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The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism

William C. Chittick

'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492), one of the most famous scholars and poets of the later period in the eastern lands of Islam, catches the paradox of the veil in two lines of Persian poetry:

I said to my rose-cheeked lovely,
"O you with bud-like mouth,
why keep hiding your face,
like flirting girls?"

She laughed and said,
"Unlike the beauties of your world,
in the veil I am seen,
but without it I stay hidden."¹

1. 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, *Lawā'ih: A Treatise on Sufism*, translated by E. H. Whinfield and Mirzā Muḥammad Kazwīnī (London, 1906; reprinted London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), my translation, from p. 20 of the Persian text (corresponding to p. 15 of the English).

The veil conceals the secrets, but no secrets can be grasped without the veil. As jāmi and many others put it, to see the veil is itself to see God's face, displaying itself through the veil. Intimations of this paradox can be found in the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet. Understanding it will help us grasp not only the role of the veil as symbol and reality in Sufism and Islam but also the Islamic understanding of the human situation.

Before I embark on a brief and totally inadequate exploration of the innumerable references to the veil in Sufi literature, I first need to say something about my understanding of "Sufism." I take the word in a broad sense. By it I mean one of the essential dimensions of Islamic thought and practice. Like the other dimensions of Islam, Sufism is rooted in the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet, and gradually became articulated as a specific perspective during the first three centuries of Islamic history. What differentiates Sufism from other perspectives—such as jurisprudence, Kalam (dogmatic theology), and philosophy—is mainly its acceptance of the legitimacy of suprarational knowledge as a means to understand the Koran. The most general and common term for this sort of knowledge is *kashf*, or "unveiling."

The term *unveiling* is derived from the Koran, where it is used about fifteen times and can best be translated as "remove." Usually God is the subject of the verb, and what He removes is "harm" (in seven verses), "chastisement" (in four verses), and painful things in general. The most significant of these passages for the later use of the term in Sufism is a verse in which God addresses the soul that has just died: "You were heedless of this—therefore We have removed from you your covering, and your sight today is piercing" (50:22). The "covering" (*ghitā'*)—a word that is taken as one of several synonyms for veil (*ḥijāb*)—will be lifted at death and people will then see clearly. One of the basic themes of Sufi teachings becomes the quest for the voluntary death that will yield the lifting of the veil already in this life. Sufis support this quest not only with Koranic interpretations that pay careful attention to nuances and allusions, but also with the purported hadith, "Die before you die," and the Gospel saying that

appears in its Arabic version as "No one will enter the sovereignty of the heavens until he is born twice" (John 3:3).²

The Veil as Barrier

To speak of a veil is to speak of a barrier preventing the viewer from seeing what is beyond it, which is in the first place not "the secrets," but rather God, or God's face.³ Hence we are dealing with two sides and a middle, or two correlatives and the correlation itself. The issue, therefore, is one instance of a much more general question that is constantly addressed in Islamic thinking, especially Kalam, philosophy, and theoretical Sufism: what is the relation between God and creation, or between the One and the many? In other terms: what is God, what is the human being, and how are the two connected?

Discussion of the veil is tied to discussion of the "vision" of God (*ru'ya*), which is one of several disputed issues in Kalam. As is well known, the theologians agreed that God cannot be seen with the external eye in *this* world, though He can be understood to some degree by the rational mind. The Ash'arite theologians added, however, that He can be seen with the eye in the next world, though the Mu'tazilites rejected this position. As a general rule, the more rigorously Muslim

2. The theoretical elaboration of the doctrine of "annihilation" (*fanā'*) and "subsistence" (*baqā'*), a hallmark of Sufi works, belongs to the same conceptual realm. Here the Koranic source for the teaching is the verse "All that dwells upon the earth is *an-nihāliyah*, and there subsists the face of thy Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generous Giving" (55:27). This verse is also one of the important sources for meditating on the reality of God's face (*wajh*). Sufis understand the verse to mean that once the limitations of the human individual, dwelling in the earth—which represents the lower, corporeal domain of existence—are erased, only the face of God will remain. Through the death of the lower self, the higher self is born, and that higher self is nothing but God's face. Zaehner may have thought he had found a source for the Sufi doctrine of annihilation in the Indian concept of *nirvāṇa*, but Sufis never had to look further than the Koran and their own unveiling.

3. One of the earliest definitions of veil (*ḥijāb*) as a technical term in Sufism is provided by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrā' (d. 378/988): "The veil is any barrier that bars the intending seeker from what is intended and sought." *Kitāb al-luma'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), p. 352.

thinkers applied rational principles, the more firmly they denied the vision of God in any mode. As for the Sufis, although they spoke of the vision of God in both this world and the next, many of them agreed completely with those theologians and philosophers who held that God Himself cannot be seen or understood by the rational mind.⁴ Nonetheless, they insisted that He can be seen by the unveiled heart, and that this unveiling takes place, as the Koran suggests, at death. Hence, when the Sufis achieve the death of the lower self already in this life, they also achieve the vision of God, here and now. This is the general Sufi position, but as soon as we investigate the texts more closely, we realize that the Sufis are presenting us with a much more subtle discussion, and in order to suggest its subtlety, they frequently resort to the mentioned paradox.

While discussing the Sufi approach to the veil, we need to remember that the Sufis never addressed themselves merely to reason (*ʿaql*). They were much more interested in exciting the imagination and awakening intuition. Once intuition is given systematic training at the hands of a teacher or a "shaykh"—a true adept on the Sufi path—it can result in the lifting of the veil or, to use other common expressions, "the opening of the door" or "seeing with the heart's eye." One of the best ways to awaken this intuition is through poetic imagery, and it is no accident that most of the great Muslim poets—in a civilization in which poetry has until recently been by far the most popular and widespread form of literature, thoroughly penetrating even the illiterate classes—were also Sufis. Given the importance of the imagination and the rhetorical efforts of the Sufi teachers to excite the imagination, I will do my best to offer a taste of the stylistic peculiarities of their writings.

