

A Sufi Approach to Religious Diversity

Ibn al-ʿArabī on the Metaphysics of Revelation

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The *philosophia perennis* as expounded by Frithjof Schuon holds that the revealed religions are transcendently one, yet necessarily and providentially diverse in their historical actuality; they represent particular manifestations of a single, universal Truth. Schuon often writes about Islam, which provides many clear and explicit texts that support this position. The Koran itself declares that the essential message of every revelation is the same, while each message is unique. All believing Muslims affirm the universality of religious truth, though many if not most of them would take the position that this pertains to the historical period preceding Islam; it is true that all religions have come from God with a common underlying message, but religions other than Islam later became corrupted, which explains why the Koran often criticizes the People of the Book.

Among the Sufis one would expect to find a clear exposition of the universality of Truth without the reservations expressed by other Muslims. But the Sufis “walked on exoteric stilts”, to use Schuon’s expression, so they had to take into account the beliefs of their contemporaries. Even an Ibn al-ʿArabī, who was not afraid to attack the limitations of the exoteric mentality, often supports a literal reading of the

Koranic criticisms of the People of the Book, without suggesting that by “Christians” or “Jews” the Koran means anyone other than the contemporary practitioners of those religions. But this perspective has to do with the “particularity” of religious truth, the level where one doctrine conflicts with another; in the context of traditional Islamic civilization, Ibn al-ʿArabī could hardly speak as a person unattached to the Koran’s uniqueness.

Like most other Sufis, Ibn al-ʿArabī had little if any contact with Christianity or Judaism other than in various popular forms; he probably never met a saintly representative of either of these traditions, and he almost certainly never read anything about them except what was written in Islamic texts. So there is no reason to expect him to accept the validity of other revealed religions except *in principle*. But this is an important qualification. To maintain the particular excellence of the Koran and the superiority of Muḥammad over all other prophets is not to deny the universal validity of revelation nor the necessity of revelation’s appearing in particularized expressions. Since all revealed religions are true in principle, the particular historical circumstances which lead one to suspect that they have been corrupted may change. This is what happened when Sufis like Dārā Shukūh met Hindu saints in India.

In what follows a tiny portion of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s arguments that support the universality and particularity of revealed truth are gleaned from the *Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* and the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, two of his major works. To the extent possible I have tried to employ Ibn al-ʿArabī’s own methodology in presenting traditional metaphysics, without any attempt to correlate this with contemporary expositions; anyone familiar with the *philosophia perennis* will certainly recognize a number of its basic teachings.

Islamic dogmatics is usually divided into three broad categories that reflect the content of the Koran: divine unity,

prophecy, and eschatology. By "prophecy" is meant not just the mission of Muḥammad, but a universal dimension of the relationship between man and God, a dimension illustrated most strikingly by the series of Semitic prophets beginning with Adam and ending with Muḥammad himself, the last prophet before the end of time.

In the Koranic view, revelation is a message delivered by God to a prophet (*nabī*) or "messenger" (*rasūl*). It is universal, since "Every nation has its messenger" (Koran 10: 47) and the fundamental content of the message is always the same: "There is no god but I, so serve Me" (21: 25: cf. 16: 36).¹ Muslims must have faith in all the messengers, since each is but a confirmation of what came before.² Even so, every message is unique, since each is given to a prophet "in the tongue of his people" (Koran 14: 4).

God sent the prophets to remind human beings that they were created to be His servants (*ʿabd*) and vicegerents (*khalīfah*) and to warn them of the consequences of shirking their responsibilities. According to the Koran, when God sent Adam down from Paradise, He said to him,

If there comes to you from Me guidance, then whosoever follows My guidance shall not go astray, neither shall he be wretched; but whosoever turns away from My remembrance (*dhikr*), his life shall be a life of narrowness, and on the Day of Resurrection, We shall raise him blind. (20: 123-124)

Here, quoting as it were from the primordial revelation given to mankind, the Koran makes clear that revelation is sent for the purpose of guidance; ignoring it will lead to wretchedness (*shaqāʾ*) a term that is employed to describe the state of the inhabitants of hell, as opposed to the "felicity" (*saʿādah*) of the blessed.

The Koranic teachings on prophecy just outlined have been studied and amplified by generations of Muslim authorities representing all the perspectives of Islamic intellectual life.³ The present paper surveys the views of one of the

foremost spokesmen for Islamic esoterism, Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), whose legacy has dominated the theoretical exposition of Islamic metaphysics down to recent times;⁴ it describes his theory of revelation within the context of his comprehensive teachings on the nature of existence, the possibilities of human perfection, the parameters of knowledge, and the constraints of belief; and it concludes by showing how he upholds the necessity for religious diversity without relativizing the absolute Truth.

The One and the Many

Ibn al-ʿArabī is known primarily for a teaching that later thinkers came to call the Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). The brief reviews of this doctrine that are found in various textbooks, whether in the West or the Islamic world, usually ignore the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes most of his incredibly voluminous corpus of writings⁵ to accounting for and explaining the nature of multiplicity, which, like Being's Oneness, is an intrinsic attribute of reality.

In discussing the relationship between God's unity and the world's multiplicity, Ibn al-ʿArabī constantly makes use of the Koranic concept of the Names (*asmāʾ*) of God. (He also employs the term "attributes" [*sifāt*]: if God's "Name" is Merciful, He possesses the "attribute" of Mercy.) Traditionally the Names or attributes are said to number ninety-nine, though closer to 150 are mentioned in or implied by the Koran, and sometimes they are said to number 1001. For Muslim thinkers in general, the Names, much like the Platonic ideas, provide the prototypes for all created reality. Thus, for example, God is the Living, the Knowing, the Willing, the Powerful, the Speaking, the Generous and the Just; for Ibn al-ʿArabī and others, these seven Names are the "Seven Mothers" (*al-ummahāt al-sabʿ*) who jointly give birth to the cosmos. Some of God's Names denote meanings that are diametrically opposed to each other (*mutaqābil*), e.g.,

the Abaser and the Exalter, the Life-Giver and the Slayer, the Forgiving and the Vengeful; the properties (*aḥkām*) or effects (*āthār*) of such Names help account for much of the change, opposition, and strife that are found in the world.

All the Names refer back to a single Reality, which is sometimes called Being (*al-wujūd*) or True Being (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*). The Koranic delineation of the Divine Names reveals the universal modes (*ʿtibārāt*) of Being's external and internal operations. Each Name gives news of a manner in which Being can be correctly viewed and understood. Many Names allude to different types of relationship which Being establishes with the multiple existents of the cosmos. For example, Being may be called the Creator of the world, the Light of the heavens and the earth, the Manifest and the Unmanifest, the First and the Last, etc. Yet Being Itself remains a single Reality, since the Names are only providential specifications of possible modes in which It may be envisaged. In the last analysis, they are merely relations (*nisab*) posited by revelation to explain what can be known of Being in Its self-manifestation.⁶ As Ibn al-ʿArabī remarks,

He is the First and the Last in a Single Entity... Zayd refers to you as "he", ʿAmr says to you "you", and you say "I". So "I" is the same as "you" and "he", even though "I" is not the same [in another respect]. Hence the relations are diverse. (*Futūḥāt* II 278.13)⁷

Though all the Names refer to a single Reality, none denotes Its true nature. From this point of view even the Name Allāh, which is called the "all-comprehensive Name" (*al-ism al-jāmiʿ*) since it is the referent of all other Names, is said to denote that Reality only inasmuch as It makes Itself known. In Itself, in Its very Essence, the single Reality is unknowable. The Prophet used to pray, "Oh Allāh, I ask Thee by every Name by which Thou hast named Thyself, taught to one of Thy creatures, or kept exclusively to Thyself" (cf. II 619.18). These "exclusive" Names, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, are "the Names outside of creation and relation" (II

69.31). They pertain to Being in Itself, which Ibn al-ʿArabī often refers to simply as the It-ness (*al-huwiyyah*)⁸ or the Essence (*dhāt*; originally "possess or of," i.e., that which possesses or is named by the Names).

