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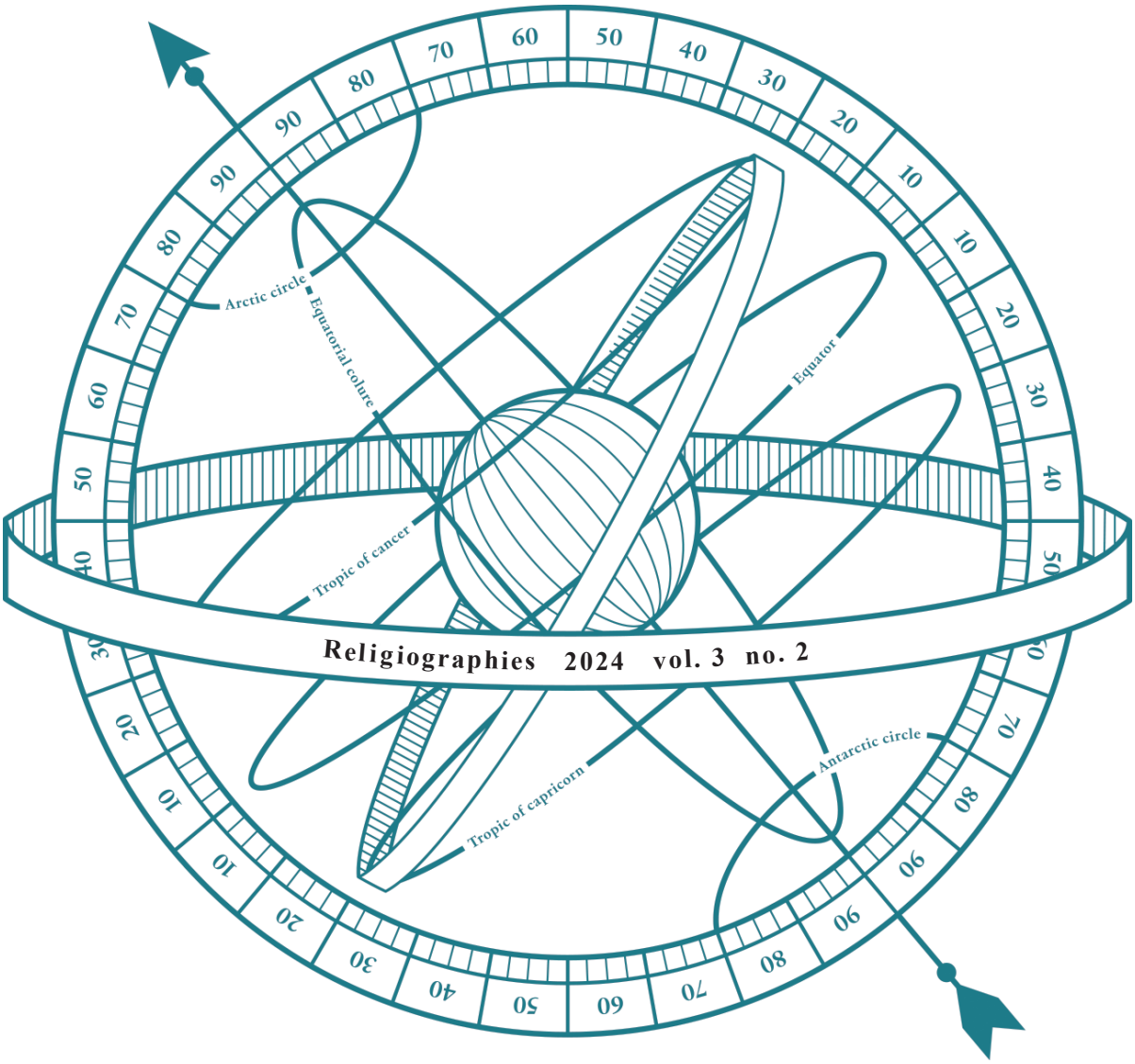

Special Issue
"Reviving Muhyi al-Din: Contemporary Uses of Ibn ʿArabi's Thought and Reinventions of Islam"
edited by
Mark J. Sedgwick and Gregory Vandamme

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The Many Lives of Ibn ʿArabi's Thought

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

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

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

The relevance and creative potential of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas have not diminished in the modern era. Many Muslim thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have drawn on his works to develop their own intellectual frameworks. One notable example is the way his thought continues to shape the reflections of various Muslim actors on profoundly contemporary issues such as ecology[5] and feminism.[6] Whatever the approach, Ibn ʿArabi's *oeuvre* has much to offer contemporary readers, whether in terms of his philosophical and theological explorations or his vivid and dynamic reading of the Qurʾan.

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

1
For an excellent short overview of Ibn ʿArabi's life and thought, see Claude Addas, *Ibn Arabî et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Points, 1996), translated as *Ibn ʿArabi: The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000), and William C. Chittick, *Ibn ʿArabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005). These authors also wrote what are the most important scientific biography and doctrinal synthesis on Ibn ʿArabi to this day: Claude Addas, *Ibn ʿArabī ou la quête du soufre rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), and William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989). For the history of the polemical reception of Ibn ʿArabi's work within the Islamic tradition, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

2
Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*; Muzaffar Alam, *The Mughals and the Sufis: Islam and Political Imagination in India, 1500–1750* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021); and Hüseyin Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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

4
On those aspects of Ibn ʿArabi's writings, see the seminal works of Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn ʿArabî* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), translated as *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), and *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn ʿArabî, le livre et la loi* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), translated as *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

5
See for instance Munjed M. Murad, "Vicegerency and Nature: Ibn ʿArabī on Humanity's Existential Protection of the World," in *Voices of Three Generations: Essays in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohammad H. Faghfoory and Katherine O'Brien (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2019), 299–314; Syafwan Rozi, "Understanding the Concept of Ecosufism: Harmony and the Relationship of God, Nature and Humans in Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Arabi," Alumna, Journal of Islamic Studies, 23, no. 2 (2019): 242–65; Bambang Irawan, Ismail F. A. Nasution, and Hywel Coleman, "Applying Ibn

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

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

ʿArabī's Concept of Tajallī: A Sufi Approach to Environmental Ethics," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism*, 10, no. 1 (2021): 21–36.

6
See for instance Saʾdiyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ʿArabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Kahina Bahloul, *Mon Islam ma liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2021); and Francesco Piraino, "A Female Imam in Paris: Islam, Gender, and Secular Normativity," *Culture and Religion* 24, no. 2 (2024): 1–21.

7
Keller has in recent years been a harsh critic of Guénon and his Traditionalist followers, but has also written of the importance, for his conversion to Islam, of the works of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), who was a follower of the Swiss Muslim Sufi shaykh Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), himself one of the successors of Guénon. Nasr may also have had some impact on Fardid.

thought relates to it shift considerably.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Akbarian Anarchism: Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917) on Islam, Freedom and Shariʿa

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Abstract
This article explores the multifaceted legacy of Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917), a pivotal figure in the introduction of Ibn ʿArabi's thought to the West. Aguéli's paradoxical trajectory—encompassing art, anarchism, and Sufism—has elicited diverse interpretations. By situating him firmly within the Akbarian interpretative tradition, the article challenges views of his work as an eclectic appropriation, instead demonstrating its philosophical coherence and grounding in the doctrinal framework of Ibn ʿArabi and his commentators. Aguéli's philosophy highlights a dynamic equilibrium between strict adherence to the shariʿa and intellectual freedom, offering a profound reinterpretation of the shariʿa as a safeguard of individual liberty rather than a constraint. This balance reflects Ibn ʿArabi's harmonisation of intellectual creativity with unwavering commitment to tradition. By synthesizing spirituality, intellectual inquiry, and practical engagement, Aguéli emerges as a significant yet underappreciated modern interpreter of Akbarian thought.

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Introduction

Few historical figures have managed to exert a significant influence on their era while remaining largely unknown to the general public. Such is the case with Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917). Beyond his pivotal role in introducing and disseminating Ibn ʿArabi's thought in the West, Aguéli appears to have been at the nexus of several dynamics that would prove crucial to the evolution of both Western and Muslim societies in the twentieth century. The various facets of Aguéli's life and work—paradoxical and disconcerting in many respects, lending themselves to widely divergent interpretations—undoubtedly account for his longstanding marginalisation within contemporary Muslim thought. Recent editions and studies have fortunately reassessed Aguéli's significance,[1] but these contributions have yet to fully resolve the challenges of engaging with his thought.

Born in 1869 in Sweden, the young John Gustav Agelii left his native country at the age of twenty-one for Paris, where he studied painting and adopted the name Ivan Aguéli.[2] He cultivated an early interest in the spirituality of Swedenborg—a legacy from his mother—and in Islam.[3] Also early on, Aguéli became involved in anarchist circles and was arrested in 1894 during a crackdown on radical groups in Paris. During his four months in prison, Aguéli deepened his reading and studies, particularly in the field of Islam.[4] Upon his release, he travelled for the first time to Egypt, before returning to Paris to undertake advanced studies in Arabic. His formal conversion to Islam is documented as early as 1898, and in 1899, he travelled to India and Sri Lanka, where he studied in Muslim madrasas and adopted the name ʿAbd al-Hadi.[5]

After a brief sojourn in Paris, he went back to Cairo in 1900, where he became a disciple of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿIllaysh (1840–1921) and was initiated into the works of Ibn ʿArabi. The nature and implications of this relationship will be central to the analysis offered here, as it ultimately situates Aguéli within the long tradition of interpreters of Ibn ʿArabi's thought. During this period, he contributed mainly to the journal *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, where he wrote in Arabic and Italian under the name ʿAbd al-Hadi until 1907.[6] In those articles, Aguéli often acted as a spokesperson for ʿIllaysh, while more broadly presenting an Islamic vision rooted in Ibn ʿArabi's thought, which we will examine in greater detail below.[7]

In the winter of 1909, Aguéli returned to Europe and began writing a new series of articles in French, still under the name Abdul-Hâdi, primarily in *La Gnose*, a journal edited by René Guénon (1886–1951). These writings address the doctrines of Sufism and the thought of Ibn ʿArabi, while also formulating Aguéli's approach to Islam by integrating these doctrines into his reflections on art and politics.[8] In 1911, Aguéli founded a society dedicated to studying and disseminating Ibn ʿArabi's thought: *Al-Akbariyya*, which can, in many respects, be regarded as the birth of Akbarian studies in the West. Nevertheless, he continued to paint and to write reflections on art, winning praise in the Parisian artistic milieu.[9]

Back in Cairo in 1913, Aguéli seems to have focused primarily on painting.[10] With the outbreak of World War I, the British colonial administration suspected him of harbouring pro-Ottoman sympathies

1 Among the most notable works, one must mention the extensive study conducted by his compatriot Axel Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli: Människan, mystikern, målaren*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Sveriges allmänna konstförening, 1940–41). A re-edition of his writings for the French journal *La Gnose*, accompanied by a biographical introduction, was published by G. Rocca: Abdul-Hâdi (John Gustav Agelii, dit Ivan Aguéli), *Écrits pour La Gnose, comprenant la traduction de l'arabe du Traité de l'Unité*, ed. G. Rocca (Milan: Archè, 1988). Jean Foucaud has published several detailed articles: "Le Musulman, Cheikh ʿAbdu-l-Hedi al-Maghribi Uqayli - I," *Vers la Tradition* 72 (June–August 1998), "Notes complémentaires," *Vers la Tradition* 73 (September–November 1998), "Le Musulman, Cheikh ʿAbdu-l-Hedi al-Maghribi Uqayli - II, le précurseur," *Vers la Tradition* 77 (September–November 1999), and "Rectificanda," *Vers la Tradition* 79 (March–May 2000). These articles were later republished by the author online, with additional annexes: http://dinul-qayyim.over-blog.com, accessed Sept. 1, 2024. Mark Sedgwick devoted an entire section to Aguéli in *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59–63. Oliver Fotros published an anthology of Aguéli's writings translated into English: *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity; Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Fotros (n.p.: Oliver Fotros, 2021), along with a study demonstrating René Guénon's borrowings from Aguéli's writings: *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown* (n.p.: Oliver Fotros, 2021). A significant milestone in Aguéli studies came the same year with the publication of the substantial collective volume edited by Mark Sedgwick to commemorate Aguéli's 150th birth anniversary: *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. M. Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Many studies cited here derive from this volume.

2 For a general overview of Ivan Aguéli's trajectory, see Viveca Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 17–32.

3 Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," 20–21.

4 Wessel, 24.

5 A mark of this sojourn is the translation he published in 1910 for *La Gnose* of a classical text from the Indian curriculum: "Épitre intitulée 'Le Cadeau sur la manifestation du Prophète,' par le sheikh initié et inspiré Mohammed Ibn Fazlallah El-Hindi," *La Gnose* 1, no. 12 (December 1910): 270–75. On this text, see Michel Chodkiewicz, "L'offrande au Prophète de Muhammad al-Burhânpûrî," *Connaissance des Religions* 4, no. 1–2 (1988): 30–40.

6 See Paul-André Claudel, *Un journal "italo-isla-*

and inciting unrest among Arab populations. Ultimately, they expelled him from Egypt in 1916, deporting him to Spain. Living under difficult circumstances, Aguéli died mysteriously in 1917, struck by a train in the outskirts of Barcelona.

How can we evaluate the legacy left by Aguéli? It is challenging to encapsulate his artistic work, political engagements, spiritual journey, and intellectual trajectory within a single framework. Yet it is essential to consider all these elements together, resisting the temptation to isolate them by their respective domains, in order to honour the originality of Aguéli's thought and uncover the underlying coherence beneath the apparent contradictions of his eclectic and colourful outlook. For many, Aguéli represents a personal and eccentric appropriation of Ibn ʿArabi's thought, diverging from what is considered the authentic and legitimate interpretative tradition. Rocca and Sorgenfrei emphasise this eccentricity,[11] while Fiscella and Hatina identify in Aguéli's work a tension between anarchism and Islamic norms that remains unresolved.[12] Marchi, however, suggests that Aguéli's "Sufism" resolves this tension, though only by positing a form of spirituality that transcends common religious norms.[13]

This paper aims to show that, quite the contrary, Aguéli should likely be situated within the Akbarian tradition itself. His case reveals its possibilities of interpretation and compels us to reassess not only our conceptions and definitions of this tradition—and therefore of the broader Islamic tradition—but also how we approach the many contemporary interpretations and appropriations of Ibn ʿArabi's thought. We will see that Aguéli's grounding in Sufi Islam should not be viewed as merely one element within a radically modern bricolage. On the contrary, his Western and modern background is fully integrated into an Islamic perspective, where it is reinterpreted and transformed. Aguéli upholds a traditional approach to Islam and may have been the first to use the term "Islamophobia" to denounce how this traditional Islam was caricatured and disparaged by both Westerners and Muslim modernists of his time.[14] At the same time, he remains driven by a quest for radical freedom and the liberation from alienating norms.

These tensions in Aguéli echo a central characteristic of Ibn ʿArabi's thought: his continuous articulation of profound intellectual freedom, at times provocatively creative, with rigorous adherence to tradition, and meticulous observance of the sharīʿa.[15] The peculiarities and paradoxes of Aguéli's thought should therefore be seen as a faithful expression of Ibn ʿArabi's approach, which Chittick describes as "both intensely loyal to the tradition and exceedingly innovative."[16] Aguéli advanced this element of Ibn ʿArabi's thought arguably further than many others and one might draw an intriguing parallel between Aguéli's position and the way Ibn ʿArabi himself has often been regarded: as a sublime yet marginal figure in Islamic history, existing beyond the boundaries of the common tradition more than subtly reinforcing its contours.

It is therefore particularly fruitful to examine Aguéli's philosophy through the prism of Ibn ʿArabi's thought and its transmission. This approach introduces a significant interpretative shift: rather than viewing Aguéli's work as an eclectic orientalising assemblage of Sufi elements, it is better understood as a modern articulation of the doctrinal frame-

mique" à la veille de la Première Guerre mondiale: Il Convito / النادي - Le Caire, 1904–1912, Études alexandrines 57 (Alexandria: Centre d'Études Alexandrines, 2023).

7
See, notably, "I grandi initiati musulmani" and "Dio il bello—la maestà della bellezza," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25; "El Akbariya," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 2 (June 1907): 48–55; "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 3–4 (July 1907): 90–103; "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 5–6 (September 1907): 154–57; and "El Akbariya—continua," *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* 4, no. 7–8 (November 1907): 194–95.

8
The articles in which he directly addresses Ibn ʿArabi's thought include "L'identité suprême dans l'ésotérisme musulman: Le Traité de l'Unité (*Risalatul-Ahadiyah*), par le plus grand des Maîtres spirituels, Mohyiddin ibn ʿArabi (traduction)," *La Gnose* 1, nos. 6, 7, 8 (June, July, August 1911): 168–74, 199–202, 217–23; and "Les catégories de l'initiation (*Tartîbut-Taçawwuf*) par le plus grand des Maîtres spirituels Seydi Mohyiddin Ibn ʿArabi," *La Gnose* 2, no. 12 (December 1911): 323–28. Akbarian elements are also disseminated in other articles, such as "Pages dédiées à Mercure: *Sahaif Ataridiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 1 (January 1911): 28–38; no. 2 (February 1911): 66–72; "Pages dédiées au Soleil: *Sahaïf Shamsiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 2 (February 1911): 59–66; "*El-Malâmatiyah*," *La Gnose* 2, no. 3 (March 1911): 100–107; "L'Universalité en l'Islam," *La Gnose* 2, no. 4 (April 1911): 121–31; and "L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," *La Gnose* 2, no. 5 (May 1911): 152–53.

9
Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) even dedicated an article to him, "Le Suédois mahométan," in *Le Mercure de France* 365 (September 1, 1912): 220–21. However, Aguéli declined Apollinaire's offer of collaboration, as he seemed determined to avoid the Parisian art world at all costs, see Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 29.

10
Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's Life and Work," 31.

11
See Rocca, introduction in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, op. cit.; Simon Sorgenfrei, "The Great Aesthetic Inspiration: On Ivan Aguéli's Reading of Swedenborg," *Religion and the Arts* 23 (2019): 1–25.

12
See Anthony T. Fiscella, "Kill the Audience: Ivan Aguéli's Universal Utopia of Anarchism and Islam," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 81–93; and Meir Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision: Islam, Sufism, and Universalism," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 139–50.

13
Alessandra Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics: Ivan Aguéli and Il Convito," in *Anar-*

work established by Ibn ʿArabi and his followers. The interpretation of Aguéli as a translator of the Akbarian heritage, serving the intellectual project of his Eastern masters, was already advanced by Guermazi.[17] He demonstrated how the teachings and actions of ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿIllaysh, Aguéli's master, should be understood as a direct continuation of the efforts of his own teacher, the renowned Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir (1808–1883), to disseminate Ibn ʿArabi's ideas and employ them as a tool for reviving Islamic thought.[18] This article seeks to deepen this perspective by analysing key aspects of Aguéli's philosophy. It opens with an examination of his engagement with the concept of tradition, followed by a focus on his distinctive affiliation with the Akbarian lineage. The analysis will then focus on how Aguéli, drawing on this tradition, conceives of Islam and shariʿa.

A Higher Notion of Tradition

Aguéli occupies a position that straddles the two meanings of the term "traditionalist." His conception of tradition combines adherence to the continuity of a specific spiritual and intellectual lineage with a metahistorical notion of a primordial and immutable tradition, which can be seen as a precursor to Traditionalist philosophy.[19] As he stated: "We have a higher notion of Tradition . . . According to us, it is the very 'spacism' that allows the rediscovery of the Ancient Tradition, that which is imprescriptible and forever young."[20] Despite his metahistorical conception of tradition, Aguéli remains firmly rooted in the specific religious framework of Islam, consistently upholding its integrity and relevance throughout his writings. Recent references to Aguéli within Western traditional Muslim circles, by figures such as ʿAbd al-Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter) and Hamza Yusuf—both regarded by some as "neo-traditionalists" in a conservative sense—demonstrate that, despite his originality, Aguéli continues to inspire some contemporary traditional Muslims.[21]

Interestingly, Aguéli's position could, in a certain sense, be understood as attributing a traditional origin to the emergence of the so-called Traditionalist movement. Aguéli's ideas appear to have had a profound influence on Guénon. The most notable example is Aguéli's use of the term "supreme identity" (*identité suprême*) to render—non-literally—the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. This expression would later become central to the technical vocabulary of Guénon and his followers.[22] However, Guénon does not seem to have been aware of Aguéli's true identity, believing him to be a born Muslim and, therefore, a wholly traditional figure.[23] The central role played by the study and dissemination of Ibn ʿArabi's thought and its interpreters among Guénon's followers could thus be viewed as, in some sense, a return to the source. This approach was notably adopted by Michel Mustafa Vâlsan (1911–1974), who observed in 1953 that the true origin of the ideas disseminated through Guénon lay in the Akbarian heritage.[24]

Aguéli regarded himself as being at the service of that tradition, signing some of his writings as "servant of the saints" (*khādim al-awliyāʾ*) and stating: "One day, my art will explain the eccentricities of my life. I am the servant of a tradition I cannot deny."[25] Yet, this deference to tradition did not prevent him from cultivating an ideal of

chist, Artist, Sufi, 115–26.

14 See "I nemici dell'Islam," *Il Convito* 7 (July 1904): 1, where Aguéli presents several typologies of Islamophobia. See the introduction and its English translation in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 205–10.

15 See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivages: Ibn Arabî, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) and James W. Morris, "Ibn ʿArabi's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority," *Studia Islamica* 71 (1990): 37–64. The centrality of the Shariʿa is also at the heart of Lipton's critique of universalist readings of Ibn ʿArabi, which he perceives as "absolutist and exclusivist" in nature, see *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi*, op. cit.

16 William C. Chittick, "Ibn ʿArabī" in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 497–98.

17 See Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy of Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 127–37.

18 On the multifaceted activities of ʿAbd al-Qadir, consult the collective volume *Abd el-Kader, un spirituel dans la modernité*, ed. Ahmed Bouyerdene, Éric Geoffroy, and Setty G. Simon-Khedis (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2012). A broader reflection on the links between Sufism and political engagement surrounding Aguéli was earlier explored by Meir Hatina, "Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement, and Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (August 2007): 389–409.

19 See Mark Sedgwick's analysis of the terms "Traditionalism" and "tradition" in *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3–20, 22–24.

20 "Les Indépendants, 29ème," *L'Encyclopédie contemporaine illustrée* 664 (May 25, 1913), trans. Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73.

21 See, for instance, the lecture dedicated to him by ʿAbd al-Hakim Murad as part of the "Paradigms of Leadership" series at the Cambridge Muslim College: https://youtu.be/hRivu7eYE-sA?si=4eQEL3XpKKwgAwfR, accessed Aug. 28, 2024, or Hamza Yusuf's mention of him during his debate with conservative psychologist Jordan Peterson: https://youtu.be/x7ZlXD7COMU?si=EuI-KOKUuTk3Ed6XZ, accessed Aug. 28, 2024.

22 See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 27–31.

radical freedom. Aguéli understood tradition as a framework guiding a path that remains deeply personal and individual. For him, both spiritual realisation and aesthetic pursuit emerge through a balance between fidelity to one's inner nature and adherence to tradition, which facilitates the full actualisation of that nature.[26] He thus emphasises the need to maintain a delicate equilibrium between "emotion (individual love, personality, nature) and style (collectivity, external order, tradition)," warning that any imbalance risks leaving the seeker either confined within sterile formalism or ensnared by the excesses of subjective emotion.[27] Tradition, therefore, only assumes its full significance when personally appropriated by the individual. Otherwise, it becomes merely a formal and harmful instrument of coercion: "Tradition without initiative produces only cunning and sleight of hand."[28]

Aguéli's approach to tradition is most evident in his engagement with Islamic doctrines. His conception of Islamic faith is far from naïve or immature, as demonstrated as early as his 1902 article *Notes sur l'islam*, which contains the seeds of many principles later developed in his contributions to *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* and *La Gnose*. The vision of Islam presented by Aguéli reflects the teachings he received in Cairo, where Sufism was the most widely practised form of religion.[29] Late Ottoman Egyptian Sufism was strongly influenced by the doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi and his commentators, particularly in emphasising the concordance between traditional religious law (shariʿa) and the personal spiritual path (tariqa).[30] A notable example of how the Akbarian heritage was integrated into mainstream Islam is found in a figure who preceded Aguéli by more than a century yet is linked to him through Shaykh ʿIllaysh's initiatory chain: the renowned Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–1790). As a leading authority in the traditional sciences and a transmitter of the *khirqa akbariyya*—the spiritual influence of the Shaykh al-akbar—al-Zabidi embodied what Reichmuth calls a "Sufi humanism," perfectly aligned with the orthodoxy of his time.[31]

Although Aguéli stands firmly within the living tradition of Egyptian Sufism and the Akbarian heritage, his connection to Ibn ʿArabi's spiritual influence is profoundly personal.[32] This is particularly evident in the verses concluding his *Pages dédiées au Soleil*, published in *La Gnose* in 1911 "I read the books of the Master before I knew Arabic. I saw him before I knew his name."[33] These lines refer to a dream Aguéli reportedly experienced in 1893, which he disclosed only in 1907, in a letter to Huot. In this letter, he explained that he recognised the Shaykh al-akbar after coming across specific details in a recently published biography.[34] This is particularly significant for understanding his connection to the spiritual lineage of Ibn ʿArabi, as it indicates that he viewed his relationship with the Shaykh al-akbar as deeply personal and intimate—a bond that preceded both his formal conversion to Islam and his initiation under Shaykh ʿIllaysh.

The nature of Aguéli's connection to Ibn ʿArabi is thus twofold, reflecting his conception of tradition. On the one hand, it seems to have been established through a spiritual bond of the *ʿuwaysī* type, which connects a disciple directly to a deceased master without a formal intermediary.[35] Aguéli himself hints at this form of transmission when he writes: "There is always a master, but he may be absent, unknown, or even deceased for several centuries."[36] On the other hand, Aguéli

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See Mark Sedgwick, "The Significance of Ivan Aguéli for the Traditionalist Movement," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*," 167–168. Aguéli was, moreover, presented in *La Gnose* as "a Muslim student, Abdul-Hâdi, who knows only Islam, or rather a single Islamic school, that of Mohyiddin ibn Arabi, the Malāmatiyah, and Abdul-Karim al-Jīlī" (*La Gnose*, December 1910, 268–69). See Rocca, introduction in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, vii. Michel Vâlsan appears to have been the first among Guénon's followers to investigate Aguéli's background and to portray him positively, owing to his own affinity with the works of Ibn ʿArabi. See Rocca, introduction, 172–73, and Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 90–92.

24
"The traditional idea as it is known today in the West through the works of René Guénon has, historically, a definite Islamic and Akbarian origin," Michel Vâlsan, "L'islam et la fonction de René Guénon," *Études traditionnelles* 305 (January 1953): 44–46. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

25
Letter to Carl Wilhelmsson, in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:252, cited in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73. In another letter, he similarly wrote: "How ideal it would have been to be in an entirely wild and barren land where there was none other of the race of man! If only I had not had the tradition to defend!," letter to Richard Bergh, Feb. 8, 1916, in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:260, cited in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: The Pearl upon the Crown*, 73.

26
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 41.

27
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 39.

28
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 39.

29
See Gilbert Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans dans l'Égypte du XIXe siècle (1798–1882)*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale [IFAO], 1982).

30
On the place of Ibn ʿArabi within late Ottoman Egyptian Sufism, see Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction in *Le soufisme à l'époque ottomane, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle / Sufism in the Ottoman Era, 16th–18th century*, ed. Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, Cahier des Annales Islamologiques 29 (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2010), 11, 45–48.

31
See Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009).

is formally linked to the Akbarian lineage through Shaykh ʿIllaysh. Notably, both aspects of this connection correspond to what Aguéli terms "the instruction of men" (*taʿlīm al-rijāl*), as distinct from "lordly instruction" (*al-taʿlīm al-rabbānī*).[37] In other words, Aguéli situates himself firmly within the tradition transmitted by men, albeit in an original manner, and does not claim direct access to a primordial or divine source of knowledge. At most, he sees himself as a "servant of the saints."

Al-Akbariyya

Faithful to the traditional notion of Sufi education, Aguéli considers initiation under a master indispensable. That master should not be seen as either a cleric or merely a schoolteacher but rather as "a spiritual father whom one chooses and can leave whenever one wishes."[38] In Aguéli's case, the spiritual fatherhood of Ibn ʿArabi is mediated through Shaykh ʿIllaysh, who connected him to an initiatory chain that included Murtada al-Zabidi and Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir. Aguéli describes this lineage and its significance in a 1903 letter to Huot, while hinting that his connection to Ibn ʿArabi ultimately predates his initiation by Shaykh ʿIllaysh.[39] It is worth noting that a dual relationship to Ibn ʿArabi's spiritual influence—both personal, subtle, and direct, as well as collective, formal, and mediated through teaching—is commonly observed within this chain of transmission. This is particularly evident in the case of Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir, who recounts numerous visions of Ibn ʿArabi in his writings and states that he acquired his knowledge both from Ibn ʿArabi's books and from his spiritual presence.[40]

Despite the subtle bond linking him to Ibn ʿArabi, Aguéli has a connection to Shaykh ʿIllaysh that should not be regarded as merely formal or secondary. His correspondence is filled with expressions of deference and devotion towards his master, leaving no room for doubt about the sincerity of his attachment. In fact, Shaykh ʿIllaysh possessed such charisma that the son of Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir described him as "equal in sanctity" to his father.[41] It is known that Aguéli began meeting with Shaykh ʿIllaysh in Cairo from 1900 onwards, but it is not unlikely that he had already connected with him during his 1899 stay in Sri Lanka. This period coincides with the exile of the nationalist leader Ahmad ʿUrabi Pasha (1841–1911), who was close to the ʿIllaysh family and established several Islamic educational institutions in the country.[42] It is therefore possible that Aguéli first encountered Shaykh ʿIllaysh's circle in one of these madrasas. Regardless, it was in Cairo that Aguéli formally placed himself under ʿIllaysh's guidance and joined the tariqa Shadhiliyya ʿArabiyya. The nature of this affiliation has been debated, given the decline of the ʿArabiyya at the time and the lack of evidence of Aguéli's formal participation in any of its activities.[43] However, these doubts rest on an idealised and ahistorical view of Sufi initiation, failing to account for the circumstances of the time.[44] Shaykh ʿIllaysh himself appears to have adopted a highly flexible approach to spiritual transmission: rather than confining his disciples solely to the ʿArabiyya—which he led—he would initiate them into various schools to which he was connected through familial inheritance.[45] The nature of Aguéli's initiation, therefore, depends far

32
It should be noted that the distinctiveness of this relationship far exceeds Aguéli's engagement with Swedenborg's thought, despite the familial and spiritual connection Aguéli's mother maintained with Swedenborg. Sorgenfrei nevertheless regards Swedenborg as Aguéli's primary influence, but this conclusion likely stems from the fact that his study focuses on letters from 1894, predating Aguéli's travels to Egypt and his formal conversion to Islam—after which he repeatedly criticised Swedenborg's ideas. See Sorgenfrei, "The Great Aesthetic Inspiration," op. cit.

33
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 64.

34
Letter to Huot, July 29, 1907, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 136. See also Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli*, *The Pearl upon the Crown* 18.

35
See Michel Chodkiewicz, Le Sceau des Saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn ʿArabî (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 178–179, and Claude Addas, "Introduction," in Ibn ʿArabî. Le Livre de la filiation spirituelle (Kitâb nasab al-khirqa), ed. and trans. Claude Addas (Marrakesh: Al Quobba Zarqua, 2000), 15–16.

36
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 30.

37
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 30.

38
"Notes sur l'Islam," *L'Initiation* 11 (August 1902): 99–107, in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 168.

39
Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 135–36.

40
Michel Chodkiewicz, introduction in *Abd el-Kader. Écrits spirituels*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 15–40. See also Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 133.

41
Marie D'Aire, *ʿAbd al-Qadir, Quelques documents nouveaux lus et approuvés par l'officier en mission auprés de l'émir* (Amiens: Imprimerie Yvert & Tellier, 1900), 247, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 134.

42
See Costantino Paonessa, "La contestation de la 'réforme' en Égypte à la fin du XIXe siècle: anarchistes et soufis," *Émulations - Revue de sciences sociales*, Varia, online (2022).

43
See Anthony T. Fiscella, "Kill the Audience: Ivan Aguéli's Universal Utopia of Anarchism and Is-

more on Shaykh ʿIllaysh and his teaching methods than on Aguéli's own involvement. The question becomes even more nuanced when we consider the transmission of the *khirqa akbariyya*, which Aguéli appeared to seek above all from Shaykh ʿIllaysh, whom he described as "the current representative of Ibn ʿArabi, that is to say, his school."[46]

The nature of Aguéli's initiation and the teachings he may have received from Shaykh ʿIllaysh are inseparable from broader inquiries into his understanding of Sufi doctrines, particularly those of Ibn ʿArabi and his commentators. Aguéli seems confident in this regard, writing to Huot: "The rare persons of our time who understand the master recognise that I perfectly understood him, but in an absolutely novel manner."[47] A compelling element supporting this claim is the opinion of the Swedish scholar Henrik Samuel Nyberg (1889–1974), who produced the first critical edition and academic study of Ibn ʿArabi's early epistles in 1919.[48] Nyberg's assessment, based on Aguéli's notes and correspondence, along with testimonies he personally gathered in Cairo, appears in an appendix to Gauffin's comprehensive biography.[49] Although critical of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas and somewhat dismissive of Aguéli's eccentricity, Nyberg nonetheless acknowledges Aguéli's profound mastery of Arabic, his serious commitment to Islamic practice, his involvement in Cairo's Sufi circles, and the esteem in which Egyptian peers held him, as well as his meticulous work in collecting, copying, and synthesising Ibn ʿArabi's manuscript writings.

It remains striking, however, that Aguéli ultimately presented and commented on only a limited selection of Ibn ʿArabi's writings. Among his publications in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, there is only a brief excerpt from chapter 558 of Ibn ʿArabi's magnum opus, *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*).[50] Of particular interest are two texts attributed to Ibn ʿArabi that Aguéli published in *La Gnose*. The first, which is the most famous, is the *Treatise on Unity (Risalat al-Ahadiyya)*, serialised by Aguéli in 1911.[51] This work continues to circulate under Ibn ʿArabi's name and has been reprinted numerous times. Yet, as Chodkiewicz demonstrated in his own study and translation, it is not actually a work of Ibn ʿArabi but rather of Awhad al-Din Balyani (d. 1288).[52] Aguéli was not unaware of the doubts concerning the text's attribution, acknowledging them in the introduction to his translation and noting the various manuscript versions at his disposal. Nevertheless, he remained convinced that it was indeed the work of the Shaykh al-akbar.[53] Despite this misjudgement, the doctrinal differences highlighted by Chodkiewicz—namely, that Balyani's metaphysical perspective is closer to the concept of absolute unity (*al-waḥdat al-muṭlaqa*) espoused by Ibn Sabʿin (1216–1270) than to Ibn ʿArabi—do not appear in Aguéli's writings. On the contrary, Aguéli repeatedly affirms the ultimate transcendence of the Divine being over its manifestations.[54] The second text attributed to Ibn ʿArabi and published by Aguéli in *La Gnose* explores the categories of initiation.[55] This work remains poorly known, as its manuscripts have not yet been critically edited, and its attribution has not been definitively settled by contemporary specialists. However, it is not considered part of Ibn ʿArabi's authenticated works.[56]

Ultimately, although these heuristic uncertainties raise valid concerns, they should not obscure Aguéli's evident mastery of the techni-

lam," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 237, note 3, and Simon Sorgenfrei, "Ivan Aguéli's Monotheistic Landscapes: From Perspectival to Solar Logics," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 63, 232, note 35.

44
On the modalities of affiliation to Sufi orders in the context of modern Egypt, see Rachida Chih and Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction, 38–42, and Gilbert Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:242–60. On the milieu of Shaykh ʿIllaysh specifically, see Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:129–67. The decline of the Shadhiliyya ʿArabiyya may, in fact, be attributed to its subversive nature, as it was not officially recognised among the confraternities by the council established by the Egyptian state in 1882, likely due to its ties with ʿUrabi. See Paonessa, "La contestation de la 'réforme' en Égypte," op. cit.

45
Frederick De Jong, *Ṭuruq and Ṭuruq-linked Institutions in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organizational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 173–74.

46
Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 135–36.

47
Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 135–36.

48
Henrik S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn ʿArabī: Nach Handschriften in Upsala und Berlin zum ersten Mal herausgegeben und mit Einleitung und Kommentar versehen* (Leiden: Brill, 1919).

49
Henrik S. Nyberg, "Aguéli och islam," in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:299–304.

50
See "I grandi iniziati musulmani" and "Dio il bello—la maestà della bellezza," *Il Convito* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25.

51
"L'identité suprême," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, op. cit.

52
Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī, *Épître sur l'Unicité Absolue*, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1982).

53
"L'identité suprême," 109–10.

54
See, for instance, the distinction between "the Lord" and "the One" in "L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 105; or the distinction between "neutral and absolute unity" and "primordial unity" in "Pages dédiées au soleil," 56.

cal vocabulary and concepts derived directly from Akbarian literature, which permeate his writings.[57] Aguéli's works contain numerous paraphrases and allusions to the *Futuhat*, such as his exposition of the principle of the union of opposites (*ijtimāʿ al-ḍiddayn*),[58] or his depiction of perplexity (*ḥayra*) as a form of knowledge in itself.[59] Aguéli also frequently refers to the doctrine of the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*),[60] particularly in his articulation with the figure of Adam: "The prophetic spirit is the doctrine of the 'Supreme Identity,' of the One-All in metaphysics, of the Universal Man in psychology, and of Integral Humanity in social organization. It began with Adam and was completed with Muhammad."[61] Another striking instance of the direct influence of Ibn ʿArabi's writings is found in the critique of the figure of Hallaj (858–922). While justifying Ibn ʿArabi's condemnation, Aguéli simultaneously expresses respect and compassion for Hallaj's martyrdom.[62] This stance contrasts with the widespread reverence Hallaj enjoyed in the West at the time. Aguéli's use of the concept of *malāmatī* is also worth noting, as he defines it in three ways: as a well-known historical movement; as a later tariqa in its own right; and as the highest rank in the spiritual hierarchy, a conception specific to Ibn ʿArabi.[63] All evidence indicates that Aguéli deeply understood Ibn ʿArabi's ideas and positions, and that his familiarity with the Shaykh al-akbar's works extended well beyond the limited selection of texts he chose to translate.

As Guermazi has demonstrated, Aguéli's efforts to disseminate Ibn ʿArabi's thought should be viewed as a continuation of Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir's project to develop a Muslim intellectual framework rooted in the teachings of the Shaykh al-akbar and capable of addressing the challenges of his time.[64] The Emir's initiatives, such as financing the publication of Ibn ʿArabi's monumental *Futuhat*,[65] served a purpose that extended beyond mere philological or intellectual interest. The same holds true for Aguéli, whose engagement with Ibn ʿArabi was not that of a historian of ideas, but of an activist seeking to present him as a thinker with contemporary significance.[66] While Aguéli's reading of Ibn ʿArabi remains deeply rooted in traditional interpretations and relatively conservative,[67] it simultaneously accentuates the humanistic and universalist dimensions of his thought.

Aguéli's project to revive and disseminate Ibn ʿArabi's thought culminated in creating the *Al-Akbariyya* society. This initiative was closely aligned with his editorial efforts at *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, where the promotion of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas was repeatedly emphasised,[68] and where the society's foundation was first announced in 1907, preceding its formal establishment in 1911.[69] Although *Al-Akbariyya* appears to have held only a single meeting—Aguéli having left Paris for Sweden shortly after its foundation—it is no exaggeration to view it as the founding act of Akbarian studies in the West. Through the influence of one of its signatories, René Guénon, the study and translation of Ibn ʿArabi's works would later flourish among several disciples of Michel Vâlsan and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998).[70] These disciples became prominent figures, either within esoteric circles—such as Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Martin Lings (1909–2005), and Charles-André Gilis (b. 1934)—or in academic contexts, including Michel Chodkiewicz (1929–2020),[71] Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), William Chittick

55
See "Les catégories de l'initiation," op. cit.

56
The text is known under two titles, *Risala fi Tartib al-Tasawwuf wa-Atwarihi* or *al-Salik wa-l-Murid*. See Osman Yahia, *Histoire et classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn ʿArabi: Étude critique* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1964), 2:506 (RG no. 769). Yahia lists two manuscripts, one of which is preserved in Cairo and was likely the source of Aguéli's translation.

