

# Experiencing Tawḥīd

*Ibn ʿArabī and the Power of Imagination*

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Master of Arts

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## *Dedication*

To the *Imāmim Mubīn* of my being,

*“Were you not to have a manifest reality,  
no face could look to Him in radiant contemplation!”*

- Ibn ‘Arabī

# *Abstract*

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This thesis will examine how the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd* (“monotheism”) was understood, and perhaps more importantly, *experienced*, by the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Ṣūfī, Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), also known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“The Greatest Master”). It has been argued that *tawḥīd* is not simply a belief but also an operation, that is to say, a continual process whereby the literal meaning of *tawḥīd* (“asserting oneness”) is upheld. This understanding of *tawḥīd* implies a certain dualism which for Ibn ‘Arabī is a reflection of the two perspectives which express God’s oneness, namely, *tanzīh* (“transcendence”), which literally means “declaring something to be pure and free of something else,” and *tashbīh* (“immanence”), of which the literal meaning is “declaring something to be similar to something else.” As can be seen, *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are mutually contradictory and thus present *tawḥīd* as a paradox. However, for Ibn ‘Arabī, it is essential to not ignore any one perspective in favor of the other. For him, the paradox can and must be reconciled through the power of *khayāl*, or imagination, which alone has the ability to combine opposites and thus, bridge the gap between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, thereby allowing for the experience of *tawḥīd*.

# Résumé

Auteur: Adil. S. Dhanidina  
Titre : L'expérience du *tawḥīd*: Ibn 'Arabī et le pouvoir de l'imagination  
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Ce mémoire examine comment le Ṣūfī des 12<sup>e</sup> et 13<sup>e</sup> siècles, Ibn 'Arabī (1165-1240), connu aussi sous le nom de *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* («le plus grand des Maîtres»), a compris le *tawḥīd* («monothéisme») et, d'une manière plus importante encore, en a fait l'expérience. On a pu dire que *tawḥīd* implique un certain dualisme, ce qui pour Ibn 'Arabī renvoie à deux perspectives expérimentant l'unité de Dieu: *tanzīh* («transcendance»), qui veut dire déclarer une chose pure et non soumise à une autre chose, et *tashbīh* («immanence»), qui veut dire déclarer une chose semblable à une autre. *Tanzīh* et *tashbīh* sont donc des termes contradictoires qui font du *tawḥīd* un paradoxe. Selon Ibn 'Arabī, il est essentiel de ne pas négliger une de ces perspectives en faveur de l'autre. Selon lui, il est possible et même impératif de résoudre le paradoxe par l'entremise du pouvoir de *khayāl*, l'imagination. Elle seule est capable de relier ce qui est en opposition, et donc d'établir un rapprochement entre *tanzīh* et *tashbīh*, permettant ainsi l'expérience du *tawḥīd*.

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## *Transliteration Table*

This thesis makes use of the following table for the transliteration of Arabic words and names as is used by the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University.

b	=	ب	z	=	ز	f	=	ف
t	=	ت	s	=	س	q	=	ق
th	=	ث	sh	=	ش	k	=	ك
j	=	ج	ṣ	=	ص	l	=	ل
ḥ	=	ح	ḍ	=	ض	m	=	م
kh	=	خ	ṭ	=	ط	n	=	ن
d	=	د	ẓ	=	ظ	h	=	ه
dh	=	ذ	‘	=	ع	w	=	و
r	=	ر	gh	=	غ	y	=	ي

Short vowels:     a = ا    i = إ    u = و

Long vowels:     ā = آ    ī = إِي    ū = وِ

Diphthong:       ay = آي ;    aw = وَا

# INTRODUCTION

## *“Show Us Things as They Are”*

From the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (570-632), Muslims have sought positive knowledge about God, Who is one, and His creation, which is many. Positive knowledge is knowledge of what God is like as opposed to what God is not like. Generally speaking, theologians of monotheistic religions have attempted to safeguard God’s oneness and incomparability with respect to the manyness of creation, and in so doing, tended to emphasize a method of discourse known as *via negativa*, which articulates what God is not; for example, God is not corporeal nor is He temporal.<sup>1</sup> The method of *via negativa*, also known as negative or apophatic theology, negates attributes which are deemed not compatible with a description of God and as a result, the knowledge of what God is not is obtained. Such a view operates under the assumption that God is inaccessible and beyond the understanding of His creatures. This is the classical position of Islamic Theology (*Kalām*)<sup>2</sup> and proponents of this view may cite any number of Qur’ānic verses (*āyāt*) in their favor. For example, verse 37:180 declares: “Glory be to God, the Lord of Inaccessibility, above everything that they describe,” and 42:11 appears to confirm that “Nothing is like Him.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Tanzīh & Tashbīh**

In the technical language of the Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*), verses like the ones just cited express what is known as *tanzīh*, which means literally “to declare something pure and free of something else.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, *tanzīh*, often translated simply as “incomparability”, asserts that God can not be compared to created things because He is

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Coates, *Ibn ‘Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously* (Oxford, 2002), 40.

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction on *Kalām* and its development see Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton, 1981), 67-116; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, Second ed. (Chicago, 1979), 85-99. On the significance of *Kalām* throughout Islamic History including the modern period, see S.H. Nasr, “Theology, Philosophy and Spirituality,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York, 1991), 393-446.

<sup>3</sup> al-Qur’ān 37:180; 42:11, cited in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam : A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (New York, 1992), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, 1994), 71.

pure and free from the defects and imperfections which are perceived in them.<sup>5</sup> God, from the perspective of *tanzīh*, is considered to be above and beyond association with creation; therefore, *tanzīh* is frequently translated as “transcendence”<sup>6</sup> and is generally associated with negative or apophatic theology.<sup>7</sup> All that can be known from its perspective is that God *is not* like anything else.

However, as stated above, Muslims have sought positive knowledge of God, and such knowledge requires a description of God which is in some sense similar to the observable attributes and qualities of created things, particularly human beings, who could then gain a sense of what God is like. Those who sought such a description did not have to look far, as they were able to turn to the same Qur’ān which describes God in terms of incomparability (*tanzīh*). For the Qur’ān also describe God in terms of what is known as *tashbīh*, which literally means “to declare something similar to something else.”<sup>8</sup> The perspective of *tashbīh*, often translated as “similarity”, maintains that there is, in fact, a certain similarity between God and His creation.<sup>9</sup> Verses which express the perspective of *tashbīh* often describe God as having attributes that are shared with creation. For example, the very same verse that first denies that there is anything like Him (i.e. 42:11), continues on to describe God in a way that makes Him appear in some way similar to creation. The verse in full reveals that “Nothing is like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly created things hear and see, and thus, the verse suggests a certain similarity (*tashbīh*) between God and creation. The Qur’ān also describes God as Loving, Forgiving and Merciful, all of which give a positive description of what God is like. Certain verses even describe God in anthropomorphic terms. For example, the Qur’ān tells us that “God’s Hand is above their hands,”<sup>11</sup> and that “wherever you all may turn, there is the Face of God!”<sup>12</sup> These verses also suggest that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of The Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism: Ibn ‘Arabī and Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu*, Part I (Tokyo, 1966), 41; cf. Rahman, *Islam*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London, 1993), 293; Murata, *Tao*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, 71.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), 69. Hereafter: Chittick, *SPK*.

<sup>10</sup> al-Qur’ān 42:11, cited in Ibid., 74.

<sup>11</sup> al-Qur’ān 48:10, cited in Ibid., 255.

<sup>12</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:115, cited in James Winston Morris, “‘Seeking God’s Face’: Ibn ‘Arabi on Right Action and Theophanic Vision,” Part I, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 16 (1994), 1.



God is close to His creation and thus, *tashbīh* is often translated as “immanence.” Indeed, the Qur’ān explicitly suggests God’s immanence when it tells us that “We are nearer to the human being than the jugular vein,”<sup>13</sup> and that “He is with you wherever you are.”<sup>14</sup> Not only does this profound sense of Divine proximity appear to directly contradict statements of Divine transcendence, it also presents a greater problem with respect to God’s oneness, for if God is one while creation is many, His immanence with the latter must be reconciled with His Oneness.

### **Tawhīd**

God’s Oneness, the fundamental message of the Qur’ān, is known as *tawhīd*. The word *tawhīd* is derived from the root letters *w.h.d* and literally means “making one” or “asserting oneness.”<sup>15</sup> The Qur’ān repeatedly asserts that “No god is there but one god,”<sup>16</sup> and that “Your god is one god, so submit to Him.”<sup>17</sup> *Tawhīd* is also expressed in the creedal formula: *Lā ilāha illā’Llāh* – “No god (*ilāh*) but God (*Allāh*).”<sup>18</sup> Theologically, this is a straightforward affirmation of monotheism and a negation of polytheism or the idea that there can be multiple gods. However, the Qur’ān also refers to God as *al-Ḥaqq*, “the Truth” or “the Real”<sup>19</sup> and therefore, the formula has also been understood on a metaphysical level where it “is read as an affirmation of the true nature of being: no reality but the one Reality.”<sup>20</sup> This is considered to be a shift from theological *tawhīd* to ontological or metaphysical *tawhīd*, which seeks to emphasize God’s omnipresence. In other words, more so than expressing the idea that there is only one real God, ontological *tawhīd* emphasizes that there is nothing but God, Who is the Real. Therefore, from the perspective of metaphysical *tawhīd*, “there is nothing in

<sup>13</sup> al-Qur’ān 50:16, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> al-Qur’ān 57:4, cited in Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, *The Concept of Tawhīd in the Thought of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī* (McGill University: PhD Thesis, 1986), 47; cf. Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, xxx; 46-77.

<sup>16</sup> al-Qur’ān 5:73, cited in Ibid., 47.

<sup>17</sup> al-Qur’ān 22:34, cited in Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Reza Shah-Kazemi, “The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue: Sufi Perspectives on the Universality of the Quranic Message,” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, 2002), 143.

<sup>19</sup> As in the verse: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within their own souls, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.” al-Qur’ān 41:53, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Shah-Kazemi, “Metaphysics of Interfaith,” 143.

existence apart from God”<sup>21</sup> and “There is no reality, but Reality,” i.e. monoreality. This is not to suggest that ontological *tawḥīd* makes no distinction between God and creation, or that it posits that there is no God only an impersonal Reality of which everyone is a part. Rather, this understanding of *tawḥīd* recognizes that God is at once transcendent and immanent, and is therefore the One Reality behind the appearance of the many in existence. As the Qur’ān confirms: “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God.”<sup>22</sup> This verse acknowledges both a subject (“you”) and an object (“face”), and the distinction between creation and God is upheld. This only makes God’s Oneness all the more emphatic, for He is at once distinct from the many, yet the one immanent within creation. The verse also presents a conundrum: it speaks to the many (i.e. the “you”), which is other than God, and tells them that wherever they turn (i.e. in the direction of the many), there is to be seen God’s Face. Here the literal meaning of *tawḥīd*, “making one”, begins to be revealed: it is not that the many is itself the One but that the One is recognized despite the many and in this way, the many is “made one.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the manyness of creation or the created things is not denied but it is seen in its relationship to the Oneness of God, Who alone is Real.<sup>24</sup>

Understood in this way, *tawḥīd* recognizes both *tashbīḥ* and *tanzīḥ* and reconciles the two. As we have seen, there is ample Qur’ānic support for both *tanzīḥ* and *tashbīḥ*, and therefore, Murata informs us that “The most sophisticated of the Muslim thinkers strike a delicate balance between the two positions. Both negative and positive theology are needed to bring about a right understanding of the Divine Reality.”<sup>25</sup> This is certainly no easy task and the Qur’ān, which provides humankind with God’s Self-description, often leaves those who seek knowledge of Reality in a state of bewilderment; all the more so when a single verse describes God in the language of opposites, as does the already cited 42:11 and also 57:3: “He is the First and the Last,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:115, cited in William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994), 35.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on *tawḥīd* and mystical union with God, see Bulent Rauf, “Union and Ibn ‘Arabi,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 3 (1984), 20, where it is argued that *tawḥīd* is a deliberate and continuous act of progression to being One.

<sup>24</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 356.

<sup>25</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 9.

the Manifest and the Nonmanifest.”<sup>26</sup> It is no wonder then, that the Prophet himself is reported to have implored God to reveal things as they truly are. The renowned Ṣūfī poet, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), tells us that “If everything that appears to us were just as it appears, the Prophet who was endowed with such penetrating vision, both illuminated and illuminating, would never have cried out, “Oh Lord, show us things as they are!”<sup>27</sup>

### **Ibn ‘Arabī**

In the history of religions, to “see things as they are” has been the goal of all seekers of knowledge, whether they be theologians, philosophers, mystics or ordinary believers committed to increasing their the knowledge of God, of creation and of the relationship between the two. In the history of Islam, one such seeker was the 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century Ṣūfī Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), also known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“The Greatest Master”). Although Ibn ‘Arabī often emphasized God’s immanence (*tashbīh*), nothing would be further from the truth than to claim that he failed to perceive or – and what is perhaps more reprehensible to the Muslim mind – knowingly ignored God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*). A more than cursory reading of the Shaykh’s major works reveals not only that he did vigorously defend God’s utter incomparability, but also that he regarded the notion that God in Himself can be known as absurd. Indeed, the tradition of negative theology is deeply rooted in his metaphysics which is itself based on his conviction in the Qur’ānic truth that “Allah is Independent of the worlds.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to repeatedly quoting this verse, Ibn ‘Arabī maintained that the standard characterization of the relationship between God and creation in general, and man in particular, is to be found in verse 35:15. In the following text from his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiya* (“The Meccan Openings”), he cites and comments on this verse, and refers to creation with the philosophical term “possible thing.”

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<sup>26</sup> al-Qur’ān 57:3, cited in William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Rūmī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, 1983), 19.

<sup>28</sup> al-Qur’ān 3:97, cited in Idem, *SPK*, 49.

God says, “O people, you are poor toward Allah, and Allah – He is the Independent, the Praiseworthy” (35:15)... Independence from creation belongs to God from eternity without beginning (*azal*), while poverty toward God in respect of His Independence belongs to the possible thing in the state of its non-existence from eternity without beginning.”<sup>29</sup>

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the essential attribute of created things is “poverty” or “need”, which translates the Arabic *faqr*, and stands in opposition to the term *ghina*, which means “wealth” or “having need for nothing”, hence, signifying independence.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, while everything other than God is continually in need of God, “He Himself,” explains Chittick, “is independent of the cosmos and needs nothing whatsoever from it.”<sup>31</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī upholds God’s essential independence from creation throughout his works and thus, to claim that the Shaykh did not make a distinction between creation and God, Who is the Real, is to be ignorant of a number of the Shaykh’s statements on the issue, such as the following one:

But the Real’s independence is absolute with regard to His Essence, while creation is poor absolutely, also with regard to its essence. Thus the Real is distinguished from creation. This is why he who said, God is poor and we are the independent [3:181], was an unbeliever, for this distinction is never lifted, since it is an essential distinction in both the Real and the creation that are described by it.”<sup>32</sup>

From this it is clear that while the created things are distinguished from God, they are by their very essence dependent on Him in all aspects of their existence, including their very existence itself. That there is eternal dependence demands that there be a relationship between the dependents, i.e. the creatures, and the one who is depended on, i.e. God, Who is the Creator.

The term “Creator” itself signifies the existence of a relationship and this did not go unnoticed to Ibn ‘Arabī, who was unwilling to ignore those verses in the Qur’ān which speak of such a relationship. Thus, while God Himself has no need of creation, as He is transcendent and “far above what they describe,” this certainly did not preclude

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<sup>29</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 64.

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

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany, 1998), 305. Hereafter: Chittick, *SDG*.

God from describing Himself as intimately close to His creation, particularly to His servants. According to Sachiko Murata,

a simple calculation of the number of divine names that occur in the Koran shows that the names that imply God's closeness to and concern for human beings, such as Merciful, Compassionate, Kind, Generous, and Forgiving, far outnumber names that speak of Him in terms of distance and transcendence. These names of proximity demand that God be concerned with the intimate details of everyday human life.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the Qur'ān instructs the Prophet, "When My servants ask thee about Me – surely, I am near. I respond to the supplication of the supplicator when he supplicates Me" (2:186).<sup>34</sup> This indicates a direct relationship where God's servants can in fact induce a response from the one they serve. Verses such as this seem to call into question God's independence and troubled Muslim thinkers who wanted to safeguard God's transcendence. Ibn 'Arabī, who was also concerned with this situation, sought a solution that upheld both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, thereby doing justice to God's own Self-description. As Murata points out, God describes Himself through attributes which have come to be known in Islamic tradition as Divine Names, or God's "Most Beautiful Names". Thus, on the one hand, God is unknowable and on the other, through His Names, we come to know something about Him. God's Names allow us to describe Him, but this presented a problem for those who believed that God must remain nondelimited and above or beyond description. The problem then, is mainly over the nature of God and His Names or Attributes and this itself is largely a restatement of the tension between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. According to Ian Richard Netton, Ibn 'Arabī developed a doctrine of God and the Attributes which was extremely complex. In fact, Netton is so impressed by the Shaykh's doctrine that he goes as far as to say that "by comparison, the earlier debates of the medieval Islamic theologians on the subject, with their interwoven intricacies of *ta'fīl*, *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, appear positively elementary if not naive."<sup>35</sup> For sure, Ibn 'Arabī did not simply negate all attributes from God, and Netton criticizes A. Ates for his bland statement that Ibn 'Arabī "believes that God is an Existence free of all

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<sup>33</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Cosmology* (New York, 1989), 274. *Ta'fīl* is the result of pushing God's incomparability too far by altogether rejecting or ignoring *tashbīh*. In the words of Murata, *ta'fīl* is "the heretical idea that God is totally disconnected from the world." Murata, *Tao*, 53.

attributes.”<sup>36</sup> Rather, according to Netton, Ibn ‘Arabī was “clearly very conscious of the need for a dual methodology or approach to the question of attributes, which necessitated looking at God from two different angles.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, since God Himself combines both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* when describing Himself, it is imperative to understand the relevance of both. The Shaykh warns: “If you insist only on His transcendence (*al-tanzīh*), you restrict Him. And if you insist only on His immanence (*al-tashbīh*) you limit Him. If you maintain both aspects (*al-amrayn*) you are right.”<sup>38</sup> However, many Muslim thinkers, particularly the theologians, had immense trouble reconciling God’s transcendence and immanence. In their attempt to avoid any form of anthropomorphism and to safeguard God’s Unity or Oneness (i.e. *tawhīd*), they often ignored or tried to explain away verses which expressed *tashbīh*. This approach, which describes God only in terms of His transcendence, “does not account satisfactorily for the ‘signs’ of God that appear in the cosmos and in scripture.”<sup>39</sup> Chittick is here referring to the *āyāt* (“signs”) that, according to the Qur’ān, appear not only in the horizons, i.e. the external world (*āfāq*), but also within human selves or souls (*anfus*). Verse 41:53, which Ibn ‘Arabī cites frequently, reveals: “We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.”<sup>40</sup> This is yet another verse which indicates God’s immanence and for the Shaykh, to reject *tashbīh* is to reject God’s own Self-disclosure.

### **The Scope of this Study**

It has been established that the perspectives of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are mutually contradictory and that this presents *tawhīd* as a paradox. However, for Ibn ‘Arabī, it is essential to not ignore any one perspective in favor of the other. For him, the paradox can and must be reconciled through the power of what is known as *al-khayāl* or “The Imagination”, which alone has the power to bridge the gap between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, thereby allowing for the experience of *tawhīd*. Far from being perceived as merely a

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<sup>36</sup> Ates, quoted in Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 274; cf. A. Ates “Ibn al-‘Arabī,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Ed. Vol. 3 (London, 1960), 710.

<sup>37</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 274.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> al-Qur’ān 41:53, cited in Ibid., 42.

mental faculty, imagination (*khayāl*) greatly affects - some may say dominates - Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics, which places great emphasis on the transcendence and independence of God whilst maintaining a certain unity between *al-Ḥaqq* and *al-khalq* (“the Real” and “the creation”). The Shaykh’s metaphysical position, usually designated by the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence”), “cannot be understood,” according to Chittick, “without grasping imagination’s importance, and his view of imagination cannot be understood outside the realm of metaphysics.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, this study examines Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of Islam’s basic principle of monotheism-cum-monorealism<sup>42</sup> and illustrates how the Shaykh’s doctrine of Imagination allows such a reality to shift from the theoretical to the experiential.<sup>43</sup> The basic question of this study, then, is the following: what is the role of *khayāl*, as understood and articulated by Ibn ‘Arabī, in experiencing the fundamental Islamic concept of *tawḥīd*? The response offered examines how the concept of imagination affected Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of theology, epistemology, ontology, cosmology, cosmogony and psychology. Additional questions will be raised concerning the relevance of reason vis-à-vis imagination, Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of creation as manifestation (i.e. theophany), and the effect of imagination on prayer and other acts of worship.

### **Ibn ‘Arabī: Brief Historical Background**

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-‘Arabī al-Ta’ī al-Ḥātimī, better known as Ibn ‘Arabī,<sup>44</sup> was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> night of the sacred month of Ramaḍān in 560/1165 in the township of Murcia in southern Spain (al-Andalus). He would go on to

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<sup>41</sup> Idem, *SPK*, x.

<sup>42</sup> In using the term “monorealism” to designate Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics of Oneness, this thesis follows the work of Muhsin Araki, who employs the term as a definition for *waḥdat al-wujūd*, usually translated literally as “Oneness of Being” or Unity of Existence.” Muhsin Araki, “The place of Mysticism (‘Irfān) within the hierarchy of Islamic Sciences,” *Transcendent Philosophy* Vol. 2 No. 2 (2001). This article may be found online at < <http://www.islamic-studies.org/philosophy%205.htm> >. It is perhaps interesting that the 48<sup>th</sup> Imām of the Shī‘a Imāmī Ismā‘īlī Muslims, Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah, better known as Aga Khan III, used the term “monorealism” to define Islam’s basic principle. See Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (London: Cassell & Co Ltd., 1954), 175.

<sup>43</sup> Not to be confused with “empirical”!

<sup>44</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, “Ibn al-Arabī,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987), 552.

become one of the most influential thinkers of the second half of Islamic history.<sup>45</sup> This is partly due to the education he received: from a young age on, Ibn ‘Arabī became well-versed in the traditional Islamic sciences – the Qur’ān and its exegesis; the ḥadīth literature; Arabic grammar and composition; Islamic law; theology and philosophy.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps more influential was his early experiences with *taṣawwuf*, commonly known as Ṣūfism: from his youth he kept company with many spiritual teachers and Ṣūfī Shaykhs.<sup>47</sup> According to his own account, he first became a Ṣūfī in 1184 or at the age of twenty,<sup>48</sup> but it is more than likely that he had previously become quite familiar with Ṣūfī circles and practices, for in the course of writing about his famous meeting in 1179 with the celebrated Muslim philosopher and judge, Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), Ibn ‘Arabī indicates that he had already experienced illumination (*fath*)<sup>49</sup> and had gone on some retreats (*khalwāt*),<sup>50</sup> two significant elements of the Ṣūfī path, which means that he had to have been traveling along this path prior to the year 1184. Based on his own account, Ibn ‘Arabī’s early retreats were extremely fruitful where he received countless mystical experiences, visions and revelations.<sup>51</sup> He would later write that during his retreats, verses of the Qur’ān would descend to him in a shower of stars.<sup>52</sup>

Ṣūfism was not uncommon in Ibn ‘Arabī’s family. Although there is indication that Ibn ‘Arabī’s father did not always share his son’s religious vocation,<sup>53</sup> according to what he later wrote about his father, it appears that his father belonged to a special category of spiritual men that Ibn ‘Arabī designates as *al-raḥmāniyyūn*, those governed by the Divine Name *al-Raḥmān*, (“the Merciful”).<sup>54</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī also had three relatives who were accomplished Ṣūfis: on his fathers side, his uncle Abu Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh

<sup>45</sup> Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*, (Leiden, 1999), 17; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion on the two major Ṣūfī movements in the Islamic West in Ibn ‘Arabī’s time, see Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Cambridge, 1993), 52-59.

<sup>48</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Etymologically, *fath* means “opening”, but as a technical term in the vocabulary of Ṣūfism, indicates a spiritual opening or illumination, ordinarily obtained after a long period of *riyāḍa* or spiritual discipline. Ibid., 35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Light*, trans. Cecilia Twinch, Pablo Beneito (Oxford, 2001), 7. Hereafter: Twinch and Beneito, *Contemplation*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>53</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 19.



b. Muḥammad al-‘Arabī al-Tā’ī, who made a profound impression on his nephew; on his mothers side, Abu Muslim al-Khawlānī and Yahyā b. Yughān.

Much of Ibn ‘Arabī’s life was spent in travel, both physical and spiritual, starting from 1193, where at the age of thirty, he left the Iberian Peninsula for the first time and traveled to Tunis. Whilst in Tunis, Ibn ‘Arabī entered for the first time what he called “God’s Vast Earth”, or the “Earth of Reality”: a spiritual realm beyond the senses.<sup>55</sup> Returning home from Tunis, over the next few years, Ibn ‘Arabī continued his travels in Spain and North Africa. Due to a vision he received, he headed East and made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1202. From then on, he traveled extensively throughout the Islamic lands, visiting Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Rūm (present-day Turkey). In 1223 he decided to settle in Damascus where he would stay until his death in 1240.<sup>56</sup> Today, his mausoleum, built in the sixteenth century by Sultan Salīm II, stands at Ṣālīḥīyah, at the foot of Mt. Qāsiyūn north of Damascus, and has become a great center of pilgrimage.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout his travels, the Shaykh, who had acquired a circle of disciples, would spend his days and nights studying, teaching and writing. In fact, one of the many reasons for which Ibn ‘Arabī was to receive the title ‘The Greatest Master’ was due to his enormous literary output. According to Osman Yahia, Ibn ‘Arabī produced some 700 works, of which 400 are extant in some form.<sup>58</sup> *The Futūḥāt al-makkiya* (“Meccan Openings”), considered to be the Shaykh’s *magnum opus*, contains 560 chapters and will alone fill a projected 17,000 pages.<sup>59</sup> It has been described as a “veritable compendium of the esoteric sciences in Islam which surpasses in scope and depth anything of its kind that has been composed before or since.”<sup>60</sup> This is not to say that the ideas that the Shaykh expressed had never been articulated before him – indeed much of what Ibn ‘Arabī wrote may be found in the sayings and writings of earlier spiritual teachers. However, with Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, the doctrines of Ṣūfism, previously contained implicitly in these sayings or only briefly alluded to, find explicit formulation, and

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<sup>55</sup> Twinch and Beneito, *Contemplation*, 8. More on this later.

<sup>56</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, xi.

<sup>57</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cambridge, 1964), 97.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Oxford, 1999), 236-237.

<sup>59</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, xi.

<sup>60</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 98.

according to one scholar, he “has an answer for everything.”<sup>61</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī left behind a comprehensive theosophical system that proved helpful for generations of Ṣūfis to come. In this way, according to Nasr, Ibn ‘Arabī “became the expositor *par excellence* of gnosis in Islam.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Survey of Scholarship**

There has been a relative profusion of translations, biographies and studies of Ibn ‘Arabī and his writings in recent years, including important studies in French which have been translated into English. For a good introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s life, immediate historical context and a basic summary of his central teaching, Stephen Hirtenstein’s *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabī* (1999), was explicitly designed to introduce these points to a general, nonacademic English-speaking audience. For a more academic introduction to the same subject, Claude Addas’s *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabī* (1993) remains the best biography of Ibn ‘Arabī and provides details on his teachers as well as cultural roots in different fields of medieval Islamic scholarship. Addas’s *Ibn ‘Arabī: The Voyage of No Return* (2000) is a shorter, more accessible introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s life and teachings. Both of these works contain significant sections dealing with Ibn ‘Arabī’s entrance into the “Imaginal World”. More significantly, both Addas and Michel Chodkiewicz’s *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book and the Law* (1993) correct or highlight points which they believe Henry Corbin either missed and/or overemphasized in his treatment of theophanic imagination.

The best introduction to those unfamiliar with the Shaykh’s teachings on theophany and imagination is William C. Chittick’s *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (1994). Chittick admittedly allowed himself to speak for the Shaykh, opting to present Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas on imagination within the wider context of the Shaykh’s metaphysics, but without overwhelming newcomers with extensive citations. For those who would prefer to see the Shaykh speak for himself, wishing to pursue Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought further and in a more rigorous manner, Chittick’s

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<sup>61</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Doctrine,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* 9 (1991), p. 51; cf. Nasr, 90-91.

<sup>62</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 90.

earlier work *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of the Imagination* (1989), offers a voluminously illustrated, detailed and clearly structured study, based on hundreds of shorter translations from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *magnum opus*, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya* (“The Meccan Revelations”). Extensive translations of the *Futūḥāt* also appear in Chittick’s *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabī’s Cosmology* (1998), which contains an important chapter detailing the structure of the intermediary “Imaginal World” of the microcosm.

For studies and translations of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most widely read work, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (“The Bezels of Wisdom”), the most comprehensible introduction remains Toshihiko Izutsu’s pioneering *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism: Ibn ‘Arabī and Lao-Tzū, Chuang-Tzū* (1966), despite its reliance on the more Avicennan philosophical commentary tradition of al-Kāshānī. For a complete translation, R.W.J. Austin’s *Ibn al ‘Arabī: The Bezels of Wisdom* (1980) includes an introduction and helpful prefaces to each chapter.

No survey of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on imagination would be complete without mentioning the works of the late Henry Corbin whose *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (1969) is the richly evocative and moving fruit of an intensely personal, life-long reflection on the central issues and perspectives of Ibn ‘Arabī’s then accessible writings. Both this work as well as his later project, *Spiritual body and Celestial Earth* (1977) reveals that both before and after Ibn ‘Arabī, Muslims neither lost sight of the subtle intermediate worlds which separated - yet provided the means to connect - the physical realm with the spiritual, nor did they cease seeking entrance into these worlds, ascending by means of the God given faculty of imagination that all human beings share.

# CHAPTER I: THEOLOGY

## *“God Warns You about His Self”*

As both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* informed the *Shaykh al-Akbar*’s knowledge of God, according to Akbarian Metaphysics, the Islamic concept of the one God (*Allāh*) must be understood or viewed from two perspectives, namely, God as “The Essence” (*al-dhāt*) and God as “The Divinity” (*al-ulūha*). Before proceeding further, it needs to be emphasized that Ibn ‘Arabī is not positing the existence of two Gods as Allah denotes both Essence and Divinity. Rather, it is our own existence, as creatures considering, experiencing and speaking about God, that necessitates an apparent dualism. This is only natural since “duality”, Murata observes, “is inherent in speech and rational thought.”<sup>1</sup>

She elaborates:

We affirm God’s Unity – *tawḥīd* – but in doing so we establish the reality of duality, since it is we who speak.... There is something self-contradictory about a discourse that claims to establish the unity of the Real. The Real in His Unity effaces all duality. By declaring His Unity we affirm duality through being ourselves and speaking.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the word duality is somewhat misleading in articulating Ibn ‘Arabī’s perception of God, and Murata herself notes that the issue is not a matter of absolute separation but of polarity, i.e. “two complementary dimensions of a singular reality.”<sup>3</sup>

### **1.1 The Essence: Allah**

When Ibn ‘Arabī speaks about “The Essence” (*al-dhāt*) Itself, he is considering Allah strictly from the perspective of *tanzīh*, which refers to God in Himself beyond any polarity and without reference to the relationship between Creator and created. The Essence of God (or the Essence of the Real), remains nondelimited and as such, is completely transcendent and unknowable. The *Shaykh* expounds this nondelimitation of

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<sup>1</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Murata cites the interesting example of the Ḥanbalī Ṣūfī Khwāja ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī (d.481/1089), who expresses this sentiment when he says: “None has affirmed the Unity of the One, since all who affirm it deny it. The *tawḥīd* of him who speaks of His description is a loan, made null by the One. His *tawḥīd* of Himself is His *tawḥīd* – he who describes it has gone astray.” ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Murata continues: “The sapiential tradition keeps the language of duality, but it understands duality strictly in terms of interrelationships and polarity.” Ibid.

God in no uncertain terms. “He is independent of the worlds,”<sup>4</sup> writes Ibn ‘Arabī in his *Futūḥāt*, “and this belongs to no existent essence save the Essence of the Real – no engendered thing is tied to the Essence, no eye perceives It, no limit encompasses It, and no demonstration (*burhān*) gives knowledge of It.”<sup>5</sup> This being the case, in speaking about the Essence only negative attributes, i.e. attributes which negate God’s similarity to creation, can be used. In other words, we can only say what God is not but not what He is. It may be objected, and rightly so, that even saying what something is not, is to define and delimit it. Recognizing this, Ibn ‘Arabī “sometimes says that no name whatsoever can be applied to the Essence, since It is absolutely unknowable.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, names are often ascribed to the Essence but these are precisely the names which distinguish God as Essence from creation – which is delimited. In other words, they are “names of incomparability” and since, for example, it is observed that created things are temporal, it would be difficult to deny that the Essence is eternal. The Shaykh elaborates:

In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To it are ascribed descriptions that make It incomparable with the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (*al-qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginninglessness (*al-azal*). But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything appropriate to temporal origination.<sup>7</sup>

Names of incomparability are precisely those names that signify that the Essence can not be judged or known by created things and this is why Ibn ‘Arabī can claim that “The names that demand incomparability are the names which the Essence demands in Itself.”<sup>8</sup> God in Himself or “The Absolute”, is beyond conception because He/It simply transcends all qualifications that are humanly conceivable. Izutsu explains that

Man can neither think of anything nor talk about anything without first giving it some qualifications and thereby limiting it in some form or another. Therefore, the Absolute in its unconditional transcendence...cannot be an object of human knowledge and cognition. In other words, as far as it remains in its absoluteness it is Something unknown and unknowable.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to verse 3:97 of al-Qur’ān.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 58.

<sup>9</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 17.

It would be erroneous, however, to claim that nothing can be known about God. Such a claim would not be taking into consideration that fact that God has chosen to make Himself known through His messengers, who have brought God's own Self-description; a description which includes numerous names and attributes that have been designated as "names of similarity". As Murata pointed out earlier, such names of *tashbīh* far outweigh names of *tanzīh* and suggest God's intimate relationship with creation.<sup>10</sup> Recognition of this relationship led Ibn 'Arabī to speak of God as Divinity, which is the Essence considered in relation to creation.

## **1.2 The Divinity: Allah**

The Arabic word for "Divinity" (*al-ulūha* or *al-ulūhiyya*), derives from the same root as does the name Allah as well as *ilāh* ("god").<sup>11</sup> When Ibn 'Arabī considers the Divinity, he refers to Allah in terms of what he calls a "Level", which can then be contrasted with other levels found within the cosmos, such as the level of creature or servant. "Once God created the cosmos," explains the Shaykh, "we see that it possesses diverse levels and realities. Each of these demands a specific relationship with the Real...."<sup>12</sup> For Ibn 'Arabī, to speak of levels is to speak of relationships which demand polarity and to reiterate, "strictly speaking, The Essence as Essence has no relationships with anyone or anything. When we speak of relationships, we are discussing the Essence inasmuch as It is a God (*ilāh*)."<sup>13</sup> For the Shaykh, although the name Allah is used for both the Essence and the Divinity, when people speak or think about God they are, in fact, referring to the Divinity which is the Level of the Essence. Thus, Ibn 'Arabī often uses the generic term *ilāh* ("god")<sup>14</sup> when speaking about Allah as the Divinity, Who is indeed God as is typically understood, i.e. the Creator Who assumes a great variety of relationships with created things. Therefore, while only negative attributes can be applied to the Essence –

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<sup>10</sup> See p. 7 in this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Murata, *Tao*, 51. It is only because such relationships exist that the lowest of the low, say for example the dust, has any connection whatsoever with the Highest of the High. An Arabic proverb asks: "What does dust have to do with the Lord of lords?" Ibid., 50.

<sup>13</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 50. Cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Ibn al-'Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York, 1981), 105. Hereafter: Austin, *Bezels*.

<sup>14</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 49. For example, Ibn 'Arabī writes: "In respect of His Essence, 'Allah is Independent of the worlds' (Koran 3:97), so we speak about Him only inasmuch as He is a god. Hence we speak about the Level...." Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

albeit only hesitantly – God as Divinity accepts all attributes, both positive and negative,<sup>15</sup> which means that Allah is both transcendent and immanent and accepts and unites within Himself both the names of incomparability (*tanzīh*) and names of similarity (*tashbīh*). For this reason, according to the Shaykh, the name Allah is “the all-comprehensive name” (*al-ism al-jāmi‘*)<sup>16</sup> or “the greatest name” (*al-ism al-a‘ẓam*).<sup>17</sup>

While all talk about the Essence of God falls short of its mark, human beings can effectively reflect and speak about the Divinity and the relationships it assumes with creation, especially since “these relationships are given verbal expression by the divine names.”<sup>18</sup> In the following passage, Ibn ‘Arabī categorically denies the existence or possibility of a relationship between the Essence of God and creation.

Interrelationship (*munāsaba*) between the Real and creation is neither intelligible (*ma‘qūl*) nor existent. Nothing comes from Him in respect of His Essence. Everything denoted by the Law or taken by the rational faculty (*al-aql*) as a denotation is connected to the Divinity, not the Essence.<sup>19</sup>

Keeping in mind that we are talking about a single reality, it can be said that for Ibn ‘Arabī, the Essence is the Reality that forever lies beyond the grasp of created reality, while the Divinity is the same Reality which is now turned towards creation, allowing the latter to come to know God Who can only be known inasmuch as He reveals Himself to us. God’s revelation of Himself comes through scripture or else is perceived through the human faculties, which, as we shall see in greater detail in the following chapter, come to know something about Him through His “Self-disclosures” (*tajalliyyāt*) or His signs (*āyāt*), which are displayed within the Book (i.e. the *āyāt* of the Qur’ān), in the horizons (*āfāq*) and within human souls (*anfus*). To speak of signs is to speak of what is being signified, and another way of articulating this – with a slightly more theological bent – is to speak of names and that which is being named.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>16</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 100.

<sup>18</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 59. The term “Law” refers to the Qur’ān and the *Ḥadīth* (traditions or reports of the Prophet Muḥammad).

