

# EBNO'L-'ARABI AS LOVER

by William C. Chittick

**E** bno'l-'Arabi (d. 1240), known as the 'Greatest Master' (*ash-Shaykh al-Akbar*), was the most prolific of all Sufi authors. Of his 500 surviving works, the longest is probably the 'Meccan Openings' (*al-Fotuhāt al-Makkiya*), which will fill over 15,000 pages in its new edition. In it Ebno'l-'Arabi describes in incredible detail the visionary knowledge revealed to him by God, the prophets, and the saints or God's 'friends' (*awliā*). Employing vocabulary drawn from the important schools of Islamic thought - especially Law (*Shari'at*), Sufism, theology, and philosophy - the shaykh throws fresh light on the unitary perspective of the Islamic revelation, presenting his expositions largely in the form of commentaries on Koranic verses and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet). The 'Meccan Openings' also brings together the major currents of Islamic mystical thought and provides an important source for the sayings of earlier Sufi masters, including many whom the shaykh knew personally. He considers his work an elaboration on the teachings of the great masters who preceded him, though he is not afraid to point out that they had not taken the trouble to explain many of the points that he elucidates. His works mark a culmination of the written tradition of Sufism, so much so that

the majority of the philosophers and mystics and many of the poets who followed him in the far-flung lands of Islam have been deeply influenced by his ideas and modes of expression down to modern times.

Like many, if not most Muslims, Ebno'l-'Arabi insists that the seeker of God ascends on the path primarily through knowledge. However, he does not neglect the role of love. In fact, he puts so much stress upon love that Henry Corbin would like to put him into the same category of Sufis as Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1126) and Rumi (d. 1273) (Corbin 1969, pp. 70-71, 110, 289). But it is probably fair to say that Ebno'l-'Arabi considered knowledge a more basic quality of the spiritual traveler. No doubt the 'lover' (*mohebb*) of God possesses an exalted rank in the hierarchy of perfect human beings, but the 'knower' or 'gnostic' (*'āref*) ranks even higher. However, a true gnostic is also a lover, and a true lover can be no stranger to gnosis.

Though Ebno'l-'Arabi discusses the qualities of gnostics much more than he talks about lovers, his 'Meccan Openings' are so voluminous that he is able to provide detailed explanations of the Muslim understanding of what it means to be a lover of God. Chapter 178 in particular discusses most of the ideas about love mentioned by earlier

Sufis.<sup>1</sup> In one long section of this chapter the shaykh lists forty-five of the lover's major attributes and then comments on them in a semi-independent treatise called 'God's Loci of Manifestation to the Gnostic Lovers within the Bridal Thrones: Explaining the Attributes of the Lovers in their Love.'

It should not for a moment be imagined that Ebno'l-'Arabi writes about love out of academic curiosity or as a compiler of mystical lore. On the contrary, he is describing his own contemplative experiences, but he employs the didactic and doctrinal language that characterizes the intellectual tradition. He often mentions that everything he has set down in this work was given to him when God 'opened' up his soul to receive it. He has not acquired his knowledge through personal effort or study, since it is the fruit of a direct vision of the realities of things in the spiritual world or with God. His knowledge derives from 'tasting' (*dhawq*) given to him by God, for, as the Arabic proverb expresses it, "He who has not tasted does not know."

One incident drawn from some of the shaykh's autobiographical remarks in the *Fotuhāt* may help support the claim that his exposition of love derives from his own experience and not

from books. He is in the midst of explaining that true love can carry the lover to a spiritual station where he is deaf to every sound but his Beloved's words, blind to every vision but his Beloved's face, and dumb to every utterance but mention of his Beloved's name. Nothing enters his heart but love. Love's power is so transformative that

it fixes its lock on the treasure house of the lover's imagination. He can no longer imagine anything but the form of his Beloved. On the basis of either a previous vision or a description, his imagination configures a form. Then he is like the poet:

Your image in my eye,  
Your mention on my tongue,  
Your home in my heart -  
Where can you hide? (*Fotuhāt*  
II, 325. 17)

Then Ebno'l-'Arabi alludes to the famous hadith in which the Prophet describes the fruit of man's love for God and God's love for man. The hadith reads in part:

God says, "My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him; then, when I love him, I am the hearing through which he hears, the sight through which he sees, the hand through which he grasps, and the feet through which he walks."

