SUFI'S HERMENEUTIC AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY DISCOURCES ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE
(Studies on Ibn al-'Arabi's Hermeneutics and His Concept of Religious Diversity and Its Application for Interfaith Dialogue)

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Ibn al-'Arabi's life

Ibn al-`Arabi, whose full name is Muhammad b. Ali b. Muhammad b. al-`Arabi al-Ta`i al-Hatimi is acclaimed to be one of the greatest Sufi masters of all time. By all informed accounts, he was "a towering figure in human spirituality"[1] and thus came to bear the *laqab* or honorific epithet of *al-shaykh al-akbar* or "the Greatest Master." He was born on 27 July 1165 /17 Ramadan 560, or, according to other sources, 6 August/27 (Ramadan)[2] in the beautiful township of Murcia, inland from the Mediterranean Costa Blanca between Valencia and Almeria, in the qiblah of Andalus, at the beginning of the Almohad reign. His father exercised military duties in the service of Ibn Mardanish,[3] ex-Christian warlord.

Ibn al-`Arabi's family was related to one of the oldest, noble and pious[4] Arab lineages in Spain of the time—the lineage of the Banu Ta`i. Ibn al-`Arabi himself states, "I am al-`Arabi al-Hatimi, the brother of magnanimity; in nobility we possess glory, ancient and renowned."[5] As asserted by Addas, Ibn al-`Arabi's family belonged to the *khassa* of his society, meaning the cultural "elite" that consisted of the ruling class and the highest officials in the Andalusian administration and army.[6]

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[1] Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Merciful, The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn `Arabi* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999), ix.

[2] Cf. Khalil ibn Aybak Safadi, *al-Wafi bi al-Wafayat*, Weisbaden, 1966, vol. 4, 178. See also Al-Muhadarat, I: 34 (Cairo, 1906), where Ibn al-`Arabi said: "I was born in Murcia when it was under sultan Abi 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Mardanish's reign, in Andalus, cited by Asin Palacios, *Ibn al-`Arabi,* 6.

[3] Muh. B. Sa'd b. Muh. B. Ahmad Ibn Mardanish.

[4] Ibn al-`Arabi has at least two uncles who were on the Path (Zahid). Ibn al-`Arabi said in *Futuhat*, "One of my family who was zahid, or who withdraw from the world was from Tunis. He used to stay in the mosque praying for God and his tomb was a place for ziarah (visit)." See *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya II*. ed. `Uthman Yahya. Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyat al-`Amma li al-Kitab, 1972- .Vol. 12 has date on cover: 1989. Includes bibliographical references and indexes Introductions in Arabic and French, 23 (hereafter abbreviated as Fut.)

[5] Ibn al-`Arabi, *al-Diwan al-akbar*, Bulaq, 1271H, 47, cited by *QRS*,17.

[6] See *Fut.* I, 506, 588-9; cited by Claude Addas, *Ibn `Arabi: The Voyage of No Return* (hereafter abbreviated as VNR) (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000), 11-12; see also Addas, Claude. *Ibn `Arabi, ou, La quete du sourfre rouge, (Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn `Arabi)*. translated from the French by Peter Kingsley, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993 (hereafter abbreviated as *QRS*), 48-49.

What is interesting about Ibn al-'Arabi's foray into Sufism is the nature of the narrative material we have about his experiences. Not only are they decidedly hagiographical, as one might suspect, but they are auto-hagiographcal. In other words, the large percentage of the material at the center of Ibn al-'Arabi's hagiographical portrait comes from the pen of the master himself. The significance of this is not entirely clear. One might imagine, for example, that such attestations about oneself might bring more scorn and derision than admiration and adulation. If so, it would not be the first time that a Sufi has sought to engender the scorn of potential admirers. Indeed, the entire tradition of the Malamatiyya is based on the performance of antinomian acts as an effective means of acquiring the public derision necessary to keep the ego (i.e., *nafs*) under tight control. At the same time, these accounts are celebrated and carefully preserved for posterity. Perhaps Ibn al-'Arabi's auto-hagiography is a way of grounding the admiration for the master among those who recognize his gifts and are open to his teachings, while simultaneously working to dismiss those who are closed to what he has to offer. In any case it is also clear that this genre of auto-hagiography which we find in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabi, seems closely linked with the fact that Ibn al-'Arabi understands all of his writings, not to be the product of his own isolated consciousness, but rather as revelations which he receives in visions and for which he cannot take any ultimate credit. Henri Corbin argues that this is all part of Ibn al-'Arabi's imaginal[7] epistemology according to which abstract intellectual distillations of mystically perceived truths are even farther from the Real than the visions of the imagination.[8]

If, according to Islamic tradition, the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel, so the *Futuhat*, Hirtenstein says, which "explains the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an was revealed to Ibn al-'Arabi by the Youth with no name. And like the Qur'an, which is said to have descended in its totality upon the heart of Muhammad and then been revealed to him piece by piece, so the *Futuhat*, although present in its entirety within the Youth, would also take many years to write down."[9]

Some of the themes in the *Fusus,* Ibn al-'Arabi's other book, have become the focus of attacks from the eighth century down to the present day, such as the unity of being, the notion of the pre-existence of the human soul, the final salvation of Pharaoh, the perfect man, and the non-eternity of infernal punishments—though they are not absent from the *Futuhat*. It was for this reason, Addas argues, that –"due allowance being made for the intellectual laziness of the jurists, who were generally happy simply to cite the 'condemnable propositions' already catalogued by Ibn Taymiyya—the *Fusus* lent themselves to criticism far more readily than the *Futuhat*."[10]

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[7] I borrow the term "imaginal" from William Chittick (see his *Imaginal Worlds*) who uses is it as an alternative for "imaginary" primarily because the latter connotes a sense of the false or unreal in colloquial English. By "imaginal," Chittick is coining an adjective used to describe a phenomenon closely connected to the imagination, but which is understood to be uniquely real.

[8] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imaginaion in the Sufism of Ibn `Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 377.

[9] Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Merciful*, 152.

[10]*QRS*, 278.

During the last years of his life, Ibn al-'Arabi was still active composing a number of works, revising the *Futuhat,* and teaching his disciples. One day God commanded him: "Tell your disciples: 'Make the most of my existence before I go!'"[11] It seems that it was what his disciples did; they never tired of gathering around the shaykh to study his works. In 22 Rabi' II 638 / November 1240, at the age of seventy-five, Ibn al-'Arabi passed away. "The pilgrim," Addas writes, "arrived at the end of his long terrestrial journey… the Shaykh al-Akbar left his disciples to perform a *mi'raj* from which there would be no return: one that would lead him to the Rafiq al-A'la, the Supreme Friend."[12]

Controversy and the Example of Ibn Taymiyya

Much of Ibn al-'Arabi's works have triggered attacks from certain jurists. The question that must be addressed in any assessment of his legacy is *why* his teachings aroused so much hostility among certain Muslims toward him? In his monograph on the subject, Alexander D. Knysh presents a study of the disagreement within Islamic world over the legacy of Ibn al-'Arabi. He analyzes the intense theological and intellectual debates about Ibn al-'Arabi, including the doctrinal disagreement and factional differences among the ulama, whose interests were by no means identical with those of other strata of medieval Islamic society. According to Knysh, to understand the fierce disputes over Ibn al-'Arabi, it is crucial to understand the place and role of the ulama in medieval Islamic society.[13] Now, why was Ibn al-'Arabi was condemned?

No discussion of the controversial legacy of Ibn al-'Arabi would be complete without the mention of the systematic attacks against Ibn al-'Arabi and his school that culminated in the writings of the famous Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who articulates one of the most scathing and subsequently influential critiques of Ibn al-'Arabi and his teachings. That Ibn Taymiyya was a Sufi, there can be no doubt.[14] But as a conscientious Sufi, Ibn Taymiyya felt obliged to defend orthodox/orthoprax Sufism against corrupting innovations in Sufi belief and practice.

Contemporary scholarly assessments of Ibn Taymiyya's perspectives on the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi vary to a certain degree. Some, such as the work of Muhammad Umar Memon, are themselves polemical, echoing and even magnifying the negative sentiments of Ibn Taymiyya himself.[15] Others, such as the work of Alexander

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[11] *Fut.* I, 723. 14, *QRS,* 287.

[12] *QRS,* 287.

[13] See Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Mediaval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[14] See George Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiyya: A Sufi of the Qadiriya Order," *The American Journal of Arabic Studies,* 1 (1973), pp. 118-129 quoted in Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), x.

