

## 6 Religious Experience in Traditional Islam

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Numerous terms were employed in Islamic languages to designate the ways in which people perceive and experience ordinary and extraordinary phenomena pointing back to God, though the words used nowadays to translate the modern notion of experience (e.g., *tajriba*) were not among them. Anyone acquainted with Islam will be aware that what is commonly called "Sufism" or "Islamic mysticism" addresses the issue of experiencing God's presence in voluminous detail. Given Sufism's prominence over history, this means that the path of finding and perceiving God has been a preoccupation of countless Muslims. Carl Ernst is expressing the consensus of specialists when he says, "Islamic mysticism is one of the most extensive traditions of spirituality in the history of religions. From its origins in the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'anic revelation, the mystical trend among Muslims has played an extraordinary role in the public and private development of the Islamic faith."<sup>1</sup> Here I will highlight a few themes in the primary literature.

Let me begin by explaining why Sufism rather than any other form of Islamic learning provides the most detailed expositions and analyses of the soul's awareness and perception of God. From earliest times it was clear to Muslims that the Quran addresses a great variety of issues that can be subsumed under the word "religion" (*dīn*), a term that was commonly used to designate Islam as a whole or, with a modifier, other traditions such as Judaism and Christianity. Before the nineteenth century *al-dīn*, "the religion," was used in Arabic more commonly than *al-islām*, "the submission." How the word was understood is encapsulated in a famous saying of Muhammad explaining that the religion brought by the Quran differentiates three dimensions of human engagement with

God: practice and ritual, faith and understanding, and beautification of character.<sup>2</sup>

Islam has no priesthood, so the transmission of the religion was the task of the 'ulamā', the "knowers" or "learned," that is, scholars recognized by their communities as having the competence to speak with authority. These ulama gradually developed several fields of learning, each field focusing on one of the religion's three dimensions; only the most outstanding scholars were able to integrate all three dimensions into a coherent vision of the whole. Setting down the details of right practice became the specialty of experts in jurisprudence (*fiqh*). They devoted their efforts to codifying the Shariah (literally, "the broad path"), a word that was commonly employed for the instructions about do's and don'ts found in the Quran and the Hadith. Because the jurists dealt with law, they tended to form links with the ruling powers of the day, and other scholars often criticized them for their worldly inclinations. Given the political orientation of modern institutions, it should come as no surprise that most ulama who play prominent roles in contemporary Islam have little religious knowledge other than jurisprudence.

The religion's second dimension, faith and understanding, became the specialty of three groups. Scholars of Kalam (dogmatic theology) used the tools of intellect or reason (*'aql*) to clarify the Quranic depiction of God and explain his exact relationship with his human servants. Scholars of philosophy (*falsafa*) also stressed the importance of intellect, but they followed in the tracks of Aristotle and Plotinus in order to delve into the mysteries of the Necessary Being and the human soul. Although the secondary literature has usually portrayed the philosophers as scientific types with little patience for religion, their impatience was not with faith and understanding, but rather with the strident efforts of both jurists and theologians to impose their own versions of orthopraxy and orthodoxy on everyone else.

As for scholars of Sufism, they left the codification of the Shariah to the jurists, the delineation of dogma to the Kalam experts, and the appropriation of ancient wisdom to the philosophers. They focused instead on becoming truly human, that is, on discovering and actualizing the divine beauty within oneself. Like the philosophers, Sufis aimed explicitly at overcoming the forgetfulness endemic to the human "soul"

<sup>1</sup> From the preface to Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 1. For the best survey of the field, though far from comprehensive, see Knysh, *Sufism*. For a fine appreciation of Sufi literature, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the Hadith of Gabriel, often cited by Muslim scholars to delineate the three realms of engagement with God. For an analysis of "the religion" in these terms, see Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*.



or "self" (the same word *nafs* is used in both senses). Like them they offered broad overviews of reality rooted in metaphysics (*ilāhiyyāt*, "the divine things") while describing the human soul as a microcosm, created in the "form" (*ṣūra*) of God. God, as the possessor of "the most beautiful names" (Quran 7:180), is "the most beautiful Creator" (Quran 23:14) who "formed you and made your forms beautiful" (Quran 40:64, 64:3). Both Sufis and philosophers held that the soul's original divine form, created in the "most beautiful stature" (Quran 95:4), corresponded perfectly with God and the macrocosm. The soul, however, had fallen out of balance because of forgetfulness and the misuse of free will, so it needed purification and rectification. In contrast to the early philosophers, Sufi teachers did not neglect the religious rules and theological dogma. They considered them instead prerequisites for beautifying the soul.<sup>3</sup>

Both philosophers and Sufis differentiated between two basic sorts of knowledge, using the generic word *ilm*. The first sort is "transmitted" (*naqlī*), that is, handed down by society; it includes practically everything we know or think we know – language, culture, scripture, dogma, law, science. The second sort is "intellectual" (*'aqlī*). It can only be actualized by discovering it within oneself, even if it can be described in transmitted terms; examples include mathematics and metaphysics. Once acquired, intellectual knowledge is self-evident, which is to say that knowers cannot deny the truth that they find in their own souls. Sufi teachers often distinguished between these two sorts of knowledge by calling the first *ilm* in the sense of learning acquired from others and the second *ma'rifa* or "recognition." In the standard descriptions, learning is acquired by hearsay and imitation (*taqlīd*), while recognition is gained by realization (*taḥqīq*), which is actualization of the soul's potential by perceiving the truth (*ḥaqq*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the self, the universe, and the Real (*al-ḥaqq*).<sup>4</sup>

When the Quran is read with attention to the second and third dimensions of the religion – faith and beautification of the soul – it is obvious that the book highlights perception of the world and the soul. These two – world and self, or macrocosm and microcosm – display what the Quran calls the "signs" (*āyāt*) of God, all of which signify the reality of their Creator. Repeatedly the Quran asks its readers to heed

<sup>3</sup> On the common goals of philosophy and Sufism, see, for example, Zargar, *The Polished Mirror*.