Of the eight Koranic references to the word *veil*, only two refer to the veil that separates human beings from God. The first of these is often cited by the theologians to prove that God cannot be seen in this world: "it belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or, that He should send a messenger" (42:51). The second reference, using the past participle of

4. The "heart" (*qalb*) in Koranic language is the seat first of intelligence and awareness, and only then of other qualities. See S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), Chapter 10.

the verb, associates the veil with the vision of God in the next world, and it implies that the people of paradise, in contrast to the people of hell, will see God: "No indeed, but on that day [the people of hell] shall be veiled from their Lord" (83:15).

The most commonly cited saying of the Prophet in this context is the famous hadith of the veils, which begins with the words, "God has seventy veils of light and darkness." Another version, considered more reliable by the hadith specialists, begins, "God's veil is light." Both versions of the hadith continue by saying, "Were He to remove it [or "them"], the glories of His face would burn away everything that the eyesight of His creatures perceives."⁵ Again, the verb translated here as "remove" is *kashf* or "unveil," and it is God who removes the veil, not the servant.

Especially noteworthy in this hadith is that both light and darkness are veils. Light is that through which we see, yet it can also be bright enough to blind us, and this is manifestly so in the case of God. And light, it needs to be remembered, is a Koranic name of God. As the famous "light verse" of the Koran tells us, "God is the light of the heavens and the earth" (24:35). This verse can mean that God's light makes itself known through every luminosity that appears in the heavens and the earth, but it also implies that God's light prevents us from seeing God, since the only thing we see through God's light is precisely the heavens and the earth, not God himself. When the Prophet was asked if he had seen God during his night journey, he replied, "He is a light. How could I see Him?" Thus, in the earliest texts, along with the idea that a veil is something that prevents the vision of God, we also have the idea that the most basic of veils is the superabundance of God's light.

Given the fact that the "Sufis," as understood by the early Sufi authors, were those Muslims whose qualities included the fact that they had experienced the lifting of the veil, references to veils and unveiling are common in the early Sufi sayings and writings. For example, one of the earliest systematic expositions of Sufism is found in the Arabic work *al-Tarraf* by Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990). In the introduction, after praising God and the Prophet, the author

5. The more reliable version is found in Muslim (Imān 293) and Ibn Mājā (Maʿaddima 13), two of the standard sources.

This world is the veil of the next world. Everyone who is at ease with this world has let go of the next world.

People are the veil of obedience. Everyone who busies himself at the feet of people has let go of obedience.

Satan is the veil of religion. Everyone who conforms with Satan has let go of religion.

The self is the veil of the Real. Everyone who goes along with the self's caprice has let go of God. Thus God says, "Have you seen him who has taken his caprice as his god?" [45:23]...

As long as these four veils have not been lifted from the heart, the light of true knowledge [ma'rifa] will not find a way into it...

The sum of all that has been said about the veil is that everything that busies the servant with other than the Real is a veil, and everything that takes the servant to the Real is not a veil. The light of true knowledge is the strongest of all lights, and everything that tries to veil the knower from the Real is burned away and pushed aside by the light of true knowledge. If the light of true knowledge did not stay hidden in the inmost heart and were to appear, heaven and earth would not be able to bear it.⁷

Another typical discussion of the veil is provided by Hujwiri (465/1072-3), author of the classic Persian Sufi manual, *Kashf al-mahjûb*, "The Unveiling of the Veiled." Hujwiri explains that there are two basic sorts of veil: one is essential and cannot be removed, because it is a fundamental inadequacy of the servant; the other is accidental and

7. Abû Ibrâhîm Bukhârî Mustamîf, *Sharh-i tarânuף* (Lucknow: 1328/1910), vol. 1, pp. 26-27.

turns to praising those great Muslims who had followed the Prophet fully, not only by imitating his outward acts but also by understanding his words and realizing his inner states. Thus they shared with the Prophet in the direct knowledge of things that he had gained when God lifted the veils preventing him from true vision—a vision that is alluded to in the often-cited prayer attributed to him, "O God, show us things as they are." Notice that al-Kalâbâdhî is already hinting at the implications of some of the paradoxes of simultaneous veiling and unveiling. He writes,

God placed among [the followers of Muhammad] the limpid and the chosen, the noble and the pious.... Their feet were made firm, their understandings purified, and their banners shone. They understood from God, traveled to God, and turned away from everything other than God. Their lights tore apart the veils.... They are spiritual bodies, heavenly beings in the earth, lordly ones with the creatures—silent and observing, absent and present, kings in rags. They are outcasts from all the tribes, owners of all the virtues, lights of guidance. Their ears are comprehending, their inmost hearts limpid, their attributes hidden. They are chosen, luminous, limpid Sufis.⁶

In a Persian commentary on this work by the fifth/eleventh-century scholar Abû Ibrâhîm Bukhârî Mustamîf (d. 434/1042-43), we find an early example of a topic that comes up frequently in later texts—the classification of veils into different sorts. Thus in explaining the brief reference to veils in the quoted passage—"their lights tore apart the veils"—Bukhârî describes the basic veils that need to be lifted before someone can be a full follower of the Prophet:

The veils are four: this world, the self, people, and Satan.

