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**“MY PASSION IS FOR THE LIGHTNING AND ITS GLEAM”:  
CONSIDERATIONS OF EAST AND WEST  
IN THE LIGHT OF IBN ‘ARABĪ’S TEACHINGS<sup>1</sup>**

Once many years ago, a friend of mine from Turkey had come to England to further her interest in mysticism and also to study English. After some weeks of struggling with the language and worse, struggling with the ways of behaviour of English people, which she found sadly lacking in the proper manners of her homeland (*adabsız* as she called them), she went to her elderly cousin to complain. She said: “I don’t know what to do. How can I put up with all this strange English behaviour? They are so different to me, I am a Turk,” to which her cousin replied: “Never forget, you were born into the world, you were not born a Turk...”

This anecdote illuminates one of the problems all human beings face: our tendency to take pride in the nation and culture in which we find ourselves, to the exclusion of others, and, more importantly, to the exclusion of our own deeper humanity. We were first born into the world, not into the East or the West. We were first born into this world, not into a particular culture — although we have of course all subsequently taken on further identities associated with the physical realm, family, neighbourhood, nation etc. To become aware of and remember this essential fact of our real origin, which is always transcendent of the material plane of existence, lies at the heart of common spiritual values: we live in exile in this world.

In his *‘Anqā’ Mughrib*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

“Precedence belongs to the World of the Transcendence of Man (*‘ālam ghayb al-insān*) over whatever is found in him of an animal origin (*nasab al-hayawān*). For [rational-spiritual Man] is the Mover and the Disposer, the Instructor and the Appriser of [the lower, animal faculties]. But the World of their own Transcendence (*‘ālam ghaybihim*) is utterly concealed from most people by that which appears (*mā zahara*) — for which reason they are prevented from

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded and elaborated version of my paper, which was presented at the International Ibn ‘Arabī Symposium in Baku, Azerbaijan (9–11 October, 2009).

finding pearls [and other such hidden treasures]. An obstruction is set up between them and the Secrets (*asrār*), and they are blocked from the dawning of the Lights (*maṭlaʿ al-anwār*) by the shadow of this Wall....”<sup>2</sup>

This assessment of the human predicament could hardly be more stark: most people, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, are unable to penetrate beyond the apparent surface of things, and consequently have no knowledge of their own inner nature, that part which remains always unknown and invisible, which for him is the source of the pearls of wisdom and the lights of self-realisation. If we were to conceive of existence as an onion, it is as if only the outermost layer of the onion is being perceived and understood, the inner layers remaining hidden and ignored. One could legitimately understand this passage in the modern psychological sense, as describing the way in which our inner world (*ghayb*) of knowledge, feelings, imaginings etc. determines over the outer world in which we apparently live, and pointing to the ignorance that most people have of their own subconscious motives and patterns of thought and behaviour. What is different to such a “modern” perspective, however, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment here is that he goes further and speaks of “pearls” which are to be found within, “secrets” and mysteries, “lights” that dawn and illuminate our true nature.

For Ibn ‘Arabī and other saints and prophets, it is this transcendent inner nature of the human being that has precedence and priority over all that is manifest. In our onion analogy, the real growth only occurs from within. This precedence is not only true microcosmically for each human being — however little recognised, it exists in potential in everyone — it is also made evident in all its fullness in the angelic annunciation of Jesus’s coming. As the Quran puts it, “O Mary! God gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him, whose name is the Anointed (Messiah), Jesus, son of Mary, high-honoured in this world and the hereafter and one of those who are brought close [to God].”<sup>3</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, this Quranic text is a proof-text showing that the high-honouring of the Christic Word takes place prior to his physical appearance in the world, just as Muhammad is honoured with prophecy prior to being known in this world, as in the saying “I was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay.”<sup>4</sup>

This fundamental insight into the pre-eminence of the human reality forms the basis for Ibn ‘Arabī’s realisation of the fundamental Unity of Being, for Man alone has the capability to know Reality as It is. “The Way which I follow and the Station I seek — single-minded [in my devotion] to it — is the Station of the Singularity of the One and the negation of multiplicity and number.”<sup>5</sup> God is not

<sup>2</sup> Translated by Elmore in: *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*. Leiden: Brill, 1999. P. 485–486 (slightly adapted).