<sup>4</sup> On the interplay between the two sorts of knowing, see Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos*.

the signs. "In the earth are signs for those with certainty, and in your souls. What, do you not see?" (51:20–21). It rebukes them for not employing their seeing, hearing, understanding, and witnessing to perceive the signs: "They have hearts but do not understand with them, they have eyes but do not see with them, they have ears but do not hear with them" (7:179). It pays close attention to the soul's diverse attributes and character traits (*akhlāq*), praising the beautiful and condemning the ugly. Some forms of Quran commentary – an activity undertaken by specialists in every school of thought – interpreted many verses as allusions (*ishārāt*) to the manner in which the soul experiences the divine presence while climbing the ladder toward realization.<sup>5</sup>

The Quran's frequent mention of the soul's qualities and attributes contributed to the development of an extensive literature on what can be called "spiritual psychology," the goal of which was to provide a roadmap for beautification and realization. Philosophers like Avicenna (d. 1037) followed Greek models in writing books on *ilm al-nafs*, "the knowledge of the soul," and *akhlāq*, "ethics," though the literal meaning of this latter word is "character traits." The philosophers considered the soul a potential intellect in need of training and discipline so that it could find its innate intellectual light and act accordingly.<sup>6</sup> Many of them held that their final goal was achieving "similarity to God" (*al-tashabbuh bi'l-ilāh*) or "deiformity" (*ta'alluh*, from the same root as *Allāh*). Sufis agreed with the philosophers in their general evaluation of the soul's need for transformation, but they drew most of their terminology and practical instructions from the Quran, the Hadith, and the lives and sayings of the saintly forbears.

Many important works by Sufi teachers have been translated into European languages. Readers will quickly see that these works focus on the achievement of first-hand, realized knowledge rather than the explanation of dogma or law. Their authors often criticized other scholars for not understanding that transmitted knowledge is a means to an end. They reminded their readers that the legal nitpicking of the jurists, the dogmatic assertions of the Kalam experts, and the logical analyses of the philosophers too often distracted people from the goal of knowledge, which is to actualize the beautiful divine form within the

<sup>5</sup> For three examples of commentaries that investigate spiritual psychology (all available for free download at [altafsir.com](http://altafsir.com)), see al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), *Luṭā'if al-ishārāt: Subtle Allusions*; Maybūdī (twelfth century), *Kashf al-usrār*; and al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 1330), *Tafsīr al-Kāshānī*.

<sup>6</sup> For an Aristotelian who insisted that the goal of philosophy was actualizing one's true self, see Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*.



soul. Shams-i Tabrizi, the famous teacher of Rūmī (d. 1273), summed up their perspective with these words:

Why do you study knowledge for the sake of worldly mouthfuls?  
This rope is for people to come out of the well, not for them to go  
from this well into that well.

You must bind yourself to knowing this: "Who am I? What  
substance am I? Why have I come? Where am I going? From  
whence is my root? At this time what am I doing? Toward what  
have I turned my face?"<sup>7</sup>

John Renard has provided a long anthology of important early texts delving into the nature of religious experience in *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*. He writes in his introduction that Sufi teachers always made a distinction between *'ilm* and *ma'rifa*. Trying to catch the connotations of the latter word, he explains that the standard translation as gnosis is misleading. He chooses instead to render the word variously as experiential knowledge, infused knowledge, intimate knowledge, and mystical knowledge. It seems, however, that the best way to catch the sense of *ma'rifa* is to translate it consistently as recognition, which is its Quranic and everyday meaning. Translating it in a variety of ways obscures the fact that one sort of knowing is at issue. Translating it as gnosis, which has no verbal form in English, has led many scholars to ignore the word's frequent use in the earliest sources. Its *locus classicus* is a famous saying ascribed to the Prophet: "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord." Constantly quoted and glossed by Sufi teachers, this saying asserts that one will never perceive God without perceiving one's own soul. Given the soul's potential omniscience because of its divine form, in coming to know itself the soul "re-cognizes" what it already knows. After all, Sufi teachers like to remind us, God taught Adam "all the names" (Quran 2:30), and every one of us is Adam (= "human" in Arabic).

It should also be noted that the meaning of the important Quranic term *dhikr*, "remembrance," overlaps with that of *ma'rifa*. When our father Adam "forgot" (Quran 20:115), God reminded him and he remembered, and then God forgave him and appointed him vicegerent in the earth. The Quran describes "reminder" (*dhikrā*) as the primary function of the prophets, who were traditionally numbered at 124,000, beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. Remembrance is

<sup>7</sup> Chittick, *Me o' Rumi*, p. 51.

then the proper human response to a prophetic message. The book frequently encourages *dhikr*, specifically *dhikr Allāh*, "the remembrance of God," as the cure for forgetfulness. Practically all Sufi teachers inculcated the methodical practice of *dhikr*.