6. *Al-Tarânuף li-madhhab al-taqawwuf*, ed. A. Majmûd and T. A. Surûr (Cairo, 1960), p. 19. The work has been translated into English by A. J. Arberry as *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1966).

can be lifted. He calls the first "the veil of rust," and the second, "the veil of clouding," deriving his terms from the Koran and the Hadith.⁸

The veils are two: The first derives from rust—we seek refuge in God from that!—and it will never be lifted. The second derives from clouding, and it can be lifted quickly.

The explanation of this is as follows: There are some servants whose very essence veils the Real, so the Real and the unreal are the same in their view. There are other servants whose attributes veil the Real, but their nature and secret heart constantly seek the Real and flee from the unreal.

Thus the essential veil, which derives from rust, will never be lifted. Here the meaning of "rust," "seal," and "stamp" is one. God says, "No indeed, but what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts" [83:14]. Then He makes the ruling property of this manifest and He says, "Surely those who disbelieve, equal is it to them if you warn them or do not warn

8. Hujwiri cites the source of the term *rust* (*ṣaym*) in the discussion itself. The term "clouds" (*ghaym*) derives from the prophetic saying "Sometimes my heart is clouded over, and verily I ask forgiveness from God one hundred times a day" (Muslim, *Dihkir* 41). The commentators were quick to insist that the prophetic cloudiness was different from the cloudiness of ordinary mortals. The seventeenth-century scholar al-Munāwī explains the hadith by first citing the words of a famous Sufi master: "The gnostic [Abū'l-Ḥasan] al-Shādhallī [d. 656/1258] says, 'This is the cloudiness of lights, not the cloudiness of others,' since the Prophet was climbing perpetually. Hence, whenever the lights of the gnostic sciences came one after another into his heart, he would climb to a higher level, so he would count what had come before as if it were a sin.' In other words, this 'cloudiness' was not the cloudiness of a veil, nor was it heedlessness, as has been imagined. On the contrary, the lights of [the divine] self-disclosures were immersing him, so he would become absent [from the creatures] through that presence [with God]. Then he would ask God for 'forgiveness,' that is [literally], the 'curtaining' of what He was pouring upon him. After all, were the self-disclosure to become continuous for the elect, they would be taken to nothingness by the ruling authority of the reality. Hence curtaining is for them a mercy. However, for the common people, it is a veil and a vengeance." *Fayḍ al-quḍrī fī sharḥ al-Ḥamīd al-ṣāghir* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1972), vol. 3, p. 11.

them—they will not have faith" [2:6]. Then He explains the cause for this: "God has sealed their hearts and their hearing" [2:7]. He also says, "God has stamped their hearts" [16:108].

The veil through attribute, which derives from clouding, may be lifted from time to time. After all, altering a thing's essence would be strange and marvelous, and impossible in the entity itself. But it is permissible for the attribute to be altered from what it is....

Junayd says, "Rust is one of the homelands, but cloudiness is one of the passing things." The homeland remains, but the passing thing disappears.

No stone can be changed into a mirror, even if many people come together to polish it, but when [an iron] mirror becomes rusty, it can be made limpid with a file. Darkness is intrinsic to the stone, and brightness is intrinsic to the mirror. The intrinsic remains, but the borrowed attribute has no subsistence.⁹

A Sufi scholar of a slightly later period, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī, who finished his ten-volume Koran commentary called *Kashf al-asrār* ("The Unveiling of the Secrets") in 520/1126, describes seven veils that God has created in human beings preventing them from "seeing the subtleties and finding the realities." These are reason, knowledge, the heart, the self, sense perception, desire, and will.

Reason keeps people occupied with this world and with governing their livelihood, so they stay back from the Real.

9. Hujwiri, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. V. Zhukovsky (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1336/1957), p. 5. This work was translated by R. A. Nicholson as *The Kashf al-Maḥjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism* (London: Luzac, 1911).

Knowledge pulls them into the playing field of vain-glory along with their peers, so they stay in the valley of boasting and rivalry.

The heart puts them into the station of courage and stout-heartedness, so they fall into temptation in the arenas of champions by craving for fame in this world, so much so that they have no concern for religion or their religion's victory.

The self is itself the greatest veil and the enemy of the religion. [The Prophet said.] "Your worst enemy is the self that is between your two sides." If you catch it, you will win, but otherwise, you will fall such that you will never rise again.

Here "sense perception" is appetite, "desire" is disobedience, and "will" is lassitude. Appetite and disobedience are the veil of the common people, and lassitude is the veil that keeps the elect of the Presence from the road of the Reality.

Whatever holds you back from the way—

Let it be unbelief or faith!

Whatever keeps you back from the Friend—

Let it be ugly or beautiful!¹⁰

One of Maybudi's contemporaries, the famous al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), feels it especially important to explain how knowledge becomes a veil on the path to God, even though the search for knowledge is, as the Prophet put it, "incumbent on every Muslim."

10. Maybudi, *Kashf al-asrār wa 'udādat al-abdār*, edited by 'A. A. Jilkmāt (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1331-39/1952-60), vol. 6, p. 440. Maybudi has taken the line of poetry from his contemporary Sanā'ī (d. 525/1131), the first of the great Sufi poets of the Persian language. See his *Dīwān*, edited by Modarris Raḍawī (Tehran: Ibn Sīnā, 1329/1950), p. 51.

You may have heard that the Sufis say, "Knowledge veils from this path," and you may have denied it. But do not deny these words, for they are true. After all, when you occupy yourself with and immerse yourself in the sensory things and any knowledge that is gained by way of the sensory things, this is a veil.

The heart is like a pool, and the senses are like five streams by which water enters the pool from the outside. If you want limpid water to rise up from the bottom of the pool, the way to do this is to remove all the water from it, along with the black mud that is the trace of the water. The paths of all the streams must be blocked so that water does not come. The bottom of the pool must be dug out until limpid water rises up from within the pool. As long as the pool is busy with the water that comes from the outside, water cannot rise up from within. In the same way, the knowledge that comes from within the heart will not be gained until the heart is emptied of everything that has come from the outside.

