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Cover: Persian miniature of a mystical landscape.

**Table of Contents**

Changing the Shibboleth of Evolution..... 7  
*by Huston Smith*

A Conversation with Huston Smith..... 9  
*Interview by Terry Moore*

Harmony of Heaven, Earth and Man—  
Harmony of Civilizations..... 17  
*by Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

Navigating the Ocean of the Soul..... 29  
*by William C. Chittick*

On Divine Self-Disclosure:..... 47  
Christianity amidst the World Religions  
*by M. Darrol Bryant*

Huston Smith, Bridge-Builder Extraordinaire..... 73  
A Tribute  
*by Harry Oldmeadow*

Huston Smith's Encounter with the Islamic Tradition..... 81  
*by Zachary Markwith*

The Way Things Are for Huston Smith..... 95  
*by Phil Cousineau*

**Reviews**

Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy..... 109  
*by Harry Oldmeadow*

Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy  
*by Michael Fitzgerald*  
*A Review Essay by Peter Samsel*

In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation..... 140  
*with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought*  
*by Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahangloo*  
*Reviewed by Mohammad M. Faghfoory*

Tajna Hasanaginice (The Mystery of Hasanaginica)..... 149  
*by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić*  
*Reviewed by Florence Graham*

In Print..... 163

Notes on Contributors..... 166

# Navigating the Ocean of the Soul

by William C. Chittick

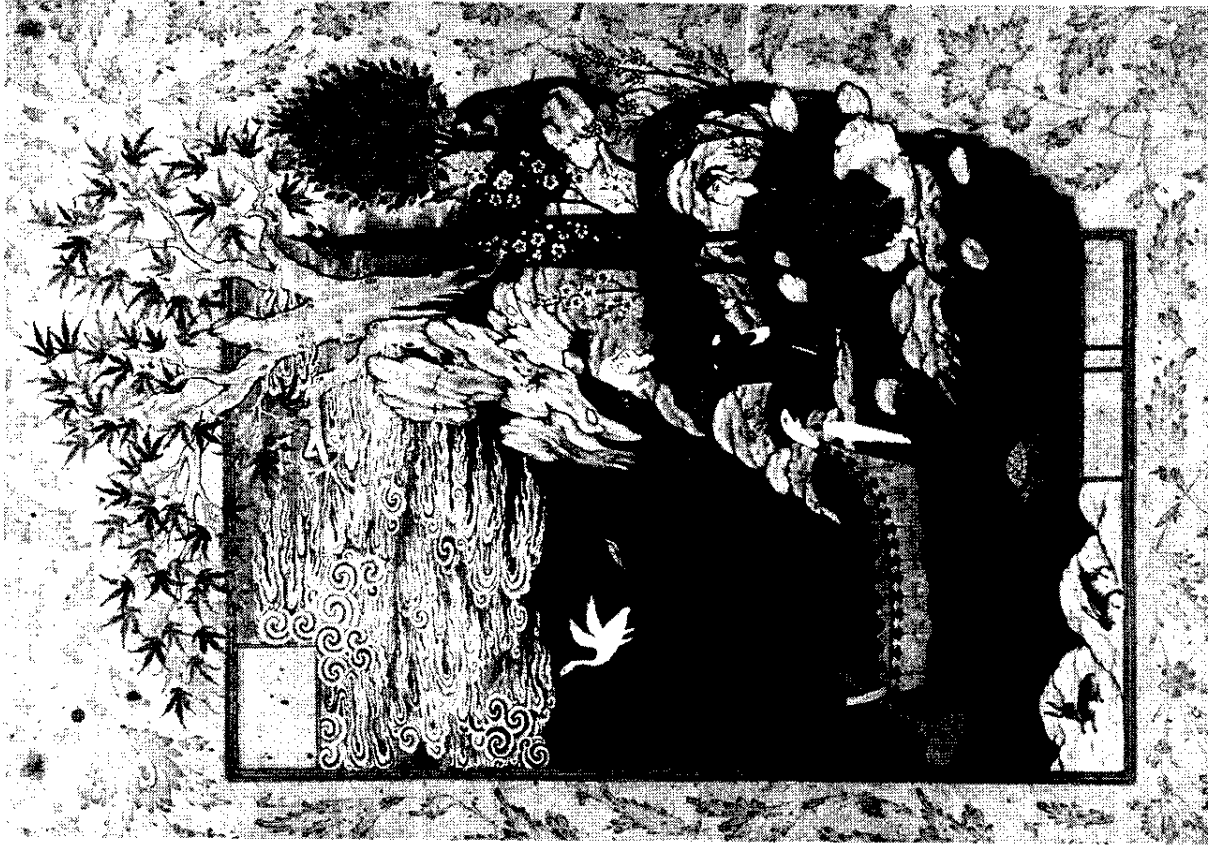
*This is the text of a talk delivered in London on 16 October 2007 under the auspices of The Asia House as part of "The Bagri Foundation Lecture Series on Asian Mysticism."*

