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**TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHITEHEAD  
IN THE CONTEXT OF IBN ‘ARABI**

**Abstract**

This paper proposes that it is too early to say “process philosophy is dead.” The dipolar and holistic character of this philosophy makes it a promising trend now and the future—there are still/always potentialities for every philosophical tradition. Thus, I am trying to show how Whitehead’s legacy could be appropriated within an entirely different context, that of a Muslim mystic, Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1239).

“Along the south of the Mediterranean the Mahometan conquerors carried Hellenistic thought, as colored by the mentalities of Arabs, Jews, and Persians, through Africa into Spain. From Spain, the Mahometan and Jewish versions made contact with the Christian version of Alexandrian culture. This fusion produced the brilliant culmination of Christian Scholasticism in the thirteenth century; and, in the seventeenth century, Spinoza.”

Alfred North Whitehead<sup>1</sup>

“The issue is not wholly new with quantum physics or Whitehead but was suggested by some Islamic as well as all Buddhist thinkers long ago, and by Hume more recently.”

Charles Hartshorne<sup>2</sup>

“The originality or novelty of Process theism lies not in its overcoming of older views but in its synthesis of diverse traditional views.”

Muhammad Iqbal<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Whitehead A.N.* *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Macmillan, 1933. P. 133–134. Cf. “There was a great and wealthy civilisation, Pagan, Christian, Mahometan. In that period a great deal was added to science”: *Whitehead A.N.* *Science and the Modern World*. Simon & Schuster Adult, 1997. P. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Hartshorne Ch.* *Creativity in American Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. P. 262.

<sup>3</sup> *Iqbal M.* *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Lahore: Javid Iqbal, 1944. P. 34.

## 1. Understanding Whitehead Today

The *reality* is that the *process* eliminates the philosophers and their texts from the scene of the history of philosophy. In this paper, I am going to examine the case of *Process and Reality*.<sup>4</sup> Is it still alive academically, then? At the AAR meeting, William J. Wainwright declared that “One thing which does seem to me dead, and this may be regrettable, is process philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> In our age, it is very common to declare something’s end or death. However, in this case, it seems too early for the “declaration of death of process philosophy.”

Nowadays, discussions of “open theism” and the revival of pantheism between scholars are signs that the *potentialities* of process philosophy have not been exhausted yet. Process philosophy, even if it succeeds in transforming the dominant philosophical-theological tradition, will not bring the process to a conclusion. On the contrary, *it looks forward to its own creative transformation into something else*.<sup>6</sup> If process philosophy is *still* part of the philosophical process, among many other things, the main reason is its *dipolar* and *holistic* character. This point makes this philosophy a promising philosophy now and in the future. Alongside many different philosophical traditions, this philosophy is accessible in the so-called *postmodern conditions*.<sup>7</sup> For example, the main poststructuralist French philosopher, Giles Deleuze, re-appropriates Whitehead’s legacy in a different context.<sup>8</sup> There are also some other studies linking Derrida with Whitehead.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is not surprising to see a Muslim philosopher trying to understand Whitehead within an Islamic context.

## 2. Understanding Whitehead in Islamic Thought

In the *Adventures of Ideas*, Whitehead refers to Muslim thinkers as the *Mahometans*, representing the re-created civilization, and writes,

The Byzantines and the Mahometans were themselves the civilization. Thus their culture retained its intrinsic energies, sustained by physical and

<sup>4</sup> Whitehead A.N. *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> “Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: A Dialogue” // *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. Vol. 28. No. 2 (2007). P. 230.

