

TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE OF THE MYSTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF MUHYID DIN-IBN ARABI

Muzairi

A. Ibn 'Arabi, The Great Master

Whereas Suhrawardi's spiritual legacy remained, for the most part, restricted to the Persian world, the influence of Ibn 'Arabi – ash-shaykh al-akbar, "the greatest master" – on the general development of Sufism can scarcely be overrated. For most of the Sufis after the thirteenth century, his writings constitute the apex of mystical theories, and the orthodox have never ceased attacking him.

A correct interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's thought is difficult1. The traditional Western view is that he is the representative of Islamic pantheism, or monism, and that because of such monist theories; he destroyed the Islamic idea of God as living and active force and was largely responsible for decay of true Islamic religious life. On the other hand, modern mystical thinkers, such as Seyyed H. Nasr, see in Ibn 'Arabi's work a full explanation of what was already understood by earlier Sufis. In fact, it is surprising to find how many formulations attributed to him are already found in the so-called "classical" period. It may be that the very fact that he was more a genius of systematization than an enraptured mystic proved helpful for the generations to come, who found, thank to him, a comprehensive system at their disposal. As even Ahmed Sirhindi - usually considered Ibn 'Arabi's antagonist - had to admit: "The Sufis who preceded him - if they spoke about these matters at all - only hinted at them and did not elaborate. Most of those who came after him chose to follow in his footsteps and used his terms. We latecomers have also benefited from blessings of that great man and learned a great deal from his mystical insights. May God give him for this the best reward?"2

Ibn 'Arabi's was born in 1165 in Murcia, Spain, and was educated by two women saints, one of them Fatima of Cordova. It is said that, during his stay in

SUMBANGAN DARI NAMA : Muzain

MIP/NIM

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, (America: The University of North carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1981, p 263.

² Ihid.

Cordova, he met Averroes, the philosopher and court physician of the Berber dynasty of the Almohads of Marrakesh. In Tunisia, Ibn 'Arabi's studied Ibn Qasyi's Khal'an-na'layn, "The Taking Off of Both Shoes", a book of which Ibn Khaldun said, 150 years later, that it should be burned or washed off because of its heterodox ideas. The author of this questionable work had been the founder of a mystico-political group, the muridun that was involved in an insurrection against the Almoravid rullers in Algarve in southern Portugal about 1130³.

Ibn 'Arabi certainly studied the works of Ibn Masarra of Cordoba, who, about 900, had spoken about the purifying illumination and who has been classified among the philosopher-mystics. Perhaps the western Muslim world was generally more inclined toward a more philosophical or theosophical interpretation of religion, as contrasted to the enthusiastic, enraptured attitude of many of the mystics in the eastern countries – trends that can be observed in the peculiarities of some of the mystical fraternities as well⁴.

In 1201 Ibn 'Arabi was inspired to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. It was there that he met a highly accomplished young Persian lady. Enraptured by her beauty and intelligence, he composed the *Tarjuman al-ashwaq*, "The Interpreter of Longing", graceful verses written in the best tradition of classical Arabic poetry⁵. He himself later interpreted the booklet in a mystical sense, a device common too many Sufi poets. Further journeys led the mystic – who claimed to have received the *khirqa* from Khidr – to Cairo and to Konya, the capital of the Rum Seljukids. Young Sadruddin Qonawi was to become his foremost interpreter (d. 1274). The sheikh visited Baghdad and eventually settled in Damascus, where he died in 1240; his tomb is a goal for pious pilgrims.

Ibn 'Arabi has produced an enormous number of works, among which Alfutuhat al-makkiyya, "Meccan Revelations", in 560 chapters, and the Fusus alhikam, "Bezels of Divine Wisdom", have gained the greatest popularity. The fifteenth-century Nagshbandi mystic Muhammad Parsa compared the Fusus to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The "Tarjuman al-Aswaq": A Collection of Mystical Odes by Musyiu'ddin ibn al-'Arabi, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (London, 1911), with translation, is still the best available introduction.

the soul and the Futuhat to the heart (N. 306); later Naqshbandis would be more reserved in their judgment, if they did not condemn outright the theories contained in these books.

The Futuhat were, as the author claims, dictated by God through the angel of inspiration, whereas the Fusus, a small volume of twenty-nine chapter dealing with prophetology, were inspired by the Prophet. Each "bezel" speaks of the human and spiritual nature of a certain prophet; this serves as a vehicle for the particular aspect of divine wisdom revealed to that prophet.