I normally avoid the word "mysticism" in talking about Islamic spirituality because of its many negative connotations. I am perfectly happy, however, to quote the description of a mystic by Ursula King, the first lecturer in this series. According to her,

A mystic is a person who is deeply aware of the powerful presence of the divine Spirit: someone who seeks, above all, the knowledge and love of God and who experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life.<sup>1</sup>

If this is what we mean by a "mystic," then Sufis are mystics, or at least aspiring mystics. What distinguishes Sufism from the mystical paths of Christianity, Hinduism, and other traditions is not so much the goal as the grounding in the Quran and the model of Muhammad. When Muslims "seek the knowledge and love of God" and when they "experience to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life," they do so by following in Muhammad's footsteps and conforming to the model of human perfection set down in the Quran.

In each of their daily prayers, Muslims recite the Fatihah, the Quran's opening chapter. Of its seven verses, the last three ask God to guide those who recite it on "the Straight Path." It is



*Illustration from the Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones) by Jami. 16<sup>th</sup> century Persian.*

1 Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2001), p. 3.

called "straight" because life is a journey in which many paths are available, but not every path leads to human fulfillment or to the actualization of the full potentialities of the soul. In other words, not every path leads to knowledge and love of God.

The image of traveling on a path is central to the Quran and Islamic thought generally. For example, Muslims should follow the "Shariah," the revealed law, which means literally road or avenue. In the religious sense, it is the road leading to knowledge and love of God and revealed in the Quran and the Sunnah, which is the exemplary behavior of the Prophet Muhammad. Typically the word is used to designate all the rituals, practices, and rules for proper behavior that Muslims should observe.

The word Shariah is commonly contrasted with Tariqah, which also means road or path. Tariqah, however, means the narrow path followed by those who aspire to reach God's presence here and now. Several other words for path, or for the stages of the path, are commonly used in the Quran and the tradition, but these examples are sufficient to make the point that I want to stress: There are few ideas quite as basic to the Islamic tradition than that the goal of human life can only be achieved by following a path that leads to knowledge and love of God.

Clearly, for Muslims, the path is delineated by the Quran and the Sunnah. But to grasp its implications for the mystical quest, we should remember that it is modeled on one of the two primary events that determine the very structure of the Islamic worldview. These events are the Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*) and the Night of the Journey (*laylat al-isra'*). The tradition tells us that the Quran was revealed to Muhammad by means of the angel Gabriel on the Night of Power. The revealed book then provided the guidance that people need to make the best use of their human embodiment. The fact that Muhammad, the initial recipient of the message, made the best use is demonstrated most strikingly by the Night of the Journey. Notice the symbolism of the night, which typically designates the nonmanifest realm, or the time when invisible realities interact with the visible world.

The accounts of the Night Journey tell us that Muhammad was escorted by the angel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he met the 124,000 prophets and led them in the ritual prayer. Then

Gabriel took him up level by level through the celestial spheres. In each of the spheres, Gabriel introduced him to the prophets and angels who dwell there. After they had passed through the spheres, Gabriel showed him hell and paradise. Finally, he sent the Prophet alone to meet God, for, he said, if he tried to fly any closer to the Divine Presence, his wings would burn off. The Prophet met God and then descended back to Gabriel, who returned him to his community by the same route they had followed in coming.