<sup>6</sup> Cobb J.B. and D.R. Griffin. *Process Theology: An Introductory*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976. P. 137.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, the title of D.R. Griffin’s last book is really challenging: *Whitehead’s Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy: An Argument for Its Contemporary Relevance*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze G. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Chapter ‘What is an event?’, Robinson K. (ed.). *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic Connections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Keller C. and A. Daniell (eds.). *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Post-structuralist Postmodernisms*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

spiritual adventure. They traded with the far East: they expanded westward: they codified law: they developed new forms of art: they elaborated theologies: they transformed mathematics: they developed medicine. In this final period of Near Eastern greatness the Jews played the same part as did the Greeks during the Persian epoch.<sup>10</sup>

According to Whitehead, *fusion* within Islamic philosophy produced the brilliant culmination of Christian Scholasticism in the thirteenth century; and, in the seventeenth century, Spinoza.<sup>11</sup> These remarks by Whitehead seem challenging, even today, for the historiography of philosophy:

The records of the Middle Ages, during the brilliant period of Mahometan ascendancy, afford evidence of joint association of Mahometan and Jewish activity in the promotion of civilization. The culmination of the Middle Ages even in Christian lands was largely dependent upon this association. Thomas Aquinas received Aristotle from it; Roger Bacon received the foundation of modern science from it. The commercial system of the Italian seaports was a copy of the activities throughout the preceding Dark Ages, carried on by Syrians and Jews. The association of Jews with the Mahometan world is one of the great facts of history from which modern civilization is derived.<sup>12</sup>

If we want to pursue Whitehead's philosophical gesture, we should ask whether there is any figure or any tradition in the *Mahometan*, i.e. Islamic, tradition, which corresponds to Whitehead's insights? Certainly, there could be many answers; but, to mention Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), Whitehead's contemporary Muslim philosopher, seems a sound beginning.

Muhammad Iqbal did not see any difficulty in linking Whitehead's ideas with the Qur'an. It might be a surprise that Iqbal finds some of the main Whiteheadian themes in the Qur'an itself.

We have seen that Professor Whitehead describes the universe, not as something static, but as a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow. This quality of Nature's passage in time is perhaps the most significant aspect of experience which the Quran especially emphasizes and (...) offers the best clue to the ultimate nature of Reality. To some other verses (3: 190–91; 2: 160; 24: 44) bearing on the point I have already drawn your attention.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Whitehead*. *Adventures of Ideas*. P. 104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*. P. 134; Whitehead cannot help himself to confess that Bagdad, at the height of its prosperity, exhibited forms of human life in many ways more gracious than our own, was a great civilization: *Whitehead*. *Adventures of Ideas*. P. 99–100.

<sup>12</sup> *Whitehead A.N.* *Essays in Science and Philosophy*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1947. P. 70–71.

<sup>13</sup> *Iqbal*. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. P. 45.

So, how did Iqbal use Whitehead’s philosophy in an Islamic context and, also, why did Whitehead fit in so well in the Islamic world? In some sense, the answer is simple: to overcome the crisis which haunts the Islamic thought, Iqbal needed a method to unite the Islamic disciplines that are seen as fragmented.

Thus, the originality or novelty of Process theism lies not in its overcoming of older views but in its synthesis of diverse traditional views.<sup>14</sup>

Iqbal, as a poet-thinker, wanted to link all Islamic sciences such as philosophy, Sufism, theology, etc. Whitehead seemed to him a wonderful medium for achieving this aim. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought*, not only Whitehead, but also Einstein, Bergson, Nietzsche, ‘Iraqi, Beyazid, the Qur’an, etc. ... appear together in the same paragraph, sometimes on the same line. We might ask whether Iqbal’s gesture was pragmatic/figurative or authentic; but his gesture seems really authentic. Against all delicacy, it is far from an artificial synthesis; on the contrary it is creative.

In this context, I am going to concentrate on Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1239), known as the greatest master (*Shaykh al-akbar*) in the Muslim world. I am going to propose that Iqbal’s philosophical gesture is very closely connected with Ibn ‘Arabi. And also, their texts have some insights which would allow us to read Whitehead and Ibn ‘Arabi together.

### 3. Trying to Understand Whitehead through Ibn ‘Arabi for the Future of Philosophy

It might be helpful beginning to discuss the issue with Charles Hartshorne, well known Whiteheadian scholar. Within the legacy of Hartshorne, there is an uncanny reference to Muslim philosophy. Hartshorne cites Omar Khayyam’s poems,<sup>15</sup> and comments on them.<sup>16</sup> Without any context, he says that:

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. P. 34.

<sup>15</sup> We are ...