57
Aguéli's works are replete with allusions to specific texts from the Sufi tradition. For instance, he references treatises on grammatical symbolism ("Pages dédiées à Mercure," 40). On this topic, see Chiabotti, "*Naḥw al-qulūb al-ṣaġīr*: La 'grammaire des cœurs' de ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qušayrī, Présentation et traduction annotée," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 8 (September 2009): 385–402. Similarly, the pages Aguéli dedicates to the origins of languages (*Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, no. 25 [1905]: 2) seem inspired by conceptions of the primordial language (*suryāniyya*) as formulated by the Moroccan Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Dabbagh (d. 1718), who is also regarded as the progenitor of the ʿIllaysh family. See Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:130, and Rocca, introduction, xviii, note 11.

58
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 56.

59
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 91. See also my doctoral dissertation: *Ḥayra: La perplexité chez Ibn ʿArabī; Épistémologie, métaphysique, herméneutique coranique* (PhD diss., UCLouvain, 2023).

60
See "Épître intitulée 'Le Cadeau,' " op. cit.

61
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88. See also "Épître intitulée 'Le Cadeau,' " in "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 11, note 3. On the articulation between the figures of Adam and Muhammad in Ibn ʿArabi's prophetology, see Gregory Vandamme, "Some Notes on Ibn ʿArabī's Correlative Prophetology," in *Thought and the Art of Translation: Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata*, ed. Mohamed Rustom, Islamic History and Civilization 202 (Boston: Brill, 2023), 97–116.

62
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 27–28.

63
See "El-Malâmatiyah," op. cit. The tariqa to which Aguéli refers here is likely that of the Melami, which developed in the Ottoman world and was deeply influenced by Ibn ʿArabi's thought. On this subject, see Ballanfat, *Unité et spiritualité: Le courant Melâmî-Hamzevî dans l'Empire ottoman* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013).

64
Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy,"

(b. 1943), and Denis Gril (b. 1949). In many respects, the foundation of *Al-Akbariyya* can also be seen as a precursor to the establishment of the *Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* (MIAS) in England nearly half a century later.[72]

The name *Al-Akbariyya* introduces a certain ambiguity, as it might suggest a Sufi tariqa. Although Ibn ʿArabi never founded a tariqa in the formal sense, several brotherhoods, particularly in India, have claimed affiliation with him.[73] While *Al-Akbariyya* was primarily an intellectual project—described by Aguéli as "a society for the scientific study of the life and works of Mohyeddin Ibn Arabi," to promote his thought "in East and West . . . through editions of his works but also through translations and philosophical and rational commentaries on his writings"—the society also had an overtly religious and practical dimension, with plans to construct a mosque in Paris that would serve as a centre for its activities.[74] Membership conditions were primarily doctrinal but also required freedom from the influence of any religious authority. As stated in the statutes: "Each member should: (1) Formally recognise the unity of the Supreme Being; (2) Acknowledge the Prophetic mission of Mohammed; (3) Express affinity for the Shaykhul Akbar Mohyeddin Ibn Arabi and a desire to study his works in order to develop esoterically and commit to develop to the limits of his possibility; (4) Pledge not to be influenced by any clergy that is Christian, Jewish, Magian, Buddhist, or pagan."[75]

It is worth noting that *Al-Akbariyya* embraced a diversity of esoteric influences while maintaining the exclusivity of Islam in matters of exoterism: "An Akbarite may belong to any school of esoterism . . . yet on the other hand he may not belong to any other exoterism than that of Islam (since Mohyeddin faithfully followed the Prophetic tradition, which is incomprehensible to non-Muslims)."[76] While members of *Al-Akbariyya* remain spiritually and socially free and independent, their common bond is the shariʿa: "A member has no further rights over another member, except for what is due by the Shariʿa, and no more. Apart from the formal obligations of the statutes, the Shariʿa is also the ultimate rule in the social interactions between different members."[77] This final paragraph of the statutes encapsulates Aguéli's conception of the relationship between individual freedom and the normative framework of Islam, a theme that will now be analysed in detail.

Islam: "The High Transcendental Distraction"

As we have seen, the traditional context in which Aguéli operates offers valuable insight into the primary orientations of his philosophy. However, to fully appreciate the more original aspects of his thought, it is equally important to consider the influence of his anarchist inclinations and how these were reshaped through his engagement with Ibn ʿArabi's doctrines. While some have interpreted the long history of autonomous pirate communities along the North African coasts as embodying a form of Muslim anarchism,[78] one of the most original aspects of Aguéli's thought lies in his attempt to reconcile anarchist ideals with a deep commitment to the Islamic tradition and its normative framework.[79]

128, 131–34.

65
Ibn ʿArabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, 4 vols. (Bulaq, Dār al-Kutb al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā, [1911]). This edition, collated from the autograph manuscript, remains the standard reference to this day, as no complete critical edition has yet been undertaken.

66
See the Letter to Huot, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 136.

67
This becomes clearer when comparing Aguéli's interpretation with that of his contemporary Reza Tevfik (1869–1949), who read the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as a treatise on agnosticism, drawing parallels to Spencer's concept of the Unknowable. See Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et francs-maçons en islam: Reza Tevfik, penseur ottoman (1868–1949), du soufisme à la confrérie*, Bibliothèque de l'institut français d'études anatoliennes d'Istanbul 37 (Istanbul: Institut français d'études anatoliennes-Maisonneuve, 1993).

68
See, for instance, "I grandi iniziati musulmani," *Il Convito* 4, no. 1 (May 1907): 19–25. An article authored by ʿIllaysh first appeared in Arabic under the title "al-Imām al-quṭb al-kabīr wa-l-kawkab al-ḍiyāʾ fī kulli zamān munīr (The Imam and great pole, the bright planet that forever illuminates)," *Il Convito* 4, no. 2 (June 1907): 59–60, before being published in Italian as "Il principe della religione, il gran polo spirituale, la stella brillante in tutti i secoli" (The Prince of the Religion, the Spiritual Grand Pole, the Shining Star in All Ages), *Il Convito* 4, no. 5–6 (September–December 1907): 154–57. See Paul-André Claudel, "Ivan Aguéli's Second Period in Egypt, 1902–9: The Intellectual Spheres around Il Convito/Al-Nadi," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 111.

69
"Miscellanea/Notizie," *Il Convito* 4, no. 3–4 (July 1907): 130–31. See also Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33, and Sedgwick, "The Significance of Ivan Aguéli," 165.

70
It should be noted that Schuon was at times surprisingly critical of Ibn ʿArabi, accusing him of an excessive "exotericism," see *Le soufisme: Voile et quintessence* (Paris: Dervy, 1980).

71
Chodkiewicz appears to be the only one among these authors to mention Aguéli by name, in the foreword to his *Le Sceau des saints*, 13.

72
Remarkably, studies on the history of MIAS fail to mention this precedent. Taji-Farouki includes a lengthy note—albeit containing errors, such as the claim that Aguéli outlived ʿIllaysh and changed tariqa after his death—that recognises Aguéli's pioneering role and its continuation by Guénon's collaborators. However, she makes no mention of the creation of *Al-Akbariyya*. See Suha Taji-Fa-

Aguéli's engagement with anarchist thought emerged almost simultaneously with his interest in Islam. It is recorded that he met Kropotkin in 1891 and borrowed a copy of the Qurʾan from the Swedish National Library in 1892.[80] By 1893, he was already quoting the Qurʾan in his correspondence and approaching the challenges he faced with an unshakable faith in the God of Islam.[81] However, despite the presence of anarchist thinkers and activists in Egypt during his first visit in 1894,[82] Aguéli showed no interest in them, gravitating instead toward the Sufi circles and scholarly milieu of Al-Azhar. These environments, however, were far from apolitical: Shaykh ʿIllaysh and his father were actively engaged in the politics of their time, particularly through their involvement in the ʿUrabi revolt, in which several Italian anarchists also participated.[83]

Aguéli's engagement with the political context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt aligns with the efforts of Shaykh ʿIllaysh, who aimed to provide an alternative to the reformist projects of Afghani (1839–1897), ʿAbduh (1849–1905), and Rida (1865–1935).[84] These prominent figures were the targets of several scathing critiques by Aguéli in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*. He described them as "the Calvinists of Islam," whose project aimed to "reduce Islam to a mere police regulation" and could only result in draining the religion of its spiritual essence. They were, in his view, "the fiercest adversaries of Ibn Arabi."[85] However, Aguéli's role extended beyond merely promoting Shaykh ʿIllaysh's political cause. His writings reveal an integration of his anarchist ideals with the Sufi vision of Islam espoused by his master.[86] This vision continues to resonate in Aguéli's later contributions to *La Gnose*, even though these writings addressed an entirely different context.[87]

Ultimately, Aguéli appears to have set aside political activism in favour of a project focused on spiritual and intellectual engagement. This shift is made explicit in the announcement of the creation of *Al-Akbariyya*: "The Society will not be concerned with political issues, whatever they are, and will never emerge outside the philosophical, religious, or theosophical circle on which it is based."[88] Although his contributions to *La Gnose* do not address the political concerns central to some of his articles in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*—which directly engaged with the situation in the Middle East and the relations between Muslim countries and colonial powers—they nonetheless reflect a consistent outlook, rooted in a staunch defence of individual freedom and a vision of Islam as a metaphysical worldview with universal significance.

The vision of Islam advocated by Aguéli is rooted in the doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi and in the interpretative tradition inherited from Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir and Murtada al-Zabidi.[89] It rests on a deliberate tension between the universal scope of Islam and its specificities. Faithful to the Arabic etymology and its traditional interpretation, Aguéli explains that Islam consists of surrendering to God, "that is, to follow one's destiny submissively." In light of the Sufi theological anthropology and its concept of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the ultimate destiny of every human being is to attain the highest degree of universality.[90] The Islam depicted by Aguéli is therefore "neither a mixed religion nor a new religion," but rather "the primitive and ancient faith" of humanity restored by the Prophet Muhammad.[91]

rouki, *Beshara and Ibn ʿArabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2007), 345–47, note 106. Isobel Jeffrey-Street, while discussing Guénon's role in spreading Ibn ʿArabi's thought in the introduction to her work, does not mention Aguéli at all. See Isobel Jeffrey-Street, *Ibn ʿArabi and the Contemporary West: Beshara and the Ibn ʿArabi Society* (Sheffield-Oakville: Equinox, 2012), 7–10.

73

For example, a branch of the Qadiriyya. See Octave Depont and Xavier Coppolani, *Les confréries religieuses musulmanes* (Paris: Maisonneuve-Geuthner, 1897): 319–20. In a letter dated November 8, 1950, Guénon claimed that Aguéli had informed him of the existence of an Akbarian tariqa in southern India; see Rocca, introduction, xxiii, note 23. On the close relationship between the dissemination of the Qadiriyya and the thought of Ibn ʿArabi, see my forthcoming article: "Devotion and Metaphysics in a Litany Ascribed to ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī," in *The "I" of the Heart: Texts and Studies in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Mohamed Rustom and Muhammad U. Faruque (Boston-Leiden: Brill, 2025).

74

See the reproduction of these statutes in Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

75

See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

76

Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33. This esoteric inclusivity is illustrated by the suggested reading list included as an annex to the statutes. It begins with a translation of Bukhari's hadith compilation but continues with the *Zohar*, Taoist writings, and the *Gita*. Notably, in the initial *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* article announcing the society's project, Aguéli even asserts that, given the political-religious context where he accuses Arab Jesuits of working to undermine Islam, "one can therefore be atheist and Akbari together, but one cannot be a Jesuit." See "Miscellanea/Notizie," *Il Convito*, no. 2 (May 1907): 130–31, and Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 121.

77

See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 128–33.

78

See Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995).

79

Fiscella, who provides a brief history of the intersections between Islam and anarchism, identifies Aguéli as the first figure to practically unite the two. See Anthony Fiscella, *Varieties of Islamic Anarchism: A Brief Introduction* (n.p.: Alpine Anarchist Production, 2014). Surprisingly, a recent essay exploring possible connections between Islam and anarchism makes no mention of Aguéli. See

Aguéli's twofold approach to tradition is again fully evident in how he articulates this vision of Islam with the historical Islamic tradition itself. On one hand, he clarifies: "It is well understood that Islam, in its true abstract and metaphysical sense, must not be confused with the political or ethnic communities of the East."[92] At the same time, he affirms: "Even in its exoteric form, Islam has always rejected the notion of being a new religion; it has consistently claimed the title of *Dīn al-Fiṭrah*, that is, the Primordial Religion, the one at the origin of Humanity."[93] Aguéli further adds that while Islam represents "the golden mean and balance between Judaism and Christianity," the religion closest to it in essence is Taoism. He supports this claim by referencing a hadith in which the Prophet is reported to have said: "Seek knowledge, even if it be in China." Such an inclusive vision of Islam did not originate with Aguéli himself and can notably be found in the writings of Ibn ʿArabi and Emir ʿAbd al-Qadir.[94] What is particularly striking, however, is that in a letter from 1894, prior to his formal conversion to Islam, Aguéli already appears to regard the faith of Muslims as closer to his monotheistic ideal: "What my faith consists of. What is Christianity? . . . Belief in a supreme being which is above all else, Allah . . . Monotheism is the essence of Christ's teachings, so significant that the faithful Muslim is more Christian than most Christians."[95] Here again, Aguéli's fundamental intuitions appear to have found a natural home in the Akbarian vision of Islam. This suggests that what was initially personal and intimate to him eventually aligned with the framework of the tradition in which he would later situate himself.

The contemplative and metaphysical approach to Islam formulated by Aguéli is rooted in the theophanic perspective of Ibn ʿArabi, which perceives the world as a veil that simultaneously conceals and reveals Divine reality. Viewed as independent entities, things are mere illusions or idols: "The tangible Universe is nothing more than an immense collective, hereditary, and deep-seated hallucination."[96] However, when seen from the correct perspective, these same things become manifestations and revelations of the One God: "I consider the world to be a book of God, like any other. Its signs are everywhere, and we are among them."[97] The Islam presented by Aguéli is therefore not a rejection of the world but rather a way of reintegrating things into their proper perspective: "When contemplated in isolation, they may appear real, but this is an illusion. However, this illusion is not diabolical, as certain schools claim. On the contrary, it is so sacred that religion obliges us to believe in it under pain of heresy and posthumous punishment."[98]

The relationship with God is what allows breaking free from the illusory aspect of the world. According to Aguéli, it is "the high transcendental distraction" through which human beings can liberate themselves from their conditioning: "What I place above all else, what is everything to me, that is my God. God is what distracts me from all that is not Him. They who do not know how to gather themselves together on any given point of existence, they alone are the atheists. For faith, in short, is nothing but the high transcendental distraction."[99] All the ritual practices and norms of Islam ultimately converge on this quest for unification: "Islam, as a religion, is the path of unity and totality."[100]

Mohamed Abdou, *Islam and Anarchism: Relationships and Resonances* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

80
See Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 83.

81
"Praise is due to Allah forever! 'After difficulty comes relief' (Qurʾan 94:5–6). Constraint and liberation actually lead to the same result for the one who is blessed, just as they lead to the same result for the one who is cursed." Letter to Richard Bergh, October 10, 1893, cited in Gauffin, *Ivan Aguéli*, 2:188, and in Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 84.

82
Fiscella highlights figures such as Shibli Shumayyil (1850–1917), author of what is likely the first anarchist text in Arabic, as well as the Free and Popular University group in Alexandria, see Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 86–87.

83
See Paonessa, "La contestation de la 'réforme' en Égypte," op. cit.

84
Shaykh ʿIllaysh's opposition to ʿAbduh was particularly forceful, as he prevented him from teaching at Al-Azhar and had his turban removed, to the extent that ʿAbduh was compelled to teach with a cudgel by his side for self-defence. See Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:135. The ʿIllaysh family also maintained close ties with the renowned Palestinian scholar and polymath Yusuf Nabahani (1850–1932), a staunch opponent of ʿAbduh's modernist reformism. See Francesco Chiabotti, "Yūsuf b. Ismāʿīl al-Nabahānī (m. 1932), *adīb* soufi au temps de la Réforme," in *Adab and Modernity: A "Civilising Process"? (Sixteenth–Twenty-First Century)*, ed. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2020), 506–07.

85
"La moschea 'Umberto,' " *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*, 4, no. 3–4 (July–August 1907): 103–11. See also Claudel, "Ivan Aguéli's Second Period in Egypt," 111–13, and Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 123. On the political-religious context of Egypt during this period, the dynamics involving Al-Azhar scholars, Sufi circles, and the ʿIllaysh family in particular, see Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London-New York: Tauris, 2009).

86
See Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 115–26.

87
The political orientation of the esoteric circles associated with *La Gnose* stands in clear contrast to anarchism, as it often advocates for societal organisation based on spiritual hierarchies. See, for instance, the article by F.-Ch. Barlet, "Principes de sociologie synthétique," in *L'Initiation* 22 (1894): 97–134, which outlines an ideal form of government structured around various institutional organs,

In his *Notes sur l'Islam*, published in 1902, Aguéli outlines a definition of Islam grounded in this unifying experience, integrating the ritual and doctrinal dimensions of the religion to sustain it: "*Islam is above all a mental state*,[101] which results from worship that is at once sincere, hieratic, and ritualistic. Doctrinal details are meaningless for one who does not practice."[102] For Aguéli, ritual practice serves as an "insulator," protecting and supporting the effort to distract oneself from the world: "Religion strengthens the Muslim by separating him from everything that is not God, leaving him alone with the force of forces. *Islam is a great insulator*, and the more perfect the isolation, the more strength is gained . . . The one who prays has God before them and the world behind them."[103] For Aguéli, religious norms are thus tools for inner emancipation rather than externally imposed rules: "*Islam is a discipline that emancipates*. Both regional and universal, it places one's homeland in the heart of man, preparing him to feel at home everywhere."[104]

This principle of personal freedom, which Aguéli sees as fundamental to the Islamic religion, allows it to dispense with any formal organisation of the sacred: "Islam is the only religion in the world that can do without clergy or priestly institutions in any form while remaining firmly rooted in the foundations of Tradition."[105] The essence of Islam, according to Aguéli, lies in the personal, inner experience of the practitioner, rather than in any external normative framework to which they must conform. Even the theological doctrines of Islam, he argues, aim to preserve the mystery of divine presence: "One cannot explain to the ordinary man how God does everything, how He is everywhere, and how each person carries Him within themselves."[106] The ritual and normative framework of Islam must not, therefore, replace the divine presence or act as an intermediary between the believer and God. Instead, it should serve to prepare the Muslim to realise this presence and to act accordingly: "One must avoid anything resembling a clergy, even remotely . . . Heaven is like nature, which always answers truthfully when questioned properly, but only then."[107] In other words, for Aguéli, the essence of Islam is not located in its formal manifestations but in the experience of the informal reality that these forms are meant to facilitate. Even the Qurʾan itself is not a necessary condition for the existence of Islam; rather, it is the reality of Islam that constitutes the necessary condition for the Qurʾan: "Let us suppose for a moment that all copies of the Sublime Recitation could be destroyed, and all believers killed to the last: Islam would still live, for its homeland is not of this world. God does not need us, but we need Him."[108]

Aguéli's radically metaphysical approach to Islam, however, is not divorced from its formal substratum. Instead, it seeks to integrate the religion's doctrinal and normative elements as instruments for communicating this perspective: "Formalism is obligatory; it is not superstition but a universal language." While "universal intelligence" is the heart of the Islamic experience, its formal aspects are nonetheless akin to a circulatory system, allowing this intelligence to flow through human society: "Since universality is the principle and raison d'être of Islam, and since, on the other hand, language is the means of communication among rational beings, it follows that the exoteric formulas are as important to the religious organism as arteries are to

explicitly aiming to "save our societies from death and anarchy" (Barlet, "Principes de sociologie synthétique," 107). On the political implications of Aguéli's writings and the continuity between his publications in *Il Convito/Al-Nadi* and *La Gnose*, see Hatina, "Where East Meets West," op. cit.

88
"Miscellanea/Notizie," *Il Convito*, no. 2 (May 1907): 130–31. See Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 121.

89
Traces of a metaphysical and universalist conception of the notion of religion (*dīn*) in Islam are already evident in Murtada al-Zabidi's thought. See Stefan Reichmuth, "The Arabic Concept of *Dīn* and Islamic Religious Sciences in the 18th Century: The Case of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791)," *Oriens* 44, no. 1–2 (2016): 94–115.

90
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88–89.

91
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 101.

92
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 63, note 32. Notably, this assertion—that "Islam must not be confused with Muslims"—can already be found in the early issues of *Il Convito/Al-Nadi*: "Perché sono disprezzati i mussulmani. Non bisogna confondere l'Islam con i Mussulmani," *Il Convito*, no. 7 (July 17, 1904). See Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 118.

93
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 23.

94
See the recent study by Faris Abdelhadi, *Ibn ʿArabī's Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity* (London: Routledge, 2024). ʿAbd al-Qadir expresses this view in the following terms: "Religion is one, and it is so by the agreement of the prophets. For they differ in their opinions only regarding certain details and rules. Indeed, they resemble men who have the same father, each of them having a different mother." *Rappel à l'intelligent, avis à l'indifférent*, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 130.

95
Letter to von Hausen, April 24, 1894, cited in Sorgenfrei, "The Great Aesthetic Inspiration," 11.

96
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 56.

97
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 31.

98
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 56.

99
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 57.

the animal body."[109] The metaphysical reality of Islam is therefore never entirely separate from its formal manifestations but remains latent within each of them: "As a universal religion, [Islam] has degrees, but each of these degrees is truly Islam, meaning that any aspect of Islam reveals the same principles."[110] As Aguéli succinctly puts it, Islam is thus "esotero-exoteric."[111]

For Aguéli, the fullest expression of this metaphysical and integrative perspective of Islam is found in the Sufi teachings of the Akbarian tradition: "The 'Supreme Identity' (*Wahdatul-wujûd* = the identity of Existence) is based on the perfect accord between the external and the internal."[112] Aguéli critiques the conventional understanding of mysticism, which he considers inadequate for describing Akbarian Sufism. The latter, he argues, is genuinely metaphysical—or, in his own terminology, "mathematical": "The lucid mysticism of the 'Supreme Identity' should not be confused with those schools of past and present times that are commonly referred to as mysticism or neo-mysticism, etc. We replace Theology with Mathematics."[113] However, the Sufi spiritual path necessarily unfolds within the formal framework of Islam, which guarantees its metaphysical orientation and universal scope: "The formula of *Et-Tawhîd*, or monotheism, is a common *sharaïte* principle. The meaning you ascribe to this formula is your personal affair, as it pertains to your Sufism. Any deductions you may draw from this formula are more or less valid, provided they do not abolish its literal meaning; for doing so would destroy the Islamic unity, that is, its universality."[114] The Sufi spiritual teachings presented by Aguéli thus align both with the principles of Islamic religious norms and with the inalienable personal freedom that underpins spiritual life: "The true Sheikh is not the one who moulds the aspirant in his own image, but rather the one who, on the contrary, develops the *morîd* (the aspirant) according to the will of God . . . You believe you are walking in the footsteps of the Sheikh, whereas, in reality, you are following your own path, the path that is personal to you according to divine destiny."[115] This conception of Sufi spiritual education corresponds to that of Ibn ʿArabi, as expressed in his famous maxim: "It is through God that one comes to know the masters, not through the masters that one comes to know God."[116]

"Besides, Who Is Free?": An Anarchist View of Shariʿa

The way Aguéli managed to transform his anarchist aspirations through his engagement with the doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the conception of shariʿa. Fiscella has noted that Aguéli "never described anarchism in Islamic terms nor Islam in anarchist terms," and suggested that his approach "conformed to a pattern of people from Europe who adopted individualistic interpretations of foreign traditions."[117] Hatina asserted that he never successfully reconciled his anarchist ideal of freedom with the constraining framework of tradition, and that his thought was thus riddled with contradictions.[118] As we have seen, Aguéli actually operated within the framework of a well-established tradition, and his conception of Sufism fully integrated the Islamic religious norm. Furthermore, while Aguéli presented Islam as a religion without clergy, he held the notion

100
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 89.

101
Aguéli himself emphasises these definitions.

102
"Notes sur l'Islam," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 164.

103
"Notes sur l'Islam," 165.

104
"Notes sur l'Islam," 164.

105
"L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," in *Écrits pour La Gnose*, 106.

106
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 89.

107
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88.

108
"Notes sur l'Islam," 161.

109
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 90.

110
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 89.

111
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 101.

112
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 26.

113
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 60–61, note 26. It should be noted that this conception of mysticism precedes his engagement with the Akbarian tradition, as is already evident in a letter from 1893, where he discusses his interest in "so-called Mysticism, which under closer inspection is found to be non-mysticism, but instead the chemistry and mathematics of the thought and will, or rather chemistry and physiology." Letter to Bianchini, February 3, 1893, cited in Sorgenfrei, "The Great Aesthetic Inspiration," 5.

114
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 90.

115
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 33.

116
Ibn ʿArabi, *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, 2:366. See also my forthcoming article: "L'éducation spirituelle et le "maître imaginaire" selon Ibn ʿArabī dans son *K. al-Ajwiba al-ʿarabiyya fī sharḥ al-naṣāʾiḥ al-yūsufiyya*," in *Sainteté et héritage prophétique en islam: Études sur Ibn al-ʿArabī et l'histoire de la sainteté à la mémoire de Michel Chodkiewicz*, ed. Denis Gril (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2025).

of tradition itself in the highest regard and considered the instruction of a spiritual master to be an indispensable element of that tradition.[119] One might therefore ask what remains of the anarchist ideal in Aguéli's writings after his integration into the Akbarian tradition.

The ideal of freedom, as we have seen, lies at the heart of Aguéli's approach. However, all indications suggest that his conception of freedom underwent a profound transformation as he deepened his understanding of the doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi. As illustrated by the title of a 2021 exhibition at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, Aguéli's quest for freedom was grounded in questioning the very notion of freedom itself: *"*Besides, who is free?"[120] Rather than seeking liberation from sociopolitical structures, the emancipation advocated by Aguéli aimed to liberate the individual from their own conditioning and emotions: "Sentimentality is a kind of inner idolatry, in the same way as the idol is collective sentimentality in tangible form."[121] Aguéli thus denounces, from the vantage point of Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysical perspective, the illusory freedom that imprisons the individual within this sentimentality. Chief among these, he argues, is the freedom claimed by so-called free thinkers, whom he accuses of being more religious than they realise: "Free thinkers should have been our brothers; but, lacking breadth, they stopped halfway and, succumbing to the obscure instinct of the 'religious animal,' they established themselves as pontiffs like the others, only without the art."[122]

Aguéli's ideal of freedom is therefore a quest for self-liberation—a struggle against the limitations and conditionings of the individual perspective—rather than a struggle to free oneself from others. True to his principle of distraction, any focus on an object from this individual perspective is, for Aguéli, an attachment to a form of "fetish" or idol: "This is how I understand a modern monotheism: fanatical towards oneself, tolerant towards others . . . It is a balance within the self and not outside of it. Whoever has his centre of gravity exclusively in exterior things is a fetishist."[123] This radical interiorisation of the process of emancipation aligns with Ibn ʿArabi's treatment of practical virtues. In the second section of his *Futuhat*, dealing with ethics (*faṣl al-muʿāmalāt*), each chapter dedicated to a particular virtue is followed by another discussing its renunciation (*tark*), which entails the internal reintegration of the objectivities of ethical consciousness.[124] Aguéli appears to draw inspiration from this logic when discussing the notion of humility: "It means nothing to be humble or not, as we are all nothingness. They have turned humility into a virtue, a goal, whereas it is merely a means, an exercise, and a form of training. It is just a small station on the journey, where one stops as needed. Vanity is foolishness. Misplaced humility can be equally so."[125]

Another fundamental aspect of the path to emancipation advocated by Aguéli seems to diverge from anarchist ideals: the recognition of a natural hierarchy to which one must conform. Faithful to Qurʾanic cosmology and the doctrinal developments of Ibn ʿArabi and his commentators, Aguéli emphasises the polarisation of reality, described as a "world of opposites" (*ʿālam al-aḍḍād*). The hierarchical order of this world, fragmented by rational thought, must be reconstituted by the spiritual intelligence of the heart, which alone is capable of unifying and ordering what has been divided.[126] Aguéli draws on an expres-

117
Fiscella, "Kill the Audience," 93.

118
Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision," 148.

119
The context of Egypt in which Aguéli was situated also holds significance in this regard. While Shaykh ʿIllaysh was renowned for his zeal in observing the Sunna and the Maliki tradition (see Delanoue, *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*, 1:131–32), the dynamics of Egypt's modern scholars often ran counter to Ottoman efforts to systematise and hierarchise religious norms. See Chih and Mayeur-Jaouen, introduction, 35–36, 52–53.

120
This title is drawn from the conclusion of a letter Aguéli wrote to the Finnish painter Werner von Hausen on July 14, 1894: "*Du reste, qui est libre?*" See https://www.nationalmuseum.se/en/du-reste-qui-est-libre-vem-är-förresten-fri, accessed Oct. 30, 2024.

121
"L'Islam et les religions anthropomorphiques," 106.

122
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 26–27.

123
Letter to von Hausen, 1894, cited in Guermazi, "Ivan Aguéli and the Islamic Legacy," 128.

124
Ibn ʿArabi, *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, 2:139–213.

125
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 92.

126
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 32.

sion dear to Ibn ʿArabi, defining wisdom (*ḥikma*) as "the art of placing each thing in its rightful place."[127] This ontological hierarchy finds its counterpart in Aguéli's vision of a social hierarchy, one not based on privileges but rather on the responsibilities that wisdom demands in proportion to its realisation: "The Arab social principle is both fraternal and aristocratic. The wealthy, the learned, and the strong bear duties toward the poor, the ignorant, and the weak."[128] The ideal society described by Aguéli is thus far from being anarchist. On the contrary, he characterises it as an "Islamic aristo-democracy."[129]

The notion of shariʿa takes on a unique meaning in Aguéli's thought. It integrates the preservation of radical individual freedom with the maintenance of the ontological hierarchy that serves as its necessary condition. In this sense, Aguéli's conception of shariʿa encapsulates the entirety of his spiritual and intellectual approach. He refers to what he sees as both the foundation and the ultimate aim of the shariʿa as "lordly freedom" (*liberté dominicale*), in the sense of sovereign or divine freedom. This freedom is "original, innate, extra-temporal" and always exists in the individual: "It cannot be destroyed, it is inevitable, as it constitutes the reason for each person's existence."[130] According to Aguéli, the shariʿa seeks to preserve and cultivate this freedom, not to restrict it: "The Law that acknowledges this secret, as well as its inaccessible, inviolable, and incommunicable nature, guarantees the most precious of humanity's four cardinal freedoms, for it is the expression of the highest form of life."[131]

Unsurprisingly, Aguéli draws direct inspiration from Ibn ʿArabi's conception of the shariʿa: "Mohyiddin ibn Arabi refers to exclusivists—that is, fanatics and those astray—as those who exhort you to be like them and do as they do in all things, failing to respect the legitimate freedom of the individual. Everything comes from God: the disbelief of the faithful as well as the faith of the believer. Any zeal outside of public matters is an inconsiderate act, committed by those with a crude understanding of God's power."[132] For Aguéli, the shariʿa functions as a bridge between the most intimate and irreducibly personal aspects of each individual—"I say that the light of the same Sun is not the same for everyone"[133]—and that which is necessarily universal and communal. This ability to make the shared law a pathway for personal realisation is, for him, "a distinctive feature of Islam" and "the central point of the idea of Muhammad the Prophet."[134]

The junction between the individual and collective dimensions of the shariʿa is achieved through another concept employed by Aguéli: that of the "average man" (*l'homme moyen*). While this term appears to be borrowed from the social sciences of his time, particularly the statistical sociology of the Belgian scientist Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874),[135] Aguéli assigns it a completely different meaning. Hatina errs in suggesting that Aguéli viewed the formalism and observance of the shariʿa as pertaining to the average man in a pejorative sense of mediocrity, in contrast to a select few elevated individuals with access to esoteric knowledge.[136] In Aguéli's thought, the average man represents an abstract reality that does not pertain to specific individuals but rather encompasses humanity as a whole, uniting all classes within the spiritual and social hierarchy: "The fusion of the elite and the common, the Islamic aristo-democracy, can be achieved without violence

127
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 45.

128
"Notes sur l'Islam," 164.

129
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 86.

130
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 121–31.

131
"Pages dédiées au Soleil," 63. These four cardinal freedoms find their fullest expression in different contexts according to Aguéli: divine freedom (*liberté dominicale*) in Islam, political freedom in Celtic England, intellectual freedom in France, and sentimental freedom in Italy, "Pages dédiées au Soleil," note 32.

132
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 31. For more on Ibn ʿArabi's conception of the Shariʿa, see Samer Dajani, *Sufis and Sharīʿa: The Forgotten School of Mercy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

133
"Pages dédiées à Mercure," 46.

134
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 86.

135
See Maurice Halbwachs, *La théorie de l'homme moyen: Essai sur Quetelet et la statistique morale* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1913).

136
Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision," 147.

and without promiscuity thanks to the specifically Islamic institution of a conventional type of humanity, which I will call, for lack of a better term, the average man or human normality . . . This type is always fictitious and never real. It serves as a neutral and impersonal insulator that facilitates certain pre-arranged and regulated relationships."[137] The average man thus functions as an insulator between individuals, much as religion itself acts as an insulator between the presence of God and the world, as previously discussed. It encompasses every individual without exception and provides the shariʿa with its universal dimension: "Being no one and everyone, without any concrete reality, always the rule, never the exception, it is nothing more than a universal standard of measure for all conceivable social, moral, and religious rights and duties . . . Through it, the social state of the Arab-Semitic tribe, which is an ideal of justice, integration, cooperation, and solidarity, can expand over the entire Universe."[138]

In this way, the shariʿa formally preserves that which remains resolutely informal within human consciousness: "The formalism, the institution of the average man, allows the primitive man to achieve universality without losing any of those precious characteristics attached to the primordial, quasi-paradisiacal Adamism. It is precisely the 'average man' who is the object of the *Shariyah* or sacred law of Islam."[139] The breadth of shariʿa norms is justified by the diversity of individuals. Because the shariʿa applies to the average man, who synthesises all individuals, it is thus a practical implementation of the notion of the Integral or Perfect Man: "Certain prescriptions of the Shariʿa may appear absurd in the eyes of Europeans. However, they have their raison d'être. A universal religion must take into account all intellectual and moral levels . . . The average man establishes around each person a kind of neutrality that guarantees all individualities while obliging them to work for all of humanity. History knows no other practical form of integral humanity."[140] Due to this universal scope, the shariʿa is not a closed and immutable corpus of norms. On the contrary, it necessarily evolves alongside the development of the average man throughout history, requiring the ongoing effort of adaptation and commentary that constitutes the broader Islamic tradition.[141]

The concept of the average man thus enables Aguéli to reconcile the normative prescriptions of the shariʿa with the radical freedom of each individual. On one hand, the shariʿa concerns only the common and formal aspects of human existence.[142] On the other, it allows each individual to recognise as illusory their attachment to the formal particularities that constitute them: "There is no difference between you and others. You are the others, all the others, all things. All things and all the others are you. We only reflect one another . . . If, regarding a theft, you cannot understand that you are both the thief and the victim; that, in a murder, you are both the murderer and the slain . . . you would be better off not studying esotericism, for you are wasting your time . . . I am not saying that all humans are the same, but I am saying that they are all 'the same.' "[143]

The shared framework of the shariʿa enables the individual to transcend the illusion of collective relations and to transform them into a means of spiritual conversion: "The doctrine of identity and unity is more developed in Islam than elsewhere. Its precious esotero-exoteric

137 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 86–87.

138 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 86–87.

139 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 87–88.

140 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 87–88.

141 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 87–88.S

142 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 98.

143 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 98.

quality stems above all from its conception of collective reality as an indispensable agent in transforming personal reality into human Universality or prophetic reality."[144] True to Ibn ʿArabi's vision, Aguéli holds that the reality of the shariʿa is esoteric, insofar as it aims to distract the Muslim's inner self from an illusory relationship with the world: "It may seem strange that obedience to laws can yield such a brilliant result, but one must not forget that the law being obeyed is not man's law but God's law, the 'Sharia.' Yet it is primarily a matter of conforming to its esoteric meaning, which is a magnificent doctrine of universality and hieratism . . . Respect for the rights of others—persons, beasts, or things—not out of fear of men or devils but out of love for God, universal harmony, and cosmic responsibility, constitutes the very spirit of the 'Supreme Identity' or Arab-Muslim esotericism."[145] In other words, the shariʿa enables humanity to integrate into the ontological hierarchy and to conform to it by using the world as a means rather than an end in itself: "The sacred Law of Islam, the 'Sharia' (= the great Path, the exterior Path) encompasses material life with rites, ceremonies and various considerations and obligations, solely to teach us that things exist, how they exist and the proper measure of respect due to their existence. The canonical laws of Islam are, without doubt, a social order, but above all they are a magnificent treatise on symbolism which assigns each thing to its proper place in the universal hierarchy."[146]

Aguéli does not refer to an abstract or idealised vision of the shariʿa, as he integrates the practical application of Islamic jurisprudence into his conception. Islamic law as exercised by the jurists represents for him the enactment of God's rights: "The doctors of the Shariyah are always infallible when they speak 'ex cathedra,' in the name of the Law and the Tradition, because they then participate in the infallibility of the Doctrine itself."[147] Aguéli repeatedly defends the democratic and liberal nature of Islamic legal practice, describing it as a flexible system that rests on individual consent and offers a wide array of accommodations.[148] This flexibility inherent in Islamic norms means that they are never formulated in an ideal or synthetic manner, as they must necessarily adapt to those unaware of their true nature: "The heaviest tax in Islam is not the tithe, but democracy and respect for certain rights of ignorance."[149]

For Aguéli, the shariʿa constitutes the most universal path to emancipation. Far from imposing limits on human freedom, it offers a framework for transcending individual conditioning, allowing one to rediscover the informal and radically free dimension of existence. In other words, it is within and through the shariʿa that Aguéli locates the realisation of perfect freedom: "We struggle through a religious duty imposed upon us, which we fulfil with humble joy."[150]

Conclusion

This brief overview of Ivan Aguéli's philosophy has shown how the various elements of Islamic tradition he engages with are deeply intertwined with his ideal of freedom. Furthermore, by situating Aguéli's thought within the continuity of the Akbarian tradition, we can interpret his work—despite its originality and eclecticism—as an expres-

144 "L'Universalité en l'Islam," 99–100.

145 "Épître intitulée 'Le Cadeau,' " in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 16, note 7.

146 "Pages dédiées au Soleil," 56.

147 "El-Malâmatiyah," in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 67–70.

148 See "La moschea 'Umberto,' " op. cit., and "L'Universalité en l'Islam," in *Écrits pour la Gnose*, 89. See also Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision," 141–42.

149 "Pages dédiées à Mercure," 27–28.

150 "Notes sur l'Islam," 161.

sion of that lineage, contributing to the ongoing efforts of his predecessors to revive and disseminate Ibn ʿArabi's teachings.

The case of Aguéli reveals the hermeneutical potential and adaptability of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas. His philosophy illustrates—sometimes disconcertingly, yet always provocatively—how Ibn ʿArabi's thought continued to invigorate Islamic philosophy well into the twentieth century. The defining characteristic of Ibn ʿArabi's thought that Aguéli cultivates and develops lies in its capacity to structure itself around paradoxes that balance the informal with the formal, the universal with the particular, and the collective with the individual. In this way, Aguéli's philosophy reflects what Thomas Bauer has identified as the "culture of ambiguity" inherent in the Islamic tradition.[151] The interplay between the framework of tradition and personal creativity, or between religious law and the quest for freedom, runs throughout his work, revealing its deeper significance and broader reach.

While Aguéli's philosophy ultimately operates within a metaphysical perspective, it also incorporates practical considerations and social and political reflections. As we have seen, the formal and normative framework of the Islamic religion is neither relativised nor undermined by Aguéli. Instead, it is elucidated and justified within this metaphysical perspective. Although Aguéli's thought significantly pushes the boundaries of Islamic norms, he never openly criticises traditional structures or institutions.[152] However, one should not conclude that Aguéli merely reinforces established religious authorities, much less than he endorses the various attempts at politicising the Islamic religion that were prevalent in his time. For him, the spiritual authority of Islam is irreducible to any form of institution or clergy and must, in this regard, remain independent of historical contingencies. He vehemently opposes efforts to appropriate Islamic doctrines for political purposes, particularly when such appropriations lead to conflict.[153] Aguéli's activism is fundamentally spiritual and metaphysical. For him, if there is a Jihad to be waged, it is the struggle for spiritual emancipation and the realisation of Islam's metaphysical perspective. He contends that the colonisation of the Muslim world by Western powers became possible precisely because this supreme Jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) had been neglected, and Muslims had failed to convey this intellectual and spiritual vision to the West.[154]

Aguéli's philosophy also reveals the paradoxical dimension of the question of universality. Islam is for him "the best spiritual communication agent that exists," for it is capable of preserving cultural diversity and particularities by integrating them into its metaphysical perspective.[155] While the expansion of modern Western civilisation has established only a "material international" order, Aguéli argues that Islam has consistently revitalised the spiritual life of nations.[156] True to this perspective, Aguéli does not oppose Islam and the West. On the contrary, he sees the political and ideological polarisations of his time as a "war of evil against evil," arguing that only the union of East and West can bring about the advent of an authentic "kingdom of God."[157] While Aguéli can, in many respects, be considered one of the progenitors of the Traditionalist movement, his conception of Islam's universal dimension stands apart from the views of figures with a far more pronounced influence. Lipton's analysis of the Traditionalist interpreta-

151
Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel, 2011). See the English translation, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

152
Hatina, "Ivan Aguéli's Humanist Vision," 147.

153
See "Pages dédiées à Mercure," 26–27.

154
"Notes sur l'Islam," 163.