However, if a person of knowledge should empty himself of the knowledge he has learned and not busy his heart with it, this past knowledge will not be a veil for him. It is possible that this opening [of the door to unveiling] will occur for him. In the same way, if he empties the heart of imaginings and sensory objects, the past imaginings will not veil him.

The cause of the veil is that someone will learn the creed of the Sunnis and he will learn the proofs for that as they are uttered in dialectics and debate, then he will give his whole heart over to this and believe that there is no knowledge whatsoever beyond it. If something else enters his heart, he will say, "This disagrees with what I have heard, and whatever disagrees with it is false." It is impossible for someone

like this ever to know the truth of affairs, for the belief learned by the common people is the mold of truth, not the truth itself. Complete knowledge is for the realities to be unveiled from the mold, like a kernel from the shell.¹¹

A contemporary of both these authors, Ahmad Sam'ani (d. 534/1140), epitomizes nicely the general Sufi view of the veil and the desirability of overcoming it:

Very well has it been said, "There is no alienation with God, and no ease with other than God." To be with the Beloved having nothing is sweet, but to be without the Beloved having everything is not sweet. Everyone veiled from the Beloved dwells in affliction itself, even if he has the key to the kingdom's treasures in his sleeve. Everyone attracted to the Beloved's gentleness dwells in bestowal itself, even if he does not have his evening meal. This is why Sa'ī Saqā'ī said, "O God, by whatever You chastise me, do not chastise me with the lowliness of the veil!"

No matter how You kill me,
I come to life!
Just don't kill me with separation—
anything but that.

God has said concerning the unbelievers, "No indeed, but on that day they shall be veiled from their Lord" [83:15], so this is manifest proof that the believers will have no veil.

11. *Khayyā-yi sarādat*, ed. H. Khadīw-jam (Tehran: JDb, 1354/1975), pp. 36-37. For a detailed discussion of the veils hadith by al-Ghazālī, see David Buchman (trans.), *al-Ghazālī: The Niche of Lights* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1998).

They say that Paradise has a master of ceremonies without vision, the ceremonies can have no master. If both enemy and friend are veiled, how are they different?

Know that, in reality, even if God should send union's tent and nearness's dome to hell, the friends of the beginningless Garden, drunk on the song of the nightingales of the unseen attraction, will make hellfire into their eyes' collyrium. But, if for one instant, the friends were afflicted with the veil in the Highest Paradise, the Garden of Eden, and the Abode of Rest, they would lament so loudly that the denizens of hell would pity them.¹²

The Veil in al-Niffarī and Ibn al-'Arabī

Enough has been said to suggest that Sufi texts—whose basic concern is to guide the seeker on the path to God—commonly discuss the veil as a generic term for the obstructions that block the way. But the texts that I have cited so far are rather straightforward and do little to clarify the paradoxical nature of the veil. In order to understand this point better, we need to look at Sufi authors who address it directly. I want

12. Ahmad Sam'ani, *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fi sharḥi asmā' al-malik al-fatāḥ*, ed. N. Māyīl Harawī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī wa Farhangī, 1368/1989), pp. 5-6. Sam'ani's discussion here echoes that of Mustamīl, who, in the midst of the passage already cited, offers this alternative explanation for the sentence on which he is commenting: "The meaning may also be that the light of the true knowers' secret heart has passed beyond the veils of the Throne, since today they see in their secret heart exactly what they will see tomorrow face-to-face. If the knowers were to be kept busy gazing on the veils at the resurrection, they would not be able to bear it. So also, if their hearts were to be kept busy today with other than the Real, they would not be able to bear it and they would scream. It has been recounted from Abū Yazīd Basṭāmī that he said, 'If in paradise the Real veils me from the vision of Him for the glance of an eye, I will scream and moan so much that the denizens of hell will feel compassion for me.'" *Sharḥ-i tarāṭuf*, p. 26.

to consider two of the most remarkable of these. The first is al-Niffari, who died around 360/970, making him one of the earliest authors of written works on Sufism. The second is Ibn al-'Arabi, who died almost three hundred years later (in 638/1240) and who is traditionally considered the greatest of all the Sufi theoreticians.

Although two of al-Niffari's works were translated into English in 1935, he has not received as much attention as he deserves, mainly, I think, because of the extreme density and obscurity of what he is saying. He presents most of his writings as direct quotations of words spoken to him by God. Ibn al-'Arabi calls this sort of visionary interview a "mutual waystation" (*munāzala*).¹³ In it, he explains, the servant ascends toward God, and God descends toward the servant. The two of them meet in a domain somewhere in between, and there God addresses the servant. Ibn al-'Arabi tells us that this type of unveiling pertains specifically to the speech of God from behind a veil—as mentioned in the key Koranic verse already cited—"It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil." Ibn al-'Arabi devotes seventy-eight chapters of his monumental *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (about 5 percent of the text) to elucidating mutual waystations in which God spoke enigmatic words to him—much in the style of the words recorded by al-Niffari. However, in each instance Ibn al-'Arabi recounts only a single short saying. All of these sayings together would make up no more than one 1 percent of the 250 pages recorded by al-Niffari. The rest of Ibn al-'Arabi's discussion is taken up by profuse commentary on God's words to him. This suggests that a good understanding of what al-Niffari is talking about requires some explanation. In what follows, I will quote a few of al-Niffari's statements about the veil and, where useful, juxtapose them with some of Ibn al-'Arabi's explanations of the same issues.¹⁴

Both authors address two basic questions: what are veils? how can they be overcome? For Ibn al-'Arabi, the first issue is intimately related

13. For a brief discussion of these, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 278–279. For a much more detailed explanation, see idem, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 112–120.