<sup>3</sup> Q. 3:45. Referred to later in the *‘Anqā’ Mughrib* (see: *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood*. P. 512, note 9).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the sources of this hadith, see: *Chittick W.C. The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*. New York: SUNY Press, 1989. P. 405, n. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* P. 263.

simply One but also Infinite. He is One *ad infinitum*, as it were. Everything in limited existence is a place of revelation of that selfsame Unity, which at once transcends all limitation and expresses Itself through it. The world, therefore, becomes in each and every aspect a mirror: the outer “shell” (*qishr*) of a Meaning that is revealed within the inner “core” (*lubb*) of the human. As above, so below; as within, so without; on earth as it is in heaven — the principle of all true spiritual teaching, implying that no aspect of the world (or of Man) can be devoid of showing Truth Itself. As the Quran states so clearly, “to Him belongs the East (or place of rising, *mashriq*) and the West (or place of setting, *maghrib*). Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed God is Infinitely Vast, All-Knowing.”<sup>6</sup>

So when we speak of east and west, we should understand certain fundamentals: first of all, the crucial difference between a place and an orientation, between the West as an area of the globe and all its cultural associations, which we may be part of or not, and the west as a direction, which we can face at any moment, wherever we may be. The second point is our tendency in language and thought to give subtle, more or less conscious, precedence to one side over the other: in the Quran, east invariably comes before west, perhaps an admission that we view the rising sun as our primary source of light, that we welcome the day as the time of waking and the night as the time of sleeping. Here it is important to note the conventional “Sufi” wisdom: that the East, being the place where the sun rises and brings light, is a metaphor for the spiritual and divine realm, while the West represents the place of darkness, where the sun metaphorically dies, and hence is material and dense.<sup>7</sup> We find a similar motif appearing in the writings of one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s major followers, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī:

“The west is the place of bodies, the place where the divine light has set and has become concealed by dark veils. The east is the world of spirits, which is the place of the rising of the light and its appearance from luminous veils.”<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis upon the symbolic superiority of East over West (notably by people in the Islamic East, operating within a context deeply coloured by Zoroastrianism) tends to relegate the material world to a state of “ungodliness,” a darkness that is akin to the corrupt state of mankind, which the holy angels foresaw

<sup>6</sup> Q. 2:115.

<sup>7</sup> This pro-eastern viewpoint is given even more dramatic prominence by the Sufi philosopher ‘Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), who writes: “Do you know what this sun is? It is the Muhammadan light that comes out of the beginningless East. And do you know what this moonlight is? It is the black light of ‘Azrā’īl that comes out of the endless West” (*Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī*. Tamhīdāt. Ed. ‘Affī ‘Usseirān. Tehrān, 1962. § 175). Thus the east is the source, and the west is the exhaustion of manifestation.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī. Ta’wīlāt. Quoted from: *Sachiko Murata*. The Tao of Islam. Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992. P. 300. This shows very clearly, I believe, that Kāshānī viewed Ibn ‘Arabī through a Persianate perspective, and some of the subtleties of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine are obscured in the process.

when Adam was presented to them as *khalīfa*.<sup>9</sup> The ungodly and corrupt West then becomes a place to be avoided at all costs.<sup>10</sup> In a more modern context, the Lebanese writer Rihani ends one of his poems with an ironic question:

“I am the East.  
I have philosophies and religions.  
Who would exchange them for aircraft?”<sup>11</sup>

For Ibn ‘Arabī the situation is quite different with regard to metaphors drawn from the material world. In his view, the whole world comprises Signs (*āyāt*) that point to God,<sup>12</sup> and for the one who knows how to read them, there is nowhere devoid of God’s Presence. He is especially keen to give prominence to the West. This is not simply because he was a native of al-Andalus and therefore a thoroughgoing westerner (*Maghribī*). For him the West symbolises the place of secrets and concealment: like birds that set their internal compass according to the place where the sun sets so that they can fly by night, Ibn ‘Arabī always looks to the west as primary, as the inner world, entrance to the Hereafter and gnosis of the spiritual abodes and degrees. Indeed, in a complete reversal of the eastern Sufī viewpoint, he even states that vice comes from the realm of the East, i.e. from the entering into this world of manifestation, which is the abode of trial for everyone.<sup>13</sup>

When considering the four directions, Ibn ‘Arabī portrays them as symbols of the five pillars of Islam (the testimony of faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting and pilgrimage): thus the *shahāda* attestation “There is no god but God” resides at the centre, and the other four pillars are ranged in front (south), behind (north), to the right (west) and to the left (east).<sup>14</sup> He praises those who base themselves upon these articulations of faith:

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<sup>9</sup> The angels’ response to Adam being made God’s representative on earth was to question the Divine Wisdom by complaining: “What, will you place there [on earth] one who will sow corruption therein and shed blood?” (Q. 2:30) As Ibn ‘Arabī remarks in the chapter on Adam in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, their critique of Adam was in fact evidence of their own “corruption” in not acknowledging their own limitation or that they had no knowledge of the Adamic all-inclusiveness. We may add that the critique of the West as the place of darkness is of a similar nature.