155
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88.

156
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 88; "Notes sur l'Islam," 164.

157
"Notes sur l'Islam," 162. In an unpublished text titled *Les Européens et les Musulmans*, Aguéli emphasises the importance of distinguishing "between Europe and Europe." See Fotros, *Ivan Aguéli: Sensation of Eternity*, 121.

tions of Ibn ʿArabi fails to account for the paradoxes and structural tensions inherent in Aguéli's interpretations. He sees Aguéli's adherence to the framework of the shariʿa as evidence of Islamic absolutism,[158] a reading that clearly overlooks the subtilities of Aguéli's own definition of Islam and the shariʿa, as we have seen.[159]

Ultimately, it is perhaps in Aguéli's resistance to any form of classification or simplification that his philosophy most closely mirrors the approach of Ibn ʿArabi. His ability to transcend antinomies reflects what he understood as the distinctly Muhammadian nature of the Shaykh al-akbar's teaching: "The personal and collective realities, the will and the need, the outward and the inward, the unity and the plurality, the One and the All, merge into a third reality, which Islam alone knows, acknowledges, and professes. This reality is the Muḥammadian or prophetic reality."[160] While Aguéli regarded himself primarily as a servant of the saints, his devotion was unmistakably oriented toward embodying and upholding what Ibn ʿArabi articulated as Muhammadian sainthood.

158
See Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi*, 129–30.

159
It is worth noting that, whereas Lipton emphasises the connection between the "Aryanist" approach and the universalist reading of Ibn ʿArabi by Guénon and, in particular, Schuon, Aguéli repeatedly asserts that the true universality of Islam lies in its "Semitic" character. Ibn ʿArabi's Sufism is described by Aguéli as the "Arab school of Muslim esotericism," in contrast to the Persian school, which he critiques for a preciousness and intellectualism that Ibn ʿArabi consistently avoided (see "Pagées dédiées au Soleil," 53; and Marchi, "Sufi Teachings for Pro-Islamic Politics," 256, note 41). Conversely, Luther's theology is deemed inferior to the Semitic perspective for being overly Aryan, while the highest thought of the Renaissance is said to have "developed to the Arab rhythms of the troubadours" (see "Notes sur l'Islam," 162).

160
"L'Universalité en l'Islam," 83.

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Ibn ʿArabi between East and West: Henry Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism

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Abstract
This article examines how the work of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240) became a site of contention between two influential contemporary interpretations of Sufism. This dissension involved the pioneering French scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), author of the book *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* (1958), and the Urdu literary critic, Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919–1978). In 1963, the French periodical *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* published a polemical essay by Askari, titled "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," provoking a scathing response from Corbin. In his essay, Askari, an early proponent of Urdu literary modernism who later espoused anti-Western and Islamic conservative views, claimed to represent the positions of René Guénon (1886–1951), the French metaphysician who inspired the Traditionalist school of thought as well as Akbarian studies. In his response, Corbin criticized Askari's dogmatic "Guénonism" and its rationalistic distortions of Ibn ʿArabi. Thus, while looking at a significant episode in the reception of Ibn ʿArabi in the twentieth century, this article reconsiders a prevalent view that associates Corbin with Guénonian Traditionalism.

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Introduction

In 1963, the prominent French periodical *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* published a polemical article, translated from the Urdu, titled "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard." Its author, Muhammad Hasan Askari (1919–1978), was all but unknown in France. A literary critic who initially acquired prominence in British India as a pioneer of Urdu literary modernism, he migrated to the newly-created state of Pakistan, where he adopted anti-Western positions and defended Islamic traditionalism. If there is one name associated with this later period in Askari's thought, it is that of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya, more famously known as René Guénon (1886–1951), the main inspiration behind the Traditionalist school of thought.[1] Thus, in the above article, it is Guénon whom Askari cites as the main source for his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi. From Guénon, Askari derives a view that opposes "East" and "West," with the former conceived as the seat of Tradition—the timeless, sacred source of truth and social order—and the latter as the main agent of the negation and dissolution of Tradition in the modern world.

Askari's article provoked a scathing response from the influential French scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), author of the pioneering study *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* (1958), which Askari had derided. While defending his own interpretation of the Andalusian mystic, Corbin went on the offensive, attacking Askari as an example of what he saw as a trend toward dogmatic "Guénonism." Turning the tables on his critic, Corbin contended that Askari's article evinced a lack of knowledge of Ibn ʿArabi's writings; that it imposed on Ibn ʿArabi a rationalist grid of interpretation imported from modern Western categories, resulting in systematic distortions; and that it seemed ignorant of a long tradition of religious and philosophical interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi that has survived into present-day Iran.

By focusing on this little-known but illuminating dispute between Askari and Corbin, the present article challenges a widespread assumption that indiscriminately associates Corbin with the Traditionalists. Instead, it shows that, despite some thematic and lexical similarities, Corbin's project diverged in significant ways from Traditionalism. In the first section, I discuss the motives and context behind Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, in particular the role of Eranos in his conception of an esoteric religion existing across historical and national boundaries. In the second section, I outline Askari's intellectual development, highlighting his turn from literary modernism to anti-Western Islamic traditionalism inspired by Guénon. The last two sections, respectively, discuss Askari's article and Corbin's response.

Ibn ʿArabi at Eranos: Corbin's Transhistorical Esoterism

Originally published in 1958, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi* is based on two lectures that Corbin gave at Eranos in 1955 and 1956, respectively, with the titles "Sympathy and Theopathy among 'The Faithful of Love' in Islam" and "Creative Imagination and Creative Prayer in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi."[2] Eranos was a yearly

1 For a recent overview of Traditionalism, see Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (London: Pelican, 2023).

2 Henry Corbin, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958). References in the present article are to *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998). The first edition of this translation was published by Princeton University Press in 1969 under the title *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī*. In 1998, a new edition was released with a preface by Harold Bloom, titled *Alone with the Alone*. Although references in this article are to the 1998 edition, I refer to the work as *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī* (or *Creative Imagination* for short), as this is both the universally recognized title and the one originally given by Corbin. The two Eranos essays originally appeared in *Eranos-Jahrbuch* XXIV/1955 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1956) and XXV/1956 (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1957).

conference held in Ascona, Switzerland, bringing together some of the world's most influential thinkers in the fields of the comparative study of religions and sciences, including Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Carl Gustav Jung, Erich Neumann, Adolph Portmann, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, and Viktor Zuckerkandl, among others.[3] It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Eranos for Corbin. Corbin attended Eranos almost every year from 1949 until his death in 1978, becoming one of its leading contributors.[4] Indeed, most of his major publications are based on his lectures at Eranos. Parallel to his role as a professor of Islamic Studies in France and in Iran, Eranos allowed Corbin to participate in a cosmopolitan intellectual circle and to express philosophical and spiritual viewpoints free both from academic constraints and any established religious institutions. As he wrote in 1956, Eranos represented for him "the meeting of acting, autonomous individualities, each in complete freedom revealing and expressing his original and personal way of thinking and being, outside of all dogmatism and all academicism."[5]

Eranos played a key role in Corbin's philosophical war against religious and intellectual systems that, in his view, suppressed individuality in favor of group identification and collective entities. Corbin's opposition manifests in his recurrent criticism of ecclesiastical authority (in Christianity) and the rule of jurists (in Islam), both typified in his writings by the figure of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*.[6] His opposition is equally reflected in his antipathy toward any ideology that sacrifices the individual upon the altar of sacralized collectivities—whether state, nation, family, race, or social class. It also finds expression in his repeated condemnation of "historicism" conceived as the interpretation of religious phenomena as mere products of impersonal social, political, and material processes. Corbin's concerns were aggravated by the looming threat of Communism in the Cold War, which heightened for him the importance of Eranos. Thus, in 1955—the year of his first lecture on Ibn ʿArabi—Corbin described Eranos as a reaction to a "time of distress such as ours[,] . . . a time where all authentic truth is threatened by the forces of the impersonal, where the individual abdicates his duty and right to differ from the anonymous collectivity, where for [this collectivity] even individuality would already amount to guilt."[7] Similarly, a year later, he wrote that Eranos represented "an acute awareness of differences, a concern for the rights of pluralism against all monism, whether a well-intentioned monism or a brutal and unavowed monism."[8]

Corbin's attacks on "collectivism" and "dogmatism" were not merely unreflecting, expressionistic outbursts of nonconformism, without further import. Rather, they are inextricably tied to his personalist theology and metaphysics, which repudiates abstract universals and conceives all reality in terms of personal presences and relations.[9] Thus, in his already cited essay, "The Time of Eranos," Corbin criticizes "historicism" in the study of religion, and advocates instead for a phenomenology that would allow us to "substitute the hermeneutics of the human individual for the pseudodialectic of facts."[10] He argues that, to understand the individual, we must "perceive the *meaning* of the thing itself, that is, the manner in which its presence determines a certain constellation of things, which hence would have been entirely

3
On Eranos, see Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (London: Routledge, 2013).

4
Hakl, *Eranos*, 161–68.

5
Henry Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," in *Man and Time: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), xx.

6
See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 27. On Corbin's use of the figure of the Grand Inquisitor, see Hadi Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought: Part I (Early Encounters)," *Dionysius* 32 (2014): 182–83.

7
Henry Corbin, "De l'Iran à l'Eranos," in *L'Herne: Henry Corbin*, ed. Christian Jambet (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), 262. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

8
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xix.

9
See, e.g., Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, trans. Ralph Manheim and James W. Morris (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), 50–51.

10
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xiv.

different if there had not first been this presence."[11] This view rests on a kind of monadological ontology that considers the individual as the only concrete reality, and the reality of everything else as deriving from it. He writes: "There is no explaining the initial fact of which we are speaking, for it is individual and singular, and the individual can be neither deduced nor explained: *individuum est ineffabile*."[12] He contrasts this perspective with "all the attempts toward philosophies of history or toward the socialization of the consciousness: anonymity, depersonalization, and the abdication of the human will before the dialectic net that it began to weave itself, only to fall into its own snare."[13]

It should be noted here that Corbin's attack on what he calls "laicization" or "secularization" does not amount to a rejection of the principle of the separation of religion and state, widely seen as a hallmark of modernity. As he states in his book on Ibn ʿArabi, secularization, as he understands it, is not about the separation or non-separation of "spiritual authority" and "temporal power." Rather, it has deeper roots: it implies "the very idea of associating such concepts as 'power' and the 'spiritual.' "[14] This aspect of his thought has largely been overlooked, leading some critics to suggest that he, like the Traditionalists, rejected the so-called modern world and sought to restore a sacred order.[15] Although this point merits a more comprehensive and nuanced discussion than I can provide here, it should be noted that whereas Guénon and his followers located religion in the social order, and blamed modernity for evacuating religion from matters on the organization of government, Corbin rejected the identification of religion with political power as being itself a symptom of secularization.[16]

Furthermore, while Traditionalism by and large implies a nostalgic recollection of a long-lost "Golden Age," an idealized socio-political order in the distant past, this conception is absent in Corbin. His nostalgia is vertically rather than horizontally oriented: it is that of the individual gnostic for his spiritual homeland. Thus, Corbin denounces both revolutionary and reactionary political ideologies as being equally symptoms of secularization: both "the resentment against the yoke of the past . . . and, conversely, the complexes of reaction" are in his view consequences of a consciousness that has been trapped in the system of unrealities that we have ourselves constructed and whose weight falls on us in turn in the form of history as the only scientific "objectivity" that we can conceive, as the source of a causal determinism the idea of which would never have occurred to a humanity that had preserved the sense of the real subject.[17]

By contrast, Corbin aims to overcome the objectification of history by recovering "the activity of creative thinking at work, thinking by which tradition is, as such, recreated 'in the present.' "[18] Rather than a simple "return to tradition," Corbin seeks to go one step before tradition, as it were, that is, to recover the spiritual source that gave rise to it in the first place. This implies a continuous "re-activation" and "re-creation" of tradition in the present. Thus, Corbin envisions an attitude that transcends the antithesis of modernity and tradition: therein, for him, lies "the *meaning* of Eranos, which is also the entire secret of Eranos . . . it is our present being, the time that we act personally, our way of being."[19]

A brief look at *Creative Imagination* illustrates how the above ap-

11
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xv.

12
Corbin, xv.

13
Corbin, xv.

14
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 16.

15
See, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 301–02.

16
On Guénon's identification of religion with social order, see Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 46.

17
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xvi.

18
Henry Corbin, "Actualité de la philosophie traditionnelle en Iran," *Acta Iranica* 1 (January-March 1968): 6.

19
Corbin, "The Time of Eranos," xix.

proach shaped Corbin's reading of Ibn ʿArabi. This is above all noticeable in his emphasis on the autonomy and originality of Ibn ʿArabi, presenting him as a nonconformist whose ideas must be understood and evaluated on their own terms rather than judged by the standards of "tradition." In the Introduction, Corbin distinguishes his approach from one that "tends to 'explain' an author by tracing him back to his sources, by listing influences, and demonstrating the 'causes' of which he is supposedly the mere effect." Thus, Corbin presents Ibn ʿArabi as a "genius . . . [who is] radically alien to literal, dogmatic religion and to the schematizations such religion encourages." Any explanation of Ibn ʿArabi's thought as a form of "syncretism," Corbin argues, only appeals to a "dogmatic mind alarmed at the operations of a thinking which obeys only the imperatives of its internal norm but whose personal character does not impair its rigour."[20] By virtue of this "internal norm," Ibn ʿArabi "cannot be reduced to a school or other collective conformism." Rather,

> Ibn ʿArabi is one of those powerful and rare spiritual individuals who are the norm of their own orthodoxy and of their own time, because they belong neither to what is commonly called "their" time nor to the orthodoxy of "their" time. What by a historical convention is termed "their" time is not really *their* time. Accordingly, to affect to believe that such masters are nothing more than representatives of a certain "tradition" is to forget their considerable personal contribution, is to neglect the perfect assurance with which [they] . . . proclaim that such and such an idea, developed on such and such a page of their books, can be found nowhere else, because it is the discovery of their personal experience.[21]

Corbin's criticism in this passage is unmistakably aimed at the notion, characteristic of Guénonian Traditionalism, that the great spiritual traditions of the past—notably, though not exclusively Vedanta, Taoism, and Sufism—rest on immutable metaphysical doctrines, and furthermore, that those who taught these doctrines—in this case, Ibn ʿArabi—did so with the consciousness of being merely transmitters of impersonal, handed-down wisdom. Traditionalists, moreover, generally conceive these sacred traditions as having two aspects: on one hand, an inner, "esoteric" aspect, which is the proper intellectual content of these traditions, expressing timeless, universal truths; on the other hand, an outer, "exoteric" aspect, which refers to particular, culture-specific and therefore relative forms, identified with religion and serving as the basis of social order. While the Traditionalists view exoteric religion as having a subsidiary role in relation to esoteric truth, they see no opposition between them: rather, the esoteric represents the metaphysical foundation of the traditional orthodox exoteric framework. Thus, they regard Ibn ʿArabi's teachings as being fundamentally in harmony with orthodox Islam.

By contrast, Corbin posits an essential antinomy between Ibn ʿArabi and orthodox Islam. Ibn ʿArabi, he writes, has "attained to the esoteric Truth, the *ḥaqīqa*, [he has passed] through and beyond the darkness of the Law and of the exoteric religion."[22] This esoteric truth,

20 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 4–5.

21 Corbin, 5.

22 Corbin, 67.

according to Corbin (using here language similar to that of his Eranos colleague, the Swiss psychoanalyst C. G. Jung), involves a "process of individuation"; that is, "releasing the spiritual person from collective norms and ready-made evidences and enabling him to live as a unique individual for and with his Unique God."[23] Rather than complementarity between esoteric truth and exoteric religion, Corbin affirms "the irreducible antagonism between the spiritual Islam of Sufism and legalitarian Islam."[24] If on one hand Corbin argues that Ibn ʿArabi and other mystics of Islam cannot be reduced to any "collective conformism," on the other, he sees them as representatives of an "Oriental spirituality," with "Orient" here designating not a geographical location, but the symbolic source of spiritual individuation.[25] This "Oriental spirituality" is one in which "each human being is oriented toward a quest for his personal invisible guide," as opposed to "[entrusting] himself to the collective, magisterial authority as the intermediary between himself and Revelation."[26] Far from being limited by time and place, this "Oriental spirituality" represents a transnational, "eternal religion extending from the origin of origins down through the history of the human race, whose Spirituals it gathers together, at all times, in a single *corpus mysticum*."[27] Thus, for Corbin, Ibn ʿArabi has less in common with "orthodox Islam" than with figures and movements as widely separated as Jacob Boehme, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, Shiʿism, and early Christian sects like the Ebionites, among others, all of which represent in his view a transhistorical family of esoteric spirituality.[28]

That being said, it is important to distinguish here between, on one hand, Corbin's antithesis between "spiritual Islam" and "legalitarian Islam"—as two opposed types of religiosity—and on the other hand the complementarity and necessary dialectical relationship between "esoteric" and "exoteric," which he affirms as a central principle of what he calls "esoteric hermeneutics" or "spiritual exegesis." According to this principle, "to everything that is apparent, literal, external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bāṭin*)."[29] Esotericism, for Corbin, designates the recognition of this principle and the application of the exegetical practice of *taʾwīl*, which consists in "[apprehending] all material data, things and facts as symbols, transmuting them, and '[carrying] them back' to symbolized Persons."[30] Importantly, this operation does not entail the destruction of the apparent or literal meaning, but rather aims "to bring out the transparency of its depths, the esoteric meaning."[31] Ibn ʿArabi's approach to the Qurʾan, according to Corbin, exemplifies this esoteric hermeneutics.[32] By contrast, "exoteric Islam" is incapable of looking beyond the literal meaning: "the 'book descended from Heaven,' the Qurʾan, limited to the apparent letter, perishes in the opacity and servitude of legalist religion."[33]

Mohammad Hasan Askari: From Literary Modernism to Guénonian Traditionalism

A relatively minor figure of twentieth-century Urdu literature, Muhammad Hasan Askari may seem an unlikely critic of Corbin. But if Askari was (and remains) largely unknown beyond South Asia, his

23 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 268.

24 Corbin, 68.

25 Corbin, 29.

26 Corbin, 33.

27 Corbin, 47.

28 Corbin, 45, 77, 92, 181.

29 Corbin, 78.

30 Corbin, 28.

31 Corbin, 28. On *taʾwīl* in Corbin, see Hadi Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin's Hermeneutics of Scripture," in *Philosophy and the Abrahamic Religions: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Epistemology*, ed. Torrance Kirby, Rahim Acar, and Bilal Baş (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 345–69.

32 Corbin's emphasis on the significance of *taʾwīl* for Ibn ʿArabi has been contested. For instance, William C. Chittick writes: "Certain Western scholars have portrayed Ibn al-ʿArabī as a great practitioner of esoteric commentary (*taʾwīl*), whereby the literal meaning of the text becomes a window through which one looks into the invisible realm. One can agree with this statement, so long as it is understood that no Muslim commentator has been as concerned as the Shaykh to preserve the Book's literal sense. Ibn al-ʿArabī never denies the literal and apparent meaning. But he frequently adds to the literal sense an interpretation based upon an opening which transcends the cognitive limitations of most mortals." Chittick further states that "*taʾwīl* is not an appropriate term to indicate Ibn al-ʿArabī's method of interpretation, since he himself almost invariably uses the term to refer to a mental process pertaining to reflective thought whereby every verse which does not coincide with a preconceived idea of God's incomparability is explained away. More generally, *taʾwīl* is to take one's understanding of God as the standard or 'scale' by which to weigh the revelation . . . Man becomes the standard for judging the revelation, and the Koran is no longer the standard for judging man. Ibn al-ʿArabī rejects this approach entirely, insisting instead that man must allow himself to be judged, shaped, and formed by the Divine Speech" (William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* [New York: State University of New York Press, 1989], xvi, 242).

33 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 28.

knowledge of the Western canon was extensive: he was a careful reader of English, French, German, and Russian authors, and translated French writers such as Flaubert and Stendhal into Urdu.[34] The story of how Askari discovered Ibn ʿArabi and quarreled with Corbin reflects the trajectory of his intellectual career. This trajectory began with literary modernism, of which Askari was one of the most prominent advocates before the partition of the Indian subcontinent; his path took a seemingly opposite turn after the Indian Partition and his move to Pakistan, when, taking his cue from the works of Guénon as well as Indian Sufi-inspired Islamic conservatism, he began to expound an anti-Western and anti-modern vision of the Urdu literary canon.

Askari's turn from modernism to traditionalism was fueled by his disillusionment with the literary scene in the newly-founded state of Pakistan.[35] Seeing that Urdu literature was unable to serve as a basis for Pakistani identity, he declared in 1953 its death, turning his attention instead to Islam and Indo-Muslim culture.[36] Meanwhile, in 1947, Askari read Guénon, whose influence pervades his subsequent writings. The key tenets of Guénonian Traditionalism can be summed up in three points.[37] Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the idea that at the root of the various religious traditions of the world, there lies a single, timeless, primordial Tradition (with a capital T), the source of all truth and sacred order—an idea often called perennialism, a term Guénon himself did not use, but which is associated with some of his followers. Second is a notion of human history that sees nothing but decline from an earlier Golden Age. According to this view, modernity appears only as a process of accelerated, necessary decline, a loss and systematic inversion of the sacred norms of Tradition. Third is a perspective that considers Eastern metaphysical traditions—Vedanta, Taoism, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Sufism—as the purest and most comprehensive reflections of the primordial Tradition in the present age, and as offering true spiritual realization. Since these traditions are but various expressions of the original Tradition, there can be no essential contradiction between them. This assumption is why Guénon often speaks of "Eastern metaphysics" in the singular.[38] In this perspective, "Easterners" are seen overall as preservers of traditional wisdom, and "Westerners" as the principal agents of the inversion of sacred norms.[39] To be sure, Guénon also recognized that the East was not immune to the destructive effects of modernity; moreover, he affirmed that some Easterners are in fact "Westerners" and vice versa (a view also shared by Corbin), and that the world had reached such a stage of homogenization as to render the East/West civilizational binary irrelevant. Nevertheless, Guénon's high regard for Eastern traditions, coupled with his absolute condemnation of the modern Western world, fueled a romantic Orientalism among some of his followers.

Guénon's influence is perhaps most noticeable in Askari's later conception of tradition (*rivāyat*).[40] Earlier, Askari had embraced T. S. Eliot's notion of tradition as a dynamic vehicle that retains features of the past while absorbing innovations. This view of tradition informed Askari's earlier project to revitalize Urdu literature by experimenting with new forms. Later, however, Askari rejected Eliot, arguing that real tradition cannot be a fluid concept subject to change; rather, it must be based on timeless metaphysical principles.[41] In this understanding,

34
Mehr Afshan Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind: Urdu Culture, Islam, and Modernity in Muhammad Hasan Askari* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 153.

35
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 144.

36
Adrian Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari: Mulla-Turned Modernist or Saviour of Tradition?" *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasienstudien* 39 (2022): 19.

37
Cf. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 10–11.

38
René Guénon, *La Métaphysique orientale* (Paris: Éditions traditionnelles, 1939).

39
See René Guénon, *East and West* [1927], trans. Martin Lings (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

40
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 23; Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 201. The Urdu noun *rivāyat* derives from the Arabic *riwāya*, itself derivative of the verb *rawi* meaning "to bear by memory, to transmit or recite." In Arabic literature, a *rāwī* is a professional reciter of poetry. See Renate Jacobi, "Rāwī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, ed. P. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6259.

41
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 24; Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 192. See Mehr Afshan Farooqi, "Towards a Prose of Ideas: An Introduction to the Critical Thought of Muhammad Hasan ʿAskari," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 (2004): 181, https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18631.

tradition is the regulative norm and ultimate principle of social order as well as all spheres of human life and activity, including religion, culture, aesthetics, and literature.[42] The absence of such a foundation, Askari contends, drives modern Western authors into a plurality of ideologies, but these can never replace the unity and universality of truth upheld in Eastern intellectual traditions.[43] Thus, Askari sees an incommensurable and irreconcilable gulf between modern Western civilization and traditional Eastern cultures, including those of Indo-Muslims, Hindus, and the Chinese.[44]

East and West: Askari's "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard"

Guénon's influence suffuses Askari's essay "East and West: Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard." This is the article that was published in a French translation in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1963, triggering a response from Corbin.[45] Although the Askari-Corbin quarrel was ostensibly about competing interpretations of Ibn ʿArabi, there were larger and more fundamental issues at stake. In fact, Askari's article, as its title suggests, is primarily about the perceived antithesis between "East" and "West." Askari opens with an allusion to a work by André Gide titled *The Fruits of the Earth* (1897), a book that Askari describes hyperbolically as "beyond a doubt" having had "the most profound influence on the most qualitatively significant portion of Western literature in the twentieth century," and having been "seminal in the intellectual upbringing of easily three or four generations of Western writers."[46] If Askari targets Gide, it is because the latter had defended the "Western" in contrast to the "Eastern" mentality.[47] Rejecting Gide's "defense of the West," Askari refers to Guénon who, he writes, "around 1925 . . . had presented the basic concepts of the East in their original form to the West and had also analyzed Western civilization in light of those concepts." The rest of Askari's essay illustrates the East/West clash by comparing two representative thinkers: on one hand, Ibn ʿArabi, "the greatest spiritual Muslim guide," and on the other, Kierkegaard, whom Askari describes as "nowadays the most respected master of Western spirituality and philosophy."[48]

By contrasting Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Ibn ʿArabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*, Askari aims to "reveal the essence of East and West in ways that are impossible through any other method."[49] The juxtaposition of these two works, in his view, reveals "the conflict between East and West."[50] This contrast is already reflected for Askari in the motive behind each of these works. In *Fear and Trembling*, according to Askari, Kierkegaard interprets the story of Abraham through the lens of his own emotional struggles; the thoughts Kierkegaard ascribes to Abraham result from his "own confusion and perplexity." By contrast, Ibn ʿArabi's works, Askari argues, have nothing subjective about them: they are "entirely non-individual and impersonal," dealing with subjects that are "as remote as one can get from psychology, ethics, or philosophy, being entirely metaphysical in their character."[51] Consequently, Askari attacks Henry Corbin for "[digging up] a Beatrice . . . for Ibn ʿArabi."[52] In fact, in *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, Corbin emphasized the significance for Ibn ʿArabi of meeting the daughter of an Iranian shaykh in Mecca: this young wom-

42
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 179.

43
Hopf, "Muhammad Hasan Askari," 25.

44
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 167 and 184.

45
Muhammad Hasan Askari, "Orient et Occident: Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," trans. André Guimbretière, *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 1 (January-March 1963): 1–24. The Urdu text can be found in a posthumously published collection of Askari's essays titled *Vaqt kī Rāgnī* (Lahore: Maktabat-i Mihrāb, 1979). For a discussion of this collection, see Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 177–201.

46
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 1 [312]. All translations are mine and based on the French version, which Corbin references. I provide in brackets the pagination of the corresponding passage in Muhammad Umar Memon's translation of the original Urdu version into English (Muh. Hasan Askari, "Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard [A Study in Method and Reasoning]," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 [2004]: 311–35; see also the translator's preface, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard' [Translator's Note]," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 [2004]: 302–10, http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18617). There are some noteworthy variations between the French and English versions. The English version seems more faithful to the original Urdu, if a little more stylistically ornate. The French version, however, might have been authorized by Askari (who, as already noted, was proficient in French): not only was it produced during his lifetime, but the translator, André Guimbretière, professor of Urdu and Hindi at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris, had previously collaborated with Askari on a translation of a poem by Muhammad Iqbal ("La Mosquée de Courdoue," trans. André Guimbretière and Mohd. Hasan Askari, *Esprit* 259, no. 3 [March 1958]: 431–36).

47
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 1–2 [312–14].

48
Askari, 4 [316].

49
Askari, 4 [316].

50
Askari, 4 [316].

51
Askari, 5 [317] and 8–9 [321–22].

52
Askari, 5 [318].

an, Corbin wrote, "combined extraordinary physical beauty with great spiritual wisdom. She was for Ibn ʿArabi what Beatrice was to be for Dante; she was and remained for him the earthly manifestation, the theophanic figure, of *Sophia aeterna*."[53] Even if this person existed, Askari maintains, the relationship between her and Ibn ʿArabi has no bearing on the latter's writings.[54] A work like *Fusus al-Hikam*, Askari argues, can only be the product of a mind that has "risen far above the sphere of the psyche and its myriad conundrums." While Kierkegaard writes to disentangle his emotional problems, Ibn ʿArabi has already attained the level that Sufis call the "truth or reality of certainty." This, Askari contends, "contrary to what Corbin thinks . . . has nothing to do with 'creative imagination.' " Rather, he adds, "Ibn ʿArabi is writing by means of an ability that the East identifies as 'intellect' (*ʿaql*) and which René Guénon, in order to make it easier to understand for Westerners, has described as 'intellectual intuition.' "[55]

Related to Kierkegaard's and Ibn ʿArabi's respective methods of obtaining knowledge, and of the character of their respective works, are questions of authority and orthodoxy. Askari criticizes Kierkegaard for being the sole authority behind his own book. By contrast, Askari claims, "Ibn ʿArabi would have never dared to write a single word that did not accord with the Qurʾan and hadith."[56] Whereas Corbin sees antagonism between Ibn ʿArabi and the "collective conformism" of "exoteric religion," between "spiritual Islam" and "legalitarian Islam," Askari posits a harmony between Ibn ʿArabi and the normative, orthodox Islamic tradition. The Guénonian tenor of Askari's position is unmistakable. As Mark Sedgwick writes:

> [Guénon] not only condemned the idols of progress, civilization and science, but also attacked belief in originality, individualism, and sentimentality . . . For Guénon, truth was ancient, not new, and certainly not individual or "original" in the modern sense. Those who value what is new thus miss the value of ancient truth. Emphasis on the originality of individual ideas blocks access to true metaphysical ideas, which are neither original nor the creation or property of any one individual.[57]

Taking another page from Guénon, Askari highlights correspondences between Sufism and Vedanta to consolidate his representation of the "East."[58] According to him, Gide's defense of the West meant upholding multiplicity instead of unity, limited individuality instead of absolute being, and analytical intelligence, passion, and the senses, i.e., the psyche and the body, instead of spirit. Askari readily agrees with Gide's characterization of the Western mindset, but only to oppose it to the Eastern mindset, which in Askari's view transcends dualisms. He writes:

> In the East, there can be no question of contradiction or opposition. In every fibre of the Eastern civilization one finds the doctrine which Muslims call: unicity, and Hindus: non-duality. Ibn ʿArabi expressed very clearly that the affirmation of divine transcendence alone does not suffice, no more than the mere affirmation of immanence. The essential truth resides in

53
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 52.

54
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 5 [317].

55
Askari, 5 [318].

56
Askari, 5–6 [318].

57
Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 106.

58
On the role of Vedanta for Guénon, see Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 52, 61, 140, 147–54, 175, 360.

> maintaining the perfect complementarity of transcendence and divine immanence. The point of view of Shankaracharya is exactly the same, and René Guénon insisted many times on this notion in his books. But Gide, who had read [Guénon's] books, decided to continue in his errors . . . René Guénon had felt that his writings would not be understood by Westerners, who had deliberately chosen to stick with Bacon and Descartes.[59]

According to Muhammad Memon, who translated Askari's essay into English, it "as a study in method and reasoning . . . remains without precedent or parallel in Urdu literary criticism."[60] Memon, however, in his otherwise detailed introduction, omits to mention the significant influence of Guénon on Askari. Taking this influence into account, we can note that Askari's approach, to a considerable degree, amounts to applying typical Traditionalist notions to Kierkegaard and Ibn ʿArabi. In his own way, Askari ventriloquizes Guénon, a tendency noticeable also among other Traditionalists. In Askari's case, this may even have been intentional. After all, as was already noted, Askari condemns originality as a symptom of Western individualism and praises the impersonality of the Eastern mind. Thus, he asserts that Ibn ʿArabi never dared to contradict the Qurʾan and the hadith. Similarly, we can observe that Askari did not dare to contradict Guénon, as he himself confessed at the end of his article:

> As far as Ibn ʿArabi is concerned, I am truly frightened of having failed at my task. Here, there is no room for misunderstanding or personal opinion.[61] At any rate, I have taken every precaution on my part and have been inspired in doing so by the works of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya (René Guénon). If I have made any mistake, consider it mine, and whatever I have presented correctly is thanks to Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya.[62]

A True "Guénonian"? Corbin's Response to Askari

Askari's article was followed by "some reflections" by Jean Wahl, at the time director of the *Revue* and a leading scholar of Kierkegaard and existentialism.[63] Wahl's reply consists of an almost point-by-point rebuttal of Askari's interpretation of Kierkegaard.[64] In contrast to Askari's cavalier attitude, Wahl's response, though condensed, is on the whole sincere and thoughtful (he made the decision, after all, to publish Askari's essay); he methodically considers, and mostly rejects, Askari's characterizations of Kierkegaard. Whereas Askari presents Kierkegaard as a sentimental author who was limited to purely human questions, Wahl contends that, no less than Ibn ʿArabi, Kierkegaard was concerned with the world of the soul and more-than-human realities.[65] Countering Askari's claim that Kierkegaard relied on his own individual authority, Wahl points out that the Danish philosopher insisted that his thinking and authorship were guided by Providence.[66] Askari's more patronizing statements are met with sarcasm. For instance, to Askari's claim that Guénon had translated *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition" in order "to make it easier to understand for Westerners," Wahl "thanks [Askari] . . . for the generosity he has shown us

59
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 3 [314–315]. Other comparisons of Hinduism and Islam can be found on pp. 13 [327], 16 [331], and 17 [332].

60
Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,'" 310.

61
In the Urdu and English versions, there follows here a sentence curiously absent in the French version: "Nor is this kind of knowledge accessible through books" (Askari, "Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," 334).

62
Askari, "Ibn ʿArabi et Kierkegaard," 18 [334].

63
On Wahl, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France; 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 84–87.

64
Even Memon, who is rather sympathetic to Askari, notes that the latter's treatment of Kierkegaard "does raise some questions" and that "Askari [has] . . . insufficient regard to the historical context of [Kierkegaard's] ideas" (Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,' " 307).

65
Jean Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 1 (January-March 1963): 20–21. This text is included as an appendix at the end of Askari's article.

66
Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," 20–21.

[poor Westerners] by pointing the way for us."[67] Repudiating Askari's monolithic and essentialist views of the East and the West, Wahl states that "the West is not so easy to define, and neither, no doubt, is the East."[68] Rather than opposing East and West, Wahl affirms the "unity of humanity," seeing confluence between the summits of Eastern and Western thought. In sum, for Wahl, Askari's article adds little to our understanding and does not promote meaningful dialogue: "we are not aware that we have taken a single step forward," he concludes.[69]

While Wahl focused on Kierkegaard—a thinker, it bears mentioning, whom Corbin alongside Wahl and others helped introduce in France in the 1930s—Corbin's reply, which appeared in the next issue of the journal, was mainly concerned with Ibn ʿArabi. Written in the form of a letter addressed to the director of the periodical (Wahl), Corbin's response is noteworthy for multiple reasons.[70] For one, it is the only time ever that Corbin replied to one of his critics directly and publicly. This fact is all the more remarkable given that Corbin is only mentioned once in Askari's article. That Askari's passing criticism should have provoked Corbin to pen a forceful public rejoinder is in itself striking. It seems even more striking if one considers that Askari was (and remains) virtually unknown in France; his article in the *Revue* was his only work ever to appear in French.

Why, then, did Corbin—by then already an established scholar of Islam—dignify Askari's article with a reply? At least three overlapping reasons can be noted here. For one, given that Askari's article was published at the top of one of the most prominent journals for philosophical debates in France, Corbin might have felt pressured to defend his own scholarship.[71] After all, one of the main motives behind Corbin's work was to introduce non-specialist Western audiences to the Islamic philosophical tradition, which he thought had something vital to offer to the West.[72] Consequently, he was concerned with the reception of his work not only among historians of Islamic thought, but perhaps even more so among the wider French philosophical community, the main readership of the *Revue*. As for Askari's article—one of a precious few in the *Revue* to deal with Islam—it had considerable potential to shape the non-specialist perception of Ibn ʿArabi. For Corbin, there was much at stake. A second, related reason for which Corbin might have felt compelled to respond to Askari is that, despite the latter being unknown in France, his native Indo-Muslim credentials, suggested by his name and the fact that his article was originally written in Urdu, automatically imparted to Askari a quality of authenticity, the authority of a native. That is not to say Askari intended to manipulate Western readers. Indeed, as Memon in his introduction to the English translation of the article remarks, "Askari's intended audience is the insider—the Urdu reader and writer."[73] Nevertheless, the fact that the *Revue* published his article without any preface or information about the author probably contributed to Askari's mysteriousness. Shrouded in anonymity, Askari appeared on the French literary scene as a generic Indo-Muslim author; nothing was known about him, his background, or his qualifications. Yet rather than being a disadvantage, this may have only reinforced the impression of his nativity and "Orientality." His biographical erasure had the perhaps unintended effect of imparting a venerable quality to his voice, as that of one who is (in

67
Wahl, 20–21.

68
Wahl, "Quelques réflexions," 20.

69
Wahl, 24.

70
Henry Corbin, "Correspondance [lettre du 28 fév. 1963 au Directeur de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale (Jean Wahl) en réponse de l'article de Moh. Hasan Askari: 'Ibn ʿArabî et Kierkegaard']," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 68, no. 2 (April-June 1963): 234–37.

71
On the history of the *Revue,* see Stéphan Soulié, *Les philosophes en République: L'aventure intellectuelle de la Revue de métaphysique et de morale et de la Société française de philosophie; 1891–1914* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

72
Fakhoury, "Henry Corbin and Russian Religious Thought: Part I," 174–75.

73
Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e ʿArabi and Kierkegaard,'" 307.

Guénon's words) an "authentic representative" of traditional Eastern doctrines.[74] This image of Askari would have served to add weight to his argument, reinforcing his claims about an impersonal character of "Eastern" metaphysics. Furthermore, it simultaneously confirmed and was confirmed by the Guénonian notion of the East as a guardian of Tradition.

Yet, despite the imperious tone of his article, Askari does not pretend to be an authority on Ibn ʿArabi. Rather, as we saw, Askari defers to Guénon—whom he names by his Muslim moniker, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahid Yahya—as the ultimate authority on Ibn ʿArabi. This deference to Guénon by an Indo-Muslim writer no doubt played into what Mark Sedgwick has called the "myth of origin" or "sacred history" of Guénonian Traditionalism.[75] This "myth" posited that Guénon's ideas were not a synthesis of pre-existing theories, but rather, as the Traditionalist Jean Robin put it in 1978, a "mysterious body that . . . no study of sources can account for, and that one is obliged . . . to accept or refuse as a whole, as an inseparable and invariable whole from the beginning, pre-existing in its entirety."[76] Indeed, Askari's deference reinforces the Traditionalist belief that Guénon acquired his knowledge of Hindu and Islamic doctrines from the oral teaching of "Oriental masters." Consequently, as Sedgwick remarks, many Traditionalists—among whose ranks Askari can certainly be included—assumed "that they were accepting . . . an authoritative exposition of Oriental metaphysics, not the personal theories of one particular French esoteric philosopher."[77] Because Askari was Indian, his deference to Guénon would have been seen as further validation of this Traditionalist conviction. But for the same reason, Askari's Guénonism indirectly served to bolster his own authority as an authentic "Easterner." Thus, notwithstanding his apparent anti-modernism and anti-Westernism, Askari still relied on what was effectively a modern Western thinker. The irony was not lost on his critics.[78] Perhaps to avoid this paradox, Askari "orientalized" Guénon by presenting him as a Muslim shaykh, an authority on Eastern thought, and by disregarding his Western background. Contrary to this view, Corbin called attention to Guénon's "Western" sources and remarked that while some of Guénon's followers "believe that they speak as 'Orientals,' their 'occidentalism' is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism."[79]

This brings us to the third and perhaps most significant reason for which Corbin saw fit to respond to Askari. This is the fact that Askari's article represented for Corbin a bold example of a widespread current of interpretation of Sufism based in the work and intellectual legacy of Guénon. Commonly referred to as the Traditionalist or the Perennialist School, this current includes influential figures such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, and one of Corbin's own associates, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.[80] According to James Morris, the more or less covert influence of this school is "to be found virtually everywhere," both in academia and beyond, and also largely explains Ibn ʿArabi's invisible but "far-reaching influence in the West."[81] Sedgwick likewise connects the flourishing of Ibn ʿArabi studies in France with the "presence of accomplished Traditionalist scholars in French academia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries."[82] Corbin himself, in his pseudonymous and earliest publication at the age of twenty-four,

74
René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. Arthur Osborne (London: Luzac, 1942), 35, 51, 60, 151.

75
Mark Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting, and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 170–71.

