

30. *Ibid.*, 12.11, 251.
 31. *Teresa of Avila, Castile*, 6.1.8, 363.
 32. *Ibid.*, 4.2.5-6, 324-25.
 33. *Ibid.*, 6.2.2, 367.
 34. *Ibid.*, 6.2.4, 368.
 35. *Ibid.*, 6.11.1-2, 421-22.
 36. *Ibid.*, 6.2.8, 370.
 37. *Ibid.*, 6.6.5, 393.
 38. *Ibid.*, 7.2.6, 435; 7.2.9, 436.
 39. Sharafuddin Maneri, *The Hundred Letters*, trans. Paul Jackson (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 145.

SEVEN

Ibn al-'Arabī on Participating in the Mystery

William C. Chittick

JORGE N. FERRER proposes four realms in which a participatory approach to the study of religion and spirituality is more adequate than current methodologies: generosity in recognizing the infinite creativity of the Mystery, respect toward the legitimate diversity of traditions, fertility for interreligious dialogue, and expansion of the emancipatory options of human beings.¹ These in fact are a few of the characteristics of much of premodern Islamic thought, despite the stereotypes so popular in the West. Specifically, they can easily be observed in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), who was arguably the single most influential Muslim thinker before the twentieth century.

Ibn al-'Arabī was an enormously prolific author of works that defy easy classification. He was a master of the major branches of Islamic learning—Koran and Koran commentary, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Kalam (dogmatic theology), and Sufism in both its practical and its theoretical dimensions. His works integrate and synthesize all these fields, in contrast to the more specialized writings of almost every other important author in Islamic history. If he is commonly called a "Sufi," this is because he made full use of the insights of the "mystics" and was immersed in the practices and realizations of the path to God. It does not mean, however, that he identified himself with the Sufis or that he limited himself to their characteristic approaches. The claim put forth by his followers (and arguably by himself) that he was "the Seal of the Muhammadan Saints" is perhaps less telling than the fact that his tomb in Damascus is still venerated by the common people, and frequented by pilgrims from all over the Islamic world, or that he is universally condemned by the so-called "fundamentalists."²

To understand Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings in their context, we need to keep in mind that his pertinence to the Islamic tradition and his ability to speak to thoughtful Muslims over the centuries have everything to do with the fact that his writings take the Koran as their constant point of reference. Few authors have been as thoroughly versed in the Koran's own terminology or have taken as much care to recover the meaning of the text as it was understood by the Arabs to whom it was revealed. But he is not a "systematic" thinker. In no way does he try to embrace his subject matter in a comprehensive and hierarchical way. Rather, he writes—as he frequently tells us—under the pressure of divine inspiration, which flows as it wills. This might be how he would explain the fact, attested by any careful reader of his works, that he always surprises. He begins his discussions with the time-honored and well-known (Koran, Hadith), and he ends up by showing that far more is involved than meets the eye. His arguments are always coherent and convincing, even when they fly in the face of conventional logic. If there is any motive that can be ascribed to him, it is that of spiritual teachers everywhere: to open up the soul to the full range of its possibilities.

THE MEANINGS OF ISLĀM

A good place to begin investigating the participatory nature of Ibn al-'Arabī's vision and illustrating its seamless fit into the Islamic tradition may be with the word *islām* itself. Typically, it is understood to designate the religion established by Muhammad and the Koran, and its literal meaning is said to be "submission to the will of God." In fact, however, Islam as the name of the religion is not attested unequivocally in the Koran, nor is the "will" of God given special prominence. Rather, its most basic Koranic meaning—"submission" or "surrender"—designates the universal state of everything in the universe. All things are totally controlled by their Creator. The whole cosmos and everything within it participates in the flow of universal being, and nothing has any choice in the matter. As the Koran puts it, "What, do they desire another religion than God's, while to Him has submitted [*islām*] whose is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly?" (3:83). If we replace Ferrer's "participatory" in the following paragraph with *islām*, the basic sense of the word is clearly expressed:

Participatory also refers to the fundamental ontological predicament of human beings in relation to spiritual energies and realities. Human beings are—whether they know it or not—always participating in the self-disclosure of the Spirit by virtue of their very existence. The participatory predicament is not only the ontological foundation of the other forms of participation, but also the epistemic anchor of spiritual knowledge claims and the moral source of responsible action.¹

Once we acknowledge that *islām*'s first meaning is ontological, we might then say that all things are submitted to God's "will." In contrast to many Muslim theologians, however, Ibn al-'Arabī sees no reason to highlight will over other divine attributes. Typically, when explaining the submission of all things to God, he begins with the divine attribute of life (*ḥayāt*), then points to knowledge (*'ilm*), desire (*irāda*),⁴ and power (*qudra*). God creates things through his power, but he does not exercise his power without first desiring to do so. He cannot desire things without first knowing them, and he cannot know them without being alive.

Notice that Ibn al-'Arabī's discussion of the divine desire is ontological, not moral. When we speak of God's "will," we normally have in view what God "wants" from us, without any suggestion that we are forced to do it. For example, when Muslim theologians read the verse, "Thy Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him" (17:23), they tell us that it means we have the moral obligation to submit our will to that of God. Ibn al-'Arabī, however, says that it refers to the ontological fact that all things worship and serve (*'ibāda*) their Creator by the very act of existing.

In Islamic theology generally God has two sorts of command (*amr*). The first, called the "engendering" (*takwīmī*) command, brings all things into existence and thereby compels them to submit to their Creator. It is mentioned in a number of Koranic verses, such as, "His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be! [kun], and it comes to be" (36:82). In respect of this command, all things serve and worship God: "None is there in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-merciful as a servant" (19:93). Their service is "essential" (*dhātī*), which is to say that it is part and parcel of what they are. Their being is nothing but the trace of the divine Word, their activity nothing but the impress of the divine Act: "God creates you and what you do" (37:96). Hence, Ibn al-'Arabī tells us, the cosmos, which is defined as "everything other than God" (*mā swā' llāh*), is the sum total of the divine words articulated within "the Breath of the All-Merciful" (*naḥās al-rahīmān*), which is identical with the spirit that God blew into Adam's clay to bring him to life (Koran 15:29).

