

27. For a translation of excerpts of this letter, see A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London, 1950), pp. 33–35.
28. Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964), p. 48. See also Schacht's earlier work, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950).
29. For a brief discussion of the Malāmīyā and various Sufī writers' opinions on this movement, see Paul Nwyia, *Ibn 'Aṭā' Allah (709/1309) et la naissance de la confrérie shādhilīe* (Beirut, 1972), pp. 243–244, and Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 86–87.
30. See Qur'ān 7:12, 38:76, and 79:24.
31. Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallāj, *Kitāb al-tawāsīn*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris, 1913), p. 49, #19.
32. Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallāj, *Le diwan d'al-Hallāj*, ed. Louis Massignon (Paris, 1955), pp. 33–34.
33. Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1921; rpt., 1978), pp. 60–62.
34. Abūllāh Ansārī, *Munqāṭāt* (Intimate conversations), trans. Wheeler M. Thackston in *The Book of Wisdom and Intimate Conversations*, trans. Victor Danner and Wheeler M. Thackston (New York, 1978), p. 193.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 216–217.
36. Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazālī's al-Munqāṭh min al-Dalāl and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazālī*, trans. Richard J. McCarthy, S. J. (Boston, 1980), pp. 101–102.

## 7

Ibn al-'Arabī's Hermeneutics  
of Mercy

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No doubt the predominant interpretive methods of today, at least in academic circles, belong to the category of the "hermeneutics of suspicion." In contrast, Islamic civilization is characterized by a hermeneutics of trust, albeit a trust in God alone. One can observe a tension between the interpretive approach of the experts in Kalam (dogmatic theology) and the Sufīs, however: the Kalam authorities were more likely to trust in God's wrath and vengeance, while the Sufīs preferred to trust in his mercy and forgiveness. The stance of the Kalam experts, and of the jurists along with them, is not unrelated to their chosen role as guardians of religious and social order; they appealed to a God who will punish all those who stray from the straight and narrow, while the Sufīs called on a God who is inclined to forgive all sins. One major reason for this difference in perspective lies in individual religious experience. Dogmatic theologians made no claim to know God other than by way of rational interpretation of the Qur'ān and the tradition. Many of the Sufīs claimed to know firsthand that God's fundamental reality is mercy and compassion.

In his voluminous writings, the Andalusian sage Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) combined the intuitive, mystical perspective of Sufism with the rational analysis of the experts in Kalam, in jurisprudence, and in other Islamic sciences.<sup>1</sup> However, he held that rational analysis drives God far from the world and the soul, abstracting him from his creation. Rational minds find it easy to prove God's transcendence and "incomparability" (*tanzīh*), but—in contrast to direct mystical perception—they are utterly incapable of grasping his immanence and "similarity" (*tashbīh*). "Those who know God through their rational faculties look upon Him as far removed from themselves through a distance that demands the declaration of incomparability. They put themselves on one side and the Real on the other side, so He calls to them 'from a far place'" (Qur'ān 41:44; and see Ibn al-'Arabī, III 410.18).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, God called to Ibn al-'Arabī and

other Sufis from "a near place," for they found, through their own experience, that God was "nearer than the jugular vein" (50:16).

Later Sufis often referred to Ibn al-'Arabi as *al-shaykh al-akbar* (the greatest master). Part of the reason for this was that his massive corpus of writings contained consistently erudite and profound expositions of the meanings of the Qur'an that had few precedents and, indeed, no serious later challengers. Recent studies have brought out the intimate connection between his spiritual life and his understanding of the Qur'an. For him, the Qur'an was the vivifying word of God, an infinite ocean that constantly replenished his soul, a living presence that would embody itself to him and appear in visions.<sup>3</sup> The dependence of his writings on the Qur'an is obvious to careful readers, and he frequently reminds us of this fact. As he says in one passage, everything he writes "derives from the presence and the storehouses of the Qur'an," because God gave him "the key to understanding it and taking aid from it" (III 334.32). His works are based not on rational analysis of the Qur'an but on the direct "unveiling" (*kashf*) of its meanings, a visionary knowledge of its varied senses given by God.

Ibn al-'Arabi began his career as the Greatest Master suddenly, as a pure grace, when he was little more than a boy. He tells us that the "one look" that he was given at the outset became the basis for everything he wrote in later life, even though he continued to experience unveilings of the unseen world, and, indeed, from the year 1193 onward, lived in what he calls "God's vast earth," seeing God's face in all things.<sup>4</sup> But Ibn al-'Arabi is not simply a "mystic." He repeatedly assures his readers that reason (*'aql*) is unveiling's necessary complement. Without the balanced vision of "the two eyes"—reason and divine unveiling—the traveler to God runs the risk of going astray. Much of Ibn al-'Arabi's great appeal over the centuries lies in his own rational exposition of his visionary knowledge. Even those who did not trust unveilings had to contend with his arguments in defense of what he saw, arguments that drew not only from the Qur'an and the Hadith, but also from the diverse Islamic sciences.

Since Ibn al-'Arabi offered most of his writing as the fruit of divine unveiling and as explicit or implicit commentary on the Qur'an, he claims to present us with inspired and indisputable interpretations of the revealed book. Nevertheless, this does not imply that he means to preclude other interpretations. Quite the contrary, from his standpoint, a true understanding of a Qur'anic passage can never be exclusive. He goes so far as to claim that anyone who reads a Qur'anic verse in the same manner twice has not understood it as it should be understood. After all, the Qur'an is God's word, and God's word is the self-disclosure of his infinite Essence. God's infinity demands that he never disclose himself in the same form twice—this is Ibn al-'Arabi's famous doctrine of the "renewal of creation at each instant." Hence, to the degree that we understand the Qur'an, we have understood God's self-disclosure, which is to say that our understanding has been illumined by God. Given that no two human beings are identical images of God, no two understandings can possibly be illumined in exactly the same way. Moreover, no individual remains exactly the same for two successive moments. As Ibn al-'Arabi notes: "When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance. But when someone's knowledge is increased through his recitation, and when he acquires a new judgment with each reading, he is the reciter who, in his own existence, follows God" (IV 367.3).