<sup>10</sup> A similar polarity leading to feelings of superiority exists at a racial level amongst people who favour light skin over dark or black — a conceit that has, for example, afflicted many Indians even to the present day.

<sup>11</sup> See: *Imangulieva A.* Gibran, Rihani and Naimy. Oxford: Anqa, 2009. P. 103–104.

<sup>12</sup> “We shall show them Our Signs unto the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that it/He is God.” (Q. 41:53).

<sup>13</sup> *Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī*. Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya. Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir (non-dated). Vol. 2. P. 121.

<sup>14</sup> Note that the medieval mind placed south at the top of the map and north at the bottom — for example, see the famous Idrisi world-map made at the behest of the King of Sicily in 1155, with Mecca as the centre, which looks “upside down” according to modern perceptions.

“May God place us among those who have built up their house upon these foundations! Their house is Faith (*īmān*), and its boundaries are: ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) to the south, fasting (*ṣawm*) to the north, alms-giving in secret (*ṣadaqat al-sirr*) to the west, the pilgrimage (*ḥājj*) to the east. The one who dwells there is blessed.”<sup>15</sup>

What is of particular interest here is the association of the secret individual action (alms-giving) with the west, and the overt collective action (pilgrimage) with the east. We may remark that the east-west axis (which has had such a huge impact on human development in terms of crops, livestock and cultural exchange<sup>16</sup>) for Ibn ‘Arabī is primarily one of outer action, either hidden (the individual giving alms) or manifest (the community going on pilgrimage), whereas the north-south axis represents an inner act, either hidden and individual (fasting) or manifest and collective (prayer).

Elsewhere, when explaining the verse “Lord of the east and the west, there is no god but He, so take Him as your trustee” (Q. 73:9), he writes:

“Here there is an allusion to [God’s] free disposal (*taṣarruf*) within the directions, of which He mentioned only the east (*mashriq*), which is the exterior/manifest domain, and the west (*maghrib*), which is the interior/hidden domain. The One Essence/Source (*‘ayn*), which is the sun, when it rises, brings about the name East, and when it sets, it brings about the name West. Man (*in-sān*) has an exterior and an interior. ‘There is no god but He, so take Him as your trustee’ in your exterior and in your interior, for He is ‘Lord of the east and the west’.”<sup>17</sup>

The identification of east with the manifest world and west with the invisible realm appears time and again throughout Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing.<sup>18</sup> This contemplation has an alphabetical underpinning in the Arabic language: the word in Arabic for east is *sharq*, whose first letter, *shīn*, is also the first letter of the word for the world of witnessing or manifestation, *shuhūd* or *shahāda*; and the word for west,

<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī. *Futūḥāt*. Vol. I. P. 327–8. He states that this is the arrangement of faith on the Day of Resurrection, i.e. when the truth is revealed. According to a prophetic tradition, Islam has the testimony in the centre, prayer on the right, alms-giving on the left, fasting in Ramadan in front and pilgrimage behind. Ibn ‘Arabī says the order may vary, explaining that the action of prayer is like a light that lies in front, while fasting is an illumination that detaches one from all that lies behind.

<sup>16</sup> See: *Diamond J. Guns, Germs and Steel*. London, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī. *Futūḥāt*. Vol. III. P. 287. Quoted in: *Chittick W.C. The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*. New York: SUNY Press, 1997. P. 77. This extract from Chapter 360, “On the true knowledge of the abode of the darkneses which are praised and the lights which are witnessed,” corresponds to the 24<sup>th</sup> Quranic Sura, *al-Nūr* (Light), and clearly echoes the notions of east and west found in the 53<sup>rd</sup> verse of Light Sura.

<sup>18</sup> See for example: *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood*. P. 324, where Ibn ‘Arabī describes the Light of the Muhammadian Reality as “the orient of the lights and wellspring of the rivers, from which proceed the Throne and the intermediate world and the earth, as well as all things inanimate and animate, being the origin of all entities.”