In discussing the Essence's unknowability, Ibn al-ʿArabī likes to cite the Koranic verse, "Allāh is independent of all the worlds" (3: 97, 29: 60). Here it should be noted that the Name Allāh is taken, as it often is, to refer to the Essence, although from another point of view, even such terms as It-ness and Essence are considered provisional.⁹

In Itself, the Essence has no name, since It is not the locus for effects, nor is It known by anyone, nor is there any name that could clearly designate It in Its state of being devoid of relations. The reason for this is that "names" serve to make known and to distinguish, but this door is shut to everything other than Allāh, since "None knows Allāh but Allāh." (II 69. 34)

If the Essence possesses attributes that denote It in any real sense, these are negative (*salbī*). One of these, "nondelimitation" (*al-ītlāq*), is worth considering in some detail for the light it can throw on Ibn al-ʿArabī's understanding of the nature of revelation: The Essence or Being in Itself, "independent of all the worlds," is free of any limitation and confinement whatsoever. Moreover, the Essence is not delimited by nondelimitation; in other words, It is not only free of all limitations, It is also free to assume all limitations, on pain of being limited. Or again: God viewed as the Essence is not only infinitely transcendent, He is also immanent in all things, since these are nothing but the possible delimitations that He assumes because of His nondelimitation. Ibn al-ʿArabī's many summaries of these points sometimes sound like paradoxes, and he himself will often end them by speaking of the "bewilderment" (*ḥayrah*) that marks the great saints in face of God's self-manifestation. The following passage is more straightforward than many:

Allah possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimi-

tation prevents delimitation. Rather, He possesses all delimitations, so He is nondelimited delimitation, since no single delimitation rather than another rules over Him. So understand what it means to attribute nondelimitation to Him! He who is such a Being is nondelimited in the attributions [that are made to Him]: so nothing is to be attributed to Him in preference to anything else. (III 162.23)

The Divine Names, it bears repeating, represent the archetypes of the world's multiplicity: they delineate the various modes in which Nondelimited Being delimits Itself when It brings the cosmos into existence. Nondelimited Being is the Being of Allāh, while delimited Being (*al-wujūd al-muqayyad*)—which will be referred to here as “existence” (though only a single term, *al-wujūd*, is used for both Being and existence in Arabic) — refers to all the things and realities that are collectively known as the cosmos, world, or universe (*al-ālam*), i.e., “that which is other than Allāh” (*mā siwā Allāh*). Each thing (*shay'*) — or “existent” (*mawjūd*) — manifests the properties of Being through its very existence; moreover, all the specific characteristics or attributes of a thing are effects (*āthār*) of the Divine Names. The relationship between Allāh (Being, the Essence) and the Names corresponds to that between the thing and its attributes. But whereas Allāh manifests all Names, no one existent can manifest all the possible attributes of existence in their full deployment. Since each existent represents a delimitation of Nondelimited Being, it will be able to manifest Being's Attributes — Its Names — only to a certain degree. This “degree” is known technically as the existent's “preparedness” (*isti'dād*), a term which is closely connected to the idea of the immutable entity (*al-ʿayn al-thābitah*).

The infinite possibilities of self-manifestation possessed by Nondelimited Being are known by God for all eternity. In other words, every single thing or quiddity (*māhiyyah*) along with every one of its specific characteristics is a self-delimita-

tion of Nondelimited Being, determined by the nature of Being Itself, and known forever by virtue of Being's unlimited self-knowledge. As objects of knowledge (*maʿlūmāt*), the things are referred to as immutable entities; they are immutable because they are eternally known by God, and entities (sing.: *ʿayn*) because they possess specific entifications (*ta-ʿayyun*) or thingnesses (*shayʿiyyah*) or delimitations (*taqyīd*) that distinguish (*tamayyuz*) them from other entities. But as objects of God's knowledge they do not exist outside of His knowledge, any more than our thoughts exist outside of our minds.

If God chooses, He can bring an entity from nonexistence (*al-ʿadam*) in knowledge into existence. But even when an immutable entity becomes an existent entity (*ʿayn mawjūd*), it never ceases to remain nonexistent, so what is termed “its existence” is in fact delimited Being; in other words, its existence belongs to God, just as all of its specific characteristics are properties of the Divine Names. In explaining the relationship between the Nondelimited Being of God and the existence of the entities Ibn al-ʿArabī demonstrates his true skill at expressing metaphysical subtleties. Here it is only possible to allude to one of the many analogies he employs to illustrate this relationship.

Nondelimited Being is Light, for “Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth” (Koran 24: 35), but a Light so luminous that It cannot be perceived; likewise, the entities cannot be perceived, since they are nonexistent, i.e., they are pure darkness. Once Nondelimited Light and pure darkness are mixed, a realm of visible light known as “brightness” (*diyā'*) comes into view, while Light and darkness remain invisible. But in the final analysis, the only thing that is seen is Light delimited by darkness; our perception of brightness results from the privation of Light. In other words, even though the entities are nonexistent, their effect upon Being is to delimit and define it in certain specific modes, thereby distinguishing it from Being as delimited and defined by

other entities in other specific modes; all "existent entities" display the properties of Being, since nothing else truly exists. What appears to the eyes may be called the properties of darkness, but in fact it is the properties of Light, which alone is.

The extent to which each entity allows the light of Being to shine forth, or the capacity of each to act as a "locus" (*maḥall*) or "locus of manifestation" (*mazhar*) within which Being displays Its properties, is known as the entity's "preparedness" (*isti'dād*).

Opposite the Being of God stand immutable entities, eternally described as nonexistent... His Being is effused upon these entities in accordance with what their preparednesses require. (II 55.4)

Man, made in the image of the all-comprehensive name Allāh, possesses potentially the greatest capacity to manifest the properties of Being (though the preparedness of each human individual differs). Ibn al-ʿArabī compares the "effusion of existence" (*ifādat al-wujūd*) to the light of the sun, and preparedness to the ability of the creatures to absorb and make use of the sun's rays:

God says, "Thy Lord's bestowal is not confined" (Koran 17: 20). In other words, "God bestows constantly, while the loci act as receptacles in the measure of the realities of their own preparednesses." In the same way we say that the sun deploys its rays upon the existent things; it does not withhold its light from anything, but the loci receive the light in the measure of their preparednesses. Then each locus attributes the effect to the sun and forgets its own preparedness. The person of cold temperament enjoys the sun's heat, while the person of hot temperament suffers because of it. But the light in itself is one. (I 287.10)

This, in short, explains the diversity of existents in the world. The different preparedness of each entity to receive the light of Being means that each delimits Nondelimited

Being in its own fashion. But the effusion of God, His self-disclosure (*tajallī*) or self-manifestation, is One and Nondelimited in itself.

He who discloses Himself is one entity in Himself, but the disclosures differ because of the preparednesses of the loci. (I 287.19)

Ibn al-ʿArabī summarizes his doctrine of the relationship between Being and the nonexistent entities as follows:

We believe concerning the existents in all their differentiation (*tafsīl*) that they are the manifestation (*zuhūr*) of God (*al-Ḥaqq*) in the loci of manifestation, i.e., in the entities of the possible things, in keeping with the preparednesses of these possible things. The attributes of that which is manifest are diverse, so the existents become distinguished and plural in keeping with the plurality of the distinction of the entities in God Himself. So there is nothing in existence except God and the properties of the entities, while there is nothing in nonexistence except the entities of the possible things ready to become qualified by existence. (II 160.1)

The Two Commands

The Koran makes clear that both the universe and the prophets are revelatory instruments of God. The miracles and scriptures of the prophets, the verses of the Koran itself, and the phenomena of nature are all referred to as God's "signs" (*āyāt*). In respect of being signs, their function is to bring about qualities such as remembrance, reflection, understanding, and intellection in human beings.¹⁰

A Book We have sent down to thee [O Muḥammad], Blessed, that men possessed of minds may ponder its signs and so remember. (Koran 38: 29)

It is He who sends down to you out of heaven water of which you have to drink, and whence come trees for

you to pasture your herds, and thereby He brings forth for you crops, and olives, and palms, and vines, and all manner of fruit. Surely in that is a sign for a people who reflect. (16:10-11)

The creatures of the universe are not only God's signs but also His servants. The mountains, the birds, the heavens, the stars – all sing His praises. However, mankind (along with the jinn) stand apart from other creatures, inasmuch as some of them refuse to submit to God's authority. Although God says, "I have not created jinn and men except to serve (or "worship") Me" (51: 56), some men refuse to obey His commands:

Have you not seen how to God bow all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and *many* of mankind? (Koran 22: 18)

How is it that human beings are able to disobey God? One of the answers that Ibn al-ʿArabī provides for this question has to do with the nature of the command that is disobeyed. In fact, he says, following earlier authorities, the Koran clearly distinguishes between two kinds of command: the engendering command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*) and the prescriptive command (*al-amr al-taklīfī*). The first brings the creatures into existence: "His only command when He desires a thing is to say to it 'Be!' and it is" (Koran 36: 82). The second is delivered by the prophets in the form of revelation and lays down mankind's obligation to serve God through prayer, fasting, paying the alms tax, undertaking the *ḥajj*, and so on. The engendering command is directed at all existents, while the prescriptive command is aimed specifically at mankind. In virtue of the first command the Koran says, "To God bow all who are in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, as do their shadows in the mornings and evenings" (13: 15). In virtue of the second command the Koran can speak of human disobedience and sin. The first command cannot be disobeyed, since it determines a creature's very

existence; the second can be rejected, whether partially or completely.

