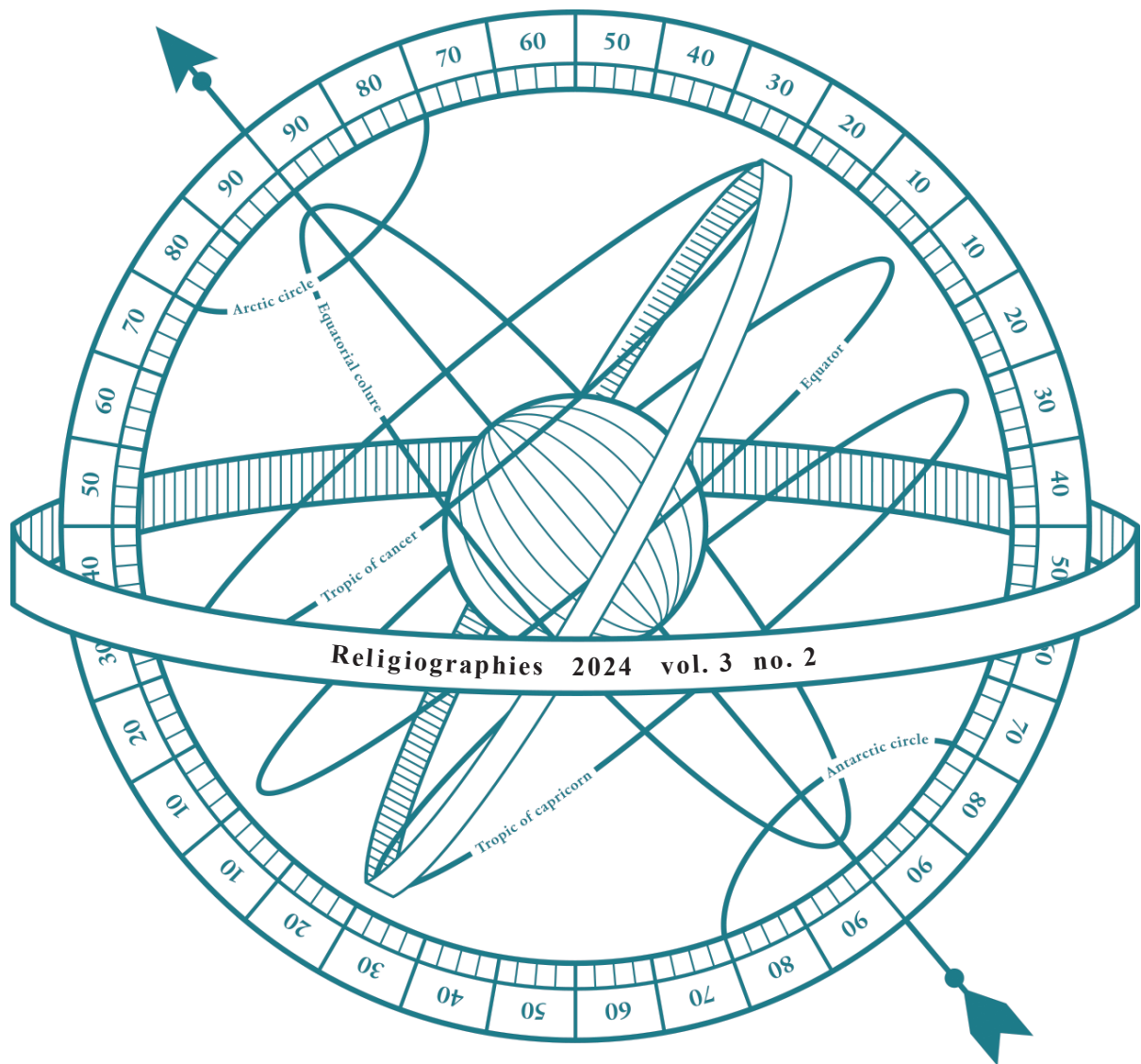


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Reviving Muhyi al-Din: Contemporary Uses of
Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought and Reinventions of Islam”

edited by

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Editorial:

The Many Lives of Ibn 'Arabi's Thought Mark J. Sedgwick and Gregory Vandamme

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The thought of the Andalusian Muslim and mystical scholar Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240)¹ has played a significant role in various forms of reinvention of Islam across the centuries. His ideas have been the object of multiple religiopolitical appropriations, sometimes at the state level, as in Rasulid Yemen, the Ottoman Empire, or Mughal India.² Yet above all, his ideas have inspired a great number of thinkers and actors within Islam who have discovered in his work a conceptual resource for addressing the challenges of their time.³

