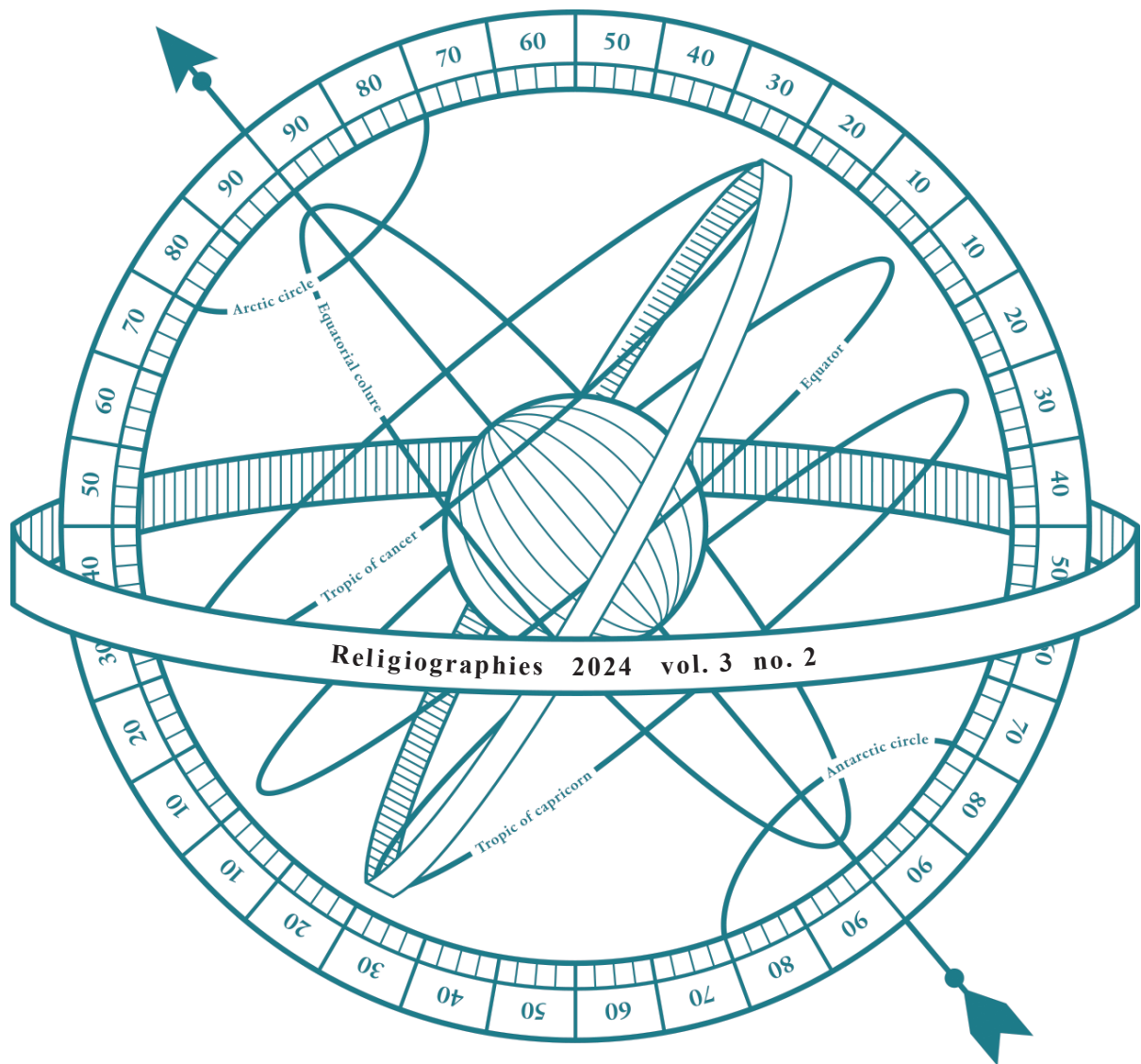


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Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought and Reinventions of Islam”

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The Oceanic Shaykh and Sea Without Shore: Nuh Keller's Polemical Image of Ibn 'Arabi

Elvira Kulieva

Author:

Elvira Kulieva
University of Freiburg, Germany
elvira.kulieva@orient.uni-freiburg.de
elvirakulieva26@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study analyzes the distinctive role of Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi in the Sufism of Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, particularly in the latter's influential work, *Sea Without Shore*. Affiliated with the Shadhiliyya spiritual path (tariqa), Keller, known for his distinctive conservatism, draws extensively upon the historically controversial Ibn 'Arabi. The analysis focuses on Keller's utilization of Ibn 'Arabi in relation to theological, legal, and Sufi themes. This study demonstrates that Keller's interpretation involves reshaping both Muhyi al-Din's historical persona and his key concepts. Shedding light on the unique connections between the thought of Keller and Ibn 'Arabi, this study contributes to our understanding of the multifaceted approaches to "reviving" Muhyi al-Din in contemporary Sufi discourse.



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Introduction

The modern Sufi tradition is a diverse patchwork composed by various charismatic figures, each with a unique approach to the spiritual dimension of Islam, many of whom (thanks to a combination of personal charisma, the international ubiquity of the English language, and the growing impact of social media) are from the anglophone world. One of the most distinctive of these modern authorities is Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, a prominent American-born Sufi affiliated with the Shadhiliyya spiritual path (tariqa). Though he is surrounded by a certain level of mystery and controversy, his name is known to many, but his image is largely unfamiliar, due to his aversion to being videoed and photographed. He stands out as an embodiment of authoritative Islamic teachings for many “authenticity”-oriented Muslims, and his writings have achieved widespread popularity the world over.¹ Keller primarily identifies as a translator but has authored many articles, as well as a modern Sufi manual, *Sea Without Shore* (2011), which has been the subject of a number of recent studies that explore how contemporary Sufis interpret classical Sufism for a modern readership.² Keller derives his Sufi lineage from his teacher, the Syrian Shadhili Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri (1912–2004) who, through another Syrian shaykh, Muhammad al-Hashimi (1881–1961), connects Keller to the renowned Algerian Sufi Ahmad al-‘Alawi (1869–1934). Standing firmly on the shoulders of Shadhili luminaries of the past, Keller grounds his teaching in the authority of figures such as Ibn ‘Ata Allah al-Iskandari (1259–1310), Ahmad Zarruq (1442–1494), and Ahmad ibn ‘Ajiba (1747–1809). At times, he also refers to such commonly recognized Islamic authorities as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), Ibn Kathir (1300–1373), and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505), among others. What may come as a surprise, from someone who proclaims his teachings conform to “orthodox”³ Islam and who is sometimes even categorized as “ultra-orthodox,”⁴ is Keller’s extensive recourse to Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240).⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi was not affiliated with the Shadhiliyya (or any other) tariqa, and is often regarded as one of the most controversial figures in Sufi history, his writings causing many Muslim jurists and theologians anxiety due to the controversial nature of his thought, and he remains a figure of heterodoxy and non-conformity.⁶ Historically, the lack of consensus on his persona has prevented him from being commonly established as a *mujtahid*,⁷ thereby placing him largely outside the mainstream conformity of theological and legal schools as well as Sufi *silsilas* (spiritual chains of authority).

Throughout the history of Sufism, perceptions of Ibn ‘Arabi have oscillated between two extremes. For some he was the *shaykh al-akbar* (the Greatest Shaykh), as he was traditionally referred to by his admirers; for others, his ideas were considered heresy or even *kufir* (disbelief).⁸ These polarizing views aside, it can be confidently stated that the transformative impact of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings has been recognized across various Sufi tariqas and in theological discourse more broadly. In contemporary Islam, the reception of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas remains polarized. While celebrated and popularized in various Western spiritual movements and organizations,⁹ he has also faced strong criticism from the modern Salafi movement. Given Ibn ‘Arabi’s towering influence on Sufism, it may not seem particularly surprising to encounter references

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The notion of “authenticity” as a key aspect of Keller’s teaching has been highlighted by Marcia Hermansen. See, for example, Marcia K. Hermansen and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, *Sufism in Western Contexts*, ed. Marcia K. Hermansen and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 14–16, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004392625_002.

2

Marcia Hermansen, “Beyond West Meets East: Space and Simultaneity in Post-Millennial Western Sufi Auto-Biographical Writings,” in *Sufism East and West: Mystical Islam and Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Modern World*, ed. Jamal Malik and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 149–80; Elvira Kulieva, “The Ethical Turn of Neo-Traditionalism: *Karāmāt al-awliyā’* in Nuh Keller’s *Sea Without Shore*,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023): 117–52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105956-bja10028>.

3

The concept of “orthodoxy” asserts a claim to truth and is inherently linked to power dynamics as it is defined and implemented. In Keller’s context, “orthodox” signifies adherence to the historically dominant Sunni scholarship, inclusive of Sufism yet without antinomian deviations.

4

Marcia Hermansen, “Global Sufism: ‘Theirs and Ours,’ ” in *Sufis in Western Society*, ed. Markus Dressler, Ron Geaves, and Gritt Klinkhammer (London: Routledge, 2009), 36. The label “ultra-orthodox” applied to Keller can be understood as a way to characterize his strict adherence to Islamic law, including his aversion, for example, to activities like watching television.

5

In *Sea Without Shore*, Ibn ‘Arabi is mentioned nearly thirty times, see Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Sea Without Shore* (Amman: Sunna Books, 2011).

6

The notion of “orthodoxy” could be applied to various groups because historically, Ibn ‘Arabi’s critics and defenders included scholars from various theological backgrounds, transcending traditional affiliations, with both proto-Salafis and Ash‘ari theologians condemning or supporting his monistic views, which reflects a diverse range of perspectives. For more on this, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn al-‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

7

A *mujtahid* is an Islamic scholar who is recognized as having achieved the highest level of expertise in interpreting shari‘a.

8

Michel Chodkiewicz, “Le procès posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabi,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill,

to him in Keller's writings. However, this study finds that Ibn 'Arabi occupies a unique and prominent position in Keller's interpretation of Sufism. This is evident not only in relation to Sufi themes but also extends to his thought on foundational topics such as *'aqīda* (creed) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Moreover, Keller's emphasis on Ibn 'Arabi's significance entails an active reinterpretation of both Ibn 'Arabi's historical persona and his central concepts. In order to demonstrate the distinctive connections between the thought of Keller and Ibn 'Arabi, I focus primarily on the former's Sufi manual, *Sea Without Shore* (although I do also explore his other writings and translations), on the basis that this work provides a summary of Keller's teaching, and it is in this text that he mentions Ibn 'Arabi the most frequently. I analyze the ways Keller employs Ibn 'Arabi to interpret Sufi themes, and examine the contexts in which Keller introduces these themes and references Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines.