*gharb*, begins with the letter *ghayn* which gives *ghayb*, meaning the non-manifest or invisible world.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, by pointing out the rather blatant fact that east and west derive all their meaning from the single source of the sun, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasises that it is the One Essence that should be our focus both interiorly and exteriorly, or rather the revelation of the One in each domain. This is clearly expressed in the fourteenth poem of his *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*:

“He saw the lightning in the East and he longed for the East; but if it  
had flashed in the West, he would have longed for the West.  
My passion is for the lightning and its gleam, not for the places and  
the earth.”<sup>20</sup>

In his commentary on these lines, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the lightning in the East signifies God revealing Himself in visible forms, i.e. through the Divine Names and Qualities, the east being “the place of immanent manifestation” (*mawḍi‘ al-zuḥūr alkawnī*). Then he writes: “If it had been a revelation to the hearts, which is a Self-revelation of the Ipseity (*tajallī al-huwiyya*) which is alluded to as ‘the West,’ then this lover would equally have longed for the World of Transcendence and the Unseen (*‘ālam al-tanzīh wa al-ghayb*), inasmuch as he would have witnessed it as a theophanic ‘place’ (*maḥall*) for a revelation transcending the manifestation in forms that takes place on the ‘eastern’ horizon. His passion is always for the places of the revelation insofar as He is revealed therein, not [as places] in themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

In speaking of a revelation in form and a supra-formal revelation, Ibn ‘Arabī makes a classic distinction which occurs in other writings (especially his *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt*), and here emphasises that the passion of the mystic is for God alone, not the place in which He reveals Himself. To that extent, at least, east and west are equal, though not the same.

At the same time Ibn ‘Arabī is well aware of the fact that there is more than one east or west: the Qur’an itself speaks of two or more easts and wests, which

<sup>19</sup> When discussing letters and their numerical values, Ibn ‘Arabī points out that the Eastern version of counting is used by the people of lights (*ahl al-anwār*) and the Western by the people of secrets (*ahl al-asrār*). The *abjad* alpha-numerical system of letter-number correspondences have two versions: an Eastern (where the last letter is *ghayn*, therefore *gharbī*) and a Western (where the last letter is *shīn*, therefore *sharqī*). See: *Ibn ‘Arabī. The Seven Days of the Heart*. Trans. P. Beneito and S. Hirtenstein. Oxford: Anqa, 1999. P. 161–162 (Appendix C) and also: *Ibn ‘Arabī. Futūḥāt*. Vol. I. P. 67. In Arabic the associations of the root *gh-r-b* include departing, being a stranger, being odd, strange or obscure. Perhaps it is no wonder that the West (*gharb*) or becoming westernised can be viewed by Arabic-speakers as something alien or outlandish (*gharīb*)?

<sup>20</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabī. Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. Trans. Reynold A. Nicholson. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978. P. 74. See also poem XLVI, verse 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabī. Kitāb al-Dhakhā’ir wa al-a’lāq*. Cairo, 1967. P. 65.

most commentators have taken in the obvious literal sense as indicating the various points of the sun’s rising and setting through the year. For Ibn ‘Arabī, however, this also has an inner meaning. In his *‘Anqā’ Muḡhrib* he writes:

“Even as the sun necessarily changes its time of rising and shifts its place, similarly the ‘Sun’ of your transcendent Truth (*shams ḥaqqika*) must rise upon the exterior of your created constitution (*ẓāhir khalqika*)” — i.e. referring to the constant change from moment to moment in what is revealed to us of our own reality. He then discusses the inherent superiority of the Western: “Now know that the sun, by an inherent motion (*bināfsihā*), is constantly circulating from the west to the east, even as it proceeds by [compulsion from] another (*bi-ghayrihā*) from the east to the west, though sight is unable [to perceive the former movement] and the mind (*lubb*) is staggered [by its computation].”<sup>22</sup>

Here Ibn ‘Arabī is again giving priority to the spiritual Sun’s hidden movement from west to east, i.e. from non-manifest to manifest, alluding not only to the motif of the Mahdi who will appear as a “sun rising in the West” to be the guide of all mankind at the end of Time, but equally and perhaps more importantly to the interior Mahdī of each person, “those lights of knowledge that arise in the world of your Transcendence and those secrets of particularization and generalization that are revealed to your heart.”<sup>23</sup>