In sum, *islām* in its broadest Koranic sense means the compulsory submission of all things to the engendering command. There can be no discussion of freedom until we look at a second, narrower meaning of *islām*, which is voluntary submission to the instructions of God as revealed to the prophets. The Koran discusses many prophets, beginning with Adam himself, and calls them and their worthy followers "*muslīm*s," meaning that they voluntarily submitted to God. The hadith literature tells us that God sent 124,000 prophets, so there is plenty of room for generosity in guessing who they may have been (the Koran mentions only twenty-five or so by name).

Prophetic instructions are contrasted with the engendering command by calling them the "prescriptive" (*takdīfī*) command. They take the form "Perform

the prayers, fast during Ramadan, avoid pork, love your neighbor, do not worship idols!" God prescribes right activity, right speech, and right thought, and human beings have the freedom to accept or reject his prescriptions. Those who accept become voluntary Muslims, whether or not they happen to be followers of Muhammad and the Koran.

As voluntary submission, *islām* has three basic sorts. The first is free acquiescence to the instructions of the Real; it corresponds roughly to "religion" as a universal phenomenon. It is in reference to this that the Koran says, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256)—it has no meaning without free acceptance. The second sort of voluntary submission is the historical religion that goes by the name. The third is the practices that are made incumbent by the Koran and the Prophet for those who choose to follow this specific revelation. In this last understanding, *islām* is distinguished from *imān*, the realm of faith and understanding, and *ih̄sān*, the realm of human goodness, virtue, and transformation.³

THE WAY THINGS ARE

Ibn al-'Arabī's writings deal with all three dimensions of the Islamic tradition—practice, understanding, and transformation—but they stress the second, that is, clarifying the nature of things in order to point the way toward transformation. It is said that Muhammad used to pray, "Our Lord, show us things as they are!" Ibn al-'Arabī writes as a guide to the achievement of the infinitely diverse implications of this vision. He commonly calls those who achieve it *muh̄aqqiqū*, "realizer," the active participle of the verbal noun *tah̄qiqū*, "realization." So central is this notion to his teachings that his greatest student, Šadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, speaks of his master's perspective as *mashrab al-tah̄qiqū*, "the standpoint of realization."

The word *tah̄qiqū* derives from the same root as *ḥaqq*, one of the most important Koranic names of God and a key technical term in several Islamic sciences. *Ḥaqq* means truth, reality, rightness, appropriateness, worthiness. As a name of God (one that in Persian, for example, is used far more commonly than Allah), it means Real, True, and Right in the absolute senses. As employed for other than God, *ḥaqq* designates the truth, reality, rightness, and appropriateness of things, and it is contrasted with *bāḡil*, untruth, unreality, and wrongness.

Tah̄qiqū means literally "to achieve the *ḥaqq*" or "to put the *ḥaqq* into practice." Like "realization" in English, it has the double sense of understanding and actualizing. It means to realize and recognize things as true, right, and appropriate, and to actualize in oneself what is true, right, and worthy. In the final analysis, self-realization is nothing other than the realization of the Real.

One of the several important scriptural bases for Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of the word *tah̄qiqū* is a hadith in which the Prophet explains that people should always keep the *ḥaqq*s of things in view—their truth, rightness,

appropriateness, and worthiness—and they should respond to these *ḥaqq*s in the right and worthy manner: "Your soul has a *ḥaqq* against you, your Lord has a *ḥaqq* against you, your spouse has a *ḥaqq* against you, your visitor has a *ḥaqq* against you. So, give to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*." One can translate the word *ḥaqq* here as "right"—and indeed, it is precisely this Arabic word that is used nowadays in discussion of "human rights." But notice that the point of observing rights is not to claim what is due to oneself, but rather to respond rightly, appropriately, and worthily to others. Observing rights is our responsibility—the rights are "against" us, not for us.

In Ibn al-'Arabī's view, the last sentence of this hadith—"Give to each that has a *ḥaqq* its *ḥaqq*"—is both a universal human obligation and the epitome of *tah̄qiqū*. Realization is to see things as they truly are—that is, it is to see them in respect of their specific *ḥaqq*s—and, simultaneously, it is to act rightfully and worthily. This demands a vision of the Absolute *ḥaqq*—not in itself, but inasmuch as it discloses itself in all things and thereby bestows upon them their "rights." It demands recognizing and observing the *ḥaqq* of our own soul against us, which is our own responsibility to ourselves. Our soul or self (*nafs*) is a gift of God, born of the All-Merciful Breath, and it is naturally inclined to serve, worship, and submit to its Lord. Our responsibility toward it is to allow it to realize its own nature.⁴ Our Lord's right against us is for us to acknowledge his Lordship and act accordingly, that is, by obeying his prescriptive command. As for spouses, guests, and others, their rights against us are that we act toward them with wisdom and compassion, but these are qualities that do not come easily to us, so again we need the guidance of the prophetic and sagely norms. What exactly all of this entails is precisely the concern of the traditional Islamic sciences, from jurisprudence to Sufism.

THE ONENESS OF THE REAL

Another hadith tells us about the *ḥaqq* of God against us, that is, our responsibility toward him: "God's right against His servants is that they worship God and associate nothing with Him. The servant's right against God is that He not chastise anyone who associates nothing with Him." This saying highlights the importance of the first of the three principles of Islamic faith, that is, *tawḥīd*, the assertion of divine unity that is encapsulated in the statement, "(There is) no god but God."⁵ The negative counterpart of *tawḥīd* is *shirk*, "associating others with God," which in Koranic terms is the one unrepented human failing that God will never pardon (4:48).