Ibn 'Arabi is called *Muhyi al-Din*, “the Reviver of the Religion,” and is referred to as *al-shaykh al-akbar* (“the supreme master”) by his numerous admirers. His works occupy a unique place in the development of Sufi thought; however, the scope of his prolific writings extends far beyond the sole domain of Sufism. As the contributors to this special issue demonstrate through their studies of various cases, the enduring interest in Ibn 'Arabi's thought focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on his metaphysical perspectives and his hermeneutics of Islam's sacred texts. On one hand, his writings can be seen as revolving around central topics: metaphysics (what is being, what are its levels, and how should we relate to it), theology (what is God, what are His attributes, and how should we relate to Him), and prophetology and hagiology (what are sainthood and prophethood, what are their characteristics, and how should we relate to them). On the other hand, his writings constitute a vast commentary on the two core texts of Islam, the Qur'an and the hadith (the reports of the Prophet Muhammad's oral teachings), as he himself emphasized on numerous occasions.⁴

Over the centuries Ibn 'Arabi's work has pushed the boundaries of what is conceivable and expressible within Islamic theology and spirituality. The influence of the *shaykh al-akbar* manifests itself primarily in the intellectual and spiritual avenues it has opened. The vast and rich tradition of commentaries on his writings stands as testimony to this enduring legacy. These commentators are often read apologetically as a coherent whole, each merely clarifying the master's thought without stepping beyond its framework. Yet the reality is quite different: some did not hesitate to diverge from the master's ideas—for example 'Afif al-Din Tilimsani (1213/1216–1291), 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (1365–1424), and Emir 'Abd al-Qadir (1808–1883)—while others proposed developments that far exceeded mere commentary—notably Qaysari (1260–1350), Haydar Amuli (1319–1385), and, to a certain extent, Mulla Sadra (1572–1641), who can be seen as continuing this intellectual trajectory. If Ibn 'Arabi appears as the supreme master of a whole tradition, it is because his thought gives rise to a wide range of divergent readings, which reflect its rich and intricate nature.

The relevance and creative potential of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas have not diminished in the modern era. Many Muslim thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have drawn on his works to develop their own intellectual frameworks. One notable example is the way his thought continues to shape the reflections of various Muslim actors on profoundly contemporary issues such as ecology⁵ and feminism.⁶ Whatever the approach, Ibn 'Arabi's *oeuvre* has much to offer contemporary readers, whether in terms of his philosophical and theological explorations or his vivid and dynamic reading of the Qur'an.

The recent uses of Ibn 'Arabi's thought covered in this special

1

For an excellent short overview of Ibn 'Arabi's life and thought, see Claude Addas, *Ibn Arabi et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Points, 1996), translated as *Ibn 'Arabi: The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000), and William C. Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: One-world, 2005). These authors also wrote what are the most important scientific biography and doctrinal synthesis on Ibn 'Arabi to this day: Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabi ou la quête du soufre rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989). For the history of the polemical reception of Ibn 'Arabi's work within the Islamic tradition, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

2

Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*; Muzaffar Alam, *The Mughals and the Sufis: Islam and Political Imagination in India, 1500–1750* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021); and Hüseyin Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

3

See James W. Morris. “Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters, Part I: Recent French Translations,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 3 (1986): 539–51; “Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters, Part II: Influences and Interpretations,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 4 (1986): 733–56; “Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters, Part II (Conclusions): Influences and Interpretations,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 1 (1987): 101–09; “Ibn 'Arabi in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 29 (2001): 87–122.

4

On those aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, see the seminal works of Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), translated as *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), and *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn 'Arabi, le livre et la loi* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), translated as *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

5

See for instance Munjed M. Murad, “Vicegerency and Nature: Ibn 'Arabi on Humanity's Existential Protection of the World,” in *Voices of Three Generations: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohammad H. Faghfoory and Katherine O'Brien (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2019), 299–314; Syafwan Rozi, “Understanding the Concept of Ecosufism: Harmony and the Relationship of God, Nature and Humans in Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Arabi,” *Alumna, Journal of Islamic Studies*, 23, no. 2 (2019): 242–65; Bambang Irawan, Ismail F. A. Nasution, and Hywel Coleman, “Applying Ibn

