

## Chapter 4

On the Cosmology of *Dhikr*

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Let me begin with a prophetic saying that expresses succinctly the basic Islamic understanding of man and the world: *al-Dunyâ mal`ûnatun, mal`ûnun mâ fihâ illâ dhikr Allâh*. "This world is accursed; accursed is everything within it, save *dhikr Allâh*." In order to suggest a few of the implications of this saying for the theory and practice of *dhikr Allâh*, "the remembrance of God", I shall review the basic concept of *dhikr* as it appears in the Koran and then look at a few of the teachings of Ibn Arabi (d. 1240 A.D.), one of the greatest Muslim metaphysicians and cosmologists.<sup>1</sup>

The Islamic tradition is rooted in knowledge. This rooting is most evident in the first testimony of faith, "There is no god but God." This statement is taken as epitomizing the first principle of Islamic faith, which is *tawhîd*, the assertion of God's unity. However, even those familiar with Islamic teachings sometimes forget that *tawhîd* has nothing to do with history, because it is simply a statement of the way things are. The more sophisticated of Muslim thinkers have always maintained that *tawhîd* is a universal and atemporal truth. To be human is to have an intuition of this truth, and every one of the "124,000 prophets" that God has sent, from Adam down to Muhammad, came with this truth as the core of his message.

Tawhîd expresses the nature of reality, irrespective of the existence of the universe, man, or any other beings. However, since we do have a world and human beings, the Islamic tradition takes into account a second fact, that of the human situation. It encapsulates this situation in the words "forgetfulness" (*nisyân*) and "heedless-

1. For more on *dhikr* in the Islamic tradition, see Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), Chapter 5. On the life and significance of Ibn Arabi, see Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabi: The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2001). For Ibn Arabi's metaphysical and cosmological teachings, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) and Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

ness" (*ghafla*). Although people do have an innate intuition of *tawhîd*, they do not necessarily find it ready to mind. It may not be easy for them to bring it from latency to actuality or to voice it in language and put it into practice. They need the help of the prophets. With "prophecy", the second principle of Islamic faith, the perspective shifts from the atemporal to the temporal, from the eternal to the contingent, from God to history.

The first function of the prophets is to "remind" people of their own divinely given reality. In speaking of this "reminder", the Quran employs the word *dhikr* and several of its derivatives (e.g., *dhikrâ*, *tadhkir*, *tadhkira*). Moreover, it calls the human response to this reminder by the same word *dhikr*. The "reminder" that comes from the side of God by means of the prophets calls forth "remembrance" from the side of man. The use of the one word for a movement with two directions—from the Divine to the human and from the human to the Divine—is typical of the Quran's unitary perspective. Here in fact there is only one motivating force, and that is the Divine activity that makes manifest the good, the true, and the beautiful, even if it appears to us as two different movements. Moreover, the Quran also makes it eminently clear that "remembrance"—the human response to reminder—does not mean simply to acknowledge the truth of *tawhîd*. The word itself also means "to mention". On the human side, *dhikr* is both the awareness of God and the expression of this awareness through language, whether vocal or silent.

If reminder is the first function of the prophets, their second function is to provide the instructions that allow people to live a life that is pleasing to God. The Quran calls these instructions "guidance" (*hudâ*). To follow the guidance of the prophets is to remember God in thought, word, and deed. So, *dhikr* is to keep God in view at all times, places, and activities. Ibn Arabi defines it as *al-hudûr ma`a'l-madhkûr*, "presence with the One Remembered" (IV 36.8).<sup>2</sup> If we remain absent from God in thought, word, or deed, we have not remembered Him as He should be remembered.

The Quran and the tradition sum up the practical implications of remembrance with the word *ibâda*, which means worship, service, and being a servant. This is the most important human task.

2. References are to Ibn Arabi, *al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, 4 volumes (Cairo, 1911). I indicate volume number, page number, and line number.

In the Quran God says, "I created *jinn* and mankind only to worship Me" or "to serve Me" (51:56). In other words, God created human beings so that they would remember Him and bring themselves into conformity with His Reality. They can do so only by means of right understanding, right faith, right speech, and right activity. The criterion for "rightness" is the degree to which one understands, acts, and exists in the presence of God. Being present with God is precisely *dhikr Allâh*, "the remembrance of God".