Generally, Muslims have held that the assertion of unity is intuitively understood by anyone of sound mind. The role of the prophets is to "remind" (*dikr*) those who have forgotten it and to provide guidance for those who remember. Guidance is needed because one cannot reach a happy and harmonious balance with the Real without the Real's initiative. Grace always

takes precedence over works. Although we may engage in a quest for the Real, we are prevented from discerning what is rightfully due to it—in itself and its creaturely manifestations—by its transcendence and omnipresence. We have no way of responding to that which is simultaneously nothing and everything—that is, no specific thing, yet revealed in all things, all God's "signs" (*āyāt*), which are precisely his creations. This helps explain why the second principle of Islamic faith is "prophesy" (*nubuwwa*)—not that of Muhammad specifically, but that of all the 124,000 prophets sent by God.

The Koran summarizes God's revelations to the prophets in these words: "And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so worship/serve Me'" (21:25). A prophetic message, according to this verse, has two basic elements: First is *tawhīd*, acknowledging the way things are, beginning with the recognition of the absolute authority of the Real and the compulsory servanthood of all things. Second is voluntary servanthood and worship, that is, observance of the prescriptive command, which delineates appropriate action as instructed by the self-revealing Real. Thus, in the Koranic view of things, *tawhīd* is the same for all prophets, but God sent each prophet with "the tongue of his people" (14:4), that is, with "guidance" (*huda*), appropriate to the cultural and linguistic context. But the Koran also reminds that God alone is the true guide. Thus, "You [O Muhammad] do not guide whom you want, but God guides whom He wants, and He knows very well those that are guided" (28:56).

THE ROOTS OF MULTIPLICITY

If we attempt to conceptualize all of reality, we can divide it into two realms: God and other than God; or the Real per se and the Real's manifestations; or the Absolute Mystery (*al-ghayb al-muṭlaq*) and the relatively mysterious.⁹ Concerning the Mystery itself, we have no proper response other than to acknowledge our ignorance. Of everything else, we can say, in Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, that it is the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the Mystery.

The term *self-disclosure* derives from a Koranic passage in which Moses asks God to show himself, and God replies that Moses will not see him. "And when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down thunderstruck" (7:143). In Ibn al-'Arabī's interpretation of the divine self-disclosure, the Real in itself remains the absolute Mystery, but it discloses itself always and forever, whether in this familiar world of ours or in any other realm of manifestation. The Mystery is one, so every self-disclosure of the Mystery has its own uniqueness. No two things can ever be the same, and no two moments of any one thing will ever be repeated. This is the meaning of his commonly cited axiom, "There is no repetition in the self-disclosure" (*lā takrār fi'l-tajallī*).

If all things are unique self-disclosures of the One, each simultaneously reveals and conceals the One. The Koran says, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115), but every face veils every other face, and the faces of God are infinite. As Ibn al-'Arabī sometimes expresses the situation, everything is He/not He (*huwa lā huwa*), that is, Real/not Real. Inasmuch as things disclose God, they are He, but inasmuch as they veil him, they are not He. In all things, the Real is at once manifest and hidden, known and unknown, plain and mysterious.

The Koran tells us, "Everything is perishing but His face" (28:88), and commentators explain that "face" here means the very Essence of the Real. Ibn al-'Arabī agrees, but he also points out that the rules of Arabic grammar would naturally incline us to read the verse to mean "Every thing is perishing except its face," that is, the face of the thing, its essence and reality. The fact that the verse is susceptible to two obvious readings follows the divine intention, says Ibn al-'Arabī, for God wants us to understand that the divine face turned toward each thing is identical with the thing's face turned toward God. Thus, each thing in the universe has a "specific face" (*waḥī khāṣṣ*), which is its own reality in God's awareness. It is to this face that God says "Be!" and though the face remains with God, its properties and characteristics become manifest as the thing in the world.¹⁰

The path to self-knowledge leads to the face of the Real, but that face is precisely the realization and actualization of one's own face, one's own true nature, one's own *ḥaqīq*. The face of the servant is nothing but the face of the Lord, and each servant is unique, each is a never-repeating self-disclosure of the Real. Inasmuch as all servants are faces, all roads lead to the Real, but inasmuch as each face is specific and unique, each servant achieves a unique actualization of the Real. The Koranic command to seek knowledge is a command to strive to know oneself and one's Lord, for the two knowledges are the same knowledge. "He who knows himself," as the Prophet is famously quoted as saying, "knows his Lord." He who sees his own face sees God's face:

God possesses relations, faces, and realities ad infinitum. Although they all go back to One Entity, yet the relations are not qualified by existence that finitude should touch them. . . . Nothing is known of the Real save what is given by the specific relation. The relations are infinite, so the creation of the possible things is infinite. Hence creation is constant in this world and the next, and knowledge constantly undergoes new arrival in this world and the next. That is why He commanded [His servants] to seek increase in knowledge.¹⁰

But the path has no end, for the Real in its very selfhood can never be reached.¹¹ The object of the search is infinite and the seeker is finite, so the journey goes on forever:

God commanded His Prophet to say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge [Koran 20:114]. . . . The command was unqualified, so he seeks increase and bestowal in this world and the next. . . . God never ceases creating, within us ad infinitum, so the knowledges extend ad infinitum. . . . The thirst of the seeker of knowledge never ceases. . . . One of the gnostics said, "The soul is an ocean without shore," alluding to infinity. But everything that enters into existence or is qualified by existence is finite. . . . If the objects of knowledge were to be qualified by existence, they would be finite and sufficiency could be bestowed. So, you will not know anything of God but what comes to be from Him and comes to exist within you."²

REVELATION

Despite the absolute mystery of the Infinite Real in itself, it articulates its own self-disclosure ad infinitum through the never-ending words of the All-Merciful Breath. We perceive these words in three domains: cosmos, soul, and scripture. The last of these is the Real's self-revelation in the language of guidance. It speaks to the uniquely human capacity to reflect upon the world and ourselves and to reorient ourselves appropriately. It addresses us inasmuch as we see that we are not yet complete and have a role to play in our own completion. It takes into account the fact that, in a very real sense, we are cocreators of our own selves and of the world, for every act we perform and every choice we make shapes the direction in which the Mystery unfolds.