Diverse interpretations of the Qur'an answer to the diverse modes in which God discloses himself to the book's readers. One could, of course, claim that this characteristic is not specific to the Qur'an since no two readers will understand any book in exactly the same way. Ibn al-'Arabi would not dispute this, but he points to one grand difference between divine and human books. When the omniscient God reveals a book, he intends every meaning that will be understood from it, but no human authors can possibly anticipate, much less intend, all the meanings that their readers will find: "The Qur'an is an ocean without shore, since He to whom it is ascribed intends all the meanings demanded by the speech—in contrast to the speech of created things" (II 581.11). This does not imply that every interpretation is equally valid, since Ibn al-'Arabi adds a number of conditions to this blanket approval—most notably, that the interpretation must be sustainable by the language of the revelation. If the language does indeed support it, "No scholar can declare wrong an interpretation that is supported by the words. . . . However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation or to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority" (II 119.24).<sup>5</sup> Responsibility for interpretation rests with the interpreter.

If interpreters of the divine speech will be held responsible—by God, of course—for their interpretations, they should naturally take care to interpret the Qur'an in a way that is appropriate to its author. Ibn al-'Arabi often quotes the Hadith Qudsi: "I am with My servant's opinion of Me, so let his opinion of Me be good." Those whose opinion of God is good (*khalaf*) will be given good by God, just as those who have an evil opinion will find evil: "That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, those who associate others with Him, men and women alike, and those who opine evil opinions of God—against them shall be fortune's evil turn" (48:6). Perhaps the best opinion that one may have of God is represented by the famous Hadith Qudsi, "My mercy takes precedence over My wrath." This *hadith* is the leitmotif of Ibn al-'Arabi's writings. When he saw God in all things, he saw mercy, and God's mercy is nothing but his goodness, bounty, kindness, love, and solicitude toward all creation. In analyzing the *hadith* of the servant's opinion, Ibn al-'Arabi points out that opinion (*zann*) occupies an intermediary position between knowledge and ignorance. A given context will alert the reader to whether the side of knowledge or that of ignorance predominates. This specific *hadith* tells us explicitly that we must make a choice between good and evil:

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"—by way of commandment. Those who fail to have a good opinion of God have disobeyed God's commandment and displayed ignorance of what is demanded by the divine generosity. . . . When people have a bad opinion of the actual situation, what overcomes them is their own bad opinion, nothing else. (II 474.26)

Ibn al-'Arabi is famous for his claim that he is the "seal of the Muhammadan saints." The claim implies that he would be the last person (before Jesus at the end of time) to inherit all the sciences, spiritual stations, virtues, and visionary experiences of Muhammad.<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an says that God sent Muhammad only as a mercy (*rahima*) to the creatures, and the fact that practically every chapter of the Qur'an begins by citing God's two primary names of mercy—*al-rahman* and *al-rahim*, the "All-merciful" and

the "Compassionate"—was lost on no one. If Ibn al-'Arabī considered himself Muhammad's last plenary inheritor, he also saw his own role as that of spreading mercy. He writes, "God created me as a mercy, and He made me an heir to the mercy of him to whom He said, 'We sent thee only as a mercy to the worlds' [21:107]" (IV 163,9). What is especially interesting here is Ibn al-'Arabī's next sentence, in which he clarifies his understanding of what this mercy implies: "God did not specify those with faith to the exclusion of others." In other words, God sent Muhammad as a mercy to everyone, not just to the Muslims or the faithful. This all-inclusiveness of the divine mercy has implications that many theologians—not only Muslim theologians—would find difficult to accept. As Ibn al-'Arabī puts it, such people would like to exclude some of God's creatures from his mercy, but their evil opinion of God can only redound upon themselves: "He who curtails God's mercy curtails it only from himself. Were it not that the actual situation is otherwise, those who curtail and limit God's mercy would never reach it" (III 532,22).<sup>7</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabī's constant stress on the precedence and predominance of God's mercy has many Qur'anic roots, but no doubt his own experience of the unveiling of God's mercy is his deepest motivation. One of his visions is especially striking in this respect. He witnessed the divine throne, upon which, according to the Qur'ān, the "All-merciful" is sitting, and he saw that it was supported by four columns. He found himself standing in the ranks of the angels who held up the most excellent of these columns, which is "the storehouse of mercy," because God had created him "compassionate [*rahīm*] in an unqualified sense" (III 431,32). Of the other three columns, one was pure wrath, severity, and hardship, while the other two were mercy mixed with wrath.

In short, Ibn al-'Arabī's Qur'anic interpretations—and all his writings are Qur'anic interpretations—are permeated by the idea of the divine mercy. His metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology are rooted in the good opinion that God's mercy predominates over his wrath. Where this stress on mercy comes out with special clarity is on the issue of hell. The Qur'ān declares that hell is a place of divine wrath and punishment. The general understanding among Muslims is that the chastisement of the Fire will last forever, though many theologians offer dissenting views.<sup>8</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī's own good opinion is categorical, however. Although certain types of unbelievers will remain in the Fire forever, even they will cease to suffer after a certain period of time, however long this may take in earthly terms. He often comes back to this idea in his *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. I have mentioned some of his arguments in a survey of his teachings on the afterlife; here I touch on a few more, paying special attention to the manner in which he reads the Qur'anic text.<sup>9</sup>

One of Ibn al-'Arabī's most basic arguments to prove the impermanence of hell's punishment is simply that God is, in Qur'anic terms, "the Most Merciful of the merciful" (12:64). After all, there are people who could never agree that anyone, even the most evil of men, should suffer forever. God is certainly more merciful than they are:

I have found in myself—who am among those whom God has innately disposed toward mercy—that I have mercy toward all God's servants, even if God has decreed in His creating them that the attribute of chastisement will remain forever with them in the cosmos. This is because the ruling property of mercy has taken possession of my heart.