Islamic faith has three principles, not just two.<sup>3</sup> After Divine unity and prophecy comes *ma`âd*, the "return" to God, commonly discussed in terms of death and resurrection. Since everyone must die and be brought forth in the presence of God, the afterlife is often called the "compulsory return". But the more sophisticated theologians, philosophers, and spiritual teachers place greater stress on the "voluntary return", that is, the fact that our existential situation demands that we choose freely to return to God here and now. This existential situation is defined by reality itself, which is primarily God, and secondarily the world and the human self as they actually are, which is to say, as they disclose the Reality of God. For those who have eyes to see, the cosmos and the human configuration, by their very nature and their very modality of being, point to God. And the fact of the repeated prophetic reminders leaves no excuse for not seeing and not remembering.

To sum up, the general Islamic understanding of the human situation is that correct knowledge of the world and the human soul demands that we freely and actively undertake the return to God. We return to God by remembering Him on every level of our being. To remember Him is to make the fact of His unity, the fact of His absolute and infinite Reality, the axis of our thought, speech, and activity. We do so by "worship", which is the appropriate response to *tawhîd* and prophecy. Thus the Quran speaks of *tawhîd* and worship as the two basic dimensions of every authentic tradition. God says in the Quran, "We never sent a Messenger before thee without revealing to him, 'There is no god but I, so worship Me'" (21:25).

3. For a detailed review of the three principles of faith and their role in formulating the Islamic worldview, see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St Paul: Paragon House, 1994), pp. 35-264.

## The Book of the Soul

A great deal could be said about the various forms that the practice of *dhikr* has taken, not only among those commonly known as "Sufis", but also among Muslims in general.<sup>4</sup> However, my purpose here is to review basic Islamic teachings about the universe and the self in order to suggest not only why *dhikr* is an efficacious contemplative practice, but also why, in actual fact, there is nothing else that we can do. On close analysis, we see that *dhikr* is the practice of God Himself and, along with Him, that of all of creation. Unless we understand this, we will not be able to grasp our human condition or to take advantage of it while we have it. Having failed to do so, "this world" will be "accursed" for us. At our inevitable return to God—when we shall finally recognize with utter certainty that we can do nothing but remember God—we shall taste the fruit of that accursedness.

Anyone familiar with the Quran knows that it speaks of God by detailing His names and activities. In the process, it goes to extraordinary lengths to emphasize that it is God's book, revelation, speech, and words. It maintains that all revelation to the prophets is nothing but God's speech, and that God speaks to the prophets so as to clarify the nature of things and to explain the appropriate human response. Moreover, it tells us repeatedly that God creates the world by speaking to it. Just as the Quran and other scriptures are collections of God's "signs" or "verses" (*âyat*), so also the whole universe is a vast collection of God's signs and verses. In effect, God creates the universe by revealing three books—the universe, the human self, and scripture. In each, He reveals His signs and writes out His words.

Once we understand that reality is configured by speech, we shall also see that the human task is to read and understand what has been written. Then we can follow the instructions laid out in the text of scripture, the world, and the soul. The interpretation of the Quran—which is the foundation and fruit of all the Islamic sciences—has always entailed the simultaneous interpretation of the universe and the soul. Every Muslim, by accepting the Quran as

4. The writings of many of the early Orientalists give the impression that the practice of *dhikr* was invented by the Sufis, probably under the influence of Christian monasticism or *japa yoga*. Although this view has largely been debunked by more careful scholarship, it can still be found in the secondary literature.

God's Word, has accepted the responsibility of understanding what this Word means. The fruit of this understanding redounds on the soul. Every soul will answer for its own reading, not only of the Quran, but also of the other two books, the universe and the soul. And, given the fact that it is the soul itself that reads and understands, the book of the soul is the all-important determinant of our destiny. This helps explain why, in recounting the events that will take place on the Day of Resurrection, the Quran tells us that every human being will be addressed by the words, "Read your book! Your soul suffices you today as a reckoner against you!" (17:14).

The crux of knowledge, then, is to read and know one's own soul. The whole trajectory of the voluntary return to God is to learn how to interpret oneself through understanding the wisdom present in both revelation and the cosmos. The return reaches its fruition on the Day of Resurrection. What we as human beings *should* want to learn is who we are now and who we will be when we arrive back at the meeting with God. All knowledge should serve the goal of this knowledge. As Rumi puts it,

The spirit of all the sciences is this, only this:  
that you know who you will be on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

In order to know who one is and who one will be, one must know one's relation with God, who created man in His own image. It is clear that the Divine speech creates the world and reveals the scriptures. It is this same speech that appears as the distinguishing feature of man, created in God's image. The same speech reveals the words of reminder, guidance, and prayer whereby man is able to remember his Source and undertake the return journey. And it is also this same speech that will be written plainly in the book of the soul on the Day of Resurrection. The human condition, then, demands knowing that everything we understand, speak, do, and embody is being written and recorded in our own selves.