A translation of the Fusus into a western language is extremely difficult; the style is so concise that it reads very elegantly in the original but needs a detailed commentary for the non-Muslim reader. The influence of gnosticism, Hermetism, and Neoplatonic thought make Ibn 'Arabi's work look very complicated and often seem to present insurmountable difficulties to the translator. That is way the interpretations of his work vary so greatly.

Ibn 'Arabi died peacefully in Damascus on the 28th day of Rabi' II, A.H. 638 (November 16, A.D. 1240), surrounded by his family, his friend, and his Sufi disciples. He was buried north of Damascus in the suburb of Salihiya, at the root of Mount Qasiyun. The curve of his life ended in accordance with its immanent norm, for the place where Ibn 'Arabi was buried, where his remains still repose with those of his two sons, was already a place of pilgrimage, sanctified in Muslim eyes by all the prophets, but especially by Khidr. In the sixteenth century Selim II, sultan of Constantinople, built a mausoleum and madrasa over Ibn 'Arabi's tomb'.

Today pilgrims still flock to the tomb of the "disciple of Khidr". One day we were among their number, savoring in secret – but who knows with how many others – the paradoxical triumph; the honors and popular cult devoted to this man whose disciples traditionally salute him as *Muhyi'd-Din*, "Animator of the Religion", but whom so many doctors of the Law in Islam have attacked,

⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical, p. 265.

Henri Corbin, L'imagination creatice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi, Paris, 1958. Translated by Ralph Manheim as Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi, Princeton, 1969.

inverting his honorific surname into its antitheses. Mahi'd-din⁸, "he who abolishes the religion", or Mumituddin, "he who kills the religion". What the paradox of his tomb guarantees is the presence of an undeniable testimony, perpetuating something which, in the very heart of the religion of the letter and the Law, prophetically surmounts and transcend them both. And another paradoxical image comes to the mind of the pensive pilgrim: Swedenborg's tomb in the cathedral of Uppsala – a mental diptych attesting the existence of an Ecclesia spiritualis reuniting all its own in the triumphant force of a single paradox⁹.

Books on Ibn 'Arabi's system of thought and spiritual teachings are also rather few. By far the best of these, especially for the present work, is Izutsu's Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concept in Sufism and Taoism, which is a very thorough and penetrating study of The Bezels of Wisdom. A profound study of certain important themes in Ibn 'Arabi's thought is H. Corbin's, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi (London, 1970), S.H. Nasr has provided a very useful study of Ibn 'Arabi in Three Muslim Sages (Harvard, 1964). Two more philosophically oriented studies are A.A. Afifi's, The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnul Arabi (Cambridge, 1939) and S.A.Q. Husaini's, The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-'Arabi (Lahore, 1970)¹⁰.

B. Ibn 'Arabi's Entire System

Ibn 'Arabi's entire system is generally designated by the term wahdat al-wujud, "unity of being". The correct translation of this expression provides the key to most of his other theories. His concept have evoked numerous discussion about the "pantheistic" or "monist" trend in later Islam. Marijan Mole has put his finger on the difficulty of translating wujud correctly (MM 59-62): Arabic, like other Semitic languages, has no verb to express "to be". The term wujud, which is usually translated as "being", "existence", means, basically, "finding", "to be found", and is, thus, more dynamic than mere "existence". "At the end of the

lbid.

¹⁰ RWI. Austin, Ibn Al'arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom, New York: Paulist Press, 1980. p. 13.

Path only God is present, is 'found'11. Thus, wahdat al-wujud is not simply "unity of being", but also the unity of existentialization and the perception of this act: it sometimes become quasi-synonymous with shuhud, "contemplation", "witnessing", so that the terms wahdat al-wuiud and wahdat al-shuhud, which were so intensely discussed by latter mystics, especially in India, are sometimes even interchangeable.

Everything gains its wuiud, its existence, by "being found", i.e. perceived, by God. and "only their face that is turned to God is real, the rest is pure notbeing"12. That would imply that terms like pantheism, panentheism, and even Louis Massignon's term "existential monism" would have to be revised, since the concept of wahdat al-wujud does not involve a substantial continuity between God and creation. In Ibn 'Arabi's thought a transcendence across categories. including substance, is maintained. God is above all qualities - they are neither He nor other than He - and He manifests Himself only by mean of the names, not by His essence. On the plane of essence, He is inconceivable (transcending concepts) and non-experiential (transcending even non-rational cognition). That means that in their actual existence the creatures are not identical with God, but only reflections of His attributes.

