

The Anthropology of Compassion¹

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Ibn 'Arabī has commonly been called al-Shaykh al-Akbar, 'the Greatest Teacher', not least because he explained in unprecedented detail and at the highest level of discourse all the implications of the Islamic worldview. The result was a vast synthesis of the basic fields of learning, including Quran, Hadith, language, law, psychology, cosmology, theology, philosophy, and metaphysics. In delving into these subjects, he wanted to show how each can act as an aid in the actualization of true human nature. But what exactly is true human nature? This is what I am calling 'anthropology' – the science of the *anthropos* – the explication of which lies at the heart of Ibn 'Arabī's writings. To get at what he is saying, however, we need to begin where he begins, and that is with the governing axiom of the Islamic worldview, *tawhīd*, or the assertion of unity.

Literally, *tawhīd* means to say one or to assert one. Technically, its first meaning is to utter the formula, '(There is) no god but God'. The simplest way of bringing out *tawhīd*'s implications is to place any Quranic name of God into the formula. God is Creator. It follows that there is no creator but God. God is Knowing. It follows that there is none knowing but God. God is Compassionate. It follows that there is none compassionate but God. In short, the formula means that all real qualities belong exclusively to the Ultimate Reality and that, simultaneously, all qualities of created things are essentially unreal. When we talk about ourselves or others using words like creativity, knowledge, and compassion, our words are more like metaphors than statements of the actual situation. In our case these

1. This paper was first presented as the keynote address at the conference entitled "Islam, Sufism and the Heart of Compassion" in Manhattan, sponsored by MIAS and the New York Open Center in November 2009.

divine attributes do not designate what they seem to designate; they are rather pale imitations or distant reflections of the true Reality. The truth of the situation is that there is no true reality but the absolute reality of the Real. This is the fundamental insight of *tawhīd*. Working out its implications has been the preoccupation of all schools of Islamic thought, not least theology, philosophy, and Sufism. No one has been as thorough in accomplishing this task as Ibn ‘Arabī.

RAHMA

I chose ‘anthropology of compassion’ as my title because I wanted to think about how Ibn ‘Arabī might have approached the theme of this conference – ‘Islam, Sufism, and the Heart of Compassion’. Given his constant stress on the unity of God, his first order of concern would be to show why God is essentially compassionate, perhaps even more so than he is anything else, and why compassion should be our own concern, perhaps even more so than anything else.

It is not necessarily clear how the word compassion should be translated into Arabic. *Webster’s Third* gives it a relatively straightforward definition: ‘deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and the concomitant desire to promote its alleviation’. Among the Quranic divine names, several have meanings that overlap with this definition, and each of these is explained in detail in Islamic texts. Ibn ‘Arabī frequently takes pains to distinguish among the meanings of God’s ‘most beautiful names’ and he devotes one of the longest chapters of his monumental *Meccan Openings* to this task (Chapter 558).

However this may be, it is fairly clear that the best word to render our notion of compassion is *rahma*, though I prefer to translate it as ‘mercy’ because of the broader range of appropriate connotations. *Webster’s* tells us that mercy means ‘compassion or forbearance shown to an offender or subject: clemency or kindness extended to someone instead of strictness or severity’. Thus compassion and mercy are near synonyms, but mercy connotes a choice of kindness rather than severity, a choice of clemency rather than strictness. This makes mercy a better

choice in translating the most important theological principle in Ibn 'Arabī's writings after *tawhīd*, a principle expressed in the Prophet's well-known saying, 'God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath'.

With *tawhīd* in view, it becomes clear that the precedence of *rahma* is more than a mere 'choice' on God's part, for there is nothing at all arbitrary about it. In human terms, we can choose to be kind rather than severe, clement rather than strict. God, however, has no choice, because mercy pertains to the very stuff of reality. He cannot give priority to wrath over mercy, to severity over gentleness, because that would be to give priority to unreality over reality, to nonexistence over existence, to others rather than to himself. It would contradict the foundational truth upon which the universe is built, the fact that there is no reality but God, there is no true existence but God's existence.