On the Night of the Journey, Muhammad climbed what is called "the ladder" (*al-mi'raj*). His climb to God on this Night explains the *raison d'être* of the descent of the Quran on the Night of Power: The revealed Book provides the guidance needed to achieve perfect knowledge and love of God. These deliver their possessors from the cosmos and take them into the very Presence of God himself. This ascent to the divine unity is, in a nutshell, the focus of all Sufi theory and practice. It is the complement of a descent into multiplicity that is the creation of the universe and everything within it. For there to be a creation, the Supreme Reality must send down the signs and traces of its own names and attributes, that is, its life, consciousness, power, desire, mercy, justice, and so on. These signs and traces—the universe and all it contains—eventually disappear, and in disappearing they ascend back where they came from, that is, to the Supreme Reality. In the same way, guidance descends into the cosmic maze from God, and the goal of guidance is to provide the path whereby people can ascend to a happy and congenial reunion with their Creator. Everyone goes back to God, but not everyone finds the posthumous realms to his or her liking.

In Sufism, as also in Islamic philosophy, descent and ascent are constant themes. They form the backdrop for explications of the nature of both the cosmos and the human soul. In contrast, scholastic theology—Kalam—hardly addresses cosmology or spiritual psychology, but it does highlight the descent and ascent under the two rubrics "prophecy" (*nubuwwa*) and "the return to God" (*ma'ad*). God sent down guidance through the prophets, and people ascend back to their appropriate places with God by following or rejecting that guidance. The two themes of prophecy and return are in fact the second and third of the three principles

of Islamic faith. The first principle is of course *tawhīd*, the assertion of the unity of God. *Tawhīd* itself already implies descent and ascent. Even the most elementary catechism explains that it means that all things appear from the One God and eventually disappear by going back where they came from.

## Love

Professor King says that mystics are seeking "above all, the knowledge and love of God." In the pre-modern Islamic tradition, it was clear that *all* Muslims should be seeking the knowledge and love of God, not just "mystic" Muslims. The Quran stresses the importance of knowledge more than any other Abrahamitic scripture, and it repeatedly instructs Muslims to seek knowledge of God and praises those who find it.

As for love, the Quran has a good deal to say about it. Probably the most often cited verse on the topic is that which speaks of the mutual love of God and human beings: "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54). Typically these two clauses are cited without the context, in which God is saying that if people do not follow his ways, he will bring another people whom he loves, and who love him. The most obvious point of the verse is that God expects his servants—that is, his human creatures—to love him, and it is this that they should be striving to do.

This verse has many other implications that Sufi authors like to draw out. Their basic tactic is to meditate on the verse in terms of the principle of *tawhīd*, the assertion of divine unity that is epitomized in the formula, "There is no god but God." Any divine name placed in this formula tells us something about God's unique reality. For example, the Quran calls God the Alive (*al-ḥayy*). In terms of *tawhīd*, this name means, "There is nothing alive but God." In other words, God alone has true and permanent life, and creatures receive any life that they may have as divine bestowals. Or again, the Quran says that God is Knowing (*al-ʿalīm*). If translators commonly render this as "Omniscient" or "All-knowing," it is because of the implication of *tawhīd*: "There is none knowing but God." No one truly has knowledge but God and, in his perfect and total knowledge, he is conscious and aware of all that

can possibly exist, always and forever. By comparison, all human knowledge is ignorance.

When we look at the verse of mutual love in terms of *tawhīd*, we see that the verse ascribes love to God—"He loves them." It follows that God is "lover." If God is lover, then "There is no lover but God." Real love is an attribute of the One God alone. Anything else that might be called "love" pales into insignificance. The same verse tells us that God is the beloved, for "they love Him." So, "There is no beloved but God." Anything other than God that appears to be worthy of love is not and cannot be a true object of love.

The notion that God is the only true lover and the only true beloved permeates Sufi literature. Among its many implications is that everyone without exception loves God. If we think we love anything else, we are mistaken. In fact we love the beauty and comeliness of God that appear in created things. Pushing the principle of *tawhīd*, we see that we love God himself, not his manifestations. This is one of Rūmī's common themes. In one of his prose works, he puts it this way:

All the hopes, loves, and affections that people have for different things—fathers, mothers, lovers, heaven and earth, gardens, mansions, sciences, activities, foods, drinks—all these are desires for the Supreme Reality, and those things are masks. When people pass on from this world and they see that King without the masks, then they will know that everything was a mask and a veil and that the object of their seeking was in fact that One Thing. All their difficulties will be solved, and all the questions and perplexities that they had had in their hearts will be answered.<sup>2</sup>

If we all love God in fact, what is the problem? Why do we need to seek knowledge and love of God? The problem is precisely that we love him without knowing that we love him. Unless we know who he is and how he is present in all things, we will continue to love the masks and veils. Overcoming false love demands searching for true knowledge.