76
Cited in Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 171.

77
Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 171.

78
Farooqi, *The Postcolonial Mind*, 167.

79
Corbin, "Correspondance," 236.

80
Nasr recalls how, after meeting Corbin in Iran in the fall of 1958, they "began immediately to discuss matters of mutual interest. At first, there was a certain friction between us, because [Corbin] was opposed to the position of Guénon and the traditionalist perspective in general, which was mine. At the same time, however, he himself was really the reviver of many aspects of traditional philosophy. Once he made a few harsh criticisms including personal attacks and I became angry. His attack during a meeting we had at the Institut Franco-Iranien was not against Guénon but against Burckhardt, who was also a very close personal friend of mine. So I got up and left the Institute. Then Stella Corbin, his wife, called me up and apologized that Corbin had said these things. She said, 'No, please, come. He wants to see you.' In any case, after that episode, I always took great care not to discuss such matters with him and so did he. I understood his idiosyncrasies and avoided matters that he disliked" (S. H. Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* [Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010], 92).

81
James Morris, "Ibn ʿArabī in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences," *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ʿArabī Society* 29 (2001): 89, 106.

82
Sedgwick, "Ivan Aguéli and the Traditionalist Movement," 177.

acknowledged Guénon as a representative of "true esotericism," who debunked "theosophical" and "occultist" approaches to the study of Eastern traditions; Guénon's work, he stated at the time, "was an excellent introduction to the purely metaphysical point of view, to the domain of the 'formless' [*informel*], and we will often find ourselves in agreement with the rich suggestions scattered through it." Significantly, however, Corbin qualified his praise by expressing reservations about "Guénon's harsh criticism of all western philosophy and of European scientific methods."[83]

This last point underscores another key difference between Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism, namely their different attitude as regards modern European philosophy. Following Guénon, Traditionalists tended to condemn modern philosophy as rationalistic and therefore incapable of accessing metaphysical realities.[84] Corbin took a more nuanced view: while rejecting rationalism, materialism, and atheism, he did not deny all value to modern Western philosophy, as evidenced by his interest in and appreciation of thinkers like Schelling and Kierkegaard, or even contemporaries like Heidegger, Berdyaev, and Souriau. This is because, for Corbin, truth is not and cannot be the property or exclusive privilege of something "out there," whether a particular historical period or a social order. Rather, it is located in the mystical encounter of the individual seeker with "what we tend to call the alter ego, who in Sufism, as in allied traditions, is the guardian angel who strangely is our own self."[85] This theme runs through Corbin's reading of Ibn ʿArabi and other mystics. Indeed, if his own lifework had any message, it is precisely that "each human being is *oriented* toward a quest for his personal invisible guide."[86] Hence, whereas Guénon rejected philosophy as expressing an individual and limited point of view, to which he opposed "metaphysics" as the proper content of a revealed body of sacred doctrine, expressing objective, universal truths, Corbin defended philosophy as a "personally lived adventure," wherein truth is not conceived as an abstract set of metaphysical propositions, but as the absolutely individual expression of the soul's encounter with its transcendent Self in "a figure that announces itself to the soul *personally* because it symbolizes *with* the soul's most intimate depths."[87] Therein, for Corbin, lies a lesson that can unite "philosophers of the Orient and philosophers of the Occident."[88]

Between that early article and his response to Askari some forty years later, there are, to my knowledge, no references to Guénon in Corbin's writings. Meanwhile, and without ever denying what he owed to Western philosophical and theological sources, Corbin worked primarily from Arabic and Persian texts, sometimes in collaboration with Muslim scholars, to develop an original interpretation of Islamic mystical spirituality. Having mastered those languages early on and with access to primary sources, Corbin felt no need to rely on Guénon for interpreting Islamic doctrines. But Guénon's ideas and influence, as already noted, continued to spread among Western students of Islam and Sufism over the next decades. Up until Askari's article, Corbin saw no need to criticize Guénonian Traditionalism explicitly in his writings, whether because of a lingering respect for Guénon or to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with the latter's followers. After Askari's article, however, the gloves were off: Corbin presumably had no reason

83
Trong-Ni [H. Corbin], "Regards vers l'Orient," *Tribune indochinoise*, August 15, 1927, 4. For a discussion of this text, see Xavier Accart, "Identité et théophanies: René Guénon (1886–1951) et Henry Corbin (1903–1978)," in "René Guénon, lectures et enjeux," *Politica Hermetica* 16 (2002): 176–200.

84
Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 46, 47, 105.

85
Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, xv.

86
Corbin, 33.

87
Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 4, 20.

88
Corbin, *Avicenna*, 4.

to hold back his objections to "Guénonism," especially since he was now the target of an apparently unprovoked and public attack by a self-styled disciple of Guénon; Corbin had little choice but to respond.

Corbin begins by questioning Askari's ostensible knowledge of Ibn ʿArabi. "There is no doubt," he writes, "that the author [i.e., Askari] read René Guénon, since he presents himself as his disciple. But we have the right to ask to what extent the author has personally read the works of Ibn ʿArabi." Corbin's irony permeates his response. Addressing Askari's claim that Corbin had invented a "Beatrice" for Ibn ʿArabi, Corbin sarcastically "[wonders] whether [Askari] has ever heard of a famous collection of poems entitled *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires), composed and commented on by Ibn ʿArabi himself." Furthermore, he writes:

> To claim that what Ibn ʿArabi, one of the greatest visionary theosophists of all time, writes is "essentially impersonal and not individual," without any link to his personal experiences, is to ignore completely that his great work (*The Revelations Received in Mecca*) is essentially based on his visionary experiences, his intuitions and his most personal dreams. Other than that, there is nothing personal or individual about this work . . .[89]

Corbin takes aim at what he sees as Askari's "rationalization" of Ibn ʿArabi. Askari had derided the importance that Corbin attributed to the "creative imagination" in Ibn ʿArabi, and instead, in Guénonian fashion, had prioritized the "pure intellect." Turning the tables on his critic, Corbin states that to translate *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition" is to run the risk of "colouring everything . . . with an unavowed Spinozism that is out of place." For Corbin, this leads to a mutilation of Islamic spirituality, which he blames on a "fashionable" trend that hastily combines Sufism and Vedanta, imposing on Ibn ʿArabi and other Islamic mystics "a perspective and categories that are not their own."[90] To claim that metaphysical knowledge is obtained through the "pure intellect," beyond "mental" and "human" conditions, Corbin argues, is to neglect the fact that "our mystics in Islam have repeated this comparison over and over again: water necessarily takes on the colours of the vase that contains it."[91] For Corbin, the Guénonians' rationalization of Sufism goes hand in hand with the lack of references in their writings:

> The author of the article [i.e., Askari] gives the impression that I simply misunderstood Ibn ʿArabi when I spoke of his "creative imagination." The unfortunate thing is that it is not what I thought, but what Ibn ʿArabi's texts say. Does the author even know the extremely dense and exhaustive pages that Ibn ʿArabi devotes to the different aspects of Imagination? He doesn't even refer to them. If his method forbids any reference, is it because, willingly or not, everything in Ibn ʿArabi has to proceed from a knowledge whose sole organ is supposedly the pure intellect (*ʿaql*)?[92]

Askari had accused Corbin of distorting Ibn ʿArabi with Western presuppositions, but Corbin responds to the accusation with an accusation

89
Corbin, "Correspondance," 234.

90
Corbin, 235–36.

91
Corbin, 236. On Corbin's and the Perennialists' uses of Ibn ʿArabi's metaphor of the vase, see Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ʿArabi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24–54.

92
Corbin, 235. Corbin's remark, while not aimed at Guénon directly, recalls Antoine Faivre's characterization of Guénon as the "Descartes of esotericism" (A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, trans. Joscelyn Godwin [New York: State University of New York Press, 1994], 101).

of his own. Askari and other "authors" (i.e., Traditionalists), Corbin writes, "believe that they speak as 'Orientals,' " when in fact "their 'occidentalism' is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism, which Ibn ʿArabi would have never admitted." Indeed, "Guénonism" appears to Corbin as a "typically Western phenomenon."[93] Thus, Corbin highlights the irony of the Traditionalists' alleged anti-Westernism:

> I don't think I can be suspected of being among those who deliberately remain on the side of Bacon and Descartes. But it is precisely for this reason that I reject a one-sided and restrictive interpretation of "Eastern" thought. This interpretation constructs a certain idea of the East, which is linked to a critique of the West; but it is curious that the inspiration and implementation of this critique should derive precisely from the categories of Western thought.[94]

Furthermore, Corbin rejects Askari's characterization of Ibn ʿArabi as an "orthodox" thinker who never wrote a line that disagreed with the Qurʾan and the hadith. Rather, Ibn ʿArabi's approach to the normative sources of the Islamic tradition, according to Corbin, should be understood in light of the "fundamental problem of *taʾwīl* (spiritual exegesis), the relationships between *ẓāhir* (the apparent, literal meaning) and *bāṭin* (the inner, hidden meaning)." In other words, the true, spiritual meaning of the Qurʾan remains hidden, personal, outside legal uses and the grasp of common consciousness. For this reason, Corbin argues, Ibn ʿArabi's "orthodoxy" should not be confused "with that of a Church that does not exist in Islam, and above all so that we understand why this superior 'orthodoxy,' which is the true one, happens to be something that the banal common 'orthodoxy' of Islam does not want to hear about."[95] To be fair, the notion of harmony between shariʿa (Law) and *ḥaqīqa* (the most secret of truths)—corresponding respectively to the "outer" and "inner" dimensions of Islam—has a long pedigree in Sufism, and can certainly be found in Ibn ʿArabi.[96] This Sufi notion also influenced Guénon, who, after moving to Egypt and living as an observant Muslim, revised his earlier understanding of the relative dispensability of exoteric religion, beginning instead "to emphasize the necessity of an orthodox exoteric religious frame for the metaphysical realization that was the aim of the primordial tradition."[97] In a posthumously published article, "The Necessity of Traditional Exoterism" (1952), Guénon went so far as to claim that, given the growing gap between the "profane" nature of modern life and spiritual truth, "adherence to an exoterism . . . is a preliminary condition for coming to esoterism."[98] Corbin, by contrast, argued that "it is hopeless to attempt to integrate an esoteric tradition with the dogmatic tradition of a magistery, which by its very nature excludes it."[99] Furthermore, Corbin claims that the Guénonian notion of metaphysics

> which claims to be so "pure," is strangely in tune with the intellectual fashion of the day in so many areas. Denouncing and devaluing everything that has to do with personal individuality. Fleeing into the impersonal and the spirit of "orthodoxy." De-

93 Corbin, "Correspondance," 236.

94 Corbin, 237.

95 Corbin, 236.

96 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 101.

97 Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 180–81.

98 Cited in Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 181.

99 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 90.

> nouncing "interiority" as "the greatest temptation," whereas all our Spirituals are pilgrims of the "interior world."[100]

[100] Corbin, "Correspondance," 237.

[101] Corbin, 236.

Corbin's ire appears to be aimed more at "Guénonism" than at Guénon himself. Indeed, he appears to distinguish between a "true" understanding of Guénon and a dogmatic, rigid interpretation of his work. Corbin gives due regard to Askari for "courageously [claiming] to follow" Guénon, adding that reading the works of Guénon "can, at some point in one's life, provoke a salutary shock." This admission may well be autobiographical given Corbin's early appreciation of Guénon mentioned above. Guénon's appeal for Corbin, however, appears to have been quite short-lived; it was already well in the rearview by the time he published his earliest works on Islamic thought at the beginning of the 1930s. Therefore, in his response to Askari, Corbin states that "anyone who has devoted his life to seeing the texts for himself will find it impossible to accept that the last word has been said in René Guénon's work, that the 'true' and definitive interpretation is his own." Curiously, however, he adds that a "true 'Guénonian' is rather one who refuses to get bogged down in a one-sided and deadly dogmatism, which is worse than what Westerners are accused of."[101] Unfortunately, Corbin does not expand here on what he understands by "a true 'Guénonian.' " This cryptic reference is made all the more ambiguous by the fact that Corbin places the word "Guénonian" in scare quotes, suggesting that the reference is not to Guénon as such, but perhaps to what he represented in a general sense, namely an attempt to regenerate Western thought with the help of Eastern intellectual traditions. In this case, the true "Guénonian" is one who, like Corbin, followed that calling.

But if the reference is to Guénon specifically, Corbin's apparent homage may contain an allusion to the fact that, for all his insistence on the need to conform to tradition and orthodoxy, Guénon was actually a pathbreaking and nonconformist thinker who boldly rejected the accepted intellectual standards of his time; moreover, Guénon always refused to have disciples of any kind and to be seen as the founder of any school. While Corbin may have admired Guénon for these reasons, and therefore might have even been willing on this occasion to imagine himself as a true "Guénonian" (recalling his above-mentioned early endorsement of Guénon as an exponent of "true esotericism") or as someone faithful to the spirit of Guénon, he was far less well disposed to Guénon's followers insofar as they transformed the latter's ideas into a "one-sided and deadly dogmatism" at odds with the independent spirit of their progenitor. For, as was noted earlier, true esotericism for Corbin entails spiritual autonomy, liberation from "collective conformism." Consequently, for Corbin, the source of spiritual degradation is not the so-called "modern world" ("what Westerners are accused of") but rather the "exoteric" attitude ("a one-sided and deadly dogmatism") prevalent throughout most of human history. In his conclusion, Corbin refers to his collaborations with Iranian shaykhs who

> know very well that in the East as in the West, there has never been and there will never be more than a small number of people to understand these things. But a Meister Eckhart and a Jacob Boehme

would have understood Ibn ʿArabi perfectly, and vice versa.[102]

Conclusion

This article examined the literary feud between Corbin and Askari both to throw light on the reception of Ibn ʿArabi in the twentieth century and to clarify the poorly understood relationship between Corbin and Guénonian Traditionalism. With respect to the latter point, the above discussion should be seen as preliminary to a comprehensive treatment that would take into account the entirety of Corbin's output and a wider range of topics in order to examine his relationships with different Traditionalist thinkers—some of whom, unlike Askari, were partly also influenced by him, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Philip Sherrard—and to highlight divergences as well as convergences between them. This is a project for a different time.

One question persists at the end of this article: why, given its awful quality, did the *Revue* see fit to publish Askari's article? One hypothesis is that it appeared typical, almost to the point of caricature, of what Corbin called a "fashionable" trend of "Guénonism," and so Wahl published it only to have it refuted. Corbin highlighted the incoherence of Askari's anti-Westernism and anti-modernism, contending that the latter's construction of a timeless, monolithic "Eastern" identity is itself a "typically Western phenomenon." As for Corbin's transhistorical approach to Sufism and related traditions, it has been welcomed by some Muslim scholars and practitioners in Iran (and beyond). As Matthijs van den Bos puts it, "paradoxically, Corbin's disembodied representations have now become 'Shiism from the point of view of Shiism itself' in Iran."[103] Of course, as Askari's own example showcases, Guénonian Traditionalism has had a no less far-reaching influence in the Islamic world.

Consequently, beyond their differences, Askari and Corbin illustrate what Mark Sedgwick describes as the globalization of Sufism, which has made it "increasingly difficult to distinguish West from non-West, and where intercultural transfer is being superseded by transcultural spaces that ignore boundaries between cultures."[104] Their responses to globalization, however, differed. Whereas Askari retreated into Islamic anti-Westernism, Corbin affirmed a transhistorical esoteric spirituality for which he found validation across national and cultural boundaries: from the post-confessional, international milieu of Eranos, to traditional Shiʿi interlocutors in Iran.

In conclusion, the Askari-Corbin feud is not just a scholarly debate about the historical Ibn ʿArabi but also illustrates contemporary expressions and uses of Sufism. Both Corbin and the Traditionalists are not simply external observers, but respectively also re-interpreters and continuators of Ibn ʿArabi's spiritual legacy. As James Morris observes, "Corbin's personal example—his indefatigable seeking, ecumenical breadth of interests, and wide-ranging efforts of communication—is likely to serve in the future as an inspiration almost as significant as the many particular earlier figures and traditions he so effectively helped to rediscover."[105] The same surely holds true for Guénon and some of his followers.

102 Corbin, "Correspondance," 237.

103 Matthijs van den Bos, "Transnational Orientalism: Henry Corbin in Iran," *Anthropos* 100 (2005): 122.

104 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism from the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 249.

105 James W. Morris, "Religions after Religions? Henry Corbin and the Future of the Study of Religion," in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et sagesses des religions du livre*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet, and Pierre Lory (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 39.

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Appendix

Henry Corbin's Response to Mohammad Hasan Askari's Article "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard," in Revue de métaphysique et de morale 68, no. 2 (April-June 1963): 234–237.

28 February 1963

Mr. Director

I thank you for sending me a copy of Mr. Mohammad Hasan Askari's article in which I am implicated.

At first sight, the association of the two names: "Ibn ʿArabi and Kierkegaard" came as something of a surprise to me. Can the comparative method afford simply to juxtapose two terms? Wouldn't it have been better to have an analogy of relationships, and for that to have four terms? On reading the article, I had the impression that it was so far off the mark that every page would have to be rewritten. Your pertinent "reflections" do justice to what is imputed to Kierkegaard. I shall therefore confine myself to what concerns me by name.

There is no doubt that the author has read René Guenon, since he refers to himself as his disciple. But one is entitled to wonder to what extent the author has personally read Ibn ʿArabi's works in the original. In any case, I doubt that he has ever read or understood my book on the *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*. The way in which he calls me into question, without giving any reference, could lead one to believe that I made it all up. So I need to set the record straight.

To claim that what Ibn ʿArabi, one of the greatest visionary theosophists of all time, writes is "essentially impersonal and not individual," without any relation to his personal experiences, is to ignore completely that his great work (*The Revelations Received in Mecca*) is essentially based on his visionary experiences, his intuitions and his most personal dreams. Other than that, there is nothing personal or individual about this work . . .

Reading the author of the article, one might think that I had invented the personage of Ibn ʿArabi's "Beatrice" out of thin air. One wonders whether the author has ever heard of a famous collection of poems entitled *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires), composed and commented on by Ibn ʿArabi himself. Thanks to this book, we are perfectly familiar with the character of this "Beatrice," her family and Ibn ʿArabi's relations with them. She even appears allusively elsewhere in his work. Without her, some of Ibn ʿArabi's pages on the dialectic of love would not have been written. Nevertheless, it is not necessary, we are told, to establish any relationship "between this fact and the substance of Ibn ʿArabi's books." The unitive fusion of the

lover and the beloved, of the knower and the known object, inspired many of Ibn ʿArabi's other poems. Despite this, we are told that he is not a poet.

The author of the article gives the impression that I simply misunderstood Ibn ʿArabi when I spoke of his "creative imagination." The unfortunate thing is that it is not what I thought, but what Ibn ʿArabi's texts say. Does the author even know the extremely dense and exhaustive pages that Ibn ʿArabi devotes to the different aspects of the Imagination? He doesn't even refer to them. If his method forbids any reference, is it because, willingly or not, everything in Ibn ʿArabi has to proceed from a knowledge whose sole organ is supposedly the pure intellect (*ʿaql*)?

Let's ask ourselves, in passing, whether Westerners really needed things to be "made easier" for them by translating the word *ʿaql* as "intellectual intuition." We simply run the risk of colouring everything in this way with an unavowed Spinozism that is out of place. Since the 12th century, it has been known in the West that *ʿaql* is *intellectus* and *intellectio*, *nous* and *noesis*. Unfortunately, however, the translation of the word as "intellectual intuition" is far from covering all the meanings, functions, and aspects of the notion of *ʿaql*. The *ʿaql qudsī* (*intellectus sanctus*) is not quite what we commonly call the pure intellect. Moreover, it is also far from the case that our authors limit the source of their higher knowledge to the *ʿaql* alone, considered as the pure intellect. There is a multitude of technical terms (*ilhām*, *himma*, *kashf*, *shuhūd*, *mushāhada*, *mukāshafa*, etc.) that indicate something quite different, and which require us to refer to the *ʿaql* with the *qalb*, the *heart* (the *Gemüt*). It is significant that, not once, does the author of the article pronounce the latter word, nor the term *maʿrifa qalbiyya.*

The impression that emerges is that of an alteration, unconscious perhaps, but seriously mutilating the perspective of the great Spirituals of Islam. Rather than hastily relating them to India and Vedanta, as is the fashion of the day, it would be more fruitful to study the great texts in which the different Schools of Islamic spirituality expressed themselves in Arabic and Persian. There was esotericism in Islam long before Ibn ʿArabi, even if the texts are not always easily accessible to us. Above all, we must not impose on our authors a perspective and categories that are not their own.

The author of the article courageously claims to follow René Guenon. I have no doubt that reading the works of René Guenon can, at some point in one's life, provoke a salutary shock. The author refers us to the example of André Gide. Unfortunately, André Gide could not go and see for himself what Eastern texts were all about. However, anyone who has devoted his life to seeing the texts for himself will find it impossible to accept that the last word has been said in René Guenon's work, that the "true" and definitive interpretation is his own. A true "Guénonian" is rather one who refuses to get bogged down in a one-sided and deadly dogmatism, which is worse than what Westerners are accused of. We forget to remind ourselves of René Guenon's "Western" sources, and we also forget that there is a mass of Arabic and Persian texts that one man alone could not have reached.

The example given above concerning the word *ʿaql* is particularly typical. It reveals in a certain "Guénonism" and in its criticism of

the West, a typically Western phenomenon. Although the authors of these criticisms believe that they speak as "Orientals," their "occidentalism" is betrayed in their bias towards systematic rationalism, which Ibn ʿArabi would never have admitted. Some evidence of this can be gleaned throughout the article.

We are told of a metaphysical knowledge [acquired] through the pure intellect, which would be neither "mental" nor "human." Yet our mystics in Islam have repeated this comparison over and over again: water necessarily takes on the colour of the vase that contains it. This raises the question of the colour of the vase.

We are told of an "orthodoxy" so strict that Ibn ʿArabi never wrote a line that disagreed with the Qurʾan and the hadith. But first we need an explanation of the fundamental problem of *taʾwīl* (spiritual exegesis), the relationships between *ẓāhir* (the apparent, literal meaning) and *bāṭin* (the inner, hidden meaning), a problem posed from the very beginning in Islam, well before Ibn ʿArabi. I say this so that we do not confuse this "orthodoxy" with that of a Church that does not exist in Islam, and above all so that we understand why this superior "orthodoxy," which is the true one, happens to be something that the banal common "orthodoxy" of Islam does not want to hear about.

We are told that it is absurd to look for a difference between East and West, but we are told that the work of the initiate is not within the power of Europeans, that Western thinkers are incapable of perceiving the difference between the concept of the *general* and the concept of the *universal*. We should remember that this fundamental distinction goes back to Avicenna's metaphysics, which posits the idea of an essence that is indifferent in itself to both the "general" and the "particular." But this in no way authorizes the misinterpretation which defines the general as "the repetition of particularity and individuality." It is no better to translate the notion in question by the term *universal* as contrasting with the *general*, because the two words are too often mistaken for each other. Unfortunately, it is this bias towards the "universal" that leads to reducing the *Intelligentia agens* to a "universal intellect," and to reducing the Perfect Man (the *Anthropos teleios*) to a "universal" Man.

The most worrying thing is that this metaphysics, which claims to be so "pure," is strangely in tune with the intellectual fashion of the day in so many areas. Denouncing and devaluing everything that has to do with personal individuality. Fleeing into the impersonal and the spirit of "orthodoxy." Denouncing "interiority" as "the greatest temptation," whereas all our Spirituals are pilgrims of the "interior world."

I don't think I can be suspected of being among those who deliberately remain on the side of Bacon and Descartes. But it is precisely for this reason that I reject a one-sided and restrictive interpretation of "Eastern" thought. This interpretation constructs a certain idea of the East, which is linked to a critique of the West; but it is curious that the inspiration and implementation of this critique should derive precisely from the categories of Western thought.

I have spent almost twenty years in the East. I know, in Iran in particular, some admirable shaykhs who continue a venerable tradition in which Ibn ʿArabi occupies an important (but not unique) place. Their books are very different from what we can read in the article in ques-

tion and others like it. They know very well that in the East as in the West, there has never been and there will never be more than a small number of people to understand these things. But a Meister Eckhart and a Jacob Boehme would have understood Ibn ʿArabi perfectly, and vice versa. I experienced this when I had some of Meister Eckhart's sermons translated into Persian for a study group with our shaykhs.

It is a meeting of this kind that today we should finally make possible. You conclude your "few reflections" on the article in question with a melancholy observation: "We are not aware that we have taken a single step forward." I'm very much afraid that, if we were to apply and generalize the author's method, we would take several steps backwards at every encounter.

Yours sincerely,

Henry Corbin

The Place of Ibn ʿArabi in the Theologico-Political Thought of Ahmad Fardid

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Abstract
Ahmad Fardid (1904/10–1994), a prominent Iranian philosopher, is considered by his followers and detractors to be among the most influential twentieth-century Iranian thinkers and philosophical theoreticians of the post-revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran, which came to power in 1979. Fardid's intellectual and political legacy has been the subject of much controversy over the past several decades. His thought turns around a radical critique of modernity, humanism, modern science, and democracy, a critique in which Islamic mysticism, especially the thought of Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240) plays a prominent role. Synthesizing Heidegger's critique of metaphysics with Ibn ʿArabi's mystical system, Fardid developed a philosophy of history illustrating a gradual forgetfulness of Being. This paper aims to explore how Fardid made ideological and political use of Ibn ʿArabi's thought in his criticism and rejection of modern/Western thought and his defense of the Islamic Republic's ideology. We will demonstrate that Fardid's eclectic ideological undertakings significantly reflect his peculiar conception of the historical periods rooted in Ibn ʿArabi's school.

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One of the most intriguing aspects of studying the history of thought is to trace and explain the odyssey of ideas that are elaborated in a specific context in response to a specific set of questions and for a particular objective, and that are then transported, transplanted, and exploited in an entirely different context. If the originators of those ideas are introduced to the new formulations of their ideas (which does not happen often because such odysseys tend to occur posthumously, after the originators have died), the originators would perhaps look at their ideas as monsters, strange beings entirely alien to their original intentions. Wouldn't Rousseau look with horror at Robespierre? What would Aristotle think of Aquinas? The phenomenon can take even more radical shapes when ideas cross fundamentally different cultural boundaries; so different that one could describe them as entirely different worlds. We are dealing here with such a case: Ahmad Fardid, a prominent Iranian philosopher, stands as a key figure in the intellectual landscape of twentieth-century Iran. Revered by some and contested by many, Fardid's influence extends particularly to the post-revolutionary Islamic regime that assumed power in 1979. His philosophical stance revolves around a radical critique of modernity, humanism, modern science, and democracy, positioning him as a critic of prevailing Western ideologies. At the core of Fardid's thought is an amalgamation of Martin Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and the mystical teachings of Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240), with a primary focus on his *Fusus al-Hikam*.

In this study, we will concentrate on the role played by Ibn ʿArabi in Fardid's thought in the following order: we will begin by offering a concise overview of Fardid's biography. Next, we will summarize the key elements of Heidegger's philosophy that have left an imprint on Fardid's system. Following this section, we will examine the notion of "Westoxification" and the significance of "divine names" in Fardid's conceptual framework, setting the stage for a detailed exploration of Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of divine names. Finally, we will offer an in-depth analysis of how Ibn ʿArabi's ideas contribute to Fardid's philosophy of history and ideology.

Life of Ahmad Fardid

Seyyed Ahmad Mahini Yazdi, who later changed his name to Seyyed Ahmad Fardid, was born in 1904 or 1910 in the city of Yazd to a well-off family.[1] He said he received some seminary education and tutoring in French and mathematics before leaving for Tehran at the age of 16, where he attended school and frequented the classes of several Shiʿi jurists. After receiving his high school diploma in 1928, he enrolled in Daneshsara-ye ʿAli, the Teacher Training College. In this period, he spent time in Yazd and Tehran, reportedly teaching French and self-studying. After graduating in 1935, Fardid started working as a high school teacher and did some editorial work until 1946, when he left for Paris on a state scholarship to pursue a doctorate at the Sorbonne. In 1955, Fardid returned to Iran without finishing his PhD and supposedly after studying for a time at Heidelberg University. Without a PhD, Fardid could not become a university professor but taught as an adjunct in different institutions, including Tehran University.

1 The biographical information about Fardid comes mainly from (1) a blog published by one of his devotees, Mohammad Reza Zad, complemented and organized by Ali Mirsepassi in his book mentioned below, (2) scattered remarks by Fardid in his interviews, and (3) interviews with figures who knew Fardid personally. See esp. Ali Mirsepassi, *Iran's Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmad Fardid's Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

He also worked in governmental cultural institutions on projects that did not amount to anything concrete. After 1968, Fardid was hired at Tehran University as a full-time faculty member; because of his lack of a PhD and publications, special permission was needed from the university. Fardid retired in 1972 but continued teaching as was customary for other retired professors, although reportedly these classes stopped when other faculty members objected to them. From 1975 to 1977, Fardid participated in some TV debates and gave interviews in newspapers. He became particularly active around the 1979 revolution by teaching and lecturing. After the revolution, Fardid stood for the constitutional assembly of the new regime and the parliament, but he was unsuccessful. He continued to hold weekly sessions, mainly at his home, and gave interviews to newspapers and journals. This period is marked by the gathering of a group of younger people around Fardid who published their notes from Fardid's meetings after his death. Fardid died in 1994.

As can be seen from the information above, Fardid did not have a particularly tumultuous life. Taking into account his life only until his retirement from Tehran University at the age of 62, it would be difficult to describe him as a particularly influential or even memorable figure. He is briefly mentioned by some of the major intellectuals of the pre-revolutionary period for coining the term *gharbzadigī*, often translated as "Westoxification," and translating some Western philosophical concepts that became accepted by others. As a person, he seems to have been disliked by many, if not all, of his contemporaries for his personal conduct, so much so that his request for teaching after retirement, which should have been a simple formality, was denied by faculty members. And it was not like Fardid's publications could have initiated a revival: when he died, he had published only three short, strictly introductory articles in his 30s and some scattered notes. Fardid began to exercise some influence when he started participating in radio and TV debates and giving interviews from 1975 to 1977. However, from what survives from these, it is difficult to identify what concrete impact could be attributed to them: in these interviews and public debates, one sees him expressing bewilderingly incoherent ideas in an unclear accent, jumping from one subject to another, and cutting off other participants. If Fardid attracted an audience, it seems it was because of a taste for the unusual, the eccentric, even the bizarre. With the 1979 revolution, things started to change. Fardid's discourse began to absorb some of the fundamental elements of the discourse of the revolution: it became highly political, anti-Western, anti-modern, religious, combative, and apocalyptic. This started a period in Fardid's life markedly different from his past obscurity, which continued until his death and still reverberates in the debates around the legacy of the 1979 revolution and its ideas. In this period, as before, Fardid, apart from some scattered notes, did not publish anything of substance. However, through his regular private meetings and public lectures, which were often highly polemical and political, he began forming a faithful circle of disciples. This enabled him to exercise an influence markedly different from his past obscurity. Fardid is today seen as one of the most important influences on the intellectual discourse of the time and, for many modernist intellectuals, a poisonous source to overcome.[2]

[2] See e.g., Dariush Ashouri, "Usturih-i Falsafi Miani Ma [The Myth of Philosophy Amongst Us]," *Baztāb Andīshi* 49 (Urdībihisht 1383 [April 2004]): 25–32; Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2007), 181–85.

Heidegger's Influence

The first step to understanding Fardid's thought is to understand that his whole intellectual system is a unique synthesis of two main elements: the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the mysticism of Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi. Fardid's usage of these two intellectual sources is often selective and idiosyncratic. Therefore, one needs to explain which specific aspects were integrated into Fardid's thought and for which specific purpose. Therefore, we begin by delineating the place of Heidegger in Fardid's thought.

Fardid was highly dismissive of all the intellectual currents of his time and considered them simplistic and unworthy of serious attention. But there was one figure who reigned supreme in his mind: Heidegger. What did Fardid learn and borrow from Heidegger? Fardid found particularly fruitful what is often called "later Heidegger" for his intellectual project. This is the Heidegger who has often been criticized and rejected as unphilosophic, a Heidegger who, for some readers, has shed all the valuable philosophical characteristics of the scientific phenomenology found in the early Heidegger of *Being and Time*, and who has ventured into the realm of poetry and mysticism, where, to borrow from Bertrand Russel, "language is . . . running riot."[3] In later Heidegger and also in Fardid's system of thought, the central place is occupied by the History of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*). Heidegger examined how the understanding of "Being," as the fundamental aspect of human understanding, has changed throughout Western philosophy. He contended that each historical period reveals a unique interpretation of Being, influenced by culture and language. While early Heidegger was still engaged in bringing out the fundamental aspects of the human experience of Being in a transhistorical manner, in a sense continuing Kant's critical perspective, later Heidegger put forward the idea that humankind's understanding of Being is fundamentally historical and changeable throughout history. But this was not everything that fundamentally distinguished Heidegger from other historicists like Hegel: Heidegger also subscribed to the idea that Being reveals itself in different forms mysteriously and unpredictably beyond humankind's agency. Heidegger also denied the possibility of us ever going beyond these historical understandings of Being and having access to a full transhistorical understanding of it; Being reveals and hides itself. Every revelation of Being is also its concealment.[4] Central to Heidegger's history of Being is also a fundamental critique of the reigning understanding of Being as fundamentally flawed. In what he sometimes termed as metaphysics or forgetfulness of Being, Heidegger saw a flawed understanding of Being manifested in the modern technological understanding of it, leading to godlessness, the violence of technology, and the homelessness of humankind.[5] Heidegger was emphatic that although the forgetfulness of Being is concomitant with the disappearance of the divine, Being is not God. And although Heidegger is right in denying a relationship between his understanding of Being and the monotheistic understanding of God, one cannot deny that Being in his thought bears some resemblance to God—Being for Heidegger possesses some form of agency, just like God in Abrahamic religions, a being who mysteriously unveils itself. Furthermore, Heidegger's view of the modern illness leads to a deep dissatisfaction with mod-

3 See e.g., Bernd Magnus, *Heidegger's Metahistory of Philosophy: Amor Fati, Being and Truth* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 141.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 148.

5 See Julian Young, *Heidegger's Later Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 32–33.

ern ideals of global culture and resembles the conservative critique of rootless cosmopolitanism of modern liberalism and Marxism. It also reminds one of the calls for a return to community and local tradition and denial of technological progressivism. These conservative ideas found a ready hearing in Fardid alongside three concomitant elements of Heidegger's thought: first, Heidegger's espousal of a style of thought that denied human agency and instead championed a passive openness to the unveiling of Being; second, Heidegger's interest in poetry as a way of approaching an understanding of Being; third, interest in language not as a simple neutral instrument of communication but as a repository of our understanding of Being whose etymological deconstruction provides us with access to the forgotten knowledge of Being: Heidegger subscribed to the idea that it is through language that we encounter the world; language is that which shapes how everything, i.e., Being, reveals itself to us, and it is through the study of language that we can access the knowledge of Being. These Heideggerian ideas occupied a prominent place in Fardid's thought.

One last point that clarifies Fardid's interest in Heidegger is a bridge he establishes between the philosophy of Being and Islamic mysticism and its theoretical elaboration in the philosophy of Illumination. In Islamic philosophy, two specific types of knowledge can be distinguished. The first type encompasses syllogistic and discursive knowledge, while the other can be referred to as mystical or esoteric knowledge. The latter category involves non-discursive and non-syllogistic knowledge communicated through divine inspiration, directly bestowed by God on select individuals. This second type of knowledge is considered superior to the first as it is God-given and more complete; it manifests itself as a form of revelation or inspiration, not reliant on meticulously constructed arguments or proofs, but rather emanating from God's immense mercy. In Fardid's terminology, borrowed from Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191) and other thinkers of the philosophy of Illumination, the first kind of knowledge is called "knowledge by acquisition" (*ʿilm ḥuṣūlī*) and the second kind is called "knowledge by presence" (*ʿilm ḥuḍūrī*).[6] While in Islamic philosophy, the source of the knowledge by presence is divine,[7] in Heidegger it is the semi-divine Being itself mysteriously unveiling itself to us and giving us access to itself. In this perspective, metaphysics is a type of knowledge by acquisition while Heidegger's philosophy through "releasement" (*Glassenheit*) is a type of knowledge by presence which opens us to Being unveiling itself. Consequently, Fardid's critique of knowledge by acquisition reflects not only his debt to Islamic tradition but also his affinity with Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and a philosophical approach close to Heideggerian "releasement." With these brief points in mind, let us now turn to Fardid.

6
For knowledge by presence see Mehdi Haʾiri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).

7
Using Ibn Arabi's terminology, Fardid defines knowledge by presence as the unmediated connection with the Names manifested by humankind and knowledge by acquisition as the mediated connection with those Names. See Ahmad Fardid, *Didari Farrahi va Futuhati Akhir al-Zaman* [Divine Encounter and the Apocalyptic Revelations, Lectures Delivered in 1979] (Tehran: Nazar, 1402 [2022]), 447.

Westoxification and Geschichte

Perhaps the best point of entry in Fardid's thought is the most influential concept that he coined: *gharbzadigī*, often translated as "Westoxification." Although there is a consensus that Fardid first introduced this term, it was another pre-revolutionary intellectual, Jalal Al-i Ahmad (1923–1969) who popularized it through his famous book of the

same name. Al-i Ahmad made a very specific usage of this concept, integrating it into his nativist perspective for describing the phenomenon of Iranians coming under the influence of Western ways of thinking.[8] Al-i Ahmad championed a return to local roots, national values, and traditions as opposed to embracing modern, foreign, and Western values. For him, Westoxification was the disease that had afflicted Iranians since the nineteenth century, when they began to lose their national identity by accepting foreign values.[9] Fardid always complained that his famous concept was wrongly understood and he was right. In Fardid's view, Westoxification is, to employ here the central and most common term that Fardid uses in his lectures and writings, the "destined consignment" (*ḥavālat-i tārīkhī*) of the contemporary world everywhere. Destined consignment is Fardid's coined word for expressing what Heidegger expressed through terms such as fate (*Schicksal*), destiny (*Geschick*), and history (*Geschichte*), all stemming from *schicken*, meaning, among other things, "to send" or "to dispatch."[10] Heidegger claimed that Being sends itself, revealing itself to us in different ways at different times. Technology is, for instance, the truth of Being sent by Being itself, revealed to us in the shape of things as "standing-reserve" to be exploited by humanity.[11] In the same way, for Fardid, Westoxification is the domination of a specific truth of Being as revealed to Western civilization and Eastern people alike; it is universalized metaphysics taking over the whole world. For Fardid as distinguished from nativists like Al-i Ahmad, to reject the West and remedy Westoxification is not to rehabilitate national identity or older Eastern ways of thought, a meaningless exercise according to Fardid, because those are the truths of Being revealed to previous generations and are thereby expired. Nativism for Fardid is a meaningless enterprise, trying to rehabilitate what is already dead and definitively expired.

8
See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

9
On Al-i Ahmad's *gharbzadigī* see: Mohsen Mottaghi, "La question de l'Occident dans les débats intellectuels en Iran," *EurOrient* 33 (2011): 123–45; Urs Göskens, "Negotiating the Relationship Human – Non-Human as a Question of Meaning in 20th Century Iranian Authenticity Discourse: the Role of Ǧalāl Al-e Aḥmad's Essay 'West Infection,' " *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 72, no. 3 (2018): 717–50; Franz Lenze, *Der Nativist Galāl-e Āl-e Ahmad und die Verwestlichung Irans im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2008).

10
Mirsepassi refers to Fardid's *ḥavālat-i tārīkhī* in relation to Heidegger's *Dasein*. However, *ḥavālat-i tārīkhī* appears to be more closely aligned with Heidegger's later thought, which shifts focus away from Dasein, particularly after the famous "Turn" (*Kehre*). See Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 228. For a discussion of the term *Geschick* in Heidegger's later philosophy, see Mark Wrathall, ed., *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 98.

11
Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 24.