This shows us, says the shaykh, that when a person truly attains to the station of love for God, "Through Him the lover hears Him, through Him the lover sees Him, through Him the lover speaks to Him." Next, by way of illustration, he refers to his own experience in this station of overpowering love:

My power of imagination was such that my love embodied (*tajsid*) my Beloved before my eyes in the outside world. In the same way, Gabriel used to embody himself to the Messenger of God. I could not bear to gaze upon Him, yet He addressed me and I heard His words and understood what He said. For several days He left me in a state where I could not eat. Whenever the dining cloth was spread for me, He would stand at

its edge, look at me, and say in a tongue I could hear with my ears, "Will you eat while you are gazing upon Me?" I was prevented from eating, yet I was not hungry, and He kept my stomach full. I even put on weight and became plump from gazing upon Him. He took the place of food.<sup>2</sup>

My companions and family were amazed at my becoming plump without eating, since I remained many days without tasting anything, though I became neither hungry nor thirsty. During all this time, He never left from before my eyes, whether I was standing or sitting, moving or still (*Fotuhāt* II 325.20).

Ebno'l-'Arabi is best known as the founder of a school of Sufism that bases its teachings on the doctrine of the 'Oneness of Being' (*waḥdat al-wojud*), which expresses the basic Islamic affirmation of Divine Unity (*tawḥid*) in the language of mystical philosophy (see Chittick, 1988-89). The concept certainly plays an important role in the shaykh's works, but not nearly as important a role as it plays in the writings of his followers. A better way to approach his way of expressing things is to look at the Koranic doctrine of the divine names (*al-asmā' al-elāhiya*), probably the most recurrent theme of the *Fotuhāt*. Strongly reminiscent of the Platonic theory of Forms, this doctrine holds that everything in the universe reveals the names (*asmā'*) or attributes (*ṣefāt*) of God by its very existence.

The Koran is full of verses in which God is called by such names as Merciful, All-knowing, Forgiving, Just and Generous. Collectively, it refers to these as God's 'Most Beautiful Names.' According to a prophetic tradition, there are ninety-nine of these names, though many different lists have been proposed and there is no general agreement as to their exact identity. Ebno'l-'Arabi quotes approvingly the opinion of one authority that only eighty-three of the Most Beautiful Names are known with absolute certainty. But he also points out that the divine names are infinite in number, corresponding to the infinite faces of God that gaze upon the creatures. "Wheresoever you turn," says the

Koran, "there is the face of God" (2: 115). As the shaykh puts it:

The cosmos has become manifest as "living, hearing, seeing, knowing, willing, powerful, and speaking," as He says: "Say: Everything works according to His manner" (Koran 17: 84). The cosmos is His work, so it became manifest in accordance with His attributes... "To God belong the Most Beautiful Names" (Koran 7: 180), and to the cosmos belongs becoming manifest through them by assuming their traits (*Fotuhāt* II, 438.20).

The Sufis see a corollary to the doctrine of the divine names in the Koranic teaching about the 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God, which are mentioned in over three hundred verses. Through the signs God reveals Himself to mankind in two basic ways: prophecy, or scriptures and prophetic miracles; and natural phenomena, such as the sun and the moon, mountains and flowers, the succession of night and day. Anyone who has read the Koran knows how often it points to the natural course of things as one of the greatest proofs of God's wisdom and mercy. In short, the doctrine of the signs teaches that God's revelatory activity can be observed both in scripture and in the 'book of nature', laid open 'for those who have eyes to see.'

Through the signs, people come to know the names and attributes of God, who is the Reality underlying all the phenomena of the world and the human soul. Knowing Him and the way He reveals Himself, they also know themselves and, more importantly in practice, their duties and responsibilities toward Him as demanded by their own human nature. The contrast between 'what people are now' as forgetful creatures who do not live up to their responsibilities and 'what they should be' as God's servants (*'abd*) and representatives (*khalifa*) on earth lies at the heart of the message.

Islam follows the earlier Semitic religions in holding that human beings are made in God's image or 'form' (*ṣura*). In Islamic terms, this means that they reflect all the names of God, though at the beginning these names

are present largely as potentialities of growth and development. Human life in this world is a process through which the names of God latent within the self come to be actualized. But revelation and divine guidance are necessary if people are to become qualified by the characteristics of the names in proper harmony and equilibrium. If they gain power and magnificence without compassion and generosity, they will be dominated by cruelty and arrogance and will join the fiery and angry demons in the next world. Only the perfect harmony of divine attributes can lead to the full blossoming of the human theomorphic nature. The shaykh often refers to this station of human deformity as "assuming the traits of the divine names" (*at-takhalloq be asmā' Allāh*) and in some passages he considers this process the very definition of the spiritual life (Chittick 1989, p. 283).