14. For a detailed discussion of the Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings on veils and the divine face, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, Chapters 3–4 and passim; see also idem, *Sufi Path*, Index.

to ontology, and the second to psychology and epistemology. Al-Niffari does not speak the same elaborate theological and philosophical language that was flourishing by Ibn al-'Arabi's time, but instead he lets God utter the mysteries in a much more mythic voice.

To answer the first question, we need to situate veils in relation to God. The preliminary answer is that a veil is anything other than God (*mā siwā Allāh*). We have either God or a veil, either the divine Face or a curtain concealing the Face. In other words, everything is a veil, both the things that we perceive and our perceptions of the things, and this includes all perceptions of God, and all the unveiling that God bestows on the seeker. In one passage, al-Niffari makes these points as follows:

[God] said to me: Your veil is everything I make manifest, your veil is everything I keep secret, your veil is everything I affirm, your veil is everything I obliterate, and your veil is what I unveil, just as your veil is what I curtain.

He said to me: Your veil is yourself, and it is the veil of veils. If you come out from it, you will come out from the veils, and if you remain veiled by it, the veils will veil you.

He said to me: You will not come out from your veil except through My light. So, My light will pierce the veil, and you will see how it veils and by what it veils.¹⁵

Al-Niffari makes three points here—that everything, including unveiling, is a veil, that the self is the greatest of veils, and that God's guidance is the only way to emerge from the veils. Ibn al-'Arabi makes these same points frequently. Let me deal with them individually. First—the fact that everything is a veil. Ibn al-'Arabi writes,

15. Paul Nwyia, *Trois oeuvres inédites de Mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1973), p. 306.

There is nothing in existence but veils hung down. Acts of perception attach themselves only to veils, which leave traces in the owner of the eye that perceives them.¹⁶

The veils, in Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, are simply the things—in the broadest sense of this word. God in himself is no "thing," because he is one and undifferentiated. He is, in the language of Islamic philosophy that Ibn al-'Arabī employs, sheer and absolute Being (*wiḥīd*). To see God as he is in himself would be to see God exactly as God sees God, and this is impossible for absolutely everything other than God. The distinction between God and the other remains forever fixed, because the reality of the thing—that which makes a thing what it is—demands that it be other than God, and, as Ibn al-'Arabī likes to remind us, realities never change; if they did, they would not be realities. This is not to deny that, in a certain respect, there are no "others," but this is another discussion—which will be addressed later.

The fact that all things are veils can be explained in terms of the philosophic principle that God alone is the Necessary Being, and everything other than God is possible (or contingent, *ḥākim*). "Possibility" is the fact that things stand midway between necessity and impossibility. In themselves, they have no claim on existence. If they do exist, this is because God has given them existence. No thing can escape its own possibility, for its possibility pertains to its very essence. Ibn al-'Arabī refers to this point while providing one of his many commentaries on the saying "God has seventy veils of light and darkness."

The dark and luminous veils through which the Real is veiled from the cosmos are only the light and the darkness by which the possible thing becomes qualified in its reality because it is a middle. The possible thing looks only upon itself, so it looks only upon the veil. Were the veils to be lifted from the possible thing, possibility would be lifted, and the Necessary and the impossible would be lifted through the lifting of possibility. So the veils will remain forever hung

down, and nothing else is possible.... The veils will not be lifted when there is vision [of God]. Hence vision is through the veil, and inescapably so.¹⁷

Al-Niffari's second point was that the self of the one who sees is the greatest of veils. The reason for this is that some remnant of the self must remain so long as we are to have this discussion. When we speak of the vision of God, we are discussing either God's vision of Himself or

17. *Faḥḥāḥ*, vol. 3, p. 276.18 (see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 156). The principle that vision is through the veil applies not only to vision of God but also to an individual's vision of self and other things. In the last analysis, each thing remains forever veiled from all things. Perfect unveiling of the things is strictly a divine attribute. This is because the "realities" (*ḥaqīqa*) of the things dwell in God's knowledge of them, and none can know these realities exactly as God knows them. These realities are what Ibn al-'Arabī often calls the "objects of the [divine] knowledge" (*al-ma'lūmāt*) or the "fixed entities" (*al-ayn al-thābita*)—fixed because God's knowledge of them never changes. It follows that human beings can never see anything but images, not the things themselves, and the whole universe, in all its temporal and spatial extent, is nothing but an incomprehensibly vast image of God's knowledge. Every image is a veil preventing the vision of the reality that projects the image. What we can see is never anything but the veil of cosmic imagination. The resemblance of this teaching to the Hindu doctrine of *Maya* is conceptual, not historical. In explaining the nature of cosmic imagination, Ibn al-'Arabī writes, "The forms seen by the eyes and perceived by rational faculties, and the forms imagined by the faculty of imagination are all veils, behind which the Real is seen.... Hence the Real remains forever absent behind the forms that are manifest in existence. The entities of the possible things in their fixed thingness and with all the variations of their states witnessed by the Real also remain absent.... The entities of these forms that are manifest in Being—which is identical with the Real—are the properties of the possible entities in respect of the states, variations, changes, and alterations that they have in their fixity. These become manifest in the Real Being Itself. But the Real does not change from what He is in Himself.... The veils remain forever hung down. They are the entities of these forms.... All this—praise belongs to God—is in actual fact imagination, since it is never fixed in a single state. But, [as the Prophet said] 'People are asleep'—though the sleeper may recognize everything he sees and the presence in which he sees it—and when they die, they wake up' from this dream within a dream. They will never cease being sleepers, so they will never cease being dreamers. Hence they will never cease undergoing constant variation within themselves. Nor will that which they perceive with their eyes ever cease its constant variation. The situation has always been such, and it will always be such, in this world and the next" (*Faḥḥāḥ*, vol. 4, p. 19, lines 5 and 34; for more context and a slightly different translation, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 231). For the cosmos as imagination, see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, especially Chapters 7–8; idem, *Self-Disclosure*, especially Chapters 2 and 10; and idem, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1992), especially Chapters 1 and 9.