But Helpless pieces of the Game He Plays  
 Upon this Checker-board of Nights and Days;  
 Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,  
 And one by one back in the Closet lays. (Verse 69)  
 Oh Thou, who didst with pitfall and with gin  
 Beset the Road I was to wander in,  
 Thou wilt not with Predestined Evil round

Enmesh, and then impute my Fall to Sin. (Verse 80) // *Hartshorne Ch. Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. P. 19.

<sup>16</sup> “The theology Omar knew was Islamic; but Christianity at the time (eleventh century) was at best ambiguous on the issue of creaturely freedom that Omar was discussing. No theologian was ever more committed to the concept of omnipotence than I, like Omar, am criticiz-

The medieval doctrine of God's power was in fact virtually refuted in its own time, by an Islamic scientist, philosopher, and poet Omar Khayyam, freely but—as an Arabic scholar has shown—essentially correctly translated by the superb English scholar and poet Edward Fitzgerald. As so often happens, the world did not fully grasp what had happened in the publication of his poem. It could be only a question of time until a new effort would have to be made to find a better way of interpreting the divine power.<sup>17</sup>

The most essential sentence in this quote is this: *the world did not fully grasp what had happened in the publication of his poem*. So, we have to ask whether there are more examples in Islamic philosophy regarding which *the world did not fully grasp what had happened?!?*" This is a challenging question for Western philosophy. In this context, the example of Omar Khayyam in Hartshorne's text seems relevant in the case of Ibn 'Arabi.

These passages from *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al hikam)*, Ibn 'Arabi's famous book, contain a lot of ideas that continue to exert their influence to this day:

Thus, in a certain sense, it may be said that He is not He and you are not you. (...) "God cannot be known except as uniting the opposites," in determining them through them. He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the un-manifest, the Essence of all that is manifest and all that is not yet manifest, even as He is manifesting Himself. Thus, only He sees Him and only He is hidden from Him, for He is manifest to Himself and hidden from Himself.<sup>18</sup>

(...) So, O friend, do not know Him in one context and be ignorant of Him in another, nor affirm Him in one situation and deny Him in another, unless you affirm Him in an aspect in which He affirms Himself and deny Him in an aspect in which He denies Himself, as in the verse in which denial and affirmation of Himself are brought together. He says, *There is nothing like unto Him*, which is a denial, *And He is the Hearer, the Seer*, which is an affirmation of Himself with attributes attributable to all living creatures that hear and see.<sup>19</sup>

The final passage of *Process and Reality*, it seems, could be read with above quotation in mind:

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

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ing than the Christian Jonathan Edwards. And he thought, with considerable justification, that he represented the tradition." *Hartshorne*. Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes. P. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Hartshorne*. Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes. P. 18–19.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibn 'Arabi*. *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Trans. Ralph Austin. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980. P. 85–86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*. P. 191.

It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many.

It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God.

God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which Creativity achieves its supreme task of transforming disjoined multiplicity, with its diversities in opposition, into concrescent unity, with its diversities in contrast. In each actuality there are two concrescent poles of realization—“enjoyment” and “appetition,” that is, the “physical” and the “conceptual.” For God the conceptual is prior to the physical, for the World the physical poles are prior to the conceptual poles.<sup>20</sup>

In these quotations, *similarities come up and disappear, a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing*. “Family resemblance of thought” might be a good expression to characterize the similarities between Whitehead and Ibn 'Arabi.<sup>21</sup>

If we look into the issue more closely, there are two concepts that could make a bridge between them: panentheism and the principle of dipolarity. Hartshorne includes Iqbal in the panentheist tradition.<sup>22</sup> He says “it is a pleasure to be able to include a modern Mohammedan, a Moslem panentheist, among our panentheists.”<sup>23</sup> In any case, for him, it is inspiring to see the motifs of dipolarity emerg-

<sup>20</sup> *Whitehead*. *Process and Reality*. P. 348.

<sup>21</sup> I borrow the term, same thought of family, from Wittgenstein. Cf. *Wittgenstein L*. *Philosophical Investigation*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford–Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996. P. 66–67.

<sup>22</sup> *Hartshorne Ch. and W.L. Reese*. *Philosophers Speak of God*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953. P. 17. Hartshorne also begins one of his books with a quotation from Iqbal: *Hartshorne Ch*. *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics*. La Salle: Open Court Pub. Co., 1962.