### **1.3 The Divine Names**

In the Qur'an, God describes Himself with certain attributes which are known as the Divine – or Most Beautiful – Names, and are the only means with which to acquire positive knowledge of Him. Lest it be thought that the Reality of God Himself may become captive to our knowledge of Him, Ibn 'Arabī specifies: “Engendered existence has no connection whatsoever to knowledge of the Essence. The only thing connected to it is knowledge of the Level, i.e., that which is named Allah.”<sup>20</sup> This is the same as what has already been said, namely, that denotation is connected to the Divinity not to the Essence, and thus, the Divine Names provide us with knowledge of, and connects us to, Allah as the Divinity. However, since the Divinity and the Essence are not separate realities, a name which is connected to the Divinity must also point to the Essence, though it does not delimit it. Therefore, while Ibn 'Arabī wants to convey the utter incapacity of the created mind to comprehend the Essence of God, he is not suggesting that the Divine Names indicate anything other than themselves and the Essence. In fact, Ibn 'Arabī tells us that “every Name indicates both the Essence and the particular meaning of which it is the Name....”<sup>21</sup> Izutsu explains that an individual Divine Name designates and points to the Essence, while by virtue of itself, it points to a meaning which is not shared by any other names.<sup>22</sup>

This necessarily leads to the question of one Divine Name's relationship with another, as well as the question of a name's identity with what is named, that is to say, the Essence. For Ibn 'Arabī, in so far as all the names designate and point to the same named one (i.e. the Essence), they all indicate one another, but in so far as they indicate a certain attribute of God of which they are the name, they are different from one another.<sup>23</sup> As for the second question, to what extent should the name identify with the named, the same logic applies since “every Name simultaneously designates both Essence and the particulate meaning it assumes.... The Name is therefore the Named from the point of view of Essence, but it is distinct from it from the point of view of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.



specific significance attributed to it.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Divine Names are both the same and other than the Essence, and this is what it means to say that the Essence is beyond denotation. Indeed, the Divine Names denote the Essence, yet, neither one name nor another in their singularity, nor all the names in their collectivity, confine the Reality that is the Essence of God, Who categorically transcends all denotation. To be sure, the Divine Names are not other than His signs which do indeed signify the Essence, but in so doing, they provide human beings with positive knowledge of God. Since the Essence in Itself can never be the object of positive knowledge, the knowledge of God can only be experienced by the created human being strictly with respect to the Level of Divinity, which is already the transcendent and unknowable God as He makes Himself known, that is to say, the revealed and immanent God facing His creation.

#### **1.4 The Divine Names and Oneness**

The moment we juxtapose God and His creation, a relationship exists between the two and as already stated, it is only the Divinity which accepts relationships, the verbal expressions of which are the Divine Names. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Divine Names are to be considered strictly as “relationships” (*nisab* or *idāfāt*), which are contrasted with “entities” (*a’yān*) and “ontological qualities” (*umūr wujūdiyya*). This is a significant element of the Shaykh’s doctrine of the Divine Names vis-à-vis God’s Oneness. Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “The names are attributed only to God, for He is the object named by them, but He does not become multiple through them. If they were ontological qualities (*umūr wujūdiyya*) subsisting within Him, they would make Him multiple.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the multiplicity of the Divine Names, which is to say the multiplicity of the relationships between the Divinity and creation, do not thereby make God multiple. Yet, as it is only Allah as the Divinity which accepts these relationships, there ought to be some sort of difference – if only conceptual – between the way in which Ibn ‘Arabī envisages the Oneness of the Essence, which accepts no multiplicity, and the Oneness of the Divinity which does.

According to the Shaykh, God’s Unity or Oneness demands two modalities, which he refers to as the “Unity of the One” (*aḥadiyyat al-aḥad*) and the “Unity of the

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Addas, *Quest*, 279.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 36.

Many” (*aḥadiyyat al-kathra*). Ibn ‘Arabī may also refer to the former as the “Oneness of Essence” (*aḥadiyyat al-‘ayn*), and the latter may be translated as the “Oneness of Multiplicity”. The latter two designations in particular indicate that what the Shaykh is juxtaposing is God’s Unity with respect to incomparability and similarity. God in Himself is the utterly unknowable transcendent Being and thus possesses the “Oneness of the Essence”, whereas God with respect to His many Names makes Himself immanent and knowable, and thus possess the “Unity of the Multiplicity”. Ibn ‘Arabī confirms that the “Oneness of God from the point of view of the Names that lay claim to us is the Oneness of Multiplicity (*Aḥadiyyat al-kathra*); but the Oneness of God in the sense that He has no need either of us or of the Names is the Oneness of Essence (*Aḥadiyyat al-‘ayn*).”<sup>26</sup> In either case, God is understood in terms of Oneness or Unity (*aḥadiyya*), because the attribution of the Names – which are not ontological entities – do not make Him multiple.

The term *aḥadiyya* (Unity or Oneness), derives from the Qur’ānic term *aḥad* or “one”,<sup>27</sup> but God is also called *wāḥid* which also translates: “one.”<sup>28</sup> The two terms derive from the same root and are often used synonymously, leaving theologians to debate whether the two terms mean the same thing. Ibn ‘Arabī often differentiates between the two and according to Izutsu, in the Shaykh’s technical terminology “the *Aḥad* is the pure and absolute One...whereas the *Wāḥid* is the same reality...at a stage where it begins to turn toward phenomenality.”<sup>29</sup> For Chittick, “inasmuch as God is *aḥad*, all multiplicity is negated from Him and no positive quality is affirmed... However, inasmuch as He is *wāḥid*, others can be envisaged in relation to Him.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, *aḥad* refers to God’s Oneness from the perspective of absolute transcendence thereby designating the Essence, whereas *wāḥid* refers to God’s Oneness from the perspective of immanence, designating the Divinity. This distinction, where God’s Oneness can be seen either at the level of *tanzīh* (i.e. God as *aḥad*) or at the level

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<sup>26</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 279.

<sup>27</sup> *Qul: huwa Llāhu aḥad* (“Say: He, Allāh, is one,”) al-Qur’ān 112:1, cited in Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book, and the Law*, (Albany, 1993), 39.

<sup>28</sup> As in the verse “To me it has been revealed that your God is one God.” al-Qur’ān 18:110, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 265.

<sup>29</sup> Izutsu, “Ibn al-Arabī,” 556.

<sup>30</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 168.

of *tashbīh* (i.e. God as *wāḥid*), is particularly important to our study, as it plays a major role in the way in which the Shaykh understands *tawḥīd* and determines what he considers to be the proper object of *tawḥīd*. This will be discussed later<sup>31</sup> but for now, we may note that since the term *wāḥid* is attributed to God at the level of *tashbīh*, Ibn ‘Arabī may also refer to a created thing as *wāḥid*, since created things share – yet do not possess in themselves – attributes of similarity with the Creator.

In so far as God is the *ahad*, He possesses an Absolute Oneness (*aḥadiyya*), which, strictly speaking cannot be discussed in terms of various names or attributes, for these are relationships and God in His Essential Oneness transcends all relationships. Since there is no (direct) relationship between the Essence and creation, there can be no Divine Names connecting the two (directly). Furthermore, as the Divine Names are precisely the verbal expressions of the relationships created between the Divinity and creation, there are no actual Divine Names with which to qualify the Essence. This being said, since Divinity and Essence are the same one reality, and since the attributes possessed by the Divinity point to and do not transcend the Essence, it can be said that the Divine Names are in a state of potentiality within the Unity of the Essence. In the *Fuṣūṣ*, the Shaykh refers to the Oneness of the Essence as the “divine Unity” and tells us that “there is no place in it for one as being one of many, nor does it admit of any differentiation or distinction. His Unity integrates all in potentiality.”<sup>32</sup> *Aḥadiyya*, then, is the Oneness of “negative theology”, where attributes are negated from God Who is said to be “purified” (*tanzīh*) from them and creation; all that can be said about the Essence is that it is not temporal or multiple and for this reason, it is *implied* that He is Eternal and One.

In so far as God is the *wāḥid*, He possesses a Oneness (*wāḥidiyya* or *waḥdāniyya*) which can be discussed in terms of various names or attributes, because at this level, there is a direct relationship between the Divinity and creation - via the Divine Names. Thus, at this level, the Divine Names come into a state of actuality as the multiplicity of relationships are taken into account. God is still One as the multiplicity of the names are

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<sup>31</sup> See the discussion of the object of *tawḥīd* at 1.5 below.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 106. Another way of saying this is that the Essence-qua-Essence, does not have any actual attributes, though attributes are expected from it. However, it must not be overlooked that even this idea of “expectation” is only a back-projection.

unified under the name Allah, the all-comprehensive a greatest name. It can be said that *waḥdāniyya* is the Oneness of “positive theology”, where attributes of God are affirmed, as He is said to be “similar” (*tashbīh*) to them and creation. However, the Divine Names are similar, not identical, to Allah, and thus, *waḥdāniyya* must also be understood from the perspective of *tanzīh*, which means that the Divinity, which possess the “Oneness of the Many”, is the unity of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. True knowledge of *tawḥīd* requires the assertion of both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, accounting for oneness and manyness. Therefore, Ibn ‘Arabī sometimes refers to God as “the One/the Many” (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*) or else as “the Many/the One”.<sup>33</sup>

### **1.5 The Object of *Tawḥīd***

The expression “the One/the Many” illustrates the extent to which Ibn ‘Arabī goes in considering *tawḥīd* to be the unity of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. This being the case, does it not imply that the object of *tawḥīd* can never be the Essence as it is utterly transcendent and unknowable? In fact, this is exactly the position Ibn ‘Arabī takes with respect to the object of *tawḥīd* when he writes: “The object of man’s knowledge of God is the declaration of the Unity of the Divinity (*tawḥīd al-ulūḥa*), that which is named ‘Allah,’ not the *tawḥīd* of the Essence, since the Essence cannot be known at all.”<sup>34</sup> Between the Essence and the Divinity, the object of *tawḥīd* can only be the Divinity of which positive knowledge can be sought through the Divine Names – both names of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* – which describe Allah. Ibn ‘Arabī presents further proof for this by referring to a ḥadīth in which the Prophet said: “Reflect (*tafakkur*) upon all things, but reflect not upon God’s Essence.”<sup>35</sup> In the following passage, Ibn ‘Arabī confirms what has been said about the object of *tawḥīd*, namely, that the object is not the Essence:

God has commanded us to gain knowledge of the declaration of His Unity, but He has not commanded us to know His Essence. On the contrary, He forbade that with His words, “God warns you about His Self” (3:28). So also the Messenger of God forbade us to reflect on the Essence of God. “Nothing is like Him” (42:11), so how can one reach the knowledge of His Essence? But He said, commanding us to declare his Unity, “Know that there is no god but God”

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<sup>33</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 168-169. Murata explains that “When Ibn al-‘Arabī calls God the “One/Many” (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*), he means that God is One in His Essence, and many in the relationships that He has with the cosmos, relationships denoted by the[divine] names.” Murata, *Tao*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 235.

<sup>35</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in Ibid., 62.

(47:19). Hence there is no knowledge of Him except in respect of the fact that He is a god. This is the knowledge of God's appropriate attributes, through which He becomes distinguished from that which is not a god....This is the knowledge commanded by the Law, [but one cannot know His Essence,] since "None knows God but God."<sup>36</sup>

This also indicates the necessity of the attributes, which distinguish the Divinity from that which is not God (i.e. creation). It is precisely because the Divinity accepts delimitation by way of names and attributes that it can be the object of knowledge and *tawhīd*, whereas about the Essence, which is completely nondelimited, nothing definite can be said except perhaps what it is not. In what follows, Ibn 'Arabī expresses the utter incapacity of creation to limit the Essence.

But since there is no correspondence (*munāsaba*) or correlation between God and creation (*al-khalq*) – on the contrary, He is "Independent of the worlds" (Qur'an 3:92), and this belongs to no existent essence except the Essence of God – no engendered existence is related to Him, no eye perceives Him, no limitation encompasses Him, and no demonstration found to be necessary (*darūrī*) by the intellect gives knowledge of Him, just as the negation of attributes of interdependence (*ta'alluq*) that would bring Him under delimitation is but speculation.<sup>37</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī's last statement, that the negation of attributes is speculation, should not be overlooked as it represents a critical element of his theology and takes our discussion of the Essence in a new direction, which reveals the secret of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*.

### **1.6 The Secret of *Tanzīh* and *Tashbīh***

What the Shaykh wants to convey is that the attempt to safeguard God's Oneness by simply negating attributes of similarity from Him, based on the conviction that the Essence is Nondelimited, is not sufficient. This is because the statement: "the Essence is Nondelimited" – if relied upon exclusively – delimits God, even while it seeks to express His Nondelimitation. In other words, if one tries to confine God to Nondelimitation, one is no longer speaking about God. To quote the Shaykh: "If He were to be delimited by His Nondelimitation, He would not be He".<sup>38</sup> If the Essence is to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations, Volume I: Selected Texts of al-Futūhāt al-Makkiya*, trans. William C. Chittick, James W. Morris, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (New York, 2002), 143. Hereafter: Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 298n38.

be properly understood as Nondelimited, then not only is it “Independent of the Worlds,” but is also Independent of this independence because, for Ibn ‘Arabī, not only is God Nondelimited, He is also not delimited by this Nondelimitation,<sup>39</sup> and this means that God may delimit Himself, though without becoming delimited thereby. To quote the Shaykh, “God possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimitation prevents Him from delimitation. On the contrary, He possesses all delimitations. Hence He is Nondelimited Delimitation.”<sup>40</sup> Stating this in more theological language, Chittick writes:

Just as God is not delimited by nondelimitation, so also He is not incomparable with similarity.... His very incomparability proves that He cannot be limited by any limitations whatsoever, including that limitation which is to declare Him incomparable and only incomparable. Hence He is also similar.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, while it is usually held that *tanzīh* means that God is incomparable to created things and that He cannot be similar to them, for Ibn ‘Arabī, this understanding of *tanzīh* is a limitation on God, and as God is completely beyond any form of delimitation, this limitation must be rejected.<sup>42</sup> Thus, God may be similar to a created thing – if He so chooses. This reveals the secret of *tashbīh*, which is, in fact, sustained by the secret of *tanzīh*. True transcendence means that God transcends any idea about what He is; if He is said to be incomparable, God transcends this limitation and is thereby comparable, i.e. similar. One must not stop here however, because the reverse is also true; if God is said to be similar, He transcends this limitation and is thereby dissimilar, i.e. incomparable. A proper understanding of *tawhīd* requires one to recognize that God is *tanzīh* whilst *tashbīh* and *tashbīh* whilst *tanzīh*.<sup>43</sup> In the Shaykh’s words:

In reality, he who professes incomparability has delimited Him and confined Him in his declaration of incomparability and emptied Him of similarity, while he who professes similarity has also delimited and confined Him in his declaration of similarity and emptied Him of incomparability. But the truth is found in combining the statement of the two groups.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Of such *tanzīh*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that it “imposes a restriction and a limitation [on the Reality], for he who asserts that God is [purely] transcendent is either a fool or a rogue, even if he be a professed believer. For, if he maintains that God is [purely] transcendent and excludes all other considerations, he acts mischievously and misrepresents the Reality....” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> A poem in the *Fuṣūṣ* states: “Know Him as both Comparable and Incomparable and so sit in the abode of truth.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 109.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 111-112.

This being said, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, “it is impossible for the realities to change”<sup>45</sup> and since the reality of the Essence is to remain always Nondelimited and unknowable, when it enters into delimitation and becomes knowable, it only does so as the Divinity. This reveals the secret of the Divinity, which is sustained by the secret of the Essence. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

Now all of this – I mean His entering under delimitation for His servants – is in respect of the fact that He is a god, not in respect of the fact that He is an essence. For the Essence is Independent of the worlds, but the king is not independent of the kingdom, since if there were no kingdom, he could not be called “king.” Hence the Level [of Divinity] bestows delimitation, not the Essence of the Real.<sup>46</sup>

This reveals that the Essence remains unknowable and can never be the direct object of *tawḥīd*. Nevertheless, if the Divinity, which can be known, is asserted to be One, the Essence can be nothing less. In this way, it can be said that the Essence is the indirect object of *tawḥīd*, while the Divinity is the direct object of *tawḥīd*. However, as we already know, Allah as the Divinity is only known through the Divine Names and thus, the Divinity too may be seen as the indirect object of *tawḥīd*. The above citation also reveals that the Divinity is somehow dependent upon creation, and this has to do with the logic of relationships that are created when God enters into delimitation as the Divinity, which then becomes known through the Divine Names.

### **1.7 The Logic of Relationships**

To say that the Divine Names give us positive knowledge of God is to say for example that He is the Creator. There is nothing radical about this for the Qur’ān itself informs us that God is the Creator. To say Creator, however, is to imply the necessity of the creature and this is precisely what demands the relationships that are established between God and His creation. Ibn ‘Arabī sets up a polarity between, say for example, the Arabic word *khāliq* (“Creator”) and the past participle of the same word, *makhḷūq* (“creature”). Else he may speak of the *rabb* (“Lord”) and *marbub* (“vassal”), or about *ilāh* and *ma’lūh*, that is, “God” and the “goddess over”, with the latter often translated as

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<sup>45</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 38.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 110.

“divine thrall”.<sup>47</sup> The implications of such polarity and its effect on Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics are brought out by Murata.

Given Arabic’s trilateral system of verbal roots, the very existence of one word makes the other side necessary. In the same way, the very existence of one side of the polar relationship makes the other side necessary. There can be no vassal without a lord, no divine thrall without a God, no creature without a Creator, no object of knowledge (*ma‘lūm*) without a knower (‘*ālīm*), and so on. By the same token, without these loci in which the divine activity becomes manifest, the divine names have no meaning. In short, unless we have the Divine Essence Itself in view, to speak of God is to speak of a relationship between the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) and the creature (*al-khalq*).<sup>48</sup>

The first point to be noted is the apparent co-dependence between any pair of polar entities, say for example, the Lord and the vassal. One may readily accept the dependence of the latter on the former, but could Ibn ‘Arabī be claiming that the reverse is equally true? In fact, this is exactly what the Shaykh has in mind and just as the vassal depends on the Lord for its existence, so too does the existence of the Lord depend on the existence of the vassal. The same is to be said for god (*ilāh*) and His divine thrall. To quote the Shaykh, “Were the Essence to be stripped of these relationships, It would not be a god. Our entities occasioned these relationships, so through the fact that we are divine thralls we make Him a god. He is not known until we are known.”<sup>49</sup> As can be expected, such statements caused a bit of scandal among some of the more exoteric minded scholars, but if one has followed the Shaykh’s metaphysics carefully, one may be less scandalized due to the distinction between the Essence and the Divinity, where the latter’s function is precisely to create and enter into myriad relationships with created things. It is impossible, due to the logic of relationships, that there be the Creator but not the created, and once it is known that there are created things, then it is known that there is a Creator Who brought them into existence. God’s independence is upheld because strictly speaking, it is not God Himself Who demands the existence of the cosmos; rather, according to the Shaykh,

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<sup>47</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 57.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 58.



that which turns its attention toward bringing “everything other than God” (*mā siwā Allāh*) into existence is the Divinity (*al-ulūha*) through its properties, relations, and attributions; it is these which call for effects. It is impossible that there might be one that overpowers (*qāhīr*) without something overpowered (*maqhūr*), or a powerful (*qādir*) without an object of power (*maqḍūr*).<sup>50</sup>

The logic of relationships calls for interdependence. This is the first point that we have made a note of. The second point that can be discerned from Murata’s explanation can be discerned from a careful reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s text just cited, which reveals that it is specifically the *properties* of the Divinity which “call for effects,” whereas the Divinity simply “turns its attention.” In mentioning the properties, relations and attributions of Divinity, Ibn ‘Arabī is referring to the Divine Names, and it is they that require – indeed desire – the cosmos within which their effects may be displayed or manifested in certain loci. In what follows, Ibn ‘Arabī clarifies his position on interdependence between God and creation, as well as the function of the Most Beautiful Names.

You should know, O seeker of truth, that the Real possesses mercy, pardon, generosity, forgiveness and other things of this sort which have been mentioned as His Most Beautiful Names. He possesses these in reality. He also possesses vengeance (*al-intiqām*) and terrible assault (*al-baṭsh al-shadīd*). So He is Compassionate, Pardoner, Generous, Forgiver, and possessor of Vengeance. It is impossible that the effects of these names be found within Him or that He be a locus (*maḥall*) for their effects. So toward whom is He compassionate? Whom does He pardon? To whom is He generous? Whom does He forgive? From whom does he exact vengeance? Hence one has to say that God the Creator demands created things (*makhḷūq*) and the created things demand the Creator.... Therefore there must be a cosmos, since the divine realities demand it.<sup>51</sup>

### **1.8 The Divine Name as the *Barzakh***

Allah, as the one and only God of creation, reveals Himself through His Names, which are Most Beautiful since “each name enunciates an attribute of God...”<sup>52</sup> and God Himself, according to a ḥadīth, “is Beautiful and He loves beauty.”<sup>53</sup> The Qur’ān instructs: “To God belong the Most Beautiful Names, so call Him by them.”<sup>54</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the transcendent God describes and makes Himself immanent through the Divine Names which are infinite in number but usually epitomized in a list of ninety-

<sup>50</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 39.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, 212.

<sup>54</sup> al-Qur’ān 7:180, cited in Chittick, *SPK*, 210.

nine Most Beautiful Names.<sup>55</sup> Through them, man may come to know something about God and thus, they are the connection or link between us and Him. Therefore, the Divine Names have an intermediate reality and for the Shaykh, *anything* that has an intermediate reality is known by the Qur’ānic term, *barzakh* or “isthmus”. In this case, the Divine Names are the *barzakh* between God and creation.<sup>56</sup> In the *Futūḥāt*, the nature of the *barzakh* is expressed as follows:

Know that the word “*barzakh*” is an expression for what separates two things without ever becoming either of them....So each of those two things, when they are adjacent to each other, have need of a *barzakh* which is not the same as each of them, but which has in itself the power of each of them.<sup>57</sup>

The Divine Names are neither God nor creation, but as the *barzakh* between the two, their reality is to both separate and conjoin the two<sup>58</sup> and to possess the power and properties – to one degree or another – of both. This is why they have an intermediate reality and another way of saying this is to say that the Divine Names have an “imaginal reality”. Chittick explains that for the Shaykh, “An imaginal – not ‘imaginary’ – reality is one that dwells in an intermediate domain between two other realities and shares in the attributes of both sides. An imaginal thing is both the same as and different from each of the two sides that define it.”<sup>59</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of Imagination (*al-khayāl*) will be discussed at great length in the following chapters but for now, we may note that to say a Divine Name is an imaginal reality, is simply to refer to its intermediacy and ambiguity, both of which are defining characteristics of imagination, which is therefore also known to Ibn ‘Arabī as a *barzakh*.<sup>60</sup>

If created things appear to possess attributes which describe the Creator (or vice versa), this is only due to the intermediacy of the Divine Names which connect yet separate the true possessor of attributes (i.e. Divinity), and the attributed (i.e. creature). In the Shaykh’s words, “The divine names are the *barzakh* between us and the Named.

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<sup>55</sup> Elton Hall, “Ibn ‘Arabi and the Perfectibility of Man,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 16 (1994), 72.

<sup>56</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in James W. Morris, “Divine ‘Imagination’ and the Intermediate World: Ibn ‘Arabī on the Barzakh,” < [http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/sp\\_barzakh.pdf](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/sp_barzakh.pdf) > (Accessed 4/29/04).

<sup>58</sup> Peter Samsel, “A Unity with Distinctions: Parallels in the Thought of St Gregory Palamas and Ibn Arabi,” in *Paths to the Heart*, 202.

<sup>59</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

They look upon Him since they name Him, and they look upon us since they bestow upon us effects attributed to the Named. So they make the Named known and they make us known.”<sup>61</sup> As a *barzakh*, a Divine Name has its reality somewhere between our reality and the Divine Reality, and it is for this reason that they are able to “look upon us,” having the ability to “bestow” effects.

### **1.9 The Divine Name as the Lord**

From such a perspective, creation, and man in particular, is in a position to receive from the Divine Names. This leads Ibn ‘Arabī to refer to each Divine Name as a *rabb* (“Sustainer” or “Lord”), which has as its *marbub* (“vassal”), a created being.<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that Ibn ‘Arabī views the Divine Names as many different gods, rivaling in authority with Allah. According to Izutsu, “one of the cardinal elements of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought on God is the theological difference between *Allāh* and the Lord (*rabb*)....The Lord is the Absolute as manifested through a particular concrete Name.”<sup>63</sup> Corbin further explains that for Ibn ‘Arabī,

*Al-Lāh* is the name designating the divine Essence which is qualified by all its attributes, while the *rabb* or lord is the divine Being personified and particularized by one of his Names and Attributes. This is the whole secret of the divine Names and of what Ibn al-‘Arabī calls ‘the God created in beliefs’, or rather the God who creates himself in these beliefs.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, because a Divine Name stands as an intermediate reality between God and creation, it is neither God nor other than God; rather, it is said to be the Lord, which requires that which is lorded over, i.e. the vassal. Allah is the “all-comprehensive name”, which accepts and unites every other name – even as they may be mutually contradictory – designating all the attributes of God. As man is incapable of perceiving all the Divine Names at once, Chittick tells us that for Ibn ‘Arabī, this “means that no one is able to call upon Allah in respect of the name’s all-comprehensiveness; rather, everyone who calls upon Him in fact has one name or another in view.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, when

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<sup>61</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 270.

<sup>63</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 103.

<sup>64</sup> Corbin, *History*, 295.

<sup>65</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 66. Ibn ‘Arabī gives the following as an example of his view: “When the person who is seeking and in need of provision says, “O Allah, provide for me!- while Allah in addition [to being All-provider] is also Withholder [*al-mānī*’] – then through his state this person is seeking on the name All-

man prays to God, he is necessarily addressing – whether he be aware or not – his own personal Lord,<sup>66</sup> since all who know and worship God do so in accordance with their individual beliefs, and this is what Ibn ‘Arabī refers to as the “God created in beliefs.”

The Lord, as a Divine Name, is not Allah, Who is Himself the Lord of Lords (*rabb al-arbāb*), but is God as He reveals Himself to His created beings, each holding a different belief about Him. The Lord is said to be the created God (in beliefs) because the Divine Name-cum-Lord is a *barzakh* between God and man, and as stated above, the nature of a *barzakh* is to share in the qualities of the two sides between which it mediates. Thus, the Lord is neither the Creator nor the created, or rather, is both the Creator and the created, and is thus said to be the “God created in beliefs.” Corbin expresses it as the “God who creates Himself in these beliefs” because, as Chittick rightly states, “the god of belief is itself the merciful self-disclosure of the Real.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, one’s personal Lord through which one worships God, Who Himself has told us to call Him by his Names, is itself a merciful Self-disclosure through which the Essence may become known, not as *dhāt* (essence) but as *ilāh* (god, i.e. Divinity). Yet, since “There is no god (*ilāh*) but God (*Allāh*),” all worship is only for Allah.

### **1.10 The Divinity as the *Barzakh* ?**

What has just been said restates what has already been said, namely, that the Divinity is the medium through which the Essence enters into *tashbīh*, whilst remaining Itself in *tanzīh*. This makes the Divinity an intermediary between the Essence and creation, for as soon as the Essence has entered into delimitation, one is no longer talking about the Essence-qua-Essence, but the Level of the Essence which is the Divinity. Since the two are not separate realities – as “There is no reality but Reality” – the Divinity-qua-Divinity accepts both, names of *tanzīh* and names of *tashbīh*, which makes it the “coincidence of opposites” (*jam‘ al-aḍḍād*) and thus, ambiguous. When it is remembered

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provider. The meaning of what he has said is nothing but, “O All-provider, provide for me.” Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in, Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 102. For Chodkiewicz, “Man in the act of adoration (*‘ibāda*) – as long as he attaches this act to himself – must address – and cannot [not] address, whatever he might think – only the Divine Name that is “his” Lord. That is, he must address only that particular “Face” (*Wajh*) of the Divine which is turned toward him and from which he draws all that he is.” Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 40.

<sup>67</sup> William C. Chittick, “Between the Yes and the No: Ibn al-‘Arabī on *Wujūd* and the Innate Capacity,” in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (New York, 1998) 96.

that the Divine Names are themselves characterized by intermediacy and ambiguity, and when each Name is seen as a *barzakh* or as a Lord between the creature and the Divinity, Who is Allah, the Lord of Lords (*rabb al-arbāb*) and the all-comprehensive Name, would this not also require that the Divinity – itself distinguished in its *function* from both the Essence and creation – be described as a *barzakh*? In fact, this is indeed Ibn ‘Arabī’s position, who maintains that “it is not correct for the Real and creation to come together (*ijtimā’*) in any mode whatsoever in respect of the Essence, only in respect of the fact that the Essence is described by the Divinity.”<sup>68</sup> The Divinity appears to function as a *barzakh* and this is made explicit in the following passage from the *Futūḥāt*, where the Shaykh also identifies the Divinity with the Most Beautiful Names.

The Divinity...confronts the creatures through its own [specific] essence [as Divinity] and It confronts the Essence through its own essence.... It has a face toward creation through which It discloses Itself in the forms of creation; It has a face toward the Essence through which It becomes manifest to the Essence. So the created things do not know the Essence except from behind this *barzakh* which is the Divinity. Nor does the Essence exercise properties within the created things except through this *barzakh* which is the Divinity. We have verified It, and we have found it no different from the Most Beautiful Names by which we call upon It. So the Essence compels (*jabr*) the cosmos only through the divine names, and the cosmos knows nothing of the Real but these Most Beautiful Divine Names.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, the Divine *Barzakh* (i.e. the Divinity) allows the Essence to remain completely transcendent and unknowable, whilst bringing creation into relationship with the Essence by means of itself (i.e. by means of the Divine *Barzakh*). The nature of a *barzakh* is to distinguish and this means that the Essence remains the Independent (*al-ghanī*) and the creation remains the poor (*al-faqīr*), while the Divine *Barzakh* prevents any change to this fixed law. The nature of a *barzakh* is also to combine within itself the properties of that between which it intervenes and this is why Allah receives, and is described by, both the names of incomparability and the names of similarity. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

The names that demand incomparability are the names which the Essence demands in Itself, while the names which demand similarity are the names which the Essence demands inasmuch as It is a god. The names of incomparability are those such as Independent (*al-ghanī*) and One (*al-aḥad*) and

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<sup>68</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 59.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 61-62.

all those which can only be possessed by Him, while the names of similarity are those such as Compassionate, Forgiving and everything by which the servant may truly be qualified...<sup>70</sup>

The names of incomparability are names of *tanzīh* while the names of similarity are names of *tashbīh*. When speaking about God, one must affirm both as the Qur'ān itself does. However, although the *Divine Barzakh*, i.e. the Divinity, is seen from two perspectives (*tanzīh* and *tashbīh*), and although Ibn 'Arabī says of it: "It has a face toward creation [and] a face toward the Essence," this does not mean that the *barzakh* is two-sided or that it has two faces. Akkach explains:

Ibn 'Arabī emphasizes that although the 'isthmus' faces two independent domains, it is not a two-sided mediator, which would mean that the aspect by which it encounters one domain is other than that by which it encounters the other. On the contrary, the aspect – which is none other than the essence of the isthmus – which encounters one domain is exactly the same as that which encounters the other...since the isthmus is one entity.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, the Divine *Barzakh* faces the Essence with the same face that faces creation. Therefore, while it is true that the Divinity is both transcendent and immanent, it is also true that it is one, since it is the nature of Allah to be One. When the servant experiences and affirms the truth of this, he is affirming *tawhīd*, which is to declare that God is *al-wāḥid* (One). Before *tawhīd* can be experienced, knowledge of God must be sought and things must be seen for what they truly are. According to Akbarian Metaphysics, just as there are two ways for man to perceive God, transcendent and immanent, so too must there be two ways for man to acquire knowledge of God. Generally speaking, knowledge of *tanzīh* is associated with "reason" (*'aql*), while knowledge of *tashbīh* is associated with "imagination" (*khayāl*). To understand the relevance of the two modes of knowing, we must further examine the relationship between God's transcendence and immanence and how the knowledge of each is to be arrived at, for as Chittick rightly points out, Ibn 'Arabī's "position on the intimate connection between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* has a direct bearing upon epistemology."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Samer, Akkach, "The World of Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī's Ontology," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 24.1 (1997), 100.

<sup>72</sup> William C. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabi," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. S.H. Nasr, O. Leaman (London, 1996), 501.

## CHAPTER 2: EPISTEMOLOGY

### *“The Possessor of Two Eyes”*

To “see things as they are” is to have knowledge of the reality of things. Although properly speaking the word “thing” is not applied to God, the knowledge of God is what is being sought after. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the greatest increase in knowledge comes by way of Divine guidance and teaching. He frequently cites Qur’ānic verse 20:114, as he does in his *Fuṣūṣ*, where he says: “Always the gnostic is seeking more knowledge of Him, saying, *O Lord, increase me in knowledge* (20:114).”<sup>1</sup> While it is certainly the human prerogative to actively search and acquire knowledge using the faculties of cognition, for the Shaykh, arriving at true and certain knowledge, particularly about God, is not so much a matter of attainment as it is of bestowal. Thus, another verse quoted not infrequently by the Shaykh tells us to “Be Godfearing, and God will teach you.”<sup>2</sup> Divine teaching for Ibn ‘Arabī comes by way of “unveiling” (*kashf*), which, as explained by Izutsu, means

to look at things in the immediate sensible world and not to stop there, but to see beyond them the ultimate ground of all Being, that precisely is what is called by Ibn ‘Arabī “unveiling” (*kashf*) or mystical intuition. “Unveiling” means, in short, taking the sensible things at their symbolic values. And a man who does so encounters everywhere and outward ‘phenomenon’ of the Reality, whatever he sees and hears in this world.<sup>3</sup>

These outward phenomena, which are also to be viewed as symbols, are indeed primary or direct objects of knowledge and are the means or intermediaries providing us with knowledge about God, Who is Himself beyond being an object confinable to the domain that is man’s knowledge. Chittick rightly observes: “no knowledge of God can be gained without intermediary, so ‘other than God’ is as important for knowledge, if not more important than God Himself.”<sup>4</sup> Having said this, one must never forget – and this is critical for a correct understanding of the Shaykh’s epistemology – that the *sole* import of God’s signs and symbols is that they stand as objects providing knowledge for the

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<sup>1</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, 150.

<sup>2</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:282, cited in Chittick, *SPK*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 147.

seeker, whosoever it may be, about the Reality that is God. Therefore, to continue with Chittick's observation, "the other must be known with a view toward God. All things must be taken back to the One, which is precisely the sense of the word *tawḥīd*."<sup>5</sup>

## **2.1 Reason**

Although Ibn 'Arabī and the Ṣūfīs in general emphasize Divine disclosure by way of unveiling, believing it to be a mode of knowing superior to reason (*'aql*), in no way does this translate into a total rejection of the use of reason and its unique method of activity, reflection (*fīkr*). In fact, despite his severe challenge on the use of reason in acquiring positive knowledge about God, the Shaykh categorically maintains that in addition to unveiling, the use of reason or the rational faculty *must* be employed if one is to properly follow the *sharī'ah* and to have a complete understanding of *tawḥīd*.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, Ibn 'Arabī's critic of reason has more to do with its improper usage and the fact that it often "oversteps its bounds". For Ibn 'Arabī, reason has not only a direct epistemological role, but an indirect one as well, where it is employed in the service of Islamic ethics and morality. We shall discuss the indirect use of reason briefly, before proceeding to its direct function in the acquisition of knowledge.

One of the primary functions of reason, as stated above, is that it keeps one steadfast on the path which leads to perfection, i.e. the *sharī'ah*, and this is because the opposite of reason is said to be "passion" (*shahwa*), which, at least in its negative association, signifies "any desire which has an object not sanctioned by the Law."<sup>7</sup> Ibn 'Arabī believes that "God created the faculty named 'reason', placing it within the rational soul, to stand opposite natural passion when passion exercises control over the soul by diverting it from the occupation proper to it as specified by the Lawgiver."<sup>8</sup> For the Shaykh, man's reason must never be dominated by passions and caprice for not only

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī," 501. Chittick states: "In fact, reason is so necessary in his view of things, that *tawḥīd*, the *sine qua non* of salvation, depends upon it." Ibid., 500.

<sup>7</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 160. Chittick points out that *shahwa*, "passion", is a near synonym of the term *hawā*, "caprice", which is "the tendency in man which turns him away from divine guidance." Ibid., 161.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn 'Arabī quoted in Ibid., 160.



would this lead him to deviate from the *sharīʿah*, but would also render inoperative his rational faculty, making superfluous the distinction in honor between man and animal.<sup>9</sup>

As may be expected, reason proves to be indispensable in the active pursuit of morality and as such, figures heavily in a discussion on Ibn ʿArabī’s ethics.<sup>10</sup> How this relates to our examination of the Shaykh’s epistemology can be seen from his statement that “knowledge requires practice, and necessarily so, or else it is not knowledge, even it if appears in the form of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> This, then, is reason’s indirect epistemological role, where there can be no real knowledge (*ʿilm*) without practice or good works (*ʿamal*), the latter being qualified as commitment to the *sharīʿah*; a commitment which necessitates the triumph of reason over illegitimate passion. We may now examine the import of reason in its more direct epistemic role.

The root meaning of the term *ʿaql* (reason) is closely connected to the term *ʿiqāl*, which is the “fetter” used to hobble a camel.<sup>12</sup> The very nature of reason is to constrict or bind and as a faculty, *ʿaql* typically implies restriction and confinement. This means that reason confines created things to its own domain, i.e. the world of creation, and restricts God to His domain, which is above or independent from the world. While it is problematic that reason attempts to define and delimit God, by this very fact, reason has a natural affinity towards *tanzīh*, which, as already explained, is the process whereby God is declared to be free from, or other than, His creation. Through reason, man understands that the things which he sees – even as they may share in the attributes of God, i.e. the attributes of similarity – are not God Himself, Who must be transcendent. The Shaykh often points out that reason has *a priori* knowledge that “Nothing is like Him” (42:11).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, reason upholds *tanzīh* and the failure of the former would

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<sup>9</sup> While the rational faculty has the capacity to subdue caprice, whether it actually does this or not is, according to Ibn ʿArabī, in the hands of man: “There is nothing stronger than caprice except man, since he is able to root out his caprice through his rational faculty, which God has brought into existence within him. So he manifests his rational faculty through its ruling power over his caprice.” Ibn ʿArabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> The proverbial yardstick by which Islamic morality is measured has always been – and for the Shaykh this is exceedingly true – the *sharīʿah*, adherence to which depends on a sound rational faculty.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn ʿArabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 151. The essential relationship between knowledge and practice (*ʿilm wa ʿamal*), where one devoid of the other makes both meaningless, was all too apparent for Ibn ʿArabī and this relationship is a mainstay within the Islamic ethical tradition.

<sup>12</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, *Imaginal Worlds*, 165.

lead to the rejection of the latter and this in turn would result in a doctrine of pantheism, which makes a substantial connection between God and creation. Since the latter represents multiplicity, for Ibn ‘Arabī, reason *must* be employed in order that God’s Oneness be upheld at all times.