History of Being and Divine Names

Fardid translated "etymology" by *nām shināsī* (literally: "knowledge of name") and described his intellectual system as *ʿilm nām shināsī tārīkhī*, "the science of historical etymology." This was Fardid's way of describing how he had created an ingenious synthesis of Heidegger's interest in the etymology of words as a way of recovering different conceptions of Being and Ibn ʿArabi's interest in the divine names (*asmāʾ ilāhī*). This synthesis is best expressed in Fardid's conception of the history of Being in which five periods are distinguished from each other: *the day before yesterday*, *yesterday*, *today*, *tomorrow*, and the *day after tomorrow*. Fardid claimed that each of these periods is best understood as the manifestation of one of the divine names. Each divine name, in Heideggerian terms, is the reigning conception of Being that dominates a period; it is the truth of Being revealed by Being itself to people of that period. In Fardid's sense, God himself has a multiplicity of names corresponding to different aspects of his being, and each of those is reflected in one divine name and revealed by God to the people of a period. The periods, in Fardid's view, end when a new divine name replaces the dominant divine name. Fardid considered this change a "revolution" in the most profound sense of the term.

Fardid's five-period history begins with an epoch of original perfection (*the day before yesterday*), an epoch of decline (*yesterday, today, and tomorrow*), and an epoch of salvation (*the day after tomorrow*). Before going further with Fardid's historical perspective and to explain what Fardid means by the domination of names in historical periods, we must better understand the place of Ibn ʿArabi in his thought. We will therefore discuss the major lines of Ibn ʿArabi's thought and how they impacted Fardid's intellectual project.

Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi and Divine Names

The thought of Ibn ʿArabi has attracted considerable attention in Iran. Theological concepts of his tradition, such as *wilāya* (Guardianship), *waḥdat al-wujūd* (Oneness of Being), and *al-insān al-kāmil* (The Perfect Human), have received considerable attention among Persian philosophers, Sufis, and poets. Interestingly, while Ibn ʿArabi made some references hostile to Shiism, he remained influential among Shiite philosophers and mystics in Iran. According to some scholars, there is a deep connection between Ibn ʿArabi's mysticism and Iranian *Weltanschauung* represented in Shiite theology.[12] As Henry Corbin accurately observed, "Ibn al-ʿArabi's theosophy and the 'Oriental' (*ishrāq*) theosophy of al-Suhrawardi are related to each other. When both united with the Shiite theosophy deriving from the holy Imams, the result was the great flowering of Shiite metaphysics in Iran (with Haydar Amuli, Ibn Abi Jumhur, Mulla Sadra, etc.) whose potential even today is far from being exhausted."[13] Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that Ibn ʿArabi is one of the most influential thinkers shaping Iranian intellectual history from the thirteenth to the twentieth century.

Fusus al-Hikam (Bezels of Wisdom) is considered the most appreciated and commented-on treatise of Ibn ʿArabi in Iranian intellectual history. In Osman Yahya's estimation, there have been 150 commentaries on the *Fusus*, about 130 of which were written by Iranian sages.[14] In the short introduction to the treatise, Ibn ʿArabi claimed that its content and the title had been revealed to him through a vision of the prophet Muhammad. *Fusus* portrays the meaning of universal human spirituality in twenty-seven chapters (or bezels), each discussing a different prophetic figure and its distinctive features. According to Ibn ʿArabi, each of these figures, from Adam, Abraham, and Moses to Jesus and Muhammad, exemplified a pearl of particular wisdom available to humankind. This idea leads us to his doctrine of the divine names, which is one of the most significant contributions of Ibn ʿArabi to Islamic mysticism.

The primary teaching of Islam has been that God is one, but the main task in Islamic theology has been to make this divine unity compatible with the multiplicity present in the world, thereby explaining how multiplicity could have arisen from a reality that is one in every respect.[15] In Ibn ʿArabi's view, the whole of Existence is one and is the same as God's existence. God's Essence, attributes, and names, and the cosmos, including all its phenomena, are one existence—this doctrine was later called the Oneness of Being. However, Ibn ʿArabi distinguishes God's Essence, which cannot be known, from His names, which can be known. He considers the attributes to be relationships

12 Henry Corbin locates the "spiritual topography" of Ibn ʿArabi's thought "between Andalusia and Iran." See Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 3–38.

13 Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrad (London: Kegan Paul, 2001), 292.

14 Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 295.

15 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 31.

or states, and as such, they are not separate entities existing in God's Essence. Accordingly, God's Unity is absolute from the standpoint of His Essence, but it is many from the perspective of the cosmos.[16] God's Essence in itself remains forever unknown to His creatures, while "He is manifest inasmuch as the cosmos reveals something of his names and attributes."[17] Since this connection between God and the cosmos is vital in Islamic theology, scholars such as Corbin and Izutsu consider the idea of God's self-manifestation or theophany (*tajallī*) as fundamental to Ibn ʿArabi's worldview.[18]

According to Ibn ʿArabi, there is only one Reality, which receives all relations and attributes called the Divine Names. Reality grants to every name, which appears endlessly, an essence by which a name is distinguished from (all) others.[19] Divine names, thus, represent relationships between God and His self-manifestation. The cosmos is under the control of God's names. From this perspective, each name is called *rabb* (lord) and is responsible for certain acts and specific people. One name does not differ from another as they both indicate the Essence. Still, one name is distinct from another because of its characteristics; each name is a reality distinct from other names through its essence even though all the names are directed to show one Essence: each name has its own rule, which no other name possesses.[20]

Every divine name is designated and depicted by all the divine names. That is because every name indicates both the Essence and the unique aspect toward which it is directed. From the point of view of its indication of the Essence, each name possesses all the other names, while from the point of view of its indication of its unique aspect, it is distinguished from the others. Thus, from the perspective of the Essence, the name and the named are identical, while from the perspective of the meaning to which the name is directed, they are different.[21]

The relationships between Divine Names are complex: since the phenomena in the cosmos are infinite, God's names are infinite, but they can be reduced to some basic names. These seven names, which are the foundation of all other names, are the Living (*ḥayy*), the Omniscient (*ʿalīm*), the Willer (*murīd*), the omnipotent (*qādir*), the Speaker (*mutakallim*), the All-Seeing (*baṣīr*), and the All-Hearing (*samīʿ*). There is a hierarchy of Names, some enjoying priority over others.[22] Additionally, names sometimes oppose each other as they represent different aspects of the Essence of God.[23]

According to Ibn ʿArabi, not only does the cosmos as a whole express God's names, but also the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*), for instance Adam or other extraordinary figures such as the Prophet and the saints. These perfect human beings contain in their essences all the ingredients of the cosmos, that is, God's names.[24] Similarly, each prophet embodies a particular divine name, manifesting one of God's numerous attributes. Muhammad, the seal of prophets, thus manifests the most comprehensive name of God. But prophets and saints are not the only individuals who manifest God's names: according to Ibn ʿArabi's anthropology, each person manifests the divine names. For instance, in *Fusus*, he interpreted both Moses and Pharaoh as manifesting different divine names.[25] According to Ibn ʿArabi, the unfolding of the divine perfections in space and time was occasioned by God's primeval desire to contemplate himself in the mirror of the

16
Binyamin Abrahamov, *Ibn al-ʿArabī's Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam: An Annotated Translation of the Bezels of Wisdom* (London: Routledge, 2015), 7.

17
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 16.

18
Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*: *A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Henry Corbin, *Creative imagination*, 184.

19
Abrahamov, *Ibn al-ʿArabī's Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam*, 33.

20
Abrahamov, 141.

21
Abrahamov, 48.

22
Abrahamov, 16.

23
Abrahamov, 99.

24
Abrahamov, 7 (translator's introduction).

25
Abrahamov, 167.

cosmos—a notion that is intimately linked to the medieval analogy of the micro- and macro-cosm and the ancient motif of the *homo imago Dei*. Therefore, each divine attribute or perfection manifests itself in the universe in accord with each individual creature's primordial predisposition to receive it. This predisposition, or readiness, is predicated on the creature's primordial essence, which is part of God's knowledge of himself and the world prior to creation.[26]

Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of the divine names has been influential in Iranian mysticism. Nur al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami (1441–1492), the prominent Persian poet and Sufi, was inspired by Ibn ʿArabi and wrote a remarkable commentary on *The Imprint of the Fusus*.[27] Jami's conception of the divine names emphasized its temporal aspect, i.e., the succession of names through time and history. Ibn ʿArabi himself implies this point by arranging the chapters of the *Fusus* in chronological order, from Adam to Muhammad, and suggests that each period manifesting a name is replaced by another period that embodies a different or even opposite name. According to Ibn ʿArabi, "God has effects manifest within the cosmos; they are the states within which the cosmos undergoes constant fluctuation (*taqallub*). This is a property of His name 'Time' (*dahr*)."[28] In a similar vein, Jami interprets the Sufi doctrine of the "recurrent creation" of the world using Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of divine names.[29] In *Lawaʾiḥ*, he writes that the world is under God's will, expressed through His opposite names. One of God's names is revealed every period, whereas others are concealed. He maintains that:

> At the very moment that it is thus stripped this same substance is reclothed with another particular phenomenon, resembling the preceding one, through the operation of the mercy of the Merciful One. The next moment this latter phenomenon is annihilated by the operation of the terrible Omnipotence, and another phenomenon is formed by the mercy of the Merciful One, and so on for as long as God wills. Thus, it never happens that the Very Being is revealed for two successive moments under the guise of the same phenomenon. At every moment, one universe is annihilated and another similar to it takes its place.[30]

Following Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of the divine names, Jami insists that the succession of historical cycles is based on this concealment/unveiling dynamic: God's essence is one, but it is expressed in each historical period through particular names and attributes. This theme can also be found in his literary writings and poems. In his well-known Persian allegorical romance, called *Joseph and Zuleikha*, Jami points to this sequel of names in history:

> In this palace of formalism
> Each, in turn, beats the drum of Being
> Truth has one manifestation in each turn
> Light is thrown on the world by a Name
> If the universe followed one command
> Many lights would remain concealed.[31]

26
Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 13.

27
The *Imprint of the Fusus* (*Naqsh al-Fusus*), the last treatise written by Ibn ʿArabi, was a summary of the *Fusus*. Jami's commentary on this treatise (*Naqd al-Nusus fi Sharh Naqsh al-Fusus*) is considered one of the best. Regarding its importance see Chittick's introduction to the book. ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami, *Naqd al-Nusus: Selected Texts to Comment on the Imprint of the Fuṣūṣ*, ed. William Chittick (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977).

28
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 100.

29
For the doctrine of the Recurrent Creation (*al-khalq al-jadīd*) and its connection to the Divine names in Ibn ʿArabi's thought, see Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 200–207; Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 96–111.

30
Nur-ud-din Abd-ud-Rahman Jami, *Lawaʾiḥ: A Treatise on Sufism*, trans. E. H. Whinfield and Mirza Muhammad Kazvini (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1906), 44–45.

31
This is our translation reflecting Fardid's interpretation. For a more literary translation see Jami, *Joseph and Zuleika*, trans. Charles F. Horne (Ames, IA: Omphaloskepsis, 2000), 21.

In Ibn ʿArabi's tradition, the Quranic verse, "Each day He is upon some task" (55:29), is interpreted through the idea of the manifestation of God through His names. As Chittick explains, these tasks are "divine states within engendered entities through names that are relationships specified by the changes within engendered existence. [God] discloses Himself as the One Entity within diverse entities in engendered existence."[32] Following the same tradition, Jami's poem implies that the Truth is manifested in every cyclic period (*dawr*) by taking a different shape and following a different divine name. Each epoch, therefore, can be understood as the manifestation of God's Essence through one of His names.

The perfect knowledge, according to Ibn ʿArabi's tradition, "remains only within the confines of divine self-manifestation and in the Real's removing of the veils covering the hearts and eyes so that they are able to perceive things, eternal and contingent, nonexistent and existent, impossible, necessary and possible, as they really are in their essences."[33] According to Ibn ʿArabi, this knowledge, which is called the "Science of the Divine Names" (*ʿilm al-asmāʾ*), is exclusive to the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) who is the vicegerent of God.[34] It is worth mentioning here that Ibn ʿArabi's anthropology has a normative aspect, one which could be called the "Ethics of Divine Names." Human beings are created in the divine image, which implies that God gave humankind His names and attributes. However, some names and attributes have been actually given, while human beings have the potential to acquire the rest of them. The realization of these other divine character traits is the ethical agenda of human beings.[35] As William Chittick explains, through perceiving the divine names, people can grasp many of the characteristics that flow forth from *wujūd* (Being) and belong to *wujūd*.[36] Hence, while the perfect human mirrors all divine names and attributes, people can grasp and realize some of them to achieve human perfection.

32
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 104.

33
Abrahamov, *Ibn al-ʿArabī's Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam*, 99.

34
Mahmud Muhammad Ghurab, *Al-Insan al-Kamil min Kalam al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi* (Tehran: Mowla, 1386 [2007]), 100.

35
Qaisar Shahzad, "Ibn ʿArabi's Contribution to the Ethics of Divine Names," *Islamic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2004): 5–38.

36
William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 19. See also William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 23.

Fardid and Ibn ʿArabi

Iranian Sufism and Islamic mysticism were crucial elements in Fardid's thought, and he often used mystic terminology to explain his ideas and insights. Fardid's familiarity with Islamic philosophical, literary, and esoteric trends and schools came partly from his youth, when he was a student in traditional seminaries. His passion for Sufism and mystic vocabulary was also rooted in his Heideggerian approach. As mentioned above, the later Heidegger proposed poetry as a genuine way to approach Being, criticizing the history of Western philosophy as a metaphysical deviation from proper ontological questions. Similarly, Fardid had a negative view of Muslim classical philosophers like al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Mulla Sadra, labeling them Greek-infected metaphysicians.[37]

In contrast, Fardid embraced Persian literature, especially mystical terminology and the spiritual symbolism of Sufi poets such as Rumi, Jami, Sanaʾi, and Shabestari. Persian Sufis influenced Fardid in his esoteric scheme partly because the Islamic Sufi tradition criticized some aspects of Greek philosophy, specifically its rational-logical foundation, embracing intuition and spiritual imagination instead. The most

37
Among Muslim philosophers, Fardid was interested in Suhrawardī. This interest may be rooted in Suhrawardī's critique of Greek philosophy, his Oriental wisdom of light/darkness, his resuscitation of ancient Persian wisdom, and his focus on presential knowledge over conceptual thought, all of which were useful for Fardid's intellectual project. It should also be noted that the young Fardid co-translated a lecture by Henry Corbin about the Philosophy of Illumination (*ishrāq*), from French into Persian. Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*, French text with the Persian translation by Ahmad Fardid and Abdolhamid Gloshan (Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy, 1946).

important figure in this Persian tradition for Fardid was undoubtedly Hafiz, an Iranian lyric poet famous among Iranians as "the Tongue of the Unseen." Fardid referred to Hafiz's poems in almost all his lectures and writings, offering esoteric and idiosyncratic interpretations. In one of his interviews, he quoted from Jami that "Hafiz's poetry is something like a divine miracle."[38] One can say that in the same way that Hölderlin's poetry resonates deeply with Heidegger, Hafiz occupies a significant place in Fardid's thought.[39]

It seems that Fardid's interest in Persian poetry and the Heideggerian taste for mysticism contributed to Fardid's turn toward Ibn ʿArabi. Fardid mentions Ibn ʿArabi on several occasions in his lectures. It is worth mentioning that according to Nasrollah Pourjavady, a scholar of Sufism and a student of Fardid in the late 1960s at the University of Tehran, Fardid's interest in Ibn ʿArabi developed later, especially at the dawn of the Islamic Revolution.[40] On the other hand, in the last years of his life and among his disciples, Fardid claimed that he had overcome Ibn ʿArabi.[41] At any rate, his influence on Fardid's most important years of intellectual activity, i.e., the 1970s and '80s, cannot be overstated. Besides the doctrine of the divine names, Fardid adopted several other terms and symbols from Ibn ʿArabi and his tradition in general, albeit through his own ideological lenses.

Fardid was familiar with Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysical system, specifically the *Fusus al-Hikam* and its themes. His conception of what he called the "historical science of Names" (*ʿilm al-asmaʾ tārīkhī*) relied on the commentarial tradition of the *Fusus*. Fardid's interpretation of *Fusus* seems to be inspired especially by two commentaries: the Commentary of Dawud al-Qaysari[42] (c. 1260–1347) and the Commentary of Jami.[43] Fardid maintained that these two commentaries had paid attention to the historical aspects of the divine names, i.e., the manifestation of names through historical periods.[44] However, he explicitly said that he did not aim to iterate Ibn ʿArabi's teachings since our epoch is different from his, and consequently, our historical "destined consignment" (*ḥavālat-i tarīkhī*) is different from Ibn ʿArabi's. Fardid maintains that:

> Today, after 400 years of Westoxified history, I cannot return to Ibn ʿArabi's school and repeat it in the same way as it was discussed in the past. However, I have great respect for Muḥyiddīn's teachings. I have frequently read and reflected upon his works and his commentaries based on epoch, time, and the course of wisdom . . . But I believe that simply repeating them will not solve any problem in today's world.[45]

According to Fardid, Ibn ʿArabi's school is partially adequate since it takes its distance from metaphysical thinking.[46] To apply it to contemporary situations, however, Fardid attempted to interpret and complement Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of divine names by emphasizing two crucial elements: historical thinking and etymology.

As for historical thinking, Fardid implied that Ibn ʿArabi did not pay much attention to history and historical epochs. Fardid interpreted or rather *reinterpreted* the succession of prophets and names in the *Fusus* chronologically, i.e., a divine name represented by a prophet is

38
Ahmad Fardid, *Darbari Mafhumi Zaman* [On the Concept of Time], ed. Ali Gheissari (Qom: Movarrekh, 1401 [2022]), 85.

39
Ahmad Ali Heydari, "Heidegger, Hölderlin-Fardid, Hafez," in *Heidegger in the Islamicate World*, ed. Kata Moser, Urs Göskens, and Josh Hayes (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 169–81. Continuing with this line of thought, one can add that Ibn ʿArabi occupies the same place that Parmenides does in Heidegger's philosophy.

40
"He (Fardid) sometimes criticized Ibn ʿArabi and considered his mysticism as metaphysics. I heard him saying that Ibn ʿArabi blinded one of Sufism's eyes and Mulla Sadra blinded the other. Years later, when I found that Fardid had been right to some extent, I was surprised that he was drawn to Ibn ʿArabi. What could be the reason except that Imam Khomeini once had taught *Fuṣuṣ al-Hikam* and had written books under the influence of Ibn ʿArabi? After the Revolution, Ibn ʿArabi's cult had grown in Iran, and Fardid's character was always to jump on the bandwagon." Nasrollah Pourjavady, "Fardidian Charlatanism," *Andishiyi Puya* 9 (1392 [2013]): 52. It should be noted that, even after the Islamic Revolution, Fardid, while embracing Ibn ʿArabi's mythology of divine names, believed that the Akbarian doctrine of the Oneness of Being had blinded Sufism in one eye. See Ahmad Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 126.

41
Mohammad Reza Zad, ed., *Fardid Nama* [An Overview of Fardid's Life and Thought] (Tehran: Mowje No, 1394 [2015]), 542.

42
Dawud Qaysari, *Sharh-i Qaysari bar Fusus al-Hikam*, translation from Arabic into Persian by Mohammad Khajavi (Tehran: Mowla, 1387 [2008]).

43
Nur al-Din Jami, *Naqd al-Nusus*, 1977.

44
Ahmad Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 16; Ahmad Fardid, *Gharb va Gharbzadigi* [West and Westoxification: Fardid's Lectures in 1985] (Tehran: Farno, 1395 [2016]), 56.

45
Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 28 (our translation from Persian).

46
Fadid, *Divine Encounter*, 387.

replaced by a different name embodied by another.[47] In the same vein, he also used the commentaries of Qaysari and Jami as they supposedly had paid attention to the "historical epochs, periods, and the historical manifestation of divine names."[48] In fact, some passages in these commentaries are prone to historical interpretation. For instance, Qaysari writes that:

> Sometimes, a government that is mainly dominated by one name emerges, and another is concealed and covered. Since the Names have manifestations and managements, the power they gain over the states is subject to the change of religions and the stellar rotation of the Seven Stars, each with a thousand-year rotation period. Therefore, every religion (*sharīʿa*) has a name that must continue with the survival of its government, and after its decline, the reign of that name will also be abolished.[49]

Consequently, adopting some elements from Ibn ʿArabi's mysticism and its commentaries, especially those prone to historical reading, Fardid stated that:

> Names evolve in history. A name can disappear, and another name is revealed in a new historical time. Humanity becomes the manifestation of the name, representing the ultimate Truth, and is the supreme and authentic name to which all other names are subordinate. Then, humankind incarnates names, but man incarnates a name in every stage, which dominates other names.[50]

We shall see that the "historical" interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi constitutes the most crucial part of Fardid's ideological scheme.

As for etymology, Fardid attempted to complement Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of divine names by connecting it to etymology. He explicitly claimed that while the doctrine of Names was rooted in Ibn ʿArabi's tradition, the "historical *ism shināsī*" (historical *knowledge of names*, i.e., historical *etymology*) is his own coinage. Ibn ʿArabi, Fardid adds, could not offer a comprehensive science of names as he was not familiar with etymology. In one of his last interviews, Fardid indicated that:

> I am an etymologist. But Heidegger is not an etymologist. This is why he falls into the trap of 'general metaphysics' and keeps talking about Parmenides. Of course, I used to pay attention to Ibn ʿArabi, as Parmenides was essential for Heidegger. But etymology opened a way for me to overcome all this. I have moved beyond general metaphysics, but Heidegger has not moved beyond it. I am an etymological thinker. Etymology is the science of Names, the meeting of names, and the language of names . . . I used to espouse the doctrine of Names based on Ibn ʿArabi because he had paid attention to this issue, but Ibn ʿArabi did not know what etymology was. My question is, what is the truth of Being? I answer that it is language, but Heidegger says it is time.[51]

47
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 22.

48
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 16.

49
Qaysari, *Sharh-i Fusus*, 36 (our translation).

50
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 20.

51
Mohammad Reza Zad, *Fardid Nama*, 541–42 (our translation).

Therefore, while Fardid took the structure of the doctrine of divine names from Ibn ʿArabi and his commentators, he attempted to complement it with Heidegger's philosophy on one hand, and etymology on the other. What he called *ʿilm al-asmāʾ tārīkhī* (historical science of names), *ism shināsī tārīkhī* (historical etymology), and *ḥikmat unsī* (gnostic wisdom) were based on his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi combined with historical thought and his own understanding of etymology.

Historical Cycles and Divine Names

Fardid's historical science of names is an eclectic scheme composed of different philosophical, theological, and mystical sources. Fardid claims that his scheme is historical, i.e., it discusses historical periods and epochs through divine names. As mentioned, the two main pillars of Fardid's thought were Heidegger (especially his later thought) and Ibn ʿArabi (especially the doctrine of Divine Names). However, one can also see the influence of other schools and thinkers in Fardid's lectures and interviews. One of the most important influences is clearly Henry Corbin, whose lecture on Persian Oriental wisdom was translated by Fardid from French into Persian in 1946.[52] At that time, Corbin was a well-known translator of Heidegger in France, who later turned from German philosophy to Islamic theosophy. As some scholars have observed, Corbin's esoteric thought significantly inspired Fardid's attempt to interpret Islamic tradition in general and Ibn ʿArabi in particular through the lens of phenomenology and ontological hermeneutics.[53] Corbin is particularly significant in this respect because of his focus on the gnostic aspects of Heidegger's philosophy; the same theme underlies Corbin's own interpretation of the Islamic intellectual tradition.[54] In other words, Fardid's appropriation of Ibn ʿArabi and Heidegger can be understood as derivative of, or significantly influenced by, Corbin's gnostic interpretations.

One of Corbin's crucial contributions was his focus on the cyclical concept of time and history in Islamic/Iranian tradition. When it comes to Fardid's account of history, one must bear in mind that it is not always clear and consistent. Some have attempted to demonstrate similarities between Fardid's historical scheme and the Hegelian/Marxian account of history and its stages.[55] Following the well-known distinction between cyclical and rectilinear concepts of history,[56] one can say that Fardid's conception of history, what he called "historiosophy" (*ḥikmat-i tārīkh*),[57] was, in the final analysis, based on a cyclical worldview in line with Ibn ʿArabi's system, Corbin's interpretation of Iranian Islam, and the post-metaphysical thought of the later Heidegger. Fardid insisted that all ancient religions and mystical systems were grounded on a cyclical conception of history.[58] On several occasions in his lectures, essays, and interviews, he started by quoting and interpreting Jami's verses about the sequence of names in history and the various manifestations of the Truth in each historical period. Here he builds a bridge between the Heideggerian interpretation of *aletheia* as the unconcealment of Being and his own historical interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of divine names as the manifestation of God.[59] Moreover, Fardid interprets these doctrines in accord with the cyclical timeline of cosmic ages in Hinduism, i.e., the doctrine of four Yuga

52
Corbin, *Les motifs Zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi*.

53
"Chronologiquement le retour de Fardid vers la mystique spéculative de l'école d'Ibn ʿArabi est postérieur à sa connaissance de Heidegger. Dans ce retour vers les sources de la gnose (*erfan*) le rôle de Corbin semble déterminant." Ehsan Mazinani, "La réception de Heidegger en Iran: Le cas de Ahmad Fardid" (PhD diss., Université de Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2006–2007), 89.

54
Manuel de Diéguez, "Henry Corbin et Heidegger," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 30 (1972): 32; Felix Herkert, "Heidegger und Corbin – Ansätze zu einer Verhältnisbestimmung" *Heidegger Studies / Heidegger Studien / Etudes Heideggeriennes / Studi Heideggeriani* 36, no. 1 (2020): 215–52.

55
For instance, Dariush Ashouri, a former disciple of his, notes that "if we leave aside dialectic as the logic of historical movement in Hegel's philosophy, the doctrine of the historical emergence of names in Ibn ʿArabi's theoretical mysticism and the historical development of the Idea in Hegel's philosophy seem similar, at least in appearance. Although Fardid is a disciple of Heidegger and has no devotion to Hegel, in any case, it was the influence of the modern philosophy of history that brought this theory of the emergence of names to the stage of world history and then mixed it with Heidegger's critiques of the history of Western thought as 'the history of metaphysics.' " Dariush Ashouri, "The Myth of Philosophy Amongst Us," 18.

56
Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 42.

57
Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 230.

58
Ahmad Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 39.

59
Ahmad Fardid, 158.

Cycles (Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga).[60]

Based on this cyclical timeline, Fardid distinguishes between five periods of human history as the main structure of his historical science of names.[61] As mentioned above, Fardid labeled these periods as *the day before yesterday*, *yesterday*, *today*, *tomorrow*, and *the day after tomorrow*. Each of these five historical periods represents a particular divine manifestation under a name. Fardid's historiosophy, therefore, is the study of events and situations of each period through the domination of some names and the concealment of others. It seems that, according to Fardid, divine names have assigned to each epoch a particular historical destiny that only a few of the wise could be conscious of. We will discuss these periods in more detail below.

The first period, *the day before yesterday*, is, according to Fardid, the primeval golden age of humanity, when the people had been One Nation (in Quranic terms, *umma wāḥida*) and had a single language. This period coincided with the pre-Socratic period in ancient Greece in which etymology (science of names) was the knowledge of the Truth. Following the Corbinian spiritual topography,[62] Fardid also applied the title of *the day before yesterday* to the East as the abode of the Truth.[63] Similarly, in ancient Hinduism, there was a time when etymology and theology had been the same knowledge with a single title.[64] Fardid insists that names (and nouns),[65] truth, and God were deeply connected in this period. Fardid's own interest in etymology was for him a remembrance of this forgotten past because he was convinced that today language and Truth have lost their connection.[66]

The second period, *yesterday*, begins with Greek philosophy; it was the age of philosophy and theology. In this period, the original names of *the day before yesterday* were concealed and replaced by the domination of the "Greek name" over the East. Using Ibn ʿArabi's terminology, Fardid sometimes explained this shift as the replacement of the names of God's beauty (*jamāl*) by the names of His majesty (*jalāl*).[67] Another expression in Fardid's scheme is the replacement of the one true God by multiple false gods; interestingly, according to Fardid, these false gods also represented some divine names and manifestations. While these false gods were worshiped as the one true God, they only impersonated the God of *the day before yesterday*.[68] The period of *yesterday*, coinciding with the Indian Kali Yuga, represents the introduction of nihilism into human history through the forgetfulness of Being and deviation from the proper understanding of time and language. Interestingly, the spirit of this period dominated the Christian Middle Ages too, and in turn inspired the theological traditions of Abrahamic religions, including Islam. What Fardid called "Wesotxification" began with the "Greek infection" of the East during the Medieval Islamic period. In this period, the intuitive and presential knowledge was replaced by acquired knowledge and conceptual thought of metaphysics. During this period, the influence of Western metaphysics alienated Eastern religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions from their authentic origins.[69] However, Fardid adds that while the destiny of the West was entirely metaphysical, the Islamic world was ambivalent as some Iranian and Muslim mystics and poets did not fall into the trap of Greek philosophy and insisted on the priority of presential knowledge over acquired knowledge.[70] At any rate, this period (*yester-*

60
For contemporary uses of the Hindu cyclical timeline, especially among Traditionalists, see Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: A Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 69–71.

61
Fardid specifies that he does not want to devote his historical scheme to the Hindu doctrine, but it could be a way to escape from modern historicism. Cf. Ahmad Fradid, *West and Westoxification*, 152.

62
For Corbin's spiritual and symbolic topography, see Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Paris: Verdier, 1999).

63
"The concealment of the East was associated with the dawn of Ancient Greeks' thought; the West began with Greece." See Ahmad Fardid, "Chand Porsesh dar Babi Farhangi Sharq" [Some Questions concerning the Culture of the East], *Farhang va Zendegi* 7 (Dey 1350 [January 1972]).

64
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 215–17.

65
In Persian, the word *Esm* means both name and noun.

66
Fardid, *On The Concept of Time*, 59.

67
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 192.

68
Fardid claims that the one true God (or the Light), which had been worshiped in ancient Hinduism, was replaced by false gods under new names such as *Ahura* (in later Zoroastrianism) and *Zeus* in ancient Greek. Cf. Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 29.

69
For Fardid's East/West split, which shows the impact of Corbin's sacred geography. See Mazinani, *Heidegger en Iran*, 95–97.

70
Mohammad Reza Zad, *Fardid Nama*, 552.

day) ended in Europe during the Renaissance, while in Iran, it ended in the early twentieth century with the Persian Constitutional Revolution.

The third period is *today*, i.e., the modern age. If *yesterday* was the age of transcendence and foundationalism, *today*'s destiny is immanence and subjectivity.[71] This age is dominated by subjective nihilism represented by the death of God (Nietzsche) and the loss of gods (Heidegger). According to Fardid, modernity is the culmination of Kali Yuga and the immanentization of false names in history, which paved the way for contemporary crises. The situation in the East is even worse. As mentioned above, Fardid insists that the East and the West were separated after *the day before yesterday*. Therefore, the destiny of the West has been nihilism, while the fate of the East was Westoxification, which is the nihilism of non-European nations. That is why Fardid always warned against following Western thought in Iran. For instance, he notes that "since Western nihilism has reached its peak in the thought of Nietzsche, we can definitely imagine what will be the end of *today*'s Westoxification."[72] Fardid thus can be considered the first modern Iranian thinker who insisted that there is a non-synchronicity between Iran and the modern West since Iranians and Europeans do not belong to the same historical course, although both are experiencing the same period of *today*.

The fourth period, according to Fardid's historiosophy, is *tomorrow*, coinciding with the postmodern age. This is when the foundations of Western thought will be completely destroyed. In this period, a horizon revealing the last cycle, the last period, will emerge. Human beings will be aware of their alienation and nihilism and will seek the Truth through "preparatory and anticipatory" thinking and intuitive remembrance (*dhikr*).[73] In this period, the modern values will completely lose their domination, but nothing replaces them before the *Ereignis* or the unfolding of Being in history.[74] This *Ereignis* has an apocalyptic character and waiting for the promised Messiah is one of its aspects (see below).

The final period is the *day after tomorrow* when the transcendental Truth reappears and is revealed. This period, symbolized by Mahdi's appearance, represents the manifestation of the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*). Fardid describes this period as "the Greatest Manifestation," which means the "manifestation of the Name that through its appearance the true man is realized, and this is the name that will be manifested in the day after tomorrow. With the Greatest Manifestation, the human age will drastically change and will overcome religious and ideological combats. The transcendental essence of man, that which is eternal time, returns, and humankind recollects [or remembers] it."[75] This period will be the end of history.

Fardid assiduously insisted that his views and concepts belonged to the *day before yesterday* and the *day after tomorrow*. That is why he repeated that his language seemed strange to the people who were still stuck in the destiny of *yesterday* and *today* and were cursed by the names ruling over these periods. The five-period history, briefly sketched above, was an idiosyncratic mixture of Heideggerian philosophy and Ibn ʿArabi's mythology of Divine Names, with some inspirations from Marxism and Hinduism. The *day before yesterday* in Fardid's scheme can be compared with Heidegger's pre-Socratic era

71
Fardid, *On the Concept of Time*, 104.

72
Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 102.

73
Fardid, *On the Concept of Time*, 93.

74
For the reception of the Heideggerian concept *Ereignis* in Fardid's thought, see Mazinani, *Heidegger en Iran*, 102 ff.

75
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 131.

(or the "first inception" in later Heidegger) and Marx's primitive communism. In addition, Fardid's view on the *day after tomorrow* is reminiscent of Marx's stateless communism at the end of history and its arrival reminds one of Heidegger's idea of *Ereignis* (or "other inception").[76] The eclectic nature of this historical scheme represents an attempt to build bridges among different traditions with entirely different foundations; because of its eclecticism, it is by no means a coherent or consistent system. For instance, as Mohammad M. Hashemi observes, Fardid's view about Islam seems incompatible with his periodization of history.[77] On the basis of Fardid's scheme, Islam emerged in the second period of *yesterday* (or Kali Yuga) when the names of God's wrath dominated, and the names of His mercy went into concealment. But then how can we accommodate Fardid's other claim that Islam is a religion of the *day before yesterday*, in which there was a proper identity of divinity, language, and truth? Or his claim that Allah is the Greatest Name of the one true God of the *day before yesterday* and the *day after tomorrow*?[78] Furthermore, the emergence of Islam in the period of *yesterday* would be incompatible with the claim that it epitomizes the true Divine Names.[79] Another difficulty stems from Fardid's indiscriminate use, or overuse, of the divine names so that he sometimes empties the mythology of names of their original value in theoretical mysticism. Although he explicitly claims that each historical period manifests a name, he does not specify which period manifests which name. Moreover, he coins, abruptly and it seems in a spontaneous manner, strange expressions such as the "name of nationality, internationalism, and cosmopolitanism,"[80] the "atheistic names" (*asmāʾ ilḥādī*),[81] and the name of the "impulsive soul" (*al-nafs al-ʾammāra*),[82] expressions that the doctrine of divine names can barely explain.

76
For the concept of "other inception" (Ereignis) in later Heidegger, especially see Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

77
Mohammad M. Hashemi, *Huviat Andishan va Miraṣi Fikri Ahmad Fardid* [Identity Thinkers and the Intellectual Legacy of Ahmad Fardid] (Tehran: Kavir, 1385 [2007]), 103.

78
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 136.

79
"Muhammad the prophet wanted to banish *yesterday*'s god by Islam, and replace it with the *day before yesterday* and the *day after tomorrow*'s God." Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 136.

80
Fardid, 49.

81
Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 237.

82
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 42.

Fardid's Ideological Scheme

Although Fardid's scheme, as described above, was not inherently political, his theological and philosophical views had political and ideological implications. His career as an intellectual coincided with some of the most turbulent moments of contemporary Iranian history: World War II and the Allies' occupation of Iran, the 1953 Coup, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Before the Islamic revolution, Fardid was not a political figure but was known for coining the term Westoxification (*gharbzadigī*), whose ambiguity allowed it to be wielded as a political and ideological weapon by both supporters and critics of the Pahlavi regime.[83] This is also the case with Fardid's thought as a whole: before the Islamic revolution, he inspired both opposition thinkers and pro-regime intellectuals. After the Islamic revolution and in his post-revolutionary lectures and public courses, Fardid presented himself as a passionate supporter of the Revolution, its ideals, and its leadership. During this period, he began commenting directly on political subjects and politically implementing his previous thoughts on Heidegger and Ibn ʿArabi.

Fardid did not shy away from eclecticism, even when politics was concerned: for instance, while Marxian materialism was incompatible with his philosophical views, Fardid found Marx's theory of revolution at times helpful and that is why some aspects of his theory have a vague

83
Ali Mirsepassi and Mehdi Faraji, "Depoliticizing Westoxification: The Case of Bonyad Monthly," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 3 (2016): 1–21.

Marxist aroma. But it was above all Fardid's five-period history that paved the way for a political ideology. Fardid's overall scheme here is similar to what is sometimes called "political gnosticism."[84] According to Mark Lilla, the three fundamental beliefs of gnosticism are "that the created world was the work of an evil lower deity or demiurge, and thus utterly corrupt; that direct access to a higher, spiritual divinity was possible for those with a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) developed from a divine spark within; and that redemption would come through a violent apocalypse, led, perhaps, by those possessing *gnosis*."[85] Political gnosticism thus is a political-theological system that uses gnostic themes for ideological and political purposes.[86] All three features of gnosticism can be found in Fardid's historical science of divine names. Fardid was emphatic that the worlds of *yesterday* and *today* are under the domination of false names. He insisted that the one true God had been replaced by false gods, or even evil forces impersonating gods. Moreover, he emphasized the direct or presential knowledge accessible to a few prophets, mystics, and poets. Finally, Fardid subscribed to the idea that redemption would be possible only on the *day after tomorrow* through apocalyptic revelations when the Greatest Name would be revealed.[87] It is therefore no accident that Fardid and his disciples have used the term *ḥikmat unsī* (*Unsī* Wisdom) to describe their intellectual project. The Persian/Arabic term *uns*, according to Fardid's etymology, has the same roots as the Greek *Gnosis*. Fardid maintains that true gnostic thinking is the knowledge of God's true names.[88]

Both revolutionary and conservative aspects are present in Fardid's political gnosticism; in this respect, he is similar to contemporary radical right thinkers.[89] Fardid's position on the Islamic Revolution must be understood within his conception of revolution, rooted in his gnostic views and the cyclical succession of divine names in history. As Arendt accurately observed, the modern concept of revolution became conceivable under the new concept of the rectilinear timeline, which introduced the entirely novel idea of a "new order" (novelty and uniqueness of events).[90] Fardid's view about the connection between history and revolution, however, completely differs from the one discussed in modern political thought. Fardid discussed the etymology of the Persian term *inghilāb* (revolution), originally meaning the rotating and ever-recurring movement of stars, similar to the Latin etymology of the term *revolution* in European languages.[91] According to Fardid, in each historical period, humanity is embodied in the image of a name; revolution occurs when a new name appears and another fades away. Hence, "the meaning of revolution emanates from the rise and fall of names."[92] That is why Fardid asserts that the true revolution of the Western world was the Renaissance, through which a fundamental change of names (i.e., a shift in the relationship between humankind and the cosmos) occurred. Other movements and occurrences (including the French Revolution) have been rebellions, Fardid claimed, not revolutions *stricto sensu*.[93]

The true revolution, hence, will be the manifestation of the Greatest Name on the *day after tomorrow*. Fardid's conception of revolution, the cyclic account of history, is complemented by an eschatological worldview: at the end of times, the promised messiah (or Mahdi according to Shiʿa beliefs) will appear:

84
According to Voegelin, "modern Gnosticism takes the form of speculating on the meaning of history construed as a closed process manipulated by the revolutionary elite—the few who understand the path, process, and goal of history as its moves from stage to stage toward some sort of final perfect realm." Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2012), xii (editor's introduction).

85
Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: NYRB, 2016), 36.

86
For the concept of "political gnosticism," see Benedikt Korf and Rory Rowan, "Arcane Geopolitics: Heidegger, Schmitt, and the Political Theology of Gnosticism," *Political Geography* 80 (2020): 1–9.

87
It should be noted that some scholars have discussed significant gnostic themes in both Ibn ʿArabi's mysticism and Heidegger's philosophy. For a gnostic reading of Heidegger, see, for instance, Susan Taubes, "The Gnostic Foundations of Heidegger's Nihilism," *The Journal of Religion* 34, no. 3 (1954): 155–72.

88
See Fardid, *On the Concept of Time*, 97; *Divine Encounter*, 56.

89
Among the prominent thinkers of the Conservative Revolution, Fardid was inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and some aspects of Oswald Spengler's thought. For the Conservative Revolution's impact on new right-wing ideologies, see for instance Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of The Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

90
Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 27.

91
"The word 'revolution' was originally an astronomical term which gained increasing importance in the natural sciences through Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium.* In this scientific usage, it retained its precise Latin meaning, designating the regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars, which, since it was known to be beyond the influence of man and hence irresistible, was certainly characterized neither by newness nor by violence." Arendt, *On Revolution*, 42.

92
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 17.