<sup>23</sup> *Hartshorne and Reese*. *Philosophers Speak of God*. P. 294. Cf. “Infinite, not with the concrete, definite, actual, finite, is the truth missed by Bergson, Peirce, and Dewey, but seen by James and Whitehead (anticipated by Buddhists and some Islamic thinkers),” *Hartshorne Ch*. *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method*. La Salle: Open Court Pub. Co., 1970. P. 122; “They (like the Jews and Christians) did produce some eloquent exponents of mysticism. But they seem to have created no philosophical solutions of radical importance for the modern age,” *Hartshorne Ch*. *Insights and Oversights of Great Thinkers: An Evaluation of Western Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983. P. 74.

ing so vividly in this tradition.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, at the beginning of the twentieth century, R.A. Nicholson (1868–1945), the translator of Rumi’s *Mathnawi* into English, sees Islamic mysticism as pantheistic:

as regards the pantheistic character attributed by Von Kremer to the Sufism of which he takes Hallaj as the prototype, I hope to convince you that such a description is not applicable either to Hallaj himself or to Sufism in general. (...) so long as transcendence is recognized, the most emphatic assertion of immanence is not pantheism but panentheism.<sup>25</sup>

Although Iqbal never used the concept “panentheism,” his philosophical system seems to be pantheistic. One of the most explicit references to panentheism in his writings is this:

If time is real, and not a mere repetition of homogeneous moments which make conscious experience a delusion, then every moment in the life of Reality is original, giving birth to what is absolutely novel and unforeseeable. “Every day doth some new work employ Him,” says the Quran.<sup>26</sup>

Our main aim is not to discuss panentheism; but, this concept shows how Ibn ʿArabi (and his successor, Iqbal) could be linked with Whitehead.

The second concept connected with panentheism is the principle of dipolarity. As already shown by David Ray Griffin, the process dipolar notion of deity, has some affinity with Islamic philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Dipolar theism, accordingly, is the view that God is to be conceived as having an Alpha aspect or nature which is included within Omega states.<sup>28</sup> For, in dipolar process theism God is to be understood as categorically superior to both the Alpha and the Omega side. That is, God is the union of categorically supreme independence and categorically supreme dependence, of categorically supreme activity and categorically supreme passivity, of categorically Supreme Being and categorically supreme becoming.<sup>29</sup> The dipolar theism can be understood as a way of incorporating a diversity of otherwise incompatible traditional views within a single coherent conception of God.<sup>30</sup> The operating principle which makes this synthesis possible is the dipolar concept of God Dipolar; and it stands in some contrast to both classical theism and classical pantheism. But its real virtue lies not so much in that contrast as in

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<sup>24</sup> Hartshorne and Reese. *Philosophers Speak of God*. P. 297.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholson R.A. *The Idea of Personality in Sufism: Three Lectures Delivered in the University of London*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970. P. 36–37.

<sup>26</sup> Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. P. 50.

<sup>27</sup> Cobb and Griffin. *Ibid.* P. 62.

<sup>28</sup> Reeves G. “God as Alpha and Omega: Dipolar Process Theism” // Clarke B.L. and E.T. Longe (eds.). *God and Temporality*. New York: New Era Publications, 1984. P. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Reeves. *Ibid.* P. 164.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* P. 155.

its ability to make sense of classical views by incorporating them with a larger, more complex conception of God.<sup>31</sup>

In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

If you insist only on His transcendence, you restrict Him, / And if you insist only on His immanence you limit Him. If you maintain both aspects you are right, / An Imam and a master in the spiritual sciences. Whoso would say He is two things is a polytheist, / While the one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him. Beware of comparing Him if you profess duality, / And, if unity, beware of making Him transcendent. *You are not He and you are He...*<sup>32</sup> (the emphasis is mine).

