

Gholamreza Aawani

(Iranian Institute of Philosophy, Iran)

**THE TRANSCENDENT UNITY
OF RELIGION IN THE SUFISM OF IBN ‘ARABI**

One of the greatest issues in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi concerns the esoteric and Sufi interpretation of prophecy, its intrinsic nature and its inner logic. This problem is most important within the context of Islam, due to its emphasis on the universal nature of prophecy and because even if, from a certain aspect, there is an order of priority among prophets, from another aspect, that is from the point of view of all of them being messengers of a single divinity, there is no distinction among them. Apart from the fact that belief in the universal prophecy is the second article of Islamic faith, the Holy Quran reiterates time and again that God has sent messengers to each community one after another and there is no community to which messengers have not been sent by God. Hence, God’s decisive proof to mankind is far-reaching and nobody can claim anything against God concerning the discharge of the prophetic message. Since prophets are the supreme exemplification of the Perfect Man (*al-insān alkāmil*), it would be apposite here to allude briefly to the spiritual function of the Perfect Man.

**The Perfect Man as a mirror
of the Divine Names**

Man (the microcosm) and the universe (the macrocosm) are the resplendent mirrors, which reflect the glory, majesty and beauty of the infinite attributes of God. Even if the microcosm and the macrocosm both manifest the Divine Names, there is the difference that, whereas the totality of the universe (this world and the next one) cumulatively and dispersedly manifest the Divine Names and Attributes, a human being manifests all the Divine Names in an integral fashion. Moreover, the macrocosm, being like an unpolished mirror, is not aware of the reality of those Names, whereas a human, being the very polish of that mirror, has the knowledge of all those names. In another simile, Ibn ‘Arabi likens the macrocosm to an equipoised body without life and man, to the very spirit of that body. Using another Quranic term, man is said to be the vicegerent

of God on earth and as such is required to have all the qualities and perfections of God, whose vicegerent he is, and of all the creatures, over whom he has been appointed as a vicegerent. He has been named *Insān* (Man) because of his close intimacy (*ums*) with the Lordship or because he is like the pupil of the eye (*insān al-'ayn*) of God, through whom He beholds the universe and showers His infinite mercy upon the creation. In yet another simile, the cosmos is like a finger-ring and the Perfect Man is like the signet of that ring, and the Divine name engraved on the signet symbolizes the Divine name dominating the reality of the prophet and determining the historical destiny of the community of the prophet in question. All the prophets have been the best exemplification of the Perfect Man.

Prophets as manifestations of the Divine Logos

Prophets and messengers, according to Ibn 'Arabi, are perfect words of God. One might suppose that Ibn 'Arabi has borrowed this term from the Christian doctrine of Logos but this is not quite correct, because we find the rudiments of that notion in the glorious Quran, while Ibn 'Arabi developed it into a thorough doctrine.

According to some verses of the Quran, all creatures are the words (*kalimāt*) of God because they are articulations of the Divine Breath (*Nafas ar-Raḥmān*). "Our command to a thing when We desire it to be is that we say to it 'be!' and it is." Things are determinations and articulations of the Divine Breath (His unique command to things "to be") as our spoken words are articulate enunciations of our breath. If all beings are the words of God, Prophets are more privileged to be called the perfect words of God. Both Adam and Jesus are said in the Quran to have been created by the Direct Divine command. Are not the children of Adam and especially the messengers of God to be so called? Accordingly, each chapter of Ibn 'Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* ("The Ringstones of Wisdom") has as its title the wisdom which is associated with the word (logos or reality) of a certain prophet. This tells us that, according to Ibn 'Arabi, all prophets are the manifestations of the Universal Logos, which he shows to be identical with what he calls "the Muhammadan Reality" (*al-ḥaqīqah al-muḥammadiyah*).

The Muhammadan Reality

The reality of Muhammad, that is his reality as eternally known by God, plays a crucial role both cosmologically, that is in the creation of the world, and as an archetype for the reality of all prophets. In the Holy Quran, it is mentioned that God has sent him as a mercy and a blessing for the whole creation. In the prophetic traditions, it is mentioned that the first thing created by God was Mu-

hammad’s light, while yet another tradition affirms that it was Muhammad’s Spirit. Ibn ‘Arabi discusses a verse in the Quran concerning the reality of the isthmus, to the effect that when two seas mingle together there should be an isthmus between the two, so that they would not encroach on one another. He interprets this metaphysically and symbolically that there should be an intermediary between two independent ontological realms, such as this world and the next, sense perception and intellection, and God and the Universe. Such an intermediary between God and the Universe is the Muhammadan Reality, which is the first determination or the first manifestation of God to Himself and comprises the reality of all things. Being a determination or a manifestation means that it is created but at the same time it embraces within itself the archetypal reality of everything other than God. It is as if the openings (*mafātiḥ*) or the master keys of all things have been entrusted to Muhammad. Moreover, all the prophets, even if historically preceding him, obtain their prophethood from the lamp of his prophecy.