93
Fardid, 70–71.

> The Russians will come[94] because they have the spirit of Messianism. Mahdi and Messiah are coming to the West, and the promised Imam that we are all waiting for is also coming. Waiting should be preparatory, and our thinking should be preparatory thinking for the promised Mahdi's *day after tomorrow*. But this promised Mahdi is not reserved for Muslims, Christians, or even Jews. He turns domination (*vilāya*) into affection (*valāya*). He is not Nietzsche's Übermensch; he is the dervish who reminds humans of their poverty.[95]

On several occasions, Fardid emphasizes that we live in the age of nihilism or Kali Yuga, waiting for the Eschaton or the end of time (*akhir al-zaman*) to arrive. This view is a stance of what Eric Voegelin called "the immanentization of the eschaton," which is the attempt to bring about the end of history, or the ultimate fulfillment of human existence, within the immanent world of human society and politics.[96] Here it is important to mention that there is a fundamental ambiguity inherent in Fardid's eschatology: on one hand, he embraces a theory of revolution that anticipates an immanent Eschaton in history, but on the other, he supports a cyclic narrative of time that would not allow any historical realization of apocalyptic revelations.

Fardid's views about the 1979 Islamic Revolution were contradictory and often confusing. On several occasions, he considered it a true revolution, a fundamental change of names, and the beginning of a new era. Referring to the opponents of the revolution, he condemned them as "anti-revolutionaries who are chanting in favor of *yesterday* and *today*'s god, not the *day before yesterday*'s and the *day after tomorrow*'s God."[97] But he sometimes called the Islamic Revolution a "mixed" movement: "It is potentially a revolution but actually a rebellion. It is a revolution as there is Imam Khomeini, and there are true believers."[98] In any case, he was strongly convinced that the Islamic Revolution would pave the way for the end of time and history.[99] Fardid's position towards the Islamic revolution is reminiscent of Heidegger's vindication of the regime of his time; both are examples of *Ereignis* that have been mysteriously "decreed" by Being, independent from human volition.[100]

It is difficult for any impartial reader who spends time on Fardid's writings to come away without mixed feelings. Here we have a thinker who never produced even a single book presenting his ideas and whose only intellectual activity was oral. His enthusiastic followers have tried to put a positive spin on this aspect of Fardid's activities by calling him "the Oral Philosopher." But in approaching the transcripts of Fardid's oral pronouncements in an attempt to systemize his ideas, one must confess that the oral character of Fardid's teaching was not entirely innocent: the constant conflict between different elements of Fardid's thought, lack of clarity in many of his core ideas, and sheer eclecticism seem to be the main culprits for him remaining an oral philosopher. But perhaps part of the attraction of his work comes precisely from this: in each of his surviving transcripts we can find some remark or random idea to combine with some other scattered remark to build a new system; Fardid thus becomes like a malleable clay that can be made to conform to many shapes and put to many uses.

94
According to Fardid, Russian people, like Shiʿa Muslims, used to subscribe to messianic beliefs until the reforms of Peter the Great, which westoxified Russia. See Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 55; Fardid, *West and Westoxification*, 154.

95
Fardid, *On the Concept of Time*, 93 (our translation).

96
Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*: *An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 134.

97
Fardid, *Divine Encounter*, 101–02.

98
Fadid, 72.

99
"Islamic Revolution is the opening of the sacred realm." Fardid, 427.

100
For Heidegger's "ontological fatalism" and its political implications, see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins, Between Philosophy and Ideology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 29.

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

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Abstract

This study analyzes the distinctive role of Muhyi al-Din ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi. The analysis focuses on Keller's utilization of Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi, 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 ʿAbd 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-ʿAlawi (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 ʿAta Allah al-Iskandari (1259–1310), Ahmad Zarruq (1442–1494), and Ahmad ibn ʿAjiba (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 ʿArabi (1165-1240).[5] Ibn ʿArabi was not affiliated with the Shadhiliiyya (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 nonconformity.[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 ʿArabi 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 *kufr* (disbelief).[8] These polarizing views aside, it can be confidently stated that the transformative impact of Ibn ʿArabi's teachings has been recognized across various Sufi tariqas and in theological discourse more broadly. In contemporary Islam, the reception of Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's towering influence on Sufism, it may not seem particularly surprising to encounter references

1
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-awliyāʾ* 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi's critics and defenders included scholars from various theological backgrounds, transcending traditional affiliations, with both proto-Salafis and Ashʿari theologians condemning or supporting his monistic views, which reflects a diverse range of perspectives. For more on this, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn al-ʿArabi 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 shariʿa.

8
Michel Chodkiewicz, "Le procès posthume d'Ibn ʿArabî," 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 ʿArabi 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 *ʿaqīda* (creed) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Moreover, Keller's emphasis on Ibn ʿArabi's significance entails an active reinterpretation of both Ibn ʿArabi's historical persona and his central concepts. In order to demonstrate the distinctive connections between the thought of Keller and Ibn ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi the most frequently. I analyze the ways Keller employs Ibn ʿArabi to interpret Sufi themes, and examine the contexts in which Keller introduces these themes and references Ibn ʿArabi'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), *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence), and *al-sāʿa* (the Last Judgment), the first three of which are often related to, respectively, the disciplines of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *ʿaqīda* (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 ʿArabi 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 "authenti*'fiqh*'ation"[13] that is present in his community, which is based in Kharabsheh, also known as 'Ḥayy' (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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi: 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. Ismāʿīl 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 (*bayʿa*). 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*, *ʿaqīda*, and Sufism. He became a Sufi initiate, and later a shaykh, under the guidance of the Syrian Shadhili ʿAbd 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 Shafiʿi *fiqh* manual *ʿUmdat 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 Aḥmad Ibn Naqīb Al-Miṣrī," trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Review of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 2 (1993): 244, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400027851.

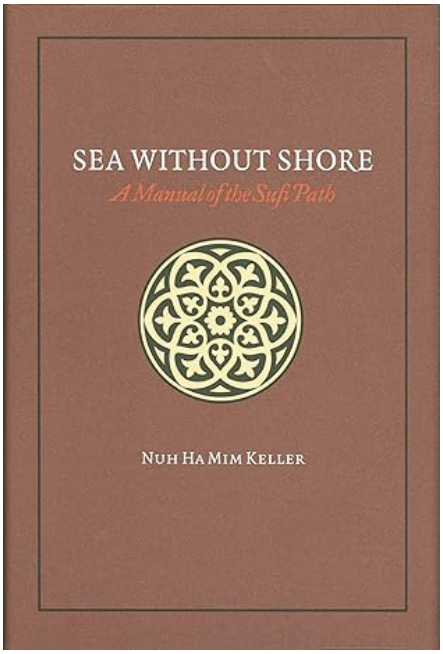

Fig.1 Cover of *Sea Without Shore*, Nuh Ha Mim Keller, 2011.

17
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 80.

18
Zygmund 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-

20 Some of the rules of the *zāwiya* are described at https://untotheone.com/articles/detail/the-zawiya/, accessed November 15, 2023.

one.com. When it comes to Ibn ʿArabi specifically, apart from some publicly available Q&A sessions, any lessons Keller may have given on Ibn ʿArabi's books have not been made public. This is important to acknowledge since the textual references to Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi. To avoid reductionism, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of this limitation on the analysis undertaken here.

Ibn ʿArabi and Legal Thought

For many critics, the theological doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi, and the proponents who have followed him over time,[21] give voice to an "unorthodox" and heretical worldview that transgresses acceptable borders in Islamic *ʿaqīda* and potentially leads to antinomian tendencies in practice.[22] As this section will show, Keller's approach to Ibn ʿArabi takes a significantly different stance: going beyond apologetics, it makes Ibn ʿArabi an important source of strict legal observance. Although Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's legal thought, it is useful to look more widely at how recent academic scholarship has analyzed Ibn ʿArabi's *al-Futuhat* and characterized his approach to *fiqh*. For Ibn ʿArabi, 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 *maʿrifa* (gnosis).[27] Issues relating to personal practice (*furūʿ*) are thus an important part of Ibn ʿArabi's teachings, which he combined in *al-Futuhat* with clarification of the methodological aspects (*uṣūl*) that underlie his understanding of shariʿa. Recently, a number of contemporary scholars elucidated Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's approach and defined it as a "personalist theory of the Law"[28] that is linked to Ibn ʿArabi's strong aversion to rigid adherence to the established *madhhab*s.[29] Thus, for Edaibat, his "theory" was not defined as a *madhhab*, but as a specific approach, which emerged as a continuation of Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysics and exegetical methodology. Edaibat writes that "this theory is likely the earliest medieval attempt to legit-

21
For an overview of Ibn ʿArabi and his "school," see William C. Chittick, "Ibn ʿArabī and his school," in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. Seyyid Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroads, 1991), 49–79.

22
Historically, Naqshbandi opposition to Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi indirectly, through citations made in Muḥammad al-Hashimi, *al-Ḥall al-sadīd li-mā istashkaluhu al-murīd min jawāth al-akhth ʿan murshidīn*, ed. Muḥammad Saʿid 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 ʿArabi argues may not be restricted to following a single school of law."[30]

In his recent study, *Sufis and Sharīʿa*, Samer Dajani presented a comprehensive analysis of Ibn ʿArabi's approach in which he contends, in contrast to Edaibat, that there is, in fact, a distinct *madhhab* associated with Ibn ʿArabi. 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 ʿArabi's *madhhab* as "mercy," asserting that it is apparent in Ibn ʿArabi's views with regard to the practices of lay Muslims. Dajani points out that Ibn ʿArabi considered the founders of *madhhab*s to be "divinely inspired saints whose positions were, in a sense, all correct."[31] According to Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's approach to law as a fully-fledged *madhhab* or as a "personalist theory," scholars agree that Ibn ʿArabi 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 *madhhab*s differs radically from Ibn ʿArabi'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 *madhhab*s 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 ʿArabi', 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 *madhhab*s, 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi.[35] In this regard, Keller prefaces his discussion of Ibn ʿArabi's position by first citing al-Juwayni (1028–1085):

> Someone convinced through his own trained legal judgement (ijtihad) 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-ʿArabi 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 *Ḥilyāt 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), ʿAbd 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 ʿArabī's Personalist Theory of the Sharīʿa: 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 ʿArabi would emphasize the necessity of directing them to relevant evidence based on the Qur'an and Sunna. Edaibat, "Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's Personalist Theory," 20. The need for a *mujtahid* to reach his own conclusion, however, did not imply that other *mujtahid*s 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 Sharīʿa: The Forgotten School of Mercy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 144.

32
Dajani, *Sufis and Sharīʿa*, 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 ʿArabi (among four other figures) who would emphasize the importance of shariʿa through strictness and seriousness. See Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 790.

34
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 247.

In this citation, Keller destabilizes Ibn ʿArabi's legal authority by pointing out the absence of consensus on his scholarly status.[37] Despite the overall centrality of Ibn ʿArabi in Keller's teaching, he takes the position that Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's judgments, "if valid, are so for himself alone." The description of an *ʿalim* who can use scriptural evidence for *fiqh* practice serves as a premise to view Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi's legal judgments coexists in Keller's text with the reoccurring theme of substantiating the image of Ibn ʿArabi as a "sober" and sharīʿa-compliant Sufi. For example, he features in the following reported dialog between Keller and his *fiqh* teacher, Shaykh ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd 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-ʿArabi:
>
> Do not follow anyone whose sharīʿa 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 ʿArabi's conformity with the established tradition of the outward practice of Islam and an orientation towards the practice of sharīʿa as a key element of Ibn ʿArabi's Islam. By locating his discussion of Ibn ʿArabi in a chapter dedicated to "The Faqih," Keller is highlighting Ibn ʿArabi's "sobriety" and counteracting the tension between Sufis and jurists that can be found in Ibn ʿArabi's writings. This raises the question: If Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿulamaʾ, it is primarily Ibn ʿArabi's creedal aspects that are problematic, rather than his *fiqh*. As will be explored later, Keller intentionally integrates controversial creedal aspects associated with Ibn ʿArabi into his own thought, even in the absence of consensus, yet he excludes Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's credentials would certainty qualify him as a *mujtahid*. See *Fiqh al-shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī fī'l-ʿibādāt wa-manhajih fī kitābihi al-futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2006), 134–38; Edaibat, "Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's Personalist Theory," 2.

38
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 250.

39
Keller, 44.

mity" (*tamadhhub*).[40] While the methodological principles that led Ibn ʿArabi to prioritize primary sources profoundly differ from those of the modern Salafiyya, it seems likely that the ubiquity of Salafi anti-*madhhab*ism has reinforced Keller's *madhhab*ism and influenced his rejection of Ibn ʿArabi's juridical rationale.

40 Edaibat, "Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's Personalist Theory," 19.

Keller's Approach to Ibn ʿArabi's Doctrines

Two theological concepts, both controversial, that are closely associated with Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi and ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri: "According to Ibn al-ʿArabi, the path may be described as 'knowledge (ʿilm) become perception (ʿayn)'; or in the words of Sheikh ʿAbd al-Rahman, 'Reflection (iʿtibar) becoming stronger than eyesight.' "[42]

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

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 *taḥrīf*, 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 ʿArabi, who has been charged with believing that the sufferings of infidels in hell will eventually come to an end. Keller, however, avoids mentioning Ibn ʿArabi here, and only briefly refutes these allegations elsewhere,

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

commenting that Ibn ʿArabi 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 Ashʿarite 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 *waḥdat 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 ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi's ontology.[48] Historically, there have been different interpretations of the concept of *waḥdat 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 Ashʿarism (although this was, in fact, a rare stance); some have attempted to divorce Ibn ʿArabi 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 (*ḥulūl*) and associationism (*shirk*). For the most part, the stance taken by mainstream exoteric pro-Ibn ʿArabi Sunni theologians did not align Ibn ʿArabi with *waḥdat 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 Ashʿarite theology. Sufi theologians sympathetic to Ibn ʿArabi, such as ʿAbd al-Wahhab al-Shaʿrani (1492–1565), who is also dear to Keller and often cited in *Sea Without Shore*, developed certain strategies to defend him. For example, al-Shaʿrani 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 *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[50] This demonstrates that even Ibn ʿArabi'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-Shaʿrani'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 ʿArabi's own writings.

A particular strategy for dealing with Ibn ʿArabi's controversial aspects can also be seen in the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-ʿAlawi, 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, "Waḥdat 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 ʿArabi in high esteem but did not embrace the tradition of ontological monism associated with him. Regarding al-Shaʿrani, el-Rouayheb points out a certain inconsistency in his strategy: on one hand, al-Shaʿrani attempts to justify Ibn ʿArabi 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-Shaʿrani also states that this statement was pronounced by "Ibn ʿArabi 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-Shaʿrani, like many other scholars supportive of Ibn ʿArabi, avoided commitments to *waḥdat 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 (ja'iz 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 ʿArabī, 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 *ʿaqīda* 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 *maʿrifa*. 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]

Waḥdat 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 *bāʾ*, one of the most important letters in Sufi letter symbolism to which Ibn ʿArabi 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 *waḥdat al-wujūd* as experiential unity, rather than as a purely theoretical concept. This limited explanation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not mention the concept of immutable entities (*al-aʿyān al-thābita*), which could be understood as "the nonexistent objects of God's knowledge"[58] and which, in certain interpretations of Ibn ʿArabi, 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 *waḥdat al-wujūd* about the Divine Names—the central and representative theme in Ibn ʿArabi'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

56
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 149.

57
On the symbolism of *bāʾ*, see Hülya Küçük, Stephen Hirtenstein, "Ibn ʿArabī's *Kitāb al-Bāʾ*," *JMIAS* 65 (2019).

58
William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 11–12.

59
For an account of Ibn Taymiyya's critique of *al-aʿyān al-thābita*, see Knysh, *Ibn al-ʿArabi*, 100–105; for al-Taftazani's (1322–1390) refutation, see Knysh, 153–58.

60
Mohammed Rustom, "Is Ibn Al-ʿArabī'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 *waḥdat 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 ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd 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 *waḥdat al-wujūd* to other Sufi luminaries who follow and predate Ibn ʿArabi, irrespective of their usage or avoidance of the term. For instance, he affirms:

> Sheikh ʿAbd al-Rahman's teaching in Sufism, like that of Dhul Nun al-Misri, Abul Hasan al-Shadhili, Ibn al-ʿArabi, Mawlay al- ʿArabi 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 *waḥdat 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 *ʿaqīda*? His approach stands in marked contrast to some of the "defensive" strategies adopted by historical Sufi scholars, including those Keller reveres, such as al-Shaʿrani. Instead, the notion of *waḥdat 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 *waḥdat al-wujūd* to the rank of "orthodoxy." Ibn ʿArabi does figure elsewhere in Keller's introduction to the six Pillars, but when Keller turns to the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he introduces it simply as a Sufi term, omitting any reference to Ibn ʿArabi: he does not address the origin

61
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 ʿArabi (*mā shammat rāʾiḥa al-wujūd*); however, he used it in relation to immutable entities *(al-aʿyān al-thābita)*, not in relation to "created things."

63
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 15.

64
Mainstream Sunni theology asserts monotheism through the concept of *tawḥīd* (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.

65
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 15.

of the term or point out that *waḥdat al-wujūd* is commonly associated with Ibn ʿArabi on a conceptual level. The way *waḥdat al-wujūd* is explained is obviously apologetic and "innocent," but Keller's failure to mention Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi, who is viewed as a medieval proponent of its "universalist" perspective. According to a recent study by Gregory Lipton, this interpretative approach to Ibn ʿArabi's views on the salvation and "abrogation" of previous religions represents a "strong misreading."[70] This is because it anachronistically (mis)interprets Ibn ʿArabi from the hegemonic perspective of the Eu-

66
Muḥyiʾddín Ibn al-ʿArabí, *The Tarjumán al-Ashwáq: 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 ʿArabi* (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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 "Aʿudhu 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 ʿArabi 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 *maʿrifa*. 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

71
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 ʿArabi*, 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 ʿArabi*, by Gregory Lipton, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 2 (2019): 360–62, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X19000430.

72
Lipton, *Rethinking*, 87.

73
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 ʿArabi 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).

75
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 6.

76
Keller, 6.

77
Keller, 6.

78
Keller, 154–55.

extensive treatment of topics relating to Perennialism and Ibn ʿArabi appears in the last part of the *Sea Without Shore*, which is dedicated to modern issues, in three interrelated chapters called "Faith and Mysticisms," "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 shariʿa 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 limitary, 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 "sober" 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.

81 Keller, 307.

82 Keller, 307.

83 Keller, 307.

84 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]

After this explanation, Keller opens the next chapter, "Universalism," in which Ibn ʿArabi figures as the main subject, by saying, " '[The] Universal validity of religions' [is] imputed to Ibn al-ʿArabi and ʿAbd 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri, never found this [universal validity of all religions] in Ibn al-ʿArabi'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-ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi by casting aspersions on the Perennialists' knowledge of Arabic and by creating a contrast between two types of epistemological approach to Ibn ʿArabi: the rational and the experiential, the second of which should be based in traditional Sufi pedagogy. Ibn ʿArabi is again presented as someone absolutely in tune with shariʿa, 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-ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi's role in it is not to provide any additional evidence but to represent the unanimous Muslim scholarly consensus, so that Ibn ʿArabi is recast as an authority who

85 Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 319.

86 Keller, 333

87 Keller, 309.

88 Keller, 320.

89 Keller, 320.

90 Keller, 321–22.

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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabī*, he continues the critique started by Keller, pointing out the following statement made by Ibn ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi, which Lipton attempted to resolve by pointing to Ibn ʿArabi's "political cosmology of abrogation," through which Lipton understood the unique role ascribed to Muhammad in Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi.[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 ʿArabi's emphasis on Muhammadan Reality that Lipton is able to argue that the other shariʿas became subsumed under the shariʿa of Muhammad's spiritual sovereignty.[98] In Keller's approach, existing (mis)interpretations of Ibn ʿArabi are not rectified through recourse to Muhammadan Reality, which Lipton asserts is the basis of Ibn ʿArabi's cosmology of

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

92
Keller, 335.

93
Keller, 323.

94
Lipton, *Rethinking*, 82.

95
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.

97
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 ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi's Muhammadan Reality is not a privileged theme in his projection of how Ibn ʿArabi's persona should be reimagined for ordinary Sufis. This potentially controversial topic is relegated to experiential *dhawq*—an invitation for curious seekers.

Ibn ʿArabi's Sufi Image

It is now clear that Keller constructs a distinctive Ibn ʿArabi narrative in relation to the creedal and legal aspects of Ibn ʿArabi's thought. The following discussion will explore into particular instances of practical Sufi aspects in order to demonstrate that Keller's references to Ibn ʿArabi's are not intended as additional for Shadhili Sufis, rather, Ibn ʿArabi 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 (*maʿrifa*) 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 *Futuhat 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 ʿArabi is mentioned in connection with such a crucial theme as gnosis. By emphasizing that the recordings of Ibn ʿArabi's *al-Futuhat* specifically were a means of gaining Sufi experience, Keller directs his readers' attention to Ibn ʿArabi 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 (*khirqa*), 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.

100
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-Futuhat*.

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 *khirqa* in "the way described by the Sheikh al-Akbar, Muhyiddin ibn al-ʿArabi, in his explanation of the conditions for donning the patched cloak (khirqa) 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 ʿArabi's opinion and description. Moreover, Keller also shows how Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi's name, including criticism from the Ashʿarite orthodoxy (which Keller endorses), and even among some Sufis, Ibn ʿArabi (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 ʿArabi's biographical details to frame the image of the exemplary and loyal disciple (*murīd*). Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi and the prophetic experience of Muhammad, the *walī* and the Prophet, though the two were of different registers. Like Muhammad, Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi's example to bolster his argument for unwavering commitment to a singular spiritual path:

> Sheikh ʿAbd 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.

104 Keller, 27.

105 Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Ibn ʿArabi 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-ʿArabi, 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]

First, this interpretation reshapes Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi 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-ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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-ʿArabi, 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 ʿArabi'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-

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

108
Keller, 270.

109
Keller, 17–18.

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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿAlawiyya Sufism), it is Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿAlawiyya 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 "ʿAlawi" practice not through recourse to Shaykh Ahmad al-ʿAlawi, with whom the ʿAlawiyya are primarily associated, but by citing Ibn ʿArabi. 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 ʿArabi.

110 Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 170–71.

Conclusion: Beyond Defending Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi

The popularization of Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi and both shaykhs were of paramount significance and deeply intertwined.[111] According to Keller's narrative, reading *al-Futuhat* became an apologetic

111 Keller, 3.

imperative of al-Shaghuri, who told Keller that he taught it "to defend [Ibn ʿArabi] 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi has a clear apologetic aim, it is still unusual for someone who claims to represent "orthodoxy" to emphasize Ibn ʿArabi to such an extent. Keller frequently positions his teaching as "orthodox" within the Ashʿari/Shafiʿi and Sufi/Shadhili traditions; however, his frequent references to Ibn ʿArabi and his willingness to align the creed with the emblematic *waḥdat al-wujūd* associated with Ibn ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi must be mentioned despite any controversy, or even because of it.

112
Keller, *Sea Without Shore*, 7.

This raises a related question: what kind of image of Ibn ʿArabi is one left with after reading *Sea Without Shore*? The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the way Keller uses Ibn ʿArabi's authority is far from simply a defense of this scholar's legacy. Keller's reshaping of the discourse surrounding Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi through the former's appropriation of the concept of *waḥdat 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 Ashʿarite thought, and pays no heed to Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi. Keller's recollections of experiencing Shaykh al-Shaghuri's *maʿrifa* and ecstasy are also linked to Ibn ʿArabi, signifying the unique importance he holds for Keller. However, Keller portrays the practical dimension of Ibn ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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 ʿArabi'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 ʿArabi 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.

113 Misri, *The Reliance of the Traveller*, viii.

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Re-Spiritualising the World: Ibn ʿArabi in the Thought of Faouzi Skali

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Abstract
This article focuses on the Moroccan Sufi Faouzi Skali, who has contributed greatly to making Sufism accessible to Sufis and non-Sufis alike, especially in France, since the 1980s. Ibn ʿArabi is a central reference in his numerous books, seminars, and lectures. But Skali also stands in the francophone tradition of intellectual engagement with Sufism and draws on Ibn ʿArabi in many places via French-speaking authors such as Titus Burckhardt and, mainly, Henry Corbin. By outlining and contrasting the perspectives of Ibn ʿArabi, Corbin, and Skali, this article demonstrates how Skali reduces the complex theories of the thirteenth and twentieth centuries to a few elements and integrates them into his introductions to Sufism, which are aimed at a wider audience. We will argue that Skali primarily uses the reception of Corbin to integrate the concepts of an intermediate world (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) and a spiritual ethic (*futuwwa*) into his contemporary programme for re-spiritualising materialised and secular societies.

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Introduction

Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) is one of the most widely received Sufis in Europe and is particularly discussed among francophone Sufi enthusiasts and Sufis in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Key figures such as René Guénon (1886–1951), Henry Corbin (1903–1978), and Michel Vâlsan (1907–1974) widely disseminated their ideas and in doing so prepared the ground for diverse historical, intellectual, and spiritually motivated engagements with the great Andalusian mystic of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries.

One contemporary Sufi who is firmly anchored in this tradition of French intellectual Sufism and who integrates many of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas into his public dissemination and popularisation of Sufism is the Moroccan Faouzi Skali (born 1953 in Fez), whose ideas will be the focus of this article.

Skali is famous for co-founding the Festival of World Sacred Music (*Festival des Musiques Sacrées du Monde*) in 1994 in Fez, as well as founding the Fez Sufi Culture Festival (*Festival de Fès de la Culture Soufie*) in 2007. He has also spread his vision of Sufism through numerous publications, seminars, and other appearances or events among francophone circles in Morocco and France, and is among the most influential present-day Sufi teachers in France and francophone Europe in general.

His work is not a detailed academic or independent contribution to Ibn ʿArabi. Rather, Skali simplifies and integrates Ibn ʿArabi, as well as modern receptions of the latter, into his explanations and dissemination of Sufism for a broader public. This article shows how Skali reduces the complexity of Ibn ʿArabi's perspective and its recent reception (mainly through Corbin) and then embeds some of their key aspects in a contemporary spiritual programme that is typically characterised by its contribution to individual and collective concerns.

This article juxtaposes the theory of two concepts in Ibn ʿArabi, Corbin, and Skali: an intermediate world or world of images (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) and "spiritual chivalry" (*futuwwa*). In doing so, it shows the scholars' respective emphases and characteristics, and demonstrates how Skali incorporates Corbin's perspective to underpin his own agenda of re-spiritualising contemporary societies. The concepts of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* are the focus of this article because they are deployed by Skali in service of this highly spiritual programme.

In the following, we will first briefly outline the reception of Ibn ʿArabi in France and situate Skali's life and work within this context. Next follows a discussion of the general significance of Ibn ʿArabi in Skali's teachings. Then the concepts of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* are presented. Concerning these two concepts, we will summarise both Ibn ʿArabi's understanding and that of other Sufi contemporaries. The reception by Corbin is then outlined, and finally Skali's view is described so that the differences and parallels with Corbin become evident, thereby proving his proximity to Corbin in terms of content and agenda.

Importance of Ibn ʿArabi in French-Speaking Europe

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans and non-Europe-

ans from Paris, Cairo, various cities in Italy, and the northern Algerian city of Mostaganem participated in a lively international exchange on Sufism. ʿAbd al-Rahman ʿIllaysh (1845–1922), head of the Egyptian Shadhiliyya ʿArabiyya, played a key role in the dialogue with European converts, particularly discussing the legacy of Ibn ʿArabi.[1] The Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917) was a convert to Islam and Sufism who was introduced to the work of Ibn ʿArabi by ʿIllaysh. He went on to present Ibn ʿArabi to an Italian and then a French intellectual public through articles in the short-lived journal, *Il Convito*, and later in the equally short-lived journal of René Guénon (1886–1951), *La Gnose*. His texts were subsequently republished in Guénon's more widely read journal, *Etudes traditionnelles*. Aguéli also founded the Société Al-Akbariyya in Paris, which was dedicated to the study of Ibn ʿArabi's work.[2]

Guénon was an influential occultist, metaphysician, and later Sufi, whom Mark Sedgwick identified as the central figure in a "traditionalist" school of thought that was developing at the time. Guénon defended a decidedly anti-modernist point of view and integrated Western occultist and metaphysical ideas as well as elements from Sufi and Hindu traditions into his thinking. Above all, he argued that one must be anchored in an authentic religious tradition in order to gain access to a primordial truth, and he instrumentalised Sufism as this kind of tradition and as a bastion against modernity.

Guénon had presumably come across Sufism and Ibn ʿArabi via Aguéli and had integrated concepts of the latter into his thinking without, however, dealing with Ibn ʿArabi more closely.[3] Nevertheless, he was an important starting point for the spread of Ibn ʿArabi in the following decades. Guénon had some influential Sufi followers who founded or frequented branches of Sufi lineages (tariqas), and who at the same time engaged intellectually with Sufism. These Sufis, such as Frithjof Schuon, Michel Vâlsan, Titus Burckhardt, Maurice Gloton, Charles-André Gilis, and Michel Chodkiewicz, studied Ibn ʿArabi more intensively. However, they merged their reception of his thought with central perspectives of Guénon and popularised their own views through numerous translations and publications both in anglophone regions (Schuon) and especially in French-speaking Europe (Vâlsan, Burckhardt, Gilis, Gloton, Chodkiewicz).[4] Their works deal with diverse topics such as number mysticism, Jesus in Islam, spiritual authority, and facets of Islamic law, among others. They also all combine their own spiritual interests with the reception of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas in these areas to varying degrees.

A new generation of French-speaking scholars continues to publish on Ibn ʿArabi in academic circles. They produce translations and research that is often, but not always, strictly academic and can still be described as "spiritually relevant research."[5]

While Islamologists in the narrower sense have been absent from the dissemination of Ibn ʿArabi so far, Corbin stands out as one such dedicated scholar of Islam, who successfully disseminated Ibn ʿArabi's thought in twentieth-century France and beyond. Corbin was also a philosopher and Protestant theologian, as well as an important member of the Eranos circle who did not follow in Guénon's footsteps. As far as his works on Islam are concerned, he was primarily interested

1
Meir Hatina, "Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement, and Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007): 390–404.

2
Mark Sedgwick, "Politics, Painting, and Esotericism," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 5–8; Viveca Wessel, "Ivan Aguéli's life and work," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 17–32.

3
Mark Sedgwick, "The Significance of Ivan Aguéli for the Traditionalist Movement," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi*, 165–78.

4
Among the most important Ibn ʿArabi-related book publications by these authors (apart from their translations with introductions and articles) are: Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber, 1959); the paper collection of Michel Vâlsan, *L'islam et la fonction de René Guénon* (Paris: Editions de l'Oeuvre, 1953); Titus Burckhardt, *Clé spirituelle de l' astrologie musulmane d'après Mohyddin Ibn ʿArabi* (Paris: Arché, 1974); Maurice Gloton, *Jésus, le fils de Marie dans le Qurʾan et selon l'enseignement d'Ibn ʿArabi* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2006); Charles-André Gilis, *René Guénon et l'avènement du troisième sceau: Suivi de les clés des demeures spirituelles dans les "Futûḥât" d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris: Etudes traditionnelles, 1991); *Les sept étendards du califat* (Paris: Etudes traditionnelles, 1993), *La doctrine initiatique du pèlerinage à la maison d'Allah* (Paris: Les éditions de l'œuvre, 1982); and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn ʿArabi, le livre et la loi* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992) and *Le sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn ʿArabi* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1986).

5
These authors include Michel Chodkiewicz's daughter Claude Addas, Denis Gril, Abdallah Penot, Max Giraud, Michel Vâlsan's son Muhammad Vâlsan, Roger Deladrière, Stéphane Ruspoli, and Paul Ballanfat, some of whom are also close to the thought of Guénon.

in Shiʿi-Islamic theology and Iranian Sufism, particularly Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (1154–1191). However, he also published on Ibn ʿArabi.

His main work on Ibn ʿArabi, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn ʿArabi*, was published in 1958. Here, he tries to understand and present the complex ideas of the mystic, but also visibly brings in his own esoteric interests and theological ideas, especially that of an intuitive imagination and spirituality that allows direct access to divine truth. Corbin influenced the work of some academically engaged Sufis, again mostly characterised by Guénonism, such as Seyyid Hossein Nasr and William Chittick.

Against the background of this francophone tradition, we can situate Faouzi Skali's reception of Ibn ʿArabi. We will explain further how Skali receives Sufism in general and Ibn ʿArabi in particular via parts of this tradition, integrating both Guénonist-traditionalist Ibn ʿArabi readings and Corbin's perspective. We will argue, however, that Skali draws particularly on Corbin's reception to revitalise Ibn ʿArabi's spirituality as life-transforming, a spirituality he integrates in turn into his own spiritual programme. Below, we will introduce this programme along with his life and work.

Life and Work of Faouzi Skali

Skali was born in 1953 in Fez, Morocco. Although his grandparents were religious scholars and Sufis, he found his own route to Sufism first by reading French thinkers during his studies in Paris, and later through his search for a Sufi shaykh in Morocco, whom he found in Hamza al-Qadiri Budshishi (1922–2017), then shaykh of the Morocco-centred Budshishiyya tariqa.[6]

Skali read Guénon and other authors with an affinity for Guénon, such as the traditionalist Sufis Martin Lings, Jean-Louis Michon, and Burckhardt.[7] He also read Corbin's *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn ʿArabi* (1958), which left a strong impression on him; while reading this work, according to Francesco Piraino, he declared that he had visions and dreams.[8] Moreover, Skali studied sociology and received his doctorate in anthropology from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1990 with a thesis on Sufi lineages in Fez.[9] He can therefore be described as an academically trained figure who, as is common for many of the authors mentioned above, can combine spiritual interests or even experiences with academic readings.

Above all, however, Skali is a public figure who has contributed considerably to the spread and public discussion of Sufism in France. Since the 1980s, he has recruited many new Sufi disciples to join the Moroccan Sufi lineage Budshishiyya in France, and he has made Sufism known and popular to a more general audience through numerous workshops, conferences, books, and articles on Sufism.[10] As mentioned, Skali has gained international renown through co-founding and founding the Fez Festival of Sacred Music and the Fez Sufi Culture Festival.[11] In addition, he is also active in Morocco with conferences and seminars on Sufism which, as they are held in French, probably attract the francophone bourgeoisies of the cities in particular.

In his publications and lectures, Skali is principally interested in

6
See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the modern world: Traditionalism and the secret intellectual history of the twentieth century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 244–46.

7
This is clear from the authors that Skali quotes in his texts, but see also: Mark Sedgwick, *Against the modern world*, 244–46.

8
Francesco Piraino, "Sufi Festivals as a Social Movement: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Politics," *Sociologica* 15, no. 3 (2021): 149.

9
Piraino, "Sufi Festivals," 149; Raphaël Voix, "Implantation d'une confrerie marocaine en France: Mécanismes, méthodes et acteurs," *Ateliers d'anthropologie: Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative* 28 (2004): 230.

10
See Voix, "Implantation d'une confrerie marocaine en France," 224–36. His best-known books include *La voie soufie (1985)*, *Futuwah: Traîté de chevalerie soufie* (1989), *Traces de lumière: Paroles initiatiques soufies* (1996), *Jésus dans la tradition soufie* (2004), *Moïse dans la tradition soufie* (2011), and *Le souvenir de l'être profond: Propos sur les enseignements d'un maître soufi, Sidi Hamza* (2012).

11
Piraino, "Sufi Festivals," 148–49.

topics such as the constitution of the cosmos and the human being; the stages of the spiritual path; the significance of symbols and archetypes in the transmission of, and as access to, spiritual truths; the figure of Jesus in Islam; and the esoteric significance of the prophets in general, as well as behavioural norms (*futuwwa)* and, in connection with this, the development of spiritual humanism.

Piraino's article "Sufi Festivals as Social Movement: Spirituality, Aesthetics, and Politics" (2022) further situates Skali in a broader network of mainly francophone Sufis who pursue overarching goals and spread them beyond the classical Sufi-tariqas. This includes promoting Sufism as a liberal, tolerant, and cosmopolitan spirituality that stands up for democracy and human rights, that rejects religious radicalism, that fights islamophobia, and that re-sacralises contemporary secularised and materialistically oriented societies.[12]

Skali's work can be read against the background of these agendas. We must understand this background, the context of French-intellectual engagement with Sufism, and the education levels of his intended audience, as the site on which he locates his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi.

Ibn ʿArabi in the Work of Faouzi Skali

Skali's reflections are based on various elder Sufis. These include, for example, Abu ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Sulami (947–1034), especially when he speaks about *futuwwa*;[13] the Persian ʿAla al-Dawla al-Simnani (1261–1336), mainly when he speaks about levels of spiritual realisation (*maqāmāt*) and of subtle organs in the human being (*laṭāʾif*) that can recognise these different levels of realisation;[14] and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), quoted for example in the depiction of Jesus or Moses.[15] Nevertheless, Ibn ʿArabi is the classical author to whom Skali most frequently refers—whether implicitly or explicitly—on all these topics and in numerous books and talks. Ibn ʿArabi is mainly received and quoted via authors of the twentieth century, specifically Burckhardt and Corbin.

Skali devotes a great deal of attention to the topic of Sufi cosmology. His view adopts the neoplatonic perspective of Ibn ʿArabi and many other Sufis, according to which an initial impulse set the creation of the universe in motion. Then it manifested itself successively on various invisible levels of reality, from the highest down to the material world.[16] At the beginning of *La voie soufie*, Skali declares that he will explain the constitution of the universe according to Ibn ʿArabi's *Fusus al-Hikam*.[17] In his subsequent remarks he reproduces elements such as the non-manifested and unknowable divine essence as a cause of all being; the first impulse, through which the divine essence sets in motion the so-called very sacred effusion;[18] the Muhammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*) which is this first effusion of divine light;[19] the world soul (*al-nafs al-kulliyya*), understood as a receptacle according to Burckhardt's translation,[20] also understood as a first archetype containing all spiritual archetypes of beings in creation;[21] and, last but not least, the combination of these elements with the letter mysticism of the Arabic alphabet.[22]

In his reception of these cosmological elements, Skali does not

12
See Piraino, "Sufi Festivals," 153–60.

13
Faouzi Skali's *Futuwah: Traité de chavelerie soufie*, traduction et introduction par Faouzi Skali (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012) is, for example, an introduction and translation of *futuwwa*-related writings of al-Sulami; see also his conference *La chevalerie spirituelle* at the opening of the *Festival soufi de Paris* in 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2Gj3dRk, or within the three-part masterclasses in 2022: *Initiation à la Futuwwa*, *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*, *La spiritualité en action*, January 23, March 21, and April 18, 2021, accessible to members of the Sufi Heritage platform at: https://sufiheritage.com.

14
For example, in Faouzi Skali, *La voie soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 21–30, and the four-part seminar with Faouzi Skali, *Le voyage de l'âme* at the Institut des Sagesses du Monde via Zoom in Spring 2021 (accessible to registered students only).

15
For example, in Faouzi Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), 84–85, 101, 111, 117; Faouzi Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011).

16
See on the spread of Neoplatonism among Sufis: Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31–49.

17
Skali, *La voie soufie*, 15.

18
Skali, 18.

19
Skali, 27–28.

20
Skali, 25.

21
Skali, 28. The archetypes refer to the idea of platonic forms that can manifest themselves in the material world and which stem, as a translation, from both Burckhardt and Corbin.

22
Skali, *La voie soufie*, 14–20.

quote Ibn ʿArabi in the original, but rather refers mostly to Burckhardt's French translation of parts of the *Fusus al-Hikam* (*La Sagesse des Prophètes*, 1974, second edition). To a lesser extent, he also cites Corbin and the eighteenth-century Moroccan Sufi Ahmad ibn ʿAjiba (1747–1809), whom Skali reads partly in the Arabic original and partly in the interpretation by Michon.[23]

Another topic in which Skali regularly integrates references to Ibn ʿArabi is the prophets and especially Jesus. Here he does not approach them as historical individuals or in their role as prophets of God, but as figures whose lives esoterically embody the realisation of a certain level of reality (*maqām*), according to a neoplatonic point of view.[24] In addition to this understanding, prominently represented by Ibn ʿArabi, Skali's depiction of Jesus includes other elements, such as Ibn ʿArabi's understanding of him as the seal of saints (*khatm al-awliyāʾ*), who will return at the end of time and re-establish the world order.[25] Finally, Skali presents episodes from the lives of Jesus and Moses from the perspective of various Sufis, including Ibn ʿArabi.[26] In this, he rarely quotes the Arabic originals (above all *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*), relying instead on translations and substantial works by French authors such as Denis Gril or the above-mentioned Burckhardt, Chodkiewicz, Gloton, and Gilis.[27]

Instead of delving further into these topics, we will focus below on the two concepts of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* which are both used for contemporary spiritual agendas. As we will show, these two concepts serve Skali's aim of re-sacralising and thus transforming individual and collective life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

23
See, for example, the footnotes in Skali, *La voie soufie*, 186–92.

24
Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 9–18; Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 39; seminar *Le voyage de l'âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, January 30, 2021, via Zoom.

25
Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 24, 57.