The main problem of interpretation seems to lie in the use of the term "transcendent", which in Western philosophy would scarcely be applicable when speaking of Ibn 'Arabi's God in words like these: "By Himself He sees Himself None sees Him other than He, no sent Prophet, nor saint made perfect, nor angel brought nigh know Him. His Prophet is He, and His sending is He, and His Word is He. He sent Himself with Himself to Himself¹³. This does not sound like a description of a "transcendent" God.

Both Henri Corbin and Seyyed H. Nasr repeatedly dwelt upon the nonpantheistic interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's thought; they have tried to show the importance of the theophanies and the decisive role of what Corbin calls the

³¹ Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical, p. 267.

³³ S.H. Nasr, Three Muslim Sages, p. 107.

"creative imagination"¹⁴. Then the relationship between God and creatures can be condensed, very roughly, approximately this way: The Absolute yearned in His Loneliness, and according to the tradition, "I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created the world", produced creation as a mirror for His taiallivat, His manifestation.

The "pathetic God" brought into existence the named things for the sake of the primordial sadness of the divine names. The infinite thirst of the pathetic God is, in a certain way, reflected in the infinite thirst of his creatures, who long for home - the concept of khamyaza, literally "yawning" i.e., "infinite longing" (the longing of the shore to embrace the whole ocean), which plays such an important role in later Indo-Muslim poetry, may have its roots in these concepts of the mutual yearning of Creator and creatures. Creation is "the effusion of Being upon the heavenly archetypes"15; it is as if glass pieces of a mirror were hit by light so that their iridescence becomes visible through this coloring. Or creation may be compared to articulation - did not the Koran speak of the nafas, the "breath" of the Lord, which is infused into Adam or into Mary to create a new being? The pure Essence was as if it has held its "breath" until it could no longer do so - and he world appeared as nafas ar-Rahman. As in breathing, so the universe is created and annihilated every moment; it is taken back into its transcendent origin just as breath is taken back into the lungs. And the great movement of going forth and returning is symbolically manifested in the two parts of the profession of faith - la ilah points to the emanation of "things other than He", and illa Allah indicates their return to Him, to the everlasting unity 16.

This creation can be seen various cosmic orders, which are veiled from each other. The divine essence itself is called *hahut* (derived from the *h* she letter of the essence) and Ibn 'Arabi is said to have experienced the vision of the highest divine essence in the shape of the word *hu*, "He", luminous between the arms of the letter *h*.

14 Henry Corbin, L'imagination.

16 Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical, p. 270.

¹⁵ S.H. Nast, Three Muslim Sages, Cambridge, Mass, 1963, p. 107.

C. Transcendence and Immanence of the Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibn 'Arabi

According to Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, second edition, unabridged, to transcend is to "ascend beyond, excel". The term is used of the "relation of God to the universe of physical things and finite spirits, as being ... in essential nature, prior to it, exalted above it, and having real being apart from it". Immanence, defined as "presence in the world ... in pantheism is thought of as uniform, God ... equally present in the personal and the impersonal, in the evil and the good. According to theism, immanence occurs in various degrees, more in the personal than the impersonal, in the good than in the evil.

It is clear that transcendence is a value term expressing the unique excellence of God, because of which worship – utmost devotion or love – is the appropriate attitude toward the being so described. It is les obvious that immanence is a value term, but *ubiquity*, "being everywhere", comes closer to expressing a unique property. If God is everywhere in the world and also in some sense beyond the world, then God certainly surpasses all ordinary objects of respect or love¹⁷.

D. Transcendence and Immanence

We have already seen that the duality of Haqq and Khalq is not on Ibnul 'Arabi's view a real duality of beings but a duality of what we might call differentiating attributes. These differentiating attributes are identified in his philosophy with what he calls transcendence and immanence. The two Arabic terms (tashbih and tanzih) whish were for a long time used by Moslem theologians to mean the comparability and incomparability of God to created beings in connection with the doctrines of anthropomorphism and corporealism, seem to have undergone a serious modification at the hands of Ibnul 'Arabi, who uses them in a more philosophical sense. An anthropomorphist (mushabbih) or a

¹⁷ Dictionary of Philosophy. 1967, p. 16. See Peter A. Angeles, Dictionary of Philosophy. New York, Barnes & Noble Book, 1977, p. 269, 127.

corporealist (mujassim) of the old school is one who attributes to God qualities which are analogous to those of men and other created beings 18.