### West is best?

Ibn ‘Arabī gives a most interesting gloss on the importance of the east-west polarity when discussing how the west has priority over the east, as the hidden world has priority over the manifest, and night over day.<sup>24</sup> In what would appear to be a relatively early work, *Risālat al-Intiṣār*, written in answer to certain questions from a Shaykh from Baghdad, he describes himself as “the lowliest Sufi of the Maghrib, the least of them in terms of following [the Way], the most incomplete in terms of spiritual opening, the most covered in terms of veils.” Then in praise of his own masters in the Maghrib, he writes:

“By God, were you to behold those among us who have arrived at the very Essence of Reality, you would completely pass away at the very first flash of being annihilated in the Real. For the spiritual opening (*fath*) of the West is unrivalled by any other opening, since its allotted place in temporal existence (*al-wujūd al-zamānī*) is the night — and the night precedes the daytime in the Glori-

<sup>22</sup> *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood*. P. 487. The movement through another refers to the idea that the sphere of the sun is partly moved by the constraint of the sphere beyond it, i.e. the sphere of fixed stars and the *falak al-muḥīṭ*. Note that this passage immediately follows the one quoted at the beginning of this paper.

<sup>23</sup> *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood*. P. 291 (slightly amended translation).

<sup>24</sup> See: *Ibn ‘Arabī. The Seven Days*. P. 16, 149, for a discussion of this precedence.

ous Scripture in every passage. At night is the night-journey of the prophets and the attainment of real benefit. At night comes the revelation of the Real to His servants, for it is a time of stillness beneath the coursing of measured things (*aqdār*) — it is pure grace (*ināya*)... So then praise be to God who has made the opening of the people of the West (*ahl al-maghrib*) an opening of secrets and other openings. For the virginal secrets are only ‘deflowered’ with us. Thereafter they emerge before you in your East as ‘divorcees’ who have completed (*faraghna*) their period of waiting. Then you marry them at the horizon of the Orient. Now we share equally in the pleasure of marriage, but we [in the West] win the pleasure of deflowering!”<sup>25</sup>

Now is Ibn ‘Arabī here indulging in a kind of one-upmanship over his Eastern brethren (just as they had been doing)? Is he not conflating the East/West orientation with physical places? If so, that might point to a somewhat naïve and youthful enthusiasm, and indicate that this was an early work (and that Ibn ‘Arabī had this insight into east/west polarity from the beginning). However, there is a much more serious point being made: the association of the primal revelation of divine secrets with the notion of the west. The west becomes a metaphor for closeness to the Real and for concealment of the secrets from all but those whom God selects. If the east opens into daytime when the sun’s light dawns upon everyone, the west opens into night when there is privacy, intimacy and seclusion with the beloved. The remarkable image of the “deflowering of virgins” is also found as a metaphor for the deepest spiritual realisation, in which new original meanings are revealed.<sup>26</sup> As Michel Chodkiewicz has pointed out, there is also an east-west polarity in his perspective on the prophets: “They are oriental in terms of *nubuwwa* [prophethood] and occidental in terms of *walāya* [sainthood].”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the prophetic function of a prophet, which is exterior, is therefore “eastern,” and his saintly side being interior is “western.”

<sup>25</sup> *Risālat al-Intisār // Ibn ‘Arabī*. Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī. Bayrūt, 1997. P. 338. I have corrected the text in places according to the superior manuscript, Ayasofya 2063. I have mostly followed the excellent translation of Gerald Elmore, to whom I am indebted for drawing my attention to this revealing passage in his *Islamic Sainthood* (P. 174–5).

<sup>26</sup> See: *Hirtenstein S. Unlimited Mercifier*. Oxford: Anqa, 1999. P. 82. For further details, see: *Elmore G. Islamic Sainthood*. P. 176ff. There is an evident allusion to the condition of Mary, and Elmore also observes a fascinating parallel in the story of Jesus’ birth, where the three wise men travelled from the east following the star of esoteric knowledge in search of the rising of the new sun of salvation in the west (P. 190, n. 158).

<sup>27</sup> See *Chodkiewicz M. Seal of the Saints*. Cambridge, 1993. P. 119. The spiritual side of the prophets is referred to as the “sunsets of wisdom” (*mawāqī’ al-ḥikam*).