Let me come back to *tawhīd* in the form, "There is no lover

2 *Fīḥi mā fīhi*, edited by Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr-Kabīr, 1969), p. 35. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 201.

but God." This has a number of implications that are brought out in many ways. To begin with, God's attribute of being a lover is often seen as the root of creation. It is helpful to recall here a purported hadith that is frequently quoted in Sufi texts: God said, "I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized." In other words, God in his absolute Oneness is hidden and known only to himself, which means that all of his attributes—the so-called ninety-nine names—are concealed. If anyone other than God is to know and recognize God, there must be a movement away from absolute unity, which is to say that there must be a creative act. But what is it in God that can drive this creative act? Why, in other words, did God create the universe? The answer is love—his love to be known by others.

In short, the fact that God is lover brings about differentiation. God as lover creates an infinity of creatures, a multiplicity without end. He wants to be recognized and known, and there can be no knowledge without differentiation. He creates the universe not as an end in itself, but as a prelude to the culmination of creation, which is knowledge and recognition of him. This can be achieved only by human souls—which is precisely the point made in the verse of mutual love: "He loves *them*." God loves human beings and only human beings. They are his goal in the creative act—not all of them, but those who come to know and love him.

Let me come back to "They love Him." We saw that one implication of this verse is that everyone loves God whether they know it or not. But God does not want them to love him without being aware of who it is that they love. He wants conscious and knowledgeable love, a love not mediated by the masks and veils. He wants them to love him with full awareness and without intermediaries, not to disperse their love in created things, which will eventually disappear and leave them bereft. The task of human beings is to respond to God's unique love for them by loving him and him alone in return. People need to see their true beloved beyond the masks and veils, to find the one they really love and then to embrace him. The fullness of love demands consummation. God did not create the universe in order to keep his loved ones separate from him. His goal was for lover and beloved to come together and live in joy.

So, the Straight Path has no function other than to remove masks and veils. People can then achieve the culmination of "they love Him" and embrace God, for "He loves them." Some might object by saying that if God loves us, why does he not simply embrace us? Why does he ask us to follow a path? The fact is that he has embraced us, but we are not aware of his embrace. Without being fully conscious of his embrace and without embracing him properly in return, we cannot celebrate the joy of union. After all, to say that God has already embraced us is not much different from saying, as the Quran does, that "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). God is with us constantly and forever, because all reality is God's—there is nothing real but the Supreme Reality, and even the masks and veils are his masks and veils, displaying the signs and marks of his beauty. We are caught up with the masks and veils, so he is with us in the masks and veils and inside ourselves, but we are not with him. He loves us, but we do not love him in return, because we love the masks and veils.

When the Quran speaks of God's love for human beings, it usually does so with qualifications. When we keep these in mind, we can see a clear distinction between God's universal love for everyone and everything—a love that the Quran calls his mercy that embraces everything (7:156)—and his specific love for some human beings, not all of them. The Quran says, for example, that God does *not* love ugliness, hatred, spite, rancor, ignorance, and other sorts of negative activities and character traits. Note that everything mentioned as being outside the pale of God's love pertains to human characteristics, or rather, characteristics that distort and corrupt our true human nature.

The Prophet implied that there are limits on God's love for us in the famous saying, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." If we are not beautiful, then God does not love us. The sort of beauty at issue here is clarified by a number of Quranic verses. For example, "God formed you, and He made your forms beautiful" (40:64). This beautiful form is precisely what the Prophet was referring to when he said, "God created Adam in His form," for God's form can be nothing but beautiful. This is why the Quran refers to his many names as "the most beautiful names," for they teach us about his beauty. God bestowed this beauty on human beings: "We created



the human being in the most beautiful stature" (95:4). To the extent that people conform to their original created nature—what the tradition calls the *fiṭra* or "primordial nature"—they are beautiful and hence loved by God. To the extent that they turn away from that original form, they will acquire ugly character traits that God does not love.