Why does one God have two commands? There is no plurality in the Divine Essence, so the commands refer back to different Names. Specifically, the engendering command derives from the Name Allāh, while the prescriptive command relates to certain other Names such as the Guide (*al-Hādī*) and the Beneficent (*al-Munʿim*); whose properties become manifest in the form of revelation.

The Name Allāh comprehends the properties of all other Names; its manifestation is the total universe on the one hand and the human individual, "created upon Allāh's form," on the other. Both macrocosm and microcosm reflect God; hence the world is often called the "great man" (*al-insān al-kabīr*).

Every attribute accepted by the ontological level of Allāh (*al-ḥaḍrat al-ilāhiyyah*) is also accepted by both the small man and the great man. (II 139.30; cf. II 150.26)

When Allāh says "Be!", this command brings the universe and all things within it into existence. But when He says in respect of His Name the Guide, "Do this!" or "Avoid that!", those who follow His command become separated from those who reject it; eschatologically, this results in heaven and hell becoming filled with inhabitants, the one to reward the obedient, the other to punish the disobedient.

Since the prescriptive command derives from certain specific Names, while the engendering command derives from the all-comprehensive Name, the prescriptive command is in fact embraced and determined by the engendering command; it can be called a specific form assumed by the engendering command for the purpose of accomplishing certain definite ends, such as the separation of the people of heaven and hell. But from the point of view of the engendering command, there can be no such thing as disobedience. In other words, disobedience toward the prescriptive command always derives from obedience toward the engendering command.

The reason that disobeying the prescriptive command will lead to wretchedness, even though it amounts to obeying God in respect of the engendering command, can best be explained by an example: In addition to being the Guide, God is also the Misguider (*al-Muḡḡill*). Though not mentioned in the well-known lists of ninety-nine Names, this Name is often referred to by Ibn al-ʿArabī and is implied by thirty-five Koranic verses in which God is the subject of the verb “to misguide.” For example, “What, do you desire to guide him whom Allāh has misguided?” (4: 88). In certain circumstances, God’s misguidance may dominate over His guidance; as a result, the prescriptive command will be disobeyed.

The factors which determine whether an individual will be guided or misguided go back to the nature of the Divine Essence Itself, or in other words, to the properties of the various Divine Names, which determine the preparedness of each entity. For example, the Koran says succinctly, “God misguides the evildoers” (14: 27; cf. 40: 74). That is to say, when a person manifests the properties of certain Divine Names that result in his committing acts that go against the prescriptive command, he calls down upon himself God’s misguidance. But on closer examination it becomes clear that here a temporal mode of explanation is inappropriate, since a person who is misguided has always been so. After all, his entity, known eternally by God, is immutable, so in fact the properties of the Name Misguider are already apparent once a person is an “evildoer,” since this Name is one of the Names that has determined his entity.

To the objection that this means that “God makes the sinners sin, then punishes them for it,” Ibn al-ʿArabī replies that God does not make the sinners *do* anything, He only makes them *exist*. They are the outward manifestations of immutable entities, so “they are what they are.” God cannot change their entities any more than He can change His own Essence. When He manifests the entity of the sun, it shines,

and when He manifests the entity of a sinner, he sins, thus displaying within himself the properties of the Name Misguider. The sinner is the locus of manifestation for a delimited possibility of outward existence possessed by Nondelimited Being in virtue of the fact that, in a certain respect, God is named the Misguider.

Three Paths to God

Ibn al-ʿArabī explains the difference between the engendering and prescriptive commands in a variety of manners. For example, he often refers to the straight path which all Muslims ask to be guided upon in their daily prayers. He points out that in fact the Koran refers to several straight paths, each of which has different characteristics; three of them are of particular relevance to the present discussion: the Path of Allāh, the Path of the Beneficent, and the Path of Muḡammad.

All creatures walk upon the straight path of Allāh, since everything obeys the engendering command. From the perspective of the all-comprehensive Name, each thing has its own perfection which is determined by its immutable entity, i.e., by those Divine Names which it manifests. However, this perfection may appear noxious and evil from the point of view of other perfections. For example, the loci of manifestation for the Name the Forgiver will be far different from those of the Name the Avenger.

The properties of the Divine Names are diverse in respect of being Names. How are the Avenger, the Terrible in Retribution, and the Severe comparable to the All-Compassionate, the Forgiver, and the Kind? For the Avenger seeks vengeance from its object, but the All-Compassionate seeks the removal of vengeance. Each Name looks upon things in keeping with its own reality. (II 93.19)

Because all things have come from Allāh and walk upon His path, all return to Him. "To Allah belongs the Kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and to Allāh is the homecoming" (Koran 24: 42; cf. 3:28, 5: 18, 35: 18). "To Allāh belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, and to Allāh are all things returned" (3: 109; cf. 8: 44, 22: 76, 35: 4, 57: 5).

Allāh's straight path is referred to specifically in the verse,

"And thou, surely thou guide unto a straight path – the path of Allāh, to whom belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and in the earth. Surely unto Allāh all things come home." (42:52)

Allusions can be found to Allāh's straight path in such verses as, "He gave each thing its creation, then guided" (20:50). Ibn al-ʿArabī comments:

So each thing is in an actualized straightness. The straightness of a plant is that its motion should be downwards, while the straightness of an animal is for it to move horizontally....

Hence there is nothing but straightness; there is no way to opposition.... "The straightness of a bow is in its curve," because of what is desired from it. So there is nothing but straightness within the engendered universe, since that which bestows existence upon it – and that is Allāh – is upon a straight path. (II 217.27)

Ibn al-ʿArabī defines Allāh's straight path as follows:

It is the general path upon which all things walk, so it takes them to Allāh. This path includes every divine religion and every construction of the human mind, since each one takes to Allāh; it embraces both the wretched and the felicitous. (III 410.24)

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the second path, the straight path of the Beneficent, is referred to in the opening chapter of the Koran; this is the straight path upon which Muslims pray to be guided in their daily prayers.

Guide us on the straight path, the path of those who receive Thy Beneficence, not of those against whom Thou art Wrathful, nor of those who are astray. (Koran 1: 5-7)

This same path is referred to in the following verse:

He has laid down for you as religion what He charged Noah with, and what We have revealed to thee [O Muḥammad], and what We have charged Abraham with, and Moses and Jesus.... (42: 13)

Having referred to these and other prophets God also says,

We elected them, and We guided them to a straight path. That is Allāh's guidance; He guides by it whom He will of His servants. (6: 89-90)

Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the straight path of the Beneficent as follows:

This is the path that includes every prophet and messenger... Concerning it al-Bukhārī [the foremost *Hadīth* authority] included a chapter entitled "*Hadīths* on the fact that the religion of all the prophets is one."... If some of the statutes [of the various religions] differ, this [goes back to] the law which God has appointed for each one of the messengers. He says, "To every one of you We have appointed a law and a way. And if God had willed, He would have made you one nation" (Koran 5: 48). (III 413.14)

Finally, the Path of Muḥammad designates the guidance that was given exclusively to him, i.e., the Koran. It leads to the specific form of mercy and felicity that God has singled out for the followers of Islam (III 413.24).