### Plurality and polarity

Fidelity to the revelation leads Ibn ‘Arabī to open up dimensions on other Quranic passages where East and West are mentioned:<sup>28</sup> for example, he quotes a Divine oath, which runs as follows: “No! I swear by the Lord of the Easts and the Wests, surely We are able to substitute a better than they; We shall not be outstripped” (Q. 70:40). In his comment on this Quranic verse (in a short treatise written in Mosul), Ibn ‘Arabī observes that God swears by His Essential Lordship in terms of east and west as they are immutable and fixed directions, rather than something transient such as the action of rising or setting. He begins by explaining that the One Essence gives rise to multiple polarities:

“He swore using the plural since easts and wests are many: His visibility and His invisibility, His manifesting and His hiding, in the world of bodies and in the world of spirits, in this world and in the hereafter, in paradise and in hell, in veils and in revelations, in union and in separation, in effacement and in establishment, in annihilation and in subsistence, in intoxication and in sobriety, in waking and in sleep, and in absolutely every state of being.”<sup>29</sup>

At the end of the treatise, he gives a terse description of the different ways in which east and west may appear to the human being. In an astonishing series of rhyming pairs, Ibn ‘Arabī depicts five different degrees of these polarities, from the outermost physical body to the innermost core of the human being:

“Within the easts and wests are obtained all the [different] points of view (*madhāhib*). The east of the physical eye is the rising of the lights (*anwār*), while the west of the eye is the finding of the moon’s last night (*sarār*).<sup>30</sup> The dawning of the intellect is the east of tradition (*manqūl*), while the west of the intellect is the mystery that is indicated (*madlūl*). The east of the soul is the rising of assimilation (*tajnīs*);<sup>31</sup> the west of the soul is the presence of purest sanctity (*taqḍīs*). The east of the spirit is the dawning of clarification (*īḍāḥ*); the west of the spirit is the evening-breaths of tranquillity (*riyāḥ*). The east of the secret consciousness

<sup>28</sup> See for example: *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. Ed. ‘Aḥfīf. Bayrūt, 1946. P. 207ff., where he discusses the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh regarding the “Lord of the East and the West and all that is between them”; also: *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Futūḥāt. Vol. IV. P. 360, where he describes the “Lord of the two Easts and the two Wests” (Q. 55:17) in terms of the exterior of the two emergences (this world and the next?) and the interior of the two forms (the divine and the worldly).

<sup>29</sup> *Kitāb al-Qasam al-ilahī // Ibn ‘Arabī*. Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī. Bayrūt, 1997. P. 134. I am indebted to Matt Warren for drawing my attention to this passage. The text has been corrected against the manuscript, Veliyuddin 51 (Beyazit Library, Istanbul), which was copied from the author’s original, written in Mosul in the year 601/1205.

<sup>30</sup> In other words, when the moon is invisible to the human eye, and darkness overwhelms the heaven.

<sup>31</sup> In the sense of finding resemblances between oneself and others and becoming assimilated as part of a group or class (*jins*).

is the rising of being rooted in the heart (*istizhār*);<sup>32</sup> the west of the secret consciousness is the contemplation of a trackless land (*zahār*).<sup>33</sup>

### Beyond east and west

Ultimately all these perspectives are rooted in the relationship between observer and observed. Ibn ‘Arabī is explicit that the Essence of God, and by extension the reality of Perfect Man, is beyond all polarity: just as the movement of the sun, a single body, produces the opposition of East and West, so does the viewer who witnesses and marks the two horizons. In fact, we can see how the two horizon-events occur through an interaction of earthly viewer and celestial Sun, in a kind of mutual vision and non-vision. The dancing interplay between God and Man in terms of polar opposites such as east and west, manifest and hidden, light and dark, day and night, are beautifully evoked in the following poem:

“When it is the eye (*‘ayn*) of the servant, then the servant is hidden.  
 When it is the hearing of the Real, then God is the one who hears  
 The whole matter is only between obligation and supererogation.  
 You and God’s Self (*‘ayn*) bring all together  
 Truth (*ḥaqq*) and creation (*khalq*), they will never cease  
 Bestowing existence on the essence one moment, the next withholding it.  
 When it is the essence/eye of the servant, then night is your state.  
 When it is the essence/eye of the Real, then light shines forth.  
 You are only between an east and a west.  
 Your sun in a west, and your full moon rising.”<sup>34</sup>

### The White Light

The West as symbol of the fundamental unknowability of God is also alluded to in a remarkable visionary meeting between Ibn ‘Arabī and Abū Bakr al-Siddīq, the first caliph and the Prophet’s closest companion. In what he calls “the theophany of white light,” Ibn ‘Arabī finds the figure of Abū Bakr at the highest rung of this revelation,

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī uses this expression in connection with Abū Yazīd [Bistāmī] having the Qur’an rooted in his heart, and he calls it “experiencing the pleasure of [God’s] bringing down from the Unseen (*ghayb*) upon the hearts” (*Ibn ‘Arabī. Futūḥāt. Vol. III. P. 314*; see also: *Chittick W.C. The Self-Disclosure of God. P. 394. note 4*).