Commonly, the goal of the Straight Path is said to be "purification of the soul" (*tazkiyat al-naḥs*). This expression derives from a Quranic passage in which God swears an oath by the human soul: "By the soul and Him who shaped it, and inspired it to its depravity and its godfearing! Prosperous is he who purifies it, and failed is he who buries it" (91:6-10). God inspires the soul with both good thoughts and bad thoughts. The good thoughts encourage searching for the beautiful, and the bad thoughts suggest opting for the ugly. People are free to follow whichever inspiration appeals to them. This is the real mystery of human existence—that God gives people the freedom to say no to the beautiful and yes to the ugly. The reason for this is simply that, although God wants us to remember that there is none truly beautiful and none truly beloved but him, he cannot force us to love him. It makes no sense to speak of coerced love, for love can only be given freely. So, these verses about God's inspirations to the soul tell us that the way to be prosperous, successful, and fulfilled is to engage in the soul's purification. If instead we bury the soul in the realm of dispersion and keep it transfixed by the masks and veils, we will never be happy, whether in this world or the next.

Purification of the soul, then, is commonly taken as a thumbnail description of the Straight Path. To purify the soul is to cleanse oneself of the ugliness, hatred, spite, rancor, ignorance, and narrowness that God does not love. People can do so precisely by following the path that leads to knowledge and love of God. The Quran tells the Prophet to address those who already have the germ of this love with these words: "Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you'" (3:31). In other words, people who love God and want God to love them in return should strive to attract his love by following in the Prophet's footsteps.

What happens when people succeed in attracting God's love to themselves? This is explained by a well-known saying of the

Prophet in which he quotes the words of God: "My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks." This saying touches on one of the most common themes in Sufi literature, that is, the consummation of mutual love, which is the mysterious union of the divine and the human.

## Knowledge

Before I try to suggest what love's consummation may mean, let me turn to another saying that is constantly cited in Sufi texts. It is usually attributed to the Prophet, though it is more likely by his son-in-law 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The usual translation is, "He who knows himself (=his own soul) knows his Lord." It is probably more accurate to translate it, "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord." The fact that this saying is frequently cited in Sufi literature should not be surprising. "Mysticism" is nothing if not a path leading to a transformed perception of God and a transformed perception of the world. There can be no transformed perception without a transformed perceiver. To understand what sort of perception and what sort of transformation are humanly possible, we need to grasp what sort of perceiver we are dealing with, and that perceiver is nothing but the human soul, the very self that perceives.

I prefer to translate this saying with "recognizes" rather than "knows" because the verb is *'araḥa*, not *'alima*, the usual word for knowing. The nouns derived from this verb—specifically *ma'rifa* and *'irfān*—are often translated in studies of Sufism as "gnosis," because the texts frequently use them to designate an immediate sort of knowing that cannot be gained from books or teachers. Seekers of gnosis can only find it by plumbing the depths of their own souls and coming into contact with their own primordial substance, created in the beautiful form of God. This sort of knowledge is in fact a *re-cognition*—a remembrance of what we have always known but have now forgotten.

Here we should recall that according to the Quran, Adam's sin

was rooted in forgetfulness (*nisyān, ghafla*), not moral corruption. The human problem is that we have forgotten who we are. "Who we are" is not defined by biography, biology, culture, language, religion, or anything else that we can analyze and explain with our sciences. Who we are is defined rather by our relationship with our Lord, the Creator of all. If we are able to remember who we are, we will simultaneously remember our Lord. This is why the Quran frequently tells us that the messages of the prophets are "reminders" (*tadhkira, dhikr*). The proper human response is to remember (*dhikr, tadhakkur*).

I have already cited the hadith of the Hidden Treasure. In this hadith also, the verb is *'arafa*, "to recognize," not *'alima*, "to know." God loved to be *recognized*, so he created the creatures that he might be recognized. A typical explanation of this hadith tells us that God is the absolute and unconditioned Reality within which every possibility of being and becoming is concealed. His love to be recognized brings into existence the universe in all its spatial and temporal vastness and demands that there be those who can recognize God and love him in return. Human beings alone are created in the fullness of God's beautiful form, so they alone have the capacity to love God in the fullness of his beauty and majesty.

Another hadith that Sufis like to cite also makes the point that God created the universe in order to bring human beings into existence. God addresses the Prophet with the words, "If not for thee, I would not have created the cosmos." As the fullness of human perfection, the Prophet is also the full actualization of God's creative love, and his love for God is the full actualization of human love.