[15] Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

Knysh on this topic, are more balanced and insightful. Knysh is well aware that Ibn Taymiyya is the author of numerous tractates and legal opinions (*fatawa*) which rely on quotations from scripture, condemning the theses that he finds in Ibn al-'Arabi's writing. He also notes that, while Ibn Taymiyya appears to have an excellent knowledge of the works he was refuting, curiously enough, his critiques are not aimed against Ibn al-'Arabi's entire corpus, but rather against certain of the master's works, especially *Fusus al-hikam*. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyya writes:

> At first, I was among those who held a good opinion of Ibn 'Arabi and praised him highly for the useful advice he provides in his books. This useful advice is found in pages of "Revelations" [*al-Futuhat al-makiyya*], the "Essence" [*al-Kunh ma la budda minhu li al-murid*], the "Tightly Knit and Tied" [*Kitab al-amr al-muhkam al-marbut*], the "Precious Pearl" [*al-Durrat al-fakhira fi dhikr man intafa'tu bi-hi fi tariq al-akhira*], and the "Position of the Stars" [*Mawaqi' al-nujum*], and similar writings. At that time we were unaware of his real goal, because we had not yet studied the *Fusus* and suchlike books. [16]

Apparently, at one time or another, Ibn Taymiyya had an appreciation of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought. He obviously read the *Futuhat* and admired it. Sometime, however, between his reading of this and other of the master's works, Ibn Taymiyya's opinion changed. According to Ibn Dawadari, the change occurred in the year 703/1303 when Ibn Taymiyya receeived a copy of *Fusus* and found it to be highly problematic. [17] It appears that the issue here is not that Ibn al-'Arabi makes a perceived departure from orthodoxy in *Fusus* which one could not impute to the *Futuhat* as well. Instead, it seems that Ibn Taymiyya is reading *Fusus* through a distinctly different interpretative lens than he read the *Futuhat*. All indications point to the fact that this second "lens" through which Ibn Taymiyya read *Fusus* is that of what he perceived to be the dangerous combination of the popularization and concomitant distortion of the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi, the proliferation of sectarian phenomena such as that of the Nusayriyya, and the bastardization of classical Sufism to include all manner of popular beliefs and practices having little to do with what Ibn Taymiyya understood to be orthodox Islam. Knysh writes:

> Using his notion of "correct Sufism" as his measuring stick, Ibn Taymiyya singled out what he viewed as Ibn 'Arabi's tendency to obfuscate the critical God-man demarcation as his main target and as the starting point of his antimonistic critique. In his view, this tendency put the Greatest Master amid the cohort of "heretics" and "grave sinners," responsible for such "vices" as the excessive influence on the Muslim state of its Christian and Jewish subjects, suggestive female dress, popular superstitions, the game of backgammon, the spread of the Mongol customs among the Mamluks, the miracle-working of the dervishes, minor pilgrimages to saints' shrines, Shi'i heresies, the exotic garments of wandering Sufis, hashish-smoking, the chivalric cult of *futuwwa*, state control of food prices, rationalist philosophy, and *kalam*. [18]

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[16] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu'at al-rasa'il wa l-masa'il*, four volumes, Muhammad Rashid Rida, ed. (Cairo: Matba'at al-Manar, 1922-1930), v. 4, 179, quoted in Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 96.

[17] Ibn al-Dawadari, *Kanz al-durar wa l-jami' al-ghurar* (Wiesbaden: Qism al-Dirasat al-Islamiyya, al-Ma'had al-Almani li al-Athar bi al-Qahira, 1960-1982), 143, quoted in Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 96.

[18] Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 89.

In simple terms, then, Ibn Taymiyya does not give us an "objective" and comprehensive review of Ibn al-'Arabi's thinking because he does not see this as his task. Rather, he understands his role to be that of a defender of orthodox/orthoprax Islam and orthodox/orthoprax Sufism at a time when he understands both to be under a tremendous pluralist cultural assault.

The premier aspect of Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching that is most troublesome for Ibn Taymiyya is his teaching on the "oneness of being" (often referred to in Arabic as *wahdat al-wujud*,[19] although Ibn al-'Arabi never uses this expression). Within this teaching, Ibn Taymiyya locates the particular difficulty to lie in Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of *al-a'yan al-thabita* or the "immutable entities."[20] For Ibn al-'Arabi, the Arabic word *'ayn* refers to an "entity" whether existent in the created order, or in a state of non-existent potentiality in the mind of God. The creative activity of God occurs as God brings into existence any combination of the entities which are established in the divine consciousness. According to this schema, nothing which is brought into existence does not have its full and complete origin in the Godhead. To say otherwise would, for Ibn al-'Arabi, be tantamount to *shirk*. For Ibn al-'Arabi, God does indeed create *ex nihilo*, but not in the sense that any reality is beyond God's imagination and the scope of God's knowledge. Therefore the "nothingness" of everything that God brings into existence is not, for Ibn al-'Arabi, a literal no-thing-ness—as it is for Ibn Taymiyya—a void that has nothing to do with, and thus is the opposite of Being. Rather, for Ibn al-'Arabi the "nothingness" out of which God creates is the nonexistence or "pre-existence"[21] of all those myriad and unlimited "things" that are established in the mind of God.

Ibn al-'Arabi insists, for example, that the fact that God "sees all things" before they exist, does not in any way contradict the fact that He creates what exists out of nonexistence. In fact, the distinction between any type of "existence" on the one hand, and "thing-ness," on the other hand, is a crucial component of Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysics. Another way of saying this is that, for Ibn al-'Arabi, the quranic equivalent

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[19] On *wahdat al-wujud*, see Chittick, "*Wahdat al-Wujud* in Islamic Thought," *Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*, 10 (1991), 7-27; Chittick, "Rumi and *Wahdat al-wujud*," in Amin Banani; Richard G Hovannisian; Georges Sabagh, *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam : the Heritage of Rumi* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1994): Chittick, "Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi on the Oneness of Being," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1981), 171-184.

[20] This is Chittick's translation of *al-a'yan al-thabita* from *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1989 (hereafter abbreviated as *SPK*), 7 and *passim*. Knysh also adopts this translation.

[21] All terms, like "pre-existent"—which are not direct English translations of an expression used by Ibn al-'Arabi and thus depart significantly from his primary discourse—can be problematic. This is because, as Knysh points out, Ibn al-'Arabi's discourse is "deliberately crafted so as to obfuscate its essence" (9). This does not mean that Ibn al-'Arabi is being deliberately obscurantist, but rather reminds us that Ibn al-'Arabi recognizes the limitations of language in any attempt to describe the Real. In this particular instance, Ibn al-'Arabi is trying to distinguish between absolute no-thing-ness and the absolute non-existence out of which God creates the phenomenal world. Insofar as "pre-existence" suggests any type of "existence"—however *potential* and not *actual* it may be—this is not what Ibn al-'Arabi is trying to evoke when he describes something as a truly nonexistent "thing." From Ibn al-'Arabi's perspective, the danger of a term like "pre-existent" is that it makes his cosmology more susceptible to the charge that he is denying *creatio ex nihilo*.

of the Christian doctrine of 'creation out of nothingness' can more precisely be glossed as 'creation out of nonexistence.' Of all things that ever have been brought into existence or ever will be, it is absolutely vital that Ibn al-`Arabi declare: "He [i.e., God] never ceases seeing it. He who holds that the cosmos is eternal," the master goes on to warn, "does so from this perspective [*but does so erroneously!*]. But he who considers the existence of the cosmos in relation to its own entity [or "thing-ness"] and the fact that it did not possess this state when the Real saw it maintains [*correctly*] that the cosmos is temporally originated."[22]

In sum, Ibn al-`Arabi intends his teaching with respect to *al-a`yan al-thabita* ("immutable entities") as an attempt to maintain fidelity to the quranic doctrine of the temporality of the cosmos alongside of an unqualified assertion that nothing—especially God's creation—can possibly be "new" or "alien" to God . Because of his historical context, however, and the vocation he embraces as a defender of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, Ibn Taymiyya does not receive this teaching in the mode in which it was intended. Instead he receives it as part of a larger threat to mainstream Islamic teaching in which Ibn al-`Arabi himself had no appreciable role during his lifetime. Speaking of Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching with respect to *al-a`yan al-thabita*, Ibn Taymiyya writes:

> ...[H]e brought together two [heretical] theories, namely the negation of God's existence, on the one hand, and the negation of His [status as the] originator of the creaturely world, on the other. Thereby he denies that the Lord is the maker [of the world] and affirms that there is neither the existence of God, nor the act of creation. In so doing, he invalidates [the Qur'anic notion of] "the Lord of the worlds." [For him,] there exists neither the Lord, nor the world over which He holds sway. In other words, there is nothing but the immutable entities and the existence that sustains them.[23]

Despite such a strong condemnation of Ibn al-`Arabi's thought, it is interesting to note that Ibn Taymiyya refrains from the *ad hominem* attacks that could be found on the lips or flowing from the pens of so many of Ibn Taymiyya's disciples in subsequent generations. Of all those who profess what Ibn Taymiyya interpreted as being heretical doctrines of the oneness of being, Ibn Taymiyya says of Ibn al-`Arabi that the latter is

> ...the closest to Islam among them.... He at least distinguished between the manifest One and the concrete forms of His manifestation. Moreover, he affirmed the validity of Divine Command and Prohibition and the Divine Laws as they stand. He also instructed the travelers on the [mystical] path how to acquire high morals and the acts of devotion, as is common with other Sufis and their disciples. Therefore, many pious worshippers (`ubbad) have learned [the rules of] their path through his instruction and thus have greatly benefited from him, even though they sometimes failed to understand his [mystical] subtleties. [24]

By recognizing the moral and ritual rectitude of his fellow Sufi, Ibn Taymiyya is locating himself squarely within a mainstream Sufism which has always placed a premium on right behavior as an absolute *sine qua non* of the spiritual quest. Indeed,

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[22] *Fut.* II, 666.34 in *SPK*, 85.

[23] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu`at*, vol. IV, 21-22 quoted in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 102.

[24] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu`at*, vol. I, 183 quoted in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* 98.

what impresses the great Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and draws him to Sufism during his years of searching for the truth is that the Sufi's are those who teach about truth, first and foremost, by the example of their lives:

> Their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character; indeed, were the intellect of the intellectuals and the learning of the learned and the scholarship of the scholars, who are versed in the profundities of revealed truth, brought together in the attempt to improve the life and character of the mystics, they would find no way of doing so.[25]

Through his praise for Ibn al-'Arabi's lived example, it is obvious that Ibn Taymiyya holds the master in high esteem and realizes that—while the master's teachings may be (mis)interpreted as challenging the practical distinction between God and the world, paradise and hellfire, and threatening the rigorous observance of the Shari'a—in his own life, the master was a scrupulously pious Sunni Muslim. By the same token, Ibn Taymiyya's comment on the tendency for people to 'fail to understand [Ibn al-'Arabi's mystical] subtleties' should not be overlooked. In fact, I would argue that it is precisely these misunderstandings to which Ibn Taymiyya feels compelled to respond, and that Ibn Taymiyya by no means would countenance the *takfir* (i.e., declaring to be an unbeliever) of Ibn al-'Arabi that one finds among so many of Ibn Taymiyya's followers in today's world.