Nuh Ha Mim Keller rose to popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, due no small part to the fact he was a vehement critic of Salafi and perennialist interpretations of Islam. Keller's vision of "orthodoxy" has often been mentioned in connection with the neo-traditionalist movement, which emphasizes the tripartite nature of Islam that includes the holistic unity of Islamic creed as well as legal and spiritual teachings. His lecture trips, as well as his numerous articles, have made him one of the most influential poles of Anglophone Islam, together with other neo-traditionalists such as Hamza Yusuf and Timothy Winter. Despite their individual differences, they share a perspective on what constitutes Muslim "orthodox" tradition, contrasting it with Salafi Islam and various Muslim reformist movements.¹⁰ For neo-traditionalists, the holistic understanding of Islamic tradition is conceptualized with reference to the *hadīth* (the Prophetic report) of Gabriel or Jibril,¹¹ in which Gabriel asks the Prophet questions about *islām* (outward faith), *īmān* (inward faith), *ihsān* (spiritual excellence), and *al-sā'a* (the Last Judgment), the first three of which are often related to, respectively, the disciplines of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *'aqīda* (creed), and *taṣawwuf* (i.e., Sufism).¹² This tripartite vision of Islam, which is emphasized in Keller's discourse, provides a useful framework to structure the following analysis of Ibn 'Arabi in *Sea Without Shore*. Before moving on to explore these issues, however, I will first provide a concise overview of Keller and the way academic scholarship has portrayed him.

Shaykh Nuh Keller's Community and Major Works

Unlike many popular Muslim scholars and preachers, Nuh Ha Mim Keller remains somewhat mysterious. Until recently, publicity shots of him were largely unavailable, and it was a challenge to find any photographs or videos of him online. Keller's strict stance on images reflects what Hermansen has termed the "authentic'fiqh'ation"¹³ that is present in his community, which is based in Kharabsheh, also known as 'Hayy' (neighborhood), in the Jordanian capital Amman. Originally from the USA and raised as a Catholic, Keller converted to Islam in 1977 and has now lived in Jordan for many decades. As a young man, he studied at various universities in the USA but became largely disenchanted with the academic environment he saw in the 1970s.¹⁴

1999), 93–123.

9

The popularization and dissemination of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas within various Western movements and organizations, such as Beshara, Maryamiyya, and The Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society (MIAS), has garnered attention from a wide range of scholarship. Some notable works on this topic include: Suha Taji-Farouki, *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2007); Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10

For Salafis, authoritative discourse is often centered on the concept of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (the pious predecessors). The status of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ* is accepted by neo-traditionalists, but for them the intellectual orientation and tradition that needs to be re-rejuvenated is often located in the era of the consolidation of Islamic disciplines (roughly the eighth to thirteenth centuries CE). On the conceptualization of neo-traditionalism and terminological problems related to it, see Walaa Quisay, *Neo-Traditionalism in Islam in the West: Orthodoxy, Spirituality and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 21–45.

11

Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002), 23.

12

Neo-traditionalists are broadly united in a framework based on general agreement on Islamic ontological and epistemological principles. A significant divergence, particularly evident in Keller's approach, lies in the strict adherence to *fiqh* and insistence on Sufism practiced through an established tariqa with an oath of allegiance (*bay'a*). In contrast, many other neo-traditionalists demonstrate more flexibility in *fiqh* rulings, and they approach past Sufi authorities as crucial sources for personal piety but perceive the social dimensions of tariqas as less relevant in modernity.

13

The neologism coined by Hermansen combines "authentication" and "fiqh," emphasizing Keller's focus on legalism in Islamic practice, see Hermansen, "Beyond West meets East," 155.

14

"Becoming Muslim by Shaykh Nuh Keller," *Seekers Guidance: The Global Islamic Academy*, February 14, 2018, accessed November 15, 2023, <https://seekersguidance.org/articles/general-articles/becoming-muslim-shaykh-nuh-keller/>.

His renunciation of Western academia was succeeded by his conversion, and he devoted years to intensive study in the traditional Islamic sciences of *fiqh*, *'aqida*, and Sufism. He became a Sufi initiate, and later a shaykh, under the guidance of the Syrian Shadhili 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri. Over the ensuing decades, through his writings and preaching, Keller has successfully built a substantial global community of followers, and has amassed both critics and admirers.

When it comes to his own scholarship, in addition to *Sea Without Shore*, Keller is also widely acknowledged for his 1994 translation of the fourteenth-century Shafi'i *fiqh* manual *'Umdat al-sālik* by Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri,¹⁵ which was published under the title *Reliance of the Traveller* and is still taught in the English department of al-Azhar University (which has also certified it).¹⁶ In addition, Keller's 2022 translation of the Qur'an, *The Quran Beheld*, has received a positive reception.

For the current and loyal members of the tariqa, he is viewed as someone who has successfully navigated the thorny path of genuine spiritual realization and who is, due to his upbringing in the West, specifically suited to communicate the methodology of the Sufi path to those who grew up in a similar context. Combating "intellectual pride," a spiritual disease allegedly common among "Westerners," is thus an important feature of Keller's teaching.¹⁷ However, the distinction between East and West is discursive and elusive in nature, and Keller's audience is not confined to white Europeans or Americans; rather, his followers encompass a diverse global audience that includes the children of migrants to Europe and the USA, converts, South Asians, and local Jordanians (although this constitutes the smallest contingent). One member of the community, living in Jordan, was eager to emphasize the benefits of Keller's Catholic background, in which the division between sacred and profane advantageously translates into the Islamic life of Kharabsheh. The area has distinctive features that differentiate it from other areas where local Jordanians live: most noticeable is the Islamic dress code that the community observes. Keller's special emphasis on discipline, much needed in modern times, when "things are falling apart," as my interlocutor-*murīd* put it, has made the community a "safe space" where those living in Kharabsheh are like *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (The Seven Sleepers), "grounded" and able to find an environment conducive to their spiritual journey. Keller's own discipline, whose *dhikr* schedule never changes (even during Muslim celebrations) makes him an example of consistency. The lifestyle in Kharabsheh, which its inhabitants describe as a place where "things [become] static and fixed," can be seen as a critique of "modern fluidity," a critique that advocates for stability and permanence as an antidote to the uncertainties of "liquid modernity," a term coined by Zygmunt Bauman.¹⁸

For Keller's critics, his community represents an escapist or even "cultish" environment in which spiritual and even physical abuse as part of disciplining children has taken place.¹⁹ This has led many families to leave the community and reconfigure the idea of spiritual progress, to move away from the "carrot-and-stick" method, where the stick is not a metaphor but an actual means to induce desired results. Women must wear the face veil, an obligatory practice for both those follow-

15

Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, ed. and trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1994).

16

This also received positive reviews from academics. See Kevin A. Reinhart, review of "The Reliance of the Traveller: A Classical Manual of Islamic Sacred Law, by Ahmad Ibn Naqib Al-Misri," trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Review of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 2 (1993): 244, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400027851>.

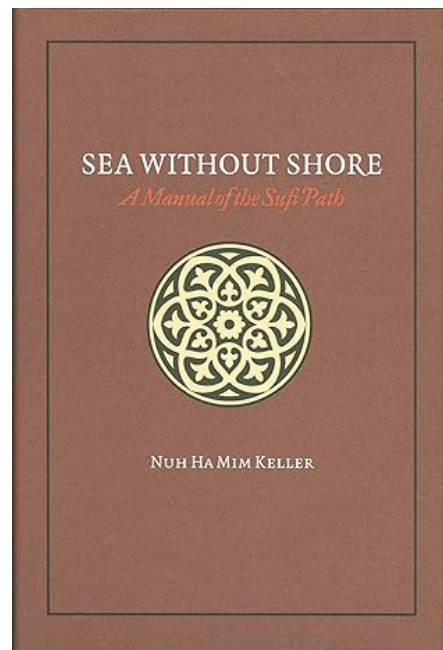


Fig.1 Cover of *Sea Without Shore*, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, 2011.

17

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 80.

18

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

19

Recently, the community has faced allegations of child abuse and spiritual abuse. Keller's defenders argue that what critics find offensive in Keller's community is merely adherence to classical Islamic pedagogy, which may clash with modern sensibilities. See <https://muslimmatters.org/2022/06/06/spiritual-abuse-sufi-nuh-keller/>, accessed November 15, 2023; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-sufi-community-us-scholar-led-faces-child-abuse-complaints>, accessed on November 15, 2023.

ers living there and visitors who want to see the shaykh in person. All guests must adhere to a meticulously observed code of conduct if they wish to participate in the activities of the *zāwiya* (Sufi lodge), where the community's rituals, practices, and teaching sessions take place.²⁰ Conservative ideas such as gender segregation define the *zāwiya*'s social practices. In this way, men can more easily access the shaykh after *dhikr*, during question sessions, or following regular prayers. This is in addition to appointments that can be set in advance, Q&A broadcasts of *What Works*, or emails. There is only one class specifically for women each month. Moreover, the structural division of the *zāwiya*, with women, located upstairs, sometimes makes them feel alienated from the shaykh, as noted by one of my interviewees. Women followers of the community are generally advised to consult Umm Sahl, Keller's wife, who has considerable power in managing the community's social issues. There is a general problem of understanding the shaykh, as his voice is often hard to hear and seems like muttering, especially for women: who must make additional efforts due to their inability to see him from upstairs. However, this issue is not new, and those with more experience emphasize that learning to listen attentively is part of *tarbiya* (spiritual upbringing). They contrast the shaykh's calm demeanor with the nearly hysterical attitudes of some Salafi preachers, believing that his restrained voice and attitude embody what a true Sufi should be. Outside the *zāwiya* complex, an extensive infrastructure has been developed, featuring a massive mosque, al-Masjid al-Bushra, which was built by the community as a service for all Muslims, not just followers of the tariqa. There is also a bookshop, educational facilities, and various small businesses run by community members.



Fig. 2. al-Masjid al-Bushra, built by Nuh Keller's community. Amman, Jordan. Photograph © Elvira Kulieva, 2019.

The textual study of Sufism, of particular interest in the context of this article, represents a significant aspect of life within the *zāwiya*. Keller reads and comments on classical Sufi authors, and some of these lessons are broadcast and shared on Keller's current website, ontothe-

one.com. When it comes to Ibn ‘Arabi specifically, apart from some publicly available Q&A sessions, any lessons Keller may have given on Ibn ‘Arabi’s books have not been made public. This is important to acknowledge since the textual references to Ibn ‘Arabi in *Sea Without Shore*, as well as the scattered references to him in the other recordings, articles, and books consulted in this study, offer us only one dimension of Keller’s discursive “revivification” of Ibn ‘Arabi. To avoid reductionism, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of this limitation on the analysis undertaken here.