In short, in the *Fotuhāt* the shaykh talks about the divine names and how the perfect man (*al-ensān al-kāmel*) - who may be male or female - comes to realize the full range of human potentialities that the names represent. The 560 chapters of the book provide at least as many instances in which the shaykh discusses various revealed names and attributes and shows how human perfection involves the harmonious and balanced actualization of all the qualities and character traits that the names demand. One of the most important and fundamental of the divine attributes is love (*maḥabba*). If human love plays a subsidiary role to knowledge in Ebno'l-'Arabi's scheme of things, this has to do with the fact that God's love is a corollary of his attribute of desire (*erāda*), which in turn is subservient to knowledge, since God never desires to do something without first knowing the situation. No one can love anything without first having knowledge of it. If other Sufis sometimes consider love higher than knowledge, this may be because God's love is closely connected with His mercy (*rahma*), which is identical with His very Being and therefore prior to all other attributes.

That God is the 'Lover' (*al-Moḥebb*) is well attested in the Koran and the

Hadith. For Ebno'l-'Arabi, the objects of God's love are especially significant in that they help delineate the qualities that human beings must strive to achieve in order to attain to perfection. Thus, God loves, among others, the repenters and the pure (Koran 2: 222), those who trust in Him (3: 159), the patient (3: 146), the virtuous (2: 195), and "those who fight in His way in ranks" (61: 4).<sup>3</sup>

Like so many other Sufis, Ebno'l-'Arabi often quotes a famous hadith that shows that God's love plays an essential role in the origin and structure of the world: The Prophet reported that God has said, "I was a Hidden Treasure, unknown to anyone; but I loved to be known, so I created the creatures, making Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me" (*Fotuhāt* II 322.29). In other words, God's love brings the universe into existence, opening up a gap between His uncreated Self and the created world. But the force that brings about separation also leads to union. Just as God's love to be known by 'others' demands the existence of the creatures, so also it demands that they love Him and strive to gain knowledge of Him in order to fulfill their purpose in creation. Sufis see an allusion to this hierarchical relationship between God's love for man and man's love for God in the Koranic verse, "He loves them and they love Him" (5: 54).

As the shaykh often points out, both the cosmos (*al-'ālam*), which is defined as 'everything other than God', and human beings are created in God's form. But the cosmos reflects the divine names only when considered as a whole - including human beings. Without perfect human beings, who are the prophets and the friends of God, the world would be a body without a spirit, and hence it would disintegrate and disappear:

Since God desired the perfection of the human configuration, He created it with both His hands and gave it all the realities of the world. He disclosed Himself to it in all His names. Thus the human being came to embrace the form of God and the form of the engendered universe. God designated him as the spirit of the cosmos and made

every kind of thing in the cosmos serve him, just as the bodily organs serve the spirit governing our bodies. Hence, if the human being were to leave the cosmos, the cosmos would die (*Fotuhāt* II 468.10).

The universe may be full of "animals in the form of men," as the shaykh puts it, but such incomplete human beings cannot help to prevent the dissolution of the world unless they attain to spiritual perfection. This is why the shaykh can write about perfect man in *Naqsh al-foṣuṣ*, "The world will be destroyed with his disappearance" (Chittick 1983, p. 38). For the same reason, many contemporary Sufis hold that phenomena such as war, unbridled technological expansion, and the ecological crisis are merely symptoms of the real danger that faces the world: the failure of human beings to actualize their own theomorphic nature.