<sup>33</sup> According to Kazimirski [*Biberstein-Kazimirski A. de. Dictionnaire arabe-français. Paris, 1860. — ed.*], *zahār* means the edge of a rocky land. The manuscripts I have consulted are unvowelled, and I am unclear whether this is the right reading here. The rhyme ends as it begins, in *-ār*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabī. Futūḥāt. Vol. IV. P. 313*, from the Presence of Light (*nūr*) in Chapter 558. I have followed with amendments Chittick’s translation (*Chittick W.C. The Self-Disclosure of God. P. 161*).

“gazing westwards, and wearing a robe of the most splendid gold, whose radiance arrests the eye. The light embraced him, streaming down from his beard to his place of sitting. Still he was, immobile and speechless, like one amazed.”<sup>35</sup>

Each element here has a precise significance. According to Ibn Sawdakīn, whose commentary is a record of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own explanations, the white light signifies that which includes all other colours, and therefore the state of complete perfection (*kamāl*) — in relation to the other colours, it is like the supreme Divine Majesty within the Names or the Essence with its qualities. The place where this light shines is entirely beyond the world of intellect or sense perception. “As for facing westwards, the west is the very source of secrets... and his face was set to the west because the sun going down is the same as the secrets disappearing.”

### The Human Tree

While the white light signifies perfection, the receptor of this light, the mystic or knower of God (*‘arif*), who is clothed in golden completion, may be depicted as a tree.<sup>36</sup> The image of the tree, in particular the olive with its light-giving oil, recalls the famous light-verse of the Quran, where the Divine Light is compared to “a niche, wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive tree that is neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would shine even if no fire touched it, Light upon Light...”<sup>37</sup>

The four elements of this image of shining light, the niche, the glass, the lamp and the oil, are taken by Ibn ‘Arabī to signify different aspects of the complete human being, which are: being protected from the passions (niche), having clarity and serenity of heart (glass), the radiant light of the heart (lamp) and finally the sheer luminosity of absolute closeness of identity between Man and God (oil from the olive).<sup>38</sup> This sheer luminosity that appears in the mystic’s se-

<sup>35</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Al-Tajalliyāt al-ilāhyya. Ed. Osman Yahya. Bayrūt, 2002. Chapter 71. P. 174. The setting for this chapter is in the mid-point between the Theophany of Red Light, where ‘Alī resides, and the Theophany of Green Light, where ‘Umar resides. The supremacy of white over the colours is thus respected, not by being put first, but by virtue of occupying the intermediate position (*barzakh*).

<sup>36</sup> See: *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Futūhāt. Vol. II. P. 646, where Ibn ‘Arabī is discussing the station of no-station (*maqām lā maqām*) in the context of Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī’s saying “I have no morning and no evening — morning and evening belong to one who is bound by quality, but I, I have no quality.” Ibn ‘Arabī comments: “The gnostic in this station is like the blessed olive, which is neither of the east nor the west, so he does not determine over this station with any quality nor is he limited by it.”

<sup>37</sup> Q. 24:35. For a fuller exposition of Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of this verse, see: *Gril Denis*. “Le commentaire du verset de la lumière d’après Ibn ‘Arabī” // *Bulletin d’Études Orientales*, XXIX. Damas, 1977. P. 179–187.

<sup>38</sup> See: *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Futūhāt. Vol. I. P. 434. According to the teaching of the great Ottoman follower of Ibn ‘Arabī and first instructor in the way of the Jelveti, Muhyiddin Mehmet Üftade (1490–1580), there are correspondences between four subtle centres in man (corporeal nature,

cret heart is “kindled from the blessed tree” of the Reality of Man, who stands always in perfect equilibrium<sup>39</sup> between God and His creation, “neither of the east nor the west,” who does not incline more to the exterior or to the interior, a complete mirror in which God can manifest Himself to Himself, the eye-pupil through whom the whole world is showered with mercy and bathed in light.