However, we have already seen that according to the Qur’ān, not only is God transcendent, He is also immanent and is the Hearing and the Seeing, attributes of similarity that offer positive knowledge of what God is. According to the Shaykh, reason on its own is ill-suited to gain any positive knowledge of what God is because its method of activity, reflection, fails to grasp the significance of the signs which God shows to His creation in order that they come to know *al-ḥaqq* (the Truth). It may be objected that the Qur’ān often asks people to reflect and Ibn ‘Arabī is certainly not unaware of this. However, he maintains that such verses serve to indicate the failure of reflection to ascertain positive knowledge of God, thus making reason aware of its own limitations. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

Then God prescribed for the rational faculty that it should come to know Him, in order that it might turn to Him for knowledge of Him, not to other than Him. But reason understood the contrary of what the Real meant by His words, “Have they not reflected?” (7:184); “[Thus do We differentiate the signs] for a people who reflect” (10:24). Hence reason supports itself by reflection and makes it a leader which it follows. It remains heedless of what the Real meant by “reflection.” For He addressed reason in order that it might reflect and come to understand that the only way to know God is for God to give it knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

This shows that for Ibn ‘Arabī, recourse must be made to “given knowledge” for, as Peter Coates points out: “Reflective thinking, in this respect, *positively* attests to the impotence and incapacity of human beings to reach the knowledge of the Real via unaided reason.”<sup>15</sup> Without given knowledge, no one can have positive – or balanced – knowledge of what God is. Coates observes that reflective thinking is only able to establish *tanzīh*, or the incomparability of God, through the method of *via negativa*, which is “the method of attempting to show what God is not; for example, God is not corporeal, He is not temporal, and so on. And yet even this would lead to an overly transcendent view of God, ultimately incompatible with Ibn ‘Arabī’s *wahdat al-*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 163.

<sup>15</sup> Coates, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 40.

*wujud*.”<sup>16</sup> It is incompatible because it does not take the perspective of *tashbīh* into account, or at least does not give it its full due. This, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is a fundamental problem since the reality of *tawhīd* is that it is the unity of opposites – *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* – and the Shaykh is convinced in this regard since God uses the language of opposites when describing Himself in the Qur’ān.

Reason, then, must be aided by revelation and this means that those who rely upon reason, which only knows what God is not, must seek help from the Qur’ān to gain knowledge of what God is. Indeed, for Ibn ‘Arabī, revelation is not only an authoritative source for gaining knowledge but a most indispensable one as it contains God’s own Self-description or Self-disclosure. The Shaykh says: “reason has nothing but the attribute of incomparability while transmitted knowledge [i.e., that provided by revelation] has the like of that along with the attribute of similarity.”<sup>17</sup> The problem however, is that most rational thinkers interpret the Qur’ān in accordance with their already decided understanding, itself based on reason, of what should and should not be attributed to God, and in so doing they attempt to “explain away” any description – be it God’s own Self-disclosure or not – that suggests that He is in some way similar to the things of the cosmos.<sup>18</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the mistake of those theologians and philosophers, who generally negate or explain away any similarity between God and the creatures,<sup>19</sup> is that they are attempting to understand God solely through rational analysis, while reason can only understand what God is not due to its innate tendency to separate and distinguish, making impossible for it to reconcile opposites. Ibn ‘Arabī’s critic against reason involves more than the acceptance of one epistemological framework over another; rather, the gravity of the error made by those who consider acceptance by reason to be the primary criterion by which reports on the nature of God are to be accepted as valid, lies not only in reason’s inability to fully grasp God’s

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Such an approach, whereby God’s own description of Himself is denied is not easily forgivable for Ibn ‘Arabī. He maintains that anyone who uses “rational hermeneutics” (*al-ta’wīl al-‘aqlī*) to turn verses and doctrines which they consider to be illogical or articulating an anthropomorphic view into metaphors or allegories, are only proving that their intelligence is corrupt and their faith, imperfect. William C. Chittick, “Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Eschatology,” *Muslim World*, 78 (1988), 51-52.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

Oneness, but also in the fact that reason is simply incapable of bringing opposites together, thus rendering the Qur'ān – *ipso facto* – false. The Shaykh writes:

The religion has brought statements that contradict rational evidence, since it ascribes to God such attributes of temporal things as coming, descent, sitting down, joy, laughter, hand, and foot...At the same time the Qur'ān says, “Nothing is like Him” (42:11), though these attributes have been affirmed. But if they were impossible, as is concluded by reason (*al-'aql*), God would not have attributed them to Himself; the true revelation would be false.<sup>20</sup>

It is imperative, for Ibn 'Arabī, that one refrain reason from stepping “beyond its own specific playing field,”<sup>21</sup> which it does when it asserts “itself as sole epistemological arbiter of truth,”<sup>22</sup> thereby judging and then explaining away revealed reports that describe God in terms of *tashbīh*. For the Shaykh, the fact that reason should readily declare, based on its inherent knowledge of God's transcendence, created things to be other than God, is not itself problematic. What is problematic however, is when reason, with its binding nature, attempts to delimit God claiming what He can or can not be, thereby nullifying the very incomparability that it wishes to uphold. In other words, since reason only knows what God is not, it must refrain from stating what God is, for any such statements fall short of their mark. To quote the Shaykh, “What reason has produced in the matter of knowledge of God is not reliable.”<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Arabī also advises: “Forsake reasoning and pay it no heed, for reasoning has a range proper to it and goes no further.”<sup>24</sup> Again, it must be emphasized that Ibn 'Arabī is not calling for a categorical rejection of reason, which he affirms is necessary in order to declare God's transcendence with respect to created things. It has its own range and should be forsaken only when defending *tashbīh*, which it can never do. Chittick reminds us about reason: “Its guiding light steers it toward *tanzīh*, and, if left to itself, it will never accept that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Coates continues: “It is Ibn 'Arabi's view that with the exception of the inspired intellect, human reason can uncover only a profoundly limited and infinitesimal faction of reality and that reason acts as a veil binding and constricting reality (and the thinker) within its own rational schemes.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Souad Hakim, “Knowledge of God in Ibn 'Arabi,” in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, eds. Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael Tiernan (Shaftesbury, 1993), 268.

According to Coates, “reason is unreliable because reason for the men of rational faculties becomes the ultimate arbiter of truth and the epistemological gold standard.” Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

God can be similar to anything, so it rejects *tashbīh*.”<sup>25</sup> To reject *tashbīh* is to reject the Qur’ān and to avoid this, one must compliment reason with another faculty.

## **2.2 Imagination**

In order to truly understand the Qur’ān and to experience the reality of *tawḥīd*, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes the role of imagination (*khayāl*), which alone is able to perceive the reality of *tashbīh*. The importance of imagination for the Shaykh can be seen from the following warning. “He who does not know the level of imagination has no true knowledge whatsoever. If this pillar of true knowledge has not been actualized by the knowers, they have not a whiff of true knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, *khayāl* is associated with *kashf* because unveiling typically occurs within the imagination.<sup>27</sup> Just as reason – the primary tool of theologians and philosophers – has the power to negate attributes from God, thereby affirming His incomparability, imagination – the primary tool of the “people of unveiling” (*ahl al-kashf*) – has the power to affirm, in fact envision, His attributes and to perceive God, in as much as He allows Himself to be perceived, thereby affirming His similarity. To be sure, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that God in Himself or His Essence (*dhāt*), is completely unknowable and cannot be seen. However, God can be seen through His own Self-disclosure, also known as theophany (*tajallī*),<sup>28</sup> by way of the infinite signs (*āyāt*) that are indicated in the Qur’ān as well as in the external world or the cosmos. For Ibn ‘Arabī, only the faculty of imagination is able to perceive God in His Self-disclosure, that is to say, God with respect to *tashbīh*, while reason declares Him to be incomparable with all of His Self-disclosure, upholding the

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<sup>25</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 121.

<sup>27</sup> In order to recall the nature of *kashf*, a term used often by Ibn ‘Arabī in his epistemological analysis, Chittick writes that it is “knowledge that God gives directly to the servants when He lifts the veils separating Himself from them and ‘opens the door’ to perception of invisible realities.” Chittick, *SDG*, xxii. According to Coates, *kashf* signifies an immediate and direct unveiling which brings “decisive certainty.” Coates, *Ibn ‘Arabī*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Tajallī* is one of Ibn Arabī’s most important technical terms. In fact, so central is its role in the Shaykh’s theosophy, that before he was known as the great expositor for *wahdat al-wujūd*, he was known as one of the “Companions of Self-disclosure” (*aṣḥāb al-tajallī*). Chittick, *SDG*, 52. The root of the term is *j.l.w.* which means “to be clear, to reveal, to disclose.” From the same root we have the term *jalwa*, which, as Chittick explains, “signifies the ‘unveiling of a bride’ on her wedding night. “God’s ‘theophany’ is His Self-unveiling to the servant (and indeed it is often used synonymously with the term *kashf*, ‘unveiling’).” Chittick quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 237n7. Ibn ‘Arabī defines *tajallī* as “that which is unveiled to the heart of the lights of the invisible.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 82.

perspective of *tanzīh*. In fact, the unaided reason is altogether oblivious of theophany and only sees, with the eye of reason (‘*ayn al-‘aql*’), the created things which, when seen in this manner, can only be other than God.

The eye of imagination (‘*ayn al-khayāl*’) may experience the vision of theophany in two basic ways: through the very same created things that reason has declared to be other than God but are seen by imagination to be the place or locus (*maḥall*) of God’s Self-disclosure, or through images which are only seen by and within the imagination, and are not necessarily visible in the physical world. It can be said that the former type of theophanic experience corresponds to God’s signs which are shown outwardly on the horizons (*āfāq*), i.e. in the “external world”, and that the latter is a subjective experience which occurs internally, i.e. in the “personal world”, corresponding to the signs which are shown within human selves or souls (*anfūs*).<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that in either case, external or internal, theophany takes place within a form<sup>30</sup> and while it is certain that neither God nor His Attributes and Names are in themselves physical forms, through the power of imagination, Divine Realities are in fact manifested as forms because, as Ibn ‘Arabī says: “Part of the reality of imagination is that it embodies and gives form to that which is not a body or a form, for imagination perceives only in this manner....”<sup>31</sup> The nature of these “imaginal forms” will be further discussed in the chapters which follow but for now, it is important to realize that for Ibn ‘Arabī, it is by this very fact, namely, the embodiment of pure noetic realities into perceptible forms, that God may be perceived as similar and immanent with respect to creation. Ordinarily, intangible realities, also known as “meanings” (*ma‘ānī*), are contrasted with “sensory forms” as they stand in mutual opposition. Reason certainly sees them in this way for, as pointed out earlier, reason does not have the power to combine opposites. The Shaykh writes: “It is impossible for sense perception or the rational faculty to bring together opposites, but it is not impossible for imagination.”<sup>32</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, *khayāl* has the strength

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<sup>29</sup> “And we will show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves.” al-Qur’ān 41:53, cited in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 188.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī refers to these forms by many names such as “imaginal form” (*ṣūra khayālīyya* or *ṣūra mithālīyya*); “locus of witnessing” (*mashhad*); “locus of manifestation” (*mazhar*); or “locus of self-disclosure” (*majlā*). See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SDG*, 332.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 115.

and power to combine meanings and sensory forms, or more generally, the power to unite all opposites and thus, imagination manifests the Divine Name: “The Strong” (*al-qawī*).<sup>33</sup> In this way, Qur’ānic verses that describe God in terms of *tashbīh*, for example the mentioning of the Hand or Face of God, need not be explained away (due to irreconcilability with *tanzīh*) as simple metaphors or allegories, as their reality may in fact be envisioned and experienced by those aware of the power of imagination.

This imagination about which Ibn ‘Arabī is speaking, is not any ordinary or uninspired type of imagination; rather, *al-khayāl*, with which one perceives God through His Self-disclosure, is the specific type of imaginal vision which occurs in the process of unveiling,<sup>34</sup> experienced only by those who are able to recognize God’s Self-disclosure in the cosmos through the eye of imagination or the eye of insight (*‘ayn al-baṣīra*), which has been opened for them by God. Such a vision “can never be achieved by the rational faculty,” says Chittick, “no matter how refined it may be.”<sup>35</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī himself distinguishes between rational and theophanic knowledge when he writes: “Some maintain that the ‘vision of the Real’ is only an increased lucidity in considerative knowledge of God, noting else. This is the doctrine of him who has no knowledge of God by way of unveiling and self-disclosure....”<sup>36</sup>

From what has been said, it should be clear that imagination is an extremely significant component of Ibn ‘Arabī’s epistemological framework. In fact one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most important contributions to Islamic thought is his emphasis on the role of imagination in cognition. In the Shaykh’s view, most of the Islamic philosophers failed to grasp the significance of imagination in acquiring knowledge due to their belief that true knowledge must come by way of reason. As we have seen, reason is unsuited to gain positive knowledge of God because reason, by its very nature, declares God to be incomparable with all things – thereby denying *tashbīh* – resulting in its inability to know what God is, remaining content in its knowledge of what He is not. According to

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<sup>33</sup> “Hence the authority and strength of the Strong only became manifest in the creation of the imaginal faculty (*al-quwwat al-mutakhayyila*)....” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Idem, *SDG*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 55. Ibn ‘Arabī indicates that caution is to be observed when speaking about theophanic knowledge. The quote continues: “unless he has said this because he is present with someone for whom it is not proper to hear this sort of thing. Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

Ibn ‘Arabī, the only way in which to gain any positive knowledge of God is to accept His Self-disclosure by way of imagination, which perceives God in terms of *tashbīh*. Without imagination, and when the perspective of *tashbīh* is not taken into account, one cannot have any true knowledge of existence because the unaided reason declares God to be utterly incomparable, so much so that He is severed from His creation.<sup>37</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī is convinced that

those who profess Incomparability remain forever grasping at nothing, nor do they actualize anything. They are the people of Severance (*ahl al-batt*) since their aspiration is dispersed and the imaginal faculty...is far from them. From the perfection of the true knowledge of existence they lack the property of imaginal faculties, which exercise no property except in those Men who are Perfect (*al-kummal min al-rijāl*).<sup>38</sup>

As we already know, Ibn ‘Arabī does not reject *tanzīh* nor reason and thus, is addressing the situation of those who *only* profess incomparability to the exclusion of similarity.

### **2.3 Imagination and Reason**

Reason itself should not be undervalued as it is the appropriate balance to the way of imagination. Exclusive reliance on the latter would either result in a crude anthropomorphism or in *shirk*, i.e. the associating of other gods with God – the very opposite of *tawhīd*. Using the term *ḥadd* to refer to the “limits”<sup>39</sup> which are set as a result of God’s Self-disclosure, Chittick confirms that both reason and imagination are to be employed commensurately.

Like everyone else the Folk of God see God through the limits (*ḥadd*) that He assumes through disclosing Himself. But they know exactly what they are seeing, and they know that no limit is God. In the midst of perceiving *tashbīh* through imagination, they acknowledge *tanzīh* through reason.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, for Ibn ‘Arabī, perfect knowledge of *tawhīd* cannot be grasped unless both reason and imagination are employed at once. There is grave danger in setting up any one faculty to the exclusion of the other, and as the sole means with which to acquire knowledge of God or to engage in His worship. On the one hand, if one attempts to

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<sup>37</sup> Radical transcendence, where God becomes so far removed from His creation that He is rendered virtually meaningless, is known in Islam as *ta’īl*, which for this reason is often translated as “agnosticism.” See Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (London, 1983), 86.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> The proper Arabic term for “limits” is *ḥudūd*, plural of *ḥadd*.

<sup>40</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 55.



understand the Absolute Unity of God by reason alone, one would only be able to assert that “Nothing is like Him” (42:11), because reason, by its very nature, is unable to reconcile the apparent opposition between the first and the last, the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* (57:3). In this way, one “is inevitably led,” says Izutsu, “to the kind of *tanzīh* which has no place for *tashbīh*,”<sup>41</sup> the ultimate destination being *taʿlīl* (radical transcendence; agnosticism). On the other hand, the use of unbridled imagination would, due to its predilection towards Divine immanence, lead one to perceive all things as similar to God whereby one “falls into pure *tashbīh*”<sup>42</sup> and hits the ground of *shirk*. Neither absolute *tanzīh* nor absolute *tashbīh* can be the Truth since the only Absolute Truth is the assertion that God is One, i.e. *tawḥīd*, which, if it is truly unconditional, cannot be identified exclusively with either *tanzīh* or *tashbīh*. Rather, transcendence and immanence are both relative truths, the realities of which must be perceived concurrently just as God’s description of Himself utilizes the imagery of both. Ibn ‘Arabī expresses this in his *Fuṣūṣ*, which tells us that “*tanzīh* cannot be separated from *tashbīh* nor *tashbīh* from *tanzīh*. It is this situation that is referred to in the Koranic verse: ‘There is nothing like unto Him, and He is All-hearing All-seeing’, in which God Himself describes Himself with *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*...”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is only when reason and imagination are brought into harmony that both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* can appropriately relate to one another and allow for an experience of *tawḥīd*.<sup>44</sup>

## **2.4 Imagination vs. Reason**

That there is harmony between the faculties need not imply that both powers are to be exactly equal or that both enjoy the same authority. In fact, when reason and imagination are in such a state, the latter ought to be dominant since “imagination is,” according to Ibn ‘Arabī, “the supreme authority (*sultān*) in the perfect natural

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<sup>41</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Chittick expresses the same as follows: “exclusive stress upon incomparability cuts God off from the cosmos, while exclusive stress on similarity obscures the unity of the Real and leads to polytheism and ‘associationism’ (*shirk*).” Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 58-59.

<sup>44</sup> On the harmony between reason and imagination, Chittick writes: “The gnostic never ceases understanding God’s Oneness, even if he sees God’s self-disclosures in all things. He declares God incomparable because he perceives through his rational faculty that ‘Nothing is like Him,’ and he declares Him similar because he perceives His presence in all things through imagination and the senses.” Chittick, *SPK*, 233.

constitution of the human mind in this world.”<sup>45</sup> There are a few reasons why this should be so and one has to do with what was said earlier about reason, namely, Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief that God prescribed reflection (*fīkr*) only so that through it, reason may come to the realization that the only way to know God is for God to give it knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Finding confirmation about this in the Qur’ān, Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

God says concerning His servant Khidr, “We taught him a knowledge from us” (Qur’an 18:64); and He says, “[He created man] and taught him the explanation” (Qur’an 55:4); so he attributed the teaching to Himself, not to reflection (*al-fīkr*). Hence we know that there is a station beyond reflection that bestows upon the servant knowledge of various things.<sup>47</sup>

This “God-given” (*ladunnī*)<sup>48</sup> knowledge is the knowledge of God’s Self-disclosure (*tajallī*) or manifestation (*ẓuhūr*), which comes by way of *kashf* and *khayāl*. In the following passage, Ibn ‘Arabī indicates how reason attains perfection.

If Reason functions by itself quite independently of anything else so that it acquires knowledge by its own cognitive power, the knowledge that it obtains of God will surely take the form of *tanzīh*, not that of *tashbīh*. But if God furnishes Reason with a (true) knowledge of the Divine self-manifestation, its knowledge of God attains perfection, and it will exercise *tanzīh* where it should, and exercise *tashbīh* where it should.<sup>49</sup>

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the ideal rational faculty is one that realizes not only its limitations but also that the ability to receive unveiling is more noble than its own power of reflection.<sup>50</sup> It is only when God grants unveiling that reason becomes aware of the Divine theophanies which may be seen through imagination; only then is reason willing to accept both the perspective of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. This signifies the importance of unveiling in allowing for the experience of *tawhīd*.

This being said, it is important to note that when read in isolation from one another, some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings may seem to challenge the value of unveiling. For example, in the *Futūḥāt* the Shaykh writes: “There can be no unveiling in the knowledge of *tawhīd*....*Tawhīd* is not something ontological....It is merely a relationship, and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> See pp. 36-38 in this thesis.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> See Chittick, *SPK*, 235.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 58.

<sup>50</sup> See Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 238, where the Shaykh expounds the virtue of the ideal rational faculty and the method by which it may accept self-disclosure by way of unveiling.

relationships cannot be seen through unveiling. They can only be known by way of proofs. For unveiling is a vision.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this certainly appears to categorically deny the role of unveiling in attaining knowledge of *tawḥīd*. However, as Ibn ‘Arabī continues, the role of unveiling is affirmed as and when it is linked with imagination.

Vision only becomes connected to its object through the qualities (*kayfiyya*) which the object possesses. But does the Divine Side have any qualities? Rational proof negates that He should have any....But if God should embody these meanings in the Presence of Imaginalization....then this knowledge can be attained through unveiling.<sup>52</sup>

This suggests that *tawḥīd*, itself a meaning or a relationship, may become embodied in an ontological object which, when seen through the presence of imagination, may allow the one who undergoes unveiling to attain experiential knowledge of *tawḥīd*.<sup>53</sup>

Another reason why reason must be dependent upon imagination has to do with the very nature of *tashbīḥ*. For Ibn ‘Arabī, and the Ṣūfī perspective in general, in the final analysis *tashbīḥ* predominates over *tanzīḥ*. The Shaykh’s emphasis on God’s immanence is grounded in his correlation between *tanzīḥ* and *tashbīḥ* on the one hand, and the two broad categories of Divine Attributes on the other. God possesses both the Attributes of Mercy (*raḥma*) and the Attributes of Wrath (*ghaḍab*). Both the Qur’ān and *aḥādīth* associate Attributes of Mercy with God’s closeness to His creatures, whereas Attributes of Wrath express His distance from creation.<sup>54</sup> With this in mind, the all important proof text which gives Ibn ‘Arabī the justification for his emphasis on *tashbīḥ*, is the famous ḥadīth: “When God finished the creation, He wrote in His Book, which is there with Him, above the Throne: ‘Verily, My Mercy overcomes My wrath’.”<sup>55</sup> The implications of this ḥadīth are not to be missed as they are at the heart of the Shaykh’s thought and are necessary in order to understand the importance of key concepts such as *tajallī*, *mazhar* (locus of manifestation) and *khayāl*. Since Divine Mercy – identified with *tashbīḥ* – takes precedence over Divine Wrath – identified with *tanzīḥ* – it can only be

<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 233.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 233-234.

<sup>53</sup> In his *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī confirms that the knowledge of *tawḥīd*, which is a relationship, may be attained by unveiling with the help of imagination. He writes: “The meanings become corporealized in the presence of Imagination, like knowledge in the form of milk. In the same way, relationships become entified, even though they have no entities.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” 501.

<sup>55</sup> W. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague, 1975), 184.

that God's "similarity and sameness are more fundamental to reality than His incomparability and difference."<sup>56</sup> According to Ibn 'Arabī, Mercy is the very nature of God's Being (*wujūd*) while Wrath is limited, comes into play only within certain relationships and must therefore be subservient to – in fact subsumed within – Mercy, for as Ibn 'Arabī loves to point out, the Qur'ān reveals that God's "Mercy embraces all things"<sup>57</sup> but never says the same about God's Wrath. Since Mercy is the very nature of God, it follows that God will make His immanence known and in so doing, reveals the truth of verse 57:4: "He is with you wherever you are."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Ibn 'Arabī is convinced that man's reason, which readily perceives God's transcendence and the Attributes of Wrath, must in some sense be subservient to – though not nullified by – man's imagination, which perceives God's immanence and attributes of Mercy.

## **2.5 "The Possessor of Two Eyes"**

Since true knowledge of God and His creation depends upon seeing things with the eye of imagination and the eye of reason, Ibn 'Arabī often refers to the one who has such a sight as the "the possessor of two eyes" (*dhu'l-'aynayn*), who is then able to witness God as both near and far – *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*.<sup>59</sup> The significance of being a possessor of two eyes is revealed when one realizes that as the eye of reason and the eye of imagination begin to work together, the possessor may in this way experience an ascension (*mi'rāj*) in both knowledge and being, for to first perceive or acknowledge the form of an object and to then recognize that object as theophany, is precisely to ascend to a higher degree of being. As Divine Names and their manifestations are, according to Ibn 'Arabī, ranked in degrees of excellence (i.e. *tafāḍul*),<sup>60</sup> this process may repeat itself and thus, the ascension is not limited to the single step of "crossing over" from a form to its meaning, but shall continue *ad infinitum*. This method of ascension, which necessarily involves a sustained affirmation of both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, may allow one to experience the reality of *tawḥīd*, which, by definition, can only be an active process. In

<sup>56</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 168.

<sup>57</sup> al-Qur'ān 7:156, cited in Idem, "Ibn 'Arabī," 502.

<sup>58</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabī," 501. For a description of the possessor of two eyes, see Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Idem, "Rūmī and *waḥdat al-wujūd*," 77.

<sup>60</sup> The word *tafāḍul* derives from the root *f.d.l.* which means "to exceed" and by extension, to excel and surpass. See Idem, *SPK*, 51.

other words, as one perceives through the power of imagination God's immanence by way of theophany, one must not stop at this level, for to do so would be to limit, define, or contain God within His created Self-manifestation and this is tantamount to claiming that the created is itself the Creator. Since God transcends His Self-manifestation, one must recognize that any given manifestation is not God and this is to employ the power of reason, which alone may distinguish between God and His *mazhar*.

That imagination dominates over reason is only due to the power of imagination that is able to perceive created objects as innumerable theophanies of the One (*al-wāhid*). Without imagination, the manifested creation is cut off from its Source, which, in this way, is considered to be utterly transcendent without having first been perceived as immanent. This is to deny *tashbīh* and to proclaim a radical transcendence that not only cuts God off from the cosmos, but also implies a certain independence on the part of creation. To be sure, both imagination and reason must be employed to ensure that neither *tanzīh* nor *tashbīh* is neglected. However, imagination, which alone has the power to combine opposites and is thus able to reconcile the "creative tension" between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*,<sup>61</sup> appears to be the motivating force initiating the ascension and allowing for the experience of *tawhīd*.

## **2.6 Knowledge of Self and Self-Knowledge**

The basic epistemological principle has been established that in order to gain any positive and true knowledge of what God is, one must, through the power of *khayāl*, seek to see with the eye of imagination, God's Self-disclosure (*tajallī*) or in Qur'ānic terms, the *āyāt* of God that are to be found not only in Scripture, but also within the cosmos and within one's self. To quote from Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt*,

When man considers with this consideration, he says, "I have come to know (*ma'rifa*) God through the denotations which He has set up for us to know ourselves and Him. They are the 'signs' (*āyāt*) set up upon the horizons and within ourselves that it may become clear to us that He is the Real, and it has become clear to us." This is what we call "self-disclosure" (*tajallī*), for self-disclosure is put there in order to be seen. It is referred to in God's words, "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real." (41:53). In other words, the self-disclosure which

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<sup>61</sup> Chittick reminds us that "The creative tension between these two perspectives – declaring God incomparable and seeing him as similar – is a constant theme of his [Ibn 'Arabī's] writings." Chittick, "Between the Yes and the No," 99.

they come to see is a mark. It is a mark of Himself, so it becomes clear to them that He is the Real who is sought. Hence God completed this verse by saying, “Is not your Lord sufficient?”, that is, sufficient as a denotation of Himself? The clearest of denotations is a thing’s denoting itself by its own manifestation....<sup>62</sup>

Self-disclosure may occur in the external world (*āfāq*) as well as in the internal world (*anfus*), but the latter is decidedly of greater epistemic relevance because according to one of the Shaykh’s favorite *aḥādīth*: “He who knows himself [or his soul] knows his Lord” (*man ‘arafa nafsa-hu ‘arafa rabba-hu*).<sup>63</sup>

This reveals a major epistemological principle in that Divine knowledge is to be gained by turning inwards to what can be called the “personal world of soul”, which is the locus for God’s signs or theophanies. The more one knows about the nature of one’s “self”, the greater is one’s knowledge of theophanies – a knowledge which leads to the recognition of one’s Lord. As we saw in our chapter on theology (1.9), one’s personal Lord is a Divine Name, itself a merciful Self-disclosure of the Real.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, “he of us who has realized in himself the Reality manifests the form of the Reality to a greater extent than he who has not.”<sup>65</sup> This suggests a link between epistemology and ontology, where an increase in knowledge (i.e. realization) results in an increase in one’s being (i.e. manifestation). Indeed, according to Akbarian Metaphysics, “the domains of ontology and epistemology are inseparable. Reality is experienced by knowers, and knowledge is supported by reality.”<sup>66</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, the knowledge which is most supported by reality is knowledge by way of imagination, for imagination has not only an epistemological function, where it is the means with which to receive theophanic knowledge, but also an ontological function, as the very nature of existence and thus, of the existents. To “see things as they are” requires knowledge about the nature of “things” or existents. Since the human self is one such existent, and since knowledge of self is Divine, we turn now to the study of Ibn Arabī’s ontology so that we may examine the nature of the existential self.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 164.

<sup>63</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> See pp. 29-30 in this thesis.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 125.

<sup>66</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 163.

## CHAPTER 3: ONTOLOGY

### “He/Not He”

Ibn ‘Arabī is often characterized as the most eminent exponent of the doctrine known as *waḥdat al-wujūd* – literally translated as “The Oneness of Being” or “The Unity of Existence” – which has been equated by at least one scholar with “monorealism.”<sup>1</sup> However, the expression *waḥdat a-wujūd* is not found in the Shaykh’s own works; it was his students who later employed the term to designate his metaphysical position, which was, in any case, permeated with the notion of *waḥdāt al-wujūd*.<sup>2</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī certainly filled countless pages discoursing on *wujūd* (Being; existence); but long before the Shaykh, the term *wujūd* was used by the Islamic philosophers when referring to God’s Being or more simply, to God.<sup>3</sup>

#### **3.1 Being / Existence**

By Ibn ‘Arabī’s day, not only philosophers, but theologians and ṣūfis as well employed the term *wujūd* in accordance with the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā’s (Avicenna, 980-1037) model of existence, where God is the “Being that necessarily exists by Itself” (*Wājib al-wujūd li dhātihī*).<sup>4</sup> In other words, God is the “Necessary Being” (*wājib al-wujūd*) who cannot *not* exist. Chittick explains that “in this sense, *wujūd* designates the Essence of God or of the Real (*dhāt al-ḥaqq*), the only reality that is real in every respect.”<sup>5</sup> If *wujūd* designates God as the only Real existence the question remains: “What about the created things, whose existence must be accounted for?” The philosophers provided the answer that was to become the standard: “God’s *wujūd* is

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 9n42 in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” 504. Elsewhere, Chittick points out that the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which is usually connected with the school of Ibn ‘Arabī, is also employed when referring to the views of other Ṣūfis, including some who lived before Ibn ‘Arabī. William C. Chittick, “Rūmī and *waḥdat al-wujūd*,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, eds. A. Banani, R. Houannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge, 1994), 70-111.

<sup>3</sup> *Falsafā* (philosophy) itself is often defined as the study of *wujūd*. Ibid. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 270. For introductory surveys of Ibn Sīnā’s life, works and thought, see Shams Inati, “Ibn Sīnā,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Oliver Leaman (London, 1996), 231-246; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 9-51.

<sup>5</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 16.

Necessary (*wājib*) while the creature's *wujūd* is possible or contingent (*mumkin*).<sup>6</sup> Ibn 'Arabī accepts this answer and simultaneously applies the term *wujūd* to God and to "everything other than God" (*mā siwā Allāh*) – which is how he defines the "cosmos" or the "universe" (*al-‘ālam*) and everything within it. Since everything other than God only has possible *wujūd*, they are all known as "possible things". Thus, while the term *wujūd* is used by Ibn 'Arabī to describe the existence of the possible thing, the difference between God and "everything other than God" is that the latter are not identical with *wujūd*, and only God truly possesses *wujūd* because, in fact, *wujūd* is God: "The Real is identical with *wujūd*,"<sup>7</sup> and "In actual fact, *wujūd* is identical with the Real, not other than He."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the existence of a possible thing, unlike the Necessary Being, is not existent in itself but only through the Real's *wujūd*.<sup>9</sup> This being said, it should not be forgotten that for Ibn 'Arabī, *wujūd* is a single reality (i.e. monoreality) and there can never be two *wujūds* any more than there can be two Gods. The dependence of a thing's *wujūd* on the Real notwithstanding, all *wujūd* is the Real, and therefore, to say Ibn 'Arabī was an exponent of *wahdat al-wujūd* is only to give a name to a doctrine which he certainly held.

Ibn 'Arabī, whose conviction in the Oneness of Being is unwavering, "devotes most of his writings to explain the reality of manyness (*kathra*) within the context of the divine oneness,"<sup>10</sup> because for him, "multiplicity is almost as real as unity."<sup>11</sup> The former is simply a reflection of the latter, since it has its roots in God, the Real, Who in creating things, drapes them in *wujūd*. It was on the basis of this that Ibn 'Arabī's critics accused him of pantheism,<sup>12</sup> claiming that he made no distinction between the *wujūd* of God and the *wujūd* of everything other than God. However, from the ongoing discussion we can see that such a claim is, at the very least, an oversimplification of the Shaykh's doctrine. To clear the *Shaykh al-Akbar* from all charges of *shirk*,<sup>13</sup> Chittick grounds the doctrine

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<sup>6</sup> Idem, "Ibn 'Arabī," 504.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SDG*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion on Ibn 'Arabī and pantheism, monism and panentheism, see Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 104-107.

<sup>13</sup> Associating other gods with God.



in *tawḥīd* and the inter-relationship between *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. According to him, passages that identify the *wujūd* of God with the *wujūd* of the cosmos “represent the perspective of *tashbīh*. They are always offset, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own writings, by discussions of *tanzīh*, in which the distinction between God and the world is vigorously affirmed.”<sup>14</sup> Further defending Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine is Nasr, who makes reference to ontological *tawḥīd*, and reverses the accusation of *shirk* by explaining that “the world and the things in it are not God but their reality is none other than His; otherwise they would be completely independent realities, which is the same as considering them to be deities along with Allah.”<sup>15</sup> Nasr continues,

while God is absolutely transcendent with respect to the Universe, the Universe is not completely separated from Him...the “Universe is mysteriously plunged in God.” It signifies that to believe in any order of reality as autonomous apart from the Absolute Reality is to fall into the cardinal sin of Islam, namely polytheism (*shirk*), and to deny the *Shahādah* (*Lā ilāha ill’-Allāh*) – there is no divinity but the Divine – which means ultimately that there is no reality other than Absolute Reality.<sup>16</sup>

We can now say that for Ibn ‘Arabī, the possible things, which earlier were designated as “everything other than God,” are not truly “other” since they do not have an autonomous existence apart from God. Ibn ‘Arabī says: “Know that what is ‘other than the Reality’ (*siwā al-Ḥaqq*), which is called the Cosmos, is, in relation to the Reality, as a shadow is to that which casts the shadow, for it is the shadow of God...”<sup>17</sup> Another way of expressing this is to say that the possible things are no more than outward manifestations of *wujūd*.

### **3.2 God: Manifest / Nonmanifest**

The Shaykh finds the Qur’ānic basis for speaking of God in terms of “manifestation” (*ẓuhūr*), in a verse which states: “He is the First and the Last, the Manifest (*al-ẓāhir*) and the Nonmanifest (*al-bāṭin*).”<sup>18</sup> Consistent with his approach to God’s Word, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that one must not attempt to explain away the verse. For him, if the Qur’ān describes God as *al-ẓāhir*, then God is indeed outwardly manifest before our eyes,

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<sup>14</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” 504.

<sup>15</sup> Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 279.

<sup>18</sup> al-Qur’ān 57:3, cited in Chittick, *SPK*, 89.

waiting to be seen through “sight” (*baṣar*). In the same way, the verse describes God as *al-bāṭin*, and as such, He is Inwardly Nonmanifest and thus, hidden from ordinary sight, though perhaps witnessed through “insight” (*baṣīra*). While it may be tempting – perhaps even convenient – to simply equate God as Nonmanifest with, and *only* with, the Essence of the Real, and vice-versa, such an identification would not be altogether accurate nor faithful to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics since *al-bāṭin* – itself one of God’s Divine Names – is still a description of what God is, that is to say, a delimitation, and as was said earlier, the Essence-qua-Essence is beyond attributes and must remain Nondelimited. As such, the Essence of the Real remains unknowable, but the Divinity, which accepts names of *tanzīh* and names of *tashbīh*, can therefore be known as both *al-ẓāhir* and *al-bāṭin*. Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics demands that the Nonmanifest be an object of knowledge and this is made evident in the following:

Just as there is no object of knowledge whatsoever which is unseen by Him – on the contrary, everything is witnessed by Him – so also He is not unseen by His creatures....On the contrary, He is witnessed by them in the attributes of manifestation and nonmanifestation....Hence the name “Manifest” exercises its properties forever in existence, while the name “Nonmanifest” exercises its properties in knowledge and gnosis. Through the name Manifest He makes the cosmos subsist, and through the name Nonmanifest we come to know Him.<sup>19</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī is clear that one may witness God, not in Himself, but in His attributes of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. This means that strictly speaking, God as Essence or as Divinity cannot be witnessed directly, but only indirectly via the attributes belonging to Allah. As for how attributes of nonmanifestation may be witnessed, it is important to keep in mind that any such qualifications (i.e. manifest, non manifest) are relative, and what may be hidden from one perspective may be revealed from another. In other words, even that which is usually considered to be nonmanifest when compared to that which is known to be manifest may be witnessed by one who possesses a special vision known as insight (*baṣīra*), which is capable of seeing what is otherwise hidden. In this way, the *tajalliyyāt* which are otherwise considered to be nonmanifest also become witnessed, though it is important to note that when the hidden becomes revealed, it is only revealed under the name “Manifest” and thus, it too is known as the manifest beyond which

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<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

stands the nonmanifest.<sup>20</sup> This process may continue *ad infinitum* so that God may remain the Nonmanifest while never ceasing to be the Manifest.

So long as God remains *al-bāṭin*, He is to be understood exclusively in terms of *tanzīh*, and *wujūd* refers only to Him Who is the Essence and the only Being. However, since we know that God is also *al-zāhir*, He must also be understood in terms of *tashbīh* and thus, *wujūd* is manifested in the form (*ṣūra*) of the entities, which are then attributed with existence. As *al-zāhir*, God displays His *wujūd* in what is known as His *mazhar* which is His own Self-disclosure (*tajallī*). Grammatically a “noun of place”, *mazhar* (pl. *mazāhir*) is derived from *zuhūr* or “manifestation”, and is translated as “locus of manifestation.”<sup>21</sup> The primary *mazhar* is the cosmos itself because “the whole world is,” according to the *Futūḥāt*, “precisely the Self-manifestation (*tajallī*) of the Truly Real, for whoever really knows the Truly Real.”<sup>22</sup> Within the cosmos however, many other loci of manifestation (*mazāhir*) appear and all of these are simply manifestations of God, or perhaps more accurately, of His Attributes or Names.

### **3.3 The Thing’s (Non) Existence**

The created things or self-disclosures are multiple due to the infinite Names of God, but are one due to the Oneness of the *wujūd* manifest through them. With this in mind, Ibn ‘Arabī comments on the seemingly ambiguous relationship between God and the “things”. Referring to *wujūd* as existence, the Shaykh writes: “God is identical with the existence of the things, but He is not identical with the things.”<sup>23</sup> From this, it may be assumed that, at least in their essence, the possible things possess existence which is then identical to God’s existence, but such an assumption would be erroneous according to the Shaykh, as it would posit two existences, i.e. two *wujūds*; rather, in its essence, the possible thing is the exact opposite of existence and thus, Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “What separates the essence of the possible thing and the Essence of God pertains to the Necessary Being of God and the necessary nonexistence (*al-wājib al-‘adam*) of the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “God’s self-disclosure to whomsoever He discloses Himself in whatsoever world it may be, whether unseen or visible, takes place from His name the Manifest.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 218. More on this at 4.2.