issue illustrate the diversity of possibilities for its interpretation and application. They also illustrate to what extent each of these interpretations serves a distinct project of reviving Islamic thought. The epithet *Muhyi al-Din* takes on its full significance when one considers the diversity of directions taken in this effort of revivification of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought. The articles presented here reflect the breadth of these possibilities: from the paradoxical articulation between the quest for individual freedom and conformity to the Shari‘a in the work of the Swedish Muslim painter and journalist Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917, discussed in this issue by Gregory Vandamme); to the re-foundation of a metaphysical system by the Malaysian philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (b. 1931, discussed by Fadila Ezzat); from the critique of Modern Western thought by the Pakistani literary critic and writer Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919–1978, discussed by Hadi Fakhoury) and the Iranian philosopher Ahmad Fardid (1904/10–1994, discussed by Ahmad Bostani and Rasoul Namazi)—the former tinged with the Traditionalist conception inherited from the French Muslim philosopher and metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951), the latter influenced by Heideggerian philosophy—to the humanistic spirituality of the Moroccan anthropologist and intellectual Faouzi Skali (b. 1953, discussed by Ricarda Stegmann) and the traditional conservatism of the American-born Sufi shaykh Nuh Keller (b. 1954, discussed by Elvira Kulieva). Each of these reinventions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought is, in itself, a reinvention of Islam.

Several overarching questions run through each of the cases presented in this special issue. One is the intellectual network linking many of the above: Aguéli transmitted his understanding of Sufism and of Ibn ‘Arabi to Guénon, who in turn influenced the intellectual formation of Askari and Skali, and (to a lesser extent) Al-Attas, Keller, and perhaps even Fardid.⁷ Guénon, then, appears as a central figure in the contemporary uses of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, as do Western converts to Islam and Muslims who, though not converts, were well versed in Western thought. Another question stands out, involving the relationship between Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and Islamic “orthodoxy,” however this difficult concept may be defined. This concern is central to Keller’s approach but is also at the heart of the polemic between Corbin and Askari. The former situates Ibn ‘Arabi as fundamentally opposed to any form of orthodoxy, which he considers antithetical to pure spirituality, while the latter, on the contrary, portrays the *shaykh al-akbar* as a representative of traditional authority. In general, there is a significant disparity in how each of these figures envisions spirituality and esotericism in relation to religious norms. The debate between Askari and Corbin is particularly telling in this regard, as it reveals how each seeks to resolve a tension inherent in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought—a tension that undoubtedly constitutes a key aspect of its originality. Aguéli, for his part, appears more at ease with this tension, for he presents Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought as a key to uncovering the ultimate meaning of the Sharia (religious norms and law), whose function is essentially spiritual. The contributions as a whole demonstrate how, between Keller’s neo-traditionalism, Askari’s Guénonian Traditionalism, and Aguéli’s articulation of the Sharia and the idea of a primordial Tradition, the contours of what constitutes Islamic “orthodoxy” and how Ibn ‘Arabi’s

‘Arabi’s Concept of Tajalli: A Sufi Approach to Environmental Ethics,” *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism*, 10, no. 1 (2021): 21–36.

6

See for instance Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Kahina Bahloul, *Mon Islam ma liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021); and Francesco Piraino, “A Female Imam in Paris: Islam, Gender, and Secular Normativity,” *Culture and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2024): 1–21.

7

Keller has in recent years been a harsh critic of Guénon and his Traditionalist followers, but has also written of the importance, for his conversion to Islam, of the works of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), who was a follower of the Swiss Muslim Sufi shaykh Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), himself one of the successors of Guénon. Nasr may also have had some impact on Fardid.

thought relates to it shift considerably.

The question of perennialism or a primordial tradition and the relationship of Islam to other religions also appears in the background of these various discussions, as can be seen in Keller's examination of access to salvation or in Aguéli's articulation of the metaphysical reality of Islam in relation to other religious forms. These various interpretations also redefine, each in their own way, the notion of tradition. Askari's conception, which employs the Urdu term *rivāya*—usually referring to transmission in its formal and textual sense—appears, in some measure, to diverge from the notion of a primordial tradition found in Aguéli, which transcends both formal and historical transmissions. The question of change likewise lies at the heart of al-Attas's thought and underpins his critique of modern epistemology, which is rooted in a metaphysical reflection that does not engage with the historical issues of transmission and tradition.