From one point of view, the second and third paths are paths of Allāh like the first, but they differ profoundly from it in that their specific determining factors are Divine Names related to guidance and felicity. "Every path leads to God," but not every path will result in a benefit accruing to the person who follows it. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's words,

God says, "This is My straight path, so follow it, and follow not diverse paths, lest they scatter you from its road" (Koran 6: 153), i.e., the road wherein is your felicity. After all, each path leads to Allāh since He is the end of every path— "To Him the whole matter shall be returned" (11: 123) — but not everyone who returns to Him attains felicity. So the path of felicity is the religious path (*al-mashrū'ah*), nothing else. (II 148.11)

Names such as the Guide, the Forgiver, and the Beneficent lead directly to salvation and felicity, but Names such as the Misguider, the Avenger, and Terrible in Retribution lead to punishment and wretchedness. In other words, everyone follows God's engendering command whether he wants to or not, but no special benefit results; felicity can only be achieved by following the prescriptive command.

There is no path that does not take to Allāh, but God says to His Prophet and to us, "Go thou straight, as thou hast been commanded" (11: 112). He does not address him in terms of unqualified straightness, since ... the important thing is to which of the Divine Names you will attain and come home: for the effect of that Name — whether felicity and bliss or wretchedness and chastisement — will penetrate him who attains to it. Hence the meaning of "straightness" here is motion and rest upon the religious way or the straight path, i.e., the Divine Law (*al-shar' al-ilāhī*). Faith in God is the beginning of this path, and the "branches of faith"¹¹ are its waystations. (II 218. 14)

Guidance and Human Perfection

It was said above that one reason for the existence of the prescriptive command is to populate the two abodes, heaven and hell. Another way of expressing this is to say that the prescriptive command brings about the full development of human possibilities. Without revelation, both the highest

and the lowest human potentialities could not be actualized. Revelation allows human beings to reach both the heights of perfection and the depths of degradation, i.e., the whole range of human possibilities that are demanded by the engendering command.

Since human beings are created "upon the form of Allāh," they possess all the divine Attributes, at least potentially. They are, in effect, "little gods," and hence God appointed them as His vicegerents or representatives upon earth. But vicegerency presupposes servanthood (*'ubūdiyyah*), which in turn means the submission of the human will to the divine Will (i.e., *al-islām*).

It can be said that the primary divine Attributes that are reflected within the theomorphic being known as man are Life, Knowledge, Will, Power, and Speech. Hence revelation is addressed to a living being who possesses knowledge, chooses among the objects of his knowledge through will, puts his will into practice through power, and grasps the divine Word while articulating his own situation through speech. By means of the last attribute in particular he actualizes an encounter between the divine and the human. Speech is the quality that sets man apart from other creatures; through it revelation descends from heaven and spiritual practice is made possible.

It hardly needs to be pointed out that these qualities are not possessed equally by all human beings and that the degree to which they are possessed determines to a large degree a person's human standing. It should also be obvious that equilibrium (*'itidāl*) among these attributes contributes to human perfection; each of the attributes supports the others, and the lack of any one will vitiate the usefulness of the others. "Knowledge without power", and even more so "power without knowledge", are conditions that seem to be well known to everyone; certainly we hear them being discussed constantly, for example, in the domain of politics.

In the Islamic view, full human perfection involves the presence of all the divine Attributes, not only these five. Moreover, equilibrium becomes the key to whether or not the attributes will lead to the felicity that is the goal of human life. In Sufi terminology, the spiritual path is said to involve "assuming the traits of Allāh" (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*), or "assuming the traits of the divine Names" (*al-takhalluq bi'l-asmā' al-ilāhiyyah*). The concrete psychological, moral and spiritual perfections that are achieved by actualizing these Names are known technically in Sufism as the "stations" (*maqāmāt*) of the spiritual path.

Even today human life is commonly viewed as a process of growth through which various attributes are acquired and developed. The worth of increasing one's knowledge and strengthening one's will power is universally acknowledged. What is not universally acknowledged is that human potential for growth and development is not limited by any conceivable bounds; made in the image of God, the human being can actualize all the Divine Names, each to an unlimited degree.

From this point of view, the need for revelation comes back to human ignorance of the human/divine nature. Without too much instruction, we can understand the value of knowledge and power, but to realize the value of all the divine Attributes and then to actualize each of them in proper equilibrium with all the others is totally beyond human capability, unless a divine intervention takes place. The final reason for the impossibility of achieving human perfection and the concordant human felicity through individual effort is the unknowability and nondelimitation of the Divine Being Itself, "upon whose form" man was created. The things of the universe – and in particular man's own self – cannot be known in their relationship to the unknowable Essence until God specifies their situation through revelation.

Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes hundreds of pages to explaining the deficiencies and limitations of the human intellect, *al-aql*, a

word which derives from a root meaning "to bind, to fetter, to confine." The intellect, he says, is that which, on a cognitive level, restricts the Nonrestricted and delimits the Non-defined. Hence it is barred from grasping the ultimate Origin of things – Nondelimited Being – through its own powers. Only revelation can provide it with the necessary guidance to function in harmony with the other human faculties and realize its full potential. And just as the intellect – the instrument of human knowledge – can only function correctly through accepting the divine guidance, so also the other faculties, such as will and speech, can only play their proper roles within a divine framework, i.e., the prescriptive command.

Through creation, Being manifests Itself within the infinite possibilities of delimitation demanded by Its very Non-delimitation. This means that the whole range of possible combinations of divine Attributes must be manifested not only in the creatures of the macrocosm, but also in the individual human microcosms. There must be a virtually unlimited number of human types and human individuals manifesting the infinite possibilities of Being's delimitation, or the whole range of possible interactions among the Names. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes in great detail about the vast range of possible human perfections as actualized in the different degrees of faith and sanctity. He also devotes a good deal of space to the various possibilities of deviation and disequilibrium that result when the properties of the Names fail to produce a harmonious human being.

From one point of view, the destiny of each person is determined by his immutable entity, or the particular possibility of ontological deployment that he represents. But from another point of view, each person participates actively and freely in shaping his own fate, since he is a divine image possessing the attribute of free will. Hence he chooses to accept or reject revelation and is held responsible for his choice. From the human point of view, we choose freely

many of the Attributes of God that we actualize within ourselves. By following revelation, a person opens himself up to the full range of human possibilities and is able to actualize them – always in keeping with his own preparedness, of course – such that those that lead to felicity outweigh those that lead to wretchedness. Human perfection as such involves a full realization of all the ontological possibilities represented by the Divine Names. Hence it is said that the “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) – he who truly actualizes the divine form – stands at the “center of the circle of existence,” equidistant from all possibilities of manifestation and displaying each in proper harmony and equilibrium with all the others. In contrast, when a person rejects the guidance of the prophets, he precludes the possibility of realizing all human potentialities and is therefore condemned to remain in disequilibrium and disharmony, a state that will lead to wretchedness in the next world.

One way to explain the concept of human perfection as the function of an equilibrium among the divine Attributes is to refer to the two Attributes of Mercy and Wrath. Although God is both Merciful and Wrathful, His Mercy – according to the well-known prophetic statement – “precedes His Wrath.” This means that God Himself is essentially Mercy, while Wrath is a secondary attribute that comes into play only when certain creatures are taken into account. The Koran affirms that “God’s Mercy embraces all things” (7:156; cf. 40:7), while it states that His Wrath is directed only toward those who have strayed from the straight path of the prophets.

The Divine Names are often divided into two categories, those of Mercy (or Gentleness, or Beauty) and those of Wrath (or Severity, or Majesty). The principle of Mercy’s precedence means that the Merciful Names possess a certain priority over the Wrathful Names. The former include Names such as the All-Compassionate, the Forgiver, the Pardoner, the Gentle, the Guide, and the Beneficent, while the latter

include Names such as the Avenger, the Terrible in Retribution, the Mighty, the Severe, and the Misguider. It will be perceived immediately that guidance pertains to Mercy and misguidance to Wrath; felicity is related to the first group of Names and wretchedness to the second.