A transcendentalist (munazzih) is one who holds that God is above all such qualities. In this sense a man may very well be an anthropomorphist or a corporealist without being a pantheist, i.e. God may very well be assumed to have qualities and attributes comparable to those of men and physical objects and yet to remain different from, and not in any way identical with either men or other physical objects or with the whole universe. On Ibnul 'Arabi's doctrine such a position could not possibly be maintained. Transcendence and immanence (tanzih and tashbih) had to be used in a different sense 19.

The assertion that God "hears" or "sees" or has "hands", etc., etc., which anthropomorphist make, is not understood by Ibnul 'Arabi to mean that God possesses "hearing" or "sight" or "bands", etc., but rather that He is immanent in all hears, sees or has hands²⁰. He hears and sees in every being that hears and sees, and this constitutes His immanence (tashbih). On the other hand, His Essence is not limited to one being or a group of beings that hear and see, but is manifested in all such beings and in ail beings whatever. In this sense God is transcendent because He is above all limitation and individualization. As a universal substance, He is the Essence of all that is. Thus Ibnul 'Arabi reduces tanzih and tashbih to absoluteness (itlag) and limitedness (tagyid) and uses the terms in a more or less materialistic sense, but in a sense fundamentally different from that of the theologians. Ibnul 'Arabi emphatically denies anthropomorphism and corporcalism in the sense explained above. In everything with God describes Himself in the Qur'an, the two aspects of transcendence and immanence must be observed. The Qur'an says that God has hands and feet, etc. This, Ibnul 'Arabi holds, is true not in the anthropomorphic sense that He has hands and feet comparable to those of men, but in the sense that He is essentially the hands and

¹⁶ A.E. Affifi, The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnu 'Arabi, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1939. p. 18. 19 *Ibid.* p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 19.

feet of all that have hands and feet²¹. His manifestation in such limited forms as hands and feet, etc., constitute His *tashbih*, but His being in Himself above such limitations constitutes His *tanzih*.

On the same grounds Ibnul 'Arabi denies the Christian doctrine of incarnation (hulul). To say that Christ is God is true, he says, in the sense that everything else is God, and to say that Christ is the Son of Mary is also true, but to say that God is Christ the Son of Mary is false, because this would imply that He is Christ and nothing else. God is you and I and everything else in the Universe. He is all that is perceptible and imperceptible; material of spiritual. It is infidelity (kufr) to say that He is you alone or I alone or Christ alone or to limit Him in any form whatever, even in a conceptual form. When a man says that he has seen God in a dream with such and such colour, size or form, all that He wishes to say is that God as revealed Himself to him in one of His infinite forms, for He reveals Himself in intelligible as well as in concrete forms. So what the man has really seen is a form of God not God Himself²².

Ibnul 'Arabi holds that transcendence and immanence are two fundamental aspects of Reality as we know it. Neither of them would be sufficient without the other if we want to give a complete account of Reality. He also holds that Islam is the only religion which asserts both aspects in an equal degree. Noah's religion, he says, was one-sided because it laid too much emphasis on transcendence, but it had to do so to counteract a prevailing polytheism. His whole attitude is summed up in the following verses:

If you assert (pure) transcendence you limit God,
And if you assert (pure) immanence you define Him,
But if you assert both things, you follow the right course,
And you are a leader and a master in gnosis,
He who asserts duality is a polytheist,
And he who asserts oneness is a Unitarian,
Beware of tashbih if you couple (i.e. God and universe),
And beware of tanzih if you assert oneness,

²¹ Ibid, p. 20.

²² Ibid, p. 20.

You are not He, nay, you are He, and you see Him in the a'yan of things. absolute and limited23.

"The Haga of whom transcendence is asserted is the same as the Khala of whom immanence is asserted although (logically), the creator is distinguished from the created.

Although Ibnu 'Arabi asserts that everything and all things are God (the immanent aspect) he takes not to assert the converse, i.e. that God is all things in the sense of being an aggregation of existents. God is the unity behind the multiplicity and the Reality behind the Appearance (the transcendence aspect) 24

On any pantheistic doctrine either God or the universe is bound to suffer either the phenomenal world, as we know it, is a mere illusion, the Real being God alone, or God is a mere fabrication of the human mind, and the Phenomenal World is the only Reality. Ibnul 'Arabi chooses the former alternative as we shall see in the Section on Pantheism²⁵. The assertion of transcendence saves him from into gross materialism.