16. *Al-Faḥḥāḥ al-maḥkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), vol. 3, p. 214, line 25. For the passage in context, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, pp. 110–111.

the other's vision of God. As long as the "other"—the thing, the self—is part of the discussion, the vision cannot be identical in every respect with God's vision of Himself. Naturally, there are degrees of vision and varying intensities of unveiling—on a scale, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, that is infinite. But the "other" always remains itself, and the other is finite. The finite can never embrace the Infinite as Infinite, so it can never see the Infinite as the Infinite sees itself. Ibn al-'Arabi writes,

God has made you identical with His curtain over you. If not for this curtain, you would not seek increase in knowledge of Him. You are spoken to and addressed from behind the curtain of the form from which He speaks to you.

Consider your mortal humanity. You will find it identical with your curtain from behind which He speaks to you. For He says, "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil" [42:51]. Hence, He may speak to you from you, since you veil yourself from you, and you are His curtain over you.

It is impossible for you to cease being a mortal human being, for you are mortal by your very essence. Even if you become absent from yourself or are annihilated [*fanā*] by a [spiritual] state [*ḥāl*] that overtakes you, your mortal humanity will abide in its entity. Hence the curtain is let down, and the eye will never fall upon anything but a curtain, since it falls upon nothing but a form.... There is no escape from the curtain, for there is no escape from you.¹⁸

Al-Niffari's third point was that God's guidance alone can deliver people from the veils. The seeker can never rend the veils, but God can lift some or many of them, and in each lifting, the seeker may move closer to the object of his quest. The result of this lifting of

18. *Futūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 554.4, 21 (see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 109).

the veils might be inexpressible ecstasy or extraordinary influxes of visionary knowledge, but again, in the last analysis, to emerge from one veil is to enter into another veil. In the following passage, Ibn al-'Arabi discusses the veils as the "occasions" or the "secondary causes" (*asbāb*) through which God establishes the order of the universe.

Since God established the occasions, He does not lift them for anyone. What He does do is to give some of His servants enough of the light of guidance so that they can walk in the darkesses of the occasions. He does nothing else. Then, through that, they see face-to-face in the measure of their own lights.

The veils—which are the occasions—are hung down and will never be lifted, so do not wish for that! If the Real transfers you from one occasion, He will only transfer you to another occasion. Moreover, He will never let you lose the occasion completely.

After all, the "cord of God" [3:103] to which He commanded you to cling is an occasion, and that is the revealed Law. It is the strongest and most truthful occasion. In its hand is the light by which one can be guided "in the darkesses of the land and the sea" [6:97] of these occasions. Whoever does such and such—which is the occasion—will be recompensed with such and such. So wish not for that which cannot be wished for. Instead, ask God to sprinkle something of that light on your essence.¹⁹

Ibn al-'Arabi again discusses the divine wisdom that has established the veils in a chapter on "obliteration" (*maḥw*), a state achieved on the Sufi path through which all awareness of the individual self is erased by the intensity of the unveiling. Ibn al-'Arabi explains that this does not mean that all the veils have been lifted, as

19. *Futūḥāt*, vol. 3, p. 249.22 (see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 179).

some Sufis have suggested. If it did, there would be no acquisition of knowledge, but this is not the case.

When someone achieves obliteration, his *reliance* on the occasions is obliterated, not the occasions themselves. God will never make the wisdom in things ineffectual. The occasions are veils established by God that will not be lifted. The greatest of these veils is your own entity. Your own entity is the occasion of the existence of your knowledge of God, since such knowledge cannot exist except in your entity. It is impossible for *you* to be lifted, since God desires for you to know Him. Hence He "obliterates" you from yourself, and then you do not halt with the existence of your own entity and the manifestation of its properties.²⁰

In the first passage quoted from al-Niffarī, God said to him, "You will not come out from your veil except through My light." This might be read to mean that God's light can bestow full deliverance from the veils. But many other passages suggest that al-Niffarī—like Ibn al-'Arabī—holds that the lifting of one veil is simply the letting down of another. For example, al-Niffarī writes,

[God] said to me: Making manifest is My veil, and making manifest has nonmanifest domains that are My veil. The nonmanifest domains have degrees that are My veil. The degrees have ends that are My veil. The ends have furthest limits that are My veil. The furthest limits have attainments that are My veil. The attainments have knowledges that are My veil. The knowledges have sorts that are My veil. The sorts have judgments that are My veil. The judgments have verdicts that are My veil. The verdicts have overturners that are My veil. The overturners

20. *Furūḥāt*, vol. 2, p. 553.5 (see Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 176).

have successors that are My veil. Behind the successors is My command, which is My veil.

He said to me: My veils that can be communicated are but a speck of My veils that cannot be communicated.²¹

In short, veils are inescapable, but God's light allows the seeker to grasp exactly what the veils are and to know how to put them to good use for the goal of achieving deliverance from everything other than God and total reliance on God. Al-Niffarī writes,

[God] said to me: If I call you, do not expect the veils to be thrown aside by your following Me, for you cannot reckon their number, and you will never be able to throw them aside.