Ibn al-ʿArabī develops a complicated cosmology based largely on the interplay of Mercy and Wrath.¹² He demonstrates that the ontological priority of the Merciful Names means that these attributes pertain to the divine Nature as such, while the second group comes into play within the cosmos. Thus, for example, the Koran states that “The All-Merciful is seated upon the Throne” (20:5), while the traditions of the Prophet make clear that the Throne encompasses the Footstool upon which God’s “two feet” are placed. According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, these are the foot of Mercy and the foot of Mercy mixed with Wrath. And since “His Footstool encompasses the heavens and the earth” (Koran 2:255), Mercy and Wrath enter into the very fabric of the created universe, while beyond the Footstool there is only the all-Merciful.

Since Mercy is an Attribute that pertains to God Himself without taking creation into account, it is closely connected with those Attributes that result from “proximity” (*qurb*) to God, such as knowledge or illumination, union, unity, and equilibrium; in contrast, Wrath is manifested only within the creatures, so it has a certain connection with ignorance, separation, multiplicity, and deviation. To the extent that a human being is dominated by attributes connected to Wrath, he remains in separation and dispersion; only by seeking out God’s Mercy and Forgiveness is he able to ascend to the realm of union and unity.

Wrath has a necessary role to play within the cosmic harmony, though it is subordinate to Mercy; in the same way, separative existence performs a positive function, since through it the full manifestation of all the divine Attributes is achieved. Even the Names of Mercy depend in a certain

respect upon the Names of Wrath for the entire range of their possibilities to be actualized. Ibn al-ʿArabī likes to quote a prophetic tradition in this connection:

By Him in whose hand my soul is, if you had not sinned, God would have removed you and brought a people who do sin, then ask God's pardon and are forgiven.¹³

Through these words, says Ibn al-ʿArabī, "The Prophet alerted us to the fact that everything which occurs in the cosmos takes place only to make manifest the property of a Divine Name" (II 96.12).

In the same sort of context, Ibn al-ʿArabī relates the story of one of the faithful who complained to a saint about the corruption of the times. The saint replied,

What business have you with God's servants? Do not interfere between the Master and His slaves! Mercy, Forgiveness, and Charity are seeking them [the sinners]. Do you desire that the properties of the Divinity should remain ineffectual (*mu'attal*)? Busy yourself with yourself and pay no heed to such things! (II 177. 11)

But it is especially the Names of Wrath that achieve the full deployment of their properties through those who reject the prescriptive command. For example, God is "Tyrannical, Proud" (Koran 59: 23). When these two Attributes are actualized by the saints within the context of Mercy's precedence, they are accompanied by the necessary humility appropriate to the fundamental human situation, which is that of servanthood. But these two attributes must also possess loci of manifestation wherein they can dominate over the properties of servanthood, and the result will be pride and arrogance of the worst sort. Since the effects of the Merciful Names will be almost totally nullified in such cases, disequilibrium, spiritual blindness, and ultimate wretchedness will be the result. Hence the Koran says, "God sets a seal upon every heart that is tyrannical, proud" (40:35). The disequilibrium produced by the manifestation of such Names, says Ibn al-

ʿArabī, can lead a person to claim divinity, as in the case of Pharaoh (II 244.35). Hence even extreme forms of human imperfection display the properties of certain Divine Names, albeit in a mode that will lead to wretchedness and chastisement.

But wretchedness is not separate from Mercy, since Mercy precedes Wrath and must exercise its effects even upon the objects of Wrath. This is a constant theme of Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings and it leads him to insist upon the limited duration of the chastisement of hell.¹⁴ Aeons and aeons may pass, but eventually the fires of hell will be quenched and Mercy will embrace all of its inhabitants.¹⁵

The Gods of our Beliefs

Revelation is a self-delimitation of Nondelimited Being with a view toward human perfection and felicity. To reject revelation is to reject the possibility of attaining to the perfection of the human state and to delay the arrival of felicity for aeons if not "forever". To accept it is to acknowledge its truth (*taṣḍīq*), to commit oneself to its demands (*īmān*: "faith"), and to put one's commitment into practice. To the extent that the individual conforms to the norm provided by the religion (*al-mizān al-mashrūʿ*), he will be led to the actualization of the potentialities of human nature, which are determined and defined by the full range of the divine Attributes, latent within him by virtue of his having been created "upon Allāh's form."

The degree to which conformity to the divine norm will be actualized depends upon many factors, not the least of which is "belief" (*i'tiqād*), or the manner in which one conceives of the object of one's faith. Though each practitioner of the religion will have "faith in God," what he actually understands by this "God" in whom he has faith has far-reaching implications. The Arabic word *i'tiqād* – "belief" – derives from the root ʿ-q-d, which means to knit, knot, or tie;

to join together, to convene, to make a contract. The word *ittiqād* itself, the eighth verbal form of the root, means to become firmly tied or established, literally or figuratively. "Belief", then, is a "knot" firmly tied in the heart or the mind. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, it is a binding and delimitation of Nondelimited Being that takes place within the human subject. It is a natural human state, in the sense that everyone has some concept of the nature of reality or the meaning of existence, however unarticulated this concept may be. At the bottom of everyone's heart there is a knot, a delimitation, which determines how he looks upon Nondelimited Being and how he lives his life. Hence it is not necessary for a person "to believe in God" to have a belief; in the final analysis, every knot tied in the heart is a delimitation of the Nondelimited, hence a "belief" about Being or "Allāh".

The extent to which our belief corresponds to God as He is in Himself depends upon our capacity for knowledge. In other words, an individual's "preparedness" allows him to understand what he understands, just as it allows him to be receptive (*qābil*) toward the properties of Being's Names to a certain specific degree, no more and no less. The preparedness delimits knowledge, just as it delimits Being.¹⁶ Hence Ibn al-ʿArabī speaks of God's "ontological" self-manifestation or self-disclosure (*tajallī*) to the entity, a self-disclosure that is delimited by the entity's preparedness; and he employs the same term to refer to the "epistemological" self-manifestation of God that is perceived for what it is by the saints through "unveiling" (*kashf*) and perceived by others in a form that is delimited and defined by their own beliefs. For example, he quotes the famous answer of Junayd when asked about knowledge and the knower: "The water takes on the color of its container."

Junayd declared that the container has an effect upon what is contained. He wanted you to *know* whom you know. Then you will understand that you only judge your object of knowledge in terms of yourself. So you only know yourself. (III 161.24)

Since man knows only himself, he also believes only in himself, in the sense that his belief is determined and defined by his own conceptual limitations. And again, this depends totally upon his preparedness.

God bestows preparedness, as indicated in His words, "He gave each thing its creation" (Koran 20: 50). Then He raises the veil between Himself and His servant, who sees Him in the form of his own belief; so God is identical with the servant's belief. Thus neither your heart nor your eye ever contemplates anything but the form of your own belief concerning God. (*Fuṣūṣ* 121; cf. *BW* 149)

Since the object of one's worship or service (*ʿibādah*) is determined by one's belief, one never worships anything but one's own fabrication.

It is proper for the creatures to worship nothing but what they believe concerning God, so they worship a created thing There are none but idol worshippers. (IV 386.17)

If the precise content of an individual's belief is determined by his preparedness, this in turn is determined by a divine Name or Names.

Each person who conceives of God is dominated by the property of one of God's Names. That Name discloses itself to him and bestows upon him his belief through the disclosure, without his knowing it. (II 58.14)

But God in Himself is nondelimited, "so He is far exalted above entering under the sway of delimitation or being restricted to one form or another" (II 85.21). True knowledge of God demands nondelimitation by any form or belief. Hence the "gnostics" (*al-ʿārifūn*), those saints who have perfect knowledge of things as they are, never deny God in any belief.

The eye sees nothing but the God of belief, and clearly, beliefs are variegated. So he who delimits God denies Him in that which is other than his own delimi-

tation, while acknowledging Him only in the manner in which he delimits His self-disclosure. But he who frees Him from any delimitation will never deny Him and will acknowledge Him in every form in which He undergoes transmutations. (*Fuṣūṣ* 121; cf. *BW* 149)

Here Ibn al-ʿArabī alludes to a well-known ḥadīth which is one of the scriptural bases for his teaching concerning the “God of belief” (*al-ilāh al-muʿtaqad*). In a long description of the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet recounted how God will appear to people in various forms, each one of which will be denied. Finally, He will transmute Himself (*tahawwul*) into a form which they will recognize as the object of their own belief, and only then will they acknowledge His lordship.¹⁷ According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the “gnostics” grasp God’s nondelimitation and therefore never deny His self-disclosure in any form; all others delimit Him and therefore deny Him in the forms that do not correspond to their particular brand of delimitation (III 410.17). In the next world, the ability of the gnostics to recognize every self-manifestation for what it is will place them in the highest levels of paradise.