Ibn al-'Arabi's last Influence

Although there are still ongoing polemics against Ibn al-'Arabi and his teaching, he is nonetheless very influential for the development of contemporary Sufism, in both its intellectual and popular forms. It should be noted, however, that differences of circumstance and context will determine not only the mode and scope of the dissemination of Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching, but also the ways of understanding it. On certain occasions—as we saw in the case of the causal factors behind Ibn Taymiyya's polemic—the doctrine of "the unity of being" (*wahdat al-wujud*), for example, has been interpreted in ways approaching monism or pantheism. Accordingly, some saw the mystic path as a personal striving to become one with the only Being—a striving that has no use for so-called "organized religion." Such relativistic and anti-religious[26] interpretations depart radically from the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi in the way that they blur all distinctions between Islam and other religions (something Ibn al-'Arabi never did), and generally undetermined all legitimate the notions of "heresy."

For many centuries now, the teachings and legacy of Ibn al-'Arabi have held a special attraction for those who strongly feel the mysterious dimensions of God's presence in all human experience. Many find Ibn al-'Arabi's spirituality—one of deep piety and moral conviction, on the one hand, and an expansive notion of what is True and

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[25] Montgomery, Watt, *Muslim intellectual; a study of al-Ghazali* (Edinburgh, University Press, 1963), 60, see also Al-Ghazali, *Al Munqid min al-dalal* (Lahor: Hay'ah al-Awqaf bi-Ḥukumat al-Bunjab, 1971).

[26] Especially in the contemporary sense in which "spirituality" is set up in opposition to "religion."

Real, on the other hand—uniquely compelling, especially in a context where the importance of embracing cultural, ethnic, political, and religious plurality is only matched by the importance of rooting oneself in what it is one believes.

Ibn al-'Arabi's Scriptural Hermeneutics and his perspective on Religious Diversity

Ibn al-'Arabi is a figure who has been at the center of some controversy within his tradition. In light of this fact, it would not be surprising if some were to find the idea of using the thinking of controversial figure within the tradition as the source of understanding of religious diversity and dialogue. To those who would have serious reservations about the use of this figure based on the controversial nature of certain aspects of his thinking, I respond in two related ways. The first is to point out that the greatest and most creative minds in the history of religions have always been at the center of some controversy. From Maimonides to Augustine to Shankara to al-Shafi'i and Ibn Rushd, the historical record is replete with stories about the "trouble" caused by particularly gifted religious geniuses.[27] The second is to say that if, in the process of mining the riches of our tradition, we wish to assess fairly and accurately the orthodoxy of a religious thinker, we need to do so on the basis of a fair and open analysis of his teachings themselves and not on whatever propaganda may exist for or against the figure in question. When it comes to the figure of Ibn al-'Arabi and the way in which his teachings can be seen as expressions of Islamic orthodoxy on the issues of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, this process of fair analysis may be simpler and more straightforward than many would suspect.

In one of his well-known essays on biblical hermeneutics, Michael Fishbane notes that the tradition of rabbinic mystical exegesis known as Sod[28] turned on the principle that the words of sacred scripture speak to the reader "without ceasing." Thus, Fishbane asserts, "There is a continual expression of texts; and this reveals itself in their ongoing reinterpretation. But Sod," Fishbane emphasizes, "is more than the eternity of interpretation from the human side. It also points to the divine mystery of speech and meaning."[29] Fishbane goes on to speak about the "prophetic task" of "breaking the idols of simple sense" and restoring "the mystery of speech to its transcendent role in the creation of human reality." He asserts that one of the primary functions of the mystical exegete—individual like Ibn al-'Arabi —is "to continue this prophetic mission." It is "in the service of Sod [i.e., mystical exegesis]," that mystical exegete like our master mediates "a multitude of interpretations" as "he resists the dogmatization of meaning and the eclipse of the divine lights of speech." Taking our lead from Fishbane, we can assert

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[27] For orthodoxy and heresy in Medieval Islam, see Alexander Knysh, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 1 (Jan. 1993).

[28] In his essay entitled, "The Teacher and the Hermeneutical Task: a Reinterpretation of Medieval Exegesis," Fishbane makes reference to the four-fold typology of medieval scriptural interpretation common to both the Jewish and Christian traditions. For Jewish exegetes, this typology took the form of the acronym PaRDeS, where P=*Peshat* (the literal meaning); R=*Remez* (the allegorical meaning); D=*derash* (the tropological and moral meaning); and S=*Sod* (the mystical meaning). See Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 113.

[29] Fishbane, *Garments*, 120.

that, as a mystical exegete, our master seeks to "transcend the idolatries of language" and to condemn "hermeneutical arrogance in all its forms...."[30]

In his approach to canonical scripture, Ibn al-`Arabi fulfill the role of mystical exegete as Fishbane interprets it for us. He believes unequivocally in an infinitely readable Text, and he champions this infinite readability in the hopes of combating the "idolatries of language" and "hermeneutical arrogance." According to Ibn al-`Arabi, each word of the Qur'an –not to mention its verses and chapters –has an unlimited meanings, all of which are intended by God. Correct recitation of the Qur'an allows reader to access to new meanings at every reading.[31] "When meaning repeats itself for someone reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance."[32] In fact, Ibn al-`Arabi regards the words of language as symbolic expressions, subject to the interpretive efforts, which he calls *ta'bir* (lit. the act of "crossing over"). Thus, for him the truth of the interpretive effort presents itself in the act of crossing over from one state to another, and under this interpretation, difference becomes the root of all things since for the thing to be in a constant state of crossing is for it to be constantly differentiated, not only from other things, but also from itself. [33]

Thus, with respect to scriptural hermeneutics, our master appears to be convinced in the infinite potential for meaning inherent in the nature of divine revelation, especially in the form of sacred scripture. Such an understanding of the nature of scripture can be invaluable in dialogue because it demands that the person of faith not only take a stance of conviction within the teachings of his or her sacred texts, but also that they realize that this conviction—however deep it may be—does not restrict or exhaust in any way the potential meaning of these texts. There is also an additional sense in which the insights of the masters with respect to the infinite readability of scripture have particular relevance to dialogue. If dialogue is authentic and brings about authentic transformation, then the encounter with the religious other should have some effect on our religious self-understanding, and therefore on our own readings of our own texts.

For some, religious diversity may be viewed as a problem, but it certainly is not for Ibn al-`Arabi and for the school of thought that he established. In fact, Ibn al-`Arabi has an *explicit* theology of religions. In Ibn al-`Arabi's own words, "There are as many

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[30] Fishbane, *Garments*, 120.

[31] We may also mentioned here about Muhammad Shahrour, a professor of Civil Engineering who was born in Damascus in 1938, in his 800 page book, *Al-kitab wa'lqur'an: qira'a mu'asira* (The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Interpretation) (1990), who asserts the timelessness of the Qur'an and says that there is a direct conversation between the reader and the text, "If Islam is sound for all times and places," Muslims must not neglect historical developments and the interaction of different generations. Just as the Prophet, his contemporaries and his immediate successors understood the text of the Qur'an in the light of their intellectual capacities and of their perception of the world, so we should read and understand it in the light of ours. We should reinterpret sacred texts and apply them to contemporary social and moral issues. The Qur'an should be read as if the Prophet Muhammad had only recently died, informed us of this Book (41).

[32] *Fut.* IV, 367. 3.

[33] *Fut.* II, 518. 12. Indeed, Ibn al-`Arabi was what Bruce Lawrence calls "a deep-sea diver in the Ocean of the Qur'an." (See Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an, A Biography* (New York: Broadway, 2006), 109,

paths to God as there are human souls." The reality, however, of how religious diversity has been dealt with in Islamic history varies from context to context. To generalize, it is not inaccurate to say that—much the same as the case of Christianity (which tended, at least in the medieval period, to be significantly less tolerant of intra- and interreligious diversity than Islam)—some Muslim scholars have emphasized an exclusivist approach, while others have emphasized a more open and inclusivist one. Ibn al-`Arabi seems to be the most sophisticated and profound thinker of this second category.

Ibn al-`Arabi's discussion of religious pluralism begins with the assertion that God Himself is the source of all diversity in the cosmos. Thus, divergence of beliefs among human beings ultimately stems from God:

> God Himself is the first problem of diversity that has become manifest in the cosmos. The first thing that each existence thing looks upon is the cause of its own existence. In itself each thing knows that it was not, and that it then came to be through temporal origination. However, in this coming to be, the dispositions of the existent things are diverse. Hence they have diverse opinions about the identity of the cause that brought them into existence. Therefore the Real is the first problem of diversity in the cosmos.[34]

According to Ibn al-`Arabi, this diversity of opinion is one of the many signs that, to paraphrase the famous hadith *qudsi*, God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath.' Thus, "since God is the root of all diversity of beliefs within the cosmos, and since it is He who has brought about the existence of everything in the cosmos in a constitution not possessed by anything else, everyone will end up with mercy."[35]

In addition, for Ibn al-`Arabi, religious diversity is a natural consequence of the unlimitedness of God's Self-disclosure[36] and the concomitant degree of "preparedness" of any element of the phenomenal world to be a *mahall* or "locus" of the Self-disclosure. Another way of articulating this point would be to say that diversity in the phenomenal world is a direct function of the varying "preparedness" or capacity of creatures to receive the divine Self-disclosure. For Ibn al-`Arabi, God's Self-disclosure or his *tajalli* is very much connected with the "receptivity" (*qabul*) and "preparedness" *(isti`dad)* of the creatures or the vessels (*mahall*). Thus, when God discloses Godself, the degree to which a thing receives God's Self-disclosure is determined by its "preparedness" to bear

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[34] *Fut.* III, 465, 23 in *IW*, 4.