He said to me: If you were able to throw the veil aside, where would you throw it? Throwing is a veil, and the "where" to which it is thrown is a veil. So follow Me. I will throw aside your veil, and what I throw aside will not return. I will guide you on your path, and what I guide will not go astray.²²

Only the light of God's guidance can dispel the darkness brought about by the greatest of veils, which is the self. This darkness is often called "ignorance," and its opposite is "knowledge." But, as we have seen, knowledge itself can be a veil and, in the last analysis, it can be nothing other than a veil, since it is something other than God. However, one must distinguish between knowledge that blocks the path to God and knowledge that assists the seeker in traveling the path. As God said to al-Niffarī, "O My servant! A knowledge in which you see Me is the path to Me, and a knowledge in which you do not

21. Nwyia, *This oeuvre*, p. 241.

22. *Mawāḥif* 18:8-9; text in A. J. Arberry, *The Mawāḥif and Mukhtalabāt of Muhammad Ibn 'Abdī 'l-Jabbār al-Niffarī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); my translations throughout.

see Me is the captivating veil."²³ To be a liberating veil, knowledge must see God within the veils. Otherwise, most knowledge captivates and imprisons. One must empty oneself of all knowledge, all awareness of self and others, all things, in order to see God. This is true knowledge, the liberating veil. AL-Niffarî writes,

He said to me: I am gazing upon you, and I love for you to gaze upon Me, but all appearance veils you from Me. Your self is your veil, your knowledge is your veil, your gnosis is your veil, your names are your veil, and My making Myself known to you is your veil. So expel from your heart everything, and expel from your heart knowledge of everything and remembrance of everything. Whenever I make something appear to your heart, cast it back to its appearing and empty your heart for Me, that you may gaze upon Me and not overcome Me.²⁴

By guiding people on the path, God does not do away with the veils, since that is impossible. What he does do, in al-Niffarî's terms, is to take people from the "far veil," which is ignorance, to the "near veil," which is recognition of God's radiant light within the veils.

O My servant! If knowledge does not expel you from knowledge, and if you enter from knowledge only into knowledge, then you are veiled from knowledge.

O My servant! Veil yourself from knowledge by knowledge, and you will be veiled by a near veil. Do not veil yourself from knowledge by ignorance, lest you be veiled by a far veil.

O My servant! Cast your knowledge and your ignorance into the sea. I will take you as a servant and I will inscribe you as secure.²⁵

23. *Mukhtabât* 47:1 (in Arberry, *The Mawâjif and Mukhtabât*).

24. *Mawâjif* 14:14.

25. *Mukhtabât* 16:2-4.

In short, these passages tell us that the veils will never be lifted, but that God's guidance can give people security and safety from the dangers of being veiled. It follows that true knowledge is not really "unveiling," but is rather the lifting of the far veils so that they may be replaced by the near veils; or, it is the recognition of the veils for what they are.

Veils as Face

This brings us to the question, once more, of the reality of the veils. What exactly are they? Although from one point of view, nothing can ever be seen but a veil, from a second, complementary point of view—to which I alluded earlier—every veil is simply another form in which God's face appears. In Arabic, the "face" (*wajh*) of a thing, as Ibn al-'Arabi often reminds us, is its reality and its entity. God or Absolute Being is the underlying reality that gives rise to every other reality. Other realities are veils, but they are also nothing but manifestations or disclosures of the Supreme Reality. Hence, every reality manifests the divine face and, inasmuch as it is truly a reality, it is truly the face of God. Among the Koranic verses that are cited in this context is that which tells us, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). Another is "He is the First and the Last and the Manifest and the Nonmanifest" (57:3). Here then we have the paradox: God is hidden by the veil but also appears through it, and without it, he can never be seen. Ibn al-'Arabi writes,

He is perpetual Being, and the entities of the possible things become manifest through their properties from behind the veil of His Being because of its subtlety. We see the entities of the possible things—which are our entities—from behind the veil of His Being, but we do not see Him.... [The Koran says,] "God is Subtle to His servants" [42:19]. Part of His subtlety is that He comes to them in everything in which they are, but the servants' eyes fall only upon the occasions that they witness, so they attribute what they are busy with to the occasions. Thus the Real becomes manifest by being veiled, so He is the

Manifest/the Veiled.... No eye witnesses anything other than He, and no veils are lifted from Him.²⁶

One side of this paradoxical situation is that the seeker's seeking to lift the veil is itself the veil. Al-Niffari tells us that God said to him, "O My servant! I have entrusted My veil to your seeking for Me."²⁷ Or again:

O my servant! What are you seeking from Me? If you are seeking what you know, then you are satisfied with the veil. But if you are seeking what you do not know, then you are seeking the veil.²⁸

Ibn al-'Arabi expresses the paradox in the following passage:

There is no veil and there is no curtain. Nothing hides Him but His manifestation. Were the selves to halt with what has become manifest, they would know the situation as it is in itself. However, they seek something that is absent from them, so their seeking is identical with their veil. Hence "They measured not" what has become manifest "with the appropriate measure" [6:91] because they are busy with what they imagine to be nonmanifest to them.

Nothing is nonmanifest. The lack of knowledge has made it nonmanifest. There is nothing nonmanifest in the case of the Real, for He has addressed us by saying that He is "the Manifest and the Nonmanifest," and "the First and the Last" [57:3]. In other words, what you seek in the nonmanifest domain is manifest, so do not weary yourself.²⁹

26. *Furūḥīdī*, vol. 3, p. 547.8 (see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 129).

27. *Mukhāṭabāt* 28:9.

28. *Mukhāṭabāt* 33:3.

29. *Furūḥīdī*, vol. 4, p. 407.22 (see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, p. 104).