Cocreativity is not a term that one will encounter in Arabic, not least because of the concern to stress that "There is no creator but God." Nonetheless, Ibn al-'Arabi is not averse to pointing out that human beings do in fact participate in the divine attribute of creativity. He reminds us that the Arabic word *khaliq*, "creator," has two basic meanings: to bring what never was into existence, and to give new shape to that which already is. God alone possesses the attribute of saying "Be," so he alone creates in the first sense. But both God and human beings create in the second sense, a point to which the Koran alludes in the verse, "Blessed is God, the best of creators" (23:14).

The role of prophetic revelation is to provide guidance so that people can understand the *haqq*s of things and exercise their creative powers appropriately. The outstanding feature of the Koran's own style of guidance is perhaps found in the way it goes about naming the Unnamable. The so-called "ninety-nine most beautiful names of God" permeate the text and provide the fundamental building blocks of Islamic theology. The Mystery discloses itself by calling itself Alive, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Generous, Just, Merciful, Loving, Forgiving, Vengeful, and so on. In each case the formula of *taẓwīd* supplies the sense: There is none truly alive but God, none truly knowing but God, none desiring but God, none generous but God, none just but God.

When we understand the divine names in terms of the Mystery's absoluteness, they declare that the Real alone is truth, life, knowledge—all else is illusion, death, ignorance. When we read the names in terms of the Real's infinite self-disclosure, they declare that every trace of life, knowledge, desire, and speech can be nothing but the face of the Real. All without exception participate in the Real's self-disclosure. But human beings alone, among all the participants—so far as we know—share in the very creativity of the One, for they alone have a say in how the divine attributes and qualities unfold in themselves and the world.

Can we then know the Mystery by knowing its names? The answer is always yes and no. We can know it inasmuch as it names itself through the qualities of things and people and discloses itself linguistically and conceptually in the prophetic messages. But its names remain, as Ibn al-'Arabi likes to say, "relations" (*nisab*), not things in themselves. They allow us to orient ourselves rightly and appropriately to the Real, but they do not give access to the Mystery in itself.

Then, of course, there is the whole question of what we mean by "knowing" the Real. Ibn al-'Arabi frequently comes back to the various modalities of understanding and to the difference between mental conceptualization and "cordial" vision, for the heart is the true locus of human selfhood and awareness, the only thing in the universe that can, according to a hadith, embrace God: "Neither My heavens nor My earth embraces Me, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me."³

In Ibn al-'Arabi's view, real knowledge, real awareness of the way things are, goes back to the Real's presence in every self-disclosure, that is, to the *haqq* of things. The Real is the Alive, the Knowing, the Desiring, the Powerful; the self-disclosures participate in these attributes to the degree of their receptivity. Ibn al-'Arabi quotes the saying of the great Sufi Junayd: "The water takes on the color of the cup." In the last analysis, knowing is an attribute of the Real—"There is none knowing but God." Real knowing, the sort achieved through realization, demands identity with the real knower. Once one finds the specific face of God that is the face of oneself, then one knows. One reaches that state through love, one of the most basic themes of all Sufi teachers. In this sort of discussion Ibn al-'Arabi often cites an authentic hadith that quotes God's words concerning the servant who becomes worthy of his love: "When I love him, I am his hearing through which he hears, his eyesight through which he sees, his hand through which he holds, and his foot through which he walks." Needless to say, God is also his mind and heart through which he knows.

THE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN

One of Ibn al-'Arabi's concerns as an instructor on the path to God is to map out the range of human possibility. Any thorough review of his teachings will

alert us to the fact that he provides a vastly complicated exposition of human types that is given overall orientation by the notion of "the perfect human being" (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Perfection is the ultimate human state, the full realization of the human substance, the furthest goal beyond which none can aspire. But no one should imagine that it is fixed or limiting, nor should one think that there is but one path to its achievement. It is the station embodied by all the prophets, each in his or her own perfect way. And, like anything else, it has degrees—a fact that follows upon the axioms "There is no god but God" and "There is no repetition in the self-disclosure." Absolute perfection is an attribute of the Real alone, and no relative, disclosed perfection can ever be exactly the same as any other.

Ibn al-'Arabī cites a verse that the Koran puts into the mouth of the angels, "None of us there is but has a known station" (37:64). He tells us that this verse applies to everything in the universe, but, in the human case, it does not come into play until after death. All things, in other words, are fixed in their own unique natures and capacities, even if each undergoes constant change as a never-repeating self-disclosure of the Real. But human beings are not yet fixed in their selfhoods, so the Mystery discloses itself within them in unpredictable ways—in contrast to animals and plants, for example, which retain the limitations of their species. The human soul is open-ended, an ocean without shore. As long as people live in this world they possess some degree of freedom in heart, soul, and body, or in awareness, character traits, and activities. As the Prophet put it, the possibility of "repentance" (*tawba*, literally "turning" toward God) remains until the last breath.

Human beings are essentially mysterious in a way that is not replicated in nonhuman things. God, after all, "created Adam in His own form [*sūra*]"—to cite Muhammad's version of this Biblical saying. Adam and his children are forms of the absolute Mystery; they disclose it in itself, not inasmuch as it has this or that possibility of manifestation. In Koranic terms, Adam was the first prophet and the first perfect human being. God created him to be his vicegerent and taught him all the names (2:30). For Ibn al-'Arabī and others, this means that human beings were given the potential to understand, embrace, and make manifest all the names and qualities of God and things. They can be global self-disclosures of the Mystery, and it is precisely their self-aware participation in the Real's global manifestation that Ibn al-'Arabī calls "realization." It demands recognizing both the Absolute *ḥaqq* and the relative *ḥaqqs* of all things. It requires knowing the proper response to the *ḥaqqs*—that is, the duty and responsibility bestowed upon us by the rights of God and others. And it means that one must act on the basis of the *ḥaqqs*—this is precisely what ethical and moral activity is all about.