<sup>21</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 224. This was revealed to Ibn ‘Arabī, during his personal ascension, by the Prophet Aaron.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 90.

possible thing.”<sup>24</sup> Articulating his view in perhaps more clear terms, Ibn ‘Arabī elaborates on the nature of the created thing’s existence – or lack thereof – as follows: “The existence attributed to each created thing is the Being of the Real, since the possible thing has no existence. However, the entities of the possible things are receptacles for the manifestation of this Being.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, it becomes clear that what is ordinarily perceived to be existence is really a matter of manifestation of Being, that is to say, manifestation of *wujūd* within an otherwise non-existent and empty cup.

Lest it still be thought that *wujūd* is somehow associated with the thing itself, in the following passage the Shaykh emphasizes once again the function of manifestation, rejecting even the idea of an “acquired existence.” This may be due to a realization that upon being acquired, a situation arises where there is now two existences, which violates reality that “There is no *wujūd*, but *Wujūd*.” Making reference to God’s creative command *Kun* (“Be!”)<sup>26</sup> through which things “come to be”, the Shaykh explains:

God says to the thing, “Be!” He does not address or command any but that which hears, yet it has no existence....It receives coming to be. But our view of its reception of coming to be is not like your view. Its reception of coming to be is only the fact that it becomes a locus of manifestation for the Real. This is the meaning of His words, “[Be!] And it is.” This does not mean that the thing “acquires existence” (*istifādat al-wujūd*). It only acquires the property of being a locus of manifestation [*mazhar*].<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 143. Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to the possible things as being in themselves “nonexistent”, due to their essential poverty (*fāqr*) or dependence on God who is the Rich (*ghani*). For Ibn ‘Arabī, this means that “there is nothing in Being/existence but God. As for us [creatures] though we exist, our existence is through Him. He whose existence is through other than himself is in effect nonexistent.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 92. It is because Ibn ‘Arabī believes that the possible things are in themselves non-existent that he believes they can not be identical to God of whom the same can never be said. The following confirms this and also indicates why the charge of *shirk* is not accurate. “He is identical (‘*ayn*) to all things in manifestation (*ẓuhūr*), but not identical to them in their essences (*dhawāt*) – Glory be to Him and high exalted is He [above that]! No, He is He, and the things are the things....” Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 160. Therefore, what is identified with God is nothing other than His own manifestation which, strictly speaking, is not the thing itself which only serves as a locus for the manifestation of the one Being.

<sup>26</sup> “Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it ‘Be!’ and it is.” al-Qur’ān 16:40, cited in Idem, “Ibn al-‘Arabī and his School,” 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 90. Elsewhere, Chittick points out that each locus of manifestation, even as it manifests *wujūd*, remains, in it itself non-existent. The *mazāhir* also have an effect on the way *wujūd* is manifested, which accounts for the multiplicity and diversity in existence. He writes: “The things or entities remain eternally nonexistent. They cannot “acquire existence” as the philosophers maintain because ‘realities do not change’ (*al-haqāiq lā tatabadḍal*). What appears to be the acquisition of existence by the things is in fact God disclosing Himself to us under the guise of His name the ‘Manifest’ (*al-zāhir*), though His Self-Disclosure is colored by the properties and effects of the things.” Chittick, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 159.

For the Shaykh, created things neither have existence of their own nor do they acquire it; they simply manifest it. Not only do the *mazāhir* manifest *wujūd*, they also are manifested within *wujūd* since they are found within the cosmos which is said to be all of existence. It is to be remembered that the cosmos itself is the primary *mazhar* and thus, each created entity which receives the command “Be!”, becomes a *mazhar* within a *mazhar*.

### **3.4 Immutable Entities**

In the passage quoted above, the “it” which “has no existence” refers to the created thing or “entity” (*‘ayn*), before it comes into existence in the cosmos, and is thus said to be “nonexistent”.<sup>28</sup> However, the nonexistent entity does have some sort of existence since it exists in the Knowledge of God Who knows all things even before they enter into the cosmos as existent entities. According to Ibn ‘Arabī the nonexistent entity which exists in God’s Knowledge is to be known as *‘ayn thābita*, translated by some scholars as “immutable entity” and by others as “immutable prototype” or “permanent archetype.”<sup>29</sup> The immutable entity and the “existent entity” (*‘ayn mawjūda*) are the same reality, except that the latter is found (*mawjūd*) within the cosmos and the former is the same entity before coming into the cosmos, and thus, is only found (*mawjūd*) in God’s Knowledge. In either situation, i.e. whether the thing comes into existence in the cosmos or not, it is known as a “possible thing.” To recall, it is known as “possible” because it has no existence (*wujūd*) of its own, but depends on God. However, since it is something known by God, it cannot be said that the possible thing is absolutely nonexistent, and thus, it has a relative nonexistence. In other words, the possibles have an intermediate status between absolute nonexistence and *wujūd*.<sup>30</sup>

As God knows all things eternally, and since there is no change in His Knowledge, whether or not a possible thing enters into the cosmos as an existent entity, it is still found within God’s Knowledge as an immutable entity and never ceases to be

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<sup>28</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> In this thesis, both entity and prototype will be used. Chittick prefers entity, and believes the translation as archetype is particularly misleading. See *Ibid.*, 84. Ibn ‘Arabī acknowledges that he learnt the term *‘ayn thābita* from the Mu‘tazilite theologians, but also states that they did not understand its significance fully. *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*, *SDG*, 345.

“nonexistent.”<sup>31</sup> This means that any given possible thing that is found in the cosmos as an existent entity is *at the same time* found as a possible thing in God’s Knowledge as an immutable entity, which Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to as the “root” (*aṣl*)<sup>32</sup> or “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*)<sup>33</sup> of the existent thing. As for why the possible things are found in existence, Ibn ‘Arabī believes that the

possible things...desire to taste (*dhawq*) the state of existence, just as they tasted the state of nonexistence. They ask the Necessary Being with the tongue of their immutability to bring their entities into existence, so that their knowledge may become tasting. Hence He brings them into existence for themselves....<sup>34</sup>

Still, the “immutable entities” (*al-a’yān al thābita*) themselves do not leave their state of nonexistence, and immutable as they are, remain in this state while they only become loci of manifestation (*mazāhir*) for *wujūd*, which is then manifested in the cosmos as the existent thing. This allows them to taste existence, without ever becoming existent themselves. Thus, the existent thing which is found in the cosmos has no real existence, for in itself, it is nonexistent and is only a *maḥall* or locus, where *wujūd* (Being) is manifested as existence (*wujūd*). Nonetheless it certainly appears to be existent and thus *wujūd* may be ascribed to things in the cosmos in a “metaphorical” sense (*majāz*).<sup>35</sup> This, then, is what it means to say that the possible things are “none other than God”, for the countless entities within existence, and in fact existence itself, are nothing other than infinite loci for the Self-disclosure of God Who is the “One/Many”.

This need not suggest that God’s Self-manifestation occurs in a chaotic way, devoid of a wisdom-filled arrangement. In fact, as Chittick points out, “*wujūd* discloses itself in keeping with a specific order and arrangement that is determined by itself.”<sup>36</sup> The roots of this Divinely determined order are the Divine Names, themselves ranked in degrees of excellence (i.e. *tafāḍul*), with the result that the cosmos, that is to say, all of existence, manifests *wujūd* in a hierarchical manner.<sup>37</sup> Adding to the order is the

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<sup>31</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 152.

<sup>33</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, *SDG*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Based on several Qur’ānic verses (e.g. 12:76; 16:71) which indicate that certain things or people surpass or are more excellent than others, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that God establishes a hierarchical order throughout the cosmos. Idem, *SPK*, 51; cf. p. 46n60 in this thesis.

“preparedness” (*isti‘ādā*) of the created thing, which is an important technical term employed by Ibn ‘Arabī when discussing how God manifests Himself through the possible things. According to the Shaykh, *wujūd* manifests itself in full, but the entities of the possible things receive (*qabūl*) that manifestation according to the degree of their own preparedness, which is determined by its immutable entity, and this means that *wujūd* becomes manifest in various degrees.<sup>38</sup>

### **3.5 *Mazhar: Tanzīh* and *Tashbīh***

While the degrees vary, the *wujūd* itself is one. This is important because for Ibn ‘Arabī, the principle of ontological oneness, evinced in the expression *wahdat al-wujūd*, dominates over any perceived duality or multiplicity which may seem to appear due to appearance of the *mazhar*. The deception of appearances aside, there can be no real ontological multiplicity as there is no “other” to diversify the One, except for that which is “none other than He.” Thus, in his *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the *mazhar* as a “locational determinant” and says that it is

nothing other than the immutable essence in respect of which the Reality is [formally] diversified within the theater [of His Self-revelation]. These locational determinants *seem* to diversify Him, but it is He who absorbs every determinant, He Himself being determined only by His own Self-manifestation. There is naught but He.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, the seeming duality has more to do with perception than anything else. Thus, from the perspective of *tanzīh*, God’s *mazhar* is other than God, because God’s Essence lies infinitely beyond it. From the perspective of *tashbīh*, God’s *mazhar* is none other than God because it has no existence of its own and simply manifests Him. It is only when both perspectives are affirmed simultaneously, that the reality of *tawḥīd*, where “there is naught but He,” is confirmed as it ought to be.

Indeed, if we perceive the *mazhar* from the perspective of *tanzīh*, then it is certainly other than God because God’s Essence is not confined by any thing and lies

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<sup>38</sup> Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 299n42. Ibn ‘Arabī quotes verse 17:20: “The bestowal of Thy Lord is not confined,” and explains that “God bestows continually, but the loci receive this bestowal in the measure of the realities of their preparedness. In the same way we say: The sun spreads its rays over all existent things and is not stingy in its light toward anyone. But the loci receive that light in the measure of their preparedness.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 87 (emphasis mine).

infinitely beyond all things. However, the *mazhar* as a created thing which enters into relative existence, i.e. the cosmos, cannot be independent since only God is independent. For this reason a connection is established between the *mazhar* and God Who wishes to reveal Himself. Seen from this Self-revealing aspect, God is, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Divinity, itself not a separate reality from the Essence. Thus, even with respect to God’s transcendence, the *mazhar* must still be viewed and understood according to its relationship with God and therefore, while it is certain that the *mazhar* is “not God,” it may be said – keeping in mind the conditions of *tanzīh* – that the *mazhar* is “from God” in the same way that the Prophet is seen to be from God, as expressed theologically in verse 21:107: “And We have sent thee only as a mercy to the worlds.”<sup>40</sup> The more one begins to emphasize this relationship between God and creation, where the most Merciful manifests His Mercy in the person of the Prophet, the more one shifts from the perspective of *tanzīh* to *tashbīh*. While it is true that the Qur’ān forbids man to “make up likenesses for God,”<sup>41</sup> it is also true that the Qur’ān says that it is God Himself “Who makes up likenesses for people,”<sup>42</sup> and thus, by referring to Muḥammad as a “mercy” or a “luminous lamp”,<sup>43</sup> and by equating the Prophet’s hand with God’s Hand,<sup>44</sup> the Qur’ān repeatedly calls for a discussion of *tashbīh*. Therefore, God’s signs, symbols and similitudes (i.e. His *mazāhir*) must be viewed in light of *tashbīh*, just as they must be viewed in the light of *tanzīh*.

From the perspective of *tashbīh*, not only is God’s *mazhar* “from God,” but it also signifies none other than God because it has no existence of its own; it simply manifests Him. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the truth about God or anything for that matter, can never be expressed in terms of “either/or” (i.e. either *tanzīh* or *tashbīh*) and must be expressed in terms of “both/and” (i.e. both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*), because “ambiguity does not grow up simply from our ignorance, it is an ontological fact, inherent in the nature of

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<sup>40</sup> al-Qur’ān 21:107, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 221.

<sup>41</sup> al-Qur’ān 16:74, cited in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 215.

<sup>42</sup> al-Qur’ān 14:25, cited in Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See al-Qur’ān 33:46.

<sup>44</sup> “Those who pledge their allegiance to you [Muḥammad] pledge their allegiance to God. The Hand of God is over their hands.” al-Qur’ān 48:10, cited in Kenneth Cragg, *Readings in the Qur’ān* (London, 1993), 252.



the cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, only when both perspectives are affirmed simultaneously, is the reality of *tawḥīd* confirmed.

### **3.6 “He/Not He”**

Ibn ‘Arabī himself sums up what has been said concerning God and His manifestation, particularly the ontological ambiguity inherent in the discussion, in his formula: *huwa lā huwa* or “He/not He”.<sup>46</sup> When looking at the *mazḥar* in the light of *tashbīḥ*, one may say “*huwa*”, as it will be seen as none other than He. When looking at the *mazḥar* in the light of *tanzīḥ*, one must say “*lā huwa*,” because it ought to be recognized as other than He. The Shaykh finds support for his formula “He/not He” in the Qur’ān, which makes reference to an incident where the Prophet Muḥammad threw sand in the direction of the enemy at the battle of Badr. Verse 8:17 reveals: “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw.”<sup>47</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī comments:

There is none in *wujūd* [Being/existence] but God. But the clear formulation of this question is terribly difficult. Verbal expression falls short of it and conceptualization cannot define it, because it quickly escapes and its properties are contradictory. It is like his words “You did not throw,” so He negated, “when you threw,” so He affirmed, “but God threw,” so He negated the engendered existence (*kawn*) of Muhammad and affirmed Himself as identical (‘*ayn*) with Muhammad since He appointed for him the name “God”.<sup>48</sup>

By saying Muḥammad was appointed the name “God”, Ibn ‘Arabī is referring to the fact that the verse both identifies the individual thrower as the Prophet – if only in appearance – and negates the Prophet’s individuality as well, only to re-identify him with God - the reality behind the appearance. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the appearance or form of Muḥammad is the “not He”, whereas the Prophet’s reality is the “He”. This is because Muḥammad, like all others, is a *mazḥar*, but unlike others, is the *mazḥar par excellence*; he is the most eminent exemplar or perfect symbol (*mithāl*) of “He/not He.” For this reason, the Shaykh sometimes refers to the Prophet as the “Muḥammadan form”, in which the reality of God appears. “In this matter,” says Ibn ‘Arabī,

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<sup>45</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 25-26.

<sup>47</sup> al-Qur’ān 8:17, cited in Samsel, “A Unity,” 209.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 209-210.

faith is very necessary, so consider His effectiveness in that God was sent down in a Muhammadan form. It is God Himself Who has related this to His servants, not us, but He Himself. Now, His word is true and to believe it is obligatory, whether one grasps the significance of what He has said or not, whether one be a learned man or just a believing Muslim.<sup>49</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī believes that the reality of “He/not He” can be best understood through *khayāl*, because imagination has the power to bring together opposites. When God as *al-zāhir* manifests His *wujūd* through the loci of manifestation, particularly when these loci are the created objects visible to ordinary sight, these *mazāhir* – and this is perhaps ironic – are most often said to be “not He.” To see them as “He” one must be cognizant of the fact that something is being manifested and that something is what is otherwise known as the hidden or *al-bāṭin*.<sup>50</sup> As a result of the continual interplay between *al-zāhir* and *al-bāṭin*, and because, as the Shaykh says, realities never change,<sup>51</sup> God manifests Himself through the *mazhar* when He is hidden, but is hidden when He is manifest, due to the “form” of the *mazhar*, which acts as a veil. Thus, “He becomes manifest without any doubt in that He is He,” writes the Shaykh, “But He is hidden through the binding that He undergoes in His manifestation,”<sup>52</sup> with the result that He is not recognized as He. If He is to be recognized, one must perceive the locus (*maḥall*) for what it truly is, i.e. to perceive the manifestation (*zuhūr*) within it, which only then becomes a *mazhar*. To miss God’s theophany within the *mazhar* is to see it only with the eye of the unaided reason, which can only see “not He.” To see “He” requires the eye of imagination, with which *al-bāṭin* is made manifest through the *mazhar*. This is why Ibn ‘Arabī, as stated earlier at 3.2, tells us that through the name Nonmanifest, we come to know God.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.7 Imaginal Existence**

The most basic characteristic of imagination is ambiguity or intermediacy. Imagination is that which mediates between any two given realities and that which exists in such a state is said to be an imaginal (*khayālī*) thing. We may recall that intermediacy is also

<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 234.

<sup>50</sup> Such cognition may be equated with illumination and Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that “He whom God has illuminated sees Him in all things.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Addas, Ibn ‘Arabī: *The Voyage of No Return*, (Cambridge, 2000), 55. Hereafter: Addas, *Voyage*.

<sup>51</sup> See Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Idem, *SDG*, 334.

<sup>53</sup> It should be remembered that, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, only imagination is able to gather positive knowledge about God, whereas reason is suited for negative theology which tells what God is not.

the basic characteristic of the possible things, and this means that intermediacy is the defining characteristic of both imagination and possibility. Chittick brings us to the conclusion: “Thus, in a broad cosmological perspective, every possible thing is precisely an imaginal thing, an image of both *wujūd* and nonexistence.”<sup>54</sup> With this understanding, all existent things, which are God’s theophanies, are in fact imaginal things, as they stand somewhere between true or absolute *wujūd* (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and absolute non-existence (*al-‘adam al-muṭlaq*). In his *Fuṣūṣ* the Shaykh writes:

Hence everything that we perceive is the *wujūd* of the Real within the entities of the possible things. In respect of the He-ness of the Real, it is His *wujūd*, but in respect of the diversity of the forms within it, it is the entities of the possible things.... Since the situation is as we have mentioned to you, the cosmos is imaginal. It has no true *wujūd*, which is the meaning of “imagination.”<sup>55</sup>

This means that everything other than God, including all of created existence as we know it, is imagination, as it is *wujūd*/not *wujūd* or He/not He. Aside from using the term *khayāl*, Ibn ‘Arabī expresses the imaginal nature of the existents by referring to them with the term *mithāl* (“image”), which he often employs as a synonym for imagination (*khayāl*).<sup>56</sup> The root meaning of *mithāl* is to look like, to resemble, to appear in the likeness of,<sup>57</sup> and thus, it may also be translated as “symbol”. A form (*ṣūra*) which appears in the created world, is in fact a symbol or an image (*mithāl*) of a more noble reality, which is that which is being symbolized (*mamthūl*).<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the most significant Qur’ānic usage of the root occurs where the word *tamaththul*, which means “to appear in the image of” or “to become imaginalized”, is employed. The Qur’ān reveals that when God sent His Spirit to Mary, it “became imaginalized to her as a man without fault.”<sup>59</sup> The significance, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is that the verse illustrates how a spiritual reality, by way of imaginalization, may appear onto the physical realm as a seemingly ordinary thing. In fact, it can be no other way since the very nature of creation is imagination and thus, anything which appears therein is said to be imaginalized.

<sup>54</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 345.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 27.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī employs the term *mithāl* only when speaking about ontological objects or existence itself as being imagination, but never for the faculty of imagination.

<sup>57</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 117.

<sup>58</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 6.

<sup>59</sup> al-Qur’ān 19:17, cited in Chittick, *SPK*, 117. In this verse, God’s Spirit is believed to be Angel Gabriel.

The significance of ontological imagination is further revealed when we see how the term *mithāl* is associated with a major doctrine of Akbarian Metaphysics. As we know, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, creation is essentially and irreversibly poor (*al-faqīr*) with respect to God who is the Rich (*al-ghani*). Ontologically speaking, the poverty of the possible things signifies its lack of *wujūd*. When it enters into creation as a *mazhar* manifesting *wujūd* (Being), its poverty does not cease. Therefore its *wujūd* or its existence needs to be continually re-sustained. As the *mazāhir* are nothing but image-symbols that are imaginalized (*tamaththul*) into the created world, and because they are essentially poor, they need to be continually re-imaginalized. In other words, the images, which are none other than the theophanies, undergo perpetual “renewal” (*tajaddud*). According to Ibn ‘Arabī, this means that the world and everything in it is being recreated anew at every single moment.<sup>60</sup> The Shaykh calls this the doctrine of “New Creation” (*al-khalq al-jadid*), where *jadid* (new) in this technical sense has the meaning of “renewal”, because it is the same created thing which is being continually recreated at every moment.<sup>61</sup> The name for this doctrine is derived from a Qur’ānic verse which asks: “Were we wearied by the first creation? Yet they are uncertain about a new creation.”<sup>62</sup> The immediate context of this verse makes it pertain to the “resurrection,” but according to the Shaykh, most people misunderstand this and believe that the “new creation” applies strictly to the next world where they will receive a new body. Ibn ‘Arabī however, who believes in the imaginal nature of existence where there is perpetual renewal of images at every instant, maintains that the “new creation” is to be experienced in the here and now.<sup>63</sup>

### **3.8 *Tawhīd*: An Ontological Object?**

Since, according to Shaykh, existence as a whole is a *mazhar* where God reveals Himself, all of creation and everything in it is “He/not He”, and as such, is a testament of God’s Unity (*tawhīd*), where *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* come together as one (*wāḥid*). In our

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<sup>60</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 197.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> al-Qur’ān 50:15, cited in Corbin, *Alone*, 201. Corbin notes that the Arabic term translated by “doubt” signifies both confusion, ambiguity (*lubs*), and to put on a garment (*lubs*). Therefore, he believes that hidden beneath the exoteric translation of this verse is its theosophical significance: “Should we be powerless to *clothe* them in a new creation?” Ibid., 353n29.

<sup>63</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 58.

chapter on theology, it was noted that Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the term *wāḥid* allowed him to use it both for the Creator and the created, and shaped his understanding of *tawḥīd* and its proper object.<sup>64</sup> The following passage from Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Kitāb al-Alif*, reveals his belief that every created thing is itself a *wāḥid* which signifies *tawḥīd*:

So everything in *wujūd* is a *wāḥid*. Were a thing not a *wāḥid*, it could not affirm that oneness belongs to God, for it can only affirm for its Existence-Giver what it has itself. Thus it has been said, “In each thing He has a sign signifying that He is one.” This sign that is found in each thing signifying God’s oneness is the thing’s oneness....There is nothing in *wujūd*, whether inanimate object or anything else, high or low, that does not recognize the unity of its Creator, so it is *wāḥid*, inescapably.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, all created things which are found in existence recognize the *tawḥīd* of their Creator. When it is remembered that “The Creator”(*al-khālaq*) is an attribute of the Divinity, it is further realized that the *tawḥīd* of Allah, if it is to be understood and experienced by a created thing, can only be a statement about the Divinity, i.e. Allah as *al-wāḥid*, which has a relationship with the cosmos, and not about the Essence, i.e. Allah as *al-aḥad*, which is utterly unknowable and never the object of reflection.<sup>66</sup> In fact, about *al-aḥad*, Ibn ‘Arabī states:

The *aḥad* does not accept association, and no worship is directed toward it. On the contrary, worship belongs to the Lord, so pay attention to giving the station of Lordship its full due and leaving unity in the *tanzīh* to which we have alluded. The *aḥad* is exalted, forbidden through its unreachability, and it remains forever in obscurity.<sup>67</sup>

It is clear that no one can be certain in speaking about *al-aḥad* or the Essence. Since a Muslim ought to be certain about God’s Oneness, that which is declared to be One (*al-wāḥid*) is the Lord of Lords (*rabb al-arbāb*), that is to say, Allah as the Divinity, Who accepts and unites both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* within Himself. What is also brought out by the passage from the *Kitāb al-Alif* (cited at the top of this page), is that each created thing is itself a *wāḥid*, which necessitates that it too possesses a certain oneness, which enables it to recognize its Lord’s Oneness after having recognized itself. Thus, when the mystic reflects upon the created object – or indeed upon his self – and when he sees

<sup>64</sup> See the discussion on *aḥad* and *wāḥid* at 1.4 in this thesis.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 168; cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 359.

<sup>66</sup> See 1.5 in this thesis.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 169.

through the power of imagination that it – or he – is in fact a self-disclosure, a locus of manifestation for Divine Oneness, he then knows what the object of *tawhīd* really is. In the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī advises:

Do not let manyness veil you from the *tawhīd* of Allah! I have explained to you the object of your *tawhīd*, without addressing myself to the Essence in Itself, since reflection upon it is forbidden according to the Law. The Messenger of God said, “Reflect not upon God’s Essence,” and God says, “God warns you about His Self” (3:28), that is, that you must not reflect upon It and judge by some matter that It is such and such. But God did not forbid talking about the Divinity, though It is not grasped by reflection, and the Folk of Allah declare witnessing It to be impossible. However, the Divinity has loci of manifestation within which It becomes manifest, and the vision of the servants becomes connected to these loci, while the religions have mentioned this sort of thing.<sup>68</sup>

Here again we see that for Ibn ‘Arabī, the *tawhīd* of Allah, in so far as this reality can be understood, experienced and verified by servants of God, has not to do with the Essence but the Divinity. As for the Essence, reflection upon it is categorically forbidden and as for the Divinity, while the right to reflect upon it is not altogether denied, it is acknowledged that the Divinity can neither be grasped nor witnessed through the act of reflection. Thus, Allah as the Divinity can only be the indirect object of *tawhīd* for His subjects, i.e. His servants. However, there is indeed a direct object of *tawhīd* and this is the *mazhar* within which the Divinity can be witnessed and thus grasped. This confirms the observation made in our chapter on epistemology (2.4) where Ibn ‘Arabī seemingly suggested the possibility of *tawhīd* becoming embodied in an ontological object which, when seen by the eye of imagination, would allow for an experiential knowledge of Oneness. This is precisely why Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that the vision of God’s servants, and even their reflection,<sup>69</sup> becomes connected neither to the Essence nor to the Divinity, but to the *mazhar*, which is itself *wāḥid* and the direct object and embodiment of *tawhīd*.

The *mazhar* is the embodiment of *tawhīd* because it is an “imaginal object” bringing together “He” and “not He”, the same way the Divinity brings together within itself the Essence and creation. As we already know, for Ibn ‘Arabī, to see the *mazhar* as

<sup>68</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 155.

<sup>69</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, to reflect upon the *mazāhir*, i.e. the engendered things, is to reflect upon God’s Names because the Names are the root (*aṣl*) of the engendered things. He writes: “God says, ‘In that there are signs for a people who reflect’ (13:3). But reflection upon the Essence of God is impossible, so there remains only reflection upon engendered existence. That to which reflection becomes connected is the Most Beautiful Names or the features (*simāt*) of the temporally originated things. The names, all of them, are the root of engendered existence.” Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 62.

it is requires the power of *khayāl*, for only imagination may perceive the imaginal (*khayālī*), which is the theophany. Reason, of course, is also necessary so that the *mazhar* may also be seen as what it is not, and what it is not is the Divinity itself. Without the balance of reason, it is possible that one may remain transfixed by a single locus of manifestation of God, and as we know, the *mazāhir* are ranked in degrees of excellence. However, only imagination has the strength to unite the opposites and therefore, *khayāl*, particularly when aided with *kashf*, is able to unite the eye of imagination with the eye of reason, and the two may see as one.

The *mazhar* is also not *tawhīd* itself, which is a relationship or a meaning. However, as noted in our chapter on epistemology (2.4), through the “Presence of Imagination”, which refers to a domain or realm wherein imagination exerts its influence or properties,<sup>70</sup> the meaning of *tawhīd* takes on a form or image, and in this way becomes embodied or imaginalized, the same way in which God’s Spirit became imaginalized to Mary as a man. Since the cosmos as a whole is imagination, *tawhīd* may become imaginalized therein, and this it does most perfectly, in the *mazhar* of Oneness.<sup>71</sup>

### **3.9 The Mirror of Muhammad**

The loci of manifestation, to which the servants of God connect or attach their vision, appear in the external world (*āfāq*) as well as in the internal world (*anfus*). While the servant may attach his vision to any of these *mazāhir*, those which appear within his own self are particularly significant as the servant is himself a *mazhar* within whom theophanies are revealed. We have already seen that “He who knows his soul knows his Lord” and since “worship belongs to the Lord,”<sup>72</sup> the servant must turn within and know his self or his soul in order to know and worship his Lord, which is none other than the Name of God. Therefore, the gnostic should seek the manifestation of the Divinity by way of theophany within his own soul, for this is where greater *mazāhir* shall appear. However, all loci do not equally manifest the Real, since there is a definite ranking in

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<sup>70</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> It goes without saying that to see imaginalized *tawhīd* requires the eye of imagination which is typically veiled in the physical world and thus, blind to the Presence of Imagination. However, the cosmos may contain within it a world where the Presence of Imagination does not go unnoticed. More on this in 4.2.

<sup>72</sup> See Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted on p. 48 and p. 63 in this thesis.

degree. The greatest of all *mazāhir* is the reality of Muḥammad, who for this reason is known by the Ṣūfīs as *al-insān al-kāmil*, “The Perfect Man”.<sup>73</sup> Muḥammad’s perfection is a result of his being created - like Adam and all Prophets - in the “form” or “image of God”.<sup>74</sup> It follows that the vision of the servant, even while turning to his own self in order to know his soul and Lord, should be connected to the soul, self or light (*nūr*) of Muḥammad.<sup>75</sup> This is indeed what Ibn ‘Arabī advises for he who desires to have the vision of the Real. In what follows, the Shaykh reveals how one is to experience the most perfect manifestation of the Real:

Once you come to know this, and once you desire to see the Real in the most perfect manner in which He can become manifest in this human plane, then you need to know that this does not belong to you. You do not have a constitution like that possessed by Muḥammad. Whenever the Real discloses Himself to you within the mirror of your heart, your mirror will make Him manifest to you in the measure of its constitution and in the form of its shape. You know how far you stand below Muḥammad’s degree in knowledge of his Lord through his plane. So cling to faith and follow him! Place him before you as the mirror within which you gaze upon your own form.... When you do this, you will come to know that God must disclose Himself to Muḥammad within his mirror.... So the manifestation of the Real within the mirror of Muḥammad is the most perfect, most balanced, and most beautiful manifestation, because of the mirror’s actuality. When you perceive Him in the mirror of Muḥammad, you will have perceived from Him a perfection which you could not perceive in respect of considering your own mirror.<sup>76</sup>

Such is the importance of the Perfect Man who allows those servants who are seeking the beatific vision to have the most perfect perception of their Lord they can have, by

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<sup>73</sup> It has been well noted that although Ibn ‘Arabī appears to have been the first to use the phrase, “*al-insān al-kāmil*”, the concept itself, as well as other similar formulations, had already existed within Ṣūfism and other esoteric traditions within Islam. See Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1921), 77-78, and his “*al-Insān al-Kāmil*,” *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1961), 170.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī writes, “the Prophet said: ‘God created Adam according to His Image,’ and this is his quality. In creating him, God brought together both His Hands, and therefore we know that He gave him the quality of perfection (*kamāl*). He created him perfect and all-inclusive, and thus he is able to receive all the Names. Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 48.

<sup>75</sup> On the connection between the individual soul and the soul of the Perfect Man, Elton Hall comments: “The true self (*nafs*) of each individual cannot be other than the Reality of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), and any other sense of self, however useful at different stages along the path, must be dissolved in degrees of annihilation (*fānā*). Hall, “Ibn ‘Arabī and the Perfectibility of Man”, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 352. The idea that the *mazāhir* which one should focus his or her attention on are in the form of living human beings is supported by the text of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, where the Divine voice tells the Shaykh: “Look for Me in the vicegerent and amongst the guardians of the night and you will find Me.” Twinch and Beneito, *Contemplation*, 49.



being the mirror within which they witness the Face of God.<sup>77</sup> The *insān kāmil* is himself the supreme *mazhar* who unites within himself all of the Divine Names – names of *tanzīh* and names of *tashbīh*. The servant who is able to perceive the Perfect Man as the supreme *mazhar*, or the greatest name (*al-ism al-a‘zam*), through the power of *khayāl*, may see all of the Divine Names and theophanies brought together and reflected as images or forms in the mirror of the Perfect Man. In this way the servant recognizes his own Lord by recognizing the Lord of the Perfect Man whose Lord is *rabb al-arbāb*. Another way of saying this is that the servant recognizes his own reality, that he too is made in the image of God,<sup>78</sup> through the reality of the Perfect Man who has already recognized within himself the most perfect manifestation of the Real. In this way, the Perfect Man through his own perfection perfects others, and this is indeed the reason why Muḥammad, the “luminous lamp” and the embodiment of *tawḥīd*, was sent as a “mercy to the worlds”.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Chodkiewicz observes: “It is in fact, the symbol of the mirror which allows us to understand what, from a strictly theological point of view, seems to be a blasphemous ‘divinification’ of the Prophet.” Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Banner of Praise,” in *Praise: Foundations of the Spiritual Life according to Ibn ‘Arabi*, ed. Stephen Hirtenstein (Oxford, 1997), 57.

<sup>78</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, one’s “humanity” in its truest sense, continues to remain a potentiality until one has realized and actualized the meaning of being created in God’s Image, or one’s “Adamic form.” He writes: “Man is defined specifically by the Divine Image, and he who does not possess this definition is not a man. Rather, he is an animal whose form resembles the outward appearance of man.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 49. Thus, to become *insān* (man) is to have the realization of the Divine Image, the experience of which constitutes man’s second birth, “the real birth of Adam,” which is not a past event, now long gone, but one that must occur continually as an internal spiritual event.

<sup>79</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī is not suggesting that the physical person of Muḥammad or the person of any Perfect Man, be considered as an object of worship; rather, Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to a well-known ḥadīth which says that perfection (*al-iḥsān*) is to worship God as though you were seeing Him. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the “as though” is an allusion to the power of the imaginative faculty (*khayāl*), through which the *mazhar* of God may be imaginalized, so as to allow the worshiper to worship “as though” he were seeing God. See Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 76n6. In the same way, it is not that the physical Muḥammad is to be the object of vision, but that the reality or light of Muḥammad should be epiphanized within one’s imagination, so as to serve as the mirror which reflects the most perfect manifestation of the Real.

## CHAPTER 4: COSMOLOGY

### *“The Imaginal Barzakh”*

Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on imagination apply the ontology of “He/not He” to every level of existence. His ontology is dominated by the concept of imagination and likewise, the relevance of imagination is partly due to its ontological status. Ibn ‘Arabī insists that one must perceive the ontological role of imagination within the cosmos and adamantly claims: “He who does not know (*ya‘rif*) the ontological status (*martaba*) of imagination (*al-khayāl*) has no knowledge whatsoever.”<sup>1</sup> Taking the *Shaykh al-Akbar*’s warning into account, we will do well to examine Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology in greater detail, by discussing his views on cosmology, where the properties of imagination are found on three basic levels within the cosmos.

#### **4.1 First Cosmic level: Supreme *Barzakh***

On the first level, known as the level of “unbounded” or “Nondelimited Imagination” (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*), imagination refers to the greatest of all intermediate realities, “The Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-raḥmān*), i.e. all of created existence, or the cosmos as a whole, which stands halfway between Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), or the unrestricted existence of God, and Absolute non-Being (*al-‘adam al-muṭlaq*).<sup>2</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, the cosmos is “He/not He”, making it a *barzakh* (isthmus), which, as we may recall, is that which comes between and mediates between two sides. In fact, the cosmos is the Supreme *Barzakh* since it is none other than the Breath of the All-Merciful, “the intermediary realm between Absolute Being and absolute nonexistence.”<sup>3</sup> As such, it is the realm where all of existence is found. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, through the power of *nafas al-raḥmān*, “that which cannot possibly exist [since it is not Allah, the only Being there is] comes to exist.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Supreme *Barzakh* by virtue of it being Nondelimited Imagination makes the impossible possible. To be more specific, Chittick

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, “Death and the World of Imagination,” 53.

<sup>2</sup> Akkach, “World of Imagination,” 99; cf. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 259.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, “Ibn al-‘Arabī and his School,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. S. H. Nasr (New York, 1990), 62.

tells us that through the Supreme *Barzakh*, the immutable entities in God's knowledge that have no – and never will have any – existence of their own “are able to find existence in the cosmos, just as through imagination, meanings without form come to be seen in the clothing of forms.”<sup>5</sup> The fact the cosmos undergoes continual creation and constant transformation is for Ibn ‘Arabī proof that it is nothing other than “He/not He”:

The reality of imagination is continual change in every state and manifestation in every form. There is no true existence that does not accept change except God, and there is nothing in verified Being (*al-wujūd al-muḥaqqaq*) except God. As for everything other than He, that dwells in imaginal existence (*al-wujūd al-khayālī*). But when the Real becomes manifest within this imaginal existence, He only becomes manifest in keeping with its reality, not in His Essence, which is True Being (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqīqī*). That is why it is mentioned in the sound hadith that he undergoes transmutation in His self-disclosure to His servants....<sup>6</sup>

Since the cosmos could not possibly exist if a borrowed *wujūd* was not granted to it, it is clear that it is utterly dependent on God. As for how one might perceive the cosmos as independent, Ibn ‘Arabī calls attention to the Qur’ānic usage of the term *khayāl* in the verse concerning Moses and the sorcerers. When the sorcerers threw down their staffs, Moses “was made to imagine, by their sorcery, that their ropes and their staffs were sliding”<sup>7</sup> (20:66). In the same way, if people remain “ensorcelled,” they will see the cosmos as if it were independent from God<sup>8</sup>:

The cosmos stands between nature and the Real and between *wujūd* and nonexistence. It is neither pure *wujūd* nor pure nonexistence. Hence the cosmos is all sorcery, and you are made to imagine that it is the Real, but it is not the Real. And you are made to imagine that it is creation, but it is not creation. For the cosmos is not creation in every respect, nor is it the Real in every respect.... Hence it is known for certain that were creation to be disengaged from the Real, it would not be, and were it identical to the Real, it would not be creation.<sup>9</sup>

The Shaykh's words make it clear that the cosmos, or existence as we know it, is truly nothing but imagination; but it must be emphasized that the cosmos is God's imagination, not our own imagination. Since it is God's Imagination, all things have been given “a certain mode of real and seemingly independent existence.”<sup>10</sup> In a well-

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<sup>5</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 126.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 118.

<sup>7</sup> al-Qur’ān 20:66, cited in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 16.

known poem in the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī comments: “Engendered existence (*al-kawn*) is nothing but imagination, though in reality it is Truth (*ḥaqq*).”<sup>11</sup> In other words, although engendered existence is only imagination, it nevertheless stands on firm ontological ground and should not be thought of as imaginary in the profane sense, i.e. as a mere fanciful illusion of the mind. The correct position is to accept the ambiguity of the cosmos, since being halfway between Absolute Being and Absolute Nothingness, it can not be anything other than ambiguous, and as such, the cosmos and everything within it are “He/not He”. Concluding the discussion of imagination on the first cosmic level, Chittick writes: “The whole mystery of existence lies in the fact that the cosmos is both real and unreal at the same time; the spiritual traveler’s task is to discern between these two dimensions and pass by way of the relatively real side of the cosmos to the absolutely real.”<sup>12</sup>

#### **4.2 Second Cosmic Level: *Imaginal Barzakh***

We saw that on the first level, imagination, which is all of created existence, mediates between Being and Non-Being, forming a tripartite hierarchy. On the second level of cosmic imagination, based on the above hierarchy, Ibn ‘Arabī views manifested existence itself to be three-fold, consisting of a higher, lower and intermediary world,<sup>13</sup> where the latter refers to imagination as a semi-independent domain of the cosmos. It must first be understood that the world outside, i.e. the “macrocosm,” is made up of two created worlds, the higher and the lower, also known as the spiritual or invisible world of spirits, and the corporeal or visible world of bodies. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the former as ‘*ālam al-ghayb*’ (“The World of the Unseen”), which is also known as “the world of abstract meanings”, and to the latter as ‘*ālam al-shahāda*’ (“The World of the Seen”), sometimes referred to as “the world of forms”, which brings out the contrast with the “world of meanings”. These two worlds stand in opposition and cannot be in direct contact, but a third intermediate world is “born” between the two worlds which at once separates and links them. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to this macrocosmic middle world as ‘*ālam al-khayāl*’ (“World of Imagination”), though he also may refer to it as ‘*ālam al-mithāl*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, “Death and the World,” 55.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Akkach, “World of Imagination,” 101.