Wrath, severity, and strictness have feeble supports in the nature of things, even if those supports are real enough in relation to us, because our own supports are rather feeble. In the grand picture, wrath and severity have no sway with God. This is a recurrent theme in Ibn 'Arabī's writings. He sees it expressed clearly by the Quranic verse in which God says, 'My mercy embraces everything' (7: 156). He often reminds us that the Quran never says anything remotely similar about wrath or severity or vengeance. He tells us over and over that everything will find its final resting place with mercy, because mercy is real, and all else is unreal. In a typical passage, he writes,

The final issue will be at mercy, because the actual situation inscribes a circle. The end of the circle curves back to the beginning and joins it. The end has the property of the beginning, and that is nothing but Being. 'Mercy takes precedence over wrath', because the beginning was through mercy. Wrath is an accident, and accidents disappear.²

Notice that in this passage, Ibn 'Arabī uses the word 'Being' – Arabic *wujūd* – as a synonym for mercy. From the time of Avicenna (d.1037), who died 117 years before Ibn 'Arabī's birth, *wujūd* was

2. *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. IV, p. 405, line 7.

a standard way to designate the stuff of reality. By Ibn 'Arabī's time, the word was used to mean 'existence' or 'being' not only by philosophers, but also by many theologians and Sufis. As soon as we consider the notion in terms of *tawhīd*, it becomes clear that there is no *wujūd* but God's *wujūd*, no true being but the Being of the Real. Al-Ghazālī, the famous theologian, philosopher, and Sufi who flourished in the period between Avicenna and Ibn 'Arabī, often speaks of *wujūd* in terms of *tawhīd*. He commonly uses the formula *lays fi'l-wujūd illa'llāh* – 'There is nothing in *wujūd* but God' – meaning that God alone truly exists, and everything else is a passing cloud.

Although 'being' or 'existence' is usually adequate to bring out *wujūd*'s meaning in philosophical texts, this is not so in Ibn 'Arabī's writings. In the Quran and in everyday Arabic, the word means 'to find'. The philosophers took the passive sense – 'to be found' – as a designation for the Greek notion of existence. The logic of this choice is fairly clear: what exists is either that which is found or that which might be found if we had the right perceptual faculties. Sufis and some theologians, in contrast to philosophers, paid attention to the meaning of the word in the Quran, where God is often the subject of the verb. Hence they included the name *al-wājid*, 'the Finder', in discussions of God's most beautiful names. Al-Ghazālī, for example, tells us that the Finder designates God as he who finds everything and lacks nothing.³ Ibn 'Arabī discusses the name in detail in his chapter on the divine names under the heading *hadrat al-wijdān*, 'The Presence of Finding'.⁴ Sufis had used the word *wujūd* in the sense of finding long before they used it to mean existence. For them, it is a divine attribute that designates awareness and consciousness.

In Ibn 'Arabī's vocabulary, *wujūd* means either existence or consciousness, or both at once. For him what exists is found and also finds, even if we do not understand how it finds. As for what does not exist, it is not found, nor does it find. In

3. *al-Maqsad al-asnā fi sharh ma'ānī asmā' Allāh al-husnā*, edited by Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971), p. 143.

4. *Futūhāt* IV.292–93.

short, the same word designates both being and consciousness. To declare that something exists but does not find is based on a misperception rather than the actual situation.

By Ibn 'Arabī's time, philosophers and theologians often discussed God as the Necessary *Wujūd* – the Being that must be and cannot not be. Ibn 'Arabī sometimes uses the same terminology, but he stresses a side of the discussion that earlier thinkers often forgot. God, he says, is the Real *Wujūd*, and everything other than God has an ambiguous status. This means not only that there is no being but God, but also that there is no consciousness but God. Any other being and any other consciousness is neither real being nor real consciousness. Rather, it is a shadow of *wujūd*, or its reflection, like an image in a mirror. In the last analysis, being and consciousness do not belong to anything other than God, who is the Necessary Being and the Necessary Consciousness. Rather, being and consciousness – like all other positive attributes – are loans from God. In order for these attributes to subsist in created things, God must constantly bestow them anew. This is to say that God is essentially real – he is real by his very Essence and cannot be unreal in any respect whatsoever. In contrast, things, creatures, people – all things other than God – are essentially unreal, because any being and consciousness they may have does not pertain to their own essences, but is rather the on-going bestowal of Real *Wujūd*.