Every prophet, from Adam to the last prophet, takes [light] from the niche of the seal of prophets (Muhammad): even if his earthy existence was temporally posterior to them all, in reality he preceded them all, as he himself (the benedictions of God be upon him) has well attested when he said: “I was a prophet while Adam was still a mixture of water and clay.” Other prophets were not so except when they were chosen by God.¹

Another divine privilege enjoyed by the Prophet is that he has been endowed with the special status and station of the Quran. He was the real Quran. The word “Quran” etymologically means “to gather together”: when one reads meaningfully, he reintegrates the scattered words disseminated on one page or in one chapter. Symbolically, it means that the Prophet has been endowed with the mysteries and secrets (*asrār*) of all the preceding prophets. The Prophet himself said with reference to the all-inclusiveness of his message, “To me was given the totality of the Divine Words” — a saying which Ibn ‘Arabi frequently alludes to. He even claims that the Prophet’s adherents, following his footsteps, can attain the station of the Quran. Referring to himself, Ibn ‘Arabi says in a famous verse:

I am the Quran, I am the seven double verses (*sab‘ al-mathānī*),
 I am the spirit of the Spirit, not the spirit of clay vessels.
 My heart always resides with my Beloved
 Beholding her incomparable beauty, and with you is my tongue.

That is why, when Ibn ‘Arabi talks about the divine prerogative of a special prophet, he wants to reiterate that the Prophet was divinely endowed with that spiritual rank or even see in the case of the prophets Adam, Noah, Isaac, Joseph,

¹ *Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī*. Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. Ed. A. ‘Afīfī. Tehrān: Az-Zahrā, 1370 S.H. P. 63.

Jesus and others. The all-comprehensiveness of the spiritual rank of the Prophet justifies the Quranic reference to that fact that the Prophet is a witness to all prophets both in this world and in the hereafter, and his community have been made witness to all communities, tribes and nations.

Universal and contingent beliefs

It is one of the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabi that God manifests himself on two planes: first, ontologically in the being of all creatures and, second, epistemologically in their beliefs, so that everybody knows and worships God according to the form (*šūra*) in which he has manifested Himself in the consciousness of the believer. That is why the belief of an overwhelming majority of believers is limited, contingent and quite fragmentary, and this explains why they immediately accept what is in accord with their narrow beliefs and immediately reject what does not harmonize with their bigoted views. On the other hand, an accomplished Gnostic (*'ārif*) never rejects the partial truth inherent in each belief, as in the external world he does not vaingloriously discard or repudiate the manifestation of God in each being, regarding everything as a special aspect (*wajh*) of the Divine Being. So a true Gnostic should never deny God in whatever aspect He appears either within or without.

In sum, each person necessarily has a belief concerning his Lord, by which He returns to Him and through which he seeks Him. When God appears to him in that form he knows Him and acknowledges Him but if He manifests Himself in another form, he denies Him and seeks refuge from Him (*tu'awwadha minhu*) and shows discourtesy towards him, though it appears to him that he has been very courteous. So no believer believes in a godhead (*ilah*) except he fabricates (*ja'ala*) in himself. Thus, the God of beliefs is a fabrication. They see nothing but themselves and what they have fabricated.

So look! The rank of people with regard to their knowledge of God is the same as their rank in their beatific vision in the hereafter. I have already let you know the justificatory reason for that. So beware, lest you restrict yourself to a particular belief and utterly deny other beliefs. In that case, you would miss the greatest good. Nay, you would miss the knowledge about the matter as it is in itself. So be in yourself the matter (*hayūla*) for accepting all forms of beliefs; because God the Almighty is infinitely greater and more majestic than to be contained in one belief rather than another; He says: "Wherever you turn, there you find the face of God." He did not mention a specific "where" rather than another. Again, He mentioned that you shall find the face (*wajh*) of God, and the face of everything in its reality."²

² *Ibn al-'Arabī*. *Fuṣūṣ*. P. 113.

Ibn 'Arabi resumes the same subject in the ringstone dedicated to Shu'ayb. Referring to the sacred tradition: "My heavens and my earth do not encompass me but the heart of my believing servant encompasses me," he remarks that what the heart of each believer encompasses is not the Absolute (*al-Haqq*) itself but the absolute as determined by the believer's peculiar form of belief. If God appears to him in that particular form, he will know Him. So nobody knows God except in the form of his fabricated belief. There is no doubt that beliefs of believers are quite divergent and multifarious; as a result, they acknowledge their own form of belief and repudiate the others. According to a prophetic tradition known as *ḥadīth al-taḥawwul*, God appears in the hereafter to all believers and they only recognize him in the form they used to know and acknowledge Him in this world and they deny Him in other forms.