But what exactly is this "soul" that can recognize God and love him? From one point of view, the soul is simply the individual, the self; it is who we are in our very selfhood. From another point of view, the soul is indistinguishable from God, for it is God's beautiful form, or the disclosure of the sum total of God's names and attributes. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the great Sufi theoretician of the thirteenth century, this is why the hadith that speaks of the union of lover and beloved uses the verb *kunutu*, "I am," not "I become." It means "I am the hearing with which My servant hears." For, God is always and forever the hearing with which we

hear, the eyesight with which we see, and the heart with which we know and love. If we do not *re-cognize* this, it is because we are caught up with the masks and veils.

In the typical lore of Sufism, love brings about a great transformation: The two selfhoods—the self of the servant and the self of the Lord—come together such that God is the very faculties of the soul. Or, to put it in another way, the true selfhood of God replaces the false selfhood of the servant. This transformation is described in a variety of ways. One of the better known discussions goes on in terms of the words *fanā'* and *baqā'*, annihilation and subsistence, or passing away and remaining. The words derive from the Quranic verse, "Everything in the earth is *passing away*, and there *remains* the face of your Lord, the possessor of majesty and generosity" (55:26). This verse is understood first of all as a statement of the actual situation. Compared to God, all things are in fact as ephemeral as clouds, and the very becoming that things undergo is their passing away. But, the verse is also read as a summary of the path to knowledge and love of God. When the soul knows and loves God and when God loves the soul in return, God's love erases the soul's ignorance, forgetfulness, and self-centeredness. The light of knowledge and recognition dissipates the darkness of forgetfulness, and only God-centeredness remains.

## The Ocean

When I chose the title of this talk, I had in mind a saying quoted by Ibn 'Arabī from an unnamed "gnostic," that is, a "recognizer" of self and Lord. At the time, I was not thinking of Helmut Ritter's book on the great Persian Sufi poet 'Attār, *The Ocean of the Soul*, but I can hardly fail to mention it. This detailed study of 'Attār's poetry is named after an image of which 'Attār and many other Sufi poets are fond, an image that depicts the process of *fanā'* and *baqā'*, annihilation and subsistence, as the return of the drop to the ocean, that is, the return of the soul to God such that only God remains.

If we put aside poetry and look at the sophisticated expositions of the soul's nature found in the writings of Ibn 'Arabī and many others, we see that the return of the drop to the Ocean does

not imply that the soul loses its own reality. After all, God created the soul in his own form, and he does not create in vain. The soul in particular he created for everlasting life. The spiritual essence of the soul, like all things, returns to its native home, but the soul lives on in the realm of subtle reality.<sup>3</sup>

To come back to the "ocean" as an image commonly employed in Sufism, it should be obvious why it is an appropriate word to symbolize the fundamental implication of *tawhīd*, that the Divine Reality gives rise to all things and that all ultimately return to that Reality. Water represents the primordial chaos in creation myths from around the world. It has no specific form, but it can assume the form of anything. God as "Ocean without Shore" is precisely what Sufis and philosophers are talking about when they speak of the Real Being or the Necessary Being, which is the source of all existence and all individual things, but which remains forever hidden in itself. The Ocean of Being is the primordial reality, the Hidden Treasure that desires to be recognized, and the waves and drops are the myriad things that appear in the process of creation.

But why should the human soul also be an ocean without shore? Briefly, because God created human beings in his own form and, in doing so, taught them "all the names," as the Quran tells us. Commentators explain that the names taught to Adam—the primordial human being in whose nature all human beings share—are the names of all things, or the names of God, or the names of both together. In any case, names are designations, and the Supreme Reality has designations only inasmuch as it can be recognized and known. But God in himself, in the depths of his very Essence, remains forever unknown, undesignated, formless. This is why Ibn 'Arabī frequently cites the maxim, "None knows God but God." He (as well as many others) insists that none can ever truly know God but God himself. No one has access to the depths of the Infinite Ocean but the Infinite Ocean itself; drops and ripples and waves are forever barred from the Ocean's infinity.

At the same time—and this is where human uniqueness enters the picture—human beings are made in the form of the Ocean. They were created precisely because the Ocean desired to be recognized.