As the all-comprehensive Reality that is the source, sustainer, and destiny of all things, the Mystery is often called *al-wujūd*, Being, or *al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*, the Real Being. In the secondary sources, Ibn al-'Arabī is generally

described (misleadingly) as the founder of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, "the oneness of Being."¹⁴ The word *wujūd* was central to the vocabulary of the Peripatetic philosophers such as Avicenna, who is famous among other things for his distinction between necessary and possible (or contingent) *wujūd*. The Necessary Being is that which is and cannot not be; the possible is everything else, which may or may not be, given that its existence is utterly dependent upon God's saying "Be!" to it.

Ibn al-'Arabī made use of the Avicennan distinctions, but he also gave prominence to the literal senses of the word *wujūd*, which are to find, perceive, understand, enjoy, and be ecstatic. For him, one of the best ways to gain insight into the Mystery is to conceive of it simply as the One *Wujūd*, that which is truly and uniquely finding, understanding, enjoying. The Mystery is the necessary Being/Consciousness/Bliss, and everything else—all possible, contingent things—are its self-disclosures, limited and confined manifestations of its attributes and qualities. Do they exist, are they conscious, are they blissful? Yes and no, He/not He—yes inasmuch as they are He, no inasmuch as they are not He.

To say that there is only one *wujūd* means that the Mystery alone is truly real and worthy and truly present in all that is. Things have no existence of their own, no self-reality, because *wujūd*—existence, reality—is the exclusive property of the Real. *Wujūd* discloses its own infinity through the beginningless and endless cosmos.¹⁵ Inasmuch as things exist, they can only be its face, but inasmuch as they are what they are in their own specificities, they reveal its possibilities by veiling its infinite light. Things are real enough for practical purposes, just as, in the common analogy, red and blue are truly red and blue, though they are nothing but light.

What distinguishes human beings from other creatures is the fullness of their spectrum. All other things in the universe stand in known stations, which is to say that each is defined by a specific and unique color of Infinite Light. In contrast, human beings, made in the form of the Formless, have no specific color; they are simply light. This is not to deny that every human individual is dominated by specific and changing colors and attributes; it is simply to say that in their fundamental, underlying humanness—in the fact that they are forms of the Real in itself—they are not fixed in their coloration and can strive for colorlessness. They alone among all things can attempt to actualize fullness and totality, "the station of no station," the color of colorlessness, the purity of Being/Consciousness/Bliss.

MODELS OF PERFECTION

Ibn al-'Arabī talks of human perfection in two basic modes: inner and outer, or mysterious and manifest. In respect of inner perfection, all perfect human beings achieve oneness with the Real; all participate in the self-disclosure of

the Real under the aegis of the name Allah, the nonspecific and all-comprehensive name that designates the Mystery both in itself and in the attributes through which it discloses itself. In respect of the second mode of perfection, each perfect human being discloses specific divine attributes and character traits appropriate to the *ḥaqq*s of the historical and social circumstances in which they find themselves.¹⁶

This way of looking at perfection can be observed at work in Ibn al-'Arabī's most famous book, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, "The Ringstones of the Wisdoms."¹⁷ Each of twenty-seven chapters is dedicated to a divine wisdom embodied in a specific word or logos (*kalīma*) of God, in each case identified with a prophet or perfect man, from Adam down to Muhammad. The wisdom that is embodied in Adam, to whom the first and longest chapter of the book is dedicated, is that of the name Allah itself. Here Ibn al-'Arabī investigates various implications of the fact that human beings were created in the form of this all-comprehensive name, not in the form of any less inclusive name. In succeeding chapters, he associates specific divine qualities with other prophetic figures.

The underlying idea, not completely explicit in the text but clear enough from his other writings, is that Adam, as the progenitor of the human race and the father of all the prophets, necessarily represents a plenary disclosure of Real *Wajūd* itself, with all its concomitant attributes and qualities. As for the other prophets, each realizes the fullness of the divine form internally but is governed externally by the implications of a single divine attribute—Noah by glorification, Ishmael by exaltation, Joseph by light, and so on. As for Muhammad, he manifests singularity, since, as the last prophet, he represents the unique example of a human being in whom all of the potentialities implicit in Adam and made manifest successively in the chain of prophets are synthesized and actualized in one individual.

So, are some of the 124,000 prophets superior to others? The Koran provides the mythic answer with a set of apparently contradictory verses. From Ibn al-'Arabī's point of view, some of these verses have in view the inner unity of human perfection, and others the outer diversity of prophetic function. Internally, the perfect human beings are one, externally they make manifest degrees and types of perfection, each of which will have a relative superiority over others. For example, the Koran commands people to say, "We make no distinctions among His messengers" (2:285). It also tells us, "We preferred some of the prophets over others, and We gave David the Psalms" (17:55).

RECEPTIVITY

Ibn al-'Arabī explains the manner in which created things participate in the self-disclosure of the Real by using the notion of "receptivity" (*qabūl*). Everything in the universe is a "receptacle" (*qābil*) for *wajūd*. Everything, in

Junayd's analogy, is a cup that bestows its color on the water. But, where do the cups come from? The Koran says, "Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!', and it comes to be" (16:40). How can God desire a "thing" that does not exist? Ibn al-'Arabī explains that the nonexistence of things is relative to the cosmos, not absolute. The things do not exist in themselves or as objects in the world, but they do exist as concomitants of God's self-awareness, much as our own ideas exist in our minds. Real *Wajūd* transcends all spatial and temporal limitations, for these are simply disclosures of the possibilities and limitations of being-in-the-world. Its consciousness embraces knowledge of all things for all eternity, for each thing in the cosmos, irrespective of time or place, is a possibility of existence contingent upon the Real's own Necessity.