The sort of transcendence hitherto discussed is the sort asserted by the unaided intellect. Ibnul 'Arabi goes a step farther when he says that it is not transcendence as asserted by man which explains the real nature of God as the Absolute. Even the most abstract transcendence (conceived by man) is a form of limitation, because it implies, at least, the existence of an asserter besides that of God. Further, to assert anything of anything is to limit; therefore, the assertion even of absolute transcendence of God is limitation. The assertion, made by the intellect, of the transcendence of God is only a convenient way of contrasting the two aspects of Reality as we understand it, but it does not explain its nature. Such transcendence, which is regarded by the philosophers as the sole characteristic of God is, when it is not coupled with immanence, an abomination on Ibnul 'Arabi's view.

He condemns the philosophers on the ground that they base everything on the intellect which, by virtue of its nature, cannot rise above deductive

²⁰ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 21. ²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 21.

knowledge based upon the understanding of the Phenomenal World. Hallaj whom Ibnul 'Arabi follows here, expresses the whole position in the following words: "Tuwhid (unification which is equivalent to Ibnul 'Arabi's transcendence) belong to the Muwahhid, not to God, since God is above all assertions26. No one, except God Himself, knows His real transcendence aspect. In other word, no one except God can fully comprehend His essential unity. The perfect Sufi, in his ecstatic flight, might have a glimpse of this unity, not through the intellect but by means of super-mental intuition which belongs only to such a state. This higher form of transcendence is independent of all assertion.

It belongs to the divine Essence per se and a se and it is what Ibnul 'Arabi calls the transcendence of the unity (tanzih al tawhid). The absolute unity and simplicity of the divine Essence is only known to the divine Essence - there is no duality of subject and object, knower and known. This form of transcendence is not the same as that which we usually contrast with immanence, for this latter belongs to the intellect as the logical correlative of immanence. It is predicable of God as al Haqq when contrasted with Phenomenal World - al Khalq, and is ultimately subjective. The former (higher) transcendence is objective and follows from the nature of the Absolute Himself.

Of such transcendence we have no knowledge and cannot take it as a part of our definition of God. The only possible definition of God, so far as God is definable at all, is by means of transcendence as contrasted with immanence²⁷.

God is everything, yet above all things, which is a description rather than a definition. But even such a definition (or a description) would contain, Ibnul 'Arabi urges, definitions of all beings, actual and potential, physical and spiritual, and since a complete knowledge of everything is an impossibility for man, a complete definition of God therefore is impossible.

Having made a distinction between God and the universe, al Haqq and al Khald, on the one hand, and a distinction between the Godhead and the divine Essence in the other, and having pointed out the difference between the kind of

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 22. ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 23.

transcendence asserter of the Godhead and the transcendence that belongs to the Essence per se, Ibnul 'Arabi concludes by saying that the so-called attributes of transcendence (sifat al tanzih) should be predicated of the Godhead (al Haqq) not of the Essence, for the Essence, in its bare abstraction, is attribute less. These attribute of transcendence are summed up in what he calls absoluteness (itlaq) as contrasted with the limitedness (taqyid) of the Phenomenal World.

To the divine Essence explained above Ibnul 'Arabi sometimes applies the pronoun "He", for the Essence alone is the absolute Ghayb (unseen).

E. Conclusion

To sum up all the Ibnul 'Arabi says about transcendence. We must distinguish two fundamentally different kinds of transcendence.

- That which belongs to the divine Essence per se and a se the absolute simplicity and unity of the One - the state of the Ahadiyyah.
- 2) Transcendence asserted by the intellect, which must be always coupled with immanence and which may assume the following forms:
 - a. God may be called transcendence in the sense of being absolute, or
 - b. He may be called transcendence in the sense of being a necessary being, self-begotten, self-caused, etc., in contradistinction to the contingent, created or caused beings of the Phenomenal World, or
 - c. He may be called transcendence in the sense that He is unknowable and incommunicable and beyond all proof.

This second kind of transcendence Ibnul 'Arabi condemns if taken by itself (i.e. without immanence) to be an explanation of the whole truth about Reality. Reality is Ibnul 'Arabi understands it has both aspects: transcendence and immanence.

F. Bibliography

A.E. Affifi, The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnu 'Arabi, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1939.

Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1981.

Henri Corbin, L'imagination creatice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi, Paris, 1958.

Peter A. Angeles, Dictionary of Philosophy, New York, Barnes & Noble Book, 1977.

R.W.J. Austin, Ibn Al Arabi the Besels of Wisdom, New York, Paulist Press, 1980.

Reynold A. Nicholson, The Mystic of Islam, 1921. Reprint Cambridge, 1967.







