and no. Yes, since all beliefs correspond to possible limitations of Unlimited Reality. No, since only those beliefs which correspond to revelation lead to felicity; what is "true" is not that which corresponds to Reality, but that which is adequate to bring about human perfection.

Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasized that Ibn al-'Arabi continues to affirm the truth and validity of every belief on its own level. This fact leads to a conclusion that may at first sight appear surprising: Instead of rejecting all doctrines that do not lead to felicity, Ibn al-'Arabi maintains that full human perfection means the acceptance of all beliefs! It is true that human perfection involves following the Straight Path and

therefore having "faith" in the technical sense, but the fullest human perfection can only be actualized by understanding the validity of every human belief. Each belief—every limitation of Reality—represents a point of view that has something to teach us about the possibilities of Unlimited Being, or else it would not exist. The perfect sage needs to adopt each belief, but without being limited by it; in other words, he should comprehend all knots tied in the fabric of Reality, or all possibilities of limitation represented by the human subject. By accepting each knot for what it is, the sage learns what it has to teach, and by not limiting himself to this one knot, he allows for the tying of other knots or the knowledge of other possibilities.

This sort of openness to every belief is only achieved by those whom Ibn al-'Arabi calls the "gnostics" (*al-arifun*) or the "People of Allah."

The perfect gnostic recognizes God in every form in which He manifests Himself ... , but the non-gnostic recognizes Him only in the form of his own belief, denying Him when He manifests Himself in another form. (III 132.24)

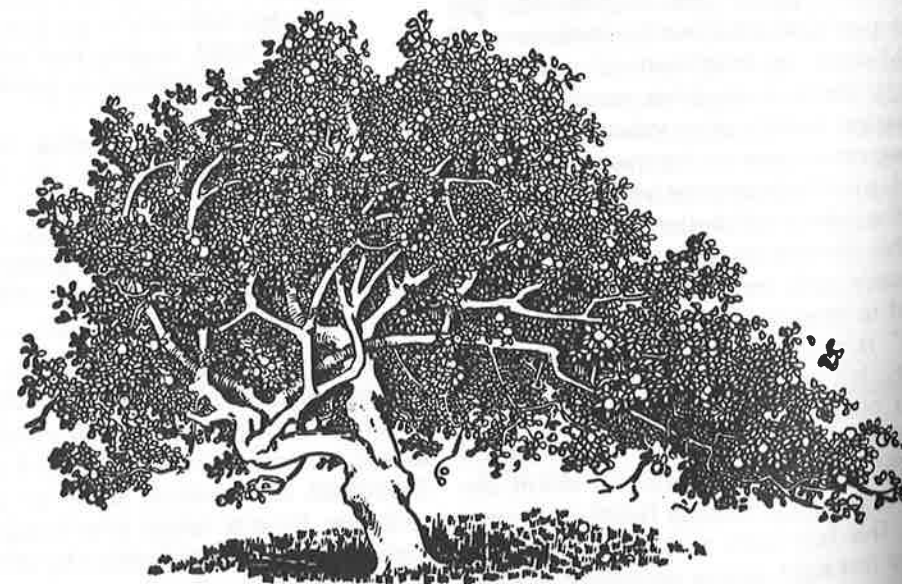
The People of Allah follow Him whose people they are, so His property flows over them. And His property is the lack of limitation, for He possesses all-pervading Being. So His people possess all-pervading vision. (III 161.15)

Despite Ibn al-'Arabi's relatively complex explanation of the nature of revelation and belief, his basic position clearly corresponds to the Koranic teachings outlined earlier: Revelation is universal, since its aim, in whatever form it takes, is to bring about human perfection and felicity by delivering the individual from limitations; the *shahadah*, "There is no god but God," means that all our beliefs, to the extent that they are not turned toward the Infinite by revelation, are limitations, so many false gods that must be transcended. Revelation is particular because

the different situations of human beings demand a great variety of specific self-limitations of the Unlimited, so that the diverse human capacities for belief can be accommodated and directed toward Absolute Reality. □