26
Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 24, 47, 90–91, 114; Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 53, 62, 81, 83–84, 89, 125–28, 136, 170, 232.

27
Some of the works used by Skali are *La sagesse des prophètes* (2nd edition 1974) (parts of *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikām*, trans. Titus Burckhardt); *Le dévoilement des effets du voyage* (1994) (*Kitāb al-isfār ʿan natāʾij al-asfār*, trans. Denis Gril); *Les illuminations de la Mecque* (1988) (*Kitāb al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Michel Chodkiewicz); *Traité de l'amour* (1986) (from the *Futūḥāt*, trans. Maurice Gloton); and *Le livre des châtons des sagesses* (1999) (from *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām*, trans. Charles-André Gilis); see, for example, the footnotes in Skali, *Jésus dans la tradition soufie*, 146–54 and in Skali, *Moïse dans la tradition soufie*, 249–56.

Re-Spiritualising the World Through Ibn ʿArabi

ʿĀlam al-mithāl or World of Symbols

ʿĀlam al-mithāl in the Thought of Earlier Sufis, Including Ibn ʿArabi

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a primary reading or analysis of the concepts in Ibn ʿArabi. Instead, some key points for understanding *ʿālam al-mithāl* in Ibn ʿArabi will be provided based on secondary literature by Fazlur Rahman and William Chittick, who deal with the concept in earlier Sufis.

Before Ibn ʿArabi, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1055/56–1111) had already postulated the ontological and experienceable existence of certain religious phenomena, such as the snakes that, according to the Islamic tradition, visit an unbeliever in the grave after death. He describes these phenomena as realities which cannot be perceived by the normal senses, but by "another sense" which some people can develop.[28]

Suhrawardi was the first to define a separate sphere of existence and to call it *ʿālam al-mithāl*. In Suhrawardi, the concept serves as a place where imagined phenomena become reality, especially in relation to the afterlife, and where concepts, especially eschatological ones, exist ontologically.[29]

28
Fazlur Rahman, "Dream, imagination and ʿālam-al-mithāl," in *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1964): 169.

29
Rahman, "Dream, Imagination," 169–70; Naeem S. Fuad, "The Imaginal World (ʿĀlam al-Mithāl) in the Philosophy of Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī," *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 365.

Suhrawardi's conception has many parallels with Ibn ʿArabi's. According to Rahman and Chittick, in the *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Ibn ʿArabi explains that imagination within the physical world manifests quasi-physically within *ʿālam al-mithāl*. Demons, spirits, and angels populate this world, and are just as real as hell or paradise, which manifest for the deceased exactly as they had imagined them in the physical-mental world. *ʿĀlam al-mithāl* is therefore, as with Suhrawardi, the location where resurrection takes place.[30] We should also note that, according to Chittick, Ibn ʿArabi commonly refers to this realm of imagination (*khayāl*), the spiritual and physical spheres, as *barzakh*, a term that Corbin uses only in passing in his remarks on the intermediate world, and that does not appear in Skali.[31]

Ibn ʿArabi also places much emphasis on the idea that the souls of especially pure people can create ideas within *ʿālam al-mithāl* which in turn manifest in the physical world and are even capable of overriding its natural laws. That is how, for example, miracles can transpire through prophets and saints.[32] According to Rahman, Ibn ʿArabi is referring here in particular to the idea, spread among Sufis through numerous stories, that people can leave their bodies through connection with *ʿālam al-mithāl* and then manifest in several places and bodies at once, because physical laws and boundaries no longer exist in that world.[33] Ibn ʿArabi's *ʿālam al-mithāl* is therefore not simply conceptual, but a tangible reality situated between the physical and spiritual realms.

Finally, according to Rahman, *ʿālam al-mithāl* in Ibn ʿArabi's and Suhrawardi's thinking fulfils the function of creating a place where the unbelievable and the phenomena that override the laws of nature can be located, and where dogmatic beliefs and eschatological concepts are validated as realities.

30
Rahman, "Dream, Imagination," 170–71; William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al- ʿArabīs Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 332–39.

31
Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 258–65.

32
Chittick, 258–65.

33
Chittick, 169–73.

ʿĀlam al-mithāl in Henry Corbin

Henry Corbin is considered an important author in popularising the conception of (creative) imagination in the twentieth century.[34] In his famous article "Mundus Imaginalis ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal" (1964) as well and in his book *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn ʿArabi*, Corbin deals extensively with the *mundus imaginalis*, or the world of archetypes, which he equates with *ʿālam al-mithāl*.[35] In the prologue to part two, he laments the loss of belief in an intermediate world between the physical and the spiritual, stating:

> In this context of agnosticism, it will be accepted that the divinity and all forms of divinity are creations of the imagination, which is to say unreal. What sense could there still be in praying to this divinity, if not that of a desperate deception?[36]

In this context, Corbin assigns an important function to *ʿālam al-mithāl*, which is not found in Ibn ʿArabi and must be read as an expression of Corbin's own spiritual interests and as a response to the circumstances of his time. For Corbin, *ʿālam al-mithāl*, as an intermediate world between the material and the higher divine spheres, has the potential to sanctify human life and to restore not just direct access

34
See for example Daniel Proulx, "Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera," in Riccardo Barontini and Julien Lamy, eds., *L'Histoire du concept d'imagination en France (de 1918 à nos jours)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 187.

35
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 6.

36
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 135. All quotes translated by the author from the French original.

to God, but also a real participation *in* God, to secularised life worlds which are devoid of this possibility. Moreover, he does not see this as a mere theoretical possibility but proposes this re-sacralisation in a concrete way.[37]

Corbin's perspective in *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn ʿArabi* is two-fold. On one hand, he pursues the goal of presenting *ʿālam al-mithāl* and other concepts from the thinking of Ibn ʿArabi and other early Sufis. On the other, this merges with his own conceptions of imagination, the divine, and an intermediate world, which he also developed and defended as a philosopher and theologian.

Concretely, Corbin explains and adopts various aspects found in Ibn ʿArabi. This includes seeing *ʿālam-al-mithāl* as a world into which a few pure souls project their ideas to make them realities *sui generis* there,[38] or as a plane through which objects can be removed and made to manifest in different places.[39] For Corbin too, *ʿālam al-mithāl* is a realm that exists ontologically between the spiritual and tangible worlds;[40] it is populated by demons, angels, heavens, hells, and many other objects and beings that function as archetypes for humans.[41]

Moreover, Corbin repeatedly expounds the cosmological conditions of *ʿālam al-mithāl* in Ibn ʿArabi, and refers to the entire creation (meaning all realms, from the spiritual to the material) as a product of divine imagination or *theophany.*[42] In explaining the creative power of divine imagination, Corbin refers to concepts of early Sufis such as the heart being the seat of so-called subtle spiritual organs (*laṭāʾif*) in human beings—as postulated especially by the Kubrawi Sufis of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[43] The heart contains the creative capacity of imagination, while this self-same capacity *is* the divine imagination which created the world. He then continues to say that in this way, human beings participate in creation and that their creation is not their own as humans, but is rather divine creation, which continues to take place at every moment. In other words, imagination is *really creative*, i.e., it produces realities, and this production takes place in the realm of *ʿālam al-mithāl.*[44] Corbin further describes *ʿālam al-mithāl* as both the possibility and the prerequisite for human ascension towards God.[45] In addition, it is the world where divine prayer meets human prayer, allowing both to know themselves as being one and the same.[46]

However, this conceptualisation of divine imagination and creative power as well as of *ʿālam al-mithāl* is not merely a reproduction of early Sufi theories. It is also a product of Corbin's own spiritual perspectives, on which he expands in his philosophical works. In *Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera*, Daniel Proulx has also shown that Corbin's conceptions of a *mundus imaginalis* and *imaginatio* are further rooted in a Western history of ideas and concretely influenced by the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), even if he uses these terms differently, and by the philosopher and historian Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) in particular.[47]

Finally, we should mention that Corbin intensively studied Iranian Islam and Sufism, and he integrates considerations from his engagement with Shiʿi authors and concepts into his explanation of *ʿālam al-mithāl.* These include, for example, the twelfth (hidden) Imam as inhabiting this intermediate world,[48] and a Shiʿi version of *taʿwīl* as a specific way of interpreting the Qurʾan. He explains this as a way of

37
See for example Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 15–16.

38
Corbin, 136.

39
Corbin, 177–78.

40
Corbin, 6.

41
This shines through in most chapters; see, for example, Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, i.e., Introduction, I, II, 3–5, Première Partie 1–6, Deuxième Partie IV, 12–13.

42
Corbin, 137–40.

43
The Kubrawiyya is a Sufi tariqa founded in the twelfth century by Najm al-Din al-Kubra in Central Asia. Well-known representatives are Najm al-Din Daya Razi (1177–1256) and ʿAla al-Dawla Simnani.

44
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 161–77.

45
Corbin, 152–53.

46
Corbin, 140–41.

47
Proulx, *Henry Corbin et l'imaginatio vera*, 187–95.

48
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 65.

"reading" the perceptible material world as "symbolical," thus transforming the tangible into symbols within the symbolic world of *ʿālam al-mithāl*.[49]

49
Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice*, 13–14.

ʿĀlam al-mithāl in Faouzi Skali

Corbin's presentation is that of an academic and consequently contains detailed and referenced historical outlines and philosophical reflections. Skali, on the other hand, intends to spread knowledge about Sufism among a broader public, albeit a public that is assumed to be well-educated. Accordingly, while he draws on this academic literature, he chooses a few aspects of *ʿālam al-mithāl* that are relevant to him and presents them in simpler language and in less detail.

Skali's vision of *ʿālam al-mithāl*, which he also calls the world of symbols, is primarily embedded in his descriptions of the human path of spiritual development, and he primarily talks about it in his seminars and lectures.[50] The following analysis is mainly based on a YouTube video entitled "Le monde imaginal face à la crise du sens," which is explicitly dedicated to a detailed discussion of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and the underlying cosmology.[51]

As oral statements, Skali's lectures on *ʿālam al-mithāl* contain hardly any references. He nevertheless generally quotes Ibn ʿArabi when he explains this intermediary world and discusses aspects found within it. Meanwhile his definitional framework is characterised by Corbin's reception.

Like Ibn ʿArabi and Corbin, Skali assumes a neoplatonic cosmology with various levels of reality (*maqāmāt*), and he defines *ʿālam al-mithāl* as a real, intermediate world situated between the material and the spiritual realms. Ibn ʿArabi tends to refer to the middle level of reality between the higher and the lower spheres as *ʿālam al-jabarūt*.[52] By contrast, Skali takes up Corbin's perspective and denotes *ʿālam al-mithāl* as this level in the middle, where communication between these higher and deeper realms is possible.[53]

Some metaphysical and structural aspects of *ʿālam al-mithāl* found in Ibn ʿArabi and Corbin are not addressed by Skali in the material accessible to us. These aspects include, for example, *ʿālam al-mithāl* as a place of resurrection, or where imagined versions of heaven and hell are concretely realised, or as a place through which saints can manifest their physical appearances or other objects in various places of the material world.[54] Instead, Skali limits his explanations to describing the nature of divine creative imagination and the role of *ʿālam al-mithāl* in this. As outlined above, these are also central to Corbin, and Skali places these aspects at the service of his theory of and demand for the re-sacralisation of human life.

Like Corbin, Skali laments that contact with the intermediate world has been lost in modern times, where only the belief in the perceptible and the divine worlds persist. Belief in the higher spheres without one's own direct access via the mediating spheres is tantamount to a faith that has degenerated into a one-sided hope in God. Hence, Skali explains, human life has become devoid of meaning and has lost contact with life's mystery.[55]

Skali then describes the cosmos in terms that resemble Corbin's

50
For example, in *Le voyage de l'âme* at the Institut des Sagesses du Monde via Zoom in Spring 2021 or in his seminar *Imagination créatrice et cheminement spirituel*, at the same institute.

51
This video is part of Skali's Seminar *Imagination créatrice et cheminement spirituel* and was made public on YouTube in 2020 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QodEnO-B8Q0). Two other seminar cycles addressing *ʿālam al-mithāl* have been included in this analysis.

52
Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 260.

53
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, seminar *Le voyage de l'âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, and part 3: *Les fruits du voyage*, February 13 and March 6, 2021, via Zoom. We should note, however, that Skali also refers to the intermediate world in some places as *ʿālam al-malakūt*, as did some earlier Sufis. In the passages on *ʿālam al-malakūt*, Skali is specifically based on Al-Simnani, whom he probably also refers to via Corbin (see Ricarda Stegmann, *Transmitting the Untransmittable: Sufism in Europe today* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming]).

54
The link that Corbin establishes between a symbolic reading of the universe and the Shiʿi *taʾwīl*, as well as other Shiʿi elements in Corbin's reception, are also logically not taken up by Skali, who stands in a Sunni frame of reference.

55
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*.

perspective in order to explain how human life can be reinscribed in the divine and become meaningful again. In concrete terms, the cosmos is a divine vision in Skali's view, and the world (including human beings) is a product of infinite creative power striving to realise its vision.[56] Skali emphasises that the polished heart, in human beings who are conscious of themselves, can receive or access divine creative imagination. They thereby become creators themselves, co-creating creation, which is renewed in every moment (and in this way the human being no longer creates as a human being, but as the divine).[57]

Reception of the divine message happens, as in Corbin, on the level of the world of symbols.[58] Skali declares that this world expresses itself in symbols and myths (in which he shows a special interest), which humans can only intuitively understand at the level of the heart, and concretely through one of the so-called *laṭāʾif* (the *laṭīfa sirriyya*), as part of the heart.

Moreover, the higher worlds communicate with the lower through the world of symbols, and Sufis with higher spiritual knowledge always speak and transmit this divine knowledge in the language of the symbols they receive (and respectively create).[59] Skali describes how this kind of access to the divine fills human life with meaning again, and he speaks repeatedly of a pure or authentic way of being that thus becomes possible.[60]

To summarise, Skali receives key points of Ibn ʿArabi's *ʿālam al-mithāl* via the reading of Corbin. However, he omits central aspects of both their perspectives on this concept and limits himself to the element of access to, and communication with, the divine via the symbols located in and transmitted by *ʿālam al-mithāl*. He uses this as an important element of his aforementioned spiritual agenda to show people in secularised contexts an approach to re-sacralising their lives. Below, we will outline his understanding of *futuwwa,* which has a similar aim.

Futuwwa

Historical futuwwa and Ibn ʿArabi's Perspective

Futuwwa, translatable as "young-manliness," derives from the Arabic term for young man (*fatā*) and generally refers to the virtues and qualities that a young man should possess.[61] As a social phenomenon, *futuwwa* usually alludes to military and civil male societies or associations, such as merchant or craft guilds with their initiatory character and rules of conduct. These groups developed in various Islamic countries from the tenth century and were widespread throughout the Islamic world until the early twentieth century, especially in regions such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia. Their character and social standing varied greatly by era and location.[62]

Many Sufis have also been concerned with *futuwwa* and have dedicated treatises to this topic. The tenth-century Persian Sufi scholar al-Sulami was one of the first to write extensively about *futuwwa* as a norm for a Sufi's behaviour in his *Kitab al-Futuwwa*.[63] However, most of the arguments by Sufis appear later, especially the thirteenth century.[64] Ibn ʿArabi deals extensively with the *futuwwa* in three chapters of the *Futuhat*,[65] where he defines the term in both a general and

56
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; see also Skali, *La voie soufie*, 33–38. The archetypes refer to the idea of platonic forms which can manifest themselves in the material world, as Skali explains in *Le monde imaginal* and which stem, as a translation, from both Burckhardt and Corbin. However, it was of course Corbin who established a more detailed theory of archetypes as having a real existence and cosmological function, thereby developing the foundations for a theory of characters and psychological dispositions. See James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A brief account; Together with a complete checklist of works* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1988), 3–4.

57
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*. This description is found in very similar words in Corbin, as shown above. With the idea of the polished heart, Skali alludes to a widespread Sufi concept of the heart which becomes a mirror of the divine when it is polished, purified, or developed.

58
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, seminar *Le voyage de l'âme*, part 2: *Les symboles du voyage*, part 3: *Les fruits du voyage*; Skali, *La voie soufie*, 30.

59
Skali, *La voie soufie*, 57, 140–43.

60
Skali, *Le monde imaginal*; Skali, *Le chemin du cœur*. Skali is at the centre of the Eranos circle's thinking here. This understanding of symbols and myths as carriers of a spiritual truth that can be deciphered through an intuitive knowledge corresponds to the core interests and theories of religion for which not only Corbin, but the great figures of the Eranos circle in general, became famous; see Stephen M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*: *Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

61
Robert Irvin, " 'Futuwwa': Chivalry and Gangsterism in Medieval Cairo," *Muqarnas* 21 (2004): 161.

62
Irvin, " 'Futuwwa,' " 93.

63
Irvin, 161.

64
Mehran Afshari, "Sufism, *Futuwwa,* and professional guilds," in *Handbook of Sufi Studies*, vol. 1, *Sufi Institutions*, ed. Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 95.

65
Mukhtar H. Ali, "Futuwwa as the Noblest Character Traits (Makārim al-Akhlāq) in Anṣārī's Manāzil al-Sāʾirīn with al-Kāshānī's Commentary," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, no. 1/2 (2020): 45.

specific sense. In the general sense, like many other Sufis, Ibn ʿArabi understands *futuwwa* as the highest morality and the realisation of noble character traits (*makārim al-akhlāq*) that humans must develop to progress on their spiritual path.[66] However, for Ibn ʿArabi, attaining the noble character traits is situated on one of the higher, although not the highest, spiritual station (*maqām*). *Futuwwa* is a stage that must be attained and then surpassed on the way to the highest levels of closeness to God.[67]

In the specific sense, Ibn ʿArabi defines *futuwwa* as the ethical perfection that is first and foremost embodied by God[68] and that Muhammad incarnated on earth. Muhammad was thus the perfect *fatā,*[69] and *futuwwa* took on the function of a spiritual pole (*quṭb*) when Muhammad died and the line of prophets ended. In this way, the cosmos could continue to turn and all knowledge could be passed on through *futuwwa*, as Laila Khalifa explained.[70]

At this point, a complex theory unfolds in Ibn ʿArabi, linking *futuwwa* to prophethood (*nubuwwa*) and God's vicegerency on earth (*niyāba*). He introduces Abraham as the incarnation of the exoteric pole of *futuwwa* and Jesus as the esoteric pole, saying that the exoteric pole displays values directed towards others (such as forgiveness and courage) while the esoteric pole is directed towards itself (characterised by values such as abstinence, ascesis, devotion, etc.).[71] Human seekers orient themselves towards these poles and models in order to attain *futuwwa* within themselves. To do so, they need both inner strength (*quwwa*) and knowledge (*ʿilm*) of how to develop and master these character traits; they are also characterised by serving others more than themselves.[72]

Futuwwa in Corbin

Henry Corbin published on *futuwwa* in his detailed introduction to the *Traités des Compagnons-Chevaliers. Rasail-e Javanmardan. Recueil de sept Fotowwat-Nâmeh*, edited by Morteza Sarraf,[73] as well as in parts of his *En Islam Iranien*.[74] As with *ʿālam al-mithāl*, Corbin provides historical depictions of how *futuwwa* has been understood by various authors,[75] but also unfolds his own complex theory on the topic[76] and clearly addresses a highly specialist audience.

Corbin's version is only briefly touched on here because, while Skali refers to it in some places, their perspectives differ on this point more than they do on *ʿālam al-mithāl*. This is no doubt also because Corbin, as an Iranist and scholar of Shiʿi Islam, deals primarily with Shiʿi interpretations of *futuwwa*, which Skali, as a Sunni author speaking to a Muslim-Sunni or non-Islamic audience, does not adopt.

Concretely, Corbin describes *futuwwa* as a phenomenon which is tied to Sufism,[77] but which is mainly Shiʿi by nature.[78] He regularly refers to Ibn ʿArabi, but also to various Persian Shiʿi authors, including Shiʿi interpreters of Ibn ʿArabi, who write on spiritual knighthood in treatises dedicated to *futuwwa*, the so-called *futuwwa-nāma*.[79] Corbin embeds his interpretation of *futuwwa* in a comprehensive Shiʿi cosmology of cycles. In contrast to Ibn ʿArabi, he describes a decidedly Shiʿi guardianship (*walāya*) of God: after the last prophet, ʿAli as the first imam is the perfect *fatā* and *quṭb* of *futuwwa;* meanwhile, the

66
Ali, "Futuwwa," 11, 17–18; Laila Khalifa, *Ibn Arabî: L'initiation à la* Futuwwa (Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2001), 161–63.

67
Ali, "Futuwwa," 58–59.

68
Khalifa, *Ibn Arabî*, 190–91.

69
Khalifa, 197.

70
Khalifa, 200.

71
Khalifa, 204–47.

72
Khalifa, 185–99. Zargar furthermore claims that Ibn ʿArabi's general treatises on *futuwwa* fulfilled an important socio-political function: the degenerating (non-Sufi) *futuwwa* of the time, with their outlaw morality and tendency to disregard social norms, had become a social and political danger that politicians and the religious sought to control. Ibn ʿArabi's theory contributes to this aim by detaching this (non-Sufi) *futuwwa* ideal of a free and indomitable personality from the practice of transgressing social norms and by integrating it into Sufi theology. The heroic freedom to ignore social rules is thus transformed into the more socially conformist profile of fearlessly defying lower personal and group tendencies such as robbery and greed; as well as into living the freedom to obey the higher religious norms without expecting recognition, Zargar, *A Daring Obedience*, 55–62.

73
Henry Corbin, "Introduction analytique," in *Traités des Compagnons-Chevaliers*: *Rasail-e Javanmardan; Recueil de sept* "*Fotowwat-Nâmeh*," ed. Morteza Sarraf (Tehran: Imprimerie Taban, 1973), 5–102; Mark Sedgwick, "Politics, Painting, and Esotericism," in *Anarchist, Artist, Sufi: The Politics, Painting and Esotericism of Ivan Aguéli*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 5–8.

74
Especially in Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophique* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1972).

75
Especially in Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–102.

76
Mainly in Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:390–460.

77
Corbin, *Introduction analytique,* 8.

78
Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:410.

twelfth imam, who (according to the Twelver Shiʿi view) did not die but was raptured and has been hidden ever since, will act as the seal (closure) of *futuwwa* at the end of time.[80]

At the same time, Corbin understands *futuwwa* as a spiritual chivalry whose secret knowledge unites all Abrahamic traditions. One main interest of his is to prove that this secret knowledge—notions of closeness and the representativeness of God—held by the respective spiritual elites can be found in all these traditions and especially in Shiʿi Islam and Christianity.[81]

Futuwwa in Skali

Skali has been engaged with *futuwwa* since the end of the 1980s. He has mainly dealt with the topic in *Futuwah. Traitê de chevalerie soufie* (1989) but also more recently at Sufi festivals and in masterclasses.[82]

Ibn ʿArabi is a central reference in Skali's older and newer reflections on *futuwwa*. His book provides a translation of al-Sulami's *futuwwa*-related writings, but Skali sees Ibn ʿArabi's thoughts on the topic as a valuable comment on al-Sulami.[83] Moreover, in his long introduction to al-Sulami's translation, he introduces Ibn ʿArabi's perspective on *futuwwa*[84] and regularly quotes the latter in the remaining pages of the same introduction,[85] as well as in his oral lectures.

Skali has also read texts by Corbin on *futuwwa*, repeatedly quoting the latter's comments on this topic in his masterclass and book.[86] However, while Corbin builds his own complex theology, Skali's explanations are once again simpler and part of introductory lessons on Sufism that can be understood by an educated but lay audience. Skali makes complex *futuwwa* theories publicly available in simpler language and ties in a spiritual message.

In his reflections on *futuwwa*, Skali provides a short introduction on its history as a social phenomenon and embeds his explanation of the spiritual dimension in general introductions to Sufi concepts. For example, he explains what the Sufi saints (*awliyāʾ*) are and in what states of closeness to God they can be. He also describes how Sufis distinguish between different levels of spiritual realisation (*maqāmāt*), and that there are various types and branches of knowledge in Islam. He then builds on these explanations to establish the significance of *futuwwa* as a spiritual reality.[87]

Like Ibn ʿArabi and other Sufis, Skali firstly defines *futuwwa* as the totality of the *makārim al-akhlāq*.[88] For Skali, too, the unfolding of these noble character traits is the sign of attaining a certain, but not the highest, *maqām,*[89] at which a person is characterised by great humbleness, generosity, or by renouncing revenge when wronged.[90] Secondly, Skali refers to Ibn ʿArabi's specific use of the term and describes Muhammad, other prophets, and saints as bearers of *futuwwa*, which is defined as a spiritual reality. He explicitly cites Ibn ʿArabi when introducing the Malamatis as the highest realisers of *futuwwa*, as they have walked the path to God up to the highest *maqām* and then brought the achieved knowledge back into the world of multiplicity.[91]

In terms of determining the spiritual dimension of *futuwwa*, Skali refers to Corbin when he says, "Futuwah is the marrow of Shariʿa, of Tariqa (path) and Haqiqa (truth)."[92] Continuing with the reference to

79
Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–102.

80
Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4:415, 430–36; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 9, 29, 31.

81
This is the aim of the part on spiritual chivalry in Corbin's *En Islam iranien*, 4:390–460.

82
For example at the Sufi Festival in Paris in 2018, lecture available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2Gj3dRk&t=88s or during three masterclasses dedicated to *futuwwa* on the Moroccan-based platform Sufi Heritage, available for registered students at: https://sufiheritage.com.

83
Faouzi Skali, *Futuwah: Traitê de chevalerie soufie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 9.

84
Skali, *Futuwah*, esp. 37–39.

85
Skali, esp. 7–44.

86
Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*, March 21, 2021; Skali, *Futuwah*, 30, 36.

87
See Skali in the masterclasses and in *Futuwah*, 7–44.

88
Skali, Masterclass part 1: *Initiation à la Futuwwa*, January 23, 2021.

89
Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*; see also Skali, *Futuwah*, 39.

90
Skali, Masterclass part 2, March 21, 2021.

91
Skali, *Futuwah*, 37–39.

92
Skali, 36.

Corbin, he goes on to define *futuwwa* as the essence or highest degree of initiation as well as the orientation for the spiritual pilgrim.[93] Apart from readers basically understanding it, however, the concept of *futuwwa* as a mainly Shiʿi phenomenon and its integration into a Shiʿi cosmology (as we find in Corbin) does not appear in Skali, as might be expected. Skali does not mention ʿAli or the hidden imam as bearers of *futuwwa* and he does not quote the Shiʿi commentators. Instead, Skali cites some classical Sunnis, such as Hasan al-Basri (652–728), Abu Hafs al-Nisaburi (died in 877–79), and Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (died in 910), which allows him to anchor *futuwwa* in early Sufism. He even more frequently cites verses from the Qurʾan and hadiths that explain the values of *fatā*, thereby legitimising *futuwwa* as a theme at the core of Islam itself.[94]

Building on this spiritual conceptualisation, Skali regularly emphasises *futuwwa* as an inner force, which, as we argue, serves to underpin his interest in developing a spiritual and societally transformative humanism.

In his opening to the Sufi festival in Paris in 2018, Skali presented *futuwwa* as a force of the soul that helps to counterbalance the negative tendencies of the ego (*nafs*):

> All these values [of *futuwwa*] are ways of finding antidotes to our ego (*al-nafs*). Since the ego, by definition, is to have as much as possible, it is greed, it is cupidity. Developing this generosity through the power of the soul is therefore a form of antidote to the ego.[95]

He also continues to emphasise an aspect highlighted by Corbin,[96] namely that *futuwwa* does not refer to physical, but to spiritual youthfulness, which is independent from physical age:

> We must approach the youth of our soul. The soul that worships its Lord is in a state of perpetual youth. You can be 90 or 100 years old but still have a soul that lives in eternal youth.[97]

Ultimately, Skali sees in this development of one's own spirituality the potential for social change:

> It is this strength of soul that is capable of changing certain rules of social life and social behaviour. In other words, to go beyond simple accounting, simple reciprocity, to be in the spirit of giving, of compassion, of love that expects nothing in return, that free love.[98]

As concrete examples, he mentions companies in which people are exploited. By realising *futuwwa* values, he argues, people could achieve a deep change in this environment, as well as in schools and education. Based on the principles of *futuwwa*, Skali explains, a spiritual humanism could emerge which would permeate professional activities and be more efficient than secular Western humanism.[99] This is reminiscent of Corbin's citations of the Persian *futuwwa-nāma*, in which *futuwwa* ethics are said to be capable of transforming every human action in

93
Skali, 36; see Skali, *Futuwah*, 7–44 and Masterclasses; Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4:413–14; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 40–41.

94
This is the case in Skali's Masterclasses and in his introduction in *Futuwah*, 7–44.

95
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x57S2G-j3dRk, all quotes are translated by the author from their French original.

96
Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 4:411; Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 5–6.

97
Skali, Masterclass part 1: *Initiation à la Futuwwa*; see also Skali, *Futuwah*, 29.

98
Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*.

99
Skali, Masterclass part 2: *Initiation à la chevalerie spirituelle*.

general and artisan guilds in particular.[100]

In summary, Skali presents basic elements from the *futuwwa* doctrines of Ibn ʿArabi and other Sufis, while also incorporating Corbin's perspective. However, he simplifies or omits the more complex details from Ibn ʿArabi and the Shiʿi elements from Corbin, ultimately putting a simpler description of *futuwwa* as spiritual ethics and a spiritual force at the service of humanising professional and educational environments through spiritualisation.

100 Corbin, *Introduction analytique*, 83–102.

Conclusion

Publishing on Ibn ʿArabi is an important part of a specifically French Sufi tradition that goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Skali positions himself within this tradition by receiving and explaining elements of Ibn ʿArabi, often via followers of Guénon such as Burckhardt in particular, and finally via Corbin.

In describing the thought of Faouzi Skali, this article has focused on a public figure who does not analyse Ibn ʿArabi's teachings in detail but integrates them into his own theological perspectives, as can be said of many of the traditionalist Sufis, as well as Corbin. Instead, we have chosen to show how this contemporary Sufi simplifies the complex doctrine of Ibn ʿArabi to introduce Sufism to an interested public.

Skali adopts the main features of Ibn ʿArabi's concepts such as *ʿālam al-mithāl* as a real, existing, intermediate world populated by beings that can be experienced spiritually and intuitively, and the *futuwwa* as the totality of noble character traits and as a spiritual reality that has been achieved and exemplified by the prophets and saints.

We can also see that many of Skali's statements, even if they are present in Ibn ʿArabi, are received via Corbin, and correspond with his emphases, especially in the case of *ʿālam al-mithāl*. For example, Skali reproduces Corbin's talk of *imagination créatrice* and the human (-divine) co-creation of a constantly renewing cosmos. In the case of the *futuwwa*, Skali's references to Corbin are more selective and primarily composed of adopting Corbin's definition of *futuwwa* as the highest degree of initiation and the essence of shariʿa, tariqa, and *ḥaqīqa*. The second primary element entails focusing on *futuwwa* as the youthful power of the soul, independent of physical age.

We argue that Skali uses this recent reception of Ibn ʿArabi through Corbin because Corbin's work has a similar objective to re-sacralise history as well as current life worlds. Thus Skali adapts Ibn ʿArabi's concepts to suit agendas of the twentieth century. However, while Corbin undertakes an extensive academic-intellectual consideration of various aspects of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa*, Skali only selects some basic features and omits more detailed metaphysical aspects. As a Sunni Sufi, speaking predominantly to a Sunni or non-Muslim audience, he also excludes Corbin's reading of the Shiʿi commentary tradition, and anchors the concepts more firmly in Sunni thinkers, and in the Qurʾan and sunna themselves.

Thus Skali brings no new aspects or insights of a theological nature. Interestingly, though, he embeds some main features of *ʿālam al-mithāl* and *futuwwa* in the trend of contemporary spiritualities in the West, which increasingly emphasise their contribution to collective

societal problems and derive their legitimacy from offering engagement with these concerns.[101] Furthermore, Skali's embedding of Ibn ʿArabi's perspective as well as of Corbin's interpretation must be contextualised more specifically in the above-mentioned Sufi movement, in which, according to Piraino, francophone Sufis in particular want to promote Sufism as a liberal and open spirituality which, moreover, offers a transformative response to secularised and materialistic contexts. Skali uses Ibn ʿArabi's *ʿālam al-mithāl* to show how individual life can be re-sacralised, and uses *futuwwa* to show how collective life can be transformed through re-spiritualisation. Thus, parts of the great Andalusian Sufi mystic's theory are embedded into a contemporary spiritual programme for social transformation which is formulated in a simpler language and opened to a broader audience.

101 See Ricarda Stegmann, *Transmitting the Untransmittable: Sufi Teachings in Europe Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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Sufi Metaphysics of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Highlighting the Relevance of al-Shaykh al-Akbar for Our Times

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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape of Islamic studies, the contribution of the Malay scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (born 1931) advances a worldview that challenges contemporary perspectives and their attendant ontological models. Yet his presentation of Islamic metaphysics, which arguably adopts an Akbarian "onto-cosmology," has remained somewhat marginal when compared to some of his peers. The main aim of this paper is to analyse how al-Attas demonstrates the continued relevance of Ibn ʿArabi today as well as how Sufi metaphysics serve as a lens through which it is possible to critique "modern secular Western civilization." We examine two problematic notions for al-Attas and the Akbarian alternatives he proposes instead. The first is the "correspondence theory of truth." The second involves the various definitions of the concept of "change," which al-Attas disagrees with. For the former, he proposes Akbarian understandings of *ḥaqq* and *ḥaqīqa* as better definitions of truth, while for the latter, the concept of fixed essences (*aʿyān thābita*) is used to explain changes that occur in the phenomenal world without absolutising change.

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Introduction

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is a contemporary Malay Sufi scholar and philosopher born in 1931 in West Java, Indonesia. According to his biography, his "genealogical tree can be authentically traced over a thousand years through the Baʿalawī sayyids of Hadramaut."[1] The Ba ʿAlawi (or Bani ʿAlawi) is a clan hailing from the region of Hadramaut, located in the southernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Attas's ancestry traces back to Prophet Muhammad through Ahmed b. ʿIsa of Basra (?–956) who emigrated to Hadramaut between the early tenth and mid-tenth century.[2] The Ba ʿAlawi clan was named after one of Ahmed b. ʿIsa's grandsons, and the tariqa ʿAlawiyya is an inextricable part of it. According to A. Bang, "Since early in their history, the main social glue of the Ḥaḍramī ʿAlawīs has been the tariqa ʿAlawiyya, a Sufi order perpetuated by the Ḥaḍramī *sāda* until the present."[3] The order shares many commonalities with the tariqa Shadhiliyya since one of the two chains of transmission (*isnād*) of the ʿAlawiyya goes back to the Andalusian Sufi master Abu Madyan (1115/6–1198), to whom the Shadhiliyya also traces back its origin.[4] The kinship between the two orders is most apparent in their emphasis on Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), especially his *Ihyaʾ ʿUlum al-Din*, but also the works of Abu Hafs ʿUmar al-Suhrawardi (1145–1234). Bang notes, however, that "The works of Ibn al-ʿArabi seem to have been known [to the ʿAlawis] but controversial,"[5] which makes the case of al-Attas all the more interesting. It can be said that the Ba ʿAlawi do not diverge on any major doctrinal point from Ibn ʿArabi and, in fact, have profound respect and reverence for him. It seems, however, as is quite common among many orders, that they are wary of his thought being misinterpreted, leading to the deformation of orthodox belief and pantheism, a point which we will examine in our study of al-Attas.

Al-Attas is an atypical Ba ʿAlawi in the sense that Ibn ʿArabi overtly constitutes a key figure for any in-depth understanding of his thought, and because al-Attas repurposes some of the core metaphysical ideas of the Shaykh al-Akbar to formulate a powerful foundational critique of "modern Western thought" or the "modern Western worldview" (*Weltanschauung*), as he calls it. Several authors have dealt with al-Attas's thought but have done so, for the most part, either from a sociological perspective or by examining aspects of his work without delving deeply into its underpinning principles. For example, there is abundant literature dealing with al-Attas's concept of "islamisation of present-day knowledge."[6] Also, authors writing about al-Attas often focus on the politics of Malaysia and al-Attas's treatment of ideas, such as secularism and secularisation.[7] This has unfortunately resulted in a somewhat superficial examination of his writings.[8] While there is much to learn from scholarly analyses of, and conclusions about, al-Attas's thought, we must contend with the fact that claiming they offer a critical reading of it is somewhat of an overstatement.

I would like to argue in this article that any serious engagement with al-Attas's works cannot dispense with a thorough examination of his Sufi metaphysics. It is also necessary to treat his works holistically, as a coherent system, but not immune to criticism, of course. Several concepts undergird his philosophical system. The purpose of this ar-

1 Wan Mohd Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998), 1.

2 Ismail Fajrie Alatas, "Ḥabāʾib in Southeast Asia," in *Encyclopedia of Islam Three*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 56–59. According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam Three* (henceforth *EI3*), Ahmed b. ʿIsa of Baṣra emigrated in 929, while for Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London: Routledge, 2005), 12, this happened "around 950 AD."

3 Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea*, 13.

4 Bang, 14.

5 Bang, 15.

6 On the topic of *Islamisation* applied to social sciences, see Syed Farid Alatas, "The Sacralization of the Social Sciences: A Critique of an Emerging Theme in Academic Discourse," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 91 (1995): 89–111; for a general typology of scholars who have written on Islam and sciences in the second half of the twentieth century (including al-Attas), see Nidhal Guessoum, "Issues and Agendas of Islam and Science," *Zygon* 47, no. 2 (June 2012): 367–87; Ali H. Zaidi, "Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and the Re-enchantment of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 5 (2006): 69–91; Hasan Dzilo, "The concept of 'Islamization of knowledge' and its philosophical implications," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 247–56; Ibrahim Kalin, "Islam and Science: Notes On An Ongoing Debate," in *Science, Religion and Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Controversy,* vol. 1, ed. A. Eisen and G. Laderman (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 112–18. For a comparison between the epistemological approach of al-Attas and the Palestinian-American scholar Ismaʿil Raji al-Faruqi (1921–1986) see R. Hashim and I. Rossidy, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptions of Al-Attas and Al-Fārūqī," *Intellectual Discourse* 8, no. 1 (2000): 19–44. In this chapter, Noor writes about al-Attas's Islamisation of knowledge in the context of Malaysian politics: Farish Noor, "The Localization of Islamist Discourse in the *Tafsir* of Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, *Murshid'ul Am* of PAS," in *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, ed. V. Hooker and N. Othman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 195–235.

7 For a recent critical reading of al-Attas's concept of secularism, see K. Aljunied, "Deformations of the Secular: Naquib Al-Attas's Conception and Critique of Secularism," *Journal of the Histo-*

ticle is not to challenge those concepts, nor evaluate the validity of his use of such expressions as "modern secular Western civilization."[9] For example, what does al-Attas really mean by the adjective "modern" or by "civilization" or the "West"? While these are legitimate questions, they represent the "particulars" of larger questions. Instead, what we wish to offer in this article is a bird's eye view of his system. We would like to qualify al-Attas's approach as "metaphilosophical" following the definition of that term given by the Japanese philosopher and scholar Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993). Izutsu's metaphilosophy consisted in identifying key concepts within "the major philosophical traditions, both of East and West."[10] His purpose was to subsequently integrate these major philosophical systems as structural elements within a larger structure or metaphilosophy. This approach within comparative religion would allow him to then see the common ground and differences between these various systems. Al-Attas cannot be classified as a structuralist thinker even though he knew Izutsu personally. However, his writings do bear some resemblances with those of Izutsu given that al-Attas is often comparing various systems. As we will see, al-Attas's comparative approach is also inspired by the Persian poet and Sufi Nur al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami (1414–1492). In any case, we wish to depart from the usual approaches of al-Attas's works, which treat his ideas in a fragmented way, instead of looking at the broader structures he is discussing. By narrowing their analyses, these authors miss the "bigger picture," so to speak, and al-Attas's ideas do not make much sense within the narrow confines they have imposed on his texts.

For example, the concept of "change" that we deal with in this article is used by al-Attas to deconstruct a whole cluster of concepts such as religion, secularisation, and the Hegelian dialectic, which are, according to him, partially built on a common understanding of change. One may disagree with how he groups those concepts together, but that would require a separate analysis, one that would examine how he deals with each one of these items. It could also be argued that how one interprets al-Attas's system may radically change depending on the level at which one positions oneself. Some of his remarks may appear as sweeping generalisations, but if they are meant to apply to entire civilisations or larger systems, then some details are inevitably bound to "get lost" in the process. This article is therefore intended as a preliminary study whose point of departure (for a change) is "general," with the hope that future studies will allow us to tie the general to the particular. Al-Attas subjects the metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabi to the same kind of treatment as those other systems. Since Akbarian (in reference to Ibn ʿArabi) metaphysics constitutes the best ontological model for al-Attas, it is within that system[11] that he searches for other key concepts that can serve as alternatives to those concepts he attempts to deconstruct.