(“World of Images”).<sup>14</sup> The following passage from the *Futūḥāt* brings out the intermediacy of ‘*ālam al-khayāl*, which is referred to as a presence and a world:

We say: The world is two worlds and the presence (*hadra*) two presences, even though a third presence is born between the two from their combination (*majmūʿ*). The one presence is the Presence of the Unseen (*al-ghayb*); it has a world called the World of the Unseen. The second presence is the Presence of Sense Perception (*al-hiss*) and of the Visible (*al-shahāda*); its world is called the World of the Visible. That which perceives (*mudrik*) this world is sight (*basar*), while that which perceives the World of the Unseen is insight (*basīra*). What is born from the combination of these two presences is a presence and a world. The presence is the Presence of Imagination, the world the World of Imagination.<sup>15</sup>

This makes the World of Imagination a *barzakh* between the two sides. As a *barzakh*, the intermediate world of imagination separates and distinguishes the two created worlds, and Ibn ‘Arabī cites verse 55:20: “God let forth the two seas that meet together, between them an isthmus (*barzakh*) they do not overpass,” and explains that “if it were not for the isthmus, the two seas would not become distinct.”<sup>16</sup> The two seas are the spiritual and corporeal worlds of the macrocosm, or more generally, Being (*wujūd*) and nonexistence (‘*adam*), depending on whether 55:20 is employed on the first level, where existence itself is imagination, or on the second. Since the nature of a *barzakh* is to possess attributes of both sides, the World of Imagination must be described in terms of “neither/nor” or “both/and”.<sup>17</sup> For example, the World of Imagination and everything within it, is neither luminous nor dark, or it is both inward and outward. More clearly, “it is luminous and invisible in relation to bodies, but dark and visible in relation to spirits.”<sup>18</sup>

That ‘*ālam al-khayāl* possesses an intrinsic ambiguity is clear and it is this very ambiguity which allows this intermediate world to fulfill one of its basic functions, which is to bring “spiritual entities into relationship with corporeal entities. It does this by giving incorporeal realities the attributes of corporeal things...even though they do not gain all the attributes of corporeality, remaining ‘both/and.’”<sup>19</sup> In other words, while

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<sup>14</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, “Death and the World,” 58.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

purely spiritual entities are immaterial, intangible and thus unrecognizable by physical entities, the World of Imagination “clothes” spiritual realities in a garb of physicality. In this way, spiritual realities take on a semblance of physicality and are thus recognizable, but more importantly, experienceable, to corporeal entities. Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “The world of imagination is the embodied lights that signify what is beyond them, for imagination brings intelligible meanings down into sensory molds....”<sup>20</sup> Here we see that spiritual realities are also known as “meanings” (*ma‘ānī*), while “sensory molds” are identified with corporeal realities. Ordinarily, intelligible meanings cannot be experienced in a sensory way, that is to say, by man’s senses, but through the world of imagination, where meanings are revealed as sensory images, meanings or spiritual realities can indeed be experienced by the senses since the *barzakh* bridges the gap. About this the Shaykh writes:

The *barzakh* is the junction of the two seas: the seas of spiritual meanings and the sea of sensory objects. The sensory things cannot be meaning (*ma‘nā*), nor can the meanings be sensory. But the World of Imagination, which we have called “the junction of the two seas,” gives meanings corporeal shape and makes sensory objects into subtle realities.<sup>21</sup>

We must note that in the World of Imagination, not only does a spiritual meaning or reality – normally intangible and hidden in *‘ālam al-ghayb* – acquire aspects of physicality, thereby becoming tangible, but also, a sensory object – usually found in *‘ālam al-shahāda* as a created thing or a *mazhar* – is here, in the *‘ālam al-khayāl*, stripped from its corporeality and thus seen as a subtle reality which reveals more clearly than before its spiritual meaning. However, one must keep in mind that that which is found in the World of Imagination is not purely spiritual nor purely physical; therefore things manifested here are in the forms of symbols which must then be appropriately interpreted.<sup>22</sup> The Shaykh gives examples of imaginal symbols:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 332.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in William C. Chittick, “Eschatology,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. S.H. Nasr (London, 1987), 391.

<sup>22</sup> More on this in 6.2 of this thesis.

Imagination is the manifestation of meanings (*ma'ānī*) in sensory frames (*qawālib hissiyya*), such as knowledge in the form of milk, firmness in religion in the form of a fetter, Islam in the form of a pillar, faith in the form of a handle, and Gabriel in the form of Dhiya al-Kalbī, in the form of a Bedouin, and imaginalized (*tamaththul*) to Mary as a man without fault.<sup>23</sup>

When the Prophet met with the form of milk in the World of Imagination, he interpreted and received it as “knowledge” by lifting the veil of the form and passing on to the meaning, and it is precisely in the World of Imagination that unveiling takes place. Furthermore, when the angels descend to the prophets with revelation, they descend from *'ālam al-ghayb* into *'ālam al-khayāl*, because an angel, which is a spiritual being, must be perceived in a more or less corporeal form.<sup>24</sup> In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn 'Arabī writes:

When the Apostle used to receive a revelation he was withdrawn from all usual sensations, covered with a cloak, and [in all but his body] absent from all present. When the revelation ceased he was restored [to the sensory world]. What he perceived [in this state] he perceived only in the plane of the Imagination...In the same way the appearance of the Angel to him as a man was also from the plane of the Imagination, since he [Gabriel] is not a man but an angel who took on himself human form.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, just as theophanies are made manifest in the physical world, so too are they made manifest in the World of Imagination, though in keeping with the basic properties of this world. The realities of such manifestations will not be seen by all; only by those who are able to see with the power of imagination.

#### **4.2.1 Imagination and Dreams**

The description of *'ālam al-khayāl* may leave some questioning whether such a world is actually experienceable. In fact, the Shaykh answers that all human beings have, to some degree or another, experienced the reality of *'ālam al-khayāl*. Ibn 'Arabī repeatedly states that the reality of imagination is understood most easily through dreams, which even ordinary people experience. For him, dreams are the proof of the existence of the World of Imagination and so he says: “God placed sleep in the animate world only so that everyone might witness the Presence of Imagination and know that there is another world similar to the sensory world.”<sup>26</sup> In a dream one sees that which is not corporeal in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> Chittick, “Ibn 'Arabī,” 506.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 26.

a corporeal form. For example, in a dream one may see various images and will indeed perceive the images in a sensory way, where the images have a physical form. Yet, one can also be certain that any given image was not physically present, but was rather a thought that acquired the semblance of a physical form and was thus perceptible in a sensory way. While dreaming, the objects seen are not corporeal but are nonetheless perceived as such, since they dwell in the imaginal world of the soul. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

God appointed for human spirits natural instruments, such as the eye, the ear, the nose.... He placed within them faculties that he called “hearing,” “eyesight,” and so forth. He created for these faculties two faces, a face toward the sensory things, the world of the witnessed; and a face toward the Presence of Imagination.... Within this Presence, He assigned a faculty named “imagination” to many faculties, such as form giving, reflection, memory, fantasy, reason and so on. Through these faculties the human soul perceives all the objects of knowledge given by the realities of these faculties. Through the eyesight’s face toward the world of the witnesses, the soul perceives all sensory things and lifts them up to imagination. It preserves them in imagination through the preserving faculty [memory] after the form-giving faculty has given form to them. The form-giving faculty may take affairs from diverse existent things, all of which are sensory, and compound from them an alien shape, the totality of which the soul has never seen in the sensory domain. However, there is no part of it that it has not seen. When human beings sleep, eyesight gazes by means of the face that it has toward the world of imagination....<sup>27</sup>

The reality of dreams is like the reality of the World of Imagination, although in an extremely limited way, and the existence and truth of the latter is in fact much more real. While everyone has some – though usually corrupted – access to the World of Imagination by way of dreaming, only the elite, that is the spiritually advanced, have access to *‘ālam al-khayāl* while still awake. In the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “The common people (*al-‘amma*) do not know imagination or enter into it, except when they dream and their sensory faculties (*al-quwā al-hassāsa*) return into it. The elite (*al-khawāss*) see it in wakefulness through their power of realizing it.”<sup>28</sup>

#### **4.2.2 “Earth of Reality”**

It is certain that Ibn ‘Arabī considered himself part of *al-khawāss* with regards to his ability to willfully enter into imagination or *‘ālam al khayāl*. He in fact provides detail on when and how he gained access to the World of Imagination which he often calls

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<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SDG*, 338.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*. 172.



“God’s Vast Earth” (*arḍ Allāh al-wāsi‘a*), the “Earth of Reality” (*arḍ al-ḥaqīqa*), and/or the “Realm of Symbols” (*manzīl al-rumuz*).<sup>29</sup> He tells us that once he entered into it, he has never since left it and he never will. Specifically, this entrance came about upon hearing an *imām*<sup>30</sup> behind whom he was praying recite the verse: “You My servants who believe, My Earth is vast, therefore worship Me.”<sup>31</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī devoted all of chapter 8 of his *Futūḥāt* to the description of this Vast Earth, adding further detail in chapter 351. From chapter 8 we learn that the Earth of Reality, which was created out of the surplus clay from which Adam was created,<sup>32</sup>

has hidden in it so many marvels and strange things that their number cannot be counted and our intelligence remains dazed by them.... For God’s magnificence is manifested on that Earth and His creative power dazzles the eyes of him who contemplates it. A multitude of things exist there which are rationally impossible, that is, a multitude things about which reason has established a decisive proof that they are incompatible with real being. And yet! – all these things do indeed exist in that Earth.<sup>33</sup>

The rational faculty of one who enters into this Earth is bewildered due to witnessing the existence of things which are “normally” thought to be impossible; this first-hand experience no doubt is decisive because it challenges the supremacy of reason. This “earth of reality”, says Chittick, is “precisely the world of imagination,”<sup>34</sup> where reason takes a back seat to the power of imagination, which is able to accept the theophanies which make manifest God’s magnificence and His creativity. In fact, this “Earth”, which is the “theatre where the visions of the gnostics are seen,”<sup>35</sup> is special in that it allows one to contemplate and gain knowledge from these manifestations because, according to

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<sup>29</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> The person who leads the prayer when Muslims pray together.

<sup>31</sup> al-Qur’ān 29:57, cited in Addas, *Quest*, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi’ite Iran* (Princeton, 1997), 137.

<sup>34</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 333. Elsewhere, Chittick sates that Ibn ‘Arabī identifies God’s Vast Earth rather clearly with the world of Imagination, and cites a passage in support of this identification of which we quote the following: “Whatever reason’s proofs have declared impossible to us, we have found possible and actually occurring in this earth. God is powerful over each thing [2:20]. Thus we came to know that rational faculties are inadequate and that God is powerful over bringing together opposites.... When any hadith or Koranic verse has come to us and reason has turned aside from its manifest meaning, we have found it in this earth according to the manifest meaning.” Ibid., 358. Chittick further suggests (p. 407n18) to compare this passage with what Ibn ‘Arabī has to say about imagination as seen in Idem, *SPK*, Chapter 7, especially the last section: “The Manifestations of the Impossible.”

<sup>35</sup> Claude Addas, “The Ship of Stone,” in *The Journey of the Heart: Foundations of the Spiritual Life according to Ibn ‘Arabi*, ed. John Mercer (Oxford, 1996), 7.

the Shaykh, in this “Earth” a special kind of theophanic vision occurs which does not annihilate one’s contemplative perception, making one “more firmly in [one’s] own company.”<sup>36</sup> To continue with the description of this world, things here are imperishable and absolutely everything is alive and speaks. Ibn ‘Arabī reveals that for he who has entered into it, “every stone, every tree, every village, every single thing he comes across, he may speak with...this Earth has the gift...of conferring on whomsoever enters, the ability to understand all the tongues that are spoken there.”<sup>37</sup>

#### **4.2.3 “Earth of Reality” and Religion**

The communication and theophanic experiences that one undergoes here are of a religious nature even if this is not readily apparent.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Fazlur Rahman’s assessment: “although Ibn al-‘Arabī insists that only gnostics can have access to this Realm, there is nothing spiritual or religious about it except Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statement that this Realm contains a Ka‘bah which, like everything else, converses...”<sup>39</sup> needs to be balanced if not corrected. It is difficult to overestimate the significance that the Ka‘ba holds for Muslims, and this is certainly the case for Ibn ‘Arabī, whose mystical experiences connected with the Ka‘ba - whether these be on the physical or imaginal plane - were to be illuminating moments and the source of his Ṣūfī metaphysics. We will have occasion later to review Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical encounter with and around the Ka‘ba, for now it must be noted that according to our Shaykh, the encounters one has on the Earth of *Ḥaqīqa*, produce for the mystic a profound theosophy or Divine Wisdom. About one who has entered into this land of contemplation, Ibn ‘Arabī says: “his knowledge of God has increased by something he had not previously envisioned. I do not think that understanding ever penetrates in depth with a speed comparable to that with which it

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<sup>36</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 138-139.

<sup>38</sup> In his study of *‘ālam al-mithāl*, Fazlur Rahman questioned the religious motivation of authors who wrote of the imaginal world. Rahman writes: “Once the flood of imagination is let loose, the World of Figures goes beyond the specifically religious motivation that historically brought it into existence in the first place and develops into the poetic, the mythical and the grotesque: it seeks to satisfy the relatively suppressed and starved artistic urge. Much of the contents of the *‘Ālam al-Mithāl* as it develops later has, therefore, nothing to do with religion but indirectly with the theater.” Fazlur Rahman, “Dream, Imagination and *‘Ālam al-Mithāl*,” *Islamic Studies* 3-4 (1964-65), 173.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Ka‘ba that he saw in the Imaginal Earth of Reality had its veil (*kiswa*) removed and began to speak to those who were making the circumambulations, granting them spiritual knowledge. Addas, “The Ship of Stone,” 7.

proceeds when it comes about in that Earth of which I am speaking.”<sup>40</sup> Souad Hakim appreciates the significance the Earth of *Ḥaḳīqa* has for the one who travels to and from it, and believes that the resultant increase in knowledge is critical in preparing the mystic’s aptitude for true realization of being. For her, the fact that rational impossibility takes place here teaches one that God is capable of uniting contraries. This means that “when, from the Earth of Truth, the knower returns to his universe, his return will be different. He will be endowed with a new logic: for example he will not see with his senses, in the sensory realm, something ‘impossible’ because he will have already ‘seen’ it.”<sup>41</sup> During his sojourn in the land of truth, the mystic has seen the possibility of the impossible, such as the manifestation of meanings in forms, and this prepares him to receive theophanies even when he is no longer in *‘ālam al-khayāl*. However, it must be remembered that all of the cosmos is Nondelimited Imagination and thus, one never escapes from the authority of imagination. The mystic also gains the knowledge of the *coincidentia oppositorum* which is necessary to see God as the “One/Many”, the *mazāhir* as “He/not He”, and the unity of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*.

Apart from his statement concerning an increase in Divine knowledge and understanding – which seriously calls into question any challenge to the religious nature of the World of Imagination – Ibn ‘Arabī also indicates another reason why this Earth of Reality is of critical religious import for the one who finds a way to journey into it. In a section of chapter 351, Ibn ‘Arabī brings out an important ontological and theological element of *‘ālam al-khayāl*, where one who finds himself therein is able to realize his total ontological servitude to God, thereby experiencing the reality that is *islām*, i.e. “submission”. Ibn ‘Arabī declares:

Servitude is complete and pure submission, in conformity with the very essence of the servant’s nature.... It is only realized by those who inhabit God’s Vast Earth.... This is the Earth of God; whoever dwells there has realized true servitude with regard to God, and God joins that person to Himself, because He has said, “You my servants who believe, My earth is vast, therefore worship Me” (Qur’an 29:57),<sup>42</sup> alluding in these words to the Earth of which I am speaking. I

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 139-140.

<sup>41</sup> Souad Hakim, “Knowledge of God in Ibn ‘Arabī,” 289.

<sup>42</sup> Hirtenstein believes that the mentioning of “servants who believe”, that is, those who have *īmān* (faith), is significant because it is by one’s strength of *īmān*, which he calls a divine light in the heart, that one is able to penetrate into the Vast Earth and Worship God, thereby fulfilling the Divine Command issued in

myself have been worshiping God in this place ever since the year 590, and we are now in the year 635. This Earth is imperishable and immutable; that is why God has made it the abode of His servants and the place of His worship.<sup>43</sup>

From this and from what the Shaykh goes on to say, it appears that for Ibn ‘Arabī living upon this “Earth” - which he believes is the subject of verse 29:57 – is the only way that one may truly experience *‘ubūdiyya*, a term which expresses the condition of *‘ubūda*, the “radical servitude of man.”<sup>44</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī himself defines *‘ubūda* as “perfect and immediate conformity to divine order without a hint of disobedience”<sup>45</sup> and believes that “the highest station with God is that God should preserve in His servant the contemplation of his servanthood....”<sup>46</sup> The servant is totally dependent on the Lord and from what we have just read, Ibn ‘Arabī considers God’s Vast Earth to be the place to fully realize this condition of dependence, with submission and servitude being natural corollaries of such a realized state of being. Thus, it is difficult to understand where the religious sentiment is lacking, particularly as the Qur’ān (29:57) alludes to that which the Shaykh makes explicit: God’s Vast Earth is the true place of His worship (*‘ibāda*).<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.2.4 The Subtle Imaginal Body**

In discussing the nature of this world, Ibn ‘Arabī alludes to the existence and usefulness of one’s subtle or imaginal body with which one may gain access into it. As the Earth of Reality is permanent and imperishable, Ibn ‘Arabī concludes that entrance is not allowed to corporeal, physical bodies made of clay which - as it is all too obvious – are certainly perishable. Rather, the nature of this world demands that it allow entrance only to bodies “of the same quality as that of its own universe or of the world of Spirits.”<sup>48</sup> This means that that which is to be found in the higher world, i.e. *‘ālam al-ghayb*, for example angels and intelligibles, may descend into the *‘ālam al-khayāl*, as well as those “bodies” which are in agreement with this imaginal universe, that is to say, “bodies of the same quality”,

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verse 29:57. To this Hirtenstein adds: “It is by virtue of the Divine Name *al-Mu’min* (He who gives faith and security) that the pure servant accomplishes this Divine Command.” Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 257n17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Addas, *Quest*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 121-122.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 128.

<sup>47</sup> To be fair, it must be noted that it appears Rahman did not make use of chapter 351 in his assessment of the nature of *‘ālam al-khayāl*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 139.

which are certainly not corporeal. It is certain that Ibn ‘Arabī believed in man’s ability to willfully withdraw from his corporeal, material body and he connected this feat with Ṣūfī practice. On how to enter into ‘*ālam al-khayāl*, the Shaykh advised: “Whenever one of us is searching for the way of access to that Earth...the first condition to be fulfilled is the practice of mystical gnosis and withdrawal from the material body.”<sup>49</sup> This is possible because man is not strictly identified with his body, but may also identify with his spirit or soul, and thus, Ibn ‘Arabī concludes: “it is in their spirit and not in their material body that the mystics enter into it. They leave their fleshly habitation behind on our earthly Earth and are immaterialized.”<sup>50</sup> While the mystic enters this world by way of his spirit, it must be remembered that ‘*ālam al-khayāl* lies in – or is indeed itself – the *barzakh* which occupies a place between ‘*ālam al-ghayb* and ‘*ālam al-shahāda*. This means that the bodies which make their way into this *barzakhī* world, whether descending from above or ascending from below, are not purely spiritual nor purely corporeal, but are said to be subtle or corporeous.<sup>51</sup>

As seen earlier, the World of Imagination is connected with what we may call the world of dreams, both being the domain where subtle bodies may be seen. In what follows, while informing us that the bodies which are to be found in the *barzakh* are subtle, the Shaykh also recalls once again that the images perceived in a dream are in fact beings composed of subtle bodies, and that the “place” one’s soul is transferred to during sleep is none other than this *barzakh*, i.e. the World of Imagination.

Every body in which spirits, angels, and *jinn*s clothe themselves and every form in which a man perceives himself while asleep is a subtle body belonging to that earth.<sup>52</sup>

The cause of this is that God laid out this Earth in the *barzakh*, the inter-world, and fixed a location there for these subtle bodies assumed by pure spiritual beings, toward which our souls themselves are transported during sleep and after death. This is why we are ourselves a part of its universe.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 139.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid. We may recall here that the ‘*ālam al-khayāl* is precisely the world in which bodies are spiritualized and spirits are embodied. This embodiment that the pure spirits or meanings undergo can not be pure physical bodies, but it can be said that they are “subtle bodies”.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī often differentiates between two types of bodies: *jism* (corporeal) and *jasad* (corporeous), where *jism* pertains to the visible world and *jasad* to the imaginal world. He often refers to *jasad* as a “subtle” body, since it does not have the same density as a corporeal body. Chittick, *SDG*, 282.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Addas, *Quest*, 118.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 142.

The last line in particular raises the interesting question of the connection between the macrocosmic '*ālam al-khayāl*' and man, who is the microcosm. Ibn 'Arabī has just informed us that we ourselves are not separate from the *barzakh* and to understand this, we must discuss cosmic imagination on the third level - the level of the microcosm.

#### **4.3 Third Cosmic Level: Soul as *Barzakh***

It must first be noted that the World of Imagination, which exists between the spiritual and physical worlds, is known as "discontiguous imagination" (*al-khayāl munfaṣil*), because it is independent of man. The microcosmic imagination, which will be discussed momentarily, is known as "contiguous imagination" (*al-khayāl al-muttaṣil*), and is contiguous to man's psyche, where its existence depends on the soul's perception. Comparatively, discontiguous imagination is autonomous, more permanent and stands on a more firm ontological ground than does contiguous imagination, which derives its existence from discontiguous imagination.<sup>54</sup> For Ibn 'Arabī, the third level on which imagination operates is the microcosmic or human level, where imagination is the soul (*nafs*). In fact, imagination at the microcosmic level is a reflection of imagination at the macrocosmic level and just as '*ālam al-khayāl*' is an intermediate world between the spiritual and physical worlds, so too is man's soul an intermediate realm between spirit (*rūh*) and body (*jism*). Thus, man is said to be like the macrocosm in miniature, i.e. the microcosm. What '*ālam al-khayāl*' is to the macrocosm, the soul is to man and thus, Ibn 'Arabī claims: "Imagination has no locus except the soul."<sup>55</sup> Elaborating on the imaginal nature of the soul, Chittick writes:

The spirit, which according to Koran 32:9 derives from God's Breath, is a...reality that possesses innately all the divine attributes. Hence it is inherently luminous, alive, knowing, powerful, desiring and so on. It represents a direct manifestation of God. In contrast, the body came to exist when God "kneaded from clay." It has many parts, and is overcome by darkness, inanimate matter, ignorance, and the lack of divine attributes. The soul is a mixture of the two sides. It is neither pure light nor pure darkness, but rather an intermediate state

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<sup>54</sup> According to Ibn 'Arabī, the "difference between contiguous and discontiguous imagination is that the contiguous kind disappears with the disappearance of the imaginer, while the discontiguous kind is an autonomous presence, constantly receptive toward meanings and spirit. It embodies them in accordance with its own characteristics, nothing else. Contiguous imagination derives from discontinuous imagination." Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 117.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 25.

between light and darkness. It possesses every divine attribute to a certain ambiguous degree.<sup>56</sup>

Man's soul, then, is essentially a *barzakh* and as such, the soul is neither pure light nor pure darkness, and possess attributes of both the spirit and body.<sup>57</sup> The human task, then, is to integrate the soul with the divine spirit – which always remains pure as it is the very breath of God – rather than with the body. The soul may then strengthen its spiritual light while weakening its bodily darkness. Ibn 'Arabī repeatedly emphasizes that integrating the soul with the spirit is achieved by strict observance of the *sharī'ah*. While microcosmic imagination refers to the soul itself, Ibn 'Arabī also uses imagination to refer to the specific *power* of the soul to bridge the gap between the spiritual and corporeal, the spirit and body, or the meanings and sensory objects. In this sense, imagination corresponds more or less to the faculty of the mind known as “imagination” in English. Imagination as a faculty is the means by which the soul itself comes into contact with both *'ālam al-ghayb* and *'ālam al-shahāda*. Chittick explains the power of imagination as follows:

On the one hand, it “spiritualizes” corporeal things that are perceived by the senses and stores them in memory. On the other, it “corporealizes” the spiritual things known in the heart by giving shape and form. The soul's “storehouse of imagination” (*khizānat al-khayāl*) is full of images derived from both the outward and the inward worlds. Each image is a mixture of subtly and density, luminosity, and darkness, clarity and murkiness.<sup>58</sup>

Once again, ambiguity is the chief characteristic of imagination since the resultant images that are stored in the memory depend entirely on the source from which the imagination as a faculty draws upon. While the power of *khayāl* can and should certainly be used in a positive way, namely to perceive God's Self-disclosure, it can also lead to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> The Qur'ān distinguishes between souls when it speaks of the “soul that commands to evil” (12:53), the “soul that blames” (76:2) itself for its own shortcomings, and the “soul at peace” (89:27) with God. Amongst Sūfis, it has been understood that this represents different stages of the soul's development. Idem, “Death and the World,” 60.

<sup>58</sup> Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 72.

negative results, because while the power of imagination can lead the soul up into the unity of the spirit, it can also lead one down into the dispersion of the body.<sup>59</sup>

The power of imagination allows man's soul, which is contiguous imagination, access to discontinuous imagination. To be sure, the two types of imagination are closely interrelated and furthermore, if one remembers that both microcosmic and macrocosmic imagination are themselves "enveloped" within Nondelimited Imagination (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*), then one will know that nothing escapes the ruling property of imagination. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that human beings have access to all the worlds. With their external senses they are able to perceive the visible world and with their internal faculties they are able to perceive *'ālam al-khayāl* and the whole microcosm, that is, themselves, which includes body, soul and spirit.<sup>60</sup>

Both in the macrocosm and the microcosm, God discloses Himself by manifesting the properties of His Names and thus, God's Self-disclosure may be perceived at any of the levels. When a *mazhar* is seen for the *tajallī* that it is, it is an event that occurs within and through the soul, because man's soul has the power of imagination (necessary to perceive theophany), and is itself the locus of imagination. In this way, the soul becomes the theater (*majlā*) for God's Self-manifestation. In what follows, Ibn 'Arabī expresses this notion of the soul as theater with the Qur'ānic term "womb" (*raḥim*), which he identifies here with imagination.<sup>61</sup>

How beautifully does God call the attention of...the folk of crossing over when He says, *It is He who forms you in the wombs as He will* [3:6]. Among the "wombs" is that which is imagination. God forms within it the imaginalized things as He wills on the basis of a supersensory marriage and a supersensory

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<sup>59</sup> Idem, *SDG*, 339. Ibn 'Arabī recognized the danger of the unguided use of imagination; he repeatedly warned that the *sharī'ah* must be strictly followed, and emphasized the necessity of a Shaykh or master. In fact, although all humans possess the power of imagination and contain within themselves, in their own personal world, the "world of imagination", according to Chittick, "The inward world of imagination can not be transformed into a place for witnessing the self-disclosures of *wujūd* without following the guidance of those human beings who have already reached perfection – the messengers, prophets, and friends of God." Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>61</sup> That the Qur'ānic term for "womb" (*raḥim*) derives from the same root as the words "mercy" (*raḥma*) and "All-merciful" (*raḥmān*) was not overlooked by Ibn 'Arabī, who was familiar with a ḥadīth in which the Prophet said: "the womb (*raḥim*) is a branch of the All-merciful (*al-raḥmān*)."<sup>62</sup> See Chittick, *SPK*, 330. Ibn 'Arabī believed that mercy is the nature of existence and he observed that the Qur'ān says that God's "mercy embraces all things" (7:156), and that the same can be said for *wujūd* (Being, existence). As we already know, Ibn 'Arabī equates all of existence with Nondelimited Imagination, and thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the womb is here explicitly identified with imagination.



pregnancy. He opens up meaning in this womb and *in whatever form He wills He mounts them* [82:8]. He shows you Islam as a Dome, the Koran as butter and honey, perseverance in religion as a fetter, and religion as a shirt.... Thus imagination is one of the wombs within which forms become manifest.<sup>62</sup>

It is to be noted that the womb is said to be imagination itself, and that which is seen within it is said to be imaginalized things. The same can be said of man's soul which is imagination in itself and also the place where imaginalized things are to be seen through the soul's power of *khayāl*. This is also the nature of the Earth of Reality, which has its existence in the World of Imagination and is itself the place of theophany. Therefore, it can be said that there is an intimate connection between the womb, the soul and the Earth of Reality, and when it is remembered that man himself is the microcosm which contains within itself the reality of the cosmos, then it comes as no surprise when Ibn 'Arabī instructs: "You should know, dear brother, that the earth of your body is the true 'all-embracing [i.e. vast] earth' in which the Real commanded you to worship Him."<sup>63</sup>

#### **4.4 Cosmic *Khayāl*: Universe and Soul**

For Ibn 'Arabī, it is only natural that human beings should be described as "all-embracing," since they were created in the form of the all-comprehensive name, which brings together everything in *wujūd*.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabī believes the following often cited *ḥadīth qudsī* indicates that the human body is none other than God's all-embracing earth: "Neither My heaven nor My earth embraces Me, but the heart of My servant with faith does embrace me."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, for Ibn 'Arabī, man himself is God's Vast Earth, within which can be found God's House. The Shaykh writes:

When God created the earth of your body, He placed within it a Kaabah, and that is your heart. He placed this heart-house, the most eminent of houses, in the person of faith, for He reported that the heavens, in which is the Inhabited House, and the earth, in which is the Kaabah, do not embrace Him and are too constricted to hold Him, but He is embraced by the heart in this configuration of the human being with faith. What is meant here by the "embracing" is

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<sup>62</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 345-346.

<sup>63</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 350. In translating here the Arabic term *wāsi'*, Chittick prefers "all-embracing" over "vast," though the latter would be more usual in such a context. However, *al-wāsi'* is also a Divine Name and is translated as "all-embracing." Chittick believes it is important to keep the connection between the Divine Name and the use of the term in this context because "the vastness of the human reality is the mirror image of the divine vastness." *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ḥadīth* quoted in *Ibid.*

knowledge of God. This will prove to you that the human configuration is the “all-embracing earth” and that it is the earth of your worship.<sup>66</sup>

None of this is to suggest that the Earth of Reality, which is found in the macrocosm between *‘ālam al-ghayb* and *‘ālam al-shahāda*, is simply a metaphor for the earth of man’s body. Rather, as stated earlier, what the World of Imagination is to the macrocosm, man’s soul is to the microcosm, and herein lies the mystery of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, or man and his universe.

One aspect of this mystery is brought out when we learn that on the Earth of Reality, every soul has its own universe, so that when the mystic is contemplating his own personal universe in *‘ālam al-khayāl*, his soul is actually contemplating itself.<sup>67</sup> Here we are not far from one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s favorite ḥadīth: “He who knows his self, knows His Lord.” The Shaykh writes: “In the whole of all the universes that make up that Earth, God has especially created one universe in our image (a universe corresponding to each one of us). When the mystic contemplates that universe, it is himself, his own soul, that he contemplates in it.”<sup>68</sup> This means that when the mystic sits in the practice of mystical gnosis<sup>69</sup> and gains entrance into the universe made in his image in *‘ālam al-khayāl*, he, in effect, enters into his own personal world of imagination, and all the theophanies with which he meets and speaks are epiphanic events in and for his soul. As Addas reminds us, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Earth of Reality is the “place *par excellence* of His worship.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the servant’s worship within, and contemplation of, his or her personal universe, is a special *‘ibāda* and contemplation, performed in the depths of the servant’s very being, in the soul, which, through the power of *khayāl*, becomes known. The servants desire to know the reality of things is in fact part of a much greater and universal desire where the realities of things themselves long to be known. To understand the source of this desire, we must turn to the study of Akbarian Cosmogony and examine in greater depth the interrelationship between God and creation-as-theophany. This will further reveal how significant the concept of imagination is for Ibn ‘Arabī.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>67</sup> Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 141.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>69</sup> See p. 79 in this thesis.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Addas, “The Ship of Stone,” 7.

## CHAPTER 5: COSMOGONY

### *“Divine Sadness”*

We must first understand why it is that God created. On this question, Ibn ‘Arabī, and the Ṣūfis in general, believe that the clear answer is found in the celebrated *ḥadīth qudsī* of the “Hidden Treasure” (*kanz makhfiy*), where God reveals the secret of His passion as follows: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created the creatures that I might be known.”<sup>1</sup> Corbin explains that this wanting, or rather longing, to be known reveals God’s sadness and the desire to reveal Himself and to know Himself in beings by being known by them.<sup>2</sup> In agreement with Corbin, Addas tells us that for Ibn ‘Arabī,

Cosmogogenesis is rooted in God’s desire to reveal Himself. Wishing to spread His Light, he pulls the “possibles” out of the darkness of the absolute ignorance, that is nothingness, and propels them into the sun of His Being, so that they may contemplate Him and that He may contemplate Himself in them.<sup>3</sup>

According to Corbin, this becomes the underlying motive of an “entire divine dramaturgy, an eternal cosmogony.”<sup>4</sup> Corbin continues:

This cosmogony is neither an Emanation in the Neoplatonic sense of the word nor, still less, a *creatio ex nihilo*. It is rather a succession of manifestations of being, brought about by an increasing light, within the originally undifferentiated God; it is a succession of *tajalliyāt*, of theophanies. This is the context of one of the most characteristic themes of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thinking, the doctrine of *divine Names*....<sup>5</sup>

As we already know, the doctrine of the Divine Names is the basis of Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of creation and is intimately tied with the Shaykh’s teachings on *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, where, on the one hand, God is unknowable and on the other, He makes Himself known through the Divine Names. We are also aware that the unknowable Essence is God as *al-aḥad* (The One), and Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to this aspect of God’s Absolute

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<sup>1</sup> Chittick, “Ibn al-‘Arabī and his School,” 59.

<sup>2</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 114.

<sup>3</sup> Addas, *Voyage*, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Oneness as *Aḥadiyya*.<sup>6</sup> Since God does not become multiple with the multiplicity of the Divine Names, Ibn ‘Arabī refers to this aspect of God’s Oneness, under which the Names appear, as *wāḥidiyya* or *waḥdāniyya*, according to Addas, the *ḥadīth qudsī* of “The Hidden Treasure” refers to this aspect of God’s Oneness.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on this sacred ḥadīth, Addas observes that “by definition a treasure contains riches,”<sup>8</sup> and tells us that Ibn ‘Arabī equated these riches with the Divine Names which are at once not identical nor different from the Essence. The Divine Sadness articulated in the ḥadīth also indicates the sadness of the Divine Names, which, though not identical with the Divine Essence, are not different from it either since the Attributes which the Names designate exist in potentiality from all eternity within the Divine Essence.<sup>9</sup>

### **5.1 Divine Names and *al-ʿĀyān al-Thābita***

As mentioned earlier, a Divine Name is designated by Ibn ‘Arabī as a Lord, which is the “Absolute as manifested through a particular concrete Name while *Allāh* is the Absolute who never ceases to change and transform Himself from moment to moment according to the Names.”<sup>10</sup> It was also pointed out earlier that a Name can only be a Lord if it is the Lord over some thing,<sup>11</sup> and therefore, the sadness of the Divine Names, that is to say the Lords, can only have meaning and full reality through receptacles (i.e. the *mazāhir*) which are then their epiphanic forms – the forms in which a Divine Name is manifested.<sup>12</sup> To quote the Shaykh, “He brought the world into existence to make manifest the authority (*sultān*) of the Names, since power without an object...and a possessor of compassion without an object of compassion would be realities whose effects are nullified....”<sup>13</sup> Each Name acts as the individual or personal Lord, exerting authority over the receptacle (or *mazhar*), and the receptacle is in fact none other than the outward manifestation of the “possible”, which is present from all eternity as the immutable entity or prototype within the Divine Knowledge. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī states

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<sup>6</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 279.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 114.

<sup>10</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 102.

<sup>11</sup> In the words of Izutsu, “The Lord can never be a Lord without there being someone to be ‘lorded over’ (*marbūb*).” Ibid., 105; cf. 1.9 in this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 280; Corbin, *Alone*, 114-115.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 37.

that “The Prototypes of the Universe (*a’yān al-‘ālam*) are guarded by Him in His treasures (*khazā’in*). His treasures are His knowledge; what they contain is us.”<sup>14</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement alerts us to the mysterious relationship between the immutable prototype, its manifestation, and the Divine Name which serves as its Lord. As mentioned above, Ibn ‘Arabī equates the Divine Names with the riches that are in the “Hidden Treasure”, and here, the Shaykh tells us that the immutable prototypes, which are none other than “us” (i.e. our own selves), are to be found in God’s treasures which is God’s Knowledge. Addas expresses the mysterious relationship between the two realities as follows:

Just as the distinction between Essence and Names is entirely conceptual, because none of the Names has any reality apart from Essence or adds to Essence anything it did not already contain, so the distinction between Names and “immutable prototypes” – and therefore also between the Names and created beings, whose predispositions and very nature (*isti’dādāt*) are determined by their prototypes (*a’yān*) – remains completely relative: Names and prototypes are merely the two inseparable sides of the object of God’s Knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Corbin comes to the same conclusion and tells us that the *mazāhir*, which are the forms in which the Divine Names are manifested and find their meaning, are the substrate of the Divine Names and have existed in the Essence as latent individualities or immutable prototypes (*a’yān thābita*).<sup>16</sup> Therefore, these immutable prototypes, which Ibn ‘Arabī has already identified with our own selves, aspire from all eternity to enter into *wujūd* (existence); “their aspiration”, writes Corbin, “is itself nothing other than the nostalgia of the divine Names yearning to be revealed. And this nostalgia of the divine Names is nothing other than the sadness of the unrevealed God, the anguish He experiences in His unknownness and occultation.”<sup>17</sup> It appears then, that the immutable prototypes and the Divine Names are not completely different from one another, and it may be that the latter designate the former, or that the former are themselves hidden in the latter,

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<sup>14</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 281. Addas notes that in the word *khazā’in* we encounter again the idea of a treasure, though not by the root *K.N.Z.* as in the *ḥadīth qudsī* of the “Hidden Treasure”, but by the root *KH.Z.N.*

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>16</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

making the Divine Names the treasuries which contain our essential selves.<sup>18</sup> In agreement with our assessment is Carl Keller, who believes that the *a'yān thābita* are “in or with the Names.”<sup>19</sup>

## **5.2 Existentiating Sigh**

The Divine Sadness is expressed at every level within God's Being, since there is nothing in *wujūd* other than He. For Ibn 'Arabī, this is the cause of creation:

The All-Merciful, whose very nature it is to have mercy on all things (*al-ashyā'*) and thus bring them into existence, feels distress (*kurbah*) within Himself; by the possibility (*imkān*) the things possess to display their own special qualities, they beg Him to bestow existence upon them. So God “exhales” and relieves His distress; He deploys His Breath and the cosmos is born. But this is not a simple exhalation. It is articulated speech: “Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it ‘Be!’ and it is” (Qur'an 16:40).<sup>20</sup>

God's desire results in His exclamation, “Be!” (*kun*), and this is the Divine Command (*al-amr*). This act reveals God as the Creative Being; His creation springs not from nothingness or from something other than Himself, but from the potencies and virtualities latent in His own unrevealed Being. The Divine exhales what Ibn 'Arabī calls *nafas al-rahmān*, earlier translated as “The Breath of the All-Merciful”, which can also be translated as “The Sigh of existentiating Compassion,” since Mercy, which encompasses all things, is precisely that which confers existence upon a thing. To quote the Shaykh:

God attributed a Breath to Himself, ascribing it to the name “All-merciful,” only to tell us – once our entities have become manifest and the messengers of this affair have come to us – that mercy comprises and includes all things and that all people and creatures end up with mercy. Nothing becomes manifest from the All-merciful but objects of mercy (*marḥūm*).<sup>21</sup>

It is only as a result of this existentiating sigh, which is the Divine response of Mercy seeking to relieve the distress of Names and their aspiration to manifest themselves, that

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<sup>18</sup> This reveals additional meaning to the ḥadīth: “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” When the servant comes to know his own self through and by the Divine Name which governs his being, he thereby comes to know his immutable prototype and returns to his Lord, itself having never left God's Knowledge. In this way, the Divine Sadness is appeased – if only partially – since that which was guarded in God's treasuries, along with the riches within the Hidden Treasure, becomes known.