The most famous and influential of the numerous early books differentiating between knowledge and recognition while detailing the theory and practice of actualizing true human nature is the forty-volume work of the renowned scholar Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), *Bringing to Life the Sciences of the Religion* (*Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*). The title of this book, like the title of his Persian reworking of the text, *The Alchemy of Felicity* (*Kimiyā-yi sa'ādat*), points to self-recognition and God-recognition as the *raison d'être* of the transmitted sciences. "Recognition," as one of the early Sufi teachers put it, "is the heart's life with God."<sup>8</sup>

#### THE WORLDVIEW

The Islamic worldview was presented mythically in the Quran and Hadith and elaborated upon by generations of scholars. It was typically explained in terms of three principles: the assertion of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and the return to God (*ma'ād*). Most Muslims went no further in their knowledge of these principles than memorized catechisms. The predominant methodologies of Kalam meant that students of theology were trained in rational argumentation rather than self-reflection and self-understanding. In a typical passage from *The Alchemy of Felicity*, Ghazālī differentiates among various levels of understanding *tawḥīd*, putting the dogmatic theologians in the same category as the common people. He describes the higher stages of asserting God's unity using the words witnessing (*mushāhada*), togetherness (*jam*), and annihilation (*fanā*), all three of which were much discussed in Sufi literature.

The first degree of *tawḥīd* is that someone says with the tongue, "There is no god but God," but he does not believe it in the heart. This is the *tawḥīd* of the hypocrite.

<sup>8</sup> Muḥammad ibn al-Faḍl (d. 931), as quoted by Qushayrī, *al-Risāla*; for a slightly different translation, see Knysh, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism*, p. 325. On the importance of the heart in the Quran and Islamic psychology generally, see Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, chapter 10.



The second degree is that someone believes its meaning in the heart on the basis of imitation, like the common man; or on the basis of some sort of evidence, like the Kalam expert.

The third degree is that someone sees by way of witnessing that everything comes forth from one root, that there is no more than one actor, and that no one else has any activity. This is a light that appears in the heart, and witnessing is gained through this light. This is not like the belief of the common person or the Kalam expert, for belief [*i'tiqād*] is a knot [*'uqda*] tied in the heart by means of imitation or evidence. But witnessing is an expansion of the heart that unties all knots.

There are differences between these three: one person convinces himself to believe that the master is in the house because so-and-so said he is in the house. This is the imitation of the common man, who heard it from his mother and father. Another person infers that the master is in the house because the horse and servants are standing by the doorway. This is like the belief of the Kalam expert. The third person sees him inside the house by way of witnessing. This is like the *tawhīd* of the recognizers. Although this third *tawhīd* is great in degree, its possessor still sees creation along with seeing and knowing the Creator, and he knows that creation comes from the Creator. So in this there is multiplicity and manyness. As long as he sees two, he stays in dispersion and does not have togetherness.

The perfection of *tawhīd* is the fourth degree. The person sees nothing but one. He sees and recognizes that all are one. Dispersion has no way into this witnessing. This is what the Sufis call "annihilation in *tawhīd*."<sup>9</sup>

In short, *tawhīd* is the assertion that there is nothing truly real but the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) – a word that the Quran uses to designate not only God himself, but also true, appropriate, and right along with the corresponding nouns. In several verses the Quran juxtaposes *ḥaqq* with *bāṭil*, "unreal," such as "The real comes, and the unreal vanishes away" (Quran 17:81). Avicenna explains the theological meanings of *ḥaqq* and *bāṭil* in his *Metaphysics*: "By Its essence the Necessary Existence is the Real constantly, and the possible existence is real through something else, but unreal in itself. Hence everything other than the One

Necessary Existence is unreal in itself."<sup>10</sup> In *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* ("The furthest goal"), a commentary on the divine names, Ghazālī follows the same line of reasoning:

Everything about which a report may be given is either absolutely unreal, absolutely real, or real in one respect and unreal in another respect. That which is impossible by essence is the absolutely unreal. That which is necessary by essence is the absolutely real. That which is possible by essence . . . is real in one respect and unreal in another . . . By this you will recognize that the absolutely real is the true existence by its essence, and every real thing takes its reality from it.<sup>11</sup>

If I stress the notion of *tawhīd* – the assertion of the unique reality of the Real – it is because the vast Islamic literature on the cultivation of the inner life and the clarification of inner experience cannot be contextualized unless we grasp that the authors had no doubt whatsoever that the Real alone is real. When Sufi teachers contrast imitation with "realization" – literally, the actualization of the Real – they are declaring that the human soul can be completed and perfected only by establishing a firmly rooted awareness of the presence of the Real, not simply by blindly following in the footsteps of those who have gone before. They recognized that everything other than the Real per se is unreal, including all human perception and experience. They understood that those who have "mystical experience" may indeed imagine that they are seeing or tasting or witnessing or contemplating God per se, and certainly Sufi poetry can often be read in such terms. But careful attention to the metaphysics and theology behind such statements shows that Muslim scholars were perfectly aware of the caveats.

Rumī explains the point toward the beginning of his great epic of love, the *Mathnawī*: "If you pour the ocean into a pot, // how much will it hold? One day's store."<sup>12</sup> Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910), often considered the founder of the explicitly Sufi movement, put it this way: "The water takes on the color of the cup."<sup>13</sup> Aḥmad Sam'ānī (d. 1140), author of a masterful Persian commentary on the divine names that investigates the diverse implications of finding God in the self and the world, clarifies the issue while explaining why Moses was denied the vision

<sup>10</sup> Avicenna, *al-Shifā'*, pp. 38–39 (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> *al-Maqṣad al-asnā*, ed. Fadlou Shehadi, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> *The Mathnawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, book I, verse 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi often explains the meaning of this sentence in terms of the soul's experience of the Real. See, for example, Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 341, 344, 368 [hereafter SPK].