I need to make a slight detour here in order to remind you that for the past four or five centuries, Muslim scholars and, following in their wake, modern Western scholars, have usually claimed that Ibn 'Arabī's main teaching is *wahdat al-wujūd*, 'the Oneness of Being' or 'the Unity of Existence'. Typically, those who have said this have misrepresented what he was actually saying. He himself never used this expression, and the first person to claim that he believed in *wahdat al-wujūd* was the Hanbali polemicist Ibn Taymiyya, who lived a hundred years after him. Ibn Taymiyya defined *wahdat al-wujūd* in a way that allowed him to call Ibn 'Arabī a heretic and an unbeliever. His attack turned an inconspicuous expression, hardly used by previous thinkers, into a controversial term that is still debated today. Both sides of the debate have accepted unthinkingly

and without examining Ibn 'Arabī's writings that he did believe in *wahdat al-wujūd*, but they define the expression in terms of their own theological or philosophical positions, not in terms of how Ibn 'Arabī himself might have understood it had he used it.⁵ Anyone who wants to claim that Ibn 'Arabī was teaching *wahdat al-wujūd* should be careful to point out that it is not his expression, and that all attempts to explain what he meant by it are inspired by the debates that occurred after his death once the term came into vogue. It would be much fairer to avoid the expression altogether and to say simply that Ibn 'Arabī based his perspective on *tawhīd* and also talked a great deal about the Real *Wujūd* that belongs exclusively to God. In other words, he held, like al-Ghazālī and many others, that there is no true being but God's being, no true life but God's life, no true consciousness but God's consciousness, and no true compassion but God's compassion.

MERCY AND LOVE

This brings me back to *rahma*, mercy or compassion. The Quran uses the word frequently and derives four divine names from the same root, the most prominent of which are *rahmān* and *rahīm*. Grammatically, these two names mean practically the same thing, but theologians differentiated between them on the basis of Quranic usage. We can translate them as 'the All-merciful' and 'the Ever-merciful' and thereby suggest something of their differing connotations. The names are part of the formula of consecration that begins almost every chapter of the Quran: 'In the name of God, the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful'.

When theologians wrote books explaining God's most beautiful names, they would typically explain 'the All-merciful, the Ever-merciful' immediately after the name God (*Allāh*) itself. The Quran provides good evidence for suggesting that *rahma*

5. For the history of the expression and the debate, see Chittick, 'Rūmī and *Wahdat al-wujūd*', *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, edited by A. Banani, R. Hovannisian and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 70–111.

is in fact synonymous with the divinity or godhead, as in the verse, 'Call upon God or call upon the All-merciful; whichever you call upon, to Him belong the most beautiful names' (17: 110). If a distinction can be drawn between God and the All-merciful, it is that the latter demands, by the very meaning of the word, attention to others. This is not the case with the name God – that is, not until we specify exactly what is meant by it, which is typically done by citing other divine names that are included in its meaning, such as Creator.

One way to understand the sense of the Arabic word *rahma* is to look at its derivation, as Ibn 'Arabī and others often do. *Rahma* is an abstract noun designating the qualities and characteristics of the concrete noun *rahim*, 'womb'. *Rahma* signifies all the traits associated with the womb and the mother. The mother never ceases being her children's womb, and the specific type of love that she has for the fruit of her womb is analogous to the mercy that the All-merciful has for his creation. As the Prophet said, God divided mercy into one hundred parts and kept ninety-nine parts for himself. He gave the remaining part to mothers, both human and animal, and this *rahma* drives them to care for their young. After the resurrection, God will re-unite the one part with the ninety-nine parts. Ibn 'Arabī explains something of the implications of this hadith in the following terms:

Once the Day of Resurrection has come and once God's judgment, decree, and determination by means of this one mercy have penetrated the universe; and once the calling to account has been completed and the people have taken up their dwelling places in the two abodes [paradise and hell], then God will add this one mercy to the ninety-nine mercies, so there will be one hundred. He will send down mercy unconditionally upon His creatures in the two abodes, so it will pervade and embrace everything.⁶

6. *Futūhāt* I.423.34. For more on the mercy that will eventually embrace all creatures, even the denizens of hell, see Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), Chapter 9.