Al-Niffari makes similar points in a number of passages: "He said to me: Once you have seen Me, unveiling and the veil will be equal."³⁰ "He said: You will not stand in vision until you see My veil as vision and My vision as veil."³¹ "He said: O My servant! There is a veil that is not unveiled, and an unveiling that is not veiled. The veil that is not unveiled is knowledge through Me, and the unveiling that is not veiled is knowledge through Me."³² Or again:

He made me stand in the veil. Then I saw that He has veiled Himself from a group through Himself and that He has veiled Himself from a group through His creation.

He said to me: No veil remains. Then I saw all the eyes gazing at His face, starting. They see Him in everything through which He veils Himself, and when they lower their gaze, they see Him in themselves.

He said to Me: They see Me, and I veil them through their vision of Me from Me.³³

Although ignorance is a veil, part of the paradox is that ignorance is also an unveiling. Once the veil of self is truly lifted, the seeker will see that ignorance of God is the actual state of the created thing forever. One of the earliest and most often quoted expressions of this perspective is attributed to Islam's first caliph, Abū Bakr, who said, "Glory be to Him who assigned the creatures no path to His knowledge save the incapacity to know Him!"³⁴ Al-Niffari throws some light on this darkness in the midst of a passage in which he is explaining how God made him stand first in the night, then in broad daylight. The night represents the realization of the full ignorance that belongs to the others and the utter impenetrability of the veils, while the day represents the full realization of the knowledge that the

30. *Mawāḥif* 31:1-3.

31. *Mawāḥif* 55:30.

32. *Mukhāṭabāt* 14:9.

33. *Mawāḥif* 47:1-2.

veils are identical with the divine face. The night is God as Nonmanifest, while the day is God as Manifest.

He made me stand in the night and He said to me:
When night comes to you, stand in front of Me and
take ignorance in your hand. Through it, turn the
knowledge of the heavens and the earth away from
Me. When you turn it away, you will see My descent.

He said to me: Ignorance is the veil of veils and the
veil-keeper of the veil-keepers. There is no veil after
ignorance, and no veil-keeper. Only ignorance is be-
fore the Lord, so when the Lord comes, His veil is ig-
norance. There is nothing known but ignorance.
Nothing remains of knowledge except that it is not
known *what* He is, though it is not unknown *that*
He is.³⁵ Thus, whatever you know from Me, what-
ever you know through Me, whatever you know as
belonging to Me, and whatever you know from any-
thing, shun it through ignorance. If you hear it glo-
rifying Me and calling you to Me, block your ears. If
you see Me as belonging to Me, cover your eyes.
Whatever you do not know, do not seek to know it

34. The saying is attributed to Abū Bakr in al-Sarrāj, *Luma*, pp. 36, 124, and al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, ed. A. Mahmūd and M. Ibn al-Shayfī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Hadītha), 1966, p. 585. Both of them tell us that the famous Sufī al-Junayd called this "the most eminent words in the assertion of God's Unity [*al-wahid*]." That the whole issue of the veil is intimately tied up with this fundamental axiom of Islam—God's unity and His paradoxical distance from and simultaneous nearness to His creatures—is shown by the way later authors offer variations on Abū Bakr's prayer employing the language of veiling and disclosure. Thus al-Ghazālī, in his discussion of the veils hadith, offers this version: "Glory be to Him who is hidden from the creatures by the intensity of His manifestation and veiled from them by the radiance of His Light!" (*Mishkāt al-anwār*, ed. by A. 'A. 'Aḥīn, [Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-ṭ-ṭibā'a wa'l-Nashr, 1964], p. 64). Ibn al-'Arabī offers many examples, such as the following: "Glory be to Him of whom knowledge is the same as ignorance and ignorance the same as knowledge!" (*Fuṣūḥ*, vol. 3, p. 182.14). "Glory be to Him who veils Himself in His manifestation and becomes manifest in His veil!" (*ibid.*, p. 547.12). "Glory be to Him who is hidden in His manifestation and manifest in His hiddenness!" (*ibid.*, p. 304.6). "Glory be to Him who has hidden these mysteries in their manifestation and made them manifest in their hiddenness!" (*ibid.*, p. 525.8).

and do not learn it. You are with Me, and the sign of your being with Me is that you are veiled from knowledge and the object of knowledge through ignorance, just as I am veiled.

When the daytime comes and the Lord comes to His Throne, then the affliction will come. Cast ignorance from your hands and take knowledge. Through it turn the affliction away from you. Abide in knowledge, or affliction will take you.³⁶

I conclude with one line by Ḥāfiẓ (792/1389), probably the greatest of all Persian poets. Ḥāfiẓ is traditionally given the title *isān al-ghayb*, or "tongue of the unseen world," because his poetry is considered uniquely adept at revealing secrets and disclosing mysteries.

O Lord, who is worthy for me
to tell him this subtle point?
That beloved, witnessed everywhere,
has never shown her face.

35. This, of course, is the basic philosophical and theological distinction between Being (*wujūd*) or "that-it-is-ness" (*annīyya*) and quiddity or "whatness" (*māhiyya*). Of God himself, in his Essence, people can only know "that" he is, not "what" he is. "What" is a question applying only to the entities of the things, which is to say it can be asked only of the veils; the whatness of that which the veils veil can never be known. At best, one can say that God's whatness is identical with his existence or his that-he-is-ness, whereas the existence of everything other than God is other than its whatness, which is to say that existence does not pertain to its essence, because it is a possible thing; existence must be given to it from outside its own essence. In translating this passage, Arberry missed the point entirely (in contrast to his usual habit of being one of the best translators of Arabic and Persian texts).

36. *Mawāziif* 62:1-2.