### The Breath of the All-Merciful

Ibn Arabi, who is not known for his reticence, explicates the Divine and cosmic speech in enormous detail and in respect to practically every human possibility. In discussing the implications of

5. Rumi, *Mathnawî* (Nicholson edition), Book 3, verse 2654.

God's creation of the universe by speaking to it, he frequently elaborates on the expression "the Breath of the All-Merciful", which he takes from a prophetic saying. According to the Quran, it is God as the All-Merciful who sits on the Throne. The Throne is typically understood as the outermost sphere, which embraces the whole universe in its infinite spatial and temporal expanse. The King "sits on the Throne" because He is the King and the universe is His kingdom. He sits on it as the "All-Merciful" because the Divine mercy—which is the bestowal of the good, the beautiful, and the true—determines the fundamental nature of the universe. The Prophet tells us that the inscription on the Throne of God reads, "My mercy takes precedence over My wrath." Moreover, within the human microcosm, God's Throne is the heart. It follows that, just as nothing lies beyond the Throne in the macrocosm but God, so also nothing is found within the Throne of the microcosm but God.

When the All-Merciful speaks, He articulates His words in His Breath, just as we speak by articulating our words in our breath. It follows that the All-Merciful's "Breath" is the underlying substance of the universe. It is the page upon which God writes out the book of the cosmos.

The nature of the Divine words that appear in the Breath is suggested already in the derivation of the word *kalâm*, "speech". It comes from *kalm*, a word that the Arabic dictionaries define as *jarh*, which means to cut or wound with a weapon. *Jarh* in turn is explained more generally as meaning *ta'thîr*, which means to leave effects and traces (*athar*). Basing himself on these standard definitions, Ibn Arabi explains that the Divine speech leaves traces in the undifferentiated and unarticulated divine Breath. Each of these traces is then a "word" (*kalima*), that is, a "cut" or an "articulation" in undifferentiated existence. The Breath itself remains forever untouched and unarticulated by the words that it pronounces, just as our breath is unaffected by the words that we speak.

In the eternal now, God speaks one word, and that is the command "Be!" This word gives rise to the beginningless and endless succession of words and worlds that unfolds in the spiritual and corporeal realms. It is this one word "Be!" that bestows being, so all things are implicitly contained within it. God directs this one word toward everything which He wants to bring into existence. As the Quran puts it, "Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it 'Be!', so it comes to be" (16:40). The "things" (*ashyâ*) to whom

God speaks abide in what Ibn Arabi calls “nonexistence” (*ʿadam*), which is to say that they are nonexistent in themselves, though not unknown to God. In other terms, “nonexistence” is the realm of the Divine omniscience. God knows all things and all “entities” (*aʿyân*) for all eternity, but they have no existence of their own before He tells them to come to be. At that point, they become articulated within His Breath. Their “being” belongs not to them, but to the Divine Breath within which they are pronounced. Ibn Arabi writes,

Nothing becomes manifest in the cosmos except from the attribute of speech. Thus, the All-Merciful turns His face towards one of the entities, and then the individuality that He intends opens up within the Breath. (II 181.12)

Given that creatures are nothing but words uttered by God, our knowledge of things is our knowledge of the Divine words. As Ibn Arabi puts it, “The existence of created being has no root other than the Divine attribute of speech, for created being knows nothing of God but His speech, and that is what it hears” (II 352.14). If creatures know nothing but speech, this is because there is nothing else to be known. The speech that they know is the speech that says to themselves and to others “Be!” It never ceases belonging exclusively to God. This is why Ibn Arabi can write that the true attribute of creation is silence, just as the true attribute of God is speech. When “speech” is attributed to creation, it is done so only inasmuch as God has bestowed it, just as, when “being” is attributed to creation, it is done so only inasmuch as God has said “Be!” to it. Ibn Arabi writes,

God says, “There is nothing that does not glorify Him in praise” [17:44]. . . . We maintain that there is nothing whatsoever in existence that is silent. On the contrary, all things are speaking in laudation of God. In the same way, we maintain that there is nothing whatsoever in existence that speaks in respect of its own entity. On the contrary, every entity other than God is silent and without speech. Since all things are loci of manifestation [for God’s Being], speech belongs to [God, who is] the Manifest (II 77.13).