3 See, for example, Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 352.

Only that which is created in the form of the Ocean's total reality can recognize it in its unity and wholeness, rather than in respect of its waves and ripples and drops. The deepest and truest form of the human soul is formlessness. We are not anything specific. We alone, among all creatures, stand in what Ibn 'Arabī calls the "unknown station." With this term he has in mind the words of the angels that are quoted in the Quranic verse, "None of us there is but has a known station" (37:164). Ibn 'Arabī points out that all created things, with the sole exception of human beings up until the point of death, have known stations. No one other than God, least of all ourselves, knows who we are or what we will become.

As the form of formlessness, the soul can assume any form. Forms are defined and determined by the divine source of all reality, the Ocean that gives out waves and drops and splatters in every possible shape and configuration. The creatures of the universe are relatively determined by the modalities and qualities of being and becoming that make them what they are. They never leave their known stations. Fish never turn into rabbits, and eagles do not become frogs. But human beings are utterly unpredictable, because all qualities are latent within them, waiting to become manifest.

When Ibn 'Arabī refers to the soul as a shoreless ocean, he usually has in mind its possibilities of knowing. It is precisely the potential unlimitedness of human knowledge and awareness that gives us intimations of our own boundless essence. It is not too difficult to see that, in principle, there is nothing in the realm of the manifest universe that cannot be known. It is precisely this intuition that drives modern-day scientists, who want to solve all the mysteries of existence and who imagine that, if they pile up enough data and stand on the shoulders of enough of their predecessors, they will someday achieve collective omniscience and collective omnipotence.

Mystics, however, know full well that there is nothing "collective" about knowledge of God, any more than there is anything collective about love for God. Each one of us is called to find knowledge and love in his or her own soul, for there is no other locus of consciousness and awareness. What you know and what you love is of no use to me—unless you have been given the wisdom to point me in the right direction. Still, I cannot participate in

your knowing and I cannot experience your love. That is for you alone, and what I know and love is for me alone. And certainly, what scientists and scholars may know or claim to know does not in itself aid me in my search to recognize myself and love my Lord. The only way I can help myself is to pass away from ignorance and re-cognize who I truly am in the depths of my own divine form.

Real knowledge of God and of all reality is found within, not without. If we can purify our hearts of ignorance, we can gain that knowledge from its wellspring. Ultimately, however—as Ibn ‘Arabī likes to say—what we can know about God is only our own divine form, not God in himself. Nonetheless, since our form is an ocean without shore, we will go on gaining new knowledge and awareness of the Infinite God forever. This is why, Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, God addresses the model of human perfection, the Prophet Muhammad himself, with the words, “Say: ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge!’” (20:114).

From whence, then, do we really know God? In other words, how can we really know God and be conscious of him by means of anything more than hearsay, which is the stories we have heard and the doctrines we have learned from scripture, texts, and teachers? Only from within. Ibn ‘Arabī explains this in these terms:

The root of the existence of knowledge of God is knowledge of the soul. So, knowledge of God has the property of knowledge of the soul, which is its root. In the view of those who know the soul, the soul is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end. Such is the property of knowledge of the soul. Hence, knowledge of God, which is a branch of this root, joins with it in its property, so there is no end to knowledge of God. That is why, in every state, the knower says, “My Lord, increase me in knowledge!” Then God increases him in knowledge of his own soul so that he may increase in knowledge of his Lord.<sup>4</sup>

4 Cited in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 345.

## The Path

If the soul is an ocean without shore, it is because God created it in the form of his own formlessness. On the path of climbing the ladder to God, or following in the footsteps of Muhammad, the goal is to return to formlessness and not to be diverted by forms. This is one of the messages that Sufis find in the Quran’s mention of Muhammad’s gazing upon God during the Night of the Journey. The verse reads, “The eye swerved not, nor went astray” (53:17). If the Prophet’s eye was not diverted from his beloved, this is because he was utterly rooted in *tawhīd*. He knew that there is no god but God and no beloved but God. He was never caught up with the masks and veils that confuse the rest of us. He never gazed upon the specific forms that the Hidden Treasure assumes when it discloses itself to us without also seeing the face of his Lord. His state was that mentioned in the Quranic verse, “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115).