Ibn ‘Arabi and Legal Thought

For many critics, the theological doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabi, and the proponents who have followed him over time,²¹ give voice to an “unorthodox” and heretical worldview that transgresses acceptable borders in Islamic ‘*aqīda* and potentially leads to antinomian tendencies in practice.²² As this section will show, Keller’s approach to Ibn ‘Arabi takes a significantly different stance: going beyond apologetics, it makes Ibn ‘Arabi an important source of strict legal observance. Although Ibn ‘Arabi is one of the most prolific writers of the medieval Islamic tradition, his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* is the only one of his works to which Keller makes direct reference.²³ *Al-Futuhat* comprises Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysical, cosmological, and theological teachings, with several dedicated chapters addressing the legal dimension of his worldview. It is thus reasonable that when Keller refers to Ibn ‘Arabi in his *Sea Without Shore*, he is mainly referring to his magnum opus, the immense “oceanic” thirty-seven-volume *al-Futuhat*, however without quoting anything that might perplex the unprepared mind.²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi’s most controversial work, *Fusus al-Hikam*, which became an epitome of monistic thought, is not even mentioned once. This omission perhaps reflects Keller’s position in *Reliance of the Traveller*, where he cites both premodern and modern scholars who describe the book as containing “spurious interpolations”²⁵ and therefore question its reliability.²⁶

Before turning to Keller’s own use of Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal thought, it is useful to look more widely at how recent academic scholarship has analyzed Ibn ‘Arabi’s *al-Futuhat* and characterized his approach to *fiqh*. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the personal practice of ritual worship has a symbolic significance and plays a central role because it is a precondition for Allah’s bestowal of *ma‘rifa* (gnosis).²⁷ Issues relating to personal practice (*furū‘*) are thus an important part of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings, which he combined in *al-Futuhat* with clarification of the methodological aspects (*uṣūl*) that underlie his understanding of shari‘a. Recently, a number of contemporary scholars elucidated Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal principles in detail; however, there is no strict consensus as to whether it is correct to speak about a specific and coherent Akbari legal school (*madhhab*). Omar Edaibat, for example, has explicated Ibn ‘Arabi’s approach and defined it as a “personalist theory of the Law”²⁸ that is linked to Ibn ‘Arabi’s strong aversion to rigid adherence to the established *madhhabs*.²⁹ Thus, for Edaibat, his “theory” was not defined as a *madhhab*, but as a specific approach, which emerged as a continuation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics and exegetical methodology. Edaibat writes that “this theory is likely the earliest medieval attempt to legit-

21

For an overview of Ibn ‘Arabi and his “school,” see William C. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi and his school,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyid Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 49–79.

22

Historically, Naqshbandi opposition to Ibn ‘Arabi’s *waḥdat al-wujūd* led to Ahmad al-Sirhindi (1564–625) reformulating the concept as *waḥdat al-shuhūd*. This reformulation was a response to the antinomian tendencies observed in some of al-Sirhindi’s contemporaries. See W. C. Chittick, “Waḥdat al-Shuhūd,” in *EI2*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7819. In contemporary times, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), a Perennialist ideologist and his disciples in Bloomington, were also known for “antinomian” practices. See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170–76.

23

In *Sea Without Shore*, he takes all citations from *al-Futuhat*. However, he occasionally quotes Ibn ‘Arabi indirectly, through citations made in Muḥammad al-Hashimi, *al-Hall al-sadīd li-mā istashkaluhu al-murīd min jawāth al-akth ‘an murshidīn*, ed. Muḥammad Sa‘id al-Burhani (Damascus: n.p., 1963).

24

“Unprepared mind” primarily refers to the wide readership of Keller’s books; however, the dynamics behind the text appear to be similar, as the classes and *dhikrs* in the *zāwiya* are open to the public. The hierarchy of Sufi knowledge, with possible restricted access to certain levels, is not a salient feature of the tariqa, at least on the surface, and each *murīd* begins with “The Forty Grand Lessons.” What seems more characteristic is the conviction that ritualistic rigor will have a transformative power on the Sufi perception. Thus, while the Sufi literature read in the *zāwiya* and the spiritual practices would be similar, their effect would differ depending on whether one is successful or not yet on their spiritual path. For more on “The Forty Grand” see <http://thefinalbrick.blogspot.com/2009/10/40-grand-lesson-of-shaykh-nuh-keller.html>, accessed June 25, 2023.

imize school-boundary crossing among the four Sunni schools of law, especially for the lay fatwa-seeker who Ibn 'Arabi argues may not be restricted to following a single school of law."³⁰

In his recent study, *Sufis and Sharī'a*, Samer Dajani presented a comprehensive analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's approach in which he contends, in contrast to Edaibat, that there is, in fact, a distinct *madhhab* associated with Ibn 'Arabi. This *madhhab*, according to Dajani, had a limited following in the past but has persisted to some extent to the present day. Dajani defines the quintessential feature of Ibn 'Arabi's *madhhab* as "mercy," asserting that it is apparent in Ibn 'Arabi's views with regard to the practices of lay Muslims. Dajani points out that Ibn 'Arabi considered the founders of *madhhabs* to be "divinely inspired saints whose positions were, in a sense, all correct."³¹ According to Ibn 'Arabi's approach to *ijtihād*, there is always a divine intention and a correct answer to every question. However, when qualified jurists arrive at different conclusions, God grants His "stamp of approval" to these, thereby validating multiple, different rulings. What seems clear is that, whether we understand Ibn 'Arabi's approach to law as a fully-fledged *madhhab* or as a "personalist theory," scholars agree that Ibn 'Arabi advocated that ordinary believers "freely seek from all schools the positions that caused them the least hardship."³²

Keller's approach of drawing on multiple *madhhabs* differs radically from Ibn 'Arabi's approach. For him, proper Sufism is necessarily grounded in strict adherence to one chosen school of law, which prevents one from "cherry-picking" and following one's *nafs* in its desires. Thus, when questions related to "crossing" between *madhhabs* are voiced by his followers, the non-Arabic speakers are often directed to the relevant sections of *Reliance of the Traveller*.³³ *Sea Without Shore* also has a section on "Legal Dispensations from Stricter Rulings" in which, contrary to Ibn 'Arabi, who advocated for ordinary Muslims to "freely seek from all schools the positions that caused them the least hardship," Keller restricts this dispensation. He instead lists various situations when people indeed can take a position from different *madhhabs*, but not for ease, arguing that taking a harder or more complex position is a way to achieve Allah's love.³⁴ This section is particularly relevant because Keller finds it important to mention Ibn 'Arabi and "restrict" his authoritative voice.

One situation in which one might follow the ruling of another school, according to Keller, is in the case of "persuasiveness of the primary scriptural evidence for a ruling," a theme central to Ibn 'Arabi.³⁵ In this regard, Keller prefaces his discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's position by first citing al-Juwayni (1028–1085):

Someone convinced through his own trained legal judgement (ijtihād) that such a ruling is that of Allah is who is meant by the words of Imam al-Juwayni and others "Someone sufficiently learned (alim) may not merely follow the scholarship of another [without knowing his proof and agreeing with it]" (*al-Waraqat* [64], 14). Ibn al-'Arabi may have reached such a degree, though because there is no consensus on it like the consensus of the Umma on the four Imams of fiqh, legal judgements reached through his own ijtihad, if valid, are so for himself alone.³⁶

25

Nuh Keller, biographical notes to al-Misri, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, 1081. Similarly, his "sober" treatises, such as *Hilyāt al-abdāl*, are also conspicuously absent in *Sea Without Shore*. One would also search in vain to find references in *Sea Without Shore* to the tradition of philosophical interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's earliest commentators, such as Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (1207–1274), 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (c. 1262–1345), and Dawud al-Qaysari (c. 1260–1350).

26

For counter-arguments addressing the existing objections and asserting the text's authenticity, see Maḥmūd Ghurāb and Michel Chodkiewicz, "Maḥmūd Ghurāb: 'Sharḥ Fuṣūs al-Ḥikam,'" *Studia Islamica* 76 (1992): 177–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595667>.

27

Omar Edaibat, "Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī's Personalist Theory of the Sharī'a: An Examination of His Legal Doctrine," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6 (2017): 1–46, 11.

28

Edaibat, 18.

29

According to this "personalist theory," if a person were a *mujtahid*, it would be mandatory for them to follow their own legal inferences. Even for ordinary people, upon receiving a request for a legal ruling from the scholars, Ibn 'Arabi would emphasize the necessity of directing them to relevant evidence based on the Qur'an and Sunna. Edaibat, "Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī's Personalist Theory," 20. The need for a *mujtahid* to reach his own conclusion, however, did not imply that other *mujtahids* were wrong. On the contrary, his legal intellectual project was framed by the imperative to "legitimize legal pluralism within Sunni Islamic law." Edaibat, 4.

30

Edaibat, 46.

31

Samer Dajani, *Sufis and Sharī'a: The Forgotten School of Mercy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 144.

32

Dajani, *Sufis and Sharī'a*, 157.

33

In the section on "The Delusion of would-be Sufis" (*Ghurūr mutaṣawwifa*) in Keller's translation of *Reliance of the Traveller*, he felt it important to add supplementary texts and include the sayings of a few paradigmatic Sufis ("principal Sufis," as he called them). They include Ibn 'Arabi (among four other figures) who would emphasize the importance of shari'a through strictness and seriousness. See Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 790.

34

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 247.