Each "thing" (*shay*) has a unique "thingness" (*shay'iyya*) known forever to the Real. The specificity of the thing's thingness defines its preparedness (*isī' dād*), the shape and color of its cup, or its capacity to carry the weight of the Real's self-disclosure and to make the divine attributes manifest. Ibn al-'Arabī tells us how this works while explaining why God does not always answer prayers, despite the fact that he says, for example, "Call upon Me, and I will respond to you" (40:60):

God says, "The giving of thy Lord can never be walled up" [17:20], that is, cannot be withheld. God is saying that He gives constantly, while the loci receive in the measure of the realities of their preparednesses. In the same way, you say that the sun spreads its rays over the existent things. It is not miserly toward anything with its light. The loci receive the light in the measure of their preparednesses. . . . The same thing takes place in the divine self-disclosures. The Self-discloser, in respect of what He is in Himself, is One in Entity, while the forms of the self-disclosures are diverse in keeping with the diversity of the preparednesses of the loci of self-disclosure. The same is the case with the divine gifts. Once you understand this, you will know that God's gift is not withheld, but you want Him to give you something that your preparedness cannot receive, and then you attribute to Him withholding in that which you seek from Him, and you do not turn your attention toward the preparedness. . . . You say, "But—God is powerful over every thing" [2:20], and you speak the truth in that. You forget the orderly arrangement of the divine wisdom in the cosmos and what is demanded by the realities of the things.¹⁸

We seem to be moving in a deterministic direction, but that would be to misread the intention in such explanations. What is being stressed is the reality of the Real, the primacy of the Mystery, the contingent and illusory status of everything else. With all this, there are distinctions to be drawn among the Real's self-disclosures, and choices to be made by beings who possess a certain degree of freedom, however illusory it may be when weighed against the

absolute Freedom of the Real. People need always to keep in mind that their own share in the divine gifts has not yet been fixed—our station remains unknown until death. The moral imperative of the message derives precisely from the fluidity of the human situation. Everyone is called upon to act in keeping with the *ḥaqq* of things and to follow the prescriptive command.

Given our unknown stations and the nonrepetition of the self-disclosures, our receptivity at this moment is one thing, but our receptivity at the coming moment remains unknown. The only logical course is to accept that the All-Merciful has articulated us within his Breath precisely so that we may partake of Being/Consciousness/Bliss, and that he has also commanded us to exercise our limited freedom in the appropriate way. It is the *ḥaqq* of our souls to be opened up to the fullness of divine mercy, but that *ḥaqq* is "against" us. It is up to us to follow the right path, and that can only happen when we observe the *ḥaqq* of our Lord and follow in the footsteps of his prophets and the perfect human beings.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY

Human life is a journey from the Real to the Real with the Real. This is the perspective of compulsory *isām*. It is made explicit by the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, which says that everything comes from the Mystery, everything is sustained by it moment by moment, and everything returns to it in the end. All are submitted to God "from the origin to the return" (*min al-mabda' ilā'l-ma'ād*), as the Muslim philosophers like to phrase it.

Prophecy, the second principle of faith, asserts that human beings have the unique capacity to say "No" to the way things are, for they alone are made in the form of the Formless and stand in no specific station. The Koran alludes to this peculiar human situation in the verse, "Have you not seen how to God bow all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of mankind?" (22:18). All things bow to the engendering command, but human beings have the option of not bowing to the prescriptive command. This is precisely where the third of Islam's three principles, the "return" to God, comes into play: All things return to their Creator under compulsion, but human freedom allows people to have as say in their own final destination.

Imagery of the path to God is omnipresent in Islamic lore. The revealed law, incumbent on all Muslims, is called *sharī'a*, "the wide road," and the Sufi way is known as *ṭarīqa*, "the narrow path." The path to God is typically described in terms of stations (*maqā'imāt*) or waystations (*manāzil*), both of which designate the halting places of a caravan. The number of stages varies in the accounts of the masters—seven, forty, one hundred, three hundred, one thousand and one. The point is that, despite the omnipresence of God's

face, we are foundering in ignorance and cannot recover our true human nature without prophetic help and a good deal of dedication and discipline. The goal is transformation, and the very names of the stations bespeak its nature—they designate virtues, character traits, and positive qualities of the soul. Each of them must be actualized and made permanent before the next stage can be reached.

The most famous example of the graduated path to God is provided by 'Aṭṭār's long Persian poem, *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, "The Speech of the Birds."¹⁹ The diverse birds that are the human souls need to fly over seven mountains of virtue: seeking, love, self-knowledge, independence, unity, bewilderment, and poverty. The ultimate goal is perfection, which is union with the Real. The penultimate stage, poverty (*fāqr*), refers to the seekers' realization of the way things are, their acknowledgment of the utter emptiness of all things and the illusory nature of their own selves in face of the Real. Like most of the names of the stations, poverty derives from the Koran, specifically the verse, "O people! You are the poor toward God, and God—He is the rich, the praiseworthy" (35:15).

Many masters have summed up the path with a saying of an early Sufi that describes Miḥannad's journey: "Two strides and he arrived." With one stride, they tell us, he stepped beyond this world, and with the second stride, he went beyond the realm of the spirit into the presence of the Real. The two-stride model of realization is most famously represented as "annihilation" (*imāz*) and "subsistence" (*baqā'*). Both terms derive from the Koranic verse, "Everyone on the face [of the earth] undergoes annihilation, and there subsists the face of thy Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" (55:27). Compared with the omnipresent Mystery, all things are evanescent and illusory. What truly subsists—and what is in fact always and forever present—is the face of God, the self-disclosure of the Real. In order to achieve awakening we need to undergo two simultaneous transformations: the "annihilation" of ignorance, limitation, egocentricity, and narrowness; and the "subsistence" of that which truly is, namely, the specific face of God that is unique to each of us.

Annihilation and subsistence represent one of several pairs of terms that are employed to bring home the nature of the transformative process that carries the soul to its destination. The two are often read as the application of the two halves of the formula of *tawḥīd*, the negation (*naḥy*, i.e., the words "no god") and the affirmation (*iḥbāt*, the words "but God"). "No god" strips the world, the soul, and all that they contain of any self-reality; "but God" affirms that all reality belongs to the Real alone. All the illusions of ego-centricity—all the ignorance, envy, and greed of the soul—must be negated, and then the face of God will remain, a face that is the fullness of wisdom and compassion and the self-disclosure of Being/Consciousness/Bliss. In still other terms, to undergo annihilation is to see that everything is "not He," and to achieve subsistence is to participate in the realization that all is "He."