The Shaykh often quotes this verse, “Nothing is like Him, and He is the Seeing, the Hearing” (42:11), as a Quranic proof that God combines the attributes of incomparability and similarity. The rational faculty has come with one-half of the knowledge of God, that is, the declaration of incomparability and the negation of multiple properties in Him. But the revelation brought news of God by affirming what the rational faculty’s proofs have negated in Him and establishing what the rational faculty has stripped from Him.<sup>33</sup> The right attitude is that which combines in itself incomparability (*tanzīh*) and similarity (*tashbīh*); in short, to see the One in the Many and the Many in the One, or rather to see the Many as One and the One as Many. “Where can I find God?” asks Ibn ‘Arabi and replies:

Wherever He is present, which is everywhere, since all things are His acts. But no act is identical with God, who encompasses all things and all acts, all worlds and all presences. Though He can be found everywhere, He is also nowhere to be found. He/not He.<sup>34</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi is not unique in the Islamic tradition, on the contrary, after him follows a long tradition in which God could be understood as *He/not He*, or, in

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. P. 167.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibn ‘Arabi*. Ibid. P. 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Chittick W.C.* The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn ‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. P. 73–74 // *Ibn ‘Arabi*. *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. Cairo: Bulaq, n.d. Vol. II. P. 407, line 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Chittick W.C.* The Sufi Path of Knowledge. P. 115. The concept of He/not He is connected with the verse in the Qur’an. It says “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw” (8:17). For Ibn ‘Arabi, “If you say concerning it, ‘It is God,’ you have spoken the truth, for God says, ‘but God threw.’ If you say concerning it, ‘It is creation,’ you have spoken the truth, for He says, ‘when you threw.’ So He clothed and bared, affirmed and negated: He/not He, unknown/known. ‘To God belong the most beautiful names’ (7:180), and to the cosmos belongs becoming manifest through them by assuming their traits.” *Chittick*. The Sufi Path of Knowledge. P. 114 // *Ibn ‘Arabi*. *Futūḥāt*. Vol. II. P. 438, line 20 (reference to the *Futūḥāt* given in W.C. Chittick’s book).

Hartshorne's words, as God Dipolar. As an example, I will just mention Fakhruddin 'Iraqi, one of the commentators of Ibn 'Arabi, who often refers to him. 'Iraqi writes:

How can You be manifest?  
for you are occult always.  
Yet how can You be hidden  
when You are eternally seen?  
Hidden, manifest,  
Both at once:  
You are not this, nor that—  
Yet both at once<sup>35</sup>

The concept of *He/not He* has deeply epistemological insights. In the passage below, Ibn 'Arabi shows how the concept of *He/not He* could be an epistemological gesture:

beware lest you restrict yourself to a particular tenet [concerning the Reality] and so deny any other tenet (...) Therefore, be completely and utterly receptive to all doctrinal forms, for God, Most High, is too All-embracing and Great to be confined within one creed rather than another, for He has said, Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God, without mentioning any particular direction. He states that there is the face of God, the face of a thing being its reality.<sup>36</sup>

This philosophical gesture could be called “generalized apophaticism,” that is, one that is sensitive to all kind of otherness and accepts all kinds of epistemologies in order to solve the problem of humanity.

#### 4. Toward a Conclusion: *Dipolar Philosophy*

This article does not reduce Ibn 'Arabi to Whitehead (or vice versa); however, it tries to visualize these thinkers *together*, without reducing one to the other. Their philosophical heritage seem to entail this reading: Process philosophy needs other philosophical traditions to carry on with its legacy; and it is also true that Islamic philosophy needs another engagement to express itself in the contemporary philosophical scene. Whitehead himself brought many points together which seem to other philosophers to be contradictory. His trend takes its power from the “double aspect/dipolar”; that is, he succeeded in creating a phi-

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<sup>35</sup> *Fakhruddin 'Iraqi*. *Divine Flashes*. Trans. W.C. Chittick. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2001. P. 97–98.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibn 'Arabi*. *The Bezels of Wisdom*. P. 137.

osophy which could *always* be in a process. This process gives us permission to make inter-textual study at any time. In the past, we could see almost the exact philosophical gesture in the wisdom of Ibn 'Arabi. He seems to endorse this kind of multivalent readings. While they are still read and mutually contrasted, the process of their inspiration and influence for the future will never end.<sup>37</sup>

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