In this citation, Keller destabilizes Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal authority by pointing out the absence of consensus on his scholarly status.³⁷ Despite the overall centrality of Ibn ‘Arabi in Keller’s teaching, he takes the position that Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal judgments have no benefit for modern Sufis, and specifically for his own followers. Keller does clarify the type of personality who can resort to scriptural evidence, listing their necessary qualities as follows: “The Alim whom Allah has given the light of perspicacity, tawfiq [success], and intelligence; someone who has studied fiqh and its evidentiary bases with godfearing ulema [Islamic scholars], not merely personal reading, for a considerable part of his life while following the path of taqwa [fear of God].”³⁸

Keller follows this with an assertion that Ibn ‘Arabi’s judgments, “if valid, are so for himself alone.” The description of an *‘alim* who can use scriptural evidence for *fiqh* practice serves as a premise to view Ibn ‘Arabi in a manner that absolves him from allegations of antinomianism, while simultaneously restricting the possibility of applying his legal judgments. This restriction on considering Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal judgments coexists in Keller’s text with the reoccurring theme of substantiating the image of Ibn ‘Arabi as a “sober” and shari‘a-compliant Sufi. For example, he features in the following reported dialog between Keller and his *fiqh* teacher, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wakil al-Durubi, in which al-Durubi talks about the signs of a true *shaykh*:

The first was that a sheikh be outwardly realized in Sacred Law. This Sheikh ‘Abd al-Wakil regarded as the first line of defense against deception, and he more than once quoted to me from a poem about sheikhs of the path by Ibn al-‘Arabi:

Do not follow anyone whose shari‘a leaves him;
Even if he should bring you tidings from Allah Himself.³⁹

This quotation was included in the chapter dedicated to al-Durubi entitled “The Faqih,” and it illustrates how important it is for Keller to demonstrate Ibn ‘Arabi’s conformity with the established tradition of the outward practice of Islam and an orientation towards the practice of shari‘a as a key element of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Islam. By locating his discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi in a chapter dedicated to “The Faqih,” Keller is highlighting Ibn ‘Arabi’s “sobriety” and counteracting the tension between Sufis and jurists that can be found in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. This raises the question: If Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal reasoning is dismissed on the grounds of lack of consensus, even if he is considered rigorous in matters of sacred law, why are his creedal aspects and Sufi thought incorporated by Keller when there is no consensus on them? The elusive nature of consensus notwithstanding, for many ‘ulama’, it is primarily Ibn ‘Arabi’s creedal aspects that are problematic, rather than his *fiqh*. As will be explored later, Keller intentionally integrates controversial creedal aspects associated with Ibn ‘Arabi into his own thought, even in the absence of consensus, yet he excludes Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal approach from his teachings on the basis of lack of consensus. One potential explanation for Keller’s selective approach may be rooted in his anti-Salafism. Quite ironically, modern Salafi anti-*taqlīdi* (from *taqlīd*—imitation/conformity to legal decisions) discourse bears a notable resemblance to Ibn ‘Arabi’s “disdain for strict school confor-

35
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 250.

36
Keller, 250–51.

37
In his study, Edaibat refers to the study of Muḥammad Faruq al-Badri, who argued that Ibn ‘Arabi’s credentials would certainly qualify him as a *mujtahid*. See *Fiqh al-shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī fī l-‘ibādāt wa-manhajih fī kitābihi al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006), 134–38; Edaibat, “Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī’s Personalist Theory,” 2.

38
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 250.

39
Keller, 44.

mity” (*tamadhhub*).⁴⁰ While the methodological principles that led Ibn ‘Arabi to prioritize primary sources profoundly differ from those of the modern Salafiyya, it seems likely that the ubiquity of Salafi anti-*madhhabism* has reinforced Keller’s *madhhabism* and influenced his rejection of Ibn ‘Arabi’s juridical rationale.

40
Edaibat, “Muhyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabi’s Personalist Theory,” 19.

Keller’s Approach to Ibn ‘Arabi’s Doctrines

Two theological concepts, both controversial, that are closely associated with Ibn ‘Arabi feature prominently in Keller’s *Sea Without Shore*: those of the renowned *waḥdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Being) and the soteriological fate of non-Muslims. Both themes spark tension between “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy,” generating disagreement within mainstream and non-mainstream beliefs. Questions about Islam’s focus on monotheism or monism, and debates over the abrogation of other faiths after the Qur’an, create conflicts of perspective. This tension leads to categorizing individuals into either orthodoxy or heterodoxy based on justifications and accusations. They first appear briefly in the first part of the book as part of the hagiographical narratives of the contemporary Sufis with whom Keller has studied. However, later in the work, Keller devotes more attention to them in a section and a separate chapter. It is these segments that will be address now.⁴¹

41
“Belief in Allah” and chapters of Part III, “Bearings,” in Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 148–50, 305–49.

Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)

Keller devotes significant attention to the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in his treatment of the six pillars of *īmān* (faith). Prior to discussing the six essential pillars, Keller cites Ibn ‘Arabi and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri: “According to Ibn al-‘Arabi, the path may be described as ‘knowledge (‘ilm) become perception (‘ayn)’; or in the words of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman, ‘Reflection (i’tibar) becoming stronger than eyesight.’ ”⁴²

42
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 148–49.

43
The sections are called “Belief in Allah” and “Belief that all besides Allah is contingent,” Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 148–50.

This quote demonstrates the significance of both shaykhs to Keller’s spiritual path, which is defined as a “deepening of faith.” However, to “deepen,” one needs to know the basics, hence the subsequent short sections in which Keller explains the mainstream Sunni meaning of the pillars, each of which is accompanied by a specific theological concern.

In these pillars, belief in God is elucidated through an exposition on *waḥdat al-wujūd* and contingency,⁴³ while belief in angels is linked with the rejection of figurative or modernist interpretations of these supernatural beings. The section on belief in scriptures is accompanied by a discussion on the distortion of pre-Qur’anic scriptures, or *tahrīf*, while that on belief in Allah’s messengers includes an additional section on “Other Religions in Our Time.” This section emphasizes the finality and exclusive validity of Islam as a salvific religion (a recurring theme in various writings by Keller, which will be discussed later on). Belief in the Last Day is briefly addressed with a note on the “eternality of hell,” a controversial topic also associated with Ibn ‘Arabi, who has been charged with believing that the sufferings of infidels in hell will eventually come to an end. Keller, however, avoids mentioning Ibn ‘Arabi here, and only briefly refutes these allegations elsewhere,

commenting that Ibn ‘Arabi adhered to the consensus of scholars on this issue.⁴⁴ Finally, he explores belief in destiny, delving into the mysteries of human choice and Allah’s foreknowledge. Knowledge of all these pillars constitute what Keller calls at the end of the chapter “orthodox Sunni Islam.”⁴⁵

Keller’s starting point in this discussion is an affirmation of Allah’s transcendence, which is traditionally emphasized in Sunni Ash‘arite theology. He next mentions that “the divine attribute of *Wujud*⁴⁶ or Being belongs to Him alone. Nothing is, besides Allah and His attributes and His actions and His rulings. This is what is meant by *Wahdat al-Wujud* or Oneness of Being.”⁴⁷

In a discussion about divine transcendence, it is notably uncommon to introduce the topic of *wahdat al-wujūd*, as it was heavily debated and criticized precisely due to its perceived projection of a monistic vision. While the term itself was never used by Ibn ‘Arabi, the polemical discourse that emerged later clearly associated it specifically with both him and his later proponents, and was used by later Sufis and theologians as a red flag that symbolized Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontology.⁴⁸ Historically, there have been different interpretations of the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*, and depending on whether one supported or opposed it, a wide range of perspectives has emerged from these interpretations. In addition to those who supported it, some scholars have attempted to align it with the tenets of Ash‘arism (although this was, in fact, a rare stance); some have attempted to divorce Ibn ‘Arabi from the subject; some have tried to reinterpret and reformulate the concept; and some have explicitly or implicitly decried it as heresy (*zandaqa*) or even incarnation (*hulūl*) and associationism (*shirk*). For the most part, the stance taken by mainstream exoteric pro-Ibn ‘Arabi Sunni theologians did not align Ibn ‘Arabi with *wahdat al-wujūd*. And they often distanced themselves from the controversial notion. They perceived it as a monistic assertion that implies that nothing exists except the Divine being, and that the world is merely a product of Divine theophanies. If understood in this light, their primary concern is that it obscures the distinction between the Creator and His creations, thereby jeopardizing God’s transcendence—a core tenet of Ash‘arite theology. Sufi theologians sympathetic to Ibn ‘Arabi, such as ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani (1492–1565), who is also dear to Keller and often cited in *Sea Without Shore*, developed certain strategies to defend him. For example, al-Sha‘rani avoided citing the *Fusus* (as does Keller), claiming that the problematic passages were “heretical interpolations by later hands,”⁴⁹ and he also avoided any mention of the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*.⁵⁰ This demonstrates that even Ibn ‘Arabi’s most ardent defenders were theologically uneasy with him, and highlights the essential problem of rendering ineffable experiential knowledge into limited theological dogma. Moreover, al-Sha‘rani’s approach, like that of his other defenders, can be seen as illustrative of an unwillingness to appropriate a subsequently developed polemical vocabulary that is alien to Ibn ‘Arabi’s own writings.

A particular strategy for dealing with Ibn ‘Arabi’s controversial aspects can also be seen in the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi, after whom Keller’s branch of the Shadhiliyya is named and who serves as the primary authority in Keller’s tariqa. Chodkiewicz has remarked

44

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 327.

45

Keller, 158.

46

Italicized by Nuh Keller and in all subsequent quotations from Keller where there is italics.

47

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 149.

48

W. C. Chittick, “Wahdat al-Shuhūd,” in *EI2*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7819, accessed November 15, 2023.

49

Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 240.

50

El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*, 239. In his study, El-Rouayheb provides a historical account of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Arab scholars who held Ibn ‘Arabi in high esteem but did not embrace the tradition of ontological monism associated with him. Regarding al-Sha‘rani, el-Rouayheb points out a certain inconsistency in his strategy: on one hand, al-Sha‘rani attempts to justify Ibn ‘Arabi by interpreting “there is no existent other than God (*lā mawjūda illā Allāh*)” as “simply that there is no self-subsisting entity besides God and that all other entities are in need of something extrinsic, viz. God, to keep them in existence.” On the other hand, al-Sha‘rani also states that this statement was pronounced by “Ibn ‘Arabi in a state of mystical intoxication in which his heart ‘witnessed’ God and nothing else.” This argument, among others, led El-Rouayheb to conclude that al-Sha‘rani, like many other scholars supportive of Ibn ‘Arabi, avoided commitments to *wahdat al-wujūd*. See El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*, 239.

that in one of the spiritual allusions (*ishāra*) of his *tafsīr*, al-ʿAlawi almost identically reproduces the interpretations found in Ibn ʿArabi’s *al-Futuhat* without citing it, presumably because it had historically been criticized and accused of blasphemy.⁵¹ Of course, there is no expectation that al-ʿAlawi should correspond to the contemporary academic ethics of citation, but his *tafsīr* was characterized by references for his borrowings; hence Chodkiewicz understood his strategy of not citing his source when dealing with Ibn ʿArabi’s controversial ideas as avoiding “useless provocation.”⁵²

Al-ʿAlawi’s reluctance to cite Ibn ʿArabi’s works directly may reflect the influence of critical reformist currents in the early twentieth-century Algerian context, and this would be even more relevant for Keller writing in the 1990s and 2000s. It is important, however, to note that the use of Ibn ʿArabi’s writings in Sufi literature is a distinct subject with its own peculiarities. Chodkiewicz also cautioned that an absence of direct citations of Ibn ʿArabi in the writings of various tariqas cannot serve as the primary indicator of his (lack of) influence. In fact, the controversy surrounding his ideas often led many authors to refrain from mentioning him.⁵³ This is not, however, the case with Keller who, on the contrary, sees his mission as defending Ibn ʿArabi, as is evident from his particular way of reading, citing, and reviving this figure. In his section on “Belief in Allah,” Keller gives an explanation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that does not contradict the Ashʿarite worldview and is generally satisfactory to most Muslim theological groupings:

Oneness of Being does not mean that the created universe is God, for God’s Being is necessary (*wajib al-wujud*) while the universe’s being is merely possible (*jaʿiz al-wujud*), that is, subject to nonbeing, beginning, and ending, and it is impossible that one of these two orders of being could in any sense *be* the other; but rather, the created universe’s act of being is derived from and subsumed by the divine act of creation, from which it has no ontic independence, and hence is only through the being of its Creator, the one true Being.⁵⁴

As a starting point, Keller uses the terminology of mainstream Sunni textbooks to frame *waḥdat al-wujūd* within the borders of “orthodoxy.” The rational judgments of “necessary,” “impossible,” and “possible” that describe the logical limits of reasoning create a safe space for simplifying complex Sufi metaphysics. In the biographical section of the manual, Keller also described how his teacher, al-Shaghuri, balanced his reading of *al-Futuhat*:

His main lesson of the week took place after the dawn prayer on Fridays in his own home high on the side of Mount Qasiyun above Damascus. He would begin with Ibn al-ʿArabi’s *Futuhat*, which he read consecutively in this lesson for seventeen years. Then he would read from a work of Ashʿari theology such as Sheikh al-Hashimi’s *Miftah al-janna*, Ibrahim al-Bajuri’s *Hashiya* on the *Matn* of Sanusi, or one of the other books which he finished from beginning to end over the years at this lesson.⁵⁵

51

Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ʿArabi, the Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3–4.

52

Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore*, 4.

53

Chodkiewicz, 3.

54

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 149.

55

Keller, 22.

What is particularly interesting here is the order of readings: while creedal aspects generally act as the starting point for departure into the further spiritual and metaphysical aspects of Islamic teaching, Keller presents us with a different Sufi pedagogy. Reading an *'aqīda* text after *al-Futuhat* can be seen as a way of putting things into the “proper” place after the Akbarian expansion, hence navigating and controlling the metaphysical discourse. In his “Belief in Allah” section he summarizes as follows:

Wahdat al-Wujud or Oneness of Being entails that nothing exists except Allah, His attributes, His actions, and His rulings, while created being, as manifest to us, cannot be identified with His entity or attributes but only with His actions and rulings: the world, as it were, is pure act, while Allah is pure Being. In short, our metaphysic is not pantheism, because the world is not Allah. Spinoza’s definition in the *Ethica* of God as “simple substance” (*pantheism* properly speaking), has nothing to do with the experience of those who possess *ma’rifa*. Rather, the world’s existence is *through* Allah, in Arabic *bi Llah*, the point under the Arabic letter *ba’* being both a point of ontic connection and a point of demarcation. The whole experiential training of the *tariqa* may be said to elucidate this point.⁵⁶

Wahdat al-wujūd is here seamlessly integrated into the fundamental beliefs of “orthodox” Islam. Keller asserts the separation between the Creator and His creations, highlighting the idea that creations derive their existence from God, whose sole sustenance enables non-independent contingent entities to exist. His reference to *bā’*, one of the most important letters in Sufi letter symbolism to which Ibn ‘Arabi dedicated significant attention in his writings, hints at the more complex relationship between this separation.⁵⁷ However, the metaphysical connection is left unelaborated, allowing Sufi aspirants to strive towards understanding *wahdat al-wujūd* as experiential unity, rather than as a purely theoretical concept. This limited explanation of *wahdat al-wujūd* does not mention the concept of immutable entities (*al-a’yān al-thābita*), which could be understood as “the nonexistent objects of God’s knowledge”⁵⁸ and which, in certain interpretations of Ibn ‘Arabi, such as that of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), jeopardize the principle of God’s *creation ex nihilo*.⁵⁹ Also, nothing is said in this conceptual explanation of *wahdat al-wujūd* about the Divine Names—the central and representative theme in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontological system, according to which the Divine Names, unlike the Divine Essence (*dhāt*), permeate things in existence and “act as loci for God’s manifestation.”⁶⁰ Keller avoids delving into this, as it may introduce the theme of Divine immanence, which his whole project tries to bypass, instead accentuating God’s transcendence over material reality:

It is plain that the material world which we see is not, according to the teaching of our *tariqa*, the entity (*dhat*) of Allah (“Allah Himself”), or a divine attribute, but rather is His creative act (*khalq*) and rulings (*ahkam*) . . . The rulings (*ahkam*) of Allah thus flow over created things, manifesting His attributes in

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 149.

57

On the symbolism of *bā’*, see Hülya Küçük, Stephen Hirtenstein, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Kitāb al-Bā’*,” *JMIAS* 65 (2019).

58

William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 11–12.

59

For an account of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of *al-a’yān al-thābita*, see Knysh, *Ibn al-‘Arabi*, 100–105; for al-Taftazani’s (1322–1390) refutation, see Knysh, 153–58.

60

Mohammed Rustom, “Is Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s Ontology Pantheistic?,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2006): 60.

them and determining their specific relationship to others.⁶¹

Keller's emphasis on God's rule over the created world is reflected in what can be called "tangible" focuses and "intangible" avoidances. He also brings in the "orthodox" approach to *wahdat al-wujūd*, which underscores the dependence of the created world on Allah, earlier in the book when he narrates al-Shaghuri's explanation:

"Oneness of Being" meant the being of Allah, and was never confused or identified with the contingent being of created things. "Created things," Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman would say, "never even catch the scent of true Being."⁶² Rather, Allah is One, without any partner in His transcendent perfection, without any associate in His entity, attributes, rulings, or actions; while the entire world is merely His *action*, as the Koran says, "This is the *creating* of Allah, so show me what those besides Him have created" (Koran 31:11). For Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman, the world was pure act, while Allah was pure Being, and the two were completely distinct, though the world depended solely and entirely upon its Maker, whom it revealed as His action. This was his conception of the Oneness of Being, and "the spiritual way," as he put it, is "that knowledge become vision."⁶³

It is thus evident Keller does not hesitate to associate his shaykh with contentious terminology linked with monistic heterodoxy.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Keller extends the application of *wahdat al-wujūd* to other Sufi luminaries who follow and predate Ibn 'Arabi, irrespective of their usage or avoidance of the term. For instance, he affirms:

Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman's teaching in Sufism, like that of Dhul Nun al-Misri, Abul Hasan al-Shadhili, Ibn al-'Arabi, Mawlay al-'Arabi al-Darqawi, and others, was based on *Wahdat al-Wujud*, the Oneness of Being, realized experientially by the *salik* or mystic traveller.⁶⁵

While it may sound anachronistic and proleptic, there is nothing surprising in this for Keller's intended audience, since his interpretation of *wahdat al-wujūd* is simply presented in terms of Sunni notions of the absolute transcendence of God and the contingency of His creations. The whole Sufi aim of "furthering" and "deepening" the faith can only be understood through its practical and experiential dimensions. The question is rather, why did he even use this Sufi term if his interpretation of it just corresponds to mainstream *'aqida*? His approach stands in marked contrast to some of the "defensive" strategies adopted by historical Sufi scholars, including those Keller reveres, such as al-Sha'rani. Instead, the notion of *wahdat al-wujūd* becomes a starting point from which Keller begins his explanation of faith. By incorporating it into his account of the six Pillars, he has elevated *wahdat al-wujūd* to the rank of "orthodoxy." Ibn 'Arabi does figure elsewhere in Keller's introduction to the six Pillars, but when Keller turns to the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*, he introduces it simply as a Sufi term, omitting any reference to Ibn 'Arabi: he does not address the origin

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 150.

62

Remarkably, the phrase "never even catch the scent of true Being" seems to be a translation and adaptation of famous quote of Ibn 'Arabi (*mā shammat rā'ihā al-wujūd*); however, he used it in relation to immutable entities (*al-a'yān al-thābita*), not in relation to "created things."

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 15.

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Mainstream Sunni theology asserts monotheism through the concept of *tawhīd* (Oneness of God) and relates it to the idea of worship, while monism is often linked to Neoplatonic philosophy and asserts the ultimate unity and interconnectedness of reality.

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 15.

of the term or point out that *waḥdat al-wujūd* is commonly associated with Ibn ‘Arabi on a conceptual level. The way *waḥdat al-wujūd* is explained is obviously apologetic and “innocent,” but Keller’s failure to mention Ibn ‘Arabi seems driven by his desire to present it as an “orthodox” position rather than an attempt to avoid controversy. As a theory, it contains nothing that would be offensive for anti-Akbarian theologians or Salafi-inspired readers, but, for purely practical reasons, Keller confines his discussion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* to the experiential aspect of Sufism.

Perennialism and Salvation

The contemporary image of Ibn ‘Arabi is closely linked to perceptions of him as a Sufi mystic who went beyond the confines of his socio-historical context to offer a truly universal teaching about the religion of love. His declaration in the English translation of *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Longing), that his “heart has become capable of every form,” and his confession that he “follow[s] the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith” have become emblematic.⁶⁶ The elusive language of Sufi poetry, coupled with the metamorphoses of translation, indeed transgresses the borders of strict theological dogma. Ibn ‘Arabi’s poetry on the subject of the divine, as well as his more complex books on Sufi teachings, have become celebrated channels of the universal, “oriental” wisdom that has been conveyed through popular literature as well as serious academic prose.

Many authors who have written about Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas were writing within (or associated with) the “interpretative field”⁶⁷ of Perennialism (also known as Traditionalism).⁶⁸ This Western, esoteric movement emphasized the concept of so-called Primordial Tradition (or *religio perennis*), which is understood as being an underlying universal “Truth” that exists across various religious traditions. Even though existing religions evidently contradict each other on doctrinal issues and can have mutually exclusive truth claims (such as the Christian concept of the Trinity and the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd* [Oneness of God]), their differences are reconcilable according to many Perennialist authors on the meta-level of the Primordial Tradition. This is perceived by Perennialists as constituting the essence of religions, while the various religious differences are the relative “forms.” According to this way of thinking, by virtue of retaining (to various degrees) access to the religious essence, different religions can retain salvific efficacy for their adherents. Due to Ibn ‘Arabi’s frequent stress on the Qur’anic idea that Muslims should believe in the sacred scriptures that preceded the Qur’an and the messengers who came before Muhammad, there is a common assumption that he regarded pre-Qur’anic revelations as also currently “valid” and not replaced by Islam.⁶⁹ Thus, Perennialist discourse is often specifically tied to Ibn ‘Arabi, who is viewed as a medieval proponent of its “universalist” perspective. According to a recent study by Gregory Lipton, this interpretative approach to Ibn ‘Arabi’s views on the salvation and “abrogation” of previous religions represents a “strong misreading.”⁷⁰ This is because it anachronistically (mis)interprets Ibn ‘Arabi from the hegemonic perspective of the Eu-

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Muhyi’ddīn Ibn al-‘Arabi, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. and ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 67, <https://archive.org/details/tarjumanalashwaq029432mbp/page/n77/mode/2up>, accessed November 16, 2023.