LOVE

One might conclude from various discussions of *rahma* in Islamic texts that it designates God's love for creation, and this is true enough. However, we need to keep in mind that the Quran and Muslim thinkers draw a clear distinction between love (*hubb*, *wudd*, '*ishq*') and *rahma*. This is because mercy is unidirectional – it comes from God to human beings, not the other way around. People can be merciful and compassionate toward each other, but they cannot be merciful and compassionate toward God. As for love, it is bidirectional. The Quran says, 'He loves them, and they love Him' (5: 54). This verse, which affirms the mutuality of love between God and human beings, lies at the heart of the tremendous stress on love that is generally found in Sufism, as, for example, in Rūmī.

Given Sufism's focus on transforming the human soul, love plays a prominent role for an obvious reason: the goal of the two lovers is to become one. God created the universe out of love for human beings. As their lover, God wanted them to love him in return. Hence he sends messages of love through the prophets. Shams-i Tabrīzī, Rūmī's famous teacher, said that the Quran is God's love-letter ('*ishq-nāma*') to his servants.⁷ On the human side, we cannot achieve fulfilment until we recognize that our only true object of love is God, because he alone is truly real. As Aristotle had affirmed and as Muslim philosophers insisted, all creatures are in love with God, whether they know it or not, because he alone is the reality that they truly desire. *Tawhīd* expresses the point succinctly with the formula, 'There is no beloved but God'. Moreover, 'There is no lover but God'. In the last analysis, human love for God and for anything else is God's love for himself. We, however, will never reach union with our real beloved until we wake up to our true nature.

Reaching union – that is, re-establishing the primordial unity that was the situation before God created the universe – is the ultimate goal of the two lovers, who are God and man. On the

7. Chittick, *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 156.

human side, union is achieved by the actualization of *tawhīd*. Most dogmatic theologians (*mutakallimūn*), of course, had an abhorrence of the notion of union, not least because of their fixation on the rational demonstration of God's transcendence. As Ibn 'Arabī points out,

If we had remained with our rational proofs – which, in the opinion of the rational thinkers, establish knowledge of God's Essence, showing that 'He is not like this' and 'not like that' – no created thing would ever have loved God.⁸

As for Ibn 'Arabī, he saw reference to God's invitation to love and union throughout the Quran and the Hadith. He was especially fond of a prophetic saying that tells us that when the seeker achieves nearness to God through good works, God will love him. Then, when God loves him, God is the hearing through which the seeker hears, the eyesight through which he sees, the hand through which he holds, and the feet through which he walks. In other words, the human lover and the divine lover have become one.

THE ALL-MERCIFUL BREATH

The Quran's constant mention of God's mercy and compassion makes it clear that *rahma* designates the very reality of the godhead as it relates to us. Ibn 'Arabī develops the logical implications of this Quranic language. Given that God's mercy embraces everything, it follows that 'The universe is identical with mercy, nothing else'.⁹ Mercy is in effect a Quranic name for what the philosophers called *wujūd*: 'The abode of mercy is the abode of *wujūd*'.¹⁰

If mercy embraces everything, it is because all things – whether or not they exist at any given time – are present in

8. *Futūhāt* II.326.13. For the quote in more context, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), p. 180.

9. *Futūhāt* II.437.24.

10. *Futūhāt* IV.4.32.

the divine consciousness, the divine finding, the divine *wujūd*, which is the abode of mercy. And, if things are found in the world – when they do exist as seemingly independent entities – it is because the divine mercy has bestowed existence upon them and is nurturing and sustaining them. Without the motherly attribute of mercy, nothing would exist.