The possessors of this attribute are I and my peers, and we are creatures, possessors of caprices and personal desires. God has said about Himself that He is the Most Merciful of the merciful, and we have no doubt that He is more merciful than we are toward His creatures. But we have known from ourselves this extravagant mercy. So how could chastisement be everlasting for them, when He has this attribute of all-inclusive mercy? God is more generous than that. (III 25,19)<sup>10</sup>

In this context, God's "generosity" or "nobility" (*karam*) is one of Ibn al-'Arabī's frequent themes. God has commanded his servants to acquire "noble character traits" (*makārim al-akhlaq*). How could he ask his servants to acquire attributes that he himself lacks? The Qur'ān ascribes many of the noble character traits to God by calling him compassionate, forgiving, patient, just, pardoner, and so on. These traits demand that God keep the best interests of his creatures in view. Hence the "final issue" (*ma'āl*) of the creatures will be at God's mercy.

According to a *hadīth*, God has rights (*ḥaqq*) against his servants, and his servants have rights against him: "God's right against the servants . . . is that they should worship Him and not associate anything with Him, . . . and the servants' right against God" is that "if they do that, He will bring them into the Garden," that is, paradise. The Qur'ān says that people will not be blamed for claiming their own rights, but it also states that it would be better to forgive. According to Ibn al-'Arabī, "God has set down in the Sharī'a, concerning some of our rights that, if we abandon them, it would be best for us, and He placed this among the noble character traits." To prove this, Ibn al-'Arabī cites the verse "And the recompense of an ugly act is an ugly act the like of it, but whoso pardons and makes wholesome, his wage falls upon God" (42:40). The next verse indicates that a person may claim what is due to him: "Whosoever helps himself after he has been wronged, against them there is no way" (42:41). If it is better for the servants to pardon so as to observe God's law, then God himself will certainly pardon the sin of not worshipping him: "He will pardon, show forbearance, and make wholesome. Hence the final issue will be at God's mercy in the two abodes. Mercy will embrace them wherever they may be" (III 478,20).

#### Mercy's Precedence in *Wujūd*

To say that God has noble character traits is to say that reality itself is rooted in these traits and demands that they become manifest. The key term here is *wujūd*, which is the standard theological and philosophical term for "existence" or "being." God is "the Necessary *Wujūd*," which is to say that he is and cannot not be. In contrast, everything else is a "possible thing" (*munḳin*), which is to say that nothing other than God has any inherent claim on existence. Thus the "cosmos" (*al-'ālam*), which is defined as "everything other than God," owes its existence to God's bestowal, which is his mercy. Ibn al-'Arabī's extensive teachings on cosmology are based on the idea that the universe itself, the whole domain of possible existence, is nothing other than "the Breath of the All-merciful" (*raḡas al-rahīmān*). The Qur'anic passage that he cites most often in support of the all-pervasiveness of mercy is 7:156: "My mercy embraces all things." From this passage Ibn al-'Arabī concludes as follows:

The cosmos is identical with mercy, nothing else. (II 437.24)  
 God's mercy is not specified for one locus rather than another, or for one abode rather than another. On the contrary, it embraces all things. Hence the abode of mercy is the abode of existence. (IV 4.32)

The name All-merciful protects us. Mercy has been given preponderance, so its ruling property exercises influence, for it is the root in giving existence. As for vengeance, it is an accidental property, and accidents have no fixity. After all, existence accompanies us, so our final issue will be at mercy and its property. (II 157.23)

The final issue will be at mercy, for the actual situation inscribes a circle. The end of the circle curves back to its beginning and joins it. The end has the property of the beginning, and that is nothing but *wujūd*. "Mercy takes precedence over wrath," because the beginning was through mercy. Wrath is an accident, and accidents disappear. (IV 405.7)

Inasmuch as the cosmos is everything other than God, it is everything other than the merciful, the compassionate, the permanent, the living, the powerful, the knowing, and the generous. It is, in short, everything other than the Real (*al-haqq*), who is God himself, *wujūd*. Hence the cosmos has nothing of its own to support its existence. At the same time, we all recognize that supporting the underdog is a noble character trait. How could God, who is merciful, compassionate, and generous in essence, do anything but help the weak? "And all creatures are weak at root, so mercy envelops them" (III 255.33).

The Qur'an states, "There is no fault in the blind, and there is no fault in the lame, and there is no fault in the sick" (48:17). This is normally taken to mean that the Sharf'a makes allowances for human weaknesses and handicaps. But the Sharf'a is God's law, and, as such it expresses the nature of *wujūd* itself. It follows that a deeper meaning of this verse is that God makes allowances for those who are weak and disabled. But weakness and disability are the attributes of the whole universe, which is other than the real, the strong, and the powerful.

He who is stricken by some blight has no fault, and all the cosmos is stricken by a blight, so it has no fault in the view of him whose insight has been opened by God. This is why we say that the final issue of the cosmos will be at mercy, even if they take up an abode in the Fire and are among its folk. "There is no fault in the blind, and there is no fault in the lame, and there is no fault in the sick." And there is nothing but these. . . . For the cosmos is all blind, lame, and sick. (IV 434.34)

Ibn al-'Arabī finds allusions to mercy's final triumph throughout the Qur'an. For example, the text tells us that the "felicitous" will remain in paradise forever, as "a gift unbroken" (11:108). In the same place it tells us that the "wretched" will remain forever in the Fire, but, as Ibn al-'Arabī points out, God "does not say that the state within which they dwell will not be cut off, as He says concerning the felicitous." He continues: "What prevents Him from saying this is His words, 'And My mercy embraces all things' [7:156], and His words, 'My mercy takes precedence over My wrath' in this configuration. For *wujūd* is mercy for all existent things, even if some of them suffer chastisement through others" (II 281.26).