Elsewhere, Ibn Arabi makes the point in somewhat more detail:

The servant is silent and listening perpetually, in all of his states, whether moving or still, standing or sitting. For the servant has been granted the hearing of the Real’s speech. He never ceases hearing the Real’s command to come to be, whatever may be the states and guises in which he is coming to be. Neither the servant

nor the cosmos is empty for one moment of the inward existence of bringing to be. Hence he never ceases listening, so he never ceases being silent. It is not possible for him to enter along with Him in His speech. So, when you hear the servant speaking, that is the Real’s bringing to be within Him. The servant remains in his root, silent, standing before Him—high indeed is He! So, nothing is ever heard but the Real’s acts of bringing to be. Understand this, for it pertains to the core of true knowledge (III 218.30).

In short, God speaks through all things. As speakers, the things are “signs” or “verses” that give voice to the names and attributes of God. They are words pronounced in the All-Merciful Breath. They appear in three books—the book of the universe, the book of the soul, and the book of revelation.

### Knowledge of the Names

Islamic theology commonly calls creatures the “acts” (*afʿâl*) of God. Ibn Arabi explains that these acts are nothing but the “traces” (*athar*) of God’s names, the *vestigia Dei*. But what about the Divine names themselves? What exactly are they? Ibn Arabi writes that when we speak of names (*ism*)—whether we are talking about God or creatures—we are speaking about “something that occurs from a trace, or something from which a trace comes to be” (II 120.13). So again, a name, like other words, is a “cut” or an “articulation” in the plain fabric of universal Being.

The ultimate source of all names and all realities is of course the very Selfhood of God, called the “Essence” (*dhât*). In Himself, God knows everything that will appear in the universe for all eternity, because all things are simply the traces of His knowledge of His Essence, which is Infinite and Absolute Being. So, God knows not only His own names, but also the names of all things. If He calls Himself by many names both in the Quran and in other scriptures, it is because the traces of the names are infinitely diverse. As Ibn Arabi puts it, “God made the Divine names many only because of the diversity of the traces that are manifest in created being” (IV 36.19).

So, from a certain standpoint, the Divine names are the traces of all the Divine attributes and qualities that become manifest in creation. God names Himself in terms of the creatures, which are, after all, simply the words that He pronounces. Within the creatures, cer-

tain qualities can be discerned, and these can only be the qualities of their Creator, the one who pronounces the words. The words express nothing but the Speaker. The Divine Speaker is revealing Himself through His speech as Merciful, Alive, Knowing, Powerful, Speaking, and so on down the list of the so-called “ninety-nine names” of God.

All names, whether of God or of creation, are in the last analysis traces of the Divine Essence, which is the Absolute and Infinite Selfhood of the Real. In Itself, the Essence is without trace and unknowable to any but Itself. Nonetheless, man has been given the capacity to know all the names—all the traces displayed by the Essence, traces that are nothing but all things that can enter into existence. It is this potential omniscience that sets man apart from all other creatures. When the Prophet reiterated the Biblical statement, “God created Adam in His own image”, he certainly had in mind the fact that God had given Adam knowledge of all things. The Quran is explicit on this point: “He taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:31).

Ibn Arabi points out that it is precisely names that make *dhikr* possible. This is true not only for man, but also for God. The Quran often attributes *dhikr* to God, as in the verse, “Remember Me, and I will remember you” (2:152). God, after all, knows things through their “names”, which are nothing but their traces in His own omniscience, traces that are commonly called “essences” or “entities”. Ibn Arabi writes:

Adam was preferred over the angels only because he encompassed the knowledge of the names. For, were it not for the names, God would remember nothing, and nothing would remember God. So, God remembers only through the names, and He is remembered and praised only through the names (II 489.21).

In sum, the distinguishing feature of man is knowledge of all the names, which are the traces of the Divine qualities, or the traces of the Divine Essence Itself. In the creative act of the eternal now, God voices the names, and these names appear as the creatures in the All-Merciful Breath. The endless array of creatures other than man are specific words of God. Every creature has a certain “understanding” of God, but only in respect of the name or names that differentiate it from all other named things. Only man was taught all the names, making him somehow equivalent to all the creatures.