67

Lipton has demonstrated that there are figures who do not associate with the Perennialist movement but nevertheless use Perennialist doctrines in their writings, which Lipton charts as an “interpretative field,” see Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

68

For an overview of the trend and the divergence of its associated trends, see William Rory Dickson, “René Guénon and Traditionalism,” in *Handbook of Islamic Sects and Movements*, ed. Muhammad Afzal Upal and Carole M. Cusack (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 589–611.

69

Lipton, *Rethinking*, 65.

70

Lipton, *Rethinking*, 20. Lipton referred to Harold Bloom’s “theory of influence through misreading.” See Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 285.

ropean intellectual tradition from which Perennialism has emerged.⁷¹ Furthermore, this “universalist” interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi has served as a significant component in shaping a favorable image of “moderate universalist Islam” within various interfaith dialogues and apologetic strategies, which gained prominence following the events of 9/11.⁷²

Going against the Perennialist stream, Nuh Keller’s anti-Perennialist confessional position became publicly noticeable as early as the 1990s, when he began making his critique of Perennialism a significant element of his Sufi teaching. Criticisms of the ideas of the transcendent unity of all religions and the universal validity of religions began to appear in his writings. Keller’s opposition to the Perennialist trend became a life-long concern, and anti-Perennialist tropes can be found throughout his works, from his early translation of *Reliance of the Traveller*⁷³ to his most recent *The Quran Beheld*.⁷⁴ However, Keller’s most detailed discussion of the soteriological fate of non-Muslims can be found in *Sea Without Shore*. It is my contention that Keller’s apologetic portrayal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought in this work should be viewed through the lens of modern tensions over who has the right to interpret the Islamic intellectual heritage and what kind of settings generate “authentic” knowledge. Keller’s own intellectual and spiritual path in the 1970s is demonstrative of the parallel existence of two approaches of “reviving” Ibn ‘Arabi in modernity: the universalist “academic” approach and the exclusivist “traditional” approach, although in contemporary times the boundaries between the two have become more blurred.

In the hagiographical section of *Sea Without Shore* dedicated to al-Shaghuri, Keller reminisces about his early years with his shaykh. Familiar with the works of Western scholars of Sufism such as Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, both of whom employed the Perennialist approach in their writings, Keller was “eager to explain” to his shaykh the “esoteric doctrines” he had learned.⁷⁵ Al-Shaghuri’s response to the concept of the transcendental unity of all religions was “A‘udhu bi Llah (I take refuge in Allah),”⁷⁶ apparently indicating how distant these doctrines were from a genuine understanding of Islam. This narrative is presented to readers with a specific emphasis, aiming to convince them that al-Shaghuri was truly Akbarian by introducing several key elements that explain specific facets of al-Shaghuri’s Sufi personality: the significance of the mosque of Shaykh Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi in Damascus, with which the life and death of al-Shaghuri were intricately connected; al-Shaghuri’s regular Friday classes based on *al-Futuhat*; and his ecstatic poetry, as well as Keller’s emphasis on al-Shaghuri’s Sufi realization and *ma‘rifa*. All of these elements are combined in a persuasive strategy that aims to educate readers as to how al-Shaghuri’s qualities distinguish his teaching from what Keller describes as “Orientalist philosophizing.”⁷⁷

Keller’s refutation of Perennialism emerges repeatedly throughout the manual. For example, in Chapter Eight, in which Keller elucidates the Six Pillars of *īmān*, he includes a section that specifically addresses this issue. By employing the logical principle of non-contradiction, Keller underscores the irreconcilable nature of the creedal aspects of various religions, regardless of the level of comparison, whether it pertains to a “transcendent” realm or not.⁷⁸ However, Keller’s most

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Lipton pointed out how the Guenonian, seemingly “anti-modern” movement has a traceable European genealogy and a certain paradoxical nature according to which seemingly inclusivist and pluralistic religious modalities in fact assert a hegemony structured as exclusion. See Lipton, *Rethinking*, 2–10. For a critical assessment of Lipton’s book, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, review of *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi*, by Gregory A. Lipton, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2021): 121–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etaa036>, Alexander Knysh, review of *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi*, by Gregory Lipton, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 2 (2019): 360–62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X19000430>.

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Lipton, *Rethinking*, 87.

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As early as in the late 1980s, in his translation, *Reliance of the Traveller*, Keller was referencing books written by Perennialist authors and critiquing some of their ideas regarding the contextualization of classical *fiqh*. In the biographical notes to this work, he mentioned both medieval Islamic scholars referenced by Ibn ‘Arabi in the original text, but also added some names associated with Perennialism. For example, Martin Lings is praised for some of his works, but Keller makes sure to add a refutation of the validity of non-Islamic religions as well as the refutation of the idea that all the inhabitants of hell will enter paradise. His note on Titus Burckhardt also contains praise for his scholarship combined with a long digressive refutation of his endorsement of the idea of the essential unity (and universal validity) of all religions. In his note on Muhammad, Keller also made sure to point out that his description of the Islamic mission meant “abrogating the laws of all prior religions.” Nuh Keller, biographical notes in al-Misri, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, 1070–71, 1073.

74

In Keller’s recent translation *Quran Beheld*, in the index he notes that certain Qur’anic verses are against the ideas of the “unity of religions” and “Perennialism” and demonstrate “the finality of Islam” (*The Quran Beheld: An English Translation from the Arabic*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller [Visions of Reality], 670, 684).

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 6.

76

Keller, 6.

77

Keller, 6.

78

Keller, 154–55.

extensive treatment of topics relating to Perennialism and Ibn ‘Arabi appears in the last part of the *Sea Without Shore*, which is dedicated to modern issues, in three interrelated chapters called “Faith and Mysticism,” “Universalism,” and “People of the Book.” These chapters were initially published on different online platforms. These chapters all begin with questions, an approach that bears a resemblance to the format often used by medieval scholars of ostensibly responding to students’ questions as an opportunity to fulfill their personal inclination to opine on specific topics. Similarly, Keller justifies his long treatment of these issues on the basis of “[p]uzzlement remaining in some minds,” and because “people have asked me about religious truth and the universality of faith.”⁷⁹ In light of his earlier reported conversation with al-Shaghuri, it is evident that these questions were personally relevant to Keller as well.

The chapter on “Faith and Mysticism” goes into the subtle details of the nature of truth as interpreted in the Islamic tradition in opposition to the Perennialist conception of truth. For Keller, religious truth is based on three dimensions: mind, body, and soul. This tripartite truth corresponds to the *ḥadīth* of Gabriel mentioned above. *Tawḥīd* (Oneness of God) refers to the truth of the mind, which Keller explains as a perennial but not a perennialist truth (“the Oneness of God, has never differed in the original revelations at all”⁸⁰). Time-specific shari‘a refers to the truth of the body, which differs from one messenger to another but still has “a shared moral content among the revealed religions.”⁸¹ The truth of the soul is defined as “purity of heart, [which] has differed very little in kind from faith to faith.”⁸² In this way, Keller elucidates the concept of truth and establishes the nature of the connection between different religions:

Because of the nature of God and man, of the absolute and lim- itary, of life and death, there is natural “family resemblance” between all faiths – just as the earth’s languages, in their variety and succession, articulate an essential human nature similar enough to permit translations between most of their texts and utterances. The unity of faiths proceeds from the unity of God and the unity of man; their differences represent either divine providence for different peoples and times, or the altering of the message of God by the hands of men.⁸³

Here, Keller affirms the existence of a certain “inter-religious” or “trans-religious” truth, but with different soteriological implications. In order to clarify the soteriological fate of non-Muslims, Keller dedicates the subsequent discussion to the explication of the “so-ber” approach of the medieval Muslim theologian and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, a paragon for neo-traditional discourse. Referring to al-Ghazali, Keller argues that there are people who may achieve God’s amnesty in the afterlife without becoming Muslims, but they are those who have either never heard about the last Messenger, Muhammad, or those who have heard a distorted message about him and the religion he brought.⁸⁴ According to this approach, a person’s good deeds and morality matter, even if they do not become Muslims; however, it is not because of any “truths” that they are granted salvation, since their

79
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 305.
80
Keller, 307.
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Keller, 307.
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Keller, 307.
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Keller, 307.
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Keller, 308.

“truths” were already abrogated or distorted. Their deeds still matter, but they matter “rather in the *degree* of their felicity once their salvation is granted through this amnesty.”⁸⁵ Keller then emphasizes that “it is a question of divine amnesty for their ignorance, not a confirmation of their religions’ validity,”⁸⁶ going on to say that “whoever is without the means to believe shall attain unto the mercy of Allah no matter what they believe.”⁸⁷

85
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 319.

86
Keller, 333

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Keller, 309.

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Keller, 320.

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Keller, 320.

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Keller, 321–22.