[35] *Fut.* III, 465. 25 in *IW*, 4-5.

[36] Divine Self-disclosure or Self-manifestation is one of the most central teachings of Ibn al-`Arabi's ontology. It is rooted in Ibn al-`Arabi's reflection on a well-known *hadith qudsi*[36]: "I was a Hidden Treasure [lit., "a treasure which was not recognized"] and desired [*out of love*] to be recognized, so I created the creatures and introduced Myself to them, and thus they recognized me." (*Fut.* II, 322. 29; II, 310. 20; II, 232. 11; II, 399. 29; *SPK*, 66, 126, 131, 204, 250). According to this concept, creation is God's Self-disclosure to Godself through the veils and signs of the creatures. For Ibn al-`Arabi, everything that exists in the world is, after all, nothing but the self-manifestation of the Absolute. In this case, Ibn al-`Arabi uses the term "hidden treasure" to refer to God's Being before it manifests itself and comes to be known by means of creation. Ibn al-`Arabi insists that "through the universe [which means by the creation of universe] God comes to be known." (Sachico Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, 11.)

it. In Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching, receptivity "must be taken into account not only on the cognitive level, but also on the existential level."[37] About preparedness, Ibn al-`Arabi writes:

> God says, "the giving of thy Lord can never be walled up (Q 17:20). In other words, it can never be withheld. God is saying that He gives constantly, while the loci receive in the measure of the realities of their preparedness. In the same way we say that the sun spreads rays over the existence of things. It is not miserly with its light toward anything. The loci receive the light in the measure of their preparedness.[38]

According to the quotation above, the essence of God never manifests in the universe; rather, it is God's specific attributes and Names that manifest themselves. Ibn al-`Arabi refers to God in God's manifestation as the divine presence (*al-hadra al-ilahiyya*), and he distinguishes this from God as non-manifest which Ibn al-`Arabi refers to as the primordial presence (*al-hadra al-qadima*).[39] This distinction plays an important role in Ibn al-`Arabi's understanding of spiritual attainment. The master claims that no human being can go beyond the Realm of God's Self-disclosure because the Absolute in Its Essence is absolutely unknowable. The only and the highest possibility for the human being comes in seeking the Absolute within the parameters of a particular instance of divine Self-disclosure within the human self. Now the viability of any particular instance of divine Self-disclosure is ultimately determined by the receptivity or preparedness of the existent entity. It is for this reason that there is a distinction between God's prophets and "friends" (*awliya'* or *akhilla'*) on one hand, and ordinary people on the other. The prophets and friends of God are loci of the manifestation for all the divine Names, but other people are more limited in their receptivity and can only make certain Names manifest. It is important to note that, although God's Self-disclosure depends on the receptivity and preparedness of the locus or vessel (*mahall*), this does not mean that God's Self-disclosure, which is God's Mercy, is suspended.

For Ibn al-`Arabi, the concepts of receptivity and preparedness are closely connected to the question of the divine "measuring out" of human "destiny" (*qadar*). Before it comes into existence, God knows the qualities and characteristics of each entity, because its "treasuries are with Him." Then, in the process of creation, God measures out these qualities and characteristics—including one's destiny (which ultimately is identical to one's capacity to receive divine manifestation)—according to the creature's preparedness to receive. To illustrate this point, Ibn al-`Arabi has recourse to one of his favorite ontological metaphors, the metaphor of the mirror: "Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so. So much is this the case that some have concluded that the image perceived is situated between the mirror and the eye of the beholder."[40] Thus, the recipient sees nothing other

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[37] *SPK*, 91.

[38] *Fut.* I, 287. 10; *SPK*, 91-2.

[39] Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam, An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York press, 2005), 67.

[40] Ibn al-`Arabi, Muhyi al-Din. *The bezels of wisdom*. translation and introd. by R.W.J. Austin ; pref. by Titus Burckhardt, New York : Paulist Press, 1980 (hereafter abbreviated as *BW*), 65.

than his own form in the mirror of Reality. It also means that the existent entity, fixed forever in God's knowledge, can never receive anything beyond what it demands in itself and according to its own capacity. This is one of the foundational principles behind Ibn al'Arabi's approach to the diversity of destiny among human beings, but also his approach to the diversity of religions.

When God brings the cosmos into existence, God, the One, discloses itself in the diversity of modes, which means that the One, the unlimited, delimits itself in its delimited *wujud*. With regard to human beings, their diversity is an expression of the infinite potentiality of Being which is underscored by the unrepeatability of the human soul. For Ibn al-'Arabi, diversity of religions is essentially due to the nature of the non-redundant diversity of human souls as they are brought into existence by the One. As constituent elements of the phenomenal world, each human being is by nature, as mentioned above, a *mahall* (lit. a "place") or *mazhar* (locus of manifestation) in which the One discloses Itself in and to the phenomenal realm. Because religious traditions realize themselves in the lives of the human individuals who constitute any religious community, the diversity of persons as distinct and particular manifestations of the One Being is reflected in the particular traditions as a whole. Speaking fairly directly to the issue of religious diversity, the master writes:

> You worship only what you set up in yourself. This is why doctrines and states differed concerning Allah. Thus one group says that He is like this and another group says that He is not like this, but like that. Another group says concerning knowledge (of Him) that the color of water is determined by the color of the cup. . . . So consider the bewilderment that permeates (*sariyya*) every belief.[41]

Ibn al-'Arabi is very fond of quoting the great ninth-century mystic master of Baghdad, Abu l-Qasim Muhammad al-Junayd (d. 910) who once used the metaphor of water colored by its container as a metaphor for unity in diversity: "The color of the water is the color of its container."[42] Ibn al-'Arabi's fondness for this metaphor, however, by no means indicates that he considered all religions to be equally valuable, but simply that, like every other constituent element of the existing order, all religions have their origin in God. One might paraphrase Ibn al-'Arabi's interpretation of Junayd's water metaphor by asserting that if the water represents the divine Being, the differences between religions is represented by the color or colors of the container. The color or colors, therefore, are directly related to the "preparedness" of a given religion to receive its particular manifestation of the Real. There are some religions which may be monochromatic or whose colors are strictly limited or faded. Other religions may have more distinct colors, but all of the same basic hue. Still others may have distinct colors of different hues, etc. "He who discloses Himself," Ibn al-'Arabi writes, "in respect to what He is in himself, is One in entity, but the self-disclosures—I mean their forms [e.g. the various religions]—are diverse because of the preparedness of the loci of self-

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[41] *Fut.* II, 212.1-7, also quoted by Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Barzakh, the Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 123.

[42] *Fut.* II, 316.10; *SPK*, 149, 229, 341-344.

disclosure."[43] As always, Ibn al-`Arabi roots this idea in the Qur'an. In this respect he makes specific reference to Q 11:118-119: "If your Lord had willed [it], He would have fashioned humanity into one community, *but they will not cease to differ*, except those upon whom your Lord has been merciful."[44]

Just as God never ceases to love or desire to be "recognized," or to be manifest, God's Self-manifestation also takes an infinite multiplicity of loci or receptacles (*mahallat*). Thus, phenomenal multiplicity, which is rooted in divine infinity, in fact has only one ontological entity, but because God's self-manifestation never ends, the loci of manifestation (*mazahir*) are infinitely diverse. This logic quite straightforwardly carries over to the phenomenon of the diversity of religions. In more direct terms, Ibn al-`Arabi writes, "every observer of God is under the controlling property of one of God's Names. That Name discloses itself to him or her and gives to him or her a specific belief through its Self-disclosure."[45]

One might also note that, from a slightly different angle, Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching on the diversity of religions can be inferred from what he has to say about perpetual creation. As part of his teaching on this subject, the master emphasizes that "the Real does not manifest Itself twice in one form, nor in a single form to two individuals."[46] Ibn al-`Arabi's strongly asserts, not only that creation is a never ending process, but also that God never manifests in a single form twice. Thus, for the master, the belief of believers is the cognitive manner in which the Self-disclosure of the Real is understood or misunderstood, cognitively conceived or misconceived.[47] In a similar vein, Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), who appears to have been highly influenced by the master, asks: "If you pour the ocean into a jug, how much will it hold?"[48] Thus, every believer worships God the Real according to the particular "Lord" (*rabb*) whom she or he recognizes in her or himself.[49] "Since there are as many cups as drinkers at the Pool which will be found in the abode of the hereafter," Ibn al-`Arabi himself writes, "and since the water in the cup takes the form of the cup in both shape and color, we know for certain that knowledge of God takes on the measure of your view, your preparedness, and what you are in yourself."[50] In many ways this statement is similar to the words of Thomas Aquinas:

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[43] *Fut.* I, 287. 19, also quoted by *IW*, 141.

[44] *Wa law sha'a rabbuka la-ja`ala al-nasa ummatan wahidatan wa la yazaluna mukhtalifin illa man rahhima rabbuka.*

[45] *Fut.* II, 85.14, also quoted by William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-`Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994 (hereafter abbreviated as *IW*),, 141.