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Chittick, *Divine Love*, pp. 416–17.



of God at Mount Sinai (Quran 7:143): "When He bestows on you vision of Himself, He will give it in the measure of your eyes' capacity, not in the measure of His majesty and beauty. This is why it has been said, 'He spoke to Moses in respect of Moses. Had He spoken to Moses in respect of His tremendousness, Moses would have melted'."<sup>14</sup>

The other two principles of faith – prophecy and the return to God – also play major roles in describing the human situation and bringing home the necessity of beautifying the soul. The principle of prophecy asserts that God in his mercy sent prophets to remind people of their true nature and guide them to their ultimate felicity (*sa'āda*). The third principle then explains the necessity of preparing for death and resurrection, events which pertain to the "compulsory return" undergone by everyone. The Tariqah (*ṭarīqa*) – the "narrow path" followed by the Sufis – was often called the "voluntary return," for its goal was to return to God before death.

Sufi teachers modeled their descriptions of the Tariqah on accounts of the *mī'rāj* or "ladder" of Muhammad, that is, his "night journey" (*isrā'*), during which he ascended up through the seven heavens, then on to hell, paradise, and finally into the Divine Presence (commentators find reference to the event in Quran 17:1 and 53:1ff.).<sup>15</sup> In some accounts of the path, like the famous poem of Farid al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221), *Mantiq al-ṭayr* ("The language of the birds"), there are seven preliminary stages corresponding to the seven heavens traversed by Muhammad. 'Aṭṭār describes them as seven mountains that the birds must fly over in order to reach their king, the *Simurgh* or "phoenix." Of the many birds that undertake the journey, only "thirty birds" – *sī murgh* – reach the end, discovering that they themselves are identical with the *Simurgh*. 'Aṭṭār explains the mountains as character traits of the perfected soul, namely seeking, love, recognition, unneediness, *tawhīd*, bewilderment, and poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Most descriptions of the ascent to God provide a larger number of stages, such as 40, 100, or even 1,001. In each case the author's goal is to guide seekers in navigating the uncharted realms of their own souls. People need such guidance because, as remarked by the Andalusian sage Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) – called the "greatest teacher" by the Sufi tradition –

"The soul is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end."<sup>17</sup> In *Bringing to Life the Sciences of the Religion*, Ghazālī discusses the ascending stages of the Tariqah as beautiful character traits (*maḥāsīn al-akhlāq*) that are innate to the soul's divine form but concealed by forgetfulness. In his commentary on the divine names he points out that seekers of God should strive "to become characterized by the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*), traits that are designated by God's most beautiful names. Ibn 'Arabī says that becoming characterized by God's character traits is equivalent to the philosophical goal of similarity to God and provides a nutshell description of Sufism.<sup>18</sup>

The best known of the early accounts of the Tariqah is the *Risāla* or "treatise" by Abu'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) from Nishapur.<sup>19</sup> He devotes a good deal of the book to delineating the "states" (*ahwāl*) and "stations" (*maqāmāt*) experienced by travelers on the path. States are temporary alterations of awareness that should be accepted as divine gifts but otherwise ignored, lest they divert seekers from the goal. Like most authors, he depicts them in pairs because of their constantly changing, yin-yang nature: contraction and expansion, awe and intimacy, gathering and dispersion, annihilation and subsistence, absence and presence, sobriety and drunkenness, variegation and stability, proximity and distance. Their complementarity reflects the two basic modes of perceiving the Real: God as transcendent and God as immanent. These two perceptions were commonly described in terms of the contrasting divine attributes of wrath and mercy, or majesty and beauty, or severity and gentleness, or justice and bounty, always with the understanding that, as the Prophet put it, "God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath."<sup>20</sup>

As for the "stations," these were understood as permanent character traits actualized by the soul during its climb on the ladder of realization. Qushayrī offers forty brief chapters describing them in roughly ascending order. Among them he lists repentance, striving, seclusion, scrupulosity, renunciation, silence, fear, hope, sadness, humility,

<sup>17</sup> *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, vol. III, p. 121, line 25 (quoted in SPK 345).

<sup>18</sup> SPK 283.

<sup>19</sup> The best of the three available translations into English is that of Knysh, *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle*.

<sup>20</sup> In *The Tao of Islam* Murata quotes many Sufis and philosophers to show how they understood this divine complementarity as reflected in the soul and the universe. For a 500-page twelfth-century text that describes the soul's engagement with God in terms of divine complementarity, see Chittick, *Rest of the Spirits*.

<sup>14</sup> Chittick, *Rest of the Spirits*, p. 19. Original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> The possible influence of the detailed Islamic accounts of this journey on Dante's *Divine Comedy* has been discussed by historians since the 1919 book of Palacios, *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*.

<sup>16</sup> The book has been translated into English partly or wholly several times, beginning with Edward Fitzgerald in 1889.



contentment, trust, gratitude, certainty, patience, watchfulness, approval, sincerity, truthfulness, shame, and chivalry. His contemporary in Herat, 'Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 1088), wrote two classic depictions of one hundred stations on the path, one in Arabic and one in Persian. Adding a good deal of subtlety to his books, he explained that each of the character traits he describes has three ascending levels, a tripartite scheme that correlates with the distinction drawn by Sufi teachers among three basic types of wayfarers: the common, the elect, and the elect of the elect.