How Ibn 'Arabi's ideas are received by each of these figures is particularly interesting. One might expect a correlation between the way these authors were introduced to Ibn 'Arabi's work and the orientation of their respective interpretations. However, highly diverse interpretations emerge from rather similar channels of transmission. Both Keller and Aguéli draw their knowledge of Ibn 'Arabi's thought from traditional teachings rooted in their respective Syrian and Egyptian contexts, building on earlier, somewhat different foundations. Yet, while both display a concern for adhering to the Sharia, their reformulation of this traditional teaching appears quite different—particularly regarding the prioritization of the metaphysical perspective over religious norms, or their approach to other traditions. Conversely, it is primarily through the work of Corbin that Fardid and Skali, who also draw on Guénon, engage with Ibn 'Arabi, yet the practical and political purposes they derive from his thought appear, to say the least, opposed.

The question of the political use of Ibn 'Arabi's thought is central to the approaches of many of the thinkers studied in this special issue. Following in the footsteps of Corbin and Guénon, Skali seeks to address the modern world's crisis of meaning by re-enchanting or re-sacralizing individuals' relationship with the world through the development of the imaginal faculty and the ethical ideals of *futuwwa*. Drawing on a conception of history also influenced by Corbin's ideas, Fardid formulates a critique of the Westernization of Iranian thought—depicted as a form of intoxication—relying on a chronological and historicized reading of the succession of prophetic figures described by Ibn 'Arabi in his *Fusus al-hikam*, ultimately leading to a defense of the Islamic Republic project. For his part, Al-Attas seeks to reconstruct an educational system liberated from imported Western models, grounding it in the epistemological principles of the *shaykh al-akbar*'s metaphysics.

More broadly, there is also a significant disparity in how each of these figures conceives the relationship between spiritual intuition and rational inquiry. Fardid views Ibn 'Arabi's excellence as stemming from his ability to maintain a distance from metaphysical thought, whereas Askari presents him as an authentic metaphysician, contrasting him in this regard with Kierkegaard's sentimentalism. Their polemical debate with Corbin is particularly illustrative in this respect,

as, in the end, each accuses the other of conflating inspired reason with sterile rationalization.

Finally, it is worth mentioning how most of these authors position Ibn 'Arabi's thought within the binary opposition between East and West. Fardid is emblematic in this regard, as he presents Ibn 'Arabi as an antidote to the "Westoxification" of thought—a process to which figures like al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Mulla Sadra contributed by introducing Greek philosophy into the Muslim intellectual tradition. For Fardid, Ibn 'Arabi belongs rather to the continuity of mystical poetry, particularly Persian poetry, whose ideas represent an untainted form of purity. Askari also seeks to oppose Persian poetic heritage to Western thought, yet he ultimately aligns himself with the intellectualist approach of Guénon. In their debate with Corbin, each claims to defend Eastern wisdom in their own way while accusing the other of offering a fundamentally Western interpretation. Corbin himself, however, appears to point toward a transcendence of such oppositions, asserting that a "true Guénonian" must situate themselves beyond this duality. The notion that so-called Eastern wisdom can only express itself poetically and not systematically is challenged by the case of Al-Attas, who instead seeks to establish a decolonial thought grounded in the coherence and efficacy of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical system. Aguéli, for his part, rejects the binary opposition between East and West in the name of the *shaykh al-akbar*'s ideas. His comparison of Ibn 'Arabi to the French writer Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–1889) thus stands in stark contrast to Askari's opposition of Ibn 'Arabi to Kierkegaard.

These overarching considerations should not overshadow the particularities, specific contexts, and unique dynamics of each case studied by the contributors to this special issue. The articles presented here add complexity and nuance to the analysis of the multiple uses of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. Each, in their own way, demonstrates the vitality with which the ideas of the *shaykh al-akbar* continue to revive the various forms of reinvention of Islam.

The contemporary influence of Ibn 'Arabi extends beyond the purely intellectual sphere. His work continues to inspire the creativity and practice of artistic and cultural figures. The two "heterographies" presented in this special issue provide good examples. The Tunisian artist Nacer Khemir's cinematographic work seems haunted by the presence of the *shaykh al-akbar*, and the film he devoted to him appears more centered on this subtle, inspirational presence than on his ideas alone. As for the calligraphy of Eyas Alshayeb and his master 'Arif al-Khatib al-Hasani, it draws upon the symbolism of letters developed by Ibn 'Arabi and his commentators, which endows it with a distinctly theological dimension. The original work presented here by Alshayeb, a meditation on the Qur'anic resonances of the figure of Saint George, perfectly illustrates how Ibn 'Arabi's thought enables the reinvention of the arts of Islam.