In the universe as a whole, the names are infinitely differentiated, but in the Divine image that is man, they are brought together in an all-comprehensive epitome. Adam received the all-inclusive knowledge of the names when God taught it to him, and he was able to know all the names precisely because he was made in the image of God, who knows and utters all things. In actual fact, Adam came to know and understand the names by knowing his own self, made in God’s image. This sort of knowledge does not come by the intermediacy of discursive thought, but rather directly from the nature of things. Thus, in the following passage, Ibn Arabi refers to it by a standard Sufi expression for unmediated knowledge, “tasting” (or “sapience” in the etymological sense: *dhawq*). He writes:

God taught Adam all the names from Adam’s own essence through tasting, for He disclosed Himself to him in His entirety. No name remained in the Divine Presence that did not become manifest to Adam from himself. From his own essence he came to know all the names of his Creator (II 120.24).

### Achieving the Status of Adam

Quranic theology, rooted in words, names, and remembrance, allows Muslim sages to understand the human role in the cosmos largely in terms of the achievement of true knowledge of God. This is a role that belongs exclusively to human beings, because they alone were created in God’s image, and they alone were given the potential to know all the names. Ibn Arabi explains this human uniqueness in many passages. In one of these, he begins by referring to the Quranic verse (2:30) that describes the protest of the angels when God told them that He was going to create Adam as His “vicegerent” (*khalifa*) in the earth:

The angels judged that Adam would bring about corruption because of what was manifest in his configuration. They saw that it would stand through the diverse, conflicting, and mutually averse natures. They knew that the traces of these roots must become manifest in him who possessed this configuration. However, if they had known Adam’s nonmanifest dimension, which is the reality of the image in which God created him, they would have seen themselves as a part of Adam’s creation.

The angels were ignorant of the Divine names that Adam obtained when his all-comprehensiveness was unveiled to him.

When Adam saw his own essence, he came to know his ground in all things and from all things. For the whole cosmos is the differentiation of Adam, and Adam is the all-comprehensive book. In relation to the cosmos he is like the spirit in relation to the body.

Thus, man is the spirit of the cosmos, and the cosmos is the body. Through both together the cosmos is the macro-anthropos [*al-insân al-kabîr*], so long as man is within it. But, if you look at the cosmos alone, without man, you will find that it is like a body, proportioned and made ready, but without a spirit. The perfection of the cosmos through man is like the perfection of the body through the spirit (II 67.25).<sup>6</sup>

Although man was created as the perfection of the cosmos, or as the active spirit that governs the world's receptive body, any given individual does not necessarily live up to the human role. Clearly, the whole point of the prophetic messages is to remind people that they need to exert their own efforts in order to achieve the perfection of the Divine image that is their birthright. Moreover, given that they cannot see things as they are without Divine help, they need prophetic instructions in order to exert themselves correctly.

Ibn Arabi calls those who do achieve the fullness of human stature "perfect man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*). The historical examples of those who reached this status are provided by the prophets and some of the saints. However this may be, the fact remains that most people remain at the level of what he calls "animal man" (*al-insân al-hayawân*). He reserves the attribute "perfect" precisely for the greatest of all human beings. He tells us, for example, that in every other sort of creature in the universe, some are "complete" (*tâmm*), but none are perfect. "Nothing is perfect save through this perfect, human configuration. When he is not perfect, he is the animal human, named by the definition 'rational animal' [*hayawân nâtiq*]" (IV 75.7).

Perfect human beings actualize God's goal in creating the universe. That goal is explained mythically in the famous *hadîth*, "I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known, so I created the creatures that I might be known." Only human beings can know God in the fullness of His divinity, because only they were created in His total image. Indeed, this knowledge of God is demanded by the

6. Ibn Arabi makes the same basic points, though in rather convoluted and obscure language, at the beginning of the chapter on Adam in his famous book, *Fusûs al-hikam*, "The Bezels of Wisdom".

Qurānic verse that states God's purpose in creating man: "I created *jinn* and mankind only to worship Me." As the Prophet's companion Ibn Abbas already explained, "to worship Me" (*ya 'budûni*) means "to know Me" (*ya 'rifûni*).