To say that mercy takes precedence over wrath is to say that God takes precedence over his creatures; that light takes precedence over darkness, reality over unreality, and good over evil. Or it is to say that, by embracing all things, mercy also embraces wrath, employing it in its own service: "God says, 'My mercy embraces all things' [7:156], and His wrath is a thing. Hence His mercy has embraced His wrath, confined

it, and ruled over it. Hence wrath disposes itself only through mercy's ruling property. So mercy sends out wrath as it wills" (III 9.22).

Although the Qur'an asserts that mercy embraces all things, it never suggests that wrath is all-pervasive. Thus, when it tells us in several verses that all things will be taken back to God, this can mean only that they will go back to God's all-embracing mercy:

God's mercy includes all existent things and "embraces all things" [7:156], just as He "embraces all things in mercy and knowledge" [40:7]. Wrath was not mentioned in this divine and merciful all-embracingness. So the final issue of the cosmos must be at mercy, since the cosmos has no escape from returning to God, for He is the one who says, "To Him the whole affair is returned" [1:123]. When its return reaches Him, the affair goes back to the beginning, the origin, the originator. The beginning is a mercy that "embraces all things," and the originator "embraces all things in mercy and knowledge." Hence, in going back, the affair is immersed in mercy. (III 119.35)

Ibn al-'Arabī pays extraordinarily close attention to the meaning of Qur'anic words. He often tells us that the best way to understand the words is to grasp how they would have been understood by the Arabs to whom the Qur'an was addressed. In his investigations of the etymological sense of particular terms, he invariably looks at the concrete images conveyed by the words rather than at the abstract meanings, the latter having been derived by the rational minds of the theologians and grammarians. The *ḥadīth* of the "precedence" (*sabq*) of mercy provides a good example. The basic meaning of this word is to outstrip and surpass, to come first in a race. In one verse the Qur'an employs the word as follows: "Do they reckon, those who do ugly deeds, that they will precede Us?" (29:4). Commentators typically understand this as a warning to sinners that they will not be able to escape God's punishment. Ibn al-'Arabī offers a much more interesting explanation by paying close attention to the verb *precede*, which was typically used in horse racing (which provides, by the way, the only sort of gambling that the Sharf'a permits):

When people disobey, they expose themselves to vengeance and affliction. They are running in a race to vengeance for what has occurred from them. But God races against them in this racetrack in respect of the fact that He is ever-forgiving, pardoning, overlooking, compassionate, and clement. Through acts of disobedience and ugly deeds, the servants race the Real to vengeance, and the Real precedes them. So He will have preceded them when they arrive at vengeance through ugly deeds. God passes them through the ever-forgiving and its sisters among the divine names. When the servants reach the end of the race, they find vengeance, but the ever-forgiving has preceded them and has come between them and their acts of disobedience. They had been judging that they would reach it before this. This is indicated by God's words: "Do they reckon, those who do ugly deeds, that they will precede Us?" [29:4], that is, that they will precede My forgiveness and the envelopment of My mercy through their ugly deeds? "Will they judge?" [29:4]. On the contrary, precedence belongs to God through mercy toward them. This is the utmost limit of generosity. (III 252.7)<sup>11</sup>

The Qur'an tells us that the wrongdoers, even if they possess the whole universe, will not be able to ransom themselves from the ugliness of their actions. "There will appear to them from God what they had never reckoned with. . . and they will be encompassed by what they mocked at" (39:47). Theologians of evil opinion read this as a guarantee of the "implementation of the threat" (*infādh al-wa'ad*), but, Ibn

al-'Arabī rejects this out of hand: God, after all, is "sheer good, in whom there is no evil" (II 478.9).<sup>12</sup> The wrongdoers, having been immersed in evil, reckon to receive the same from God. But, what appears to them is reality in itself: "'There will appear to them from God what they had never reckoned with,' and that is the witnessing of the affair as it is in itself. God will relieve them through what appears to them from Him, for nothing appears from the Good save good" (II 478.12).

As already suggested, one of the most obvious Qur'anic assertions of God's good intentions is found in the *basma'la*, the formula of consecration that begins practically every Qur'anic *sūra*: "In the name of God, the all-merciful, the compassionate." The name God itself embraces all the divine attributes, which are often divided into two categories—the severe and the gentle, or the majestic and the beautiful. But the fact that this name is followed by the two primary names of mercy tells us that the merciful side of God predominates in revelation and creation. Ibn al-'Arabī compares the *basma'la* to the intention (*riyya*) that undergirds every human activity. According to the Shar'ā, if one is deficient in one's practice "through heedlessness or inattention, this has no effect on the correctness of the activity, for the intention makes up for it." In the same way, God's intention, asserted in the *basma'la*, makes up for "every threat and every attribute that demands wretchedness mentioned in the *sūra* . . . . So the final issue will be at mercy, because of the *basma'la*. It is a statement of good news" (III 147.31).

None of the names of severity are manifest in the *basma'la*. On the contrary, He is "God, the all-merciful, the compassionate." Even if the name God includes severity, it also includes mercy. So the names of severity, dominance, and harshness that the name God comprises are countered measure for measure by the names of mercy, forgiveness, pardon, and forbearance that it contains in itself. There remains for us the surplus . . . and that is His words, "the all-merciful, the compassionate." . . . Thus His mercy is all-inclusive, and hope is great for everyone. . . . After all, He has made mercy three—the nonmanifest mercy within the name God, the all-merciful, and the compassionate. (III 9.24)

### The *Fitra*

People win paradise by obeying the commandments that God has sent through the prophets, just as they earn hell by disobeying these commandments. The prophets bring instructions on how to become proper "servants" (*'abd*) of God, or on how to "worship" (*'ibāda*) Him, as is his due. However, the Qur'ān also tells us that all things are servants by nature: "Nothing is there in the heavens and the earth that comes not to the All-merciful as a servant" (19:93), for all things are creatures of the all-merciful, created by him out of mercy. He says to them, "Be!," and they come into existence. "Our only speech to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!,' and it is" (16:40). Nothing can disobey this command, so the first act of every creature is to say, "I hear and I obey." In other words, the primary characteristic of everything, because of its created nature, is obedience to the divine command and service to the all-merciful. This characteristic must exercise its ruling property, sooner or later.