As to the real Gnostics, their knowledge of God knows no boundary. They always seek an increase in knowledge, as the Prophet was commanded by God to ask for an increase in knowledge.

The locus of manifestation of such knowledge is the heart (*al-qalb*) rather than intellect (*al-'aql*). Hence God has said: "This book is a reminder for those who have hearts or for those who lend their ears and they witness." (50:37) "Those who have hearts," according to Ibn 'Arabi, are the people of Divine Gnosis, because their heart (*qalb*) changes form (*yataqallabu*) with each manifestation, whereas the intellect (*'aql*, etymologically related to the verb "to bind") restricts the infinite Divine manifestation to particular determined forms. As to "him who lends his ears while he is a witness" (50:37), this is a reference to the faithful who emulate the messengers of God and not to those philosophers who impose their forged demonstrations on what has been transmitted by the messengers of God.³

Religion in the sight of God is Islam

According to Ibn 'Arabi, there are two kinds of religion: religion in the eyes of God and religion in the eyes of men. The religion in the eyes of God (*ad-dīn 'inda allāh*) is the one which God has made known to men and the knowledge transmitted by them in the same way to others. This religion is the one which God has chosen for Himself and recommended to others. An example of such a religion can be found in the following verse: "This is the religion which Abraham and Jacob recommended to their sons. They said o my son! God has chosen for you *the religion*. So do not die unless you are Muslims." (2:132) Now, according to Ibn 'Arabi, religion in the aforementioned verse is accompanied by a definite article (i.e., *the religion*), which means that it is the only religion accept-

³ The discussion is based on a few paragraphs of the chapter dealing with Shu'ayb's wisdom (see: *Ibn al-'Arabī*. Fuşuş. P. 122–123) (*the editor's note*).

able to God. But what does Islam mean? It signifies utter submission before God (*inqiyād*), “so religion consists in your submission and the religion in the eyes of God is the Law (*shar‘*) to which you have submitted yourself... So he who truly submits himself to what God has ordained, has truly executed the religion and established it as it should be established, like unto when we say that somebody has performed his prayers.”⁴

As to “the religion in the eyes of creatures,” this is the one which is esteemed and taken into consideration by God. It is not, of course, a religion in the eyes of God, but nonetheless God will consider it and will reward it. A case in point is the institution of monasticism (*ruhbanīyah*) in Christianity, which, no doubt, was not instituted by God, but “they themselves invented it (*ibtada‘ūhā*)” (57:27); God did not prescribe it for them, but whatever of it was in conformity with the Divine wisdom and the inner purpose behind the Divine law God would take into consideration. Ibn ‘Arabi gives as evidence and proof of the Divine acceptance of this innovative practice the fact that God has praised them thrice in the mentioned verse. First, even if the practice of monasticism is not obligatory (*mā katabnāhā ‘alayhim*), the verse immediately adds: “except for those who seek Divine approval” (57:27). Second, it blames them for not observing this practice as they should have, which goes to prove that God gave consent to this practice and, thirdly, it adds: “and We gave the reward to those among them who were believers” (57:27), which goes to prove that the practice was endorsed by God.

So, returning to our main issue, the religion according to God is Islam and Islam means sincere submission to God in everything, whether it be portable to our taste or not. This is due to the fact that everything is a manifestation in the mirror of God. Nothing is accorded to contingent beings except what their intrinsic nature demands in various states; so their forms are subject to change in conformity with their various states. “Then, a more profound mystery which must be considered in such a problem is that the contingent beings have their origination in non-being. So they have no being except the being which God bestowed upon them according to what the contingent beings demanded in themselves and in their fixed archetypes.”⁵

The reason for the difference between prophets and their communities

The question might be asked why is there so much difference among communities and religions. The answer to this question rests on several principles which should be taken into consideration. First, the principle, even if it is one

⁴ *Ibn al-'Arabī*. Fuṣūṣ. P. 94.

⁵ *Ibid*. P. 96.

and unique, manifests itself in multiplicity. Unity in multiplicity is the primordial principle without which creation and manifestation would not be possible. Second, "the messengers have different ranks, which depend upon what their communities are in themselves. So the knowledge of messengers is exactly in conformity with what the community of that messenger requires, no more and no less."⁶

This difference can, on the one hand, be traced back to the difference between the communities and, on the other, to the inner dispositions and susceptibilities of the messengers.