THE MERCY OF EXISTENCE

To conclude this brief presentation of Ibn al-'Arabī's participatory vision, let me emphasize his "generosity in recognizing the infinite creativity of the Mystery." What he offers is a vision of the ways thing actually are, and, he tells us, things are this way because of the infinite generosity of the creative Mystery. The overwhelming theme of his writings is the omnipresence of the divine mercy, compassion, and kindness, precisely the point that he is making when he says that the Breath of the All-Merciful is the very substance of manifest reality. He has plenty of scriptural support for this view, such as the verse, "My mercy embraces everything" (7:156) and the hadith, "God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath."

Mercy drives the engendering command, for it bestows the gift of existence on an infinity of creatures that have no claim to it. It is omnipresent, but human freedom allows us to turn away from it. Hence the All-Merciful issues the prescriptive command, which explains how to recognize the faces of mercy in the myriad things and act appropriately and worthily, in keeping with mercy's *ḥaqq*. In a typical passage, Ibn al-'Arabī comments on a hadith in which the Prophet quotes God to the effect that people should think about him in terms of his fundamental nature, which is mercy and generosity:

"God says, 'I am with My servant's opinion of Me,'" but He does not stop there, because "His mercy takes precedence over His wrath." Hence He said, in order to instruct us, "So, let his opinion of Me be good"—as a command. Those who fail to have a good opinion of God have disobeyed God's command and displayed ignorance of what is demanded by the divine generosity [*al-karam al-ḥāqīqī*]. . . . When people have a bad opinion of something, what comes back to them is their own bad opinion, nothing else.²⁰

Ibn al-'Arabī's generous appraisal of the divine mercy helps explain his critical response to the type of theological mentality that would confine the "unbelievers" to everlasting torment. As he writes in one of several similar passages:

How tremendous is God's mercy to His servants! But they are unaware—I even saw a group who dispute concerning the all-embracingness of God's mercy, maintaining that it is confined to a specific faction. They curtailed and constricted what God has made all-embracing. If God were not to have mercy on any of His creatures, He would forbid His mercy to those who say this. But God refuses anything but His mercy's all-inclusiveness.²¹

But again, we should not take Ibn al-'Arabī's position here to the extreme, as if he is negating the reality of wrath or denying the chastisement of hell. All real mercy, after all, is tempered by wisdom and justice, as every mother knows.²² If God had created us with mercy alone, we would be fixed in glorious stations like the angels, with no means to ascend or to descend.

The fullness of the divine mercy demands the fullness of our own exposure to possibility and choice, and that entails ignorance, forgetfulness, and inclination to do what is ugly and wrong.

In respect of the engendering command and compulsory *islām*, mercy permeates everything, but in respect of the prescriptive command and voluntary *islām*, wrath comes into play to the extent that people willingly fail to employ their divine gifts and freely refuse to make the right choices.²³ And if you say, "Well, why didn't God make us compulsory servants so that we would have a world without evil and always be happy," you are asking to be deprived of your own freedom and denying your own humanity, made in the form of the Formless.

The acknowledgment of the reality of wisdom, justice, and wrath keeps Ibn al-'Arabī far from saying that all is good, all is to be accepted, nothing is to be rejected—a position that sometimes ascribed to him by critics who look only at the affirmation and not the negation in "He/not He." Quite the contrary, Ibn al-'Arabī constantly speaks of the necessity of discernment. To say that everything is embraced by mercy is not to ignore the fact that each thing has its own individual *ḥaqq*—its own truth, rightness, worthiness, and appropriateness—and that, unlike the Absolute *ḥaqq*, each human soul is susceptible to *baḥīl*: illusion, untruth, wrongness, unworthiness. Everything has a right against us, and our responsibility toward it may be to avoid it or even to fight against it.

The standpoint of realization, which demands giving everything its rightful place and seeing things as they really are, helps explain why Ibn al-'Arabī maintains "respect toward the legitimate diversity of traditions." This is, after all, the Koranic position. At the same time, however, the Koran is also critical of those who fail to live up to the prophetic teachings, and Ibn al-'Arabī follows the same pattern. He provides the metaphysics to show that mercy must necessarily disclose itself to all people, but he also names error and shortcoming wherever he finds it.²⁴

For the study of religion generally, Ibn al-'Arabī points the way to a balanced view of things, including an acknowledgment of the necessity of discernment between right and wrong. His remarks on the stance one should take toward teachings about the Mystery might be the model for all who appreciate the breadth and depth of the participatory approach:

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 his doctrine. Once it has been affirmed for him in terms of the face specific to it, according to which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it. He should not deny it or reject it, for he will reap its fruit on the Day of Resurrection, whatever that belief may be.²⁵