[46] *Fut.* II, 657.13.

[47] *SPK*, 340, see *Fut.* II, 509. 31.

[48] *IW.*, 163.

[49] From the hadith: "He who knows himself knows his Lord."

[50] *Fut.* IV, 443. 33, II, 597. 35; Cf *SPK*, 342.

"Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower."[51] "Although the Real is One," Ibn al-'Arabi affirms,

> beliefs present Him in various guises. They take Him apart and put Him together, they give Him form and they fabricate Him. But in Himself, He does not change, and in Himself, He does not undergo transmutation. However, the organ of sight sees Him so. Hence location constricts Him, and fluctuation from entity to entity limits Him. Hence, none becomes bewildered by Him except him who combines the assertion of similarity with the declaration of incomparability.[52]

Ibn al-'Arabi's explanation above is based on the opinion that the "God of belief" is Being (*wujud*), which manifests itself to every believer. Because every one of God's Self-manifestations is single and never repeats, every belief is single and exclusive. And because the object of every belief is single—i.e., the "God of belief" or the "God worshipped by each believer" differs from the God of every other believer. In fact, Ibn al-'Arabi attempts to emphasize this point by talking about a multiplicity of "Lords" manifesting the one God:

> Every believer has a Lord in his heart that he has brought into existence, so he believes in Him. Such are the People of the Mark on the day of resurrection. They worship nothing but what they themselves have carved.[53] That is why, when God discloses Himself in other than that mark, they are confounded. They know what they believe, but what they believe does not know them, for they have brought it into existence. The general rule here is that the artifact does not know the artisan, and the building does not know the builder.[54]

Ultimately, for Ibn al-'Arabi, it is crucial for the believer to transcend the "God created in belief."[55] For the master, the path ultimately leads one to transcend the "color" conveyed by religious affiliation. This is not, however, a prescription for a relativistic approach to religion. We should remember that in Ibn al-'Arabi's mind God's Law (i.e., the Shari'a) is crucial for the realization of the Real (*la haqiqa bi la shari'a*). Thus, the path to God must be facilitated by the purest and most correct beliefs and practices possible. For Ibn al-'Arabi, these are found in the proper interpretations and practices of the Sunna of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets—i.e., the religion commonly referred to as "Islam."

Unlike many Muslims who believe that certain exclusive verses in the Qur'an abrogate (*naskh*) certain inclusive verses in the Qur'an—thereby concluding asserting

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[51] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* 2.2ae.1.2, cited by John Hick, "Ineffability," *Religious Studies* 36 (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40.

[52] *Fut.* IV, 393. 6, also quoted by *IW*, 163.

[53] According to Chittick, here Ibn al-'Arabi is alluding to the words of Abraham quoted in the Qur'an, Do you worship what you yourselves carve, while God created you and what you do? (Q 37: 95-96. see *IW*, 185. n. 7.

[54] *Fut.* IV, 391. 12, quoted by *IW*, 151.

[55] *BW*, 282.

that Islam abrogates previous religions—Ibn al-`Arabi does not draw such a conclusion. For Ibn al-`Arabi,

> All the revealed religions (shara`i`) are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. They being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null (batil) by abrogation —that is the opinion of the ignorant.[56]

What Ibn al-`Arabi is basically saying is that it is encumbent on Muslims to follow the path of their Prophet Muhammad and stick to the guidance of the Qur'an. At the same time, he also emphasizes that the nature of the Qur'an is inclusive; that it includes within itself the paths of all the prophets preceding Muhammad. He writes:

> Among the path is the path of blessing. It is referred to in God's words. "To every one of you We have appointed a right way and a revealed law" [57](5: 48). The Muhammadan leader chooses the path of Muhammad and leaves aside the other paths, even though he acknowledges them and has faith in them. However, he does not make himself a servant except through the path of Muhammad, nor does he have his followers make themselves servants except through it. He traces the attributes of all paths back to it, because Muhammad's revealed religion is all-inclusive. Hence the property of all revealed religions has been transferred to his revealed religion. His revealed religion embraces them, but they do not embrace it.[58]

In the *Futuhat* Ibn al-`Arabi further explores the phenomenon of the diversity of religions. To summarize what we have already stated, for Ibn al-`Arabi, God Self-discloses in numerous ways, infinitely diverse and thus unique and different from one another. Although God in Godself is immeasurably greater than all God's manifestations, God also is somehow manifest in the form of every belief. But God does not constrain Godself within one particular belief. One belief may well be more accurate than another (e.g., "I believe there is only one God" versus "I believe there is no God"), but God is too glorious to delimit Godself to one form of belief rather than another.

In fact, Ibn al-`Arabi plays with the root `QL in order to convey the inherent potential of discursive language and rationalist thought to delimit that which cannot be limited. The trouble with speculative thinking—especially when taken to the extreme—is that the `aql or "intellect" that is the human faculty enabling us to engage in such thought, acts like a "fetter" (`iqal—from the same root), which at times is very useful (i.e., helping us to develop categories with which to better understand ourselves and our world), but at other times can be very dangerous. The danger lies in the capacity of the intellect to attempt to "fetter" and pin down, that which is beyond fettering. Ibn al-`Arabi,

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[56] *Fut.* III, 153. 12, quoted by *IW*, 125.

[57] This translation should read: "a revealed law and a way (shir`atan wa minhajan)."

[58] *Fut.* III, 410. 21, quoted by *IW*, 145.

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then, criticizes speculative thinking and formulation when it acts to confine the infinite Essence of God. Ibn al-`Arabi goes on to strengthen this argument by reflecting on the root of the words for "creed" (`aqida) and "belief" (i`tiqad). The root is `QD which has to do with "binding" and "tying" a knot. He is not attacking "creeds" and "beliefs" because he thinks they have their place in the life of faith. What he is criticizing is the attempt to absolutize "creeds" and "statements" to the point at which on is involved in the futile (and perhaps even blasphemous) attempt to 'tie a knot' around God. He writes:

> God is known through every knotting. Although the beliefs are totally diverse, their aim is one. He is a receptacle for everything that you tie Him to and every knotting you make concerning Him. And within that He will disclose Himself on the day of resurrection, for it is the mark which is between you and Him."[59]

For Ibn al-`Arabi, only the `arif (lit. "gnostic"), who has attained the station and state of the Perfect Human, can see God as manifested in every belief, and as unconstrained by any belief. The true `arif identifies the Truth in any belief and understands that any belief involves a Self-disclosure of the Real. He or she understands that, while some beliefs may be true and others false, all beliefs are delimitations of the non-delimited wujud, which according to Chittick, "embrace[s] all reality on whatever level it is envisaged."[60] As the "locus of manifestation" of the all-comprehensive Name of God (i.e, Allah), and thus as one who stands in the "station of no station," the Perfect Human acknowledges any station and any belief insofar as it corresponds to one of the infinite multiplicities of the Self-disclosure of God.

Perhaps the quranic text which Ibn al-`Arabi quotes most frequently in support of his argument that all religions are manifestations of the Real is: "Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God" (2: 115).[61] Commenting on this verses and a few others like it, Ibn al-`Arabi writes, "God has made it clear that He is in every direction turned to, each of which represents a particular doctrinal perspective regarding Him."[62] Indeed, for Ibn al-`Arabi, because God is the wujud or essential reality of all phenomenal multiplicity, no path is essentially distorted or warped; every path according to him essentially brings believers to God. Quoting the quranic verse "To Him all affairs shall be returned" (Q 11: 123), Ibn al-`Arabi writes, "certainly, all roads lead to Allah, since He is the end of every road."[63] Thus, every believer serves God on the basis of God's Self-disclosures and their preparedness, so all beliefs in fact are rooted in God the infinite. By saying this, it does not mean that all beliefs are similar and have the same effect on the transformation of

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[59] *Fut.* IV, 416. 29; *IW*, 164.

[60] *IW*, 139.

[61] *Wa li-llah al-mashriq wa al-maghrib fa aynama tuwallu fa thamma waju Allah*; see for example Ibn al-`Arabi, *Fusus,* 113, and *IW*, 137.

[62] *IW*,138.

[63] *Fut.* II, 148. 11; *SPK*, 303.

human consciousness toward God.[64] It means that each belief manifests truth and, insofar as it does this, it is part of the path to human perfection in service to God.

One of the most touching and profound aspects of Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching on the diversity of religions can be found in the *Futuhat* where the master refers to God as "taking care of the needs of misbelievers" and "giving them to drink."[65] According to Ibn al-'Arabi, all those who are worshipping God, even though they may be doing so falsely by attaching the name 'God' to their idols, are nonetheless the loci of God's Self-disclosure, and as such are de facto recipients of God's mercy. "God takes care of their need and gives them to drink," Ibn al-'Arabi writes, "He punishes them if they do not honor the Divine Side in this inanimate from."[66] Here Ibn al-'Arabi's phrase "giving them to drink" echoes his discussion of "the drinking places," a discussion in which he refers to many quranic verses:

> The drinking places have become variegated and the religions diverse. The levels have been distinguished, the divine names and the engendered effects have become manifest and the names the gods have become many in the cosmos. People worship angels, stars, Nature, the elements, animals, plants, minerals, human beings and jinn. So much is this the case that when the One presented them with His Oneness, they said, "Has He made the gods One God? This is indeed a marvelous thing." (23: 117). . . . [T]here is no effect in the cosmos which is not supported by a divine reality. So from whence do the gods become many? From the divine realities. Hence you should know that this derives from the names. God was expansive with the names: He said, "Worship Allah (4:36), Fear Allah, your Lord (65:1), Prostate yourself to the All-merciful (25: 6). And He said, "Call upon Allah or call upon the All-merciful; whichever," that is Allah or the All-Merciful," you call upon, to Him belong the most beautiful names" (17: 110). This made the situation more ambiguous for the people, since He did not say, "Call upon Allah or call upon the All-merciful; whichever you call upon, the Entity is One, and these two names belong to it." That would be the text which would remove the difficulty, God only left this difficulty as a mercy for those who associate others with Him, the people of rational consideration—those who associate others with Him on the basis of obfuscation. [67]

In fact, one of the most important and striking features of Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings on the nature of the Real (*al-Haqq*) and its connection to religious pluralism is that they are thoroughly grounded in quranic exegesis. One of the most important verses upon which he bases these teachings is: "Then high exalted be God, the King, the Real! There is no God but He, the Lord of the noble Throne" (Q 23: 116). Commenting on this verse Ibn al-'Arabi says:

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[64] On the transformation process in Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching, see William C. Chittick, "Belief and Transformation: Sufi Teaching of Ibn al-'Arabi," *The American Theosophist* 74 (1986).