Regarding this tree, Ibn ‘Arabī says, “its root is its west and its branches are its east, and it itself is neither of the east nor the west. So observe! Do you [ever] see a tree that is without these two principles? You will never find such a thing unless it is God, exalted be He!”<sup>40</sup> This pithy commentary again spells out Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching: “its root is its west” because the origin of all things is the Unseen; “its branches are its east,” in the manifest world; and “it itself is neither of the east nor the west,” since this tree is the whole of Being, that which is both manifest and hidden. This tree symbolises the Divine Ipseity (Itselfness, *huwiyya*), the Reality of the Self, grounded in identification with the Divine Essence in the interior, and branching out in its full expression and manifestation. It is equally a metaphor for the Reality of Man, whose secret interior is identical to the Essence and whose exterior is the place of God’s manifestation.

In the tree’s extension from root to branch, it is “neither of the east nor the west,” as it does not become part of a polarity, and the light which shines forth from it is itself. Is this perhaps the real inner significance of offering an olive branch as an act of peace and reconciliation? For it reminds us that our reality is not of the world of polarity, and that nothing has ever left the Presence of the One and Only. Like the olive yielding its precious oil, this Divine Itselfness extends into the heart of Perfect Man, self-luminous, illuminating all through Its own sheer luminosity. Unlike earthly lights, It has no need for any other to light It (“its oil would shine even if no fire touched it”).

During a vision of this Tree, Ibn ‘Arabī sees the hearts of people of true faith (*al-mu’minīn*) brought before him and is told: “Ignite them with light, for the

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soul, spirit and secret consciousness), four aspects of man (animal, human, angelic and supreme), four steps (law, way, knowledge, reality) and four successors to Muhammad (Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī). The basis for all these is the Quranic verse (Q. 57:3): “He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden.” For further details, see: *Ūftade*. The Nightingale in the Garden of Love: Ūftade’s Divan. Trans. Paul Ballanfat (French) and Angela Culme-Seymour (English). Oxford: Anqa, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> The association of the olive tree with equilibrium is also implied in Q. 95:1–4, where it is mentioned (like a *barzakh*) between the fig-tree (associated with Jesus) and the mountain (associated with Moses). The olive, with all its associations of peace and kingliness, becomes thus the prime tree-symbol of Muhammad.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabī*. Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt. P. 187, from the oral teachings recorded by Ibn Sawdān on the Theophany of the Tree (*tajallī* 73). The whole theophanic vision is as follows in Ibn ‘Arabī’s text: “I raised the ladder of ascension and mounted it. I was given possession of the extended light, and the hearts of the people of faith were brought before me. I was told: ‘Ignite them with light, for the darkness of covering-up [the truth] has enveloped [them] and nothing but this light can dispel it.’ I was overcome by rapture during the ascension.”

darkness of covering-up [the truth] has enveloped [them] and nothing but this light can dispel it.” The extraordinary rapture which Ibn ‘Arabī says he experienced during this vision is like the parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep, an indication of the extreme Divine desire to be known<sup>41</sup> and His pleasure at the restoration of a lost soul to true knowledge. For this tree of Light is also a beacon for others to find their own reality. In other words, the only purpose and aim of the perfected human, returned to creation in full consciousness of the Divine root and acting as God’s representative on earth (*khalīfa*), neither of the east nor the west, is to serve as a guide to others, igniting their hearts with a light of guidance and knowledge which will bring them directly to the Source of all.

In this brief survey of Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of East and West, we can see the enormously rich tapestry of insights that he draws from contemplating the interaction of Sun and earth. By using West and East as symbols of hidden and manifest, Ibn ‘Arabī gives honour and dignity to every aspect of this world. But this is only possible through the most rigorous and faithful submission to the Singular Sun of Divine Reality. Whenever we forget our true orientation to the Sun, and externalise this orientation into a “place out there,” we fall into a polarisation of the place where “we” are, in contrast to that “other.” This inevitably leads to questions of superiority/inferiority and potential conflict, both personally and collectively. West and East then cease to be directions of singular vision, and become metonyms for our own divided perception. When we remember that our transcendent reality has precedence over our physical appearance, we are putting our “west” in its proper place, as having primacy over our “east.” Only then can we have true common spiritual values.

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<sup>41</sup> As in the Divine Saying (*hadīth qudsī*) “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known — so I created the world that I might be known (or: that they might know Me).”