NOTES

1. Ferrer, *Revisiting Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); for an updated account, see his chapter in this volume.
2. See Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints* (Cambridge, U.K.: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993). For the best biography of Ibn al-'Arabī, see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn al-'Arabī* (Cambridge, U.K.: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).
3. Ferrer, *Revisiting Transpersonal Theory*, 121.
4. Many scholars translate the divine attribute of *irāda* as "will" rather than desire, but this distorts the meaning of the word and makes it impossible to translate consistently, especially since it is used as the generic divine attribute that embraces more narrowly focused attributes such as will or wanting (*mashī'a*) and love (*ḥubb*). On the human level as well, *irāda* is used to point to the spiritual, psychic, and bodily realms, and theologians recognize that it comes to us by way of participation in the divine desire. A good example of the problems with translating the word as "will" can be seen in this famous saying of Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī, a great early saint who knew the Koran by heart and was perfectly aware that *irāda* is a divine attribute. He was asked, "What do you desire?" His reply points to the levels of meaning implicit in the word: "I desire not to desire." In other words, his desire is for his individual, human desire (with all its imperfections) to be effaced in the divine desire. Translating the word as "will" in this saying would sound strange in English and obscure the point.
5. For an analysis of the Islamic tradition as a whole on the basis of these three fundamental dimensions, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).
6. To the question, "Are there then two of us, one who has rights and one who recognizes them?" the answer is, "Of course, at least two." Any sophisticated autology (Vedānta or Sāṃkhya-Yoga, for example) knows that selfhood is multileveled. Ibn al-'Arabī deals with the issue in great detail and in many different ways; one of his basic schemes describes the human in terms of four basic levels: body (*jism*), soul (*nafs*), and spirit (*rūḥ*), all of which are created; and the uncreated "specific face," about which more will be said shortly.
7. The statement of *tawḥīd* is frequently translated "There is no god but Allah," but this distorts the Koranic view of things by suggesting that the issue is choosing among alternative gods. As understood by Muslim theologians over the centuries, the statement is rather an endlessly applicable methodology for understanding the self-disclosures of the Real and responding to them appropriately. It provides guidance in detaching oneself from illusion and ignorance by recognizing both the ultimacy of the Real and its presence in all things. Those who employ the word *Allāh* in translating the formula encourage exclusivist readings of the tradition and help preserve one of the deepest misunderstandings of Islam prevalent among non-Muslims, that is, that Muslims worship "another god," which by that very fact must be a false god. The Koran is vociferous in insisting that the God of all the prophets is the same God, the only God there is.

8. Ibn al-'Arabī puts it this way in a famous line of poetry: "I have not perceived the reality of anything—/How can I perceive something in which You are?" Cited in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
9. On face, veil, and specific face, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, chapters 3–4.
10. *al-Furūḡhāt al-maklūḡya* (Cairo: 1911), vol. 2, 671, line 5.
11. One might object that Sufis often speak of "reaching God" or achieving "union with God," so that would clearly be the end of the path. This would be to ignore the numerous disquisitions of Muslim scholars and saints on the subject. To cite but a single example, the most outstanding work of later Islamic philosophy is a massive book known as "The Four Journeys" (*al-Aṣfār al-arba'a*) by Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640). Drawing from a tradition that long predates Ibn al-'Arabī, he explains that the first journey is to God, but three journeys then remain, and these go on forever: the journey in God, from attribute to attribute; the journey from God to the world (like the Buddha who returns with helping hands); and the journey from God to God in the world.
12. *Furūḡhāt* 2: 552.12.
13. For a few of the issues that Ibn al-'Arabī develops in addressing knowledge of the Real, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), Part 4.
14. For the reasons why this is misleading, see Chittick, "Rūmī and *Wahdat al-wajūd*," in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, ed. A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70–111.
15. This does not imply "the eternity of the world," a doctrine for which the Peripatetics were criticized, but rather a much more subtle understanding of what "the world" means. For one of Ibn al-'Arabī's explanations, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 84–85.
16. On these two sorts of perfection, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, chapter 20.
17. The best of the several translations into English is by Caner Dagli, *Rings of Wisdom* (Chicago: Kazi, 2004).
18. *Furūḡhāt* 1: 287.10.
19. For a poetic, but not especially accurate, translation, see Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, *Conference of the Birds* (London: Penguin, 1984). A much more scholarly translation is offered by Peter Avery, *The Speech of the Birds* (London: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998).
20. *Furūḡhāt* 2: 474.26.
21. *Furūḡhāt* 4: 163.5.
22. One can hardly talk about mercy in Islamic terms without bringing mothers into the picture. Among other things, the very word *rahma*, "mercy," derives from *rahīm*, "womb." See Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), chapter 7.
23. Ibn al-'Arabī insists, nonetheless, that wrath itself is the manifestation of mercy, and that hell, despite the real chastisement imposed on its denizens, will turn

sweet in the end, for mercy must have the final say. See Chittick, *Ibn al-'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2005), chapter 9.

24. Mahmud al-Ghorab reads Ibn al-'Arabi's works from an exclusivist standpoint and is able to find plenty of examples of criticisms of both religions other than Islam and faulty doctrinal positions within Islam ("Muhayiddin Ibn al-'Arabi Amidst Religions [*adyān*] and Schools of Thought [*madhāhib*]," in *Muhayiddin Ibn al-'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtensten and M. Tiernan [Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1993], 200–27). Al-Ghorab's study, however, only confirms my point: Ibn al-'Arabi follows the Koran by affirming the universality of mercy and prophetic revelation, but he tempers this by recognizing the omnipresent human phenomena of forgetfulness and willful rebellion, which find their way into all forms of religion. Moreover, his criticisms of other religions are based not on firsthand knowledge, of which he had practically none, but on general Koranic principles, which apply just as well to bad Muslims.

25. *Fuzūḥāt* 2: 85.11.

EIGHT

One Spirit, One Body

Jesus' Participatory Revolution

Bruno Barnhart

CHRISTIANITY IS ORIGINALLY—and essentially—a mystery of participation. In the event of Christ, there is made accessible to the human person a new participation in the divine Absolute (God) which becomes the matrix of a new participatory relationship between human persons, as well as between humanity and its natural environment. The dominant modern Western consciousness, on the other hand, is distinguished by its nonparticipatory character: we commonly lack a vital sense of participation in these same three dimensions. Western Christians have, generally, been carried along within the development of this Western consciousness—especially during the last two centuries—so that they have become unaware of the participatory core of their own religious tradition.

The participatory reawakening that is now taking place—and is expressed in this collection of essays—is beginning also within Western Christianity. I write from within the Roman Catholic tradition, in which the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) has been the great symbolic event marking this participatory turn. The reawakening continues; it is a matter not only of epistemology but of life, and it therefore manifests all the complexity of life. We human beings live continually within a fabric of participations, of which we are only sporadically and minimally conscious.

In this chapter I shall focus upon the sense of participation in Christian tradition, as manifested in the foundational writings of the New Testament, and then in the development of theology, spirituality, and liturgy. "Participation" is not merely a useful category in the field of Religious Studies,¹ but is a

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