[65] *Fut.* II, 661. 27; *SPK*, 381, also cited by Dom Sylvester Houedard, "Ibn 'Arabi's Contribution to the Wider Ecumenism," in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, A Commemorative Volume*, Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael Tiernan, eds. (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993), 295.

[66] *Fut.* II, 661. 27; *SPK*, 381, also cited by Dom Sylvester Houedard, "Ibn 'Arabi's Contribution to the Wider Ecumenism," 295.

[67] *Fut.* III, 94. 19; *SPK*, 363-364, also cited by Dom Sylvester Houedard with slightly different translation in "Ibn 'Arabi's Contribution," 295.

> This is the *tawhid* of the Real, which is the *tawhid* of the He-ness. God says, "We created not the heavens and the earth and all that between them, in play" (21: 116, 44: 38). This is the same meaning as His words, "What do you think that We created you only for sport?" (23: 115). Hence, "there is no God but He" [in the above quranic passage] is a description of the Real.[68]

Here Ibn al-'Arabi is describing the way in which the verse in question (Q 23:116) speaks about a particular expression of the divine oneness. In doing so he makes two points that are critical for an understanding his teaching on religious diversity. The first point is that the Qur'an reveals multiple dimensions of the divine oneness. Another way of putting this is to say that the Qur'an discusses more than one "type" of *tawhid*. In fact, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, there are thirty-six different types of *tawhid* found in the Qur'an. The dimension of divine oneness expressed in Q 23:116 is that of the "He-ness" of God or the degree to which the Real is God and God alone. The second point Ibn al-'Arabi is making in this brief commentary on Q 23:116 is that every element of phenomenal existence is a purposeful expression of the divine oneness (i.e., no aspect of creation exists as "play" or "sport.") For Ibn al-'Arabi, this includes the diversity of religions. Indeed, Ibn al-'Arabi affirms that the abundant quranic references to the plurality of religions is by no means a reference to an accident of fate, but is rather the nineteenth type of *tawhid* which the Qur'an most directly addresses in the following verse: "We never sent a messenger before thee [i.e., Muhammad] except that We revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so worship Me!'" (Q 21: 25). Commenting this verse Ibn al-'Arabi says:

> This is a *tawhid* of the I-ness . . . . It is like God's words, "Naught is said to thee but what was already said to the messengers before thee" (41: 43). In his verse God mentions "worship" (`ibada*), but not specific practices (*a`mal*), for He also said, "To every one [of the prophets] We have appointed a Law and a way" (5: 48), that is, We have set down designated practices. The period of applicability of the practices can come to an end, and this is called "abrogation" (*naskh*) in the words of the learned masters of the *Shari`a*. There is no single practice found in each and every prophecy, only the performance of the religion, coming together in it, and the statement of *tawhid*. This is indicated in God's words, "He has laid down for you as Law what He charged Noah with, and what We have revealed to thee [O Muhammad], and what We charged Abraham with, and Moses, and Jesus: "Perform the religion, and scatter nor regarding it"" (42: 13). Bukhari has written in a chapter entitled, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religion of the prophets is one," and this one religion is nothing but *tawhid*, performing the religion, and worship. On this the prophets have all come together.[69]

What, then, is the distinction that Ibn al-'Arabi is making between Qur'an 23:116 and Qur'an 21:25? As he himself tells us, it is a distinction made between two expressions of *tawhid*. The first is an expression of *tawhid* in which God refers to Godself in the third person (i.e., as "He") and in which He makes mention of Himself as "King" (*al-malik*) and "The Real" (*al-haqq*), and also makes reference to His "Noble Throne" (*al-`arsh al-karim*). In a sense, this can be interpreted as the Qur'an's own use of the language of discursive or speculative theology which can only speak of God in the third

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[68] *Fut.* II, 415. 18; *SPK*, 134.

[69] *Fut.* II, 414.13; *SPK*, 171.

person, and thus takes as its appropriate object the divine "He-ness" (*huwiyya*). In 21:25, however, God expresses His oneness in the first person (i.e., as "I"). In this context, God makes reference to the Prophet Muhammad himself (the recipient of this specific revelation) in the second person singular, to all the messengers sent before Muhammad, and to acts of worship. For Ibn al-'Arabi, this verse is making a direct connection between the succession of messengers (and by extension the different forms that authentic religion takes) and acts of worship which ideally mediate a direct experience of the "I-ness" of God in which God acts as the subject beyond objectification. Thus, when one juxtaposes the two verses, one sees the divine oneness being expressed in two very different verbal modalities which reflect two very different human activities: the cognitive activity of speculative thought and the more affective experience of ritual worship. It is not that one modality is a more authentic expression of *tawhid* than the other, but rather that both represent two very important dimensions of *tawhid*.

As Ibn al-'Arabi more explicitly develops his teaching on religious diversity he builds upon a key insight conveyed by the second of the two verses analyzed above. For Ibn al-'Arabi, the succession of prophets and messengers, culminating in the messengership of Muhammad, which characterizes all orthodox Islamic perspectives on the history of revelation is one in which an underlying unity of encounter with the one and only God (i.e. the one immutable religion for which all of humanity for all time has been created) is historically expressed in a multiplicity of forms. In the master's own words: "The 'path of Allah' is the all-inclusive path upon which all things walk, and it takes them to Allah."[70] Thus, commenting on Bukhari's title, mentioned in the quotation above, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religion of the prophets is one," in which Bukhari uses an article in the word "religion" ("the religion", instead of a "religion"), Ibn al-'Arabi says,

> He brought the article which makes the word "religion" definite, because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it. . . . As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each of one of the messengers. He said, "To everyone (of the Prophets) We have appointed a Law and a Way [*shir'a wa minhaj*] ; and if God willed, he would have made you one nation" (5: 48). If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse, just as they are not diverse in the fact that you have been commanded to come together and to perform them. [71]

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabi is differentiating between *din*, which means primordial ideal religion and "path," or *shir'a wa minhaj* ("law" and "way"; or contextualized/historicized religion"). Although the "*din*" is always singular and unitive, the various "paths" or "laws" are numerous. "The paths to God are numerous as the breaths of the creatures," writes Ibn al-'Arabi, "since the breath emerges from the heart in accordance with the belief of the heart concerning Allah."[72] Such approach endorsed by Ibn al-'Arabi is very essential in enhancing interfaith dialogue and acceptance of different religious perspectives.

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[70] *Fut.* III, 410. 25, 411. 22; *SPK* 302-3.

[71] *Fut.* III, 413. 15; *SPK*, 303.

[72] *Fut.* III, 411. 22; *SPK*, 303.

There is no way that the careful reader of Ibn al-'Arabi can miss the fact that his teachings on the underlying unity of all human systems of belief and practice is part of an elaborate esoteric commentary on the first article of Islamic faith "*La ilaha illa Allah*" (there is no God except God). We can see a very direct example of this by returning briefly to his exegesis of Qur'an 23:115.

> That within which the existence of the cosmos has become manifest is the Real; it becomes manifest only within the Breath of the All-Merciful, which is the Cloud. So it is the Real, the Lord of the Throne, who gave the Throne its all-encompassing shape, since it encompasses all things. Hence the root within which the forms of the cosmos became manifest encompasses everything in the world of corporeal bodies. This is nothing other than the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place. Through this receptivity, it is like a container within which comes out into the open (*buruz*) the existence of everything it includes, layer upon layer, entity after entity, in a wise hierarchy (*al-tartib al-hikami*). So It brings out into the open that which had been unseen within It in order to witness it.[73]

Another quranic verse important to an understanding of Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching on religious diversity is: "Everything is perishing except His Face [or Essence] (Q 28:88). This verse refers to the sense of the relativity of all things in the face of God, which is helpful in cultivating the humility necessary for openness to other perspectives and other stories of encounters with the divine. Equally important are quranic references such as:

> And unto God belong the East and the West; and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God (Q 2:115).
> He is with you, wherever you are (Q 57:4).
> We are nearer to him [man] than the neck artery (Q 50:16).
> God cometh in between a man and his own heart (Q 8:24).
> Is He not encompassing all things? (Q 41:54).
> He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward (Q 57:3)

These verses express a profound sense of the immanence of the divine which, Ibn al-'Arabi rightly argues, are set in balance with those preeminent verses such as we find in *Surat al-Ikhlas* (Q 112) and the famous "Throne Verse" of *Surat al-Baqara* (Q 2:255) For Ibn al-'Arabi, the balance between the *tanzih* (transcendence) and *tashbih* (immanence) of God plays a major role in his thinking about religious diversity. *Tanzih* involves the fundamental assertion of God's essential and absolute incomparability "with each thing and all things."[74] It involves the assertion that His being transcends all creaturely attributes and qualities. At the same time, however, "each thing displays one or more of God's attributes, and in this respect the thing must be said to be "similar"(*tashbih)* in some way to God."[75] Thus, a certain similarity can be found between God and creation. Unlike traditionalist theologians, who opine that these two concepts are diametrically opposed and cannot exist together in harmony, for Ibn al-

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[73] *Fut.* II, 415. 20; *SPK,*134.