Philosophy and Kalam always remained elite enterprises, but Sufism attracted people from all walks of life and became by far the most popular form of learning. It made available to all Muslims the means of intensifying their engagement with God on the basis of the prophetic model. As noted, the most prominent of the practices stressed by the Sufi teachers was *dhikr*, the remembrance, mention, or invocation of God's names, a practice firmly grounded in the Quran, the Hadith, and the developed Islamic worldview.<sup>21</sup> Historians and anthropologists have often remarked on Sufism's use of invocation and other techniques to provide the general populace with religious experience, though they have sometimes missed the fact that such activities give us a better picture of mainstream Islam than do the writings of the jurists and theologians, a point that Shahab Ahmed stresses in his book *What is Islam?* He writes, for example,

The historical preoccupation of Muslims with the exploration of the meaningful is evidenced by the prolific social practice of the Sufi *samā'* – literally, "audition" – those personal and collective exercises of Sufi existential experience that were performed at any time, but especially in public on Thursday evenings in *khānqāhs* and at Sufi shrines throughout the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (the most well-known example of which, today, is the whirling of the dervishes of the order of Mawlānā Jalāl-ud-Dīn Rūmī), and through which the Muslim sought direct, personal, subjective somatic taste (*dhawq*) of the Divine in a private domain of knowledge beyond the prescribed forms of correctness.<sup>22</sup>

Many Western scholars have associated Sufism with folk religion, often forgetting that it also provided the most elite and sophisticated teachings of the tradition. Ibn 'Arabī was called the "greatest teacher"

<sup>21</sup> See Chittick, "On the Cosmology of *Dhikr*."

<sup>22</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, p. 286.

precisely because of his unparalleled mastery and synthesis of metaphysics, theology, cosmology, spiritual psychology, principles of jurisprudence, and jurisprudence. Drawing from the most erudite expressions of the developed schools of learning, he tied everything back to specific Quranic verses and hadiths. Indeed, though he does not have a separate commentary on the Quran (unlike hundreds of other scholars), the depth and profundity of his explanations of the sacred text were unprecedented. The fact that his tomb in Damascus is still a place of pilgrimage for people from all walks of life reminds us of his saintly reputation.

One of the qualities that set Ibn 'Arabī apart from most other teachers was his analysis of religious experience, both in terms of his own personal unveilings (*kashf*), witnessings (*shuhūd*), tastings (*dhawq*), findings (*wujūd*), and visions (*ru'ya*), and in terms of the theoretical explanation of the status of the non-ordinary cognitions called by such names. In his voluminous and non-repetitive works, he remarks in passing or describes in detail many experiences that he underwent, beginning with a massive opening (*futūḥ*) when he was barely into his teens. By his own account, as reported to a disciple,

I began my retreat at the first light and reached opening before sunrise. After that I entered the "shining of the full moon" and other stations, one after another. I stayed in my place for fourteen months. Through that I gained all the mysteries that I put down in writing after the opening. My opening was a single attraction at that moment.<sup>23</sup>

In one of his many references to this opening, he writes, "Everything I have mentioned after it in all my speech is simply the differentiation of the all-inclusive reality that was contained in that look at the One Reality."<sup>24</sup> He called his magnum opus "The Meccan Openings" (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*) precisely because it describes knowledge that was opened up to him, without any exertion or seeking on his part, during his pilgrimage to Mecca in the year 1202. He explains this in the book's preface, where he also provides the full title (notice the use of the word *ma'rifa*): *The Treatise of the Meccan Openings: On Recognizing the Secrets of the Master and the Kingdom*.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> SPK, p. xiii.

<sup>24</sup> *Futūḥāt* II 548.14 (SPK, xiv).

<sup>25</sup> One of Ibn 'Arabī's contemporaries, Rūzbihān Baqlī from Shiraz, describes his own remarkable visions of God's presence in *Kāshif al-astār*, translated by Carl Ernst as *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master*.



## IMAGINATION'S OMNIPRESENCE

The orientalist Henry Corbin (d. 1978) performed a great service to Islamic studies by bringing to light the importance of a number of philosophers and Sufis who had been relatively ignored by Western scholarship. In *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī* and other books, Corbin used the tools of phenomenology to stress the importance of imagination and to analyze encounters with the unseen worlds described by Ibn 'Arabī and others.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, however, he tended to extract the teachings from their metaphysical and cosmological context. More interesting, perhaps, is Ibn 'Arabī's own analysis of imagination's role in human cognition, a role that can help us understand the necessarily ambiguous nature of all experience, religious or otherwise.

In Islamic thought everything that exists in any respect whatsoever can be divided into two sorts: God and other than God, or the Real and the unreal. In explaining these two, Ibn 'Arabī often has recourse to the notion of "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*), a term drawn from the Quran's account of Moses at Mount Sinai (7:143), where God "disclosed himself" not to Moses, but to the mountain, shattering it to dust. Many teachers before Ibn 'Arabī had used the term to designate the contingent reality of the universe. Even Avicenna, who preferred abstract, non-Quranic terms when discussing the Necessary and the possible, found the term "self-disclosure" congenial in his explanation of the divine love that drives all existent things to their final goals:

Each of the existent things loves the Absolute Good with an innate love, and the Absolute Good discloses Itself to Its lovers. Their receptions of Its self-disclosure and their conjunctions with It, however, are disparate. The furthest limit of proximity to It is the reception of Its self-disclosure in reality, I mean, as perfectly as possible. This is what the Sufis call "unification." In Its munificence, the Good loves that Its self-disclosure be received. Then the things come into existence by means of Its self-disclosure.<sup>27</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī often explains why "the existent things" – which are Rūmī's "pots" and Junayd's "cups" – have disparate receptions of the Absolute Good's self-disclosure. The multiplicity of the things goes

<sup>26</sup> Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*.