Look at the levels of people in their knowledge of God: it is identical to their levels of vision of God on the Day of Resurrection.... So beware of delimiting yourself to a specific knot and disbelieving in everything else, lest you lose great good; indeed, you will lose knowledge of the situation as it is in itself. So be in your soul a *materia* for the forms of all beliefs, since Allāh is greater than that He should be confined by one knot rather than another. For He says, “Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of Allāh” (Koran 2: 115), without mentioning one place rather than another. He mentioned that “there is the Face of Allāh,” and the “face” of a thing is its reality. Through this He alerts the hearts of the gnostics, lest the accidental qualities of this world prevent them from becoming aware of something so precious. (*Fuṣūṣ* 113; cf. *BW* 137)

The great saints recognize the truth of every belief; they understand that every tying, every binding, every restriction, is necessarily a delimitation of Nondelimited Being; it is based on the properties of the Face of God, whose self-disclosures are infinitely variegated and can be seen wherever we turn. In effect, the saints recognize that – from this point of view – the whole of existence represents the dance of possibilities, the self-manifestation of the Nondelimited in the forms of the infinite entities. Each thing is exactly what it must be; every belief demonstrates the scope of the believer’s preparedness at the moment of belief. All things are on the Straight Path of Allāh; every thing obeys the engendering command, and each person possesses a belief that will take him to Allāh, the end of all paths. But the exact path of return to Allāh, who is named by every Name, will depend upon the specific Name that determines the belief.

He who makes Allāh “Time” (*al-dahr*), will attain to Him by means of His Name Time, for Allāh comprehends all Names.... When a person believes that He is Nature, He will disclose Himself to him as Nature. Whenever a person believes anything about Him, whatever it may be, He will disclose Himself to him in the form of that belief. (III 411.23)

Ibn al-ʿArabī encourages the seeker of God to expand his own beliefs in order to have a greater “share” (*ḥaqq*) in the vision of God in the next world. Speaking of the beatific vision granted to the saints in paradise, he points out that its scope depends upon the variety of beliefs concerning God that they are able to encompass.

If a saint achieves all forms of belief, he will possess the shares of everyone. He will be in general bliss and will delight in the joy of every believer.... But if he limits himself to a thing single, his share will be in that to which he has limited himself, nothing more. (II 85.26)

The saints who realize all beliefs are known as the Folk of Allāh, since they witness God in respect of this all-compre-

hensive Name and contemplate His never-ending self-disclosures in respect of each one of the Names embraced by it.

It is incumbent upon the Folk of Allāh to know the doctrine (*ilm*) concerning God of every sect (*niḥlah*) and every religion (*millah*), so that they can contemplate Him in every form and never stand in the position of denial. For He permeates existence, so none denies Him but someone who is delimited. But the Folk of Allāh follow Him whose folk they are, so His property flows over them. And His property is the lack of delimitation, for He possesses all-pervading Being; so His folk possess all-pervading vision. When someone delimits His Being, he delimits his own vision of Him; such a one is not of the Folk of Allāh. (III 161. 14)

All beliefs – i.e., all views that delimit and define Nondelimited Being in any way whatsoever – are true; all of them “lead to Allāh,” since this Name comprehends all other Names. In this respect there is no difference between the belief of the world’s greatest theologian and that of a mad man. But not all beliefs lead to human perfection or to immediate felicity in the next world, since any belief, by definition, delimits the object of belief and thereby restricts the share of the believer in the vision of Nondelimited Being. If the delimitation follows the guidance of revelation, then the Names which define the delimited object of belief will be Names of Mercy that draw the believer in the direction of unity, harmony, and equilibrium and result in felicity after death; but if the delimitation rejects the proffered guidance and instead follows the confining view of the individual, the Names ruling over the situation will be Names of Wrath that will result in disequilibrium, dispersion, disintegration, and wretchedness.

The gnostics or Folk of Allāh accept the truth of every belief, yet they walk upon the Path of the Beneficent, or more specifically, the Path of Muḥammad, since these paths provide the means to integration and unity, or to a fuller

share of the vision of God. In other words, they “believe” in all religions and all constructions of the human mind, but they have “faith” only in God as He has revealed Himself to mankind through a particular prophet; their “practice,” therefore, is based totally upon prophetic practice, and more specifically, upon the practice of Muḥammad, whose way is viewed as embracing the ways of all the prophets.

The gnostics’ understanding that all beliefs are true is intimately connected to their vision with the “eye of the heart” that all existent things are controlled by the engendering command. In no way does their acceptance of all beliefs negate their understanding that all men are called to follow the prescriptive command, since there is no other path to felicity. This is why Ibn al-ʿArabī writes,

It is incumbent upon you to practice the worship of God set down by revelation and established by tradition (*al-samʿ*) ... “So worship thy Lord” who is described in revelation “until certainty comes to thee” (Koran 15: 99). Then the veil will be lifted and your sight will be piercing (cf. Koran 50: 22). (III 311. 23)

Ibn al-ʿArabī summarizes this whole discussion in a passage that explains some of the properties of the divine Name “He who sends forth” (*al-Bāʿith*), the verbal root of which is employed repeatedly in the Koran to refer to God’s activity in “sending forth” the prophets. The disbelievers, he says, were not totally mistaken in “taking to themselves other gods apart from Allāh” (Koran 19: 81):

Nothing made them do this except a correct principle: They saw a diversity of opinion concerning Allāh, in spite of the general agreement on His Unity, or on the fact that He is one and that there is no other god but He; so they differed as to what this God is. Each person with a theory spoke of what his theory led him to; it became established that “God” is He who possesses this property. What he did not know is that this “God” was nothing but his own fabrication. Hence he

only worshipped and believed in a God created by himself Then the people differed widely, though the Single Thing does not differ in Itself.... Since this was the situation, they were easily induced to take stones, trees, planets, animals, and other such creations as their gods, each group and follower of a doctrine about God doing this in accordance with the views that dominated over him..... So man created in himself that which he worships and about which he judges.

But Allāh is the Judge; He cannot be restricted by intellect, nor can judgements be made about Him. Rather, His is the command in His creation, from before and behind. There is no god but He, the God and Master of all things....

Now Allāh is "He who sends forth," so He sends forth the messengers – thoughts – to peoples' minds (*bāwāṭin*) and they speak in accordance with these messengers and believe in them. In the same way, He sends forth the messengers known as "prophets" to the outside world.... So the intelligent person is he who abandons what he has in himself concerning God for that which has come from God concerning God. If that which the prophets have brought agrees with what the thought-messengers have brought to their minds, so be it – and let them thank God for the agreement. But if any difference appears, it is incumbent upon you to follow the outside messenger. Beware of being led astray by the messengers within the mind! Then you will attain to felicity, God willing. This is a piece of advice from me to every receptive person who possesses a sound intellect. "And say, 'My Lord! Increase me in knowledge!'" (Koran 20: 114). (IV 279.7)

Summary and Conclusion

True Being, or God, is one in Itself and many in Its self-manifestations. The cosmos as a whole – "that which is other

than God" – in the totality of its spatial and temporal extension, is Being's self-manifestation, while the innumerable existents encompassed by the cosmos represent the differentiated deployment of the One Being's ontological possibilities; the universal categories of these possibilities are referred to as the "Divine Names". By virtue of its existence, each thing follows the engendering command, and in this respect everything is exactly what it must be.