[74] *SPK*, 9.

[75] *SPK*, 9.

`Arabi, both *tanzih* and *tashbih* are in this sense compatible with each other and complementary. *Tanzih* and *tashbih* "derive necessarily from the Essence on the one hand and the level of Divinity on the other."[76] Out of this distinction, Ibn al-`Arabi challenges, that anybody who exercises and upholds *tanzih* or *tashbih* in its extreme form is either an ignorant man, or one who does not know how to behave properly toward God, because such extremes are attempts to delimit God's Absoluteness. To deny completely the authenticity of other religious "ways" is to insist that there is no divine self-disclosure to be found there. In doing so, one sets limits on God much in the same way as those who only know God through cognitive activity (which tends to place emphasis on transcendence) and not through affective experience (which can convey a profound sense of divine immanence). Only when one combines *tanzih* and *tashbih* in one's attitude can one be regarded as a 'true knower' (`*arif*) of the Absolute.[77] Ibn al-`Arabi says,

> When the Gnostics know Him through Him, they become distinguished from those who know Him through their own rational consideration (*nazar*), for they possess nondelimitation, while others have delimitation. The Gnostics through Him witness Him in each thing or in the entity of each thing, but those who know Him through rational consideration are removed far from Him by a distance which is required by their declaration of His comparability. Hence they place themselves on one side and the Real on the other. Then they call Him "from a far place"(Qur'an 41: 44).[78]

Ibn al-'Arabi's Hermeneutics and Modernist Thinkers'

It is important to note that Ibn al-`Arabi's interpretation of *tanzih* and *tashbih* and how this relates to his teaching regarding the underlying unity of all religions is by no means restricted to medieval esoteric hermeneutics. The highly influential Salafi modernist thinker Rashid Rida offers an interpretation of the meaning of the word *islam* in the Qur'an which complements and supports Ibn al-`Arabi's approach to the question of religious diversity. The Qur'an declares, "Do they seek other than the religion of God, when unto Him submit whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly? (Q 3:83). Here the Qur'an uses the word *aslama* based on the fourth form of the root *SLM* which has to do with the act of "submitting" to God. The word *islam* is the *masdar* or verbal noun from this same form and thus literally means "submission." As is the case in Q 3:19[79], in this verse *islam* is identified as "the religion of God." According to Rashid Rida, understanding the word *islam* in the proper sense (i.e., writ large as "Islam") to

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[76] *SPK*, 69.

[77] Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 54.

[78] *Fut.* III, 410. 17; *SPK*, 110.

[79] Ibn al-`Arabi offers his own interpretation of 3:19 as follows: "Verily the true *din* with God is this *tawhid* which He has prescribed for Himself. His *din* is, therefore, the *din* of the submission of one's entire being . . . [to be a Muslim means that I have] severed myself from my ego and achieved annihilation in Him." In Pseudo-Ibn al-`Arabi (`Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani), *Tafsir Ibn 'Arabi*, vol. 1 (Beirut: dar al-Sadr, n. d), 105, cited by Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism, An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, Oneworld, 1997), 127.

refer to the doctrines, traditions and practices observed by Muslims, is a post-quranic phenomenon according to which *al-din* is understood in its social and customary form.[80] For Rida, these forms of Islam, writ large, "which [vary] according to the differences which have occurred to its adherents in the way of uncritical acceptance, has no relationship with true *islam*. On the contrary,"' Rida writes, "it is subversive of true faith."[81]

Rida's interpretation of the quranic usage of the word *islam* is helpful in understanding the distinction Ibn al-'Arabi makes between the form and essence of revealed religion. Ibn al-'Arabi's interpretation of the scriptural story of Noah is clearly rooted in this distinction. In the *Fusus*, Ibn al-'Arabi says that the people of Noah are not entirely mistaken. For Ibn al-'Arabi, the idols that were worshiped by the people of Noah were in fact 'the diversity of the names' understood by Ibn al-'Arabi as the Divine Names through which human beings become aware of the self-disclosure of God. The people of Noah committed "the sin of idolatry" not because they recognized the divine in a plurality of forms, but because of their ignorance that these forms are not deities in themselves, but rather concrete forms of the one God's self-manifestation. Their sin, therefore, was in their worship of these forms as independent entities apart from God. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the idols are nothing other than God's self manifestations.[82] For Ibn al-'Arabi, the Qur'anic verse: "And Thy Lord hath decreed that you should worship none other than Him"(Q 17: 23) does not mean, as it is usually understood, "that you should not worship anything other than God," but rather "that whatever you worship, you are thereby not (actually) worshiping anything other than God".[83]

In this sense, "idolatry"—as serious a sin as it is—can be nothing more than a matter of the worshipper's awareness and intention. Since there is no God but God, it is actually impossible to worship anything other than He. Some may well ask what impact such a distinction might have on the approach to the whole question of religious diversity. Does it matter, in other words, whether one asserts that idolaters are sinning because they are actually worshipping something other than God, or because, though they are worshipping God and cannot do otherwise, they sin in their lack of awareness of the true nature of their worship? The answer seems to be "yes." By locating the sin in the human being's intent, rather than in objective reality, one retains the necessity of discernment in intent and the meaningfulness of true worship versus idolatry, without the arrogance of believing that some human beings have an authentic relationship to God and others do not. In this way, not only is it possible to perceive degrees of authenticity in

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[80] Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah), vol. 3, 361, cited by Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 130.

[81] Rida, *Al-Manar*, 361, Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, 130.

[82] Affifi, *Fusus, Com*, 39, see *BW*, 76, "The Wisdom of Exaltation in the Word of Noah."

[83] Affifi, *Fusus Com*, 39, Cf. also Ibn al-'Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, ed. A. Afifi (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabi, 1946), 55/72, also cited by Isutzu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 59-60.

different forms of worship, but it also no longer guarantees that just because an individual or group adopts a particular form of worship, they are immune to idolatry.[84]

There are many other aspects of Ibn al-`Arabi's thought that have direct relevance to what he has to say about religious diversity, but which, unfortunately, are too numerous to mention here.[85] The key thing to remember about Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching on religious diversity is that, although it is not in the least bit relativist (i.e., it never denies the superiority of Islam over the other religions of humanity), it abhors the arrogance and idolatry of suggesting that other religious ways are not somehow themselves manifestations of authentic human connections to the one source of all Being.

In the final analysis, Ibn al-`Arabi warns his fellow Muslims against restricting God to the form of one's own belief, a warning that is entirely in accordance with the thrust of so much quranic discourse:

> Beware of being bound up by a particular creed and rejecting others as unbelief! Try to make yourself a prime matter for all forms of religious belief. God is greater and wider than to be confined to one particular creed to the exclusion of others. For He says, "Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God."[86]

> He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of

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[84] We may also mention here about Nurcholis Madjid (1939-2005), one of Indonesia's most respected Islamic scholars graduated from the University of Chicago, who dubbed as the icon of reform of the Islamic movement in the country, and who had expressed concern that Islamic parties have become a new "Allah" for Indonesian Muslims who regard them as sacred and who regard Muslims who do not vote for them as sinful..

[85] E.g., in the *Futuhat*, Ibn al-`Arabi gives a more explicit explanation for the esoteric unity of all revelation, which is, for him, is innate in every diversity. He quotes the verses 42: 13, which affirms that the law with which Muhammad is charged is the same as with which Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were charged. Then, Ibn al-`Arabi quotes from other verses, which mentioned further prophets, and concludes with verse 6: 90 saying: "Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance." Then He says, "This is the Path that brings together every prophet and messenger. It is the performance of religion, scattering not concerning it and coming together in it. It is that concerning which Bukhari wrote a chapter entitled 'The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religion of the prophets is one'" (Ibn al-`Arabi, *Fut.* III, 413. 12 in *SPK*, 303). Ibn al-`Arabi also recommends to the seeker of God not to get fascinated with any one form of belief, but rather to try seeking the "knowledge that is inherent in God" (*ilm laduni*), and not to be imprisoned within ideologically closed ways of viewing the phenomenal world. This is why Ibn al-`Arabi can convey the following in a poem in his *Tarjuman al-Aswaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires): "My heart has become capable of every form." According to Peter Coate, this aspect of Ibn al-`Arabi's worldview reflects "the perfect immensity of his metaphysics which makes it intrinsically antithetical to all forms of fundamentalism, cognitive or metaphysical" (Peter Coate, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought*, 15).