<sup>27</sup> From the last chapter of *Risāla fi'l-'ishq*, translated in Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 284.

back to the Necessary Being, whose self-awareness comprehends all beings and all becoming. Given that God in his eternity "knows all things," as the Quran says repeatedly, he plays no role in determining their quiddities – they are what he knows them to be, always and forever. He simply issues the command "Be!" to their fixed thingness: "His only command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!' and it comes to be" (Quran 36:82).<sup>28</sup> In respect of their inherent nonexistence the things known eternally by God are unreal, but in respect of their God-given existence in the world, they are real. It follows that each thing is *huwa lā huwa*, "He/not He" or "it/not it." Each is itself inasmuch as it negates the Real, but other than itself inasmuch as it affirms the Real.

Ambiguity – the state of being it/not it – pertains to everything other than God. It is a characteristic of *khayāl*, a word that designates both external images and internal imagination. Whether we see an image in a mirror or in our own minds, it is it/not it, which is to say that it is itself in one respect and not itself in another. Hence the entire cosmos can be called imagination, for it is the sum total of the possible things, which are images hanging between the Necessary Existence and absolute nonexistence. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it in one passage,

Everything other than the Essence of the Real is in the station of transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of the Real is intervening imagination and vanishing shadow. No created thing remains in this world, the hereafter, and what is between the two, neither spirit, nor soul, nor anything other than God – I mean the Essence of God – upon a single state; rather, it undergoes continual change from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this ... So the cosmos only became manifest within imagination. It is imagined in itself. So it is it, and it is not it.<sup>29</sup>

Following in the line of the Quran and Muslim thought generally, Ibn 'Arabī subdivides this realm of divine self-disclosure, which he sometimes calls "nondelimited imagination," into three worlds. Most intense in divine attributes and intelligible luminosity is "heaven" or the spiritual world, home of angels and disengaged intellects. Least intense is "earth" or the realm of corporeality and sense perception.

<sup>28</sup> On the immutable fixity of things, see, for example SPK, 83–89, 297–301.

<sup>29</sup> *Futūḥāt* 2:313.17 (SPK, 118).



Standing between heaven and earth is the World of Imagination, a realm that is both spiritual and bodily, or neither one nor the other.

The human microcosm, created in the form of God per se, mirrors the macrocosm, so each individual human being has a three-level structure: luminous spirit, dark body, and in-between soul. The spirit is characterized by an intensity of divine attributes, for it is the direct manifestation of the divine light. The body is qualified by exceedingly weak reverberations of the same attributes, so weak that they can be called by the names of their opposites. The spirit is alive, knowing, desiring, powerful, speaking, hearing, seeing, and so on down the list of God's ninety-nine names, while the body is dead, ignorant, apathetic, weak, mute, deaf, and blind. The body's life does not belong to the clay substratum, but to the intermediate level of soul. The soul is then an image of both spirit and body, a never repeating self-disclosure of the Real hanging between light and darkness. It remains in a constant state of flux, pulled upward by the light of the spirit and downward by the darkness of clay. To use Rūmī's imagery, the soul is an angel's wing stuck to a donkey's tail, its destiny to be determined by which of the two sides predominates.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of the cosmology and psychology formulated by philosophers and Sufis, the first two dimensions of the religion – practice and faith – prepare the ground for the third dimension, beautifying the soul. In other words, the goal of life is to intensify the light of the spirit and overcome the darkness of the body, always with God's help. Once the soul becomes aware of itself, it experiences the ongoing self-disclosures of the Real, but these self-disclosures are shaped and colored by the soul's cup. Eventually the soul's dependence on the body will disappear, for only at a relatively early stage of its development does it need eyes to see and ears to hear, as we witness already in dreams. The great philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640) provides extensive analyses of the soul's experiences as it ascends in the stages of recognition and realization. He summarizes his position in one of his favorite aphorisms: "The soul is bodily in origination and spiritual in subsistence" (*al-nafs jismāniyyat al-ḥudūth rūḥāniyyat al-baqā*).<sup>31</sup>

In one explanation of the meaning of He/not He, Ibn 'Arabī says that "He" designates light or existence, for "God is the light of the heavens

<sup>30</sup> Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the fourth volume of Mullā Ṣadrā's magnum opus, *al-Asfār al-arba'a* ("The Four Journeys"), translated by L. Peervani as *Spiritual Psychology: The Fourth Intellectual Journey*.

and the earth" (Quran 24:35). "Not He" then designates darkness or nonexistence. All perception (*idrāk*) takes place through the presence of light in darkness, for neither light nor darkness can be perceived in itself.

Were it not for light, nothing whatsoever would be perceived, neither object of knowledge, nor sensory object, nor imagined object. The names of light are diverse in keeping with the names set down for the faculties. The common people see these as names of the faculties, but the recognizers see them as names of the light through which perception takes place. When you perceive sounds, you call that light "hearing." When you perceive sights, you call that light "seeing." When you perceive objects of touch, you call that light "touch." So also is the case with objects of imagination. Hence the faculty of touch is nothing but light. Smell, taste, imagination, memory, reason, reflection, conceptualization, and everything through which perception takes place are nothing but light.