The possible thing comes to be from the divine power in a manner that it does not know. It hurries to engendered existence, so it comes to be. Hence its own self makes manifest hearing and obeying toward Him who says to it, "Be!" so it acquires praise from God for its obe-

dience. Thus the possible thing's first situation is its hearing God and its obeying Him in coming to be, so every act of disobedience that becomes manifest from the possible thing is an accident that occurs to it, while its root is hearing and obeying. This is like the wrath that occurs accidentally, while precedence belongs to mercy. . . . The possible thing's obedience has precedence, and the end and conclusion always have the property of the precedent. The precedent belongs to mercy, so there is no escape from the final issue at mercy for every possible thing for which wretchedness occurs, for the thing is obedient at root. (IV 296.10)

There are two basic sorts of worship and obedience: The first is the "essential" (*dhātī*) worship of all things to their Lord, which follows upon their created nature; and the second is the "accidental" (*'arādī*) worship, which God commands through the prophets. Accidental worship is a human characteristic that depends on a number of factors, not the least of which is free choice (*ikhtiyār*). Other creatures, lacking this gift, never cease worshipping God through their own essential worship. In the next world, whether people enter the Garden or the Fire, they will lose their power of free choice and return to worship through their essences, making manifest their essential property of service to the all-merciful: "It is through the essential worship that the folk of the Gardens and the folk of the Fire will worship. This is why the final issue for the wretched will be at mercy, for the essential worship is strong in authority, but the command [to worship God in this world] is accidental, and the wretchedness is accidental. Every accidental thing disappears" (III 402.11).

Although human beings are free when gauged against other creatures, they have no freedom when compared to God. They are his absolute servants, like everything else. They are, as Ibn al-'Arabī often remarks, "compelled to have free choice."<sup>13</sup> They never leave their essential worship, even if they employ their free choice to reject accidental worship. Hence God will forgive them for their accidental disobedience. "Since the excuse of the world is accepted in actual fact—because they are compelled in their free choice—God placed the final issue of everything at mercy" (III 433.4).

The Qur'ān refers to the fundamental created nature of human beings as their *fitra*, a word that can be translated as "primordial nature" or "original disposition." Typically, Muslims have understood the term to mean that all people are born with a disposition toward *tawhīd*, the acknowledgment of God's unity, and if they fail to acknowledge it, they are flying in the face of their own nature. The *fitra* is associated with the Covenant of Alast, when all human beings stood before God before their entrance into this world and acknowledged his lordship over them (Qur'ān 7:172). Ibn al-'Arabī often identifies people's *fitra* with their essential worship of God, and hence he makes it their guarantee of ultimate felicity. Those in hell will reap the fruit of the covenant when they finally come to understand that they, like everything else, were created as servants of the all-merciful. At this point they will cease "making claims" (*iddi'ā'*)—asserting lordship and mastery when, in fact, they are nothing but creatures and servants. They will recognize that everything real belongs to the Real and will thereby be delivered from ignorance, illusion, and pain.

The sinners will never cease witnessing their servanthood. Even if they claim lordliness, they will know from what they find in themselves that they are liars. Hence making claims will disappear with the disappearance of its appropriate time, and the relationship of servanthood that they had had, both in the state of making claims and before making claims, will remain with them. Then they will pluck the fruit of their words [at the Covenant of

Alarūl. "Yes [we bear witness]" [7:172]. . . . The authority of Yes rules over everything and finally gives rise to their felicity after the wretchedness that has touched them in the measure in which they had made claims. The property of Yes never leaves them from its own moment *ad infinitum*—in this world, in the interworld, and in the last world. (II 213.6)

The *firra*, then, is the original human disposition that stays with people forever. In Ibn al-'Arabī's view, God will never change the *firra*. He finds support for this idea in the Qur'anic verse "God's words possess no changing" (10:64), which is usually understood to mean that God does not change his scriptural promises. But, as Ibn al-'Arabī points out, God's "words" may also be the created things, which are articulated within the all-merciful breath. God uses the term in this sense in reference to Jesus, when he calls him "His word that He cast to Mary" (4:171). From this point of view, the verse means that the existent things, which are God's words, never change. The verse of the *firra* reads: "Set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith—God's *firra* upon which He originated *lafā'ir*al people. There is no changing God's creation (30:30). "Thus He negated that people have any changing in that; rather, to God belongs the changing" (II 534.32). Ibn al-'Arabī reads this verse as another instance of God's giving good news to his servants. Their original disposition never changes, even when they associate others with God (*shirk*), which is the worst of all sins in Muslim eyes.

Since He does not ascribe changing to them, this is good news in their case that their final issue will be at mercy. Even if they take up residence in the Fire, they will be there by virtue of the fact that it is an abode, not because it is an abode of chastisement and pains. On the contrary, God will give them a constitution through which they will take enjoyment in the Fire such that, were they to enter the Garden with that constitution, they would suffer pain, because of the lack of the agreement of their constitution with the equilibrium possessed by the Garden. (II 534.34)

One of Ibn al-'Arabī's bolder assertions of the ruling authority of the *firra* is offered in the context of the constant Qur'anic criticism of the *mushrikūn*, those who associate others with God. In some verses, the *mushrikūn* give the excuse that they only worshiped the others as a means to gain nearness to God, as in 39:3: "We only worship them so that God may bring us nigh in nearness to God." It was in answer to this sort of excuse that God tells Muḥammad to ask them to name their associates (Qur'ān 13:33). In Ibn al-'Arabī's reading, "Once they named their associates, it became clear that they worshiped none but God, for no worshiper worships any but God in the place to which he ascribes divinity to Him." Hence, despite associating others with God, such people are standing firm in the *tawḥīd* that belongs to him, "because they acknowledged Him at the covenant," and so they remain in their *firra*. "Through the strength of remaining in their *firra* they did not in reality worship Him in the forms. Rather, they worshiped the forms because they imagined that within them was the level of bringing about nearness, as if they were intercessors," and this also will open them up to God's forgiveness and pardon (III 24.34).