A human being is no different from any other existent in respect of the engendering command. Every person follows the "Straight Path of Allāh" whether he wants to or not, since he is created by God. But in virtue of being made upon God's form, a human being is given life, intelligence, free will, power, and speech, attributes that manifest directly the primary Names of God. Since each person possesses these attributes, he has no choice but to employ them in his everyday life, in effect accepting responsibility for the consequences. Every sane person knows that his actions have repercussions and that he would be wise to exercise a certain care in managing his affairs. But human possibilities go infinitely beyond the parameters of those perfections that can be actualized without divine guidance; hence the engendering command brings the prescriptive command into existence, even though God is fully aware that not everyone will follow it. Indeed, if everyone did follow it, one of the purposes of its existence – to populate hell – would be nullified.¹⁸

Felicity and wretchedness are two human possibilities that go back to the domination of certain divine Names in human beings, especially Mercy and Wrath, or Guidance and Misguidance. Which one will dominate depends ultimately on the preparedness of the individual, i.e., the capacity of his immutable entity to act as a receptacle for the properties of the divine Names. Since the entities are fixed for all eternity, God does not intervene in a person's destiny, except to bestow existence when his preparedness demands it. This is

why Ibn al-ʿArabī can say, “No one possesses in himself anything from God, nor does he have anything from other than himself” (*Fuṣūṣ* 66; cf. *BW* 69); or again, writing of the human situation in the next world, whether wretched or felicitous: “Let them blame none but themselves and let them praise none but themselves: ‘God’s is the conclusive argument’ (Koran 6: 149) through His Knowledge of them [as immutable entities]” (*Fuṣūṣ* 96; cf. *BW* 115).

Ibn al-ʿArabī is not asking people to be fatalistic, quite the contrary; he wants to show why the prescriptive command must be followed, even though God’s Will shall be done. Human freedom is real on its own level and must be utilized to that extent. In particular, we are free to expand our limited beliefs concerning God; this is why the Koran commands us to pray, “My Lord, increase me in knowledge!” (20:14). The way in which we may actively seek an increase in knowledge corresponds to the way set down by the prescriptive command. Again, God says in the Koran, “I have not created the jinn and men except to serve/worship Me” (51:56), and the commentators agree that here by service or worship of God is meant gaining knowledge of Him. In the same way the Koran commands, “Serve/worship God, until certainty comes to thee” (15: 99). Worship, service, knowledge, certainty, felicity – all are actualized through following the prophetic way.

If it is true that we worship nothing but our own belief, yet it is also true that beliefs, which are the products of our thoughts – the “inward messengers” – can be shaped and refined through following the outward messengers, and eventually a person may be put into harmony with the Mercy that results in felicity. Depending upon the divine guidance provided by revelation leads to an opening up of the soul toward the mercy and grace that transform and make whole; rejection of the guidance and mercy that are offered means cutting oneself off from the Names of Mercy and turning oneself over to the Names of Wrath, which bar the way to human wholeness and condemn the soul to wretchedness.

Though this essay has barely begun the task of uncovering those aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s teachings that have a direct bearing upon the nature of prophecy and revelation, perhaps enough has been said to warrant a few brief conclusions. It was remarked at the outset that the Koran views revelation as a phenomenon both universal and particular. Every community has received a celestial message that is essentially the same in each case though different in outward details, the implication being that every revealed religion is true. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s purpose in writing about religious diversity is only to demonstrate why the Koranic view should be what it is.

One way to understand the implications of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s position is to place him within the context of the contemporary study of religion. Let us imagine that he were to apply his view of revelation to the current academic scene. He would probably note immediately that, broadly speaking, today’s scholars take one of two approaches to the question of the “truth” of the religions. One group, who might be called the “absolutists”, have firmly tied the knot of their own belief in the form of a specific religion, sect, or school of thought; there is only one true way; all others are in error or at best represent imperfect approximations of the one true path. At the other extreme, the “relativists” have loosened the knot of everyone else’s belief, saying that each religion and sect presents a valid point of view, so we must abandon any notion of absolute truth. The absolutists usually conclude that, since there is only one true perspective, there cannot be any “unity” among the religions. The relativists in contrast tend to view all religions as basically the same, which generally amounts to saying that none of them has any ultimate claim to truth.

If one can presume to suggest how Ibn al-ʿArabī might reply to these two points of view, it may be fair to say that he would agree with each on certain points and disagree on others. While agreeing with the absolutists that there is only

one road to felicity, Ibn al-ʿArabī would immediately qualify this by pointing out that the uniqueness of the path relates to the individual, not to the path itself; in other words, what makes the way “one” and therefore uniquely important is the absolute demands a religion makes upon its followers. These demands cannot be met except by total dedication to a single way.

Ibn al-ʿArabī would agree with the absolutists that the religions represent a vast array of diverse and often conflicting beliefs and practices, but he would reject any suggestion that only one of the religions is true. The whole question of “truth,” he would suggest, needs to be reexamined, since there are a number of points of view from which it can be envisaged.¹⁹ In relation to the engendering command, every perspective is “true,” since every definition delimits the Nondelimited in some manner or another, and in respect of being delimitations or “knots”, all are equivalent; every formulation is valid in some respect, or else it would not exist. What is of fundamental importance is to determine the “respect” in which we want to consider a perspective. In order to judge among different formulations, we must choose some specific attribute or definable standard against which “truth” and “falsehood” can be gauged; the Absolute as such cannot be defined or conceived, since it is “no thing”. Hence an absolute “some thing” is needed which can act as a point of reference. For example, we can ask which point of reference – which “relative absolute”²⁰ – is adequate to provide a valid formulation for the nature of “material existence” considered as an independent, self-sufficient object; and to this we might answer that the “scientific method” provides the necessary criterion for truth. “Truth,” then, is the measure of conformity to some standard of reference which plays the role of an absolute. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the standard for truth judgements in matters of religious import must be the prescriptive command: That religion or perspective within a religion is “true” which guides us to felicity. There will be

both true and false perspectives, since not every finger points at the moon. Moreover, among true perspectives some will take to a greater felicity than others, just as some will provide a more perfect image of the goal. The value of the perspective lies not only in the extent to which it is able to grasp the true human situation and to delineate the goal in accordance with the prescriptive command, but also in its ability to take the individual to the goal that it delineates. Truth works hand in hand with practice.

It needs to be emphasized that there cannot be a single “true” perspective that would preclude the existence of other true perspectives. The reason for this may be said to be the vast diversity of human capacities and “preparednesses” (*istiʿdād*), or the plurality of the divine Names, which comes down to the same thing. “The water assumes the color of its container,” said Junayd, and one of the meanings of this statement is that “We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people” (Koran 14:4). The necessity for diverse formulations of the truth is proven historically by the great number of prophets sent by God, not to speak of the diversity of perspectives within each religion.²¹ In short, Ibn al-ʿArabī sees religious diversity as an intrinsic attribute of reality; religions must differ because of the plurality of the Names, or because of the “relations” (*nisab*) that exist between God and His prophets, or God and the world.

To turn to the relativist position, Ibn al-ʿArabī would agree that there are many ways and that “all religions are one,” but he would immediately qualify this second statement. Religions are certainly not one on the level of form, rather on the level of the ultimate source of the religions (i.e., the prescriptive command as such, and beyond that, the Divine Essence). They are also one in that each attempts in its own way to actualize the unlimited potentialities of human nature; each represents a self-delimitation of the Nondelimited with a view toward dissolving privative human qualities and opening the “divine image” up to the Infinite Being from which it derives.

Finally, Ibn al-ʿArabī would reject categorically the relativist idea that there is no such thing as absolute truth. The Essence – God Himself – is by definition the Absolute, and “Truth” (*al-Ḥaqq*) is His Name, one that Ibn al-ʿArabī, like many Muslim authorities, often uses interchangeably with “Allāh”. If the Absolute Truth which is Allāh demands that all paths lead to It – just as they derive from It as a result of the engendering command – It also demands that certain paths take on an absolute value in relation to man’s felicity. Hence the Path of the Beneficent becomes an absolute standard by which the truth of human beliefs can be judged. The existence of a perspective or a belief – brought about by the engendering command – does not prove its “truth”, since truth and validity depend upon providing the means to actualize human felicity. Ibn al-ʿArabī would insist upon the existence of objective criteria for discerning between truth and error; these two must be defined in terms of felicity and therefore in terms of revelation, the only means at our disposal through which to grasp the full extent of human possibilities.

In short, there is an Absolute Truth – the Essence, It-ness, True Being – that stands beyond all possibilities of formulation but which nevertheless makes possible valid formulations of a “relatively absolute” truth through Its own self-revelation, i.e., the prescriptive command. The Absolute Truth as such cannot be defined, yet Its revealed expressions take upon an absolute value for human beings. The followers of the different revealed religions are justified in looking upon their own perspectives and ways as absolute and unique, since in fact, for its followers, each way is the only means to achieve felicity.