As for perceived things, if they did not have the preparedness to receive the perception of the one who perceives them, they would not be perceived. First they possess manifestation to the perceiver, and then they are perceived. Manifestation is light. Hence every perceived thing must have a relationship with light through which it gains the preparedness to be perceived, so every known thing has a relationship with the Real, and the Real is Light.<sup>32</sup>

#### PERCEIVING THE REAL

To perceive anything at all is to perceive the Real's self-disclosure, for there is nothing else to perceive. As Ghazālī often says, "There is nothing in existence but God." Why people perceive and experience God in endlessly diverse ways goes back to a host of factors. One is that "Self-disclosure never repeats itself," which means that the manifestation of the One is always one and unique. As Avicenna put it, the things' have disparate receptions of the Absolute Good when it discloses itself. In other words, the Infinite One gives rise to an infinity of ones. If we imagine a boundless sphere whose center is the One, every point

<sup>32</sup> *Futūḥāt* III 276.32 (SPK, 214).



within the sphere will be the center's reflection, but different from every other point because of its coordinates.

The ability to recognize what we actually perceive goes back to our cups' receptivity, the importance of which Ibn 'Arabī often explains. In one long passage he uses the analogy of a king to suggest why ignorance prevents people from seeing God, despite the fact that, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (Quran 2:115).

God proportioned the human configuration . . . , then "He blew into him of His spirit" [Quran 32:9]. At that there became manifest within him a soul governing the frame. It became manifest through the form of the frame's constitution, so the souls became ranked in excellence, just as the constitutions are ranked in excellence. In the same way, sunlight strikes diverse colors in glass and gives forth lights that are diverse in color, whether red, yellow, blue, or something else, in keeping with the color of the glass in the view of the eye. The diversity that arrives newly in the light derives only from the locus . . . The frames receive governance from these souls only in the measure of their preparedness . . . Among the souls are the clever and the dull, in keeping with the frame's constitution . . .

For example, when we see that a king takes on the form of the commoners and walks among the people in the market such that they do not recognize him as the king, he has no weight in their souls. However, when someone who recognizes him encounters him in that state, the magnificence and measure of the king come to abide in his soul. Hence his knowledge of the king leaves a trace in him, so he honors him, shows courtesy, and prostrates himself before him.<sup>33</sup>

In short, the soul's preparedness for perception and understanding determines what it experiences. Few people have enough recognition of their own souls to differentiate among the three basic levels of perception – the sensory, the imaginal, and the intellectual (or spiritual). Except in rare instances, exemplified by the prophets and the friends of God (*awliyā'*), all "significant" perceptions fall short of the spiritual realm and pertain rather to the imaginal realm, which is neither spiritual nor bodily.

<sup>33</sup> *Futūḥāt* 3:554.6. For the whole passage, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, pp. 325–26.

A good deal of Sufi literature addresses how to discern light from darkness in the ambiguous, imaginal realm of perception. Most mystical experiences – unveilings, contemplations, visions, tastings, recognitions – take place in the soul, the microcosmic world of imagination. On the macrocosmic level, the World of Imagination is the realm of intermediary beings that are neither angels nor human, beings that are generally called "jinn." The Quran asserts that they were created from "fire," which combines the spirit's light with clay's darkness. Satan himself is a jinn, which explains in Islamic terms how he could have disobeyed God, given that the Quran says that angels – who are created of light – cannot disobey the divine command. Since the soul is intermediate and "fiery" by nature, it is innately inclined to receive the deceptive and flickering luminosity of the imaginal realms. A saying of the Prophet points out that the jinn have access to human souls: "Satan runs in the blood of every child of Adam." About Satan the Quran says, "He sees you – he and his tribe – from where you see them not" (7:27). So no one should be surprised that the texts frequently stress the dangers of attempting to navigate the ocean of the soul without a qualified guide, who is traditionally called the "shaykh," that is, the elder or teacher. His authority derives from having had his advancement on the path ritually confirmed by his own shaykh. In all formalized Sufi orders – of which there have been and still are hundreds – the chain of transmitted authority goes back to the Prophet, who embodies the divine guidance revealed in the Quran.

Sufi literature often warns about thinking that "mystical experience" is by definition a good thing, or, far worse, that it delivers its recipient from the obligation to follow the Quran and the Prophet. Some authors wrote books describing the perils faced by those who allow their visions to hold sway. The great twelfth-century master Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209), for example, wrote a Persian treatise called *Ghalaṭāt al-sālikīn*, "The errors of the wayfarers." He notes that among the errors of the weak is that "They enter the world of imagination and see images, but they fancy that this is unveiling."<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Arabī frequently discusses the perils faced by the soul when it is exposed to the unseen realms.<sup>35</sup> A Persian treatise attributed to his disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274) puts the issue in a nutshell:

<sup>34</sup> *Risālat al-quḍs wa Risāla-yi ghalaṭāt al-sālikīn*, ed. Nurbakhsh, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, chapter 17 of SPK, "The Pitfalls of the Path."