Notes

1. Roman numerals refer to the volume number of Ibn al-'Arabi's *al-Futuh al-makkiyyah* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, n.d.), Arabic numerals to the page and line numbers.
2. Cf. Mulla Sadra, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, trans. J.W. Morris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); W.C. Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-'Arabi's Eschatology," *Muslim World*, forthcoming; Chittick, "A Sufi Approach to Islamic Eschatology: Rumi on Death," forthcoming.
3. Ibn al-'Arabi illustrates this passage by citing various Koranic verses that typify the three levels: 1. "Nothing is like Him" (42:11). 2. "God is powerful over everything, and God encompasses all things in knowledge" (65:12); also 2:29, 154; 9:6; 17:1; 85:16. 3. "The All-Merciful sat upon the Throne" (20:5); "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4); also 6: 3; 21:17; 54:14.
4. Cf. Chittick, "A Sufi Approach to Religious Diversity: Ibn al-'Arabi on the Metaphysics of Revelation," forthcoming, where the meaning of the Straight Path in contradistinction to other paths and its connection to Guidance and Beneficence are explained in detail.
5. *Fusus al-hikam*, ed. 'Afifi (Beirut: Dar al- Kutub al-'Arabi, 1946), p. 113; cf. R.W.J. Austin, trans., *Ibn al-'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 137.



Reviews

THE IRON COW OF ZEN by Albert Low; Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985; a Quest Book; 202 pages, \$6.50.

"At the top of a one hundred foot pole an iron cow gives birth to a calf." You have to be steeped in the tradition of Zen to be able to say something useful about this koan, never mind write a whole book about it. Albert Low, who has been a Zen practitioner for two decades, has done just that. (He is a student of Zen master Philip Kapleau, editor of the much-acclaimed book *The Three Pillars of Zen*.)

Low's work can be understood as an extensive meditation on this koan and hence about Zen itself. But you cannot speak about Zen without also speaking about yourself, the mind, the ego, and life as a whole. And so the book is a widely-cast and deep-trailing net with which the author has hauled a marvelous range of profound subjects for the reader's own examination and meditation. What is more, Albert Low brings to bear on this rich harvest his keen understanding of Zen, wide reading, and lively intelligence.

He speaks of his book as a "montage," and he writes indeed as a *bricoleur* who playfully develops his argument — more in the spirit of the French literary tradition than of his native English culture. He asks more questions than he provides answers. After all, he is a Zen teacher! His questions, of course, are poignant and intended to transcend the position of the questioner, if only the reader can grasp and slip into the spirit of Zen.

This is not a book you can or even should read in a hurry. The author takes you on a leisurely journey through the paradoxes of life. There is no particular destination, and the koan at the beginning is the same koan that informs the consideration at the end. It is an ongoing process. But, like all conscious traveling, the pilgrimage through the book is neither merely entertaining nor futile. It is, rather, a confrontation — the challenge to change radically. If you will let it, this book can sensitize you to the Thing to which it keeps pointing in a hundred different ways. The author means to

awaken your intuition. Intuition of what? you may rightly ask. Of the Way, the Tao, the One Mind. What is this Tao or One Mind? The author, following Zen master Nansen, answers: the everyday mind.

Everything is already as it should be. This is the great message of Zen. But it is a message that makes little sense outside of one's Awakening. It represents a paradox that confounds the intellect. Exactly. The rational mind is one of the means by which we deny our own Awakening, our inherent wholeness. It constantly seeks to create an alternative reality to the one that is. But, deep down (or, if we are more awake spiritually, quite obviously), we continue to feel a sense of dilemma, of unhappiness. And so we incessantly engage in efforts to resolve our situation, to create an emotional equilibrium, to fulfill our dreams of immortality, unalloyed bliss.

We go in search of the extraordinary — notably spiritual experiences — to escape the inevitability of our mortality and our fundamental self-dividedness and conflict with others and life itself. Yet our search only exacerbates our inner turmoil. We may experience moments of respite or apparent fulfillment. But, upon closer examination, life always reveals itself to be a threatening desert. This, however, is a starkly realistic vision that few can endure, and so most of human culture is invested in finding ways of dulling our fundamental heart ache, of assuaging our fear of death, and of dressing the many wounds inflicted by life. As Albert Low sums up, we are "engulfed in the twilight of suffering."

Presumably, anyone picking up a book like Low's or a journal like the present one will, to one degree of another, be sensitive to the truth of this vision. And to the degree that one is sensitive to it, one is also likely to be motivated to find a way out of the human dilemma. This is precisely what the spiritual seeker is doing. He is looking for a loophole in the iron law of existence. Yet his search is doomed. He is chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. The exit he is looking for does not exist. His search only aggravates his sense of dilemma and binds him more firmly. The seeker behaves