Thus Ibn al-ʿArabī would choose a middle path between the extreme positions of the absolutists and the relativists. He would affirm the existence of Absolute Truth but deny the possibility of providing a formulation of Its nature adequate in every respect. He would affirm the absolute neces-

sity of the prescriptive command for attaining to human felicity, but deny that that command could be revealed only in a single form. He would affirm the existence of both truth and error in human beliefs while judging among them on the basis of the prescriptive command. Finally he would maintain that truth is inseparable from practice; no matter how adequate a given formulation of the nature of human felicity might be, it must be accompanied by a means of realization to have any lasting value.

¹ This verse, which is preceded by the words, “And We sent never a messenger before thee except that We revealed to him, saying...”, corresponds to the first half of the Muslim testimony of faith (*al-shahādah*): “There is no god but God.” The particularity of revelations pertains to the domain of the second half of the testimony: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God.”

² Koran 2: 285. Cf., e.g., 2: 136, 3: 84, 4: 150-152; 3: 3, 9: 42, 46: 12.

³ For a survey of the various perspectives of Muslim authorities on the significance of other religions, see S.H. Nasr, “Islam and the Encounter of Religions,” in his *Sufi Essays*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 123-151 (also published as *Living Sufism*).

⁴ On the importance of Ibn al-ʿArabī, see Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, chapter 3. Cf. W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989. See also H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969; T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1983.

⁵ In his study of the 850 works attributed to Ibn al-ʿArabī, Osman Yahia concluded that about 700 of these are authentic and 400 are extant (*Histoire et classification de l’oeuvre d’Ibn ʿArabī*, 2 vols., Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1964). A single work, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, contains 2580 pages in the old edition. Each volume of

the critical edition, which began appearing in 1973, contains about 500 pages of text; at the present rate, 37 volumes or 18,500 pages will be needed to publish the full text of the old edition.

⁶ Cf. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Chapter Two.

⁷ References are indicated as follows: Roman numerals refer to the volume number of Ibn al-ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*, Arabic numerals to the page and line numbers. *Fuṣūṣ* refers to Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (ed. ʿA. ʿAfifi, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1946) and *BW* to its translation by R.W.J. Austin, *Ibn al-ʿArabī: The Bezels of Wisdom*, New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

⁸ *Huwiyyah* is usually translated as Ipseity or He-ness. "It-ness" may better express the nonspecificity that the Arabic term conveys. On the fact that the term is more general and all-embracing than the Name Allāh, cf. III 514.22.

⁹ Since the referent of the two terms is the same, one cannot claim that the Essence is "beyond Allāh" (II 42.35), unless Allāh is defined in the specific context as referring only to the Names and Attributes of God, not to God in Himself.

¹⁰ Cf. Chittick, "'God surrounds all Things': An Islamic Perspective on the Environment," *The World and I*, 6, June 1986, pp. 671-78.

¹¹ This is an allusion to a ḥadīth found in both al-Bukhārī and Muslim: "Faith has seventy-some branches, the most excellent of which is the declaration, 'There is no god but God,' and the least of which is the removal of what is harmful from the road." Cf. J. Robson (tr.), *Mishkāt al-maṣābīh*, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963-66, p. 6.

¹² Cf. Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Eschatology," *Muslim World*, 78, 1988, pp. 51-82.

¹³ The ḥadīth is found in Muslim. Cf. Robson, *Mishkāt al-maṣābīh*, p. 494.

¹⁴ According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, there are two kinds of mercy (*rahmah*), referred to respectively in two divine Names derived from the same root, the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) and the All-Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*), Names which are found in the Muslim formula of consecration: "In the Name of Allāh, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate." Since the Name All-Merciful is taken as practically synonymous with Allāh (cf. Koran 17: 110), the Mercy of the All-Merciful – also called the Mercy of Gratuitous Gift (*imti'nān*) – corresponds to the engendering command; hence it is showered

down upon all creatures without restraint; it is the mercy that "embraces All things." The second kind of Mercy – the Mercy of the All-Compassionate or of Necessity (*wujūb*) – correlates with the prescriptive command, since it can only be actualized by following revelation. It is referred to in the Koranic verse, "I shall write it [i.e., Mercy] down for those who are godfearing and pay the alms..., those who follow the messenger" (7: 156). Cf. Chittick, "Ibn ʿArabī's own Summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*: 'The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom,'" *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society*, I, 1982, p. 62.

¹⁵ Most Muslim theologians, not just Sufis, maintain that hell cannot be eternal. "In general it can be said that the non-eternity of the Fire has prevailed as the understanding of the Muslim community, supported by al-ʿAsharī's opinion that punishment is not of unlimited duration" (J.I. Smith and Y.Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1981, p. 95). For Ibn al-ʿArabī's explanation of this point, see Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination."

¹⁶ The essential identity of knowledge and existence is often discussed by Ibn al-ʿArabī. For example, "The root of the world (*al-ʿalam*) is ignorance, while knowledge is acquired; for knowledge is existence, and existence belongs to Allāh; but ignorance is nonexistence, and nonexistence belongs to the world" (III 160.21).

¹⁷ See Muslim, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-imān*, no.302 (Cairo: Muhammad ʿAlī Ṣabīḥ, 1334/1916, I, pp. 114-117). Cf. *al-Futūḥāt*, I 314.1, II 311.25.

¹⁸ Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to this connection between hell and the prescriptive command with his words, "If not for the existence of the religions, there would be no disbelief in God resulting in wretchedness. Therefore God, says, 'We never chastise until We send forth a messenger' (Koran 17:15)." (II 248.3)

¹⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabī's works are often structured on a principle that might be called that of "perspective shift." Each Divine Name or prophetic logos establishes a distinct perspective with its own standards for judging truth and error, differing in certain respects from other perspectives. Thus his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom") deals in 27 chapters with as many different prophetic logoi and the corresponding divine Attributes. If it be asked which perspective allows a person to see the shifting perspectives, the answer would have to be the perspective of the Name Allāh, which

corresponds to that of the Prophet Muḥammad, the most perfect of the Perfect Men. To attain to the Prophet's perspective, a person must be his inheritor (*wārith*), and Ibn al-ʿArabī clearly implies that he himself is the last inheritor of the totality of the sciences and spiritual degrees of the Prophet – hence his allusions to the “Seal of Muḥammadan Sanctity”.

²⁰ This term is not contradictory, as Frithjof Schuon has shown repeatedly in his writings (e.g., *Stations of Wisdom*, London: John Murray, 1961, p. 27).

²¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī divides human understandings into three basic types and shows how the Koran has verses aimed specifically at each type: Some people understand God as Nondelimited, others cannot gain any knowledge of Him unless they delimit Him by attributes that preclude temporality and guarantee His absolute Perfection, and still others cannot gain knowledge of Him without delimiting Him by the attributes of temporality and conceiving Him within the constraints of time, place, limitation, and measure. Hence God sent down the religions in accordance with these three levels of understanding. “God revealed ‘Nothing is like Him’ (Koran 42: 11), and this is directed at those who know Him as Nondelimited. For those who delimit Him with the attributes of Perfection, He revealed such verses as: ‘God is powerful over everything, and God encompasses everything in knowledge’ (65: 12); ‘He does what He desires’ (85:16); ‘He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing’ (17: 1); ‘God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Everlasting’ (2: 254); ‘Grant him protection till he hears the Word of God’ (9: 6); ‘He knows all things’ (2: 29). Then God also sent down the verses: ‘The All-Merciful sat upon the Throne’ (20:5); ‘He is with you wherever you are’ (57: 4); ‘He is God in the heavens and in the earth’ (6: 3); ‘And We bore Noah upon a well-planked vessel, well caulked, running before Our eyes’ (54: 14); ‘Had We desired to take to Us a diversion, We would have taken it from Ourselves’ (21: 17). In such manner the revelations embrace that which is demanded by the constitutions of the world’s inhabitants. So the believer is always one of these three types, except for the perfect human being, for he embraces all these beliefs and knows their origins and contexts” (II 219.30).

I The Synderesis

St. Albert the Great

Questio LXXI (De Synderesi) from the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Albertus Magnus, O.P.

II The Synderesis

Dom M. Prummer, O.P.

extracted from his
Manuale Theologiae Moralis secundum principia Sancti Thomae Aquinatis

two translations from the Latin by
Rama P. Coomaraswamy