Whenever a recognizer and traveler finds something shining down from the horizon of Heaven's Kingdom on the tablet of his heart, he must compare it with the Book of God. If it agrees with the Book, he should accept it; if not, he should pay no heed. Then he should compare it with the Sunnah of the Messenger. If it corresponds to it, he should judge it to be true; if not, he should take no further action. In the same way he should also compare it with the consensus of the ulama and the shaykhs of the Community . . . For, the errors of this path have no end, because the signs on the horizons and in the souls become confused in formal and supraformal unveilings. No one is saved from the clashing waves of the oceans of the signs except the masters among His sincere servants – and how few they are! Hence, except in rare and exceptional cases, one cannot avoid the need for a shaykh who is a wayfarer, a truth-teller, and a realizer. "He who has no shaykh has Satan for his shaykh" is the allusion of the king of the recognizers, Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī.<sup>36</sup>

To summarize, both Sufism and philosophy pay a great deal of attention to human experience of the Real, whether this takes place by means of the external senses in the signs of the outside world, or by means of the internal senses and intellect in the signs of the inside world. People can and do experience the Real, but they will not be able to understand what it is that they are actually experiencing without the discipline of the path. Ibn 'Arabī reminds his readers of the Quranic statement that God is "with you wherever you are" (57:4). But, he remarks, "God did not say, 'And you are with Him,' since the manner in which He accompanies us is unknown. He knows how He accompanies us, but we do not know how He accompanies us. So witness is affirmed for Him in relation to us, but it is negated from us in relation to Him."<sup>37</sup>

The Quran suggests that nearness (*qurb*) to God is the goal of the human quest. Ibn 'Arabī explains what nearness has to do with the divine witness.

God says, "We are nearer to him than the jugular vein" (50:16), thereby describing Himself as being near to His servants. But what is desired from "nearness" is that it be the attribute of the servant. The servant should be qualified as being near to the Real exactly as the Real is qualified as being near to him. He says, "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). The Men of God seek to be with the Real

forever in whatever form He discloses Himself. He never ceases disclosing Himself in the forms of His servants continuously, so the servant is with Him wherever He discloses Himself continuously . . . The recognizers never cease witnessing nearness continuously, since they never cease witnessing forms within themselves and outside of themselves, and that is nothing but the self-disclosure of the Real.<sup>38</sup>

#### THE PATH OF LOVE

Most Sufi masters have taught that love provides the motive force for recognizing oneself and finding God's self-disclosure in the soul and the world. They commonly contrasted the cold abstraction of rationality with love's transforming fire. As Rūmī put it, when a philosopher like Avicenna tried to delve into the divine mysteries, he became "an ass on ice." As for love, it "burns away everything except the everlasting Beloved."<sup>39</sup> Many Sufi teachers held that poetry and song – by far the most popular forms of literature in traditional Muslim societies – provided the ideal vehicle for conveying love's transformative power. Love's object, after all, is always beauty, and, as the Prophet put it, "God is beautiful, and He loves beauty." The imagery and symbolism of the poets provided the most effective means of describing the beauty of the divine Beloved and stirring up love in the hearts of seekers. The rational abstractions of Kalam and philosophy tended rather to stress the indifference of the Supreme, Transcendent Reality to puny human aspirations.

The goal of lovers is union (*wiṣāl*), a point obvious from the everyday experience of "metaphorical love" (*ishq-i majāzī*), which is love for anything other than the Real. Not that metaphorical love is a bad thing, for, as the well-known Arabic proverb puts it, "The metaphor is the bridge to the reality," and the reality is God. All metaphorical love prepares the way for loving God and achieving union with him. Jurists and Kalam experts found the idea that people could obtain union with God repellent and condemned such talk, but their objections never prevented Sufi teachers from holding it up as their goal. Ibn 'Arabī explains what they meant by the term:

The Real is perpetually in a state of union with created existence. Through this He is a God . . . What takes place for the people of

<sup>36</sup> Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> *Futūḥāt* II 582.10 (SPK, 364).

<sup>38</sup> *Futūḥāt* II 558.27 (SPK, 365–66).

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 264, 215.



solicitude, the Folk of God, is that God gives them vision and unveils their insights until they witness this witness. This – that is, the recognizer's witnessing – is what is called "union," for the recognizer has become joined to a witnessing of the actual situation.<sup>40</sup>

The historical role of Sufism has everything to do with the fact that it brought the experience of God's presence into everyday life, an experience that was implicitly denied by the juridical and theological interpretations of the religion, both of which stressed obedience to the Shariah and blind adherence to the creed. The Sufi teachers turned their attention instead to the divine love that infuses the universe and tends to be forgotten by calculating intellects. They read the Quran as a "love letter," as Shams-i Tabrīzī put it.<sup>41</sup> They saw that it affirms two basic sorts of divine love, thereby providing the groundwork for all theory and practice. The first sort is unqualified, for it asserts the reality of *tawhīd*: there is nothing real but the Real, so there is no beloved but God, no lover but God, and no love but God. The Quran voices this love in the verse, "He loves them, and they love Him" (Quran 5:54). God's love is unqualified because he loves human beings eternally, and people's love for God is unqualified because they love God innately, whether or not they are aware of the fact.

The second sort of love takes into account free will and the role of the prophetic reminders. It invites people to turn away from metaphorical love and recognize their true Beloved. The king is walking among them in the bazaar, but they have no way to recognize him unless they follow the path of those who witness his presence – God's prophets and friends. The path of following is summed up in the verse, "Say [O Muhammad!]: 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you'" (Quran 3:31). When people follow the Prophet and when God comes to love them with this second kind of love, the fruit will be "union." An explicit early statement of this union is found in the most authoritative collection of Hadith and is constantly quoted in Sufi literature. The Prophet narrated from God that he says, "So much does My servant seek nearness to Me through supererogatory works that I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing, so he hears through Me; his eyesight, so he sees through Me; his tongue, so he speaks through Me; his feet, so he walks through Me; his hands, so he takes through Me; his heart, so he knows through Me."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Futūḥāt* II 480.12 [SPK, 365].

<sup>41</sup> Chittick, *Me & Rumi*, p. 156.

<sup>42</sup> See Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 427.

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### Part III

#### *Religious Experience Outside Traditional Monotheism*