[86] Ibn al-`Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*, 113, cited by *IW*, 176.

his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.[87]

In light of certain key quranic verses, Ibn al-'Arabi maintains that Muslims are commanded to believe in all revelations and not just in that conveyed by the Prophet of Islam. He writes:

All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [bâtil] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant.[88]

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabi insists that one should not delimit God within just one of the many possible modes of divine self-disclosure. Instead, the true Muslim is a person who recognizes God in all revelations:

So turn your attention to what we have mentioned and put it into practice! Then you will give the Divinity its due and you will be one of those who are fair toward their Lord in knowledge of Him. For God is exalted high above entering under delimitation. He cannot be tied down by one form rather than another. From here you will come to know the all-inclusiveness of felicity for God's creatures and the all-embracingness of the mercy which cover everything.[89]

Ibn al-'Arabi alerts the believers not to fall into particularism—an admonition which resonates with the qur'anic dictum: "And they say: 'None enters paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian.' These are their own desires. Say: 'Bring your proof if you are truthful.' Nay, but whosoever surrenders his purpose to God while doing good, his reward is with his Lord; and there shall be no fear upon them, neither shall thy grieve."[90]

The Application of Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutics for the problem of interfaith dialogue

One of the larger problems facing participants in Christian-Muslim dialogue is the interpretation of certain biblical and quranic verses which are generally interpreted in highly exclusivist ways and often cited by the opponents of dialogue. The purpose here in the last session is to imagine the ways in which Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutics can provide a framework for this dialogue which is more fruitful and more grounded in

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[87] *Fut.* II, 85. 11 quoted by *IW*, 176.

[88] Fut. III, 153. 12, quoted by *IW*, 125.

[89] *Fut.* II, 85. 20; *SPK*, 355-356.

[90] Qur'an 2: 112.

orthodox/mainstream tradition than those currently available. Let us begin with a review of these verses and then move on to envision an application of the hermeneutics.[91]

The Quran does not only contain verses which clearly declare the divine ordainment of religious diversity, exhortations to engage in dialogue, and the presence of piety and righteousness in religions other than Islam. It also contains polemical verses. For example the Qur'an says:

> O ye who believe, take not the Jews and the Christians for friends [or "guardians."] They are friends [or "guardians"] one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends [or "guardians"] is (one) of them. Truly, God guideth not wrongdoing folk (5:51).

> And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of God. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. God fighteth them. How perverse are they! (9:30).

A common radically exclusivist interpretation of these verses is that Jews and Christians are corrupted peoples practicing corrupted traditions of worship and belief. As such, they can never be trusted to be "friends" to the believers. Moreover, these peoples are understood to be the enemies of the faithful since God himself "fights them" (*qatalahumu llahu*).

The New Testament has its own fair share of verses which have conventionally been interpreted in highly exclusivist ways. Such verses include are those that: present Jesus as the 'one [and only] mediator' between God and humanity (1Tim 2: 5); that there is 'no other name under heaven' by which persons can be saved (Acts 4: 12); that "no one comes to the Father except through me [i.e., Jesus] (John 14: 6); that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God (John 1:14); and that whoever sees him sees the Father (John 14:7).[92] Hence Jesus is viewed as the only one who truly and fully reveals God. It is, in part, on the basis of verses such as these that Jesus is claimed to be the particular and unique savior of the world.

What the traditions of exclusivist interpretation of both these verses have in common is that they tend to be uninformed from within as well as from without. By "uninformed from within," I mean they are usually deaf to alternative interpretative

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[91] At this juncture, it is important to emphasize once again that my aim is *not* to create such a matrix. This can only be done in the context of actual praxis and, therefore, will obviously be influenced by many more interpretations of Ibn al-`Arabi, Eckhart, and the two traditions (i.e.,Islam and Christianity) than I,as an individual scholar/practitioner, could possibly bring to bear. My aim here, rather, is to try to envision *provisionally* what such a matrix might "look like," i.e., how it might function to enhance the dialogue.

[92] See this discussion in Knitter, Paul, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1985); Knitter, Paul, "The World Religion and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Kung's On Being A Christian," in *Interreligious Dialogue*, Richard W. Rousseau, ed. (Ridge Row Press, 1981); Kung, Hans, et al., *Christianity and The World Religions, Path of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1982); Young, Frances, "A Cloud of Witness," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick, ed. (London: SCM Press, 1977).

possibilities from within their own tradition. By "uninformed from without," I mean they are usually articulated with little to no experience of genuine encounter with the other, or if there is experience of the other, it is short-lived and highly negative.

By applying some of the key points of our mystic master as a framework for exploring the significance of these verses, we can more clearly see the ways in which this orthodox teacher can help us develop a more fruitful dialogue focused on this subject. At this juncture, however, it is important to mention that the Ibn al-`Arabi hermeneutics proposed here is by no means the only way that holds some promise of fruitfulness when it comes to Christian-Muslim dialogue. Rather, this way is proposed as one among many possibilities.

The point we will now refer to that immediately comes to mind when faced with the problem of the quranic and biblical verses cited above is the *infinite potential for meaning* inherent in the nature of divine revelation. Within the context of the Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching for dialogue this important hermeneutical principle would by no means require an *a priori* dismissal of the more exclusivist interpretations of these verses. In fact, it would be a misuse of the matrix to load it with a particular political or philosophical agenda other than the foundational conviction that interfaith (and intra-faith) dialogue is inherently good and necessary for the welfare of the participating traditions as well as for the welfare of the human family in general. Rather, what this principle would do is remind the participants in dialogue who are aware of these verses and their exclusivist interpretations, that other possibilities for interpretation exist which may well be equally defensible within the context of the larger tradition and thus, depending on the authoritative consensus of the community of believers, may be equally or even more orthodox in nature.

As I see it, the Ibn al-`Arabi's teaching, especially its infinite potential of scriptural meaning, would encourage two complementary activities when faced with any scriptural text that posed a challenge (either positive or negative) for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding and trust. The first of these activities would be to imitate the master himself by delving as deeply as possible into all the contextual resources available for interpreting these texts. This not only means reading quranic or biblical passages in light of other proximate and otherwise related quranic or biblical passages. It also means using all the available tools of historical research to uncover key elements of the original context of a given passage's revelation (in the case of the Qur'an) and a given passage's composition (in the case of the Bible). The second of these activities would also involve a certain imitation of the master when it comes to his valorization of experience and its importance in interpreting sacred scripture. In this case, the experience that would be most significant would be that of the encounter with the religious other. The concept of the infinite potential for meaning of scripture would encourage interpretations of all scripture—especially passages which purport to speak about the religious other—to be rooted in actual experience of that other. Simple reason dictates that any interpretation of what the Qur'an, for example, says about Jews and/or Christians is de facto faulty if it cannot stand in the face of a given Muslim's authentic relationships with Jews and/or Christians.

Another way which is also pertinent in the case of scriptural interpretation is the teaching of the *oneness of being*. This concept dictates that God's presence and influence can be found in all traditions, thus, any interpretation of sacred scripture which suggests otherwise would be suspect. From the perspective of Ibn al-`Arabi and the orthodoxy he represents, no passage of the Qur'an should be interpreted to suggest that any group of people, by virtue of their beliefs and practices, live outside of a relationship with God. This does not mean that, according to this concept, no distinction can be made between "believers," for example, and "unbelievers." It also does not mean that one tradition cannot be perceived of as superior, in certain ways, to another. What it does mean is that the hubris of decreeing God to be "here" and not "there," or "with us" and not at all "with you" cannot be accepted.

Of course, there are many other challenges encountered in the dialogue besides those of interpreting apparently exclusivist scriptural passages. Another example might be problems of interpreting either our own or others' doctrinal formulations. A primary illustration of this in Christian-Muslim dialogue is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and/or the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Muslim doctrine of *tawhid*. Although some expect the dialogue to resolve such fundamental doctrinal differences as this one, this is by no means the purpose of the matrix. Here is where the master's idea of the "naming of God" can be helpful. Given the importance of our doctrinal formulations to the integrity of our respective traditions, we must never fall into the arrogance of believing either that these formulations are equivalent with the reality (i.e., God) of which they speak, or the arrogance of believing that they amount to little more than disposable conjecture in our quest for the truth. Through his teaching that has to do with the "naming of God" we hear our master asking us never to lose sight of our creaturely limitations —especially the inherent inadequacy of our modes of discourse to convey an understanding of God. Another way of putting this is to say that we do not preserve the integrity and sacredness of our doctrinal formulations by absolutizing them in such a way as to exclude all others. Rather we preserve this integrity and sacredness precisely by humbly recognizing that the deepest understanding of these inherently limited linguistic formulations must leave room for validating and dignifying the religious experiences and formulations of others, no matter how different they may be from our own.

Also, to the extent that we lose a sense of humility with respect to our doctrinal formulations, we also lose a sense of humility as we stand before our traditions and thus run the risk of lapsing into idolatry by mistaking our traditions for God. Through Ibn al-'Arabi's teaching that has to do with the distinction between "God created by the believer," on the one hand, and the "Godhead," on the other, the master reminds us that however passionately we may believe in the articles of our faiths or however passionately and devoutly we may perform our rituals, the moment we begin to use these beliefs and practices as weapons to establish the dominance of the self over others is the moment we mark ourselves as servants of our own egos rather than of God.

By interpreting scripture with a hermeneutic of the infinite potential of meaning, by never forgetting the oneness and ubiquitousness of the divine Being, by recognizing the limitation of our theological language and our success distinguishing between the "God" we create and the ultimately ineffable Godhead, we truly plumb the depths of our

relationship to God by opening ourselves to the goal at the heart of both Islam and Christianity: to transform the believers into better and better beings, more deeply committed to the service of God and one another.

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To serve God is hence to create culture and civilization. But this is none other than
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**   2) Religious Pluralism and the Challenge of the Quran**
**   3) The Quran and Other Scriptures**

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Relevance to Contemporary Realities.

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**   2) Arguments for Abrogation in the Qur'an: A Critique**

3) Hadith Examination from Textual Angle

4) Al-Bukhari's Chapter on Predestination: A Critical Evaluation.

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