To drive home the utter centrality of mercy and compassion for all of existence – or rather, to demonstrate the fact that our existence is nothing but the divine mercy – Ibn ‘Arabī has recourse to the recurring Quranic theme of God’s creation of the universe through speech. Genesis tells us that God created the world by saying, ‘Let there be light’. The Quran says that he created it by saying, ‘Be!’ It also says that if all the oceans were ink, and all the trees were pens, God’s words would not be exhausted (18: 109, 31: 27). Referring to these verses, Ibn ‘Arabī says, ‘All the entities of the existent things are words of the Real, and they do not “become exhausted”.’¹¹ Or again: ‘God’s “words” are nothing other than the forms of the possible things, and they are infinite.’¹²

The relationship between the divine words and God himself can be understood from the analogy of our words to our breath. God’s creation, says Ibn ‘Arabī, is ‘the Breath of the All-merciful’, because the All-merciful designates the godhead as overflowing goodness, manifestation, and creativity. Breath is the stuff of speech, so God, like us, speaks by articulating his breath. Our spoken words are nothing but our breath, and our breath is nothing but ourselves. So also the All-merciful’s words are nothing but his Breath, and his Breath is himself. Without his Breath, there would be no words, no creatures. The universe is simply the sum total of the words articulated by the All-merciful.

Mercy, it was said, is a Quranic designation for *wujūd*, which means being and consciousness. The All-merciful is the Infinite Being and Consciousness that gives of itself to all things. It gives of itself by speaking, by uttering the creatures, by articulating

11. *Futūhāt* III.556.9.

12. *Futūhāt* IV.166.34.

all things within its own realm of being and consciousness. It is this articulation that individuates the things and gives them the being through which they know and become conscious of the world, themselves, and God.

When we speak, our words immediately dissipate and disappear, never achieving independent reality. When God speaks, he says, 'Be!' – a word that Ibn 'Arabī calls 'the word of the (Divine) Presence'. This utterance is eternal, which is to say that it is always and forever voiced by God. It is the creative Logos that articulates all words, all worlds, all beings – everything other than God. In contrast to this eternal Word, God's individual words – that is, all things – constantly perish, just as our spoken words disappear. If we do not perceive ourselves as perishing, this is because God does not cease uttering our names. If we could see clearly, we would understand that each moment of our existence is a new utterance, even if, from God's unitary point of view, there is only the word 'Be!'

Ibn 'Arabī famously expresses the notion of God's on-going articulation of His words as 'the renewal of creation at each instant'. Not only is creation constantly renewed, but also no two moments and no two things can ever be exactly the same. Sameness would mean repetition, but God is infinite, far too vast to repeat himself in any respect.

THE HUMAN ROLE

In this grand picture, the divine mercy infuses everything that exists. Is there anything that makes human beings special? The answer is yes, everything. First, whose picture is it? This picture is offered by a human being in human language for the benefit of human understanding. The Quran itself was revealed in human language for human beings and provides numerous verses highlighting the unique status of man. For example, the story of Adam, as retold in the Quran, makes clear that God created man to be his representative on earth, taught him all the names, gave him superiority over the angels, bestowed on him a trust that no other creature was able to carry, and so on. The Prophet summed up the root of this anthropology with

the saying, 'God created Adam in His own form'. The Chapter of the Quran known as 'the All-merciful' (55) makes the point right at the beginning: 'The All-merciful ... He created man. He taught him the explication'. In creating man, the All-merciful taught him all the names, the understanding of all things, the explication of all that there is. He did so by creating him in his own form – the form of all-embracing mercy. The human task is to recover what we possess in our deepest selves but have forgotten or refuse to acknowledge.

The Islamic anthropology that Ibn 'Arabī unpacks with unprecedented detail and profundity can be summed up in these terms: the All-merciful created man so that man might participate to the fullest possible measure in mercy, compassion, love, blessing, benefit, and everything good and beautiful. The All-merciful could not simply create man as full participants in mercy, because full participation means consciousness and awareness not only of the good, but also of the evil of not having the good; and for that knowledge, people need to be thoroughly exposed to the realm of illusory reality that is 'everything other than God'. The consciousness and awareness that they achieve is itself *wujūd*, being and existence. It is actualization of the full implications of the divine names infused into Adam. Adam could not have actualized this awareness without first 'forgetting', which, in the Quran, was the cause of his fall from the divine presence. Only then could he recognize and experience the unlimited possibilities of manifestation and otherness present in God's *wujūd* and articulated through his Breath.

Angels were created as conscious participants in the divine mercy but, precisely because they cannot forget God, they cannot depart from him, nor can they approach any closer. They can neither expand nor contract. They are, as the Quran puts it and as Ibn 'Arabī explains, fixed in their stations.¹³ In contrast, human beings were created without fixed stations. God created them in his own form, which embraces all the divine names, every possible designation of *Wujūd* in itself, every possible articulation of the Breath.

13. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 295.

God is free from all outside constraint, for there is nothing outside his Necessary Being. When he created man in his own form, he created him with the freedom to deny him. This is to say that people have sufficient freedom to choose between the beautiful and the ugly, the merciful and the wrathful, the right and the wrong, the true Beloved and illusory objects of love. If they make the right choices, they can rise up in station and ascend toward an ever-increasing participation in goodness, beauty, and mercy. If they make the wrong choices, they will become more constricted and confined in station, and they will descend, by virtue of their own freedom to act, away from mercy and compassion. Human beings hover in an infinite realm of ambiguity – which Ibn ‘Arabī calls ‘nondelimited imagination’ – situated between Infinite Being and absolute nothingness. Their true perfection lies in rising up to the fullness of the divine form in which they were created, a form that embraces every possibility of *Wujūd*.

One of the many ways in which Ibn ‘Arabī and others discuss the quest to ascend back to the All-merciful is to employ the language of ethics, or rather ‘character traits’, *akhlāq*. Concerning the Prophet, the Quran says that he had a ‘magnificent character’ (68: 4), using the singular of this word. The Prophet’s character was often described as the sum total of a number of character traits, and these traits were called ‘the divine character traits’. They were understood as nothing other than the divine names in the form of which man was created. Ibn ‘Arabī and many others tell us that the goal of the prophetic teachings is to guide human beings in the path of ‘becoming characterized by the character traits of God’ (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). It is precisely this focus on achieving transformation that differentiates the path of the Sufis from that of other Muslim teachers, such as jurists, who specialize in law, and theologians, who specialize in the rational analysis of the creed. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s words, ‘Becoming characterized by the character traits of God – that is Sufism’.¹⁴ He also has a great deal to say about the example set

14. *Futūhāt* II.267.11. For a discussion of this theme, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 283ff.

by the Prophet in actualizing all the divine character traits. It is no accident, he tells us, that God says to Muhammad in the Quran, 'We sent you only as a *rahma* to all the worlds' (21: 107). *Rahma* is the designation for the global human perfection that is actualized when man becomes characterized by the character traits of God.

Ibn 'Arabī devotes a good deal of his writing to explaining the manner in which human beings should go about actualizing the character traits innate to the divine form. He does so in terms of the priorities demanded by *Wujūd* itself, the Mercy that is the source of all. This is why he typically unpacks the implications of the foundational axiom of thought, *tawhīd*, by working out the meaning of its first corollary, which is prophecy. Several of his books are structured around the notion of the multiplicity of the prophets, who made manifest, each in his own specific way, the Unity of Mercy. Naturally, he pays special attention to the final prophet, Muhammad, and the instructions that he provided for travelling the path to God. After all, the Quran says, addressing Muhammad, 'Say: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you"' (3: 31). The full actualization of the divine mercy comes about when the two lovers unite, and this depends on following in the path of the Prophet.

Ibn 'Arabī brings out the importance of the Prophet's example in many ways, not least by paying close attention to the ritual instructions provided by the Quran, a book which, as the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha said, is itself the Prophet's 'character'. People with little familiarity with Ibn 'Arabī's writings are usually surprised to learn that the longest chapter of his *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* or *Meccan Openings* – a chapter, by the way, that is more than twice as long as his most famous book, *Fusūs al-hikam*¹⁵ – is devoted to explaining the significance of the ritual prayer that practising Muslims perform five times a day. Among other things, Ibn 'Arabī cites and explains a whole range of differing accounts of the words and acts involved in the prayer – accounts that were offered by the scholars of Islam from the beginning.

15. 50,000 vs. 110,000 words.

One section of the chapter on prayer is devoted to a supplication that the Prophet used to recite after the formal beginning of the prayer and before the recitation of the Quran's first chapter. It includes these two sentences: 'Guide me to the most beautiful character traits – none guides to the most beautiful among them but You. Divert me from the ugly character traits – none diverts from the ugly among them but You.'¹⁶ Notice the typical stress on *tawhīd*. The Quran calls God 'the Guide', and *tawhīd* teaches that 'There is no guide but God'. Hence, beautiful character traits – merciful and compassionate character traits – cannot be achieved without divine guidance. The first corollary of *tawhīd*, however, reminds us that the prophets are precisely the 'guides' whom God appointed for the human race.