#### Pleasure in the Fire

One of the strongest arguments against universal mercy is the Qur'anic assertion of hell's everlastingness. Ibn al-'Arabī does not deny that those who belong in hell will

remain there forever. What he does deny is that their suffering will be permanent. His basic argument is simply the precedence of mercy: "How could there be everlasting wretchedness? Far be it from God that His wrath should take precedence over His mercy—for He is the truthful—or that He should make the embrace of His mercy specific after He had called it general!" (III 466.20).

The Qur'anic verse that supports Ibn al-'Arabī's position most explicitly is probably 39:53: "O My servants who have been immoderate against yourselves, despair not of God's mercy! Surely God forgives all sins." The Qur'ān often says that the sins of those who repent and do good deeds will be forgiven, but here it suggests that the sins of everyone will be forgiven. Concerning this verse, Ibn al-'Arabī says, "He brought forgiveness and mercy for the repentant and those who perform wholesome deeds, just as He has brought it for those who are immoderate, those who do not repent. The latter He forbids to despair, and He confirms the point through His word *all*. Nothing could be greater in divine eloquence concerning the final issue of the servants at mercy" (III 353.1).

One might object by citing the many Qur'anic verses that explicitly cite the sinners as objects of divine wrath and punishment. Ibn al-'Arabī answers that God only becomes wrathful in this world. In the next world, everything follows his command exactly. Hence he will be pleased with his creatures, whether they dwell in paradise or hell, because they can do nothing but obey him through their own *firra*. Both the folk of the Garden and the folk of the Fire will act in keeping with God's good pleasure (*riḍā*), "for this is required by the homestead, in contrast to the homestead of this world." In this world, they were addressed by the prophets, and they were able to act "both in that which pleases God and that which angers Him." God created the situation in this way "because He made the Fire the abode of those with whom He is angry, so, in this world, its folk have no escape from acting in that which angers God." Once they enter the Fire, however, it becomes impossible for them to act, save in God's good pleasure. "That is why the final issue of its folk will be at the ruling property of the mercy that 'embraces all things' [7:156], even if the Fire is an abode of wretchedness" (III 495.22).

The Qur'ān says, "God is well-pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with Him" (5:119, 58:22, 98:8). One should not be misled by the fact that these verses refer explicitly to paradise: "The Real does not make good-pleasure manifest until the folk of the Fire have taken up their domiciles and the folk of the Garden have taken up their domiciles. Then everyone will be pleased with that in which they are by the Real's making them pleased. None will desire to leave his domicile, and each will be happy with it" (II 244.1). Ibn al-'Arabī continues this passage by referring to the unpopularity of this sort of good opinion of God. No one, as far as he knows, has explained that good pleasure pertains specifically to the next world in *both* paradise and hell. He supposes that some people have been aware of this fact, but that they have concealed it to ward off criticism from themselves and to protect others from the harm of rejecting the truth. In his own case, he points out that mercy itself drives him to speak of such things.

This is a marvelous mystery. I have seen none of God's creatures calling attention to it, even though some have known it, without doubt. They have safeguarded it—and God knows best—only to safeguard themselves and as a mercy to the creatures, because the listeners would hurry to deny it. And, by God, I have called attention to it here only because mercy has overcome me at this moment. Those who understand will be felicitous.

and those who do not understand will not become wretched by their lack of understanding, even if they are deprived. (II 244.3)

One of God's names that has become manifest in the present world is Patient (*ṣabūr*). God is patient with the disobedience of his servants, and the Qur'ān repeatedly says that despite their wrongdoing, he will put off taking them to task until the next world. He is patient despite the fact that he is "annoyed" (*ṭāhā*). In commenting on the Qur'anic verse "Those who annoy God and His Messenger—then God has cursed in this world and the next (33:57), Ibn al-'Arabī points out that when this world comes to an end, so also does God's annoyance and, along with it, the property of the divine names that answer to this annoyance, such as avenger and severe in punishment.

Thus the wisdom in the disappearance of this world is the disappearance of annoyance from God, since there can be annoyance only within it. So, give good news to God's servants of the all-inclusiveness of mercy, of its spaciousness, and of its application to every created thing other than God, even if after a while. For, with the disappearance of this world, annoyance disappears from everyone who is annoyed, and through the disappearance of annoyance, patience disappears. One of the causes of punishment is annoyance, but annoyance has disappeared, so there is no escape from mercy and the lifting of wrath. Inescapably, mercy will include everything, through God's bounty, God willing. This is our opinion concerning God. After all, God says—and He speaks the truth—"I am with My servant's opinion of Me, so let his opinion of Me be good." Thus has He reported and commanded. (II 206.31)

Ibn al-'Arabī finds a divine allusion to the final issue at mercy in the Qur'anic word for chastisement, which is *ʿadhāb*. The basic sense of this word's root is to be sweet and agreeable. An apparently unrelated meaning is found in the noun form *ʿadhāb*, which means "bits and pieces, strips, the extremity of a thing, the end of a whip." The word *ʿadhāb* seems to have originally meant the "pain of being whipped." In the Qur'ān, it is the generic term for the punishment that is inflicted upon the folk of the Fire. But the Qur'ān could have used other Arabic words to make the same point. Why did God choose this particular word? For Ibn al-'Arabī, the reason can only be that in the end, the chastisement will become "sweet" (*ʿadhāb*) for those who suffer it: "That which causes pain is named *ʿadhāb* as a good news from God. Inescapably, you will find that everything through which you suffer pain is sweet when mercy envelops you and you are in the Fire" (II 207.1).