Especially significant here is this word "know", which also means "to re-cognize". The Arabic word implies that this knowledge is the recovery of a misplaced, innate knowledge. In other words, we come to remember what we have forgotten. It is this same knowledge that is mentioned in the famous saying attributed to the Prophet, constantly quoted in Sufi texts, "He who knows himself knows his Lord"; or "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord". In other words, he who recognizes himself for the creature of God that he actually is will recognize His Lord for the God that He actually is. The two verbal nouns deriving from this verb—*ma'rifah* and *'irfân*—are frequently translated as "gnosis". Both are used to designate unmediated knowledge of God.

In one passage, Ibn Arabi explains the purpose of creation as the "worship" that is "recognition" or "gnosis". He points out that human beings are the means whereby this purpose is achieved:

Human beings are intended by the existence of the world by the second intention, not the first intention. As for the first intention, what was intended by the creation of the world was the worship of God, I mean, worship through recognition [*'irfân*] of the perfection of existence that is achieved by contingent things (IV 75.6).

In short, the only creature—the only contingent thing—that can recognize God in the fullness of His reality and that can know Him in all His names is man. In one of the many passages in which he sums up the significance of human existence, Ibn Arabi writes as follows:

Since creation has many levels, and since the most perfect level is occupied by man, each kind within the cosmos is a part with regard to the perfection of man. Even animal man is a part of perfect man. So, every knowledge of God belonging to a part of the cosmos is a partial knowledge, except in the case of man, for his knowledge of God is the knowledge of God possessed by all the cosmos. This knowledge of God is a universal knowledge [*'ilm kullî*], though not a knowledge of all [*'ilm kullî*]. Were it a knowledge of all, he would not have been commanded to say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge!" [20:114]. Do you think that [the knowledge he is commanded to seek] is knowledge through other than God? No, by God, it is knowledge through God!

So, He created perfect man in His image, and through the image He gave him the ability to have all of His names ascribed to him, one by one, or in groups, though all the names together are not ascribed to him in a single word—thereby the Lord is distinguished from the perfect servant. Hence there is none of the most beautiful names—and all of God’s names are most beautiful—by which the perfect servant is not called, just as he calls his Master by them (III 409.16).

### The House of God

In the diverse creatures of the cosmos other than man—on whatever level they may dwell, from spiritual and angelic to corporeal and sensory—the traces of God’s names and attributes are externalized as the specific and unique characteristics of each thing. Every creature in the universe “knows” God in a specific, differentiated, and determined way, defined by the attributes that the thing displays, or by the “word” that it embodies; each thing gives news of God and displays His signs through occupying its specific niche in the never-repeated speech of God that is the universe.

In contrast, in the multileveled reality that is the human self, the traces of God’s names and attributes are relatively internalized. The traces extend from the corporeal to the spiritual realm, and they circle around their *Ka’bah*, which is the heart, the luminous center of the being, the spirit that God blew into Adam at his creation. Man alone is given the potential to know God in a global, synthetic manner, because man alone is created in the image not of one or of several specific names, but in the image of the all-comprehensive name Allah, which designates God as such, in both His absoluteness and His infinity, His Essence and His attributes, His incomparability and His similarity, His transcendence and His immanence.

If the fullness of *‘ibâda*—“worship” and “service”—is to remember God in a manner appropriate to His total reality, it is obvious that only man, made in God’s image, can be a “servant” (*‘abd*) of God. Nonetheless, in a narrower sense, *‘ibâda* simply means serving God’s purposes, and in this sense everything worships God, because a contingent being can do nothing but serve the Absolute Being from which it draws its entire self. As the Quran puts it, “None is there in the heavens and the earth that comes not to the All-merciful as a servant” (19:93). Each thing worships and serves

God in its own specific mode of being. Each creature has a status determined by the manner in which God has articulated it as a word in His Breath. However, man has no specific mode of being, because his awareness and consciousness have no inner limits. Only he is a global image of the All-Knowing and the All-Aware. In effect, man has the potential to be the outward image of the All-Merciful Breath itself, the manifestation of all of Being and of all of the Divine names and attributes.

Man’s distinctive status means that only he can fulfill the final purpose of creation, which is for God to be worshiped and served not simply in the passive way that all creatures serve Him, but also in the active way achieved by full consciousness of the Hidden Treasure and the free acceptance of everything that this demands. This is why, according to Ibn Arabi, man’s function as vicegerent of God fulfills the creative process and achieves its purpose. So central is the human role that, if it were not fulfilled, the world would simply disintegrate.