This supplication summarizes the notion of *tazkiyat al-nafs*, 'purification of the soul', which is often taken as a synonym for Sufi practice. People are called upon to purify their souls in order to rid themselves of ugly character traits and 'become characterized by the character traits of God' – a characterization which, as I noted, Ibn 'Arabī identifies with the Sufi path. Without becoming God-like, in other words, it is impossible to actualize in oneself the implications of the anthropology of compassion, for there is none merciful but God, and none compassionate but God.

THE MOST PERFECT LETTER OF THE ALPHABET

Let me end by quoting a short passage from the beginning of Ibn 'Arabī's long chapter dedicated to 'the Breath of the All-merciful' in the *Meccan Openings* (Chapter 198). In it he develops the imagery of the divine speech in great detail, pointing out, for example that God creates the cosmos in twenty-eight levels of being, each of which corresponds to one letter of the Arabic alphabet. This alphabet has three arrangements, the most common of which (*abtath*) is like our A-B-C. The next most common (*abjad*) is based on the numerical value of the letters – 1, 2, 3. The least common is based on the order in which the letters

16. *Futūhāt* I.419.26.

are articulated in the human breath, beginning with the glottal stop (*hamza*), which is pronounced deepest in the throat, and ending with *wāw*, which is pronounced with open lips.

Ibn 'Arabī uses this third arrangement to illustrate the order in which the cosmic letters become manifest in the All-merciful Breath.¹⁷ In other words, each succeeding letter represents a further disclosure of the hidden qualities of the Divine Reality. The first letter is the Universal Intellect or Highest Pen, God's first creation. The final letter designates the station of the perfect human being, the person who has undergone a total transformation of his nature, returned to the level of the Universal Intellect, and become characterized by God's character traits. This station is that of the prophets generally, but it also designates true human nature, the reality that lies within each of us, waiting to be recovered. Ibn 'Arabī describes it in these terms:

In the *wāw* is the capacity of all the letters. ... In the same way, man is the final goal of the Breath and of the divine words that designate the kinds of things, for within him is the capacity of every existent thing in the cosmos, since he possesses all the levels [of the cosmos]. This is why he alone was singled out for the [Divine] Form. Thereby he brings together in himself the divine realities, which are the names, and the realities of the [entire] cosmos, for he is the last existent thing.

The All-merciful Breath did not bring him into existence without placing within him the capacity of all the levels of the cosmos. Through him becomes manifest that which does not become manifest in any of the parts of the cosmos, nor in any of the divine names, for, in respect of each name's distinctiveness, it does not bestow what any other name bestows. Hence man is the most perfect existent thing, and the *wāw* is the most perfect letter. ...

Everything other than man is a creation, but man is both a creation and the Real. In reality, perfect man is the Real through whom Creation Takes Place, which is to say that the cosmos was

17. For the letters and the levels, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. xxviii–xxxii; see also Titus Burckhardt, *Mystical Astrology According to Ibn 'Arabi* (Gloucestershire: Beshara Publications, 1977).

created because of him.¹⁸ This is because the final goal is that which is sought by the creation that preceded it. What preceded the final goal was created only so that the entity of the final goal might become manifest. Were it not for what became manifest in fact, none of that would have preceded it. Hence the final goal is that for the sake of which the preceding causes of manifestation were created. And that final goal is the perfect human being.

The reason we say 'perfect' is that the name 'human being' may be applied to those similar to him in form. For example, you may say that Zayd is a human being and that 'Amr is a human being, even though the divine realities have become manifest in Zayd, but they have not become manifest in 'Amr. ... In the same way, a ball resembles the celestial sphere in roundness, but how can the perfection of the celestial sphere be compared to that of a ball? This is what I mean by 'perfect'.¹⁹

18. For Ibn 'Arabī's explanation of this 'Real through whom creation takes place', see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 132ff.

19. *Futūhāt* II.396.1.