In contrast to all the individual things of the cosmos, human beings are complete self-disclosures (*tajalli*) or self-manifestations (*zohur*) of the Divine Being, since they reflect all God's names and attributes and encompass all levels of created existence: corporeal, psychic, and spiritual. And because they are made in God's form, nothing can satisfy their love except God Himself or, on a lower level, another full reflection of the Divine Reality, that is, another human being. In the shaykh's words:

Love cannot absorb the whole of the lover unless his beloved is God or one of his own kind. No other love can absorb a human being totally. We say this because in his essence a human being stands opposite nothing but him who is upon his own form. When he loves that person, there is nothing in himself that does not find its corresponding part in his beloved. There remains nothing left over within him which would allow him to remain sober. His outward dimension is enraptured by his beloved's outward dimension, and his inward dimension by his beloved's inward dimension. Have you not noticed that God is named 'the Outward and the Inward' (Koran 57:3)? So man's love for God and for his fellow human

beings absorbs him totally, whereas no love for anything else in the cosmos can do that. When a person loves one of the forms found in the cosmos, he turns to it with the corresponding part of himself, while the rest of himself remains sober in its occupation.

As for the reason that man is totally absorbed by his love for God, this is because he is made in God's form. Hence he stands opposite the Divine Presence with his total self, for all the divine names have become manifest within him.... When God is his Beloved, he is annihilated in this love much more thoroughly than in his love for his fellow human beings, since, in loving a human being he loses the outward dimension of his beloved when his beloved is not with him; but when God is his Beloved, he witnesses Him constantly. Witnessing his Beloved is like a food for his body through which he grows and flourishes. The more he witnesses Him, the more he loves.... This is what the lovers find when they come together with their Beloved. They are never sated by witnessing Him. Their burning desire is never taken away from them. As much as they look upon Him, they increase in ecstasy and in yearning for Him, though they are present with Him....

If any part of the lover's rational faculty ('*aql*) remains, then he will be held back ('*aql*) by something other than his Beloved. That is not pure love. That is merely the whispering of the soul. As one of the Sufis said, "No good is to be found in a love governed by the rational faculty" (*Fotuḥāt* II, 325. 25).

When Ebno'l-'Arabi says that nothing can truly satisfy the love of a human being except God, he means specifically "God in respect of the all-comprehensive name 'Allah'," the name to which all of God's other names refer and in the form of which the human being was created. If people love God in keeping with other names, they will not be living up to their potential as divine forms and may fail to realize all the names in harmony and balance. As was pointed out earlier, all creatures reflect God's names, but creatures other than mankind - even the angels - reflect only some of the names, not all of them. If a person loves God not because He is God but

simply because He is the Benefactor or the Forgiver or the All-powerful, then he runs the risk of failing to become fully human. In other words, such a person may fail to actualize the whole range of divine names that define and determine human nature.

Imperfect love for God can be seen everywhere we look, for in fact all love that is not love for God in Himself is love for Him under the guise of one or more of the lesser names that He has lent to His creatures. Hence, Ebno'l-'Arabi writes:

All attributes belong to God at root.... When He made the creatures manifest, He bestowed upon them those names that He willed to bestow and through them He actualized the creatures.... Every name the creatures possess belongs truly to the Real and metaphorically to them (*Fotuḥāt* III 147.18).

Love or desire for any created thing is love or desire for the specific divine reality manifested by that creature. Whether we know it or not, by loving and desiring anything at all, we love and desire God (cf. Chittick 1983, pp. 200ff.):

None but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover - and there is no existent thing that is not a lover. So the cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him.... Though no lover loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su'ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words in writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veil of forms (*Fotuḥāt* II 326. 19).

Many Koranic verses assert that all things come from God and then return to Him. The force that brings them into existence is the Hidden Treasure's 'love to be known'. Among all creatures, only human beings, made in God's form, are given the gift of full and integral love in order to realize full and integral knowledge of the Hidden Treasure. In loving their Lord

and thereby actualizing the form in which they were created, they burn away the veils of ignorance and illusion that keep them back from their eternal home.

The sincere lover is he who passes into the attributes of the beloved. He does not pull the beloved down to his own level.... The same is true in the sincere servant's love for his Lord. He assumes the traits of His names (*Fotuḥāt* II 596.6).



## Notes

1. Translated into French by Gloton (1987). Parts of the chapter have been discussed and translated by Corbin (1969), pp. 145 ff.
2. Here Ebno'l-'Arabi has in mind the saying of the Prophet, "My Lord feeds me and gives me to drink." Cf. the passage from the *Fotuḥāt* translated into English in Chodkiewicz (1988), p. 295.
3. Cf. *Fotuḥāt* II 341-344. The last attribute is hardly a call to join in the 'war against the infidels', unless we understand that the 'infidels' are in fact the tendencies in the soul that take people away from God. For Ebno'l-'Arabi's explanation of this attribute, cf. Chittick (1989), p. 285.

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