God made this earth a place for the vicegerency. Hence it is the abode of His kingdom and the site of His deputy, who becomes manifest through the properties of His names. So, from the earth He created us. Within it He gave us residence, whether alive or dead. And from it He will bring us forth through the Uprising in the last configuration. Thus, worship never leaves us wherever we may be, in this world and the afterworld, for, even though the afterworld is not an abode of [religious] prescription [*taklif*], it is an abode of worship.

Among us, whoever ceaselessly witnesses that for which he was created in this world and the next is the perfect servant, the intended goal of the cosmos, and the deputy of the whole cosmos. Were all the cosmos—the high of it and the low of it—to be heedless of God’s remembrance for a single moment, and were this servant to remember Him, he would take the place of the whole cosmos through that remembrance, and the existence of the cosmos would be preserved through him. However, if the human servant were to be heedless of remembrance, the cosmos could not take his place in that. That of it which is empty of the human being who remembers would go to ruin. The Prophet said, “The Hour will not come as long as there remains in the earth someone who is saying ‘Allah, Allah’” (III 248.12).

To review my main points, the worldview of Islam depicts God, the universe, man, and prophecy in terms of words and speech. The three principles of faith—unity, prophecy, and the Return—are all

understood in terms of God's names and naming. Man's task is to respond to his situation by remembering the names of things—that is, the real and actual names of things, which are the things inasmuch as they designate the Divine Reality, or inasmuch as they are articulations of the Divine Speech.

This human task can be accomplished only in the "heart", a word that designates the unlimited realm of human awareness and consciousness. The heart alone, among all created things, is given the capacity to encompass God. As the famous extra-Quranic Divine saying puts it, "My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me." To remember God fully and actually is to find Him sitting within the heart, which is His Throne in the microcosm. As Ibn Arabi writes,

God took the heart of His servant as a house, for He made it the locus of knowledge of Him—the knowledge that is gnosis [*irfân*], not theory [*nazar*]. He defended the house with zeal and jealousy, lest it be a locus for others.

The servant is all-comprehensive. Inescapably, the Real becomes manifest to the servant in sundry forms, or in the form of everything, for the servant is the locus for the knowledge of all things. And there is no locus of knowledge except the heart. But the Real is jealous of His servant's heart, lest anything other than his Lord be within it. Therefore He showed the heart that He is the form of everything and identical with everything, for the servant's heart embraces everything. The reason for this is that everything is Real, because nothing embraces things but the Real. Whoever knows the Real in respect of His Realness has known everything.

However, someone who knows a thing does not thereby know the Real, nor [does he know it] in reality. The servant who supposes that he knows a *thing* does not in fact know it, for if he did know it, he would know that it is the Real. Thus, as long as he does not know that it is the Real, we say concerning him that he does not know it (IV 7.7).

Knowledge of things as they actually are can only come through knowing them as disclosures of the Real, as signs and traces displaying God's names and attributes. This is not a theoretical sort of knowledge, but a knowledge of recognition and gnosis. It is to gain a true vision of the Divine omnipresence, the fact that, as the Quran puts it, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). Such knowledge comes by way of *dhikr*, which is *al-hudûr ma`a'l-madhkûr*, "presence with the One Remembered".

It is only this sort of knowledge that allows man to see that everything in this world is accursed if he does not see it as displaying the Real, and that he himself is accursed to the extent that he does not know that things do in fact display the Real. Once we see the world for what it is, we see that it is nothing but *dhikr Allâh*—a reminder of God, a mention of God, a remembrance of God. Our response to the world can only be to follow its lead—to mention and to remember God. "Everything is accursed," says the *hadîth*, "except *dhikr Allâh*." But *everything* is *dhikr Allâh*, so *nothing* is accursed. The alchemy of *dhikr* transmutes the accursed into the blessed. The place of that *dhikr*, where God becomes truly present and man becomes truly blessed, is the heart.

Let me leave you with this bit of advice from Ibn Arabi:

The greatest sin is what brings about the death of the heart. It dies only by not knowing God. This is what is named "ignorance". For the heart is the house that God has chosen for Himself in this human configuration. But such a person has misappropriated the house, coming between it and its Owner.

A person like that is the one who most wrongs himself, for he has deprived himself of the good that would have come to him from the Owner of the house—had he left the house to Him. This is the deprivation of ignorance (III 179.6).



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