<sup>19</sup> Carl-A. Keller, “Praise as a Means to Mystical Advancement, According to Ibn 'Arabī and Other Religions Traditions,” in *Praise*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Chittick, “Ibn al-'Arabī and his School,” 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 130.

the immutable prototypes are endowed with *wujūd*, which then allows the “possible” to taste existence.<sup>22</sup> However, because there can be no change in God’s Knowledge, the immutable prototypes never actually leave their state of permanence within God’s Knowledge where they eternally remain, hence the designation: immutable. This is precisely where Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of creation as theophany comes in, where the possible remains just that, only now with the extension of its “shadow” onto the “plane of existence.” The latter is the locus of manifestation for the former, itself under the authority of a particular Divine Name which acts as a *barzakh*, linking the existential shadow with its source on High. The term “shadow” particularly brings out the imaginal reality of a thing which, upon finding existence in the cosmos – itself Nondelimited Imagination – is said to be “imagination within imagination” (*khayāl fī khayāl*).<sup>23</sup>

### **5.3 Theophanic Imagination**

The Breath, or the Sigh, gives rise to what is known as the “Cloud” (*‘amā*), which “receives all forms and at the same time gives beings their forms.”<sup>24</sup> This Cloud is none other than the cosmos, or Existence as a whole, and as such it is “The Absolute Unconditioned Imagination” (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*), earlier translated as “Nondelimited Imagination”. The whole process is designated by Corbin as the “creative Active Imagination” or the “Theophanic Imagination”, in which God reveals Himself to Himself.<sup>25</sup> Creation, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is not the Neoplatonic Emanation, though he does indeed use such vocabulary; rather, creation is theophany – the “passage from the state of occultation or potency to the luminous, manifest revealed state.”<sup>26</sup> The purpose of creation, then, is God’s Self-disclosure to Himself, and the cosmos is the locus of manifestation. Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Indeed there is naught in the realm of possibility more wonderful than this Cosmos, which is in the image of the Merciful (*‘alā surat al-Rahmān*) and which God created in order that His being might become manifest through its appearance.”<sup>27</sup> Creation is essentially an act of the Divine Imagination, where the

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<sup>22</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 280.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 185.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 186-187.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 283.

unknown Creator longs to become known. Thus, as a result of the Command (*al-amr*), He is manifested by and through the Cloud (*al-'amā*) that is exhaled by the Breath of the All-Merciful. Corbin tells us that for Ibn 'Arabī, the Primordial Cloud, Absolute or Theophanic Imagination, existentiating Compassion (Sigh or Breath), are equivalent notions which express the same original reality:

the Divine Being from whom all things are created (*al-Haqq al-makhlūq bihi kull shay'*) – which amounts to saying the “Creator-Creature.” For the Cloud *is the Creator*, since it is the Sigh He exhales and since it is *hidden* in Him; as such the Cloud is the invisible, the “esoteric” (*bāṭin*). And it is the manifested creature (*ẓāhir*). Creator-Creature (*khāliq-makhlūq*): this means that the Divine Being is the Hidden and the Revealed, or also that He is the First (*al-Awwal*) and the Last (*al-Akhir*).<sup>28</sup>

It cannot be stressed enough that the Unity or Oneness (*tawḥīd*) of God is not being compromised by Ibn 'Arabī; rather, God, in accordance with verse 57:3, is seen in two different aspects, from two different angles so to speak. On this, Majid Fakhry writes:

Ibn 'Arabī distinguishes between the hidden aspect of its Being, which can neither be known or described and is the aspect of unity (*aḥadiyyah*), and the aspect of lordship (*rubūbiyyah*), through which God enters into relationship with the world and becomes an object of worship, as Lord and Creator.<sup>29</sup>

The unknown Being, or Essence of Allah, Who is utterly transcendent (*tanzīh*), enters into relationship with the world as the Lord of Lords, Who is none other than the Divinity, the Creator-Creature. As such, God is immanent (*tashbīh*) and is the God manifested by the Theophanic or Active Imagination; the process by which the “Hidden Treasure” becomes known to and within Himself, and to and within the cosmos, the Absolute Unconditioned Imagination (*al-khayāl al-muṭlaq*). God as Divinity is certainly to be seen as immanent vis-à-vis the Essence but is also to be seen as transcendent vis-à-vis creation. This is why Ibn 'Arabī considers the Divinity itself to be the *Barzakh*, linking – yet separating – the Essence and creation.<sup>30</sup> In this way, God is both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*; the power of Divine Theophanic Imagination unites the opposites into one, which is God, “The One” (*al-wāḥid*).

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<sup>28</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 186. Chittick confirms that Ibn 'Arabī refers to God inasmuch as He “assumes limitations and is similar to all things by such terms as the Real Through which Creation Takes Place, the Cloud, or the Breath of the All-Merciful.” Chittick, “Between the Yes and the No,” 99.

<sup>29</sup> Majid Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York, 1970), 281.

<sup>30</sup> See 1.10 in this thesis.



## **5.4 Imagination within Imagination**

The human being, himself a *mazhar*, is a reflection of the cosmos. As such, he is also imagination and possesses the power of the “Active Imagination” (*quwwat al-khayāl*). In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī states: “If things are as we have decided, know that you are an imagination, as is all that you regard as other than yourself an imagination. All [relative] existence is an imagination within an imagination, the only Reality being God, as self and the Essence....”<sup>31</sup> Man is, and has the power of, imagination precisely because he is an imagination (i.e. microcosm) within imagination (i.e. macrocosm). Therefore, according to Corbin, “to the initial act of the Creator imagining the world corresponds the creature imagining his world, imagining the worlds, his God, his symbols.”<sup>32</sup> Created things are nothing but imaginal symbols that need to be interpreted in the same way that images are interpreted in dreams. On this, Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the *ḥadīth*: “Men are asleep, they awaken at their death.”<sup>33</sup> For him, this means that *everything* human beings see in their earthly lives are like the images seen in a dream, which are symbols taking on corporeal form. The Shaykh says:

In this world, the human being dwells in a dream. That is why he has been commanded to interpret. For the dream may be interpreted within sleep itself. “People are asleep, but when they die, they wake up.” Since according to this truthful tongue, both sense perception and sensory things are imagination, how can you have complete confidence in anything? You speak, but the intelligent and knowing person is confident that you, in your state of wakefulness, are the possessor of sense perception and sensory objects. And when you are asleep, you are the possessor of imagination and imaginalization. But the Prophet, from whom you have taken the route of your felicity, has made you a dreamer in the state in which you believe that you are the possessor of wakefulness and awareness. Hence, since you dwell in a dream in your wakefulness in this world, everything within which you dwell is an imaginal affair and is sought for the sake of something else.<sup>34</sup>

When the symbols are seen as theophanies of “He/not He”, it can be said that God makes his descent toward the creature and the creature makes his ascent toward the Creator.<sup>35</sup> This mutual relationship is the result and fulfillment of God’s longing to be known. Man’s Active Imagination is the organ of theophanies, that is to say, the organ by which

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 189.

God becomes known. It is only through the imagination that one may come to realize, see, and experience that all things – including oneself – are *mazāhir* for “He/not He”.

### **5.5 The Goal of Creation: The Perfect Man**

For Ibn ‘Arabī, everything in existence is a *mazhar* and is ranked in degrees of excellence (i.e. *tafāḍul*).<sup>36</sup> The Highest or Supreme *Mazhar* is the *insān kāmīl*, who by knowing his own self, knows and unites within his own being all of the Most Beautiful Names and their manifestations,<sup>37</sup> just as the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-a‘ẓam*) “Allah”, brings together and unites all other Divine Names. Thus, the Perfect Man, like the cosmos in its entirety, stands as the Supreme *Barzakh* (*al-barzakh al-a‘lā*),<sup>38</sup> which makes him the Absolute Imagination or the most eminent exemplar of “He/Not He”.<sup>39</sup> In the words of the Shaykh,

the *barzakh*...has a face toward the Non-Manifest and a face toward the Manifest. Or rather, it itself is the face, for it can not be divided. It is the perfect human being. The Real made him stand as a *barzakh* between the Real and the cosmos. Hence he makes manifest the Divine Names, so he is the Real, and he makes manifest the reality of possible existence, so he is a creature.<sup>40</sup>

As such, the Perfect Man is the very goal of creation; he is the one in whom God contemplates Himself, and is therefore the one in whom, by whom and for whom the “Hidden Treasure” becomes known.<sup>41</sup> In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

The Reality [i.e. God] wanted to see the essences [‘*ayān*] of His Most Beautiful Names, or, to put it another way, to see His own Essence (‘*ayn*) – in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror.”<sup>42</sup>

Reza Shah-Kazemi – who is certainly not alone in this regard – observes that “the idea of the self-disclosure of the Absolute to itself by means of the relativity of ‘the other’ lies at the very heart of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics.”<sup>43</sup> It would not be incorrect to say the

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<sup>36</sup> See p. 46n59 and p. 56n36 in this thesis.

<sup>37</sup> See Austin, *Bezels*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, “Ibn ‘Arabi and the Perfectibility of Man,” 73.

<sup>39</sup> Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi”, 507.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> John T. Little, “Al-Insān al-Kāmil: The Perfect Man According to Ibn Al-‘Arabī,” *The Muslim World* Vol. 77 No. 1 (1987), 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> Shah-Kazemi, “Metaphysics of Interfaith,” 153.

same about the Shaykh's understanding of the Perfect Man, who is the goal and cause of/for creation, since the goal of any task is also the original cause for which the task was performed. Likewise, without the existence of the cause (i.e. the Perfect Man), the effect (i.e. creation) would also cease to exist, since the latter depends on the former for its sustenance. Ibn 'Arabī expresses this when he tells us that for God, the *insān kāmīl*

is as the pupil is for the eye through which the act of seeing takes place. Thus he is called *insān* [meaning both "man" and "pupil"], for it is by him that the Reality looks on His creation and bestows the Mercy<sup>44</sup> [of existence] on them. He is Man, the transient [in his form], the eternal [in his essence]; he is the perpetual, the everlasting, the [at once] discriminating and unifying Word. It is by his existence that the Cosmos subsists and he is in relation to the cosmos, as the seal is to the ring, the seal being that place whereon is engraved the token with which the king seals his treasure. So he is called the Vice-Regent, for by him God preserves His creation, as the seal preserves the king's treasure. So long as the king's seal is on it no one dares to open it except by his permission, the seal being [as it were] a regent in charge of the kingdom. Even so is the Cosmos preserved so long as the Perfect Man remains in it.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the Perfect Man is the goal of creation and while the following quote from the *Futūḥāt* confirms this, the particular way in which Hirtenstein translates "*insān*", which in this specific context usually refers to the Perfect Man, reveals an additional meaning from which we may proceed. Ibn 'Arabī writes: "Know, may God assist you, that the true goal of the world is Mankind (*insān*), and he is the leader (*imām*)."<sup>46</sup> Clearly, Ibn 'Arabī is referring to a single reality, i.e. the Perfect Man, but Hirtenstein's translation is not inaccurate for two reasons. First, the *insān kāmīl* is also the "Universal Man" and is therefore the archetype and representative of Mankind; second, all of Mankind is on the road to perfection. Thus, all those traveling the path to perfection must recognize the nature of imagination and their own selves as "He/not He". Ibn 'Arabī writes:

Thus the world is pure representation (*mutawahham*) there is no substantial existence; that is the meaning of the Imagination.... Understand then who you are, understand what your selfhood is, what your relation is with the Divine Being; understand whereby you are He and whereby you are other than He, that is, the world, or whatever you may choose to call it. For it is in proportion to this knowledge that the degrees of preeminence among Sages are determined.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The idea of the Perfect Man bestowing Mercy finds scriptural support in the verse: "And We have sent thee [i.e. Muḥammad] only as a Mercy to the worlds." al-Qur'ān, 21:107, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 221.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Alone*, 192.

### **5.6 The Right Attitude about Creation**

We now have a more clear understanding of Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of creation which is the relationship between God and His own Self-disclosure. Insofar as God is the unrevealed Essence, He is the Absolutely Transcendent; this is the cause of the sadness of the Divine Names, which longed to be known – to be manifested in beings that would concretely reflect the reality of God’s Attributes. The Divine Sadness was appeased through an act known as the primordial Theophanic Imagination whereby the *nafas al-rahmān*, the Sigh of existentiating Compassion, allowed the Divine Names to manifest the *mazāhir* latent within. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s words, “The cosmos issues from the Breath of the All-merciful because He relieved His names of the lack of displaying effects which they were finding in themselves.”<sup>48</sup> The “effects” are the possible things in their state of latency as the immutable entities, which, when met with the *nafas al-rahmān*, enter into *wujūd* (existence) by way of manifestation (*zuhūr*) as imaginal realities and symbols of “He/Not He”. When the symbols are seen as such, the principles of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are mutually confirmed and *tawhīd* is experienced. To deny the truth of either principle is to limit the unlimitable. As Ibn ‘Arabī says, the right attitude is to admit that “thou art not He, nay thou are He, and thou seest Him in the inner essence of everything, absolutely without limitation and yet limited.”<sup>49</sup> The right attitude is a product of one’s psychological state. We must turn to Akbarian Psychology where we see how the power of imagination actually bridges the gap between He and not He, and what is the effect of imagination in the service of what can only be called Theophanic Prayer.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 130.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 48.

## CHAPTER 6: PSYCHOLOGY

### *“The Continuous Ascent of the Soul”*

Ibn ‘Arabī’s psychology absolutely depends on an understanding of one’s soul as an infinite and internal world.<sup>1</sup> Due to the *barzakhī* nature of the soul, it may be called an imaginal world in which the things encountered in the physical world by way of the senses are then raised up by the power of imagination and transformed into subtle realities reflected in the mirror of the soul.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, noetic or spiritual realities, which are said to be known to the heart are reflected into the imaginal world of soul as subtle forms. Therefore, man’s soul is full of images and is the “storehouse of imagination”<sup>3</sup> where theophany is seen, though in symbolic form. Each symbol is both “He/not He”, for it is the unknown God manifesting His Names and Attributes through the Absolute Imagination. If God manifests Himself, it is only so that He may become known. The human task, then, is to recognize the theophany of the Names and in fact, to manifest them himself, as they long for a locus within which their authority can be known.

#### **6.1 Manifesting the Divine Names**

This brings us to a significant doctrine of the Shaykh’s spiritual psychology known as *al-takhalluq bi’l-asmā’ al-ilahiyya* or “assuming the traits of the divine names.”<sup>4</sup> According to Ibn ‘Arabī, since the human being is created upon the form of Allah, the all-comprehensive Name, man has the potential to manifest all Names. However, for the overwhelming majority of mankind, these Names remain latent within them and in order to manifest them, one must “assume” them. One way in which this is done is to recognize their manifestations within oneself. According to the Shaykh, the human

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<sup>1</sup> Chittick, “Ibn Arabī,” 506.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the subtle realities are not simply conjured up images, for all physical things, themselves *mazāhir*, have subtle forms of their own and these forms are imaginalized into one’s soul. Even when the mystic instantly recognizes physical things to be spiritual realities embodied as forms, as Ibn ‘Arabī often did, they are seen through the eye of imagination, which is to say that the vision is an event of the soul, for it is only by the power of imagination which the soul possesses that *mazāhir* may be seen as theophany. Otherwise, they will be seen as ordinary engendered things, devoid of meaning. For an account of some of the encounters Ibn ‘Arabī had with imaginal figures, see Idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, 83-95.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 275.

being is the “locus wherein the divine names are disclosed. Their Essence is witnessed only within us, because of the divine form in which He created us. So our kingdom (*mulk*) is all the divine names.”<sup>5</sup> We already know that the Divine Names, in their longing to be known, require a *mazhar* in which to manifest themselves but reason rejects manifestation, which is only perceptible through *khayāl*, and that too only when it is conjoined with and inspired by discontinuous imagination, which exists independent of man. As such, imagination is then known as the “Active Imagination”, or the “*Imaginatrix*.”<sup>6</sup> It is the *Imaginatrix* which receives the image (*mithāl*) of the Divine Name within itself or perceives them within other created objects. No matter how theophanies are perceived, they are nothing more than symbols, which is to say that they are a lot. Corbin observes that to say the *mazhar* is a symbol is to say that it is other than God, but this is not depreciating it but in fact, establishing it “as a symbol relating to something symbolized (*marmūz ilayhī*), which is the Divine Being.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, theophanies are imaginal because they are more than themselves; they point to the symbolized, just as a Name names the Named. For the Hidden Treasure to become known requires that an individual *mazhar* be seen as “He/not He” and not simply as one or the other; for to say that it itself is God and to go no further is to limit the unlimited. Indeed, the *mazhar* is “He”, but as the *mazāhir* of the Names are ranked in degrees of excellence, and as theophany is continually renewed, one must say “Not He”. As Corbin had observed, to say so is not to reject or depreciate the *mazhar*, but to interpret, assume and then transcend it. Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

If you say that a certain form is God, you are homologating [i.e. confirming] that form, because it is one among the forms in which He manifest Himself (*mazhar*); but if you say that it is something else, something other than God, you are interpreting it, just as you are obliged to interpret forms seen in a dream.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, confirming and negating must go hand in hand, just as the perspective of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh* are both required. To see a form as God requires the strength of *khayāl*, which sees God as similar and immanent; but as God is also incomparable and transcendent, a truth known to reason, one must transcend a particular theophany. While

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<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>6</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 190.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 207.

reason knows innately that no theophany can be God Himself, to transcend a theophany is not simply to reject it but to assume it and then rise above it; and this requires Divine assistance (*ta'yīd*). As we saw in our chapter on epistemology (2.4), according to Ibn 'Arabī, the ideal rational faculty is one that has accepted unveiling to be more noble than its own power of reflection and thus, the rational faculty of one who is granted unveiling accepts the Divine theophanies which are received through imagination. To be sure, reason still knows that no one Self-disclosure is God Himself, but as a result of unveiling it no longer rejects theophany and therefore, it also does not attempt to interpret or explain away *āyāt* of the Qur'ān or *āyāt* of the universe with rational hermeneutics. However, all symbols certainly require interpretation and for Ibn 'Arabī, there is indeed a method of interpretation which operates within the imagination.

## **6.2 Spiritual Hermeneutics**

According to Ibn 'Arabī who bases his view on various *aḥādīth*,<sup>9</sup> all of existence is found in the Presence of Imagination and is like an ontologically sound dream that requires all forms to be interpreted.<sup>10</sup> The word Ibn 'Arabī uses most often for interpretation is the Qur'ānic term *ta'bīr*,<sup>11</sup> which conveys the sentiment of transcending the form and reaching the meaning. The root of *ta'bīr* (*ʿ.b.r.*), signifies “crossing over” and the “interpreter” (*mu'abbir*) is “he who passes from the sensory form...to the meaning which has put on the clothing of form.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, *ta'bīr* can be known as “spiritual hermeneutics” and for the Shaykh, there is indeed a science of interpretation through which “a person comes to know what is meant by the forms of images when they are displayed to him and when sense perception causes them to rise in his imagination....”<sup>13</sup> However, *ta'bīr* is not any ordinary interpretation but is a process which occurs with the aid of unveiling and with the knowledge of cosmic *khayāl* or the Presence of Imagination, which allows

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<sup>9</sup> One well-known ḥadīth teaches that “People are asleep, and when they die, they awake.” Chittick, *SPK*, 119. Ibn 'Arabī brings out the implications: “When man ascends the ladder of real knowledge, he knows through both faith and unveiling that he is a dreamer in the state of ordinary wakefulness and that the situation in which he dwells is but a dream. The Prophet said: ‘People are asleep, and when they die, they awake.’ But they are not aware, and that is why we said ‘through faith’.... All of existence is sleep and its [state of] wakefulness is sleep.” Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 5; Corbin, *Alone*, 241.

<sup>11</sup> See for example al-Qur'ān 12:43.

<sup>12</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

one to move on from the form to the meaning. What makes *ta'bīr* unique, is that it occurs within the Presence of Imagination, which unites opposites; when the *mu'abbir* crosses over from the form to the meaning, not only does he accept that the image is “He”, but also that it is “not He”. This is because the one who practices *ta'bīr* has undergone unveiling and is thus able to ascertain the true meaning of the image; and the true meaning of an image is that it is “He/not He.” Additionally, *ta'bīr* is not simply a crossing over from the outward (*ẓāhir*) to the inward (*bāṭin*); it is a process that takes the outward and unites it with the inward. Thus, with the strength of imagination, *ta'bīr* unites the opposites, allowing one to see “He/not He.” Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

As for the faithful, the truthful, the possessors of steadfastness among the friends of God, they cross over, taking the outward sense along with them. They do not cross from the outward sense to the inward sense, but they take the letter itself to the meaning, without “giving expression” to it. Hence they see things with “two eyes”.... They are not able to deny what they witness, nor do they reject that about which they have certainty.<sup>14</sup>

The faithful among the “friends of God” reconcile the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, forsaking neither. In fact, they enhance the meaning of the *ẓāhir* by uniting it with the *bāṭin*. Therefore, they become the “possessors of two eyes” and see with the eye of the ideal rational faculty, which sees in harmony with the eye of imagination.<sup>15</sup> They neither deny *tashbīh*, for they witness it, nor do they reject *tanzīh*, as they have certainty in it. What is meant by “without giving expression” (*‘ibāra*), is that the faithful do not explain away verses of the Qur’ān that indicate *tashbīh* in the way that those who use rational hermeneutics do, who consider such verses to be simple “metaphors” or “expressions.” According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the rational thinkers also attempt to cross over, but “halt with crossing over (*‘itibār*).”<sup>16</sup> The Shaykh continues, “They pass from the outward sense (*ẓāhir*) to the inward sense (*bāṭin*) and separate themselves from the outward sense. Hence they “give expression” (*‘ibāra*) to it, since they are people neither of unveiling nor of faith...”<sup>17</sup> This is the way of rational thinkers, who, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, are “slaves of their powers of reflection.”<sup>18</sup> Those who practice *ta'bīr* correctly, however,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>15</sup> On the spiritual ascension of the “possessors of two eyes”, see 2.5 in this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 246.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*



are the “people of unveiling” and their rational faculty is in harmony with imagination. Furthermore, since their rational faculty no longer rejects the Self-disclosure of God, they continue to receive greater theophany, which become imaginalized within and by the power of the *Imaginatrix*. These too are interpreted by bringing the *ẓāhir* to the *bāṭin* and the process of crossing over can be seen as an ascent of the soul. Corbin, who preferred the Qur’ānic term *ta’wīl*<sup>19</sup> when referring to esoteric interpretation (*ta’bīr*) explains that the

initial imaginative operation is to typify (*tamthīl*) the immaterial and spiritual realities in external or sensuous forms, which then become “ciphers” for what they manifest. After that the Imagination remains the motive force of the *ta’wīl* which is *the continuous ascent of the soul*. In short, because there is imagination there is *ta’wīl*; because there is *ta’wīl*, there is symbolism; and because there is symbolism, beings have two dimensions.<sup>20</sup>

Imagination is the motive force of a spiritual hermeneutic that takes as its object of operation not just *āyāt* (verses) of the Qur’ān, but the *āyāt* (signs) of the external and internal worlds, because it is through the Active Imagination, whether this be God’s Imagination (i.e. the cosmos) or man’s (i.e. his personal world of soul), that a Divine Name makes its appearance, though in symbolic/imaginal form, as a sign to be seen. Once it has been seen with ‘*ayn al-khayāl*, it is then interpreted and one may “cross over” from the form of the imaginal thing to the meaning or reality (*ḥaqīqa*), where the reality of a thing is its “immutable entity” (‘*ayn thābita*). Thereafter, the Active Imagination presents greater theophany to the mystic’s soul, which in this way ascends to its Lord, which is the higher dimension of itself or its own reality.

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<sup>19</sup> Etymologically, *ta’wīl* means to take something back to its origin or beginning (*awwal*), as in taking or following a symbol back to the origin that it symbolizes. Therefore, in its technical usage, *ta’wīl* is the process of symbolic, spiritual hermeneutics, where the *bāṭin* or esoteric meaning of a word or text (primarily the Qur’ān) is elucidated from the *ẓāhir* or exoteric meaning. Abdurrahman Habil, “Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Qur’ān,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (London, 1987), 25. In this sense, *ta’wīl*, as a method of interpretation, is almost synonymous with *ta’bīr* as used by Ibn ‘Arabi. In fact, the Qur’ān, which employs the term *ta’wīl* in seventeen verses, uses both terms interchangeably (as in 12:43-44). Most likely due to his extensive study of (and sympathy towards) Shī‘ī theosophy, which places great emphasis on *ta’wīl*, Corbin repeatedly used the term *ta’wīl* to explain Ibn ‘Arabi’s spiritual hermeneutics, though he also used *ta’bīr* on occasion. However, this is problematic because as Chittick rightly points out, Ibn ‘Arabi did not use the term *ta’wīl* when designating his own method of interpretation. In fact, although he recognized its positive usage in the Qur’ān (e.g. 3:7), he often referred to *ta’wīl* in a negative sense, as the method of interpretation used by the rational thinkers who explained away verses which did not appeal to their sense of reason. See Chittick, *SPK*, 199-202.

<sup>20</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 209.

### **6.3 Greater Preparedness**

This reveals greater significance of the doctrine of “assuming the character traits of the Divine Names.” As the immutable entities are the realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) of things within the Knowledge of God, and as the distinction between them and the Divine Names is relative,<sup>21</sup> by being the locus within which the reality of the Divine Names are manifested, the knower (‘*arif*’) may “see things as they are,” which is to say that their true meaning or reality becomes known to him. As we saw in our chapter on ontology (3.4), the immutable entity determines the preparedness (*isti’dād*) of a thing; since the preparedness of a thing is its ability to manifest *wujūd*, as one continues to receive and assume the Divine Names, one after another, one may manifest *wujūd* to a greater degree and this is nothing less than an ascent of soul. Chittick points out that “each name whose traits he assumes bestows upon him a new preparedness which allows him to move on to higher stages.”<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that one’s own immutable entity itself changes since there is no change in immutability. Rather, when it is remembered that the immutable entities are not other than the Divine Names, and since man is the only “thing” found in the cosmos that is (potentially) created upon the form of all the Divine Names, it follows that the reality of man is to subsume all other realities. Thus, as man comes to know the Divine Names upon which his form is created, he also comes to know all the immutable entities,<sup>23</sup> and this is the secret and reality of the actual microcosm or the Perfect Man, who, for this reason, is also known as the “Universal Man” (*al-insān al-kull*). According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Perfect Man is an actual microcosm and “is the totality of the cosmos in terms of its *realities*, for he is a world in himself, while everything else is but a part of the cosmos.”<sup>24</sup> The realities of the cosmos are the immutable entities, the knowledge of which is with Perfect Man in *actu* and with

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<sup>21</sup> On the relationship between the immutable entities and the Divine Names, see 5.1 in this thesis.

<sup>22</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 275. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, man is able to realize new levels of preparedness. He writes: “God never ceases creating within us ad infinitum, so the knowledge’s extended ad infinitum.... Hence the thirst of the seeker of knowledge never ceases. He never experiences “quenching,” because his preparedness (*isti’dād*) seeks to gain a knowledge. Once this knowledge has been gained, it gives to him the preparedness for a new knowledge.... Hence the seeker of knowledge is like him who drinks the water of the sea. The more he drinks, the thirstier he becomes.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> See Chittick, *SPK*, 135, where it is said that the immutable entities of things are seen only by God and certain of His Friends (*Awliyā’*).

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 48 (emphasis mine).

regular man in *potentia*, which is to say that the regular man must acquire knowledge of the Divine Names if he is to attain his “Adamic form.” The Shaykh writes:

Man, who is Adam, consists of an individual in whom the cosmos is summed up, for he is the small man, epitome of the “great man” (the cosmos or macrocosm).... So the reality of the divine Name (*Allāh*), which caused him to appear and from which he became manifest, is connected to every part of him. All the Divine Names are related to him; not a single one eludes him. Thus Adam emerged according to the image of the Name *Allāh*, since it is this Name which includes all the Divine Names.”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the *insān kāmīl*, by manifesting within himself all the Divine Names, contains in his own personal world, the realities of “all things” (*kullā shay’in*), which means that his immutable entity is the “reality of realities” (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā’iq*) otherwise known as the “Reality of Muḥammad.”<sup>26</sup> Since all men are on the road to perfection, they too “must always strive to attain [their] true archetype, the Muḥammadan Reality itself.”<sup>27</sup> This is why man’s immutable entity itself does not change, but his awareness of what is his true self – his true *ḥaqīqa* – does.

#### **6.4 New Creation and Coloring of the Soul**

The awareness comes when the servant begins to witness with the power of imagination, the manifestations of the Divine Names that are revealed within his own self and which have a great impact on the “color” of his soul. According to the *Futūḥāt*:

God makes him journey through His Names, in order to cause him to see His signs (Qur’an 17:1) within Him. Thus [the servant] comes to know that He is what is designated by every divine Name....It is through those Names that God appears in His servants, and it is through Them that the servant takes on the different “colorings” of his states: for They are Names in God, but “colorings” [of the soul] in us. And they are precisely the “affairs” with which God is “occupied” [Qur’ān 55:29]: so it is in us and through us that He acts.<sup>28</sup>

“Colorings” (*talwīnāt*), is a traditional Ṣūfī expression for constantly changing psychic states and conditions,<sup>29</sup> which come about as one receives the manifestations of the Divine Names. Ibn ‘Arabī further identifies the colorings of the soul with verse 55:29,<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> William C. Chittick, “Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Perfect Man in the view of Ibn al-‘Arabī,” *Islamic Culture* Vol. 63 Nos. 1-2 (1989), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 213.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 328n62.

<sup>30</sup> “Every day He is [occupied] in an affair [*sha’n*],” al-Qur’ān 55:29, cited in Ibid., n63.

where the term *sha'n* (affair) is interpreted by the Shaykh as a reference to the doctrine of “new creation” (*khalq jadīd*), where there are constantly renewed transformations (*taqallubāt*) within *wujūd*, by way of theophany.<sup>31</sup> The *Futūḥāt* continues,

Thus when God makes the saint (*al-walī*) travel through His most Beautiful Names...he comes to know the transformations of his states.... And [he knows] that the transformation is what brings those very Names to be in us....So there is no Name that God has applied to Himself that He has not also applied to us: through [His Names] we undergo the transformations in our states....<sup>32</sup>

Since the *walī* is the locus of manifestation for the Divine Names, the “new creation” applies especially to him, in whom the theophanies or images of the Divine Names are continuously renewed. The renewal causes transformations of states that “color” the Ṣūfī’s soul, which, as a locus for God’s signs, realizes and manifests within itself the Divine Names to a greater degree. When such a soul gazes upon the *āyāt* of the worlds, external or internal, it is able to “read” them, for it sees them not only with the eyes of imagination and reason, but also with the knowledge and “colorings” of the Divine Names, themselves the realities, roots or Lords, manifested within the created things. This is how one may “see things as they are”, but it is not sufficient to recognize the reality of things, without recognizing one’s own self and the personal Lord or the particular Divine Name of one’s being. To do this, the power of *khayāl* is put in the service of an act of worship, which can only be called Creative or Theophanic Prayer.

### **6.5 A Shared Prayer**

The Qur’ān informs us that the only reason for the creation of man (and *jinn*)<sup>33</sup> is for the performance of ‘*ibāda*’ or worship. God says: “I created *jinn* and mankind only to worship Me.”<sup>34</sup> According to Ibn Abbās, a companion of the Prophet who is known as one of the earliest esoteric interpreters of the Qur’ān,<sup>35</sup> the significance of “to worship

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<sup>31</sup> On the relationship between “new creation” and imagination, see pp. 61-62 in this thesis.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>33</sup> The Qur’ān often refers to the *jinn*, which are believed to be creatures of an ambiguous and mysterious nature, created out of fire and thus, combining elements of both light and clay. Like human beings, the *jinn* are divided into two main groups, the followers of Iblīs (Satan), and the followers of the prophets. Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, 340-341.

<sup>34</sup> al-Qur’ān 51:56, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> As for the source of his esoteric interpretation, Ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have said: “What I took from the interpretation of the Quran is from ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.” Habil, “Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran,” 29.

Me” (*ya ‘budūni*) is in fact, “to know Me” (*ya ‘rifūni*).<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī himself understood the verse in this way<sup>37</sup> and we have here the Qur’ānic counterpart to the ḥadīth of the “Hidden Treasure”, where God expresses His desire to be known; a desire powerful enough to warrant the creation of an “other”, which may then come to know God through *‘ibāda*.<sup>38</sup> However, if we have followed Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and his view of creation as Theophanic Imagination, where creation equals theophany, we realize that any perceived “other” is in fact “none other” than God, manifesting Himself through His Names in the form of His *mazhar*, wherein the Divine Names find their meaning. Thus, there is an apparent sharing of roles in the manifestation of *wujūd*,<sup>39</sup> where God the *ẓāhir*, the immanent, manifests God the *bāṭin*, the transcendent, to Himself.<sup>40</sup> This requires that there be a bi-unity<sup>41</sup> between “other than God” (i.e. the *mazhar*), and “none other than God” (i.e. the *wujūd* manifested through the *mazhar*), but the bi-unity itself is unified within the single object, which is the *wāḥid* (one) or the symbol of *tawḥīd*. This idea of a sharing of roles in manifestation is fundamental to Ibn ‘Arabī’s notion of prayer (*ṣalāt*) and led the *Shaykh al-Akbar* to speak of a “shared prayer”, where, according to Austin: “prayer is, in reality, nothing other than the contemplation by the divine Self of Itself as ‘other than Self’, and the contemplation by ‘other than Self’ of the Self in itself/Itself...”<sup>42</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī is not himself the originator of such a notion and in fact, it is already expressed in the following ḥadīth, “I have divided the prayer equally between Me and My servant, a half for Me and a half for My servant who may also have whatever he

<sup>36</sup> William C. Chittick, “On the Cosmology of *Dhikr*,” in *Paths to the Heart*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 150.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to verse 51:56, which reveals God’s reason for creating man and *jinn*, there is also verse 16:40, which confirms the link between God’s desire and the process of creation. God says: “Our only word to a thing, when We desire it, is to say to it ‘Be!’ and it is.” Chittick, “Ibn al-‘Arabī and his school,” 59.

<sup>39</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 247.

<sup>40</sup> See al-Qur’an 57:3.

<sup>41</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 247.

<sup>42</sup> R.W.J. Austin, “Aspects of mystical prayer in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought,” in *Prayer & Contemplation: Foundations of the Spiritual Life according to Ibn ‘Arabī*, ed. Stephen Hirtenstein (Oxford, 1993), 7 (Single quotation marks added). Corbin expresses the same reality thus: “This idea of *sharing* of roles in the manifestation of being in the eternal theophany, is fundamental to Ibn ‘Arabī’s notion of prayer; it inspires what we have termed his method of prayer and makes it a ‘method of theophanic prayer.’ The notion of sharing presupposes a dialogue between two beings.” Corbin, *Alone*, 247.

asks.”<sup>43</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī cites this ḥadīth in his *Fuṣūṣ*, and for Austin, the key word in the ḥadīth is *baina* (between), which Ibn ‘Arabī himself uses, apart from citing the ḥadīth, when speaking about the intimacy created in the act of prayer which is shared between man and God.<sup>44</sup> However, when taken not as a preposition but as a noun, *baina* gives the meaning of “separation” or a sense of distance which is equally essential to our experience of God. Thus, for Austin, who is certain that Ibn ‘Arabī was aware of the double meaning, the term *baina* “is a vital clue to that primordial divine mystery of own and other, creation and re-creation, which the rite of prayer and the practice of contemplation re-enacts and symbolically unfolds.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, *baina* alludes to the mystery of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, and in the act of prayer the distance between these two perspectives necessarily becomes shortened, for if prayer is to be meaningful, the transcendent God must become immanent whilst never ceasing to be what He is. For Ibn ‘Arabī, prayer is an occasion for a profound intimacy between God and creation, where that which is hidden becomes revealed and then known. Therefore, when Austin says that *‘ibāda* re-enacts “creation” and “re-creation”, he has in mind what Ibn ‘Arabī called the “Prayer of God” and the “Prayer of man”. The former refers to the creative activity which occurs due to the longing of the Hidden Treasure, and the latter to the response from the side of creation which, if it is successful, fulfills the Universal Desire to be known. This polarization in prayer is the natural outcome of the bi-unity and reciprocity inherent in the Universal Desire as expressed in the ḥadīth of the “Hidden Treasure”. Corbin observes that “although theophanies respond to the Desire, the nostalgia of the Godhead to be known, the accomplishment of this Desire depends on the forms (*maẓāhir*) which His light invests in the theophanic function.”<sup>46</sup>

As to why the “Prayer of man” should be known as “re-creation” and not “un-creation,” this has to do with the Shaykh’s doctrine *khalq jadid*, where at every moment creation is being renewed. In Theophanic Prayer, which is the prayer of one who is aware of the power of cosmic *khayāl*, the renewal of *wujūd* by way of continual Divine Self-disclosure is not only witnessed but also utilized as the force with which a conscious

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<sup>43</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, 280.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, “Aspects of mystical prayer,” 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 248.

return to one's Lord is made. The very act of prayer acknowledges both the desire of God Who created in order to be known, and the desire of the one who is seeking to know and return to His God; a return which is not a "death" in the usual sense of the word, but a re-creation. Therefore, Austin concludes that for Ibn 'Arabī,

the prayer rite is then a rehearsal of the two great divine-comic currents of creation and re-creation, the coming forth from and the holy return *to* God, the current of *kāna* or becoming into existence and the current of *sāra* or re-being in God, as in the Qur'ān, *wa ilayhi'l-masīr*: "and to Him is the inexorable becoming" [2:285].<sup>47</sup>

In the act of Theophanic or Creative Prayer, which is shared, the "coming forth from" is the Prayer of God while the "return to" is the Prayer of man, which ultimately however, is none other than the Prayer of God in the form of His *mazhar*, where the sharing takes place. This can only be understood when *tawhīd* is perceived in its ontological sense of monorealism,<sup>48</sup> where "there is no reality but Reality." Otherwise, one can only be scandalized – all the more so with the Shaykh's following statement: "It is He who worships me at the moment when I worship Him...Then it is God who causes me to exist. But by knowing Him, I in turn cause Him to exist."<sup>49</sup> For Corbin, who was certainly not amongst the scandalized, this clearly reveals that for Ibn 'Arabī, the prayer of man is itself the Prayer of God. In order to better understand this apparently blasphemous statement, we must investigate possible objections raised by it and examine in greater detail exactly what Ibn 'Arabī meant by the Prayer of God.