One of Ibn al-'Arabī's more common arguments in proof of the end of hell's chastisement is that people go where they belong. Once they arrive, they find that the domain is appropriate to their own natures. After all, "bliss" and "chastisement" are determined by the nature of the person who experiences them, not by the location in which they are experienced. The angels of chastisement enjoy hell, and the sinners will, too. The general principle is that "bliss is nothing but what is accepted by the constitution and the individual desire of the souls—places have no effect in that. Whenever are found agreeableness of nature and achievement of individual desire, that is bliss for the person" (III 387.22). The same line of reasoning helps explain why the Qur'ān refers not only to the "fire" of hell, but also to its "bitter cold" (*ẓamhārī*). Those who go to hell do so because their individual divine images—their "constitutions"—are imbalanced and therefore inappropriate for the equilibrium of the Garden:

The person of a cold constitution will find the heat of the Fire pleasant, and the person of a hot constitution will find the Bitter Cold pleasant. Thus Gehenna brings together the Fire and the Bitter Cold—because of the diversity of constitutions. What causes pain in a specific constitution will cause bliss in another constitution that is its opposite. So wisdom is not inoperative, for God keeps the Bitter Cold of Gehenna for those with hot constitutions and the Fire for those with cold constitutions. They enjoy themselves in Gehenna, for they have a constitution with which, were they to enter the Garden, they would suffer chastisement, because of the Garden's equilibrium. (II 207.2)

Ibn al-'Arabī finds another allusion to the pleasures of the Fire in the verse "Who-soever comes unto his Lord a sinner, for him awaits Gehenna, wherein he shall neither die nor live" (20:74). The folk of the Fire "will not die therein, because of the relief they gain through the removal of the pains." When the pain is removed, chastisement turns sweet: "Nor will they live therein, which is to say that they will not have a bliss like the bliss of the folk of the Gardens, a bliss that would be something in addition to the fact that He has relieved them in the abode of wretchedness" (III 245.26).

In several places Ibn al-'Arabī insists that the pleasure of the Fire is precisely the removal of suffering and pain. But this is not something small, given the Fire's severity: "The enjoyment of the Companions of the Blaze is tremendous, for they witness the abode, while security is one of its properties. There is no surprise if roses are found in rose gardens. The surprise comes when roses grow up in the pit of the Fire" (IV 307.34).<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī sees the root of wretchedness in the refusal to submit to God's wisdom and to accept one's own nature as his servant. The fire of hell arises, in other words, from mistrusting God and from insisting that the world needs to be reformed according to one's own opinions: "The wretched have chastisement only from themselves, for they are made to stand in the station of protestation and seeking the reasons for God's acts among His servants. 'Why did such and such happen?' 'If such and such had been, it would have been better and more appropriate'" (II 447.8).

By protesting in this manner, people dispute with their Lord and join among those who "broke off from God and His messenger" (8:13). Here Ibn al-'Arabī explains a meaning of the verse by playing on the similar spelling of *shaqq*, which means "breaking off," and *shiqā'*, which is the "wretchedness" that belongs to the people of the Fire: "Their wretchedness is their breaking off. Hell is 'the abode of the wretched' because they enter it in this state." Eventually, however, their state changes and they gradually come to realize that there is no profit in questioning God and refusing to submit to their own natures. "When the period becomes long for the wretched and they come to know that [dispute] has no profit, they say, 'Agreement is better.'" At this point, their situation changes, and their "breaking off" disappears: "Then the chastisement is removed from their inner selves and they achieve ease in their abode. They find in that an enjoyment known by none but God, for they have chosen what God has chosen for them, and at that point they come to know that their chastisement had been only from themselves" (II 447.12).

It is at the point of accepting their own natures that people realize that they will not be removed from the Fire. This makes them secure in their places, and they no longer wonder if they will be among those who, according to a *ḥadīth*, will be taken out of the Fire by the most merciful of the merciful, even though they did "no good whatsoever" in the world:

They had feared leaving the Fire when they saw that the most merciful of the merciful was taking people out, whereas God had placed in them a constitution that is appropriate for one who settles in that abode. . . . When they give up the thought of leaving it, they become happy, so their bliss is in this measure. This is the first bliss that they find. . . . Thus they find the chastisement sweet, for the pains disappear, though the "chastisement" remains. This is why it is called *ʿadhāb*—the final issue is that those who abide within it find it sweet. (III 463.6)

Among the Qurʾānic verses that criticize the *mushrikūn* is the following: "Be not among those who associate others with God, those who have divided up their religion and become sects, each party rejoicing in what is theirs" (30:31–32). Ibn al-ʿArabī, as usual, finds good news lurking in the text, even for sectarians. He is in the process of explaining how the Qurʾān encourages its readers to seek the deepest meanings of its verses, which are the signs that God appointed "for a people who use intelligence" (2:164) and "for a people who reflect" (10:24). These are the people that the Qurʾān calls *ulī l-ʿalbāb*, which Qurʾān translators normally render with expressions such as "possessors of minds" or "people of understanding." Literally, the term means "owners of the kernels" and Ibn al-ʿArabī contrasts them with "owners of the shell," though the latter is not a Qurʾānic expression. He points out that those who penetrate to the kernels of things enjoy their knowledge, but those who remain with the shells are happy in their ignorance. Each group has its own idea of what happiness is, and none of them is wrong, because each idea corresponds with the nature of the group that holds it. This is God's mercy, but in this world it filters in somewhat haphazardly. All are not happy with what they have. Things only become sorted out in the next world. There the true meaning of every party's "rejoicing in what is theirs" becomes manifest:

The kernel is veiled by the form of the shell. No one knows the kernel save those who know that there is a kernel. Were it not for this, they would not break the shell. . . . The knower of the kernel enjoys his knowledge of it, while the person ignorant of it is given joy through his ignorance, though he does not know that he is ignorant. After all, he does not know that the situation, which is other than what he knows, is indeed other than what he knows. On the contrary, he says, "There is nothing but this." Were he to know that there is other than what he knows and that he has not perceived it, he would be troubled, just as everyone in this world is troubled when he lacks what is demanded by his station, such as the merchant in his trading, the jurist in his jurisprudence, and every scholar in his own domain.