After this explanation, Keller opens the next chapter, “Universalism,” in which Ibn ‘Arabi figures as the main subject, by saying, “[The] Universal validity of religions’ [is] imputed to Ibn al-‘Arabi and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jazai’ri by a number of contemporary Sufi books in English. This has become a tenet of faith among present-day academics who write about the subject, and a few works [*sic.*] appear on it in print today that do not accept it.”⁸⁸

In his own discussion here, Keller clearly aims to refute the Perennialist image of Ibn ‘Arabi that he felt predominated in academia at the time and to re-claim the scholar for Islamic “orthodoxy.” This conflict saturates the chapter, in such statements as the following:

My own mentor in Sufism, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri, never found this [universal validity of all religions] in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s words after a life-time of studying them, but was aware that readers, especially those without deep learning in Arabic, could misconstrue him about it [*sic.*], and he answered with clarity. He believe that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s work was not a ‘system of thought’ at all, but an experiential school of *being* that one had to realize through Sufi instruction with a teacher before one had any authority to speak about it.⁸⁹

In the quote above, Keller, via the words of his shaykh, disqualifies Perennialist ideas about Ibn ‘Arabi by casting aspersions on the Perennialists’ knowledge of Arabic and by creating a contrast between two types of epistemological approach to Ibn ‘Arabi: the rational and the experiential, the second of which should be based in traditional Sufi pedagogy. Ibn ‘Arabi is again presented as someone absolutely in tune with shari‘a, whose understanding of the finality of Islam is not something that can be questioned. Keller goes on to say:

The scholars of Sacred Law are unanimous about the abrogation of all other religions by Islam because it is the position of Islam itself. It only remains for the sincere Muslim to submit to, in which connection Ibn al-‘Arabi has said: “Beware lest you ever say anything that does not confirm to the pure Sacred Law. Know that the highest stage of the perfect ones (*rijal*) is the Sacred Law of Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace). And know that anything esoteric that contravenes the exoteric is a fraud.”⁹⁰

While this argument demonstrates circular reasoning, assuming the truth of what it is trying to prove, Ibn ‘Arabi’s role in it is not to provide any additional evidence but to represent the unanimous Muslim scholarly consensus, so that Ibn ‘Arabi is recast as an authority who

cannot be cited in support of the theory of the universal validity of all religions. Later on, Keller contrasts an excerpt from his own translation of *al-Futuhat* with a translation and analysis of the same passage by William Chittick, which he claims illustrates the speculative interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s text, going on to critique the writings of the late Gai Eaton, and Muhammad Asad’s translation of Q. 2:62. Of all these examples, his critique of Chittick is perhaps the most illustrative as it highlights how the omission of a certain part of Ibn ‘Arabi’s text in translation was used by Chittick to support the Perennialist argument regarding the validity of other faiths. The phrase in question—which Keller translates as: “If the prophetic messengers had been alive in his time [Muhammad’s time], they would have followed him, just as religious laws have followed his law”—clearly contradicts Perennialist ideas.⁹¹

It is significant that Keller bases his critique of these scholars on careful textual analysis of problematic Perennialist interpretations and translations, instead of focusing on metaphysical critique. Aiming to refute the construction of Ibn ‘Arabi’s image as a religious universalist, he criticizes unrestrained “liberty” in interpretation and the absence of proper Sufi pedagogy in the academic approach that led to emergence of this image. Keller laments that “many of us know Muslims who believe the opposite of orthodox Islam, perhaps due to a literary and intellectual environment in which any and every notion about this world and the next can be expressed, in which novelty is highly valued, and in which tradition has little authority.”⁹²

It is worth noting here that, in Lipton’s *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi*, he continues the critique started by Keller, pointing out the following statement made by Ibn ‘Arabi, which was either intentionally or unintentionally passed over by Keller: “We are required by our universal law to believe in all prophetic messengers (rusul) and to believe that all their laws are truth, and did not turn into falsehood by being abrogated.”⁹³ This creates a further paradox, in terms of Perennialist ideas about Ibn ‘Arabi, which Lipton attempted to resolve by pointing to Ibn ‘Arabi’s “political cosmology of abrogation,” through which Lipton understood the unique role ascribed to Muhammad in Ibn ‘Arabi’s discourse as “the all-comprehensive manifestation of God’s light,”⁹⁴ the cosmic axis, the locus of manifestation for all Divine names and spiritual support for other Prophets, even before his earthly prophetic appearance. Lipton’s interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi here is based on the idea that Muhammad’s authority is universal because he is the human embodiment of the primordial “Muhammadan Reality” (*ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*). Keller cautiously mentions this Sufi concept only in the first part of *Sea Without Shore* in relation to one of his mentors, without explicitly mentioning Ibn ‘Arabi.⁹⁵ Keller states that belief in the Muhammadan Reality was “not an obligatory tenet of faith,”⁹⁶ and a careful reader can certainly feel his uneasiness in writing about this subject.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, it is precisely through explication of Ibn ‘Arabi’s emphasis on Muhammadan Reality that Lipton is able to argue that the other shari‘as became subsumed under the shari‘a of Muhammad’s spiritual sovereignty.⁹⁸ In Keller’s approach, existing (mis)interpretations of Ibn ‘Arabi are not rectified through recourse to Muhammadan Reality, which Lipton asserts is the basis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s cosmology of

91
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 323–24.

92
Keller, 335.

93
Keller, 323.

94
Lipton, *Rethinking*, 82.

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More attention is given to Muhammadan Reality outside of *Sea Without Shore*; for instance, see Keller’s explanation at: <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/masudq7.htm>. For more about the concept, see https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nur-muhammadi-SIM_5985, accessed November, 29, 2023.

96
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 84–86.

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Keller writes that “Muhammadan Reality was not mere discourse to Sufis . . . but rather directly experienced as *dhawq* (lit. ‘taste’) or the content of consciousness itself” (Keller, 86).

98
The unresolved perplexity of abrogation/non-abrogation in these two statements, according to Lipton’s interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabi, thus meant that the exclusive superiority of Islam was manifested in the physical appearance of the Prophet Muhammad, on one hand, and, on the other, in the historic position towards the People of the Book, who are “subsumed into the Muhammadan dispensation and allowed to remain upon their law” under the condition of obedience and paying the indemnity tax (*jizya*) (Lipton, *Rethinking*, 76). On this basis, Lipton argued that Ibn ‘Arabi’s whole discourse was based on the Muhammadan Reality, which “was a totalizing politico-metaphysical discourse, based around a perennial notion of the essence of Muhammad” and not a Perennialist notion of the primordial Tradition (Lipton, *Rethinking*, 175).

abrogation. Evidently, for Keller, Ibn 'Arabi's Muhammadan Reality is not a privileged theme in his projection of how Ibn 'Arabi's persona should be reimagined for ordinary Sufis. This potentially controversial topic is relegated to experiential *dhawq*—an invitation for curious seekers.

Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi Image

It is now clear that Keller constructs a distinctive Ibn 'Arabi narrative in relation to the creedal and legal aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. The following discussion will explore into particular instances of practical Sufi aspects in order to demonstrate that Keller's references to Ibn 'Arabi's are not intended as additional for Shadhili Sufis, rather, Ibn 'Arabi is frequently framed as a primary authority or link in Keller's discussion of core themes and practical elements of Sufism at a general level.

One notable excerpt of *Sea Without Shore* addresses the crucial Sufi theme of gnosis and is intimately connected to al-Shaykh al-Akbar. In this excerpt, Keller describes his spiritual education with Shaykh al-Shaghuri, recounting the content of their classes as well as edifying events that occurred in al-Shaghuri's presence. Keller also underscores the challenges of Sufi pedagogy in Syria in the 1980s, due to issues of state security, and highlights the importance of cassette recordings of al-Shaghuri's teachings, which he used rather than in person teaching to avoid "unwanted attention from the secret police."⁹⁹ Keller notes that these recordings were readings of various works,¹⁰⁰ but in relation to gnosis (*ma'rifa*) he singles out only one book and its author:

Abu Munir, the sheikh's servant, was not there at first, but came two or three years later, and taped the sheikh's regular lessons for me, which saved me many trips. In this way, several whole books the sheikh taught were recorded, and several hundred hours of Sheikh Muhyiddin's *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*. What I really gained, however, was not the fund of Sufi lore, but a perception of the approach of the sheikh to the religion as a whole, his state, his closeness to Allah, his gnosis, and his ecstasy. With the years, I came to apprehend what he would say on many questions without having to ask. I really wanted to be like him, and didn't care how long or what it took.¹⁰¹

Keller's reference to audiocassettes as a medium for the shaykh-disciple (*murīd*) relationship is already an intriguing element of modern Sufi pedagogy in itself. However, what is particularly important in this excerpt is the fact that Ibn 'Arabi is mentioned in connection with such a crucial theme as gnosis. By emphasizing that the recordings of Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futuhāt* specifically were a means of gaining Sufi experience, Keller directs his readers' attention to Ibn 'Arabi as a pivotal source of experiential knowledge in his own spiritual formation.

In another example, when addressing the practical facets of Sufi attire, and specifically the ritual of donning the patch cloak (*khirqā*), Keller elucidates that, in Shadhiliyya Sufism, the focus lies not on the actual wearing of the Sufi garment but rather on the transformation

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Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 7.

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Keller notes his shaykh's reading of diverse Sufi literature during their time together (Keller, 21). Yet, when it comes to his absorption of al-Shaghuri's spiritual state (*ḥāl*), he specifically references only *al-Futuhāt*.

101

Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 8.

of the soul that this symbolizes. He comments that “[t]he Shadhili tariqa has never had any distinctive dress or apparel; initiation into the tariqa rather meant to *change*.”¹⁰² To support this perspective, instead of mentioning specific Shadhili authorities, Keller opts to address the symbolic meaning of wearing the Sufi *khirqā* in “the way described by the Sheikh al-Akbar, Muhyiddin ibn al-‘Arabi, in his explanation of the conditions for donning the patched cloak (*khirqā*) of the Sufis: the conditions for this well-known garment resemble the mode manifested by Allah for covering one’s shameful parts.”¹⁰³ Thus, in *Sea Without Shore*, both the Sufi initiation itself and the spiritual transformation it involves are approached through Ibn ‘Arabi’s opinion and description. Moreover, Keller also shows how Ibn ‘Arabi was used as a sort of “litmus test” for identifying those who should and should not be granted Shadhili Sufi authorization (*ijāza*).

The importance of Ibn ‘Arabi in this respect can also be discerned from an anecdote recounted in the biographical section of *Sea Without Shore*. Keller tells the reader about his shaykh’s approach in this section, and it is important to note that when he shares aspects of al-Shaghuri’s teaching, his words are also representative of his own approach. This is because his decisions of what to include and what to omit in the manual are representative of his Sufi normativity and not simply a neutral recollection from his memory. Keller relates an anecdote about how, when al-Shaghuri was intending to give someone an *ijāza* to teach the Sufi path, he traveled to meet the person in question, but “when he discussed Ibn Arabi with him, [he] realized he was not of the same opinion about him as himself, and because he felt this was important, he returned to Damascus without giving [the *ijāza*] to him.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, despite the controversy surrounding Ibn ‘Arabi’s name, including criticism from the Ash‘arite orthodoxy (which Keller endorses), and even among some Sufis, Ibn ‘Arabi (who was not a part of the chain [*silsila*] in the Shadhili tariqa) becomes a measuring tool through which the path can be given.