The one-pointed focus on God achieved by the Prophet is founded precisely on knowledge and love, the same knowledge and love that mystics are trying to actualize. Both the knowledge and the love are rooted in *tawhīd*. Knowledge allows us to see clearly, and love closes the gap between knower and known, lover and beloved. In Rūmī’s terms, love is a fire that *tawhīd*—specifically, the understanding of the formula “No god but God”—kindles in the soul. It burns away everything except the Everlasting Beloved.<sup>5</sup>

Sufi texts typically describe the path of eliminating masks and veils as a series of “stations,” each of which represents a perfection that the soul uncovers in itself when it returns to the original purity of its divine form. The best-known example in the West of a treatise about the ascending stations is the great poem of ‘Attār, *The Language of the Birds*, which depicts seven mountains over which the birds of the soul must fly—seeking, love, recognition, independence, unity, bewilderment, and poverty. The qualities that the soul is striving to actualize are already present within its own ocean, but, in order for it to clear away the masks and veils, it must ascend the ladder to true knowledge and true love. Once it

5 *Mathnawī*, edited by R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925-40), Book 5, verses 588-90; Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, p. 215.

has recovered the primordial qualities of its own formlessness, it finally realizes fully and totally that in itself it is nothing. This is the stage of annihilation, in which the thirty birds of 'Attār's tale are dissolved before the radiance of the mythic Simurgh. But, annihilation is followed by subsistence, in which the divine qualities determine and define the soul's characteristics, such that God is the hearing with which the soul hears, the eyesight with which it sees. The thirty birds (*sī-murgh*) are themselves none other than the Simurgh.

Ibn 'Arabī often talks about the journey to God in the standard language of "stations" on the path. Seekers must strive to actualize the stations within themselves. At each stage of the journey, they may encounter wonders and joys, but they must never divert their eyes from the Beloved who is the final goal. The full perfection of the oceanic soul, formed in the form of formlessness, does not allow any single station or any one divine quality to determine the soul's character, just as God's reality cannot be reduced to one name or attribute. Seekers are striving to go back to what Ibn 'Arabī calls "the station of no station," which is the actualization of the fullness of the divine formlessness. This is also what he calls "the Muhammadan station," because it was achieved most fully by the last of the prophets.

In this way of looking at things, the ocean of the soul is a dangerous realm, because it is all too easy to be diverted by manifestations of divine qualities and spiritual energies, the masks and the veils, especially when these assume the seductive forms of joy and delight. This is why Ibn 'Arabī often warns seekers to avoid what Sufism calls "states" (*ahwāl*), that is, intense and even ecstatic experiences of bliss and intoxication.

I think I have said enough to suggest why the soul is an ocean that can only be navigated with difficulty. Most Sufi prose works, in fact, deal with the care that must be taken in sailing this ocean. Even a poet like Rūmī, who is usually presented as a celebrant of intoxicated union with God, has a great deal to say about the necessity of following the prophets and the saints in order not to lose one's way. His long, didactic *Mathnawī* provides many examples, and so also does his love poetry, which is interspersed with reminders to the forgetful and negligent soul.

Let me conclude, then, by citing one ghazal from Rūmī. Most of us have heard a few of his ghazals celebrating his travels on the ocean of love. In this ghazal, he reminds us that no one should try to navigate the ocean on his own.

Domestic fowl, don't spread your wings with the phoenix!  
You have no wings, don't set out for the desert.

Don't try to be a salamander by entering the heart of fire!  
Don't disgrace yourself by arguing!

O tailor, ironworking is not your job!

You don't know the activity of fire—don't do that!

First, take instruction from the ironworkers.

Otherwise, don't try it without instruction.

You're not a sailor, don't go into the ocean.

Don't set out for the waves and the ocean's roar.

Or, if you do, sit in the corner of the ship  
and hold on tight!

If you fall, fall into the ship!

Don't support yourself with your own hands and feet!

If you want heaven, become the companion of Jesus!

Otherwise, don't aim for the azure spheres!

You are a fruit that is still raw. Stay on the branch.

Don't let go of the names without having found their  
meanings.

Shams-i Tabrīzī dwells in the [Divine] Presence—

Don't make your station anything but that!<sup>6</sup>



6 *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dāwān-i kabīr*, edited by Badr al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānīshgāh, 1957-67), ghazal # 2018.