## **6.6 The Prayer of God**

How can God be "He who worships"? According to Ibn 'Arabī, the belief that God could or should engage Himself in an act of worship, say for example *ṣalāt*, can in no way be rejected, for to do so would be to reject God's words. Here, the Shaykh refers not only to the ḥadīth on prayer quoted by Austin, but finds Qur'ānic support in the verse: "It is He who prays over you and his angels, to bring you out of the Darkness to the Light."<sup>50</sup> Assured of the reciprocal nature of prayer, Ibn 'Arabī writes: "He commanded us to pray to Him and has told us that He prays for us, the prayer being both from us and from

<sup>47</sup> Austin, "Aspects of mystical prayer," 10.

<sup>48</sup> See p. 9n42 in this thesis.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Alone*, 254-253.

<sup>50</sup> al-Qur'ān 33:43, cited in Ibid., 264.

Him.”<sup>51</sup> *Ṣalāt*, which, according to the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, God does engage in, is indeed an act of worship. With such authoritative references, even those uninitiated into the Ṣūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī may accept the possibility of “The Prayer of God.”

That God “prays *over*” man, makes it difficult to claim that God *worships*, since worship implies the divinity of that which is worshiped. How is God to worship anything while He is the most-High, worship being due only to Him? In other words, the question is over the relevance of the “me” (“It is He who worships me”), that is to say, the “created other”, which stands – as it must – in a position of submission to the All-mighty Creator. However, in accordance with this line of reasoning, the same question, namely, the *worth* of the “created other”, could be posed concerning a Qur’ānic verse where God says: “Remember Me, and I will remember you.”<sup>52</sup> Here, where the “Me” refers to God, the question concerns the identity and relevance of the “you”, who, as the reader of the Qur’ān cannot but agree, is deemed worthy of God’s remembrance (*dhikr*). It may also be noted that *dhikr*, like *ṣalāt*, is an act of worship, indeed a much-adored act of worship for those traveling along the Ṣūfī path. Therefore, it appears that God engages in at least two acts that are prescribed for man, and the most authoritative text in Islam implies similarity between the worshiped and the worshiper, thus allowing for an intimate relationship between both and offering encouragement for those who seek closeness to the most High.

As we have seen continuously throughout this study, there is indeed a similarity between God and creation – indeed a most profound similarity particularly for man who is created in the image of God Who is “the First and the Last and the Manifest, the Nonmanifest.”<sup>53</sup> The servant who worships is nothing less than the theophany where the Nonmanifest manifests Himself to Himself as other than Himself. Here we arrive at the meaning the Shaykh finds in verse 57:3 with respect to prayer. For Ibn ‘Arabī, a master of philology, the *bāṭin* or hidden significance of the term *ṣalāt* is to be found in its root meaning of “back” and “behind” (*ṣala*).<sup>54</sup> The one who prays is known as a *muṣallī*, but

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<sup>51</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, 282.

<sup>52</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:152. Ibn ‘Arabī, observing that *dhikr* (remembrance) is an act of worship divided between God and His servant, cites this verse in his *Fuṣūṣ*. Austin, *Bezels*, 279.

<sup>53</sup> al-Qur’ān 57:3, cited in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Idem, *SPK*, 343.



*muṣallī* also means “he who comes after.”<sup>55</sup> Corbin notes that this homonymy illuminates the relationship between the Prayer of God and the Prayer of man, where both God and the servant take turns in being the one who comes after (*muṣallī*) the other, who is then the one who comes before or the First. This, then, is the *bāṭin* of 57:3 with respect to prayer and manifestation, where God and His manifestation – each being a *muṣallī* – receive alternately the Divine Names “the First” and “the Last”, which correspond respectively to “the Hidden” and “the Revealed”. Corbin explains that

when God is the *muṣallī*, “He who prays” and who “comes last,” He manifests Himself to us under His Name of “the Last (*Al-Akhir*), that is to say, the Revealed (*al-Zāhir*), since His manifestation depends on the existence of the faithful to whom and for whom He is manifested. The “God who prays toward us” is precisely the manifested God (whose manifestation fulfills the aspiration of the “Hidden Treasure” to be known). He is the God whom the faithful creates in his heart, either by his meditations and reflections or by the particular faith to which he adheres and conforms. To this aspect therefore belongs the God who is designated technically as the “God created in the faiths,” that is, the God who determines and individualizes Himself according to the capacity of the receptacle which receives Him, and whose soul is the *mazhar*, the epiphany, of one or another of His Names.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, the *muṣallī*, whether God or man, is known as the Last, for the prayer depends upon the existence of the other who is the First. This being said, there is no substantial division between (the prayer of) the First and (the prayer of) the Last, because God Himself is One. The sharing in prayer, as in creation, is a result of the Prayer of God, which initiates the process of Theophanic or Creative Imagination whereby God is manifested in forms in which His Names find concrete existence. These forms, i.e. creation, are the shadows of the immutable entities, which, having no existence of their own, are simply imaginal realities or the *mazāhir* for the manifestation of *wujūd* (Being, existence). Thus, what *appears* to be the independent human act of worship is in fact, as Corbin says, God Who “manifests Himself and reveals Himself to Himself, calling Himself to the worship of Himself, and is therefore the reality in the active subject of all the actions following from these forms.”<sup>57</sup> When the form, i.e. the *mazhar*, comes into existence and worships his God through theophanic prayer, the *mazhar* causes God to

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<sup>55</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 265. Due to its root meaning of “behind,” the term *muṣallī* is often used to refer to a horse that comes behind the winner in a race. Chittick, *SPK*, 343; Corbin, *Alone*, 265.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 265-266; cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 282-283.

<sup>57</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 254.

exist, not as God in Himself, Whose existence is independent of existence, but as the “God created in the faiths” or the personal Lord,<sup>58</sup> which is none other than the Divine Name of one’s being.

### **6.7 Theophanic – Creative Prayer**

Theophanic Prayer is a Creative Prayer; through the power of the Creative Imagination that the soul of the servant possesses the *muṣallī* experiences the creation and re-creation (i.e. *khalq jadīd*) of the vision of God Who is thus revealed. Once revealed, not in His Essence, but through a theophany which occurs for and within man’s own self (or soul), God is now present as the object of contemplation. On this, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes the relationship between prayer, *munājāt* (intimate discourse), and *dhikr* (remembrance), In his *Fuṣūṣ* the Shaykh writes:

He [Muḥammad] said, “and my solace is in prayer,” because it is a [state of] contemplation, being an intimate discourse between God and His servant. He [God] says, *Remember Me, and I will remember you*, since it is an act of worship equally divided between God and His servant.... Being a discourse, it is also a remembrance, since whoever remembers God sits with God and God with him, as mentioned in the tradition, “I am the companion of him who remembers Me.” Now whoever, being perceptive, is in the presence of the one he is remembering, he sees his companion. In such a case there is contemplation and vision, otherwise he does not see Him.<sup>59</sup>

It is only because prayer is a shared worship that it is a *munājāt*, an intimate dialogue. Ibn ‘Arabī also indicates in the *Fuṣūṣ* that the most effective element in the prayer is the *dhikr*, specifically the remembrance of God<sup>60</sup> Who promises to remember the servant as and when the servant remembers Him. The importance of *dhikr* is, according to Corbin, found in its literal sense of “*rememoration*; the word means to make remain in the heart, to have in mind, to *meditate*.”<sup>61</sup> It is the *dhikr*, which, according to the ḥadīth, makes God the sitting (*julūs*) companion. Thus the *dhikr*, which is not a “unilateral and exclusive act on the part of the mystic,”<sup>62</sup> initiates a *majlis* or “session”, wherein occurs an intimate dialogue between God and His servant. If the *dhākir* (“the one remembering”) is not unsuccessful, he may witness during his *‘ibāda* through the power

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 279-280.

<sup>60</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, 281.

<sup>61</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 250.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

of *khayāl* which gives form to the formless, the theophany of God which then becomes the object through which God may be contemplated and known.

The theophany of God, as seen through the *Imaginatrix*, is the “God manifested by the Theophanic Imagination” (*al-Ḥaqq al-mutakhayyal*) also known as the “God of Belief”, Who appears in various forms in accordance with the preparedness and belief of the individual believer. To be sure, God is One ( *al-aḥad* or *al-wāḥid*) but is also Many (*al-kathīr*) or All (*al-kull*) due to the manyness of the Divine Names,<sup>63</sup> along with the variety of beliefs held by the believers. According to the Shaykh, it is for this reason that God, as reported in a ḥadīth, said: “I am with My servant’s opinion of Me,” which for Ibn ‘Arabī has the meaning: “I do not become manifest to him except in the form of his belief.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, the form or image of God, is a personal image configured for and by the mystic’s belief and creative imagination, which is able to receive and perceive the theophanies of God, whether these be manifest in the macrocosm, that is “in the horizons”, or within the microcosm, “in themselves” (41:53). In the act of Theophanic Prayer, when the *muṣallī* turns inward to his innermost self, facing his own soul, he is only acting upon the wisdom of this verse; if his prayer is successful, he hopes to be shown the signs of God within himself. Furthermore, by turning inward, the one in prayer is already acting upon the reality of the Qur’ānic verse: “And God’s is the place-of-shining-forth and the place-of-Darkening: so wherever you all may turn, there is the Face of God!”<sup>65</sup> As we saw in our chapter on cosmology (4.3), the inner dimension of man is the “microcosmic world of the soul” or the imaginal *barzakh*, within which one may enter his own personal universe and contemplate the theophanies of God. As such, it cannot be excluded from the “wherever you all may turn,” and this is all the more

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<sup>63</sup> In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that God is both One and All, and emphasizes the necessity of the personal Lord. “Know that what is named ‘God’ is One in Essence but All (*al-kull*) through the names. No existent thing has anything from God except its own specific Lord. It cannot possibly have the All....That which becomes designated for it from the All is only that which corresponds to it, and that is its own Lord.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick *SPK*, 346.

<sup>64</sup> Ḥadīth and Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>65</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:115, cited in James Winston Morris, “Seeking God’s Face: Ibn ‘Arabi on Right Action and Theophanic Vision,” Part I, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, 16 (1994), 1. Morris, who appreciates the significance of verse 2:115 for Ibn ‘Arabī, writes: “It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that all the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and his generations of commentators, with their complex ontological schemas of divine ‘Manifestations’ and ‘Apparitions’ (*tajalliyāt*, *mazāhir*), could be viewed as a sort of vast, ongoing commentary on that single Qur’anic verse.” *Ibid.*

certain as the Qur'ān explicitly identifies the soul as a place for the manifestation of God's signs. Theophanic Prayer is the method by which one comes to know one's soul, one's most essential self; a cognition that culminates in the recognition and beatific vision of God's Face (*wajh*). How Ibn 'Arabī understand the reality that is the Face of God, which, according to the Qur'ān, is eternal?<sup>66</sup>

### **6.8 The Face of God**

Chittick tells us that Ibn 'Arabī understands the Face “as a synonym for *dhāt* (essence) and *ḥaqīqa* (reality), both of which can be equivalents for the word *nafs* or self.”<sup>67</sup> In order to explain the significance of a face as that which enables a thing to be known, Chittick turns to the human or mundane level, where

identifying a person's 'face' with the person's self, essence, or reality follows upon the fact that for the observer, human identity lies primarily in the face. A headless body has no immediately *recognizable identity*, in contrast to a bodiless head. The face is the *physical side* of the person that the observer identifies most intimately with the person. Hence the face of a person, on the concrete level, expresses most clearly the person's self and reality.<sup>68</sup>

One's face is the means of recognition by which an identity becomes known. Therefore, the import of the Face of God pertains to its role in the recognition of God. Yet, if the face of a thing is its reality or essence, this would mean, according to Ibn 'Arabī's theosophy, that God's Face can never be known and His recognition is precluded. Chittick confirms that “If the face of a thing is its reality, God's face cannot be known, since God's reality is His Essence, and God's Essence lies beyond human knowledge.”<sup>69</sup> The problem is not insurmountable. If we have followed the Shaykh's understanding of creation as theophany, we realize, as does Chittick, that

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<sup>66</sup> In addition to verse 2:115, two other significant verses concerning the Face of God are 28:88: “Everything is perishing except His Face,” and 55:26-27: “Everything that is thereon is passing away; and there subsisteth but the Face of thy Lord, possessor of Glory and Bounty.” al-Qur'ān, cited in Shah-Kazemi, “Metaphysics of Interfaith,” 149. Shah-Kazemi notes that in the two verses, “the words indicating the ephemeral nature of all things – *hālik*, ‘perishing’, and *fān*, ‘passing away’ or ‘evanescent’ – are both in the present tense: it is not that things will come to naught or perish at some later point in time; they are in fact, here and now, ‘extinguishing’ before our very eyes.” Ibid. This serves to emphasize the permanence of the Face, and underscores the necessity of its recognition.

<sup>67</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 91. The Shaykh writes: “The ‘face’ of anything is its essence,” and again, “A thing is known only through its face, that is, its reality.” Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid (emphasis mine).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 92.

although *Wherever you turn, there is the face of God* (2:115), the divine face that we find and recognize is not the reality that is the Essence, but the reality that is God's self-disclosure. It is God inasmuch as he displays Himself to us, the God that we know and we worship, the 'god of belief.'<sup>70</sup>

Thus, while the Face is God's Essence, the Face which is *recognizable* is the "God of Belief," Who is "He/not He". It must be reemphasized that for Ibn 'Arabī, the God of Belief is not a false god whose worship would be considered idolatrous; rather, it is God Who manifests Himself through the process of Theophanic Imagination – the process of creation whereby the transcendent God is revealed as the immanent God. However, because the Face of God manifested by Theophanic Imagination is the *Barzakh*, it is both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, and this means that the Face of God is the Lord of Lords or the Divinity.<sup>71</sup>

As stated earlier, the Divinity as the *Barzakh* creates an indirect relationship between the Essence and man who is then able to envision his God by giving Him form through the power of his Creative Imagination, which gives form to that which does not properly have form. The existence of the Creative Imagination enables man to engage in Theophanic Prayer, thus fulfilling the command "worship Me." According to the *Fuṣūṣ*, the worshiper can only pray – if his prayer is the true contemplative prayer – to that which he sees,<sup>72</sup> and vision requires a form which the worshiper creates. Thus, man shares with God, though in an extremely limited way, the ability to create. That man shares this ability with God is not as shocking as it may appear when we remember that "God created man in His form." In articulating his understanding of forms and the "form-giver", Ibn 'Arabī illustrates the use of the faculty of imagination and writes:

Among people, the "form-giver" is he who goes about creating a creation like God's creation. Though he is not a creator, he is a creator, for God says, *When you create from clay as the guise of a bird* (5:110). Thus He named Jesus a "creator," but he had nothing save the guise of a bird. The "guise" is its form.... The "form" is nothing but the entity of the shape, and "form-giving" is nothing but taking shape in the mind. Know also that since "God created Adam in His form," we come to know here that the *form* modified by the pronoun *His*, which

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> It must be noted that this does not mean that the Divinity is Himself the God of Belief for it is only when the Divinity becomes manifested in the *mazhar* through one of the Divine Names, that the Divinity is *perceived* as the God of Belief, who is then the Lord of the *mazhar*.

<sup>72</sup> The *Fuṣūṣ* states: "Indeed, he who is not present with His Lord in prayer, neither hearing nor seeing Him, is not really praying at all, since he does not listen and watch. While it lasts, there is nothing like the prayer rite to prevent preoccupation with other things." Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Austin, *Bezels*, 281.

goes back to God, is the form of the belief concerning God that the human being creates in himself through his...imagination. He says, “This is my Lord,” and then worships Him, for God has given him the faculty of form-giving.<sup>73</sup>

“The Prophet said,” continues the Shaykh,

“God is in the kiblah of the person who performs the *ṣalāt*.” God says, *Wherever you turn, there is the face of God* [2:115], and the face of a thing is its essence and its reality. Hence, in whatever form God makes His servant stand, that is a site toward which he turns, so within it is the face of God – if you understand. So the human being configures a form within himself that he worships. He is the form-giver, and he is the created, configured thing that God configured as a servant who worships what he configures.<sup>74</sup>

The last line in particular illustrates the “Creator-created” relationship as envisioned by Ibn ‘Arabī. It is precisely because of the intimate, in fact, interdependent<sup>75</sup> relationship between the Creator and the created – where the latter is created in the form of the former- that the created may enjoy, in a certain sense, the ability of the Creator, and to thereby make manifest to oneself the Face of God. Not only is man (“the latter” in the sentence) created in the form of the Creator (“the former” in the sentence) but the Creator is Himself one Who gives created beings their form and is thus a “former”. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, man too has the faculty of form-giving and this is only because he is created in the form of the former.

The link or bridge (i.e. the *barzakh*) between God and man, symbolized by the dash ( - ) in the phrase “Creator-created”, is the power of the Creative Imagination, which operates simultaneously on both the Divine and human level. In expressing the co-operative nature of the Creative Imagination, Corbin makes reference to quite a few of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings, such as the doctrine of “new creation” where the imaginal nature of existence demands that there be a renewal of theophanies or a recurrence of Imagination; the belief that (Perfect) Man is “created in the image of God”; the notion of the “Hidden Treasure”; and the imagery of the “mirror”, within which both man and God become known. Corbin writes:

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<sup>73</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>75</sup> See 1.7 in this thesis.

To the initial act of the Creator imagining the world corresponds the creature imagining his world, imagining his worlds, his God, his symbols. Or rather, these are phases, the recurrences of one and the same eternal process: Imagination effected in an imagination (*takhayyul fī takhayyul*), an Imagination which is recurrent just as – and because – the Creation itself is recurrent. The same theophanic imagination of the Creator who has revealed the worlds, renews the Creation from moment to moment in the human being whom He has revealed as His perfect image and who, in the mirror that this Image is, shows himself Him whose image he is.<sup>76</sup>

As we saw in our chapter on cosmogony (5.5), God sees, contemplates and comes to know Himself in the Supreme *Mazhar*, which is the man-made-mirror that reflects the perfect image. Man is made as a mirror but the mirror is also manmade in the sense that man must perfect himself, creating and polishing his own mirror, which will then reflect the perfect image. This is not to suggest that man alone is responsible for his spiritual development or spiritual re-creation (i.e. *khalq jadid*), both of which are in the Hands of God Who, according to the Qur’ān, created Adam with His two Hands (38:75). However, as Corbin indicates above, it is the human being who shows himself the original form in whose image he was perfectly created. In fact, this is no different from God seeing Himself in the Perfect Man and this is because one requires the other. It is precisely when man comes to see for himself in whose image he was created that God sees Himself in “he who knows himself.” This is what it means to say that the Prayer of man is nothing other than the Prayer of God, or rather, the opposite pole of the same Prayer, now in its phase of fulfillment. Thus, Corbin writes:

The Prayer of God is His aspiration to manifest Himself, to see Himself in a mirror, but in a mirror which itself sees Him (namely, the faithful whose Lord He is, whom He invests in one of another of His Names). The Prayer of man fulfills this aspiration; by becoming the mirror of this Form, the orant sees this “Form of God” in the most secret sanctuary of himself. But never would he see the Form of God (*ṣūrat al-Ḥaqq*) if his vision were not itself the Prayer of God (*Ṣalāt al-Ḥaqq*) which is the theophanic aspiration of the *Deus absconditus*.<sup>77</sup>

There is a sharing in roles of prayer and seeing: God sees Himself when the servant sees God as his Lord. It has been already mentioned that when the servant who is on the path of perfection turns inward, engaging in Theophanic Prayer in service of the imagination, he is in fact turning to the Face of God, which he configures or makes imaginalized

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<sup>76</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 188.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 261-262.

through the power of *khayāl*. Chittick, recalling the ḥadīth of “*man ‘arafa*” concurs: “When the servants turn toward themselves and come to know themselves, they come to know their own Lord, who is the face of the Real.”<sup>78</sup> In what follows, Ibn ‘Arabī confirms our conclusion about Theophanic Prayer and the Face of God, which is to be found within – or indeed is – one’s self. The Shaykh writes:

The face of God is you, so you are the kiblah wherever you may be. Do not turn your face except toward yourself. The vicegerent becomes manifest only in the form of the one who appoints him as vicegerent. *You are the vicegerent in the earth* (2:30), and He is “the vicegerent in the family.”<sup>79</sup>

The kiblah (or *qibla*) is the “direction” towards which one prays and thus, Ibn ‘Arabī states that one must turn toward oneself in recognition of the Face. Referring to the Qur’ān, Ibn ‘Arabī indicates that man is the “vicegerent (*khalīfah*) in the earth,” and he refers once again to the similarity between God and the *khalīfah* appointed by God. In fact, the argument for similarity (*tashbīh*) is strengthened when Ibn ‘Arabī makes reference to a ḥadīth that identifies God as the “vicegerent in the family.”<sup>80</sup> However, because Ibn ‘Arabī vigorously defends the perspective of *tanzīh*, it is certain that he is not suggesting that the *khalīfah* is himself God. To appreciate what it means to be a “vicegerent in the earth”, we must recall the significance of the term “earth” for Ibn ‘Arabī.

## **6.9 Earth and Ascension**

More than being the physical ground upon which one walks, the earth is, according to the Shaykh, one’s own body which is the true “all-embracing earth”<sup>81</sup> of God, within which is to be found the personal world of soul, itself the homologue of the World of Imagination (‘*ālam al khayāl*). It is within one’s self that one may enter into imagination and not only see the signs or theophanies, but also actualize the perfect state of ‘*ubūdiyya* (servanthood), for it is the place *par excellence* of contemplation and ‘*ibāda*.<sup>82</sup> If prayer is theophanic, each theophany, which is displayed within a *mazhar* witnessed in

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<sup>78</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 95.

<sup>79</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>80</sup> The ḥadīth states: “O God, Thou are the companion in travel and the vicegerent in the family.” Ḥadīth, cited in *Ibid.*, 394n5.

<sup>81</sup> See al-Qur’ān 29:57.

<sup>82</sup> On the relationship between the imaginal earth and ‘*ibāda*, see 4.2.3 and 4.4 in this thesis.



and by the power of the soul's imagination, may lead to greater theophany; this is nothing less than the ascension (*mi'rāj*) of the soul. Interestingly, it was during the course of the Prophet's own *mi'rāj*, that the ritual prayer was instituted by God. Furthermore, according to the Prophet, prayer is the "ascension of the believer" (*mi'rāj al-mu'min*).<sup>83</sup> Chodkiewicz observes that it is a paradoxical *mi'rāj*, for it is only when the *mu'min* lowers his entire being in the act of total prostration (*sujūd*) that he is raised.<sup>84</sup> Aware of this, Ibn 'Arabī identifies the *mi'rāj* with the "earth" of one's body and proclaims: "It is in your fall that your elevation comes, and it is in your earth that your heaven is found."<sup>85</sup>

The ascension from one theophany to the next can only occur through the spiritual hermeneutic known as *ta'bīr*, which allows one who has received knowledge from contemplation to continually "cross over" from the realm of *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin*, or from appearance to truth. Thus, Ibn 'Arabī writes: "through the knowledge which arises in contemplation he turns to face what is beyond each appearance: the truth beyond appearances."<sup>86</sup> Through *ta'bīr*, one may reach the truth beyond the appearance, and thus, the theophanies act as the *ma'ārij* ("stairs") of God,<sup>87</sup> the climbing of which is one's ascension (*mi'rāj*). Indeed, one must not remain fixated on any one theophanic form or stair, which would prevent one from attaining the greatest manifestation – the form of God.<sup>88</sup> The ascension occurs within the act of prayer but this is no ordinary prayer, even if outwardly it appears to be so. In a poem from the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī observes:

How many a one praying experiences nothing of his prayer save stress, exertion and a view of the *mihrab*, while another is constantly blessed with intimate divine converse, even though he seems to be only fulfilling his ordinary religious duties. How not, since the very mystery of the creation stands before him.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 112.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid. The following verse of the Qur'ān indicates how one may attain the divine proximity: "Prostrate yourself and come closer." al-Qur'ān 96:19, cited in Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power*, trans. R.T. Harris (New York, 1981), 64. Hereafter: Harris, *Journey*.

<sup>87</sup> According to the Qur'ān, God is the "Possessor of the Stairs (*ma'ārij*)."<sup>87</sup> al-Qur'ān 70:3, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 42.

<sup>88</sup> See Harris, *Journey*, 32, where Ibn 'Arabī offers two covenants one must keep while in "retreat" emphasizing continual *dhikr* and persistence in the quest of attaining God.

<sup>89</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in "The mystery of prayer: A poem from *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*," trans. R.W.J. Austin, in *Prayer & Contemplation*, 1.

Therefore, the blessed servant of God performs a personal ‘*ibāda*, which can only be a *munājāt* (intimate dialogue) that reveals the secret of creation; a secret which must reveal to the servant the mystery of his own being.

#### **6.10 “As If You See Him”**

What makes such a servant’s ‘*ibāda* different from others’ is that she has realized the truth of the ḥadīth of *ihsān*, where the Prophet instructs: “Doing what is beautiful [*ihsān*] means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”<sup>90</sup> According to the Qur’ān, the words of the Prophet always contain wisdom (16:125, 12:108) and thus, Ibn ‘Arabī believes that the “if” in the “as if you see,” is not merely hypothetical, while the “if” in “even if you do not see,” is actual, which means that one may indeed see Him. By now, it should be clear that for Ibn ‘Arabī, the way in which one may come to see God while worshiping is through the power of imagination. Morris, who prefers to translate the “as if” as, “as though”, explains that for the Shaykh, the Divine Imagination is the secret behind the ḥadīth of *ihsān*, and is the “Door to the realized vision of God’s Face.”<sup>91</sup> Morris quotes Ibn ‘Arabī who writes: “The Dominion of Imagination (*sultān al-khayāl*) is the very essence of the ‘as though (you saw Him)’, and it is the real meaning of...‘worship-serve God as though you saw Him’.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the importance of *khayāl* in ‘*ibādā* cannot be understated, since it is precisely that which separates ordinary prayer from true theophanic prayer. Furthermore, for Ibn ‘Arabī, imagination enables one to approach prayer with the right inner attitude (*adab*), because the imagination, which is all-embracing, is able to give form to God Who then becomes present (*hādīr*) in the direction (*qibla*) of the one who is praying. As stated earlier, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the true *qibla* is one’s own self, and thus, the *muṣallī* must turn inwards and face the manifestation of God within his own personal world of soul, which is the imaginal “theater of theophany” (*majla*).

For Ibn ‘Arabī, imagination is powerful enough to give form to God. In discussing the all-embracing nature of imagination, he often quotes a ḥadīth which has

<sup>90</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in Murata and Chittick, *Vision*, xxv.

<sup>91</sup> “‘Seeking God’s Face’: Ibn ‘Arabi on Right Action and Theophanic Vision,” Part II, *Journal of the Muhyiddin ibn ‘Arabi Society* 17 (1995), 17.

<sup>92</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid*.

already been cited, namely, “God is in the *qibla* of the person praying.”<sup>93</sup> As we know, for the Shaykh, the reality of those Qur’ānic *āyāt* and *aḥādīth* which describe God in terms of *tashbīḥ* (e.g. God in the *qibla*) or in an anthropomorphic way (e.g. God’s Hand or Face), which are explained away by those who rely solely on their unaided and thus partial intellect, can only be experienced by those who are able to harness the power of imagination, which has the ability to give form to the formless. Commenting on the ḥadīth of the *qibla*, Ibn ‘Arabī tells that

the intellect holds, with its arguments, that any “likeness” (between God and created things) is impossible: vision can perceive nothing but the wall (in front of the person praying)! Yet we have also learned that the prescriber (of Revelation) called upon you to imagine that you are facing God (*al-Haqq*) in your direction of prayer; indeed it has been prescribed for you to accept that. And God says: “So wherever you may turn, then there is the Face of God!” (2:115)...So the Imagination has given form to the One Who, according to the arguments of the intellect, cannot possibly be conveyed or given any form. That is why (the Imagination) is so all-encompassing.”<sup>94</sup>

This is not to say that the Essence itself is being disclosed, for the very fact of theophany in form precludes *al-aḥad*, which “remains forever in obscurity,”<sup>95</sup> from being known. What is being disclosed is the Divine form *al-wāḥid*, an attribute related to both God as Divinity the *mazhar*. This being said, Ibn ‘Arabī does not suggest that there can be no increase in one’s knowledge of God’s Essence, though it is true that it can never become known. As one’s soul ascends to higher states of knowledge – the highest being the knowledge of God – one is also ascending in one’s knowledge of God’s Essence because Allah as Divinity is not a separate reality from Allah as Essence, for *waḥdat al-wujūd* means that there is only monoreality.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, what it means to say that the Essence of Allah is never known is that knowledge of God does not come to an end and Ibn ‘Arabī particularly emphasized the eternal nature of the journey in God.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in *Ibid.*, 19; cf. Ibn ‘Arabī quoting this ḥadīth on p. 112 of this thesis.

<sup>94</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Morris, “Divine ‘Imagination’,” 11. Where Morris translates “Intellect”, Chittick translates “Rational demonstration.” See Chittick, *SPK*, 122.

<sup>95</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Idem*, *SDG*, 168. Ibn ‘Arabī continues: “There can never be any self disclosure through it [i.e. *al-aḥad*], for its reality forbids that.”

<sup>96</sup> See p. 9n42 in this thesis.

<sup>97</sup> For an excellent collection of studies on Ibn ‘Arabī’s views and writings on the physical and spiritual journeys, see *The Journey of the Heart: Foundations of the Spiritual Life according to Ibn ‘Arabi*, ed. John Mercer (Oxford, Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, 1996).

### **6.11 Imaginal Horn and Muhammadan Form**

That one's knowledge of the Essence may increase through *mi'rāj* is brought out in the following passage where Ibn 'Arabī is discussing the nature of the Supreme *Barzakh*, or all of existence, in so far as it is the Presence of (Nondelimited) Imagination. According to the Prophet, the Supreme *Barzakh* is in the shape of a luminous Horn (*al-ṣūr*) that is wide at its lower end and narrow at its higher end. For the Shaykh, within and through the Presence of Imagination, knowledge of the Essence of God may increase as one advances in the knowledge of *tawḥīd* by first knowing and then transcending the knowledge of things of the physical world in order to reach the greatest of all objects of knowledge:

That is why the true Knowers (of God) only find comprehensiveness of knowledge to the extent of what they come to know from the world. Then when they want to proceed to knowing the Unicity of God – may He be exalted! – They keep on ascending gradually from that breadth (of worldly objects of knowing) toward what is narrower.... So their forms of knowing...keep on becoming less numerous while they ascend in their knowledge of God's Essence, through spiritual unveiling, until they reach the point where they have no object of knowledge but God (*al-Haqq*) alone – which is the narrowest point in that "Horn".<sup>98</sup>

Although here, Ibn 'Arabī states that God becomes the object of knowledge, this does not contradict what was said in our chapter on ontology (3.8 and 3.9) about the direct or revealed object of *tawḥīd* being the *mazhar* of God, while God is the indirect or veiled object. This is because the ascension itself takes place within the Imaginal Horn, where realities take on forms that make them perceptible to the one who sees through the light of imagination. Therefore, it is still a matter of the image or form of God – albeit the most perfect form – which becomes the object of knowledge. The Shaykh confirms this in the *Futūḥāt*, where he speaks of the soul's ascent to the world of light traveling on an imaginal steed made from one's own deeds which is one's own personal *Buraq* – "the beast as quick as lightning (*barq*) that took Muḥammad on the *mi'rāj*."<sup>99</sup> When the gnostic no longer wishes to be restrained by the darkness of his body he frees himself of it, then he finds

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<sup>98</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Morris, "Divine 'Imagination'," 13.

<sup>99</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 301.

that God has readied for him from his deeds a docile...mount, a *barzakhi* beast...named a “*Buraq*”.... So he *emerges as an emigrant* [4:100] from the city of his body and sets off in the Sovereignty of the Higher Plenum and its signs with the eye of crossing over [*i’tibār*], because of the knowledge of God that the signs give to him.... God discloses Himself to him only in a Muhammadan form, so he sees Him with a Muhammadan vision. This is the most perfect vision within which and through which the Real is seen. Through this He lifts him up to a waystation that is reached only by the Muhammadans.<sup>100</sup>

Therefore, the direct object of vision and thus *tawḥīd*, is none other than the Muḥammadan form, and the one who journeys through *khayāl* and on the imaginal *Buraq* reaches the Muḥammadan waystation as a result of witnessing the most perfect form in which the vision of the Real appears.

### **6.12 “Die Before You Die”**

It may be objected here that according to Qur’ān, when Moses requested of God, “Let me see, so that I can behold you,” God’s reply: *lan tarāni*, “You shall not see Me!”<sup>101</sup> precludes the possibility of the vision of God. This objection is further strengthened by the ḥadīth: “not one of you will see His Lord until he dies.”<sup>102</sup> For Ibn ‘Arabī, the *lan tarāni* is not an “insurmountable obstacle;”<sup>103</sup> in the *Futūḥāt* the Shaykh recounts an encounter he had, during his own spiritual ascension, with Moses. Ibn ‘Arabī questions Moses: “You requested the vision (of God), while the Messenger of God said that ‘not one of you will see His Lord until he dies?’”<sup>104</sup> To this, the Moses of Ibn ‘Arabī’s vision replies: “And it was just like that: When I asked Him for the vision (of God), He answered me, so that ‘*I fell down stunned*’ (7:143). Then I saw Him in my ‘(state of) being stunned’.”<sup>105</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī asks: “While (you were) dead?”<sup>106</sup> Moses confirms: “While (I was) dead.... So I did not see God until I had died. It was then that I ‘*awakened*’, so that I knew *Who* I saw. And it was because of that that I said ‘*I have*

<sup>100</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 302.

<sup>101</sup> al-Qur’ān 7:143, cited in Michael Chodkiewicz, “The vision of God according to Ibn ‘Arabi,” in *Prayer and Contemplation*, 53.

<sup>102</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in James Winston Morris, “The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Mi’rāj,” Part II, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108.1 (1998), 65.

<sup>103</sup> Chodkiewicz, “The vision of God,” 57.

<sup>104</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Morris, “The Spiritual Ascension,” Part II, 65.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, quoted in Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

*returned to you*'(7:143), since I did not return to anyone but Him."<sup>107</sup> From what we read here, according to Ibn 'Arabī, one must indeed be "dead" before having the beatific vision, though it goes without saying that this is a very different "death" than what is usually known by the same term. For Ibn 'Arabī, there is both a "greater death" and a "lesser death": the former refers to the physical or "obligatory death" as experienced by all creation, the latter is known as the "initiativ death" where the servant, while physically alive, gains entrance into the imaginal world or the *barzakh* (isthmus) between this world and the next. According to Ibn 'Arabī, and the Ṣūfīs in general, the Prophet alluded to the initiatic or voluntary death when he reportedly proclaimed: "Die before you die!"<sup>108</sup> For the Ṣūfīs, this is seen as the method by which to overcome the obstacle of *lan tarāni* ("you will not see Me") and the secret key that unlocks the mystery of the ḥadīth in which the Prophet promises that no one will see their Lord until they die. With all this in mind, Ibn 'Arabī writes:

Now since we knew that our meeting with God can only be through death, and because we knew the inner meaning of death, we sought to bring it about sooner, in the life of this world.... Thus when there comes what is commonly known as death and the veil of this body is removed from us (Quran 50:22), our state will not change and our certainty will not be any greater than what we already experience now...[As the Shī'ī Imam] 'Alī said: "Even if the veil were removed, I would not be any more certain."<sup>109</sup>

According to this, the initiatic death brings with it the greatest certainty; a certainty otherwise gained after the physical death (the removal of the veil). For Ibn 'Arabī, certainty comes with the spiritual "unveiling" (*kashf*); this is precisely what occurs for the one who actualizes the command: "Die before you die." For Ibn 'Arabī the following Qur'ānic verse: "Now We have removed from you your veil, so your vision today is keen,"<sup>110</sup> otherwise recited to someone after the physical death, applies to "the man of faith who is granted the unveiling of 'things as they really are'...*before* he leaves this world."<sup>111</sup> The vision of such a man is now keen, and he is thus able to see his Lord.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>108</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 277.

<sup>109</sup> Ibn 'Arabī quoted in Ibid., 106.

<sup>110</sup> al-Qur'ān 50:22, cited in Ibid., 109.

<sup>111</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Ibid.

### **6.13 Continual Contemplation**

By contemplating the theophanies within his own imaginal world of soul, the Shaykh ascended through the Imaginal Horn to higher degrees of knowledge where the forms gradually become less numerous, until all appearances of multiplicity return to unity in the one and only single form - the one *mazhar* which is the symbol or image of *tawhīd*. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the objects of knowledge became less numerous because he was contemplating no longer the various Divine Names that were imaginalized *within* his soul but his soul *itself*, and thus came to know the Divine Name of his own being. The Divine Name upon becoming known revealed to him the truth about his own self, his reality (*ḥaqīqa*); a reality that was the root of the branch, or the Lord of the servant. While the contemplation initially began within the ritual prayer, which nevertheless was Theophanic Prayer, for Ibn ‘Arabī, who ascended within the Imaginal Horn – wide at the bottom, narrow at the top – the intervals between the times of prayer themselves became enfolded into the Hand of Oneness, with the result that every moment was spent in a contemplation. The Shaykh reveals:

This power of Active Imagination...attains in me such a degree that it has visually represented to me my mystic Beloved in a corporeal, objective, and extramental form, just as the Angel Gabriel appeared to the eyes of the Prophet.... It spoke to me. I listened and understood. These apparitions left me in such a state that for whole days I could take no food...but I felt no hunger; and I was so full of my vision that I sated myself and became drunk with contemplating it, so much so that this contemplation took the place of all food for me...But that Form never ceased to be the object of my gaze, regardless of whether I was standing or seated, in movement or at rest.<sup>112</sup>

Immediately noticeable is the profoundly physical nature of what is, at its source, a spiritual experience. This is precisely the characteristic of imagination, which unites the spiritual and corporeal. Remarkable as the account is, it is not the Shaykh’s ultimate spiritual attainment. As Ibn ‘Arabī stated, he would continue to contemplate that form, which must lead on to higher realization and greater theophany, and then reveal to himself the mystery of himself.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Alone*, 382-383n13.