In a somewhat surprising manner, Keller also employs Ibn ‘Arabi’s biographical details to frame the image of the exemplary and loyal disciple (*murīd*). Ibn ‘Arabi is known for a Sufi experience that deviates from, or even “inverts,” the typical path followed by seekers.¹⁰⁵ Qureshi draws a parallel between Ibn ‘Arabi and the prophetic experience of Muhammad, the *walī* and the Prophet, though the two were of different registers. Like Muhammad, Ibn ‘Arabi was “unlettered,” yet in his case this means Sufi instruction. Instead of undergoing initiation, grasping doctrines, and adhering to a structured regimen of spiritual practices that prepare the soul for the divine disclosure, he experienced his spiritual opening first, and only later pursued the path of studying the Islamic spiritual traditions with different Sufis,¹⁰⁶ following which he experienced new spiritual openings. However, despite this, Keller refers to Ibn ‘Arabi’s example to bolster his argument for unwavering commitment to a singular spiritual path:

Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman once told me of sheikhs who have had several masters in Sufism or been given ijazas in a number of different tariqas, “I have not found them except vacuous (*fāḍīn*).” I asked him, “What about Sheikh Muhyiddin ibn

102
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 145.

103
Keller, 145.

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Keller, 27.

105
Jawad Anwar Qureshi, “Ibn ‘Arabi and the Akbarī Tradition,” in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon (New York: Routledge, 2021), 90.

106
Qureshi, *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, 90.

al-‘Arabi, didn’t he go around to different sheikhs?” “That was only after his illumination at the hands of his first sheikh,” he said. “After that, one may go around.” He did not mention that after that, one has no need to. In a true path, the sheikh is one, the dhikr is one, and the way is one.¹⁰⁷

107
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 57–58.

108
Keller, 270.

109
Keller, 17–18.

First, this interpretation reshapes Ibn ‘Arabi’s persona as a Sufi who received his illumination through the conventional Sufi pedagogy of shaykh-disciple (*murīd*). Secondly, Keller introduces a tension whereby, on the one hand, Ibn ‘Arabi is presented as an exemplary figure, acknowledged by al-Shaghuri for seeking from different sources after his initial illumination. But on the other hand, Keller’s statement that in fact “one has no need to” implies a general disapproval of this practice. The case of Ibn ‘Arabi, although exceptional, is thus employed by Keller as an argument for full loyalty and strong fidelity to the chosen spiritual path.

In the section “Finding a Shaikh,” Keller also refers to Ibn ‘Arabi when emphasizing the need for traditional Sufi teaching, contrasting it with the “liberal” reading of Sufi literature outside the tariqa:

A true sheikh is a manifestation of Allah’s mercy and guidance. The benefits of finding one are the benefits of Sufism itself and have been extolled by Muslims throughout Islamic history. Ibn al-‘Arabi merely reiterated the consensus of all Sufi masters when he said, “Whoever does not take the path from its men simply goes from one absurdity to the next” (*al-Hall al-sadid* [40], 23).¹⁰⁸

In this quote, Ibn ‘Arabi is clearly utilized to promote the established, traditional approach to Sufism, and is portrayed as conforming to the supposed Sufi consensus. In contrast, at times Keller highlights instances where the methods employed by the Shadhilis deviate from those of Ibn ‘Arabi to emphasize his exceptionality in terms of Sufi rigor and his adoption of challenging methods that may be difficult for contemporary Sufis. This allows Keller to strategically draw a contrast between Ibn ‘Arabi and his own approach:

The path he [al-Shaghuri] taught differed from methods of Sufism prior to Abul Hasan al-Shadhili, its founder, in a number of ways. Earlier figures such as Dhul Nun al-Misri, Imam Ghazali, and Ibn al-‘Arabi, had emphasized mortifying the self with spiritual rigors like sleeplessness, silence, hunger, and solitude, until the ego died, and illumination dawned. The way of Abul Hasan was instead a way of gratitude to the Divine, humbly striving to please Allah for the sake of Allah, rather than for illumination, seeing His favor in everything, and thanking Him for it.¹⁰⁹

Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism is thus depicted as far from universalist, with the practical aspects of his teaching portrayed as exceptionally difficult and historically obsolete. Interestingly, Keller’s orthopraxis is itself characterized by various observers as having a high degree of rigid-

ity and strictness. The practices promoted in Kharabsheh are often described as ultra-rigorous compared to those of other contemporary Sufis. In *Sea Without Shore*, however, Sufi theory is explained as it is generally viewed by many Shadhili orders, as “a way of gratitude,” and Keller refers to Ibn ‘Arabi’s image to create a contrast—a legitimate but distinctive and even unapplicable approach for modern-day Sufis in comparison to what his own teaching offers.

Nevertheless, when it comes to characteristic Sufi methods practiced in the tariqa, Ibn ‘Arabi is authoritatively used to support these in *Sea Without Shore*. For example, in the section dedicated to “The Special Wird” (the Supreme Name, a theme particularly associated with Keller’s tariqa and more broadly with ‘Alawiyya Sufism), it is Ibn ‘Arabi who is called on to support this particular practice:

The Sheikh al-Akbar says: Those who truly count among humanity are the perfected, no one else, and they are those whose dhikr is *Allah*, and who invoke nothing more within themselves. That is their dhikr, whether said to themselves, or whether audibly when they are alone. As for in public, it is *La ilaha illa Llah* (“There is no god but Allah”), and then the other kinds of dhikr . . . (*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* [48], 4–75).¹¹⁰

Although the ‘Alawiyya are particularly known for the practice of invoking the “Supreme Name,” which is usually accompanied by a special type of retreat (*khalwa*), in *Sea Without Shore*, Keller supported this very “Alawi” practice not through recourse to Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi, with whom the ‘Alawiyya are primarily associated, but by citing Ibn ‘Arabi. He does make general references to Shadhili masters, but when he wants to cinch his argument about the practice of invoking the Supreme Name, Keller takes recourse to *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, thereby emphasizing a practical Sufi connection with Ibn ‘Arabi.

Conclusion: Beyond Defending Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi

The popularization of Ibn ‘Arabi in the Western context has sparked disagreements regarding the interpretation of his works and the question of who holds the rights to his legacy. Nuh Keller emerged as one of the most vehement early critics of the Perennialist movement, which disseminated Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy in English and other European languages, often emphasizing a universalist reading and downplaying his Islamic normativity. Keller strove to restore this normativity as he was dissatisfied with what the concept of “transcendental unity,” specifically its blurring the lines of the “orthodox” historical Islamic assertion that Islam has abrogated all previous religious salvific efficacy. This endeavor has become a lifelong project, and is evident across his writings, but especially in *Sea Without Shore*. From the references to his late shaykh al-Shaghuri in this work, it is also clear how and why Ibn ‘Arabi became an important source to him, and why *al-Futuhat* became *the* focal point of his interest and attachment. Keller’s recollections of Shaykh al-Shaghuri are intricately tied to Ibn ‘Arabi and both shaykhs were of paramount significance and deeply intertwined.¹¹¹ According to Keller’s narrative, reading *al-Futuhat* became an apologetic

imperative of al-Shaghuri, who told Keller that he taught it “to defend [Ibn ‘Arabi] against those in our times who claimed that what he had said was heretical or contravened the Koran and sunna.”¹¹² As a way of continuing his shaykh’s legacy, Keller, in his own Sufi writings, then drew on Ibn ‘Arabi as a major source. This emphasis is traceable through the various theological, legal, and Sufi dimensions of Keller’s writings, and indicates his central role in Keller’s contemporary Sufi discourse. While Keller’s use of Ibn ‘Arabi has a clear apologetic aim, it is still unusual for someone who claims to represent “orthodoxy” to emphasize Ibn ‘Arabi to such an extent. Keller frequently positions his teaching as “orthodox” within the Ash‘ari/Shafi‘i and Sufi/Shadhili traditions; however, his frequent references to Ibn ‘Arabi and his willingness to align the creed with the emblematic *wahdat al-wujūd* associated with Ibn ‘Arabi may prompt the question as to what extent he can actually be labeled as Akbari. Historically, it was standard practice for legalist or “orthodox” scholars to shun Ibn ‘Arabi in public and speak about him instead in private circles, to avoid being contaminated by controversy. To Keller, on the contrary, it appears that Ibn ‘Arabi must be mentioned despite any controversy, or even because of it.

This raises a related question: what kind of image of Ibn ‘Arabi is one left with after reading *Sea Without Shore*? The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the way Keller uses Ibn ‘Arabi’s authority is far from simply a defense of this scholar’s legacy. Keller’s reshaping of the discourse surrounding Ibn ‘Arabi’s persona and his construction of an “orthodox” image of this Sufi is an intellectual project that demands the inclusion and exclusion of certain elements of Ibn ‘Arabi’s immense discourse. Keller’s opposition to the Perennialist interpretative paradigm, which has its own inclusions and exclusions (as Keller has himself demonstrated), in turn creates its own limitations for Keller’s endeavor. Thus, while emphasizing Ibn ‘Arabi’s legal rigor and observance, Keller’s interpretation of his legacy ignores his pragmatic advocacy of cross-school or trans-school legal approaches and his general antipathy for strict *madhhab* (legal school) conformity. The Sufism of Keller absorbs the controversy around Ibn ‘Arabi through the former’s appropriation of the concept of *wahdat al-wujūd*, which he makes an essential part of the creedal instruction presented in *Sea Without Shore*. However, in Keller’s hands, the concept is interpreted in a purely uncontroversial fashion that falls strictly within the confines of Ash‘arite thought, and pays no heed to Ibn ‘Arabi’s use of specialized vocabulary, or to the metaphysical and theological aspects of his thought that relate to prophetology.

When it comes to some of the key Sufi rituals of Keller’s tariqa, such as *dhikr* of the Supreme Name, these are grounded by the authority of citations from Ibn ‘Arabi. Keller’s recollections of experiencing Shaykh al-Shaghuri’s *ma‘rifa* and ecstasy are also linked to Ibn ‘Arabi, signifying the unique importance he holds for Keller. However, Keller portrays the practical dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufi teaching as highly challenging and difficult for modern aspirants, and ultimately as not aligning with Keller’s understanding of the Shadhili “way of gratitude.” He also seeks to restrict his readers direct, unmediated engagement with Ibn ‘Arabi’s written legacy, echoing some existing traditional criticisms and commenting that his works are not recom-

mended for private reading because their intended audience are those who have already succeeded on the Sufi path. Despite this, the numerous scattered citations from Ibn 'Arabi in Keller's *Sea Without Shore* create an impression of Sufi "sober orthodoxy" that is far removed from the figure who could generate such medieval polemical anxiety. Keller's approach in portraying Ibn 'Arabi's theological, legal, and Sufi aspects firmly places the Sufi scholar within what Keller identifies as "the orthodox Muslim intellectual and spiritual heritage,"¹¹³ projecting him as one of the exemplary Sufi figures for his tariqa. The major disadvantage of this project is that Keller's "orthodox" Ibn 'Arabi lacks the perplexity and bewilderment that were distinct characteristics in the various competing facets of the persona of the famous "oceanic" Shaykh al-Akbar with whom scholars have sought to grapple over the centuries.

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