Ibn 'Arabi stresses time and again that the knowledge of messengers is not obtained by ratiocination, argumentation or disputation. "Their hearts are purified of any kind of intellectual speculation, because they are well aware of the deficiency of intellect with regard to its speculative function."⁷

Again, in the ringstone dedicated to Ezra (*'Udhayr*), having quoted the verse: "And God made some of you superior to others in your apportioned nourishment" (16:71), Ibn 'Arabi comments that some kinds of nourishment are spiritual, as in the case of different sciences, and some others are sensuous, like different kinds of food. Whatever God sends down in an apportioned measure is in accordance with the intrinsic aptitudes of the creatures, because God "has given everything its destined creation" (20:50), and "He sends down what he has foreordained, and He does not foreordain except what He knew from eternity, and God does not know anything except what is required by the known thing (*ma'lūm*)."⁸

Again, in the ringstone dedicated to Solomon,⁹ arguing in the same vein, Ibn 'Arabi asserts that there is difference in knowledge among scholars. We say that such and such knows more than such and such, while the nature of knowledge remains one and the same. This difference is one in aptitudes and again this difference can be traced back to the Divine names and attributes themselves. For example, knowledge is more comprehensive than volition, because God knows everything but He does not will all He knows. In the same manner, Divine will is more comprehensive than Divine power. Then follow other Divine qualities, such as hearing, seeing and speech, so there is an order of priority among the Divine names, which are the originating causes of all beings, which in truth causes the differences among things that are their manifestations.

This could also explain the difference that exists among religious communities, which is due, on the one hand, to the aptitudes of the messengers and the community and, on the other, to the preponderant Divine name or names manifested in that community.

⁶ *Ibn al-'Arabī*. *Fuṣūṣ*. P. 132.

⁷ *Ibid*. P. 133.

⁸ *Ibid*. P. 132.

⁹ See: *Ibn al-'Arabī*. *Fuṣūṣ*. P. 153.

Nubuwwah and Walāyah

Walāyah is a word difficult to translate into English. It is usually translated as “sainthood,” and *walī* as “saint,” but sanctity is only one aspect of *walāyah* that does not do justice to its true meaning. Etymologically, the word derives from the root *w-l-y*, which connotes such an existence of two things next to each other as implies no intermediary between the two, as in two consecutive numbers. So construed it signifies the “proximity to God.” Some experts on Ibn ‘Arabi, e.g. Prof. W. Chittick, have preferred to translate it as “friendship,” and *walī* as “the friend of God.” There is no objection to this, insofar as we bear in mind that the meaning of Divine proximity is implied therein.

Religion is God’s addressing human beings, so there is an aspect of religion that is oriented towards God, called by the followers of Ibn ‘Arabi *lada l-ḥaqqī* (God-oriented aspect) which itself is the basis of *walāyah*, that is, the proximity to God. The other aspect, which is called *lada l-khalqī* (creature-oriented aspect) comprises the spiritual aspect, which is called *nubuwwah* (prophecy, because the prophets receive through their spirits revelations from God) and the legislative aspect for the community, which is the foundation for the messenger status.

Now, some exoteric scholars have attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi the doctrine, according to which a *walī* is higher than both a *nabī* (prophet) and a *rasūl* (messenger).

Ibn ‘Arabi has posed this question in the ringstone dedicated to Ezra, and the upshot of his discussion is that a messenger is higher in spiritual rank than a prophet or a Friend, because he possesses three functions — those of messenger’s mission, prophecy and friendship and, for this reason, a *nabī* or prophet possessing two spiritual stations is higher in rank than the Friend. But in a single person, such as a messenger or a prophet, his aspect of *walāyah* is superior to the two other aspects, simply because they cannot be conceived without it. Another reason adduced by Ibn ‘Arabi revolves round the premise that *walī* is the name of God and, for this reason, there should be a *walī* on the earth, otherwise it would be a name without a *maẓhar* or manifestation; But *rasūl* and *nabī* are designations of human beings, not the Divine names, and as such they might cease to be, as the cycle of prophecy has ended with the prophet Muhammad. In turn, if the *walāyah* terminated, the world would be transferred from this world to the next one.

The prophet of Islam is the seal of prophecy and his message, like his revelation, is all-comprehensive and he himself is the sum total of all preceding prophets. This goes to prove that his *walāyah* is superior to the *walāyah* of all preceding prophets. But since he was dispatched as a messenger and as such he had to establish the *Sharī‘ah* like every other messenger, his *walāyah* aspect was concealed under the guise of *Sharī‘ah* and shall be revealed in the person of Jesus or Mahdi (according to two different interpretations) at the end of the present cycle.