The verification of His words, "each party rejoicing in what is theirs" [30:32], occurs only in the next world, in contrast to this world. It is not known in this world, or rather, it occurs for many people but not everyone. . . . The final issue of all in the next world, after the expiration of the term of taking to task, will be at rejoicing in what they have and what they are busy with. (III 471.4)

A final passage can serve to summarize Ibn al-ʿArabī's good opinion of God. Again, he points to the Qurʾān and insists that God never explicitly links the return to God with wretchedness and ugliness. What the Qurʾān does say along these lines should be understood as threats, and no person of true nobility and generosity would carry out his threats. In one of these more threatening passages, the Qurʾān says, "The clatterer! What is the clatterer! And what shall teach you what is the clatterer? The day that men shall be like scattered moths, and the mountains shall be like plucked

wool-tuffs" (101:1–5). This indeed sounds like a terrible situation, and it is typically taken as a dire warning of the calamities of the day of resurrection. But Ibn al-ʿArabī's good opinion allows him to read it in terms of God's precedent and all-embracing mercy:

The ultimate end of the affair will be that "with God is the most beautiful place of return" [3:14]. God does not explicitly link any ugliness whatsoever to the place of returning to Him. Things of that sort that have come to us play the role of threats in the first understanding.

"Those who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they shall be overturned" [26:227]. Concerning God's generosity they shall surely know "what they had never reckoned with" [39:47]. In the case of those who are forgiven, this happens before being taken to task, and [for others, it happens] after being taken to task, when this is cut off from them. For His mercy is all-embracing, and His blessing is abundant and all-comprehensive. The souls of the cosmos wish for His mercy, since He is generous without restriction and nondelimited in munificence, without any limitation.

This explains why all the world will be mustered on the day of resurrection "like scattered moths" [101:4]. Mercy will be scattered in all the homesteads, so the world will scatter in search of it, for the world has diverse states and variegated forms. Through the scattering they will seek from God the mercy that will remove from them the form that leads to wretchedness. This is the cause of their being scattered on that day. (III 390.35)<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. On the visionary life of Ibn al-ʿArabī in the context of the personalities and events of his times, see the unsurpassed study by Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge, 1993). On Ibn al-ʿArabī's intellectual perspective, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989); idem, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany, 1998).
2. Citations from the Qurʾān are indicated by the number of the *sūra* and the verse. Quotations from Ibn al-ʿArabī are indicated by Roman numerals, which refer to the volume number of his *al-Furūqāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), followed by the page and line number.
3. See especially, Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn ʿArabī, the Book, and the Law* (Albany, 1993).
4. On the "one look," see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. xiv; Addas, *Quest*, chap. 2. On his dwelling in "God's vast earth," see Addas, *Quest*, chap. 5.
5. For these and other passages on this theme, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 242–244.
6. See M. Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge, 1993).
7. For another passage that makes the same general point, see III 370.15, translated in William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994), pp. 114–115. See also III 120.4, 552.2; and IV 163.6.
8. J. I. Smith and Y. Y. Haddad conclude, "In general it can be said that the non-eternity of the Fire has prevailed in the understanding of the Muslim community" (*The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* [Albany, 1981], p. 95). However, other specialists disagree. W. Madelung writes, "There is . . . no sound basis for disputing the common Qurʾānic and Islamic doctrine . . . that the punishment for infidels in hell-fire is everlasting" (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* [1994], p. 101).



9. See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, chap. 7.
10. For the passage in its context, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 188.
11. For another example of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s use of the imagery of horse racing in this context, see II 673.30.
12. Ibn al-‘Arabī identifies those who maintain that God will implement his threat as the Mu‘azilite theologians (II 478.14; II. 533.24).
13. See Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 186–189.
14. For the passage in its context, see *ibid.*, p. 81.
15. For the passage in its context, see *ibid.*, p. 367.

## 8

Sacred Scriptures and the Mysticism  
of Advaita Vedānta

ARVIND SHARMA

This chapter illustrates the relationship between mysticism and sacred scripture in the philosophical tradition within Hinduism that is known as Advaita Vedānta. In this essay I use the word *mysticism* to mean “the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality, or comparable matters is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or ratiocination.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, I use the word *sacred* to mean “worthy of religious veneration”; I leave the word *religion* undefined and use the word *scripture* to mean “a body of writings considered authoritative”;<sup>2</sup> and hence I take the expression “sacred scripture” to mean religiously authoritative texts. As the relationship between mysticism and sacred scripture is explored here in relation to Advaita Vedānta, I use that term in consonance with its general employment.<sup>3</sup> In the course of this discussion, I may often employ the expression “mystical experience” in preference to “mysticism,” in keeping with the preference of the tradition of Advaita Vedānta itself, for the question of the formulation of this experience and of its assessment lies at the core of the tradition and also constitutes the issue to be explored. The point, however, requires some elaboration.

The preceding definition of mysticism referred to it as a “doctrine” that is, “attainable through immediate intuition.” This naturally disposes one to ask: How do the two relate? At the moment, however, one must make a more preliminary observation. Although the general semantic landscape covered by a word may be indicated by a definition, if a word is to be fully meaningful when applied to a specific case, it must properly account for the actual contours of the particular landscape of meaning represented by the specific case, such as that represented by Advaita Vedānta in the present instance. This attempt to make the definition fit the case requires two major shifts of nuance in the case of Advaita Vedānta. The first of these is the ultimacy we accord to