## **6.14 The Mysterious Youth**

In his *Kitāb al-Isrā'* ("Book of the Night-Journey"), Ibn 'Arabī recounts the *mi'raj* he was taken on.<sup>113</sup> We learn that at the start of the journey, he met a mysterious "Youth" (*fatā*), whose "essence is spiritual, whose qualities are lordly and whose inclination is angelic."<sup>114</sup> Ibn 'Arabī tells us that he prostrated to the *fatā*<sup>115</sup> and begged him to reveal to him the secrets of the Qur'ān. The Youth replied:

You are a cloud over your own sun. First of all, know the reality of yourself. None can understand My words except one who ascends to My Station, and none ascends to It except Me! So how is it you want to know the reality of My Names? Nonetheless you shall be taken up to My heaven!<sup>116</sup>

For Ibn 'Arabī, this was no ordinary Youth but a grand theophany who Ibn 'Arabī believed held the secrets of the Qur'ān and was thus worthy of prostration. The response of the *fatā* introduces once again the constant theme of the Delphic maxim: "know thyself."<sup>117</sup> The *fatā* continues to reveal his Lordly qualities, recites: "I am the Qur'ān and the seven repeated,"<sup>118</sup> and then "reveals himself as the ultimate source and secret of inspirations, the true Image from which all is imaged."<sup>119</sup> Having stated his reality, the *fatā* then disappears, as all forms must be transcended. Yet, this was not the last time Ibn 'Arabī encountered this mysterious Youth; the *Futūḥāt* indicates another meeting with the *fatā*, which took place while Ibn 'Arabī was making his circumambulations around the Ka'ba.<sup>120</sup> The Shaykh writes:

As I was standing in a state of rapt amazement in front of the Black Stone, I encountered the Youth steadfast in devotion, who is both speaker and silent, neither alive nor dead, both complex and simple, encompassed and encompassing. When I saw him performing the circumambulation of the House, the living circumambulating the dead, I recognized his true reality and his metaphorical appearance, and I knew that the circumambulation of the House is like the prayer over the dead...Then God revealed to me the spiritual rank of this

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<sup>113</sup> Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 115.

<sup>114</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>115</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 79.

<sup>116</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 117.

<sup>117</sup> For a study on the history of the Delphic Maxim in Islam, see Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, 1969), 2-40.

<sup>118</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 117.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> According to Chodkiewicz, the *fatā* himself is the "manifestation of what the prefatory poem of chapter 2 [of the *Futūḥāt*] calls 'the august and sublime secret' of the Ka'ba, the 'House of God' (*bayt Allāh*). Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 28.



Youth and that he was far beyond all considerations of space and time. When I recognized his rank and his bringing down [of Wisdom], when I saw his place in existence and his spiritual state, I kissed his right hand, wiped the sweat of inspiration from his brow and said to him: “Look and see how I seek your company and desire your intimacy.” He indicated to me by hint and sign that he was created to speak only in symbols, and that when I knew, realized and understood my own symbol, then I would know that the finest words can never reach it, nor the most eloquent speech manage to express it. So I said to him: “O bearer of good tidings, this is such a blessing! Grant me knowledge of your special language, and instruct me in how your keys work, How I desire your converse and long for your company! Only with you can I be matched or likened, abiding through your Essence, under your direct orders. Were you not to have a manifest reality, no face could look to Him in radiant contemplation!” Then he indicated to me and I knew. He revealed the reality of his Beauty to me and I understood. I stood completely dumbfounded, overwhelmed. When I recovered from my swoon, my limbs trembling with fright, he knew that knowledge of him had taken place, and casting down his pilgrim’s staff, he alighted...<sup>121</sup>

I said to him: “Reveal to me some of your secrets that I may be one of your scribes!” He replied: “Observe the details of my constitution and the arrangement of my form, and you will find the answer to your question inscribed within me. For I am neither speaker nor spoken to. My knowledge is not of other than Me, and My Essence is no different to My Names. For I am Knowledge, the Known and the Knower. I am Wisdom, the giver of Wisdom and the Wise!” Then he said to me: “Circumambulate in my footsteps, and observe me in the light of my moon, so that you may take from my constitution that which you write in your book and transmit to your readers.”<sup>122</sup>

To say that the experience was profound would be an understatement, but one may say that it was a prolific one because by the Shaykh’s own admission, it was from within the Youth’s very being that his *magnum opus*, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, was born. Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that the Youth commanded him to lift his veils, read what was contained within him, and to then write it in his book.<sup>123</sup> That Ibn ‘Arabī identifies the Youth as the source of his *Futūḥāt* is extremely significant, for it enables us to discover the reality of the *fatā*. In an epistle, Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

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<sup>121</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 151-152. Corbin’s translation indicates that when Ibn ‘Arabī arrived at the knowledge of who the Youth was, the *fatā* became a more permanent reality for the Shaykh. Corbin translates: “When I recovered from my faint, still trembling with fear, he knew that I had understood who he was. He threw away his travelers staff and halted (that is, ceased to be the evanescent one, he who escapes).” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Corbin, *Alone*, 384n17.

<sup>122</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 152.

<sup>123</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 202-203. “So I raised his veils,” writes the Shaykh, “and read his inscriptions. The light lodged within him enabled my eyes to see the hidden Knowledge which he contains and conceals.” Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in *Ibid.*, 203.

Now when I persisted in knocking on God's Door I was always attentive, nor was I distracted, until there appeared to my eye "*the Splendor of His Face*" until – O wonder! – there was nothing [or "you were nothing"] but It. So I encompassed in knowing (all) Being – nor did we know in our heart any other than God.<sup>124</sup>

This was the moment Ibn 'Arabī came to witness within himself the supreme theophany, or the Face of God. In chapter 36 of the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī explains that the vision of the Face that was granted to him at this moment was in fact "the source of everything expounded in the *Futūḥāt*."<sup>125</sup> The identity of the Face of God has been revealed, and it is none other than the *fatā*, the source of Ibn 'Arabī's theosophy. The *fatā*, as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, is not only the manifested Face, but also that which makes the Face manifest. This is why Ibn 'Arabī says of the Youth: "Were you not to have a manifest reality, no face could look to Him in radiant contemplation!"<sup>126</sup> In other words, when one encounters the person of the *fatā* within oneself, one is encountering the person of the Supreme *Mazhar* to which "the vision of the servants becomes connected,"<sup>127</sup> for it is the imaginalized symbol of *tawḥīd*<sup>128</sup> and the means with which to look upon and contemplate the radiant Face of God.

When the *fatā* reveals the secret of his identity, it is "as if" God has made Himself manifest to the mountain, the very manifestation which caused Moses to fall down stunned (7:143). To recall, the Moses of Ibn 'Arabī's vision reveals that in his being stunned was his "initiatric death", which allowed him to see his God. Moses says: "It was then that I '*awakened*', so that I knew *Who* I saw."<sup>129</sup> We may compare this with Ibn 'Arabī's account of his own "falling down stunned." The Shaykh has told us about the *fatā* that "He revealed the reality of his Beauty to me and I understood. I stood completely dumbfounded, overwhelmed. When I recovered from my swoon, my limbs trembling with fright, he knew that knowledge of him had taken place."<sup>130</sup> Like Moses of the vision, Ibn 'Arabī was overwhelmed, fell into a swoon, and thus died before he died. When he recovered or was "awakened", he knew Who he saw, and Who

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<sup>124</sup> Ibn 'Arabī quoted in Morris, "Seeking God's Face," Part II, 2.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted on p. 123 of this thesis.

<sup>127</sup> See Ibn 'Arabī, quoted on p. 64 of this thesis.

<sup>128</sup> See 2.4 in this thesis, particularly pp. 44-45n52.

<sup>129</sup> See 6.12 in this thesis.

<sup>130</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, quoted on p. 123 of this thesis.

he saw knew that He was known. Through Ibn ‘Arabī’s own knowing, the *fatā* himself became known; this is because the *fatā*, the Face of God, is none other than the personal Lord (*rabb*) or Divine Name of one’s being. When the Divine Name is known – which it longs to be – the servant knows the Name of the *fatā* who is his Lord. This means that the servant has learnt the Name of his own self or soul, for *only* he who knows himself, knows his personal Lord or his own personal face.

### **6.15 The Specific Face**

Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the personal face of one’s being as *al-wajh al-khāṣṣ* or “the specific face”. According to Chittick, this is “the specific face of God that is turned toward the thing to give it existence, and this is identical with the specific face of the thing that is turned only toward *wujūd*.”<sup>131</sup> This means that the servant’s specific face is “none other” than the Face of God, and this is because ontological *tawḥīd*, or *waḥdat al-wujūd*, demands that there is “no reality but Reality”, and the face of a thing is its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or its essence (‘*ayn*).<sup>132</sup> This, then, reveals yet another mystery of the *fatā* who is the specific Face and personal Lord of one’s being: it is none other than one’s ‘*ayn thābita* (immutable entity or prototype). This is further confirmed when in the *Futūḥāt* the Shaykh identifies the *fatā* with the Qur’ānic term *imāmim mubīn*,<sup>133</sup> which Chodkiewicz translates as the “manifest Prototype” or the “explicit Model.”<sup>134</sup> The *fatā*, who is “Knowledge, the Known and the Knower,”<sup>135</sup> is in fact, the *imāmim mubīn* or the Lord of Ibn ‘Arabī’s being, i.e. his “essential self” which the Prophet has told him to know. The immutable prototype has never left the knowledge of God, but becomes clearly manifest (*mubīn*)<sup>136</sup> or imaginalized within existence, itself Nondelimited Imagination, as a *mazhar* within whom is manifested the specific face or *fatā* of his own being; a being who is then the servant of the Lord on High. For Corbin, the “mysterious Youth is the divine *Alter Ego*, the Self in transcendence, that is, the person who is the

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<sup>131</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 135.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> See al-Qur’ān 36:12.

<sup>134</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 28-29; cf. Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 214.

<sup>135</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted on p. 123 of this thesis.

<sup>136</sup> *al-Mubīn* is a Divine Name that means: “the One who makes Himself abundantly Clear,” and is thus often translated as “manifest.” Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 214.

celestial pole of a bi-unity whose total being has as its other pole the earthly self.”<sup>137</sup> This is why Ibn ‘Arabī describes the *fatā* as that which is “neither alive nor dead,”<sup>138</sup> for the *‘ayn thābita* is neither in “absolute existence” (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), nor in “absolute nonexistence” (*al-‘adam al-muṭlaq*); rather, it is only found in the presence of God’s Knowledge in a state of permanence (*thubūt*) from which it never leaves. The immutable prototype’s permanence further confirms that it is indeed the *fatā* or the specific Face of God, for the Qur’ān reveals that “Everything is perishing except its Face.”<sup>139</sup> This is how Ibn ‘Arabī usually reads the verse, though he may also read it in the more common way: “Everything is perishing except His [i.e. God’s] Face”, because for the Shaykh there is no contradiction between the two readings.

That Ibn ‘Arabī identifies the Face of God with the specific or “private face” (as Hirtenstein prefers to translate) of a thing should not suggest that the thing is thereby independent of God, or that it is “the Independent” (*al-ghani*) itself. In fact, the private face is precisely that which makes each existent needy or poor (*faqīr*). In the Shaykh’s words: “God the Most High has a private face in every existent. He imparts to him from it whatever He wants...and through that [private] face each existent is needy of [or poor toward] Him.”<sup>140</sup> Thus, every existent depends on its private face, and there is no intermediary between the specific face and God, just as there is no intermediary between the Essence and the immutable prototypes, which are known and unified (i.e. made one) within God’s Knowledge and Oneness. Thus, the *fatā* or *imāmim mubīn* of one’s being is the only intermediary for a created thing. This is why it can be none other than the Face of God, seen “wherever you turn,”<sup>141</sup> or the personal Lord through which God is present (*hādīr*) with his servant. For Ibn ‘Arabī, this is the meaning of verse 57:4 which proclaims: “God is with you wherever you are.”<sup>142</sup> This reveals the mystery of *tawḥīd*, for since God is One (*wāḥid*), in so far as He is present or with a thing through *wujūd*’s Oneness, the thing is also one (*wāḥid*) through God’s Oneness (*wāḥidiyya*). The Shaykh

<sup>137</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 385.

<sup>138</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted on p. 122 of this thesis.

<sup>139</sup> al-Qur’ān 28:88, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 93.

<sup>140</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Hirtenstein, *Unlimited*, 98; cf. Chittick, *SDG*, 136. This further confirms the identification of *al-wajh al-khāṣṣ* with the *ayn thābita* of one’s being, for every existent thing must have an immutable prototype.

<sup>141</sup> al-Qur’ān 2:115.

<sup>142</sup> al-Qur’ān 57:4, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 9.

writes: “God is with all things.... That is why He has a specific face toward each existent thing. Each existent thing is one and cannot be two. He also is One, so nothing proceeds from Him but one, for He is in the unity of every one thing.”<sup>143</sup> The Face of God within each thing makes it one; there is the existence of Oneness within the existence of multiplicity. Ultimately, the existence of Oneness is the only Reality, for only that which is Real is eternal, whereas “Every [other] thing [i.e. the appearance of multiplicity] is perishing....” Shah-Kazemi who is in agreement with this, reflects on the literal meaning of *tawḥīd* (“making one”) and believes “one might also translate *tawḥīd* as ‘the realization of oneness,’ the ‘making real’ of the actual reality of oneness, through the elimination of all multiplicity.”<sup>144</sup> When the servant comes to this “realization of oneness,” he knows the meaning of monorealism and has experienced *tawḥīd*. This can not simply be a theoretical sort of knowledge, for it must be affirmed by witnessing and experiencing the imaginalized image (*mithāl*) of *tawḥīd*, in an *‘ibāda* which can only be called theophanic. As Chittick reminds us, “seeing the Face of God in things is a function of imagination.”<sup>145</sup> Thus, when the servant worships God within himself/Himself in Theophanic Prayer, he must utilize the power of *khayāl* through which he may see the Face of God – the *imāmim mubīn* of the microcosm – leading the prayer:

So whoever perceives that, all of it, on the part of the Truly Real during their Prayer has indeed perceived the Divine Cycle of Prayer through having the Truly Real as their Imam! And the (true) servant responds to that [direct revelation of God’s Presence] with the thankfulness this gracious Favor deserves.<sup>146</sup>

This, then, is the actualization of the ḥadīth of *iḥsān*, where doing what is beautiful means to “worship God as if you see Him.”<sup>147</sup> For the servant who possess the eye and power of imagination by knowing the reality of *khayāl*, it is indeed or literally as if he sees God manifested as the Imam behind whom the servant stands, re-enacting the Prayer of God and the Prayer of man – the Divine Cycle of Prayer – which makes manifest God’s greatest Favor – the symbol of *tawḥīd*.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SPK*, 137.

<sup>144</sup> Shah-Kazemi, “The Metaphysics,” 158.

<sup>145</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 95.

<sup>146</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Morris, “Seeking God’s Face,” Part II, 26.

<sup>147</sup> See 6.10 in this thesis.

## CONCLUSION

### *“Seeing Things as They Are”*

This study has discussed and investigated two things: God and creation, along with the nature of the relationship between them. It has been illustrated that the One cannot be understood without having understood the other. This is summed up in the ḥadīth-axiom: “He who knows Himself, knows his Lord,” and is made even more clear when it is realized that self-knowledge is knowledge of self. The study of self is the study of creation, which for Ibn ‘Arabī is “everything other than God.” Although God alone is Real, making everything other than God in some sense illusory, Ibn ‘Arabī does not consider the illusion that is creation in a pejorative manner, as something to be rejected; the creation of the Real must be accepted as the locus within which is displayed all of God’s Signs and Names, which signify and name “He Who is above all else”. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that for Ibn ‘Arabī, creation is not an illusion but an allusion revealing the mystery of mysteries – the relationship between God and man. Such is the importance of the “other”, which is the primary object of inquiry in the knowledge of Reality: to see *things* as they are. God is not a thing, nor is He the cause of the things; He is the originator of the causes that bring things into existence.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, God Himself cannot be an object of knowledge; this can be evinced by the prophetic report: “Reflect (*tafakkur*) upon all things, but reflect not upon God’s Essence.”<sup>2</sup> The things should be reflected upon not for their own sake – for if that is the case then indeed they are illusions and not allusions – but so that they may be seen as signs signifying the signified. This is why Chittick observes that the created things are “as important for knowledge, if not more important than God Himself.”<sup>3</sup>

That the Prophet of God set down the rule to reflect only upon the created things, requires that the things be present so that they may be observed, and be more than themselves. Indeed the things are present and are known as *mazāhir* or loci of manifestation within which God’s Names, Attributes and Being (*wujūd*) are displayed.

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<sup>1</sup> Chittick, *SDG*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ḥadīth, cited in Idem, *SPK*, 62; cf. 1.5 and 3.8 in this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Chittick, *SPK*, 147; cf. p. 33 in this thesis.

The *mazāhir* themselves are the outward manifestations or theophanies of all the immutable entities (*‘ayan al-thābita*) within God’s Knowledge, Who knows all things eternally. These immutable entities with their images manifested within creation are the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of things. To “see things as they are” requires that one be able to see the *ḥaqq* (truth) behind the appearance, or the allusion in the illusion. We have seen that for Ibn ‘Arabī, this is done is through the power of imagination (*khayāl*), which is able to perceive the theophanies within the loci of manifestation that appear outwardly in creation, and which are “He/not He”. For the Shaykh, reason and reflection are unable to receive God’s Self-disclosure, unless they have been assisted through unveiling which allows them to accept the authority of imagination, while working in harmony with it so that no one theophany is seen as only “He.” Imagination is also important for Ibn ‘Arabī in that it allows one to witness theophany that are otherwise not disclosed in form. This is because the power of *khayāl* enables one to enter into an ontological world of imagination where meanings or noetic/spiritual realities are embodied in corporeal form in a way similar to the images one perceives in a dream. The significance of this is that these imaginal theophanies increase one’s knowledge of God, for they are things which make manifest the realities. The power of imagination allows one to experience an ascension (*mi‘rāj*) in both knowledge and being:

As for the saints, they have spiritual journeys in the intermediate world during which they directly witness spiritual realities (*ma‘ānī*) embodied in forms that have become sensible for the imagination; these [sensible images] convey knowledge of the spiritual realities contained within those forms. And so they have a [spiritual journey] on the earth and in the air, without their having set a sensible foot in the heavens.<sup>4</sup>

The overall significance of *al-khayāl* is that it offers one positive knowledge of what God is, because it may actually see in a corporeal form the attributes of God. Without imagination, one would know God only in a negative way (i.e. what He is not). To be sure, this is also important, for God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*) with respect to creation demands that “Nothing is like Him.”<sup>5</sup> However, since the Qur’ān confirms that God is not only transcendent but also immanent (*tashbīh*), this too must be confirmed and experienced, and indeed it is, through the power of imagination which is able recognize

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 212.

<sup>5</sup> al-Qur’ān 42:11.

the reality of *tashbīh* and witness for itself the theophanic images that manifest God's immanence.

### **The *Tashbīh* of God's Friends**

As we know, *tashbīh* means to declare something to be similar to another. To recognize and declare that God has made Himself similar to creation becomes necessary, especially when one learns that God Himself "strikes similitudes" (*amthāl*), which He does only for the benefit of mankind. In the following, the Shaykh indicates how these similitudes reach us:

So glory be to Him who lays down decrees, sets up signs, and manifests the beauty of denotations (*dalālāt*). Among the most beautiful in entity and the most perfect in engendered existence is the World of Imagination (*‘ālam al-khayāl*), through which "God strikes similitudes (*amthāl*)" (Qur'an 13:17, etc). He has explained that He alone has knowledge of it, for He said in prohibition, "*So strike not any similitudes for God, surely God knows, and you know not.*" (Qur'an 16:74). He only brought this verse after He struck similitudes for Himself for our sake. Thus the World of Imagination became manifest to engendered existence.<sup>6</sup>

This shows that the Qur'ān (16:74) – quite equivocally – forbids man to set up things which are then to be seen as similar to God. This in no way implies, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, that *tashbīh*, along with its recognition and declaration, is in any way inappropriate or akin to *shirk*. In fact, the exact opposite is true and the only appropriate action is to declare *tashbīh* on the basis of the similitude or likeness that God Himself has set up for people. Doing so will prevent one from making up one's own likeness for God:

But as for *the friends of God* (Qur'an 10:64-66), they do not make up likenesses for God. For *God is the One who makes up likenesses for the people* (Qur'an 14:25; 24:35), because of His knowledge of the underlying intentions (of those symbols), since God knows, but we do not know (see Qur'an 16:74; 3:66; 2:216). Thus the saint [the one truly "close to God"] observes the likenesses God has made, and in that immediate witnessing he actually *sees* precisely what connects the likeness and That Which it symbolizes: for the likeness is precisely What is symbolized, with respect to that which connects them, but it is different insofar as it is a likeness. So the saint "does not make up likenesses for God"; instead, he truly *knows* what God symbolizes with those likenesses...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed). *Meccan Revelations*, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī quoted in Ibid., 215-216.



In this way, God's friends uphold *tashbīh* not in the sense of *making* similitudes for God, which would then be associating "other things" with Him, but in the sense of *recognizing* the meaning of the *mithāl* (image or symbol), which God makes known by way of imagination and by being cognizant of the relationship between the symbol (*mithāl*) and the symbolized (*mamthūl*). Knowledge of the relationship or connection between the *mithāl* and *mamthūl* is the key to understanding *tashbīh* and in fact, *tanzīh* as well, since the symbol is only a similitude of the symbolized, making the former at once similar to and different from the latter, or "He/not He".

### **Revisiting 42:11**

It has been seen that for Ibn 'Arabī, the *mazhar*, especially the Supreme *Mazhar*, is the direct object of *tawhīd*. The same can also be said about God's *mithl* (likeness) and the supreme or highest likeness mentioned in verse 30:27: "To Him belongs the highest likeness [in the heavens and the earth]."<sup>8</sup> After quoting this verse Ibn 'Arabī comments: "So He has a form in every heaven and earth."<sup>9</sup> In order to support his claim cites he verse 43:84: "It is He who is in the heaven a God and in the earth a God."<sup>10</sup> Ibn 'Arabī is certainly not positing the existence of two Gods nor does the verse itself allow for such a reading since the God Whose presence is to be found in the heaven and the earth is only "He". Rather, the Shaykh is only all too aware that "God is the light of the heavens and the earth"<sup>11</sup> and that "everywhere you look, there is the face of God."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, when Ibn 'Arabī writes that God has a form in every heaven and earth, he is referring to God's image-symbol which refers to the *mazāhir* in general, and to the reality of the *insān kāmīl* in particular who is God's likeness or similar. It may be objected that the statement that there can be anything like or similar to God is explicitly rejected by verse 42:11: "Nothing is like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing."<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Arabī himself supports this translation in upholding God's utter incomparability. However, the verse is

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<sup>8</sup> al-Qur'ān 30:27, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 254.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn 'Arabī quoted in Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> al-Qur'ān 43:84, cited in Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> al-Qur'ān 24:35, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 299.

<sup>12</sup> al-Qur'ān 2:115, cited in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> al-Qur'ān 42:11, cited on p. 2 in this thesis.

not as unequivocal as it may appear; it is necessary to quote the verse in the Arabic which is transliterated as: *Laysa ka-mithli-hi shay'un, wa-huwa al-samī'u al-baṣīr*.<sup>14</sup>

It has been pointed out by more than one scholar, that the first part of verse 42:11 – *Laysa ka-mithli-hi shay'un* – grammatically allows for two different readings and/or interpretations, with the pivotal point being the second term “*ka-mithli-hi*” which is comprised of three words: *ka* (“like” or “as”), *mithl* (“similar” or “likeness”), and *hi* (“Him”).<sup>15</sup> Izutsu explains that the grammatical function of *ka* can be understood as either “(1) expletive, i.e. having no particular meaning of its own in the combination with *mithli* which itself connotes similarity...or (2) non-expletive, i.e. keeping its own independent meaning even in such a combination.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the *ka* according to (1), is understood as superfluous and it serves only to reinforce the word *mithl*, “similar.”<sup>17</sup> Viewed in this way, the verse says: “There is nothing which is His similar.”<sup>18</sup> This is certainly a correct translation. Ibn ‘Arabī accepts this reading and makes recourse to it on numerous occasions, particularly when emphasizing *tanzīh*. However, the remainder of 42:11 – *wa-huwa al-samī'u al-baṣīr* – tells what God is like by describing Him as “The Hearing” and “The Seeing”, both of which are attributes known to and shared by created things, and are thus attributes of *tashbīh*, which make God similar to His creation. God in Himself is transcendent but in His Self-disclosure through the *mazhar*, He is immanent. Therefore, according to this reading, the verse first promises incomparability but then alludes to similarity; this is for the Shaykh the coming together of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. This much has already been said in our introduction.

What has not yet been said is that Ibn ‘Arabī may also read the verse as emphasizing *tashbīh* and thus contrasts the first reading with a second – and quite different – reading. For the Shaykh, God does not speak to say nothing; therefore, the particle *ka* according to (2), is not be superfluous and preserves its normal meaning. In

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<sup>14</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

this way – and with “rigorous fidelity to the *ẓāhir* of [the] Qur’ānic text,”<sup>19</sup> – the verse literally reads: “Nothing is like His similar,” which means that there is indeed something which is God’s similar or His likeness and that there is nothing else which is like that something. That something, or rather someone, is “man”, but it is only the Perfect Man who is God’s *mithl*,<sup>20</sup> i.e. His Likeness, inasmuch as he is God’s vicegerent on earth.<sup>21</sup> In the following, Ibn ‘Arabī reads 42:11 in terms of *tashbīh* and explicitly links God’s Likeness with the human being’s theomorphism, by referring to the ḥadīth: *Inna Llāha khalaqa Adama alā ṣūratihī*.<sup>22</sup>

In the correct understanding, the meaning of His words, “Nothing is as His likeness,” is the same as that of the Prophet’s words, “God created Adam in His form,”.... So also it means His words, “We indeed created the human being in the most beautiful stature” [95:4],<sup>23</sup> only because He created him in the form of the Real.<sup>24</sup>

It is because he has recognized and actualized his Divine form that the Perfect Man is God’s Likeness. With this interpretation, verse 42:11 emphasizes *tashbīh*. However, the balance of *tanzīh* is found in the second part of the verse (used in the first reading to safeguard *tashbīh*!). From this perspective *wa-huwa al-samī‘u al-baṣīr*, serves as a declaration of *tanzīh*, for the Perfect Man is only God’s Likeness, which means he is not identical to God Who alone is truly “The Hearing” and “The Seeing”. Izutsu confirms that this interpretation is justified because

the sentence structure – with the pronominal subject, *huwa* “He”, put at the head of the sentence, and the following epithets, *samī‘* (hearing) and *baṣīr* (seeing) being determined by the article *al* (the) – implies that He is the only *samī‘* and the only *baṣīr* in the whole world of Being.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Although Ibn ‘Arabī identifies the Perfect Man as God’s *mithl*, he also, according to Ibn Sawdakīn, uses the term *mithl* to refer to the Perfect Man in a different way. In his *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, Ibn ‘Arabī mentions, in the course of one of his visions, his encounter with the “Stone of Similarity” (*ḥajar al-mithl*), which Ibn Sawdakīn tells us refers to the Perfect Man. Twinch and Benito, *Contemplation*, 41, 43n26.

<sup>21</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 37; cf. Twinch and Benito, *Contemplation*, 27n12.

<sup>22</sup> “Certainly, Allah created Adam in His form.” Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Laqad khalaqnā-l insān fī aḥsanī taqwīm*. al-Qur’ān 95:4, cited in Claude Addas, “The Paradox of the duty of perfection in the doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Journal of the Muhiyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* 15 (1994), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chittick, *SDG*, 305.

<sup>25</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 50.

Therefore, according to this second reading, the verse first alludes to similarity but then promises incomparability. This once again represents for the Shaykh the coming together of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, which is the only right approach there can be when talking about the *tawhīd* of God. It is interesting to note that according to the second reading, the Supreme *mithl*, i.e. Perfect Man, signifies both *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, since he is at once, similar to and different from God, and similar to and different from other than God, i.e. the rest of creation. This is why he is also the Supreme *Mazhar*, the most exemplary example of *huwa lā huwa*, and the imaginalized symbol of *tawhīd*.

The *insān kāmīl* is already perfect. Since he is a symbol, he serves as an indication for others on how to perfect themselves and their knowledge of *tawhīd*. This is alluded to by the Qur’ān: “You have a beautiful model in the Messenger of God.”<sup>26</sup> The Prophet revealed and reported both attributes of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. Thus, on the road to a perfect understanding of *tawhīd* one must model oneself in this way and discover the truth of both. Many theologians and rational thinkers use the method of *via negativa* and attempt to explain away attributes or reports that describe God in terms of *tashbīh*. For Ibn ‘Arabī, this is extremely problematic because

if we confined ourselves to the rational arguments of philosophy, which, though they enable us to know the divine Essence, do so in a negative way, no creature would ever have experienced the love of God.... Positive religion teaches us that He is this and that; the exoteric appearances of these attributes are absurd to philosophical reason, and yet it is because of those positive attributes that we love Him.”<sup>27</sup>

For the Shaykh, precisely the attributes of *tashbīh* which the servant can relate to do create love for the Beloved, Who is immanent and similar to the lover. No one can truly love that which one does not know, and Murata confirms that for Ibn ‘Arabī, “The God of the theologians...was a God whom no one could possibly love since He was too remote and incomprehensible.”<sup>28</sup> Love and intimacy go hand in hand and certainly the Qur’ān confirms God’s intimate relationship with man, as it does when it reveals that “He passes between the man and his heart.”<sup>29</sup> That there is a relationship between God

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<sup>26</sup> al-Qur’ān 33:21, cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 103-104.

<sup>27</sup> Corbin, *Alone*, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Murata, *Tao*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> al-Qur’ān 8:24, cited in James Winston Morris, “Listening for God: Prayer and the Heart in the *Futūḥāt*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 13 (1993), 20.

and man that enables them to love one another is made explicit by a verse which tells that “He loves them, and they love Him,”<sup>30</sup> or another which instructs the Prophet to declare: “If you love God follow me, and then God will love you.”<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that the Qur’ān equates the love of God with obedience and devotion to the Prophet, a physical symbol of Divine Guidance. For Ibn ‘Arabī, it is in fact necessary to have an object of adoration in order to love God, though this does not mean that one worships a physical object; rather, just as the power of imagination allows one to worship God as if one sees Him, so too does it allow one to love God as if one sees Him. The Shaykh writes:

Everyone who falls in love with something only falls in love with it after actualizing it in his imagination, setting up an image (*mithāl*) for it in his imaginal faculty (*wahm*)...and making his beloved coincide (*tatbīq*) with his image.... This shows that the beloved exists with the lover in the image of a form (*‘alā mithāl sūra*) and that he has brought her forth in his imagination. Hence he clings to contemplating his beloved, his ecstasy (*wajd*) doubles, and his love continues to increase.... He who loves Him for Himself only loves an image that he has formed and imagined in himself; such people are none but those who profess Similarity (*al-mushabbihā*) in particular. But if a lover did not profess Similarity, he would not love Him; if not for imagining (*takhayyul*), he would not attach himself to Him. That is why the Lawgiver (*al-shāri‘*) placed Him in the servant’s *qibla*, made the heart of His servant encompass Him, and made Him like him or like some of his parts as a result of proximity to Him. People of this sort worship Him in images and contemplate Him as actually present (*muḥassal*).<sup>32</sup>

This indicates the significance of imagination in one’s spiritual life as well. For the one whose love of God increases, worship also becomes more intense, as he sees within his soul, which is his personal world of imagination, His object of worship.

### **Perfection of Worship**

In fact, one who has already seen God’s manifestation within himself in his personal world of *khayāl* is also able to see God’s presence in the external world of senses, for all existence is nothing other than Nondelimited Imagination. Ibn ‘Arabī indicates this when he discusses one’s descent or the return journey from an ascension (*mi‘rāj*). According to the Shaykh, the greatest and most illuminating knowledge of God takes

<sup>30</sup> al-Qur’ān 5:54, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> al-Qur’ān 3:31, cited in Chittick, *SPK*, 274.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Meccan Revelations*, 185-186.

place beyond imagination, where there is formless theophany in a realm of pure spiritual/noetic realities, which is beyond the World of Imagination.<sup>33</sup> However, as all of created existence is Imagination, the necessity of one's own imagination can not be underestimated, for it allows one to see the presence of God at all times, and to be certain in this knowledge. The Shaykh writes:

When the servant descends to the world of his own imagination, having come to know affairs as they are in themselves through witnessing, while before that he had known them through knowledge and faith, he sees the Real in the Presence of Imagination as a corporeous form. Hence he never denies Him, unlike the passer-by (‘*ābir*) and the outsiders (‘*ajānib*).

Then he descends from the world of imagination to the world of sensation and sensory thing, and the Real descends along with him through his descent, since He never leaves him. He witnesses Him as the form of all corporeal bodies...which he witnesses in the cosmos, not making Him specific to one form rather than another. He sees that He is identical to himself, while he knows that He is neither identical with himself nor identical with the cosmos.<sup>34</sup>

The servant who has seen God through imagination sees Him at all times and is also able to unite the realities of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, where everything in existence is at once “He/not He”. Such a servant who has reached ‘*ālam al-khayāl*, transcended it and returned once again, performs the most perfect ‘*ibāda*, for when he worships God, he does so in his spirit, which receives formless theophany or spiritual-intellectual manifestations of God Who is unbounded (i.e. transcendent), and in his imagination which sees the form or image of God Who is bound (i.e. immanent). Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

Hence you bring together in your worship the two forms – the worship that is rightfully demanded by Him in imagination and the worship that is rightfully demanded by Him in other than the homestead of imagination. You worship Him as both unbounded and bound. And this belongs to nothing other than this[human configuration]. That is why He has made this faithful configuration His sacred precinct and His magnified and honored house.<sup>35</sup>

This is the perfection of ‘*ibāda*, and it depends on the affirmation of both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. Those who ignore *tashbīh* in favor of *tanzīh* often do so because their reason tells them that nothing is like God. They assume that they are upholding *tawhīd* by claiming what God is not like, and that they are respecting God’s Nondelimitation and

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<sup>33</sup> On the existence of formless theophany and transcending Imagination, see Addas, *Voyage*, 56-57; Chodkiewicz, “The vision of God,” 59-60; Idem, *Ocean*, 83; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 81-82.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem., *SPK*, 185.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem., *SDG*, 351.

incomparability with respect to creation. However, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, by this very act God is delimited due to limitations on what He can or cannot be. Reason is right in so far as no *thing* is like God, but those who ignore or explain away verses of the Qur’ān which indicate what *God* is like are in fact going against the very incomparability they are seeking to establish. This is because they are implicitly comparing Him with what they believe it means to be incomparable; thus, they deny or explain away reports that contradict what is only their limited understanding of *tanzīh*. About this the Shaykh advises: “The greatest ascetic discipline (*riyāḍa*) of the knowledgeable servant is to refrain from denying him in any form and from delimiting Him by incomparability, for He is absolutely incomparable with any declaration of incomparability which delimits.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, true incomparability demands that no description should delimit Him; by saying God is incomparable but not similar one has limited the Unlimited. Therefore, verse 37:180, which is usually used by those whose reason leads them to “purify” God by denying His similarity to creation, is used by Ibn ‘Arabī as a proof that reason is incapable of assessing God’s incomparability. The Shaykh writes:

Then there is another verse in which He says, “exalted is thy Lord, the Lord of majestic power standing far above that with which they describe Him.”...This is said because men tend to describe Him with what is given by their Reason. So He “purifies” Himself here from their very *tanzīh*, because they...delimit Him by their *tanzīh*. Reason is by nature deficient in understanding this kind of thing.<sup>37</sup>

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, God’s incomparability establishes His similarity.<sup>38</sup> Thus, acknowledging *tashbīh* is in fact acknowledging *tanzīh*, so long as it is recognized that the Self-disclosure through which God chooses to become similar is a symbol that symbolizes *tawḥīd* or God’s Oneness (*waḥdāniyya*).

### **Subject into Object**

The symbol and the symbolized are the two poles of a polarity that continues to exist so long as there is both God and “everything other than God.” The “other” is the primary object through which knowledge of the One (*al-wāḥid*) may be gained. However, the “other” is not as radically different from the One as it may first appear, especially

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī, quoted in Idem, *SPK*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Izutsu, *Comparative Study*, 59-60.

<sup>38</sup> See 1.6 in this thesis.

because the Creator created man in His image. Thus, the created may enjoy in a limited way the ability of the Creator; to make manifest to oneself, the Face of God, which then becomes the created object or the God manifested by the Theophanic Imagination.<sup>39</sup> More simply – and to stress the point – the Face of God becomes a “thing” which may then be contemplated. For the Shaykh, the Real chooses to manifest Himself in an object of contemplation so that He may be known. As for man, who here acts as the subject, the reason to contemplate any object, is to know the reality of that thing. Where the thing in question is the manifestation of God, then the reality of God, that is to say the Essence, may never be known, except as the personal Lord (*rabb*) of one’s being. To know the Lord requires that one knows oneself; therefore, man is not only the subject but the object as well, just as the direct object of *tawhīd* is the *mazhar*, which man indeed is. When the subject knows the object, then the servant knows the Divine Name or the Lord which governs His being, and this knowledge initiates the Divine Command: “O the satisfied soul! Return unto your Lord, pleased and pleasing! Enter among My (chosen) servants and enter My Paradise.”<sup>40</sup> Obeying the Command of God, the servant prostrates to the *rabb* or *fata* of his being;<sup>41</sup> in this way, metaphysical *tawhīd* – in its sense of monorealism – is experienced as the subject disappears into the object, which is none other than the servant’s root (*aṣl*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*), i.e. the *imāmim mubīn* or the “companion on high” (*rafiq al-‘alā*),<sup>42</sup> who has never left the Mercy and Knowledge<sup>43</sup> of Allah, the One, the Real – the Monoreal.

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<sup>39</sup> See 6.8 in this thesis.

<sup>40</sup> al-Qur’ān 89:27-30, cited in ‘Allāmah Naṣīr al-Dīn Naṣīr Hunzai, *Book of Healing*, trans. Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, Rashida Noormohamed-Hunzai (Karachi, 2000), 333.

<sup>41</sup> See 6.14 in this thesis.

<sup>42</sup> Addas, *Quest*, 287.

<sup>43</sup> “Our Lord, Thou embracest all things in mercy and knowledge.” al-Qur’ān 40:7, cited in Murata, *Tao*, 315.



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