In addition to the above points, al-Attas's works highlight the continued relevance of Sufism not only as a living tradition but also as a subversive and alternative discourse which questions current hegemonic epistemic models and practices. Through al-Attas's lens, Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysical ideas are transformed and actualised by being confronted with contemporary modes of thinking and inhabiting the modern world. This is a departure from previous tendencies to study

ry of Ideas 80, no. 4 (2019): 643–63. A partisan (and favorable) reading of al-Attas's conception of secularism can be found in A. F. Abdul Hamid, "Religion, secularism and the state in Southeast Asia," in *Thinking International Relations Differently*, ed. A. Tickner and D. L. Blaney (New York: Routledge, 2012). Whereas Aljunied classifies al-Attas amongst "rejectionists" of secularism, it seems that Abdul Hamid's position (with which we agree) is that al-Attas accepts secularism with qualifications. This article compares several twentieth-century Muslim thinkers (including al-Attas) who have written on secularism. M. K. Masud, "The Construction and Deconstruction of Secularism as an Ideology in Contemporary Muslim Thought," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33, no. 3 (2005): 363–83.

8

We refer here to those authors who examine al-Attas's works from an "outsider perspective." Some examples of "outsider" authors include: Mona Abaza, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2006); Farah Ahmed, "An Exploration of Naquib Al-Attas' Theory of Islamic Education as *Taʾdīb* as an 'Indigenous' Educational Philosophy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 8 (July 3, 2018): 786–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1247685. For an "insider's perspective" see ʿAdi Setia, "Three Meanings of Islamic Science: Toward Operationalizing Islamization of Science," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 23–52, or Daud cited above (note 2).

9

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), xvi.

10

Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Language Studies, 1971), 36.

11

By system (in the context of the writings of Ibn ʿArabi), we do not mean something like Aristotle's systematic approach but a comprehensive, coherent, cohesive, and well-integrated structure whose purpose, approach, and outcome differed from that of the Peripatetics.

Ibn ʿArabi's works either as an historical—and obsolete–object of curiosity, or as a body of ideas that is only relevant to his contemporary followers.

This article is divided into four main parts. Part I provides a general overview of al-Attas's background; Part II offers a general framework for understanding his approach and objectives; and Parts III and IV illustrate how he mobilises Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysics by focusing on two concepts he deems problematic: "the correspondence theory of truth" and particular definitions of "change." He contrasts the former with the concepts of *ḥaqq* (true and real) and *ḥaqiqa* (truth and reality), as found in Akbarian thought, while using the notion of the "fixed essences" (*aʿyān thābita*) to formulate a theory of change which he deems more adequate.

Al-Attas's Life and Works

As mentioned above, al-Ghazali is a central figure for the tariqa ʿAlawiyya. In his description of this order, the seventeenth-century Yemeni Sufi ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAlawi al-Haddad tells us that "the tenets of this tariqa were laid down by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) in his 'The Nourishment for the Hearts' (*Qūt al-qulūb*), and by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) in his 'Epistle on Sufism' (*ar-Risāla fī at-taṣawwuf*), then detailed and refined by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences' (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*)."[12] Pious observance of the Qurʾan and the Sunna are also an integral part of this order which follows the Shafiʿi *madhhab* (school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence) and which is characterised by its emphasis on scholarly study or the "pursui[t] of religious sciences."[13] This could explain some of al-Attas's choices, namely his interest in higher-order metaphysical questions and the importance accorded to al-Ghazali in his works, which have often been dubbed neo-Ghazalian.[14] Of course, we should be careful not to reduce al-Attas's relationship to Sufism to the discursive or textual realms, nor to extrapolate too much from those observations about the order he is affiliated with—still, our analysis will essentially be focused on his writings. However, a few biographical elements can help us clarify some of his stances and choices of interpretation and allow us to situate him in the contemporary academic landscape.

From the maternal side of his family, al-Attas received a solid grounding in the classical Islamic tradition while also attending *madrasas* (traditional Islamic schools) in his youth, in parallel to receiving English schooling.[15] Al-Attas obtained his master's degree from McGill University and his PhD from SOAS. Upon returning to his native country in 1965, he was named Head of the Division of Literature at the University of Malaya,[16] before becoming the University's Dean of the Faculty of Arts between 1968 and 1970.[17] In 1991, he founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).[18]

Over several decades, al-Attas has published numerous works dealing with a variety of topics ranging from the education of Muslims (a chief concern for him) to the history of the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Al-Attas also coined the expression "Islamization of present-day knowledge"—though it has taken on a life of its

12 Muhammad Ali Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 196–97.

13 Muhammad Ali Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam*, 197.

14 See al-Akiti and Hellyer, "The Negotiation of Modernity through tradition in contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse: The Neo-Ghazālian, Attasian Perspective," in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam*, ed. Wan Mohd Daud and Muhammad Zaiyniy Uthman (Skudai: UTM Press, 2010), 119–34; ʿAdi Setia, "Kalām Jadīd, Islamization, and the Worldview of Islam: Applying the neo-ghazālian, Attasian Vision," *Islam and Science* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 25–73.

15 Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of SMN al-Attas*, 2–3.

16 Daud, 6.

17 Daud, 6.

18 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, xiii.

own since—in addition to writing *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣuri* (1970), which deals with the mystical poems of the sixteenth-century Sumatran Sufi Hamza Fansuri (fl. sixteenth c.), who was greatly influenced by Ibn ʿArabi.[19] From 1975 to 1994, al-Attas published a series of short monographs where he presented his psychology, ontology, philosophy of science, etc. These thematically organised monographs were later incorporated as individual chapters in his *magnum opus*, the *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*.[20] The *Prolegomena*, in which he expounds the "fundamental worldview of Islam," remains his most systematic work to date wherein he fuses together elements of Sufism, philosophy and *kalām* (speculative theology). His most extensive treatment of Ibn ʿArabi's thought is found in its last three chapters, which deal with such concepts as essence, quiddity, and existence.

In the secondary literature, al-Attas is most frequently compared to Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933).[21] According to Damien Howard, despite certain affinities between al-Attas and Nasr, namely the central place occupied by metaphysics and Sufism in their respective works, "Nasr takes Ibn ʿArabi as his great inspiration" whereas "al-Attas is more influenced by al-Ghazali."[22] While it is true that al-Ghazali is also another key figure for understanding al-Attas's intellectual project (to be examined shortly), al-Attas can be said to have adopted an Akbarian onto-cosmology. A fundamental difference between al-Attas and Nasr is that the former is not a Perennialist—even though his doctorate was supervised by Martin Lings (1909–2005). In fact, al-Attas dedicates a few pages in the *Prolegomena* to dismantling the concept of Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) around the "transcendent unity of religions."[23] These profound differences aside, al-Attas's writings, like those of Nasr, include a staunch critique of modernity and "Western thought." This critique is most evident in *Islām and Secularism,*[24] though we could argue that it is an inherent feature of his works in general. Al-Attas was quite influential amongst Muslim youth movements in the 1970s, and *Islām and Secularism*, first published in 1978 and dedicated to Muslim youth, is probably his most accessible work to date.

In *Islām and Secularism*, the Malay scholar describes the need to *Dewesternise* and *Islamise* knowledge. The definition of "Islamisation" falls outside the scope of this article. At a basic level, however, it can be defined as "a historical and cultural process" that the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago—and, more generally, those unchartered territories where Islam has progressed—underwent in its gradual integration of the "Islamic worldview."[25] It is important to note that "Islamic worldview" is another way of referring to Islamic ontology (or more specifically *ruʾyat al-islām li-l-wujūd*[26]) from al-Attas's perspective, and not a mere contingent perspective that is reflective of the cultural relativism that the term "worldview" usually conveys. In the preface of the second printing of *Islām and Secularism* (1993), al-Attas denounces the accelerating rate of secularisation. That development can largely be imputed to what he calls Muslim "modernists and reformers"[27] who have blindly emulated the West and projected onto Islam some of those problems he considers to be extrinsic to the religion. By "modernists and reformers," al-Attas means nineteenth-century Islamic scholars such as the Egyptian Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) and India's

19
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970).

20
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 358.

21
See Hasan Dzilo, "The concept of 'Islamization of knowledge' and its philosophical implications" and Ali H. Zaidi, "Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and the Re-enchantment of Modernity."

22
Damien Howard, *Being Human in Islam: The Impact of the Evolutionary Worldview* (London: Routledge, 2001), 121.

23
See *Prolegomena*, 7–12 and al-Attas's most recent work: *Islam the Covenants Fulfilled* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2023).

24
See note 14.

25
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 169.

26
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 2. Translated literally, this expression means "Islam's vision of existence."

27
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 113.

Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–1898). These scholars saw the need for Muslims to reinterpret their tradition in light of the onslaught of Western ideals on Muslim societies during colonial times. Often conciliatory in their stances, they advocated a reading of Islam that was accepting of many of those ideals (such as democracy, humanism, freedom, etc.). Al-Attas contends that secularisation constitutes an imported problem, or an external imposition, one which stems from a misunderstanding of the "Islamic worldview." Much of al-Attas's *oeuvre* has therefore been dedicated to dispelling those misunderstandings and highlighting those aspects of Western thought that he deems to be problematic because they cannot be *Islamised*. It is worthwhile to note that *Islām and Secularism* was first published in 1978, the same year as Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Though al-Attas's critique of the West shares some commonalities with similar critiques in postcolonial studies, the basis for his critique is fundamentally different. We must therefore turn to al-Ghazali, Ibn ʿArabi, as well as Jami to understand the methodology and principles underpinning al-Attas's project.

Al-Attas's Framework Following al-Ghazali, Ibn ʿArabi, and Jami

Al-Attas's *oeuvre* has been described as neo-Ghazalian, particularly because it draws inspiration from the way al-Ghazali responded to the challenge and threat posed by the attitude of certain philosophers to the Islamic tradition in his *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers). In this work, al-Ghazali, motivated by the need to defend the faith against those philosophers who were scorning revelation and religious rituals, set out to dismantle some twenty *masʾala* (pl. *masāʾil*) or philosophical problems as proposed by the philosophers—their most eminent representative being Avicenna. Rather than being an attack on *falsafa per se*, this work was intended to naturalise and neutralise it, removing those elements that were deemed to be incompatible with Islam while including those (such as logic) that were considered useful. Al-Ghazali is therefore not seen as an enemy of *falsafa* by al-Attas, quite the contrary. Al-Attas draws a parallel between that important moment, when al-Ghazali was confronted with those ideas deemed unorthodox and foreign to Islam, and the challenge that besets the *umma* (Muslim community) nowadays. Writing about reformers and modernists, he says:

> Their conception of the past has been influenced by Western ideas on human evolution and historical development and secular science. These ideas are the second serious instance—the first being those of the Falasifah whom al-Ghazālī vanquished—of the smuggling of Western concepts alien to Islam into the Muslim mind . . . and although these Modernists and Reformers were cautious in attempting to islamize the ideas they brought in, their ideas pose a great danger to the Muslim's loyalty to Islam because they were not ideas that could be truly islamized.[28]

To Al-Attas, it is incumbent upon Muslims to dismantle that alien

[28] Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 113.

worldview that threatens their own, and this can only be done with a solid understanding of Islam and Islamic ontology. In the same vein as al-Ghazali, and in the style of the more philosophical type of *kalām* he inaugurated, al-Attas proceeds methodically. He does so by relying on the works of eminent Western theologians and philosophers (often quoting them to indicate how they understand their own culture, tradition, and history) before deconstructing some of their ideas and highlighting the various underpinning ideologies. Al-Attas also supplements their theories with his own when he disagrees with their analyses. Though he does not deal with a set of philosophical problems that pertain to metaphysics for the most part, as was the case in the *Tahafut*, al-Attas chooses to focus on metaphysics in his works precisely because the dismantling of metaphysical foundations has the most far-reaching consequences. Though al-Attas's central preoccupation lies in Sufism, it is "Sufi metaphysics" that is of particular interest to him.

In his work, *Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*,[29] al-Attas explains that Abu-l-Qasim al-Junayd (830–910) and the Baghdadian school he inaugurated, with its more sober form of Sufism, "taught that knowledge of God could be attained by demonstrative reasoning."[30] According to al-Attas, "successful attempts had been thought out to reconcile Ṣūfī doctrines with 'orthodoxy,' but the most brilliant of these successes was that of Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazzālī (505/1111) . . . for he not only reconciled the Ṣūfī doctrines with 'orthodoxy,' but also elevated Ṣūfism to an exalted position within the fold of 'orthodoxy.' "[31] Sufism, however, reaches its culmination with Ibn ʿArabi, whose lofty metaphysics remain unsurpassed.[32]

Akbarian metaphysics is the basis upon which al-Attas builds his critique of Western thought. If certain ideas or concepts pose a problem for al-Attas because they are un-Islamic, then one must determine what metaphysical foundations these ideas are rooted in. Akbarian metaphysics serves him both as the basis upon which he builds that critique and as an alternative to the "Western worldview." Al-Attas must therefore engage in a careful balancing act: on one hand, he needs to uphold orthodoxy as formulated in the Ashʿari creed (the most prominent school of Sunni theology); on the other, the philosophical system he develops must be apodictically robust. To Al-Attas, the members of the Akbarian school—which he also refers to as the "higher Sufis" or "higher metaphysicians"—have developed the most sophisticated understanding of reality and existence, one that is rooted in the concept of the Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). For example, as we will see at the end of this part, the theologians' definition of existence is considered unsatisfactory for al-Attas. What is it, then, that makes Akbarian metaphysics so exalted for him? And what concepts and ideas of that "Western worldview" are problematic for him? The case of Jami allows us to answer the first question and complete this framework, while the second question will be answered in parts III and IV of this article.

In the *Prolegomena*, al-Attas mainly refers to Ibn ʿArabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* and his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* as well as the works of some of his famous commentators, such as the Persian poet and Sufi Jami (1414–1492). In a treatise titled *al-Durra al-Fakhira* (The Pre-

29
Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*, ed. Shirle Gordon (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963).

30
Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism*, 9.

31
Al-Attas, 9.

32
Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism*, 10–11.

cious Pearl), Jami wrote at the request of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481) a comparison of the positions of the *falāsifa* (philosophers), the *mutakallimūn* (theologians), and the Sufis, concerning God's existence and His attributes as well as other metaphysical questions.[33] *Falāsifa* here refers to the Muslim Peripatetics and, in particular, Avicenna. From this arbitration (*muḥākama*), the Sufi metaphysicians emerge victorious.

According to Nicholas L. Heer, Jami proceeds by first presenting the position of the theologians and the philosophers concerning a given doctrinal issue and then provides the answer given to that problem by the Akbarian Sufis. Importantly, a *muḥākama* (arbitration) of this sort sometimes sought to reconcile the opposing views of different schools of thought regarding a specific doctrinal point. It was therefore not exclusively dedicated to determining which group fared better on a given issue, but also contained a unifying dimension. The Qunawi-Tusi correspondence exemplifies this tendency towards a rapprochement, which has characterised post-classical Islamic thought. Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (1207–1274) was an Akbarian while Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–1274) was an Avicennian. These two contemporaries were the foremost representatives of their respective schools. In that correspondence, the two scholars discussed several doctrinal points on which the Sufis and the *falāsifa* (philosophers) disagreed, such as whether the natural Universal (*al-kullī al-ṭabīʿī*) has an extramental (i.e., outside the mind) existence or not. In fact, parts of that correspondence served as a source for Jami and demonstrate the mutual reverence Qunawi and Tusi had for each other as well as the deep knowledge both displayed of their opponent's (or rather interlocutor's) approach. Still, in Jami's *Durra*, Sufi metaphysics is considered superior because it resolves some of those doctrinal problems using apodictically stronger arguments, and because it "reconciles the opposing views of the theologians and philosophers on a particular question."[34]

For example, on the question of existence (which we explain in Part III), Jami considers that theologians and philosophers both understood existence as a mere concept, as something accidental to quiddity (although they did so in different ways). From their perspective, quiddity is then something existent to which existence is mentally superadded. This leads to the absurd conclusion that quiddity must exist before its existence. The definition of existence given by the Akbarians—which we examine below in our discussion of the *aṣalat al-wujūd* (primacy of existence) versus the *aṣalat al-māhiyya* (primacy of quiddity) debate—offers a solution to this problem. At the same time, that solution is meant to subsume rather than reject the position of the philosophers and the theologians within a larger framework. The view of the philosophers and theologians according to which existence is seen as accidental to quiddity is considered by the Akbarians to occur at the level of what al-Attas calls "everyday," "ordinary" existence. This "normal" level of spiritual experience is one in which the phenomenal world appears constituted of a multiplicity of things or existents, each having a separate existence or reality. The world is then seen as consisting of different, multiple quiddities, while existences are superadded to each of these quiddities.

For the Sufis however, there are higher levels of experience in

33
Nicholas L. Heer, *The Precious Pearl: Al-Jāmī's al-Durrah al-Fakhirah Together with His Glosses and the Commentary of ʿAbd al-Ghafūr al-Lārī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

34
Heer, *The Precious Pearl*, 7.

which the multiplicity of the phenomenal world disappears and allows the Sufi to witness the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), where Being is a philosophical term the Akbarians use to designate God.[35] In fact, to say that the Sufi "bears witness to" that Unity of Being is paradoxical, as it would imply that the observer and the observed (or a certain "subject-object" relation, according to al-Attas) still subsist. Instead, this is a state of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) where Sufis experience directly, through spiritual tasting (*dhawq*), the reality of existence. In that state they can discover that the things of the phenomenal world are determinations and particularisations of Being, that is, the Being of God, but only in so far as He has a relation to creation, not God nor His Essence.

Sufism therefore involves an emphasis on unveiling (*kashf*) as a mode of knowledge of suprarational realities, and in that regard, philosophical Sufism is viewed as superior because it manages to combine rational arguments with that approach. Also, Ibn ʿArabi often borrows philosophical terminology to explain his teachings, but also resorts to rational arguments to perhaps "overwhelm the intellect by the sheer plethora of rational and supra-rational teachings he received through unveiling."[36] All of this is done while maintaining orthodoxy as expounded in Revelation, since for Qunawi, for example, any element received through unveiling "must be disregarded if it contradicts the text of the Koran."[37]

We can say that what al-Attas is doing with the "Western worldview" is exactly what Jami did with *kalām* and *falsafa*: integrating it in a larger framework while arguing for the superiority of Akbarian metaphysics, as an ontological model, and highlighting points of convergence and those aspects that are irreconcilable with what al-Attas considers Islamic metaphysics.

Al-Attas draws on Jami's works for the above-stated reasons, but his local context might shed some light on why Jami occupies such a central place in his works. As previously stated, some of al-Attas's earliest writings deal with major figures of Malay Sufi history, such as Hamza Fansuri, whose works attest to the profound and lasting influence Ibn ʿArabi had on the region—Ibn ʿArabi's ideas circulated in the area mainly through the writings of Jami.[38] While Akbarian metaphysics made its entry into the archipelago by becoming "the most popular school . . . followed by a majority of Malay scholars from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century,"[39] it was in seventeenth-century Aceh that Jami's influence reached its height.[40]

Now that we have laid out the general framework for understanding al-Attas's project, we can examine in more detail some of his foundational critiques of the "Western worldview" and the way Akbarian thought serves as an alternative and superior ontological model of those systems. I will explain some of those Akbarian concepts using al-Attas's own words because of the concise and clear manner of his exposition, while occasionally referring to other authors to clarify some details.

Truth-Reality contra "the Correspondence Theory of Truth"

In *Islām and the Philosophy of Science*, al-Attas states that: "One of the fundamental differences between our position and that of modern

35
This doctrine will be dealt with in more detail in Part III of this article.

36
William Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The Al-Ṭūsī, al-Qūnawī Correspondence," in *Religious Studies* 17, no. 1 (1981): 96.

37
Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History," 90.

38
Paul Wormser, "The Recreation of Jāmī's Lavāʾiḥ by Ḥamza Fanṣūrī" in *Jāmī in Regional Contexts: The Reception of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's Works in the Islamicate World, ca. 9th/15th-14th/20th Century*, ed. Thibaut d'Hubert and Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 376.

39
Wormser, "The Recreation of Jāmī's Lavāʾiḥ by Ḥamza Fanṣūrī," 197.

40
Wormser, 220.

philosophy and science impinging upon the problem of formulating a philosophy of science revolves around the understanding of the meaning of *reality* and *truth* and their relation to *fact*."[41] Al-Attas goes on to explain how the term *ḥaqīqa* cannot simply be rendered by the word "truth" as *ḥaqīqa* denotes both truth and reality: it pertains both to propositional statements relating to factual occurrences and to what is real in that it refers to a "state of existence and encompasses everything."[42] Earlier, al-Attas had already questioned the validity of "correspondence theories of truth," where truth is defined by verifying an empirical fact to which it merely corresponds or to which it conforms:[43]

> Moreover, in order to verify hypotheses and theories science, according to them [i.e., "modern scientists and philosophers"], requires correspondence with observable fact, and yet since hypotheses and theories that contradict one another can correspond with observable fact, and since the preference for one as against the other of them is not dictated by any criterion of objective truth—because truth itself is made to conform with fact—such preference is then dictated simply by subjective and arbitrary considerations dependent upon convention . . .[44]

This passage contains many elements that merit our attention. First, al-Attas is saying that the correspondence of a given proposition to a fact or occurrence is a necessary though not sufficient condition for the verification of the truth of that proposition. It is insufficient not only because it eliminates the possibility of positing as truthful any statement pertaining to abstract objects, given that it restricts verification to the empirical realm or "observable fact," but also because meaning seems to involve a relational element for al-Attas. In the definition of any given word or in the evaluation of any given proposition, it is not enough for it to be taken as a self-enclosed, isolated unit of meaning. Since for al-Attas, "words reflect ontology," they cannot be taken "as such" without reference to a superstructure or a "super system." To understand that perspective we can pose the question differently: if we examine each statement in relation to a given fact and their potential correspondence, and if that is the criterion for judging truths, then how can we ensure that these truths are *true*? What is the guarantor of objectivity (if any)? Second, what do we make of moral injunctions or propositions that are prescriptive? How do we verify their *truthfulness*? For al-Attas, the concept of *ḥaqīqa* already implied a moral order so that the fact-value split (or the "is-ought problem," to use Hume's formula) cannot obtain. Therefore, the claim that "facts are neutral as far as truth and falsehood are concerned—they just *are*"[45] is untenable for him because there is an interpretative effort already involved when dealing with facts.[46] This putative neutrality of facts, therefore, leads to an unacceptable moral relativism for our Malay scholar: "We do not agree with those who take the position that reality and truth, and values derived from them, are separate, and that they articulate their meanings within the paradigms of relativity and plurality having equal validity."[47] Third, there is not only an axiological order but also an ontological order according to which things are organised, and order and hierarchy should be reflected in the way we classify things and events,

41 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 125.

42 Al-Attas, 126.

43 See preface and chapter 1 (*passim*) of Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*.

44 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 116–17.

45 Al-Attas, 115.

46 Al-Attas, 113.

47 Al-Attas, ix.

according to al-Attas.

In al-Attas's metaphysics of Islam, reality is not restricted to the world of "sense and sensible experience"[48] (*ʿālam al-shahāda*), nor to facts, which only represent but one level of that reality—we examine this in more detail later. If correspondence to facts is the way to verify truths, then a truncated reality does not constitute the whole truth. "A factual occurrence is only one aspect in many of *ḥaqīqah*, whose ambit encompasses *all* of reality. Moreover, a factual occurrence may be an actualisation of something false (*i.e., bāṭil*); whereas reality is the actualisation always of something true (*i.e., ḥaqq*)."[49] By "false" (*bāṭil*) or "falsity," al-Attas invokes a moral order. Truth in the sense of *ḥaqīqa* therefore encompasses the logical, ethical, and ontological dimensions. To qualify something as a *ḥaqīqa* does not mean it is "true" or "real" in the sense given to these terms by the correspondence theory of truth: it is not mere conformity with fact.

For example, the Ptolemaic geocentric planetary model ensured better conformity with astrological observation and was an improvement on previous models. The Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy (c. 100–170) added a set of epicycles (small circular orbits) on the trajectory of planets to ensure that his model corresponded well with observed reality. With the Copernican Revolution, Ptolemy's system was replaced with a heliocentric model of the world. Even if physical theories may appear to describe reality, for al-Attas they constitute a *choice* for its interpretation.[50] They may constitute a truth, but they are not *the truth* in the sense that *ḥaqīqa* is. Another example relating to the ethical order posited by al-Attas could perhaps be found in the social sciences. Various theories in moral psychology may be based on empirical data. Based on those findings, statements (and prescriptions) about human nature and happiness may be made. For al-Attas, conformity with data would not guarantee that these statements are true in the axiological sense (that is, in conformity to an objective moral standard).

Al-Attas therefore chooses to translate *ḥaqq* as "both reality and truth."[51] *Ṣidq,* for example, as distinguished from *ḥaqīqa* (and as opposed to *kidhb*), is a term that pertains to the truth of "statements or uttered words."[52] It seems that the definitions of these terms were taken from the commentary written by the Ashʿari scholar Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani (1322–1390) on the credal work of Najm al-Din ʿUmar al-Nasafi (1067–1142), *al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya* (Creed of al-Nasafi), where the meaning of "*ṣidq al-ḥukm*" (the truth of a judgment) is given as "*mutābaqatuhu al-wāqi*ʿ" (that it, i.e., the judgment, would conform to reality).[53] *Ṣidq* therefore seems to be closer in meaning to the word "truth" than *ḥaqq* is.

The term *ḥaqq*, on the other hand, already implies conformity with "wisdom, justice, rightness, truth, reality, propriety . . . It is a state, quality or property of being wise, just, right, true, real, proper; it is a state of being necessary, unavoidable, obligatory, due; it is a state of existence and encompasses everything."[54] Al-Ḥaqq is also one of the names of God, of course, and, in that respect, the term is no longer about one given truth, or a plurality or multiplicity of truths, but about "*the* Truth," to use al-Attas's expression: "God in His aspect as the Absolute Being in all the forms of manifestation is 'the Truth.' "[55]

48
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 124.

49
Al-Attas, 1–2.

50
Al-Attas is mainly taking issue with positivist and empiricist conceptions of knowledge and truth. It would perhaps be interesting to compare his critique of positivism with the ideas of French physicist and historian of philosophy, Pierre Duhem (1861–1916), in his book *Sōzein ta phainomena, essai sur la notion de théorie physique de Platon à Galilée* (Paris: Hermann, 1908). Duhem influenced the members of the Vienna Circle whom al-Attas criticises in his writings. The Vienna Circle was a group of philosophers from the early twentieth century whose intellectual programme advocated a radical rejection of metaphysics, upholding empiricist approaches to knowledge, and logical positivism. Pierre Duhem certainly did not espouse that radical view of science, nor did he denigrate metaphysics, quite the contrary. In fact, his philosophy of science, though anti-Thomistic in some respects (in reference to the Catholic scholastic philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, ca. 1225–1274), nonetheless included elements of neo-Thomism. On Duhem's views on the relationship between physics and metaphysics, see "Théorie physique et explication métaphysique," in *La théorie physique, son objet et sa structure* (Paris: Chevalier et Rivière, 1906).

51
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 125–26.

52
Al-Attas, 126.

53
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya* (Damascus: Dar al-Taqwa, 2020), 106–07. Those definitions may also have been taken from the *Kitab al-Taʿrifat* (Book of definitions) by the Persian theologian al-Sharif al-Jurjani (1339–1413) who was also familiar with the *Creed of al-Nasafi*.

54
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya*, 106–07.

55
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, 186.

In Akbarian thought, there is a hierarchy characterising the Names of God since some of them are more general than others; they thus vary in breadth or scope.[56] In the same manner that some terms can be predicated of more things than others, divine names can have more important effects (*āthār*) in the world than others. The term *ḥaqq* is also sometimes used by Ibn ʿArabi to denote existence (*wujūd*), not simply Being. Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) is Being beyond human conception, the ineffable, which cannot even be characterised negatively by saying what it is *not*.

Truth therefore becomes a relative value coloured by the multifarious facts it is predicated of. This translates a vision according to which Reality is composed of multiple, separate essences, that subsist independently or that each constitutes a separate existence.[57] The correspondence theory of truth is problematic for al-Attas because in it, truth becomes predicated of things and events or facts instead of the opposite: "Truth itself is made to conform with fact."[58] Whereas with the concept of *ḥaqq*, the truth as one of the manifestations of Absolute Being becomes tied to the very nature of existence and the meaning of truth becomes "a property of the nature of reality."[59]

For al-Attas, it is Revelation (by which he means the Quran and not the *process* of revelation) that is considered the *ultimate* source of knowledge. It is the guarantor of truth because it provides man with "extra-mental knowledge," i.e., knowledge that is mind-independent and not the sole product of man's reasoning and sensible experience.

Summarising the main points he made in the chapter titled "Islām and the Philosophy of Science,"[60] al-Attas adds: "We referred to the Quranic system of conceptual interrelations and its methods of interpretation, saying that Islamic science must interpret the facts of existence in correspondence with that system and not interpret that system in correspondence with the facts."[61] Islamic science is probably used to indicate the Islamic conception of science and not religious sciences. For al-Attas, the world is first and foremost of a symbolic nature. His approach can be qualified as semiotic in some respects because, for him, as meaning-making creatures, humans are meant to appropriate and interpret the world around them. This world is constituted of God's *ayāt*, a word that means both verses and signs. For al-Attas, "nature is like a great, open Book."[62] Just as the Quran (the "Book of God") requires an exegetical effort, so does the "Book of Nature" (or phenomenal world). Ultimate meaning, or *al-ḥaqīqa*, therefore relates to the ultimate meaning of any given symbol. Al-Attas is advocating that we "read" the world by deploying the same exegetical effort reserved to the Quranic text, "for nature is like a book that tells us about the Creator; it 'speaks' to man as a revelation of God."[63] In another work, al-Attas further specifies: "The world of nature, as depicted in the Glorious Qurʾān, is like a Great Open Book; and every detail therein, encompassing the farthest horizons and our very selves, is like a word in that Great Book that speaks to man about its Author."[64] Al-Attas is referring here to the verse "We will show them (*sanurīhim*) Our signs (*āyātinā*) in the horizons (*fī al-afāq*) and within themselves (*wa-fī anfusihim*) . . ." (41:53). This verse indicates a continuity between man and the Universe.[65] For Muslim scholars, the world is defined negatively, with respect to God, as being "everything other than God" (*mā siwa*

56
William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 48.

57
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 127.

58
Chittick, 116–117.

59
Chittick, 125–26.

60
Chittick, 111–142.

61
Chittick, 141.

62
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 39.

63
Al-Attas, 38.

64
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization ISTAC, 1999), 17.

65
There is much to unpack here about Akbarian cosmology but, for reasons of space, we must limit ourselves to al-Attas's epistemological and exegetical approaches. For a discussion on the relationship between man, the Cosmos, and God, see William Chittick, "Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Perfect Man in the View of Ibn al-ʿArabī," *Islamic Culture* 63, no. 1/2 (Jan.–April 1989): 1–11. For a general overview of the relationship between the microcosm (*al-ʿālam al-saghīr*) and macrocosm (*al-ʿalām al-kabīr*) in Islam (including Sufi perspectives and those of Ibn ʿArabi), refer to Pierre Lory, "Macrocosm and Microcosm in Sufi Thought," in *Sufi Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 234–49.

Allah). Through knowledge of the world, and of his own self, man thus gains knowledge about God, his Lord and Creator.

For al-Attas, in his study of himself and of nature, man should thus study God's signs in as much as they "point to" or indicate God. Taken *in themselves*, as isolated units, they are divested of any meaning. One may argue in favour of such an approach for all Muslims, whether they be philosophers, Sufis, or theologians, since all these groups took revelation seriously, each in their own way. This semiotic approach gains new significance, however, when combined with the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (mentioned earlier). This is an expression that Ibn ʿArabi did not use but that was adopted by posterity to describe his ontological system. Below, we examine that doctrine in more detail and see how al-Attas uses it to criticise, from a philosophical perspective, the "essentialist" view described above.[66]

66
The meaning of "essentialist" is explained in the next sub-section.

Waḥdat al-Wujūd and the Degrees of Reality

We can take al-Attas's conception of history as a starting point that illustrates why this "fragmented" vision of reality does not suit him and the alternative he proposes instead. During a lecture delivered in January 1972,[67] al-Attas spoke of the need to look at history comprehensively, by operating a synthesis of the events of history. Giving the analogy of Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century novel *Gulliver's Travels*, where the eponymous protagonist travels through a land inhabited by giants, al-Attas explains how, seen from a distance, the women of that land seemed beautiful, but upon getting closer to them, Gulliver could see the details of their skin, rendering them unattractive.[68] Such an exact replica of facts is therefore not necessarily an exact rendering of history in its totality. In gathering historical data, the historian must restitute each event according to its proper place, in that not all facts are of equal importance nor equally significant. Likewise, taken in isolation, historical events amount to an infinity; the historian's task is therefore to sift through these numerous events and select the ones that are relevant for her analysis, producing both meaning and an accurate picture.[69] Al-Attas does not mean that the historian must superimpose a specific narrative on history; however, he considers that underlying any depiction of history is a specific worldview and its attendant assumptions about its object of study. This critique of a form of scientism when dealing with the events of history echoes similar critiques al-Attas makes elsewhere against the "scientific conception of the world" of the Vienna Circle,[70] whose influence, according to him, extended to the whole of the social sciences as well as "many branches of formal and empirical sciences extending beyond philosophy, such as arithmetic, physics, geometry."[71]

Underlying this way of doing history are several assumptions about the nature of things and existence which al-Attas wishes to deconstruct. This view of the events of history, and more generally of the phenomenal world, supposes it to be undifferentiated, as opposed to a hierarchically organised world where everything occupies a "proper place," to use al-Attas's expression. As we have stated earlier, the conception of existence as constituted of separate, independent essences, to which existence is only accidental, is also an idea whose limits

67
Denys Lombard (1938–1998) partially translated this lecture from Malay to French: Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas Syed, "L'Islam et la culture malaise," *Archipel* 4 (1972): 132–150.

68
Al-Attas, "L'Islam et la culture malaise," 134.

69
Al-Attas, 134.

70
On scientism and the Vienna Circle, see note 50.

71
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 8n13.

al-Attas would like to qualify. Al-Attas does not reject that view outright but rather wishes to demonstrate how this represents a certain level of reality, instead of Reality as a whole:

> The view of man at the physical, or everyday, ordinary level of reason and sense experience, in which things that make up the world of multiplicity take their concrete, separate forms and identities, is the view of the generality of the people (*ʿawāmm*) . . . However, among people adhering to this common view of reality are those who attained a higher degree of perception of truth.[72]

To understand the difference between these two points of view, we can refer to Izutsu, who gives a most elegant analogy to explain the difference between the "existentialist" and "essentialist" positions. To use al-Attas's own words: "This basic matter of ontological outlook may be raised by posing the question: Is it *quiddity* or is it *existence* that is fundamentally real? By 'fundamentally real' is meant 'having a corresponding reality in the external world.' "[73] The essentialist view corresponds to what al-Attas describes above as the "physical, or everyday, ordinary level of reason and sense experience."[74]

According to Izutsu, in a proposition such as "the flower is white," where "flower" is the subject, "is" the copulative, and "white" the predicate, "white" is an attribute that is accidental to the flower both propositionally and ontologically. "Whiteness" is not something essential to the flower in that a flower can be white, blue, or some other colour. Therefore, there is a homology between the structure of the proposition itself (subject/predicate) and the reality it describes (substance/accident). When dealing with existence, the matter is altogether different. When we make statements such as "the flower exists," "exists" comes in the position of a predicate which seems to suggest that the flower's existence is superadded to the flower, as if its existence were accidental to its quiddity. However this would lead to the absurd conclusion that before existing, the flower had to *exist* since for existence to be predicated of "the flower," the latter should in fact *be*. Or in other terms, to quote al-Attas, according to this view: "The existence of an object is seen as a quality or property of its quiddity, as if its quiddity could subsist by itself prior to its existence."[75] Though linguistically and logically, the predicate "exists" is superadded or accidental to the flower; this does not hold ontologically as existence must come first.

For Izutsu, Avicenna "gave a decisive impetus to the later philosophical elaboration of the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* by his explicit statement that 'existence' is an accident or attribute of *māhiyya* or 'quiddity.' To this statement, however, he added another statement, namely that the accident called 'existence' is not an ordinary accident, but that it . . . is a very peculiar kind of accident."[76] Before Ibn ʿArabi, Izutsu tells us that Muslim philosophers following in the footsteps of the Greeks were mostly concerned with the problem of "existents" (*mawjūdāt*, sing. *mawjūd*, or *ens*), while the very act of existence (*wujūd*, *actus essendi*) was of secondary importance.[77] *Wujūd* was of interest to them only in so far as it served to understand those multiple "existents." Consequently, for al-Attas: "The view of reality based on

72
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 180–81.

73
Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 33–34.

74
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 180.

75
Al-Attas, 180–82.

76
Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Concept and Reality of Existence," *Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations*, vol. 13, ed. Shinji Maejima (Tokyo: Kokusai Printing Co., 1971), 38.

77
Izutsu, "The Concept and Reality of Existence," 38.

the ordinary level of reason and sense experience, and the philosophical and scientific developments that evolve from it, has undoubtedly led philosophical and scientific speculations to the preoccupation with *things* and their 'essences' at the expense of *existence* itself."[78]

With Ibn ʿArabi, on the other hand, this dynamic is reversed and *wujūd* is what takes precedence over the *mawjūd*, whereas according to the "ordinary level of experience" al-Attas describes, existence is taken as a "basic and universal concept"[79] that is subsequently attributed or "apportioned" to multiple things or quiddities through an intellectual operation of abstraction of "the conceptual entity, 'existence,' from the things."[80]

Very succinctly, we can summarise what al-Attas means by "the essentialist view" as follows: Al-Attas distinguishes between the "concept" of existence and the "reality" of existence. According to him, what philosophers and theologians consider to be existence amounts to a secondary intelligible, that is, a concept that refers to another concept (the latter being called a primary intelligible). While the primary intelligible refers to an extramental object, the secondary intelligible does not relate to any extramental reality. That position is described as essentialistic because in it, existence is treated the same way quiddity is: From a given extramental sensible object or quiddity, we extract a concept of that quiddity (a primary intelligible) to which we mentally superadd an existence (a secondary intelligible, a concept with no extramental referent) so that existence is taken as having no extramental referent and appears as if it were accidental to essence. The existentialist position of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, on the other hand, affirms the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) and considers that "it is existence, and not quiddity (*māhiyya*), that is the reality that is being qualified by a conceptual entity called quiddity."[81] According to that perspective, it is quiddity that is "accidental" to existence.

The debate of the "essentialists" *versus* the "existentialists" is therefore about determining what constitutes extra-mental reality in a primary sense (is it existence or quiddity?). It is quiddity that is real while existence is something merely conceptual (*iʿtibārī*), posited by the mind as accidental to quiddity, or is it existence that is real, quiddity being an accident of existence?[82] In the last chapter of the *Prolegomena* titled "The Degrees of Existence," al-Attas draws from Jami's *Durra* to compare the positions of the (early and late) *mutakallimūn* (theologians), philosophers, and Sufis regarding existence. According to al-Attas, beyond the "conceptual entity" called existence, there is the reality of existence:

> Unlike its conceptual counterpart, the reality of existence is active; it is a conscious, dynamic and creative entity, articulating from within itself infinite possibilities of self expression in analogical gradations at different ontological levels in particular and individual modes that appear as separate things in the visible world as well as the invisible world.[83]

We will explain the full meaning of this passage in due time. For now, we would like to highlight that this "reality of existence" is what corresponds to Absolute Being, or what al-Attas calls "Ultimate Reality,"[84]

78
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 181.

79
Al-Attas, 267.

80
Al-Attas, 267.

81
Al-Attas, 234.

82
This question of the primacy of existence *versus* quiddity has divided Islamic philosophers. The Illuminationist (*ishraqi*) school upheld the primacy of quiddity. The Persian philosophers Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191)—the founder of that school—and Mir Damad (ca. 1631/2) are some of the main representatives of *aṣalat al-māhiyya*. It appears that Sadr al-Din Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (c. 1572–1640), upheld the primacy of quiddity in his early years but abandoned it in favor of the primacy of existence. On Mulla Sadra see Megawati Morris, *Mullā Ṣadrā's Doctrine of the Primacy of Existence* (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2003). For a clear and concise summary of the debate, see this collection of articles by Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Fundamental Structure of Sabzawari's Metaphysics," in *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, 57–149. In particular, see chapter 5 of this article called "The Primacy of Existence over Quiddity," 99–118. Seyyed Hosein Nasr has also given an informative overview of the problem in "The Question of Existence and Quiddity and Ontology in Islamic Philosophy" in *Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), 63–84.

83
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 268.

84
Al-Attas, 268–69.

which is the very Essence (*dhāt*) of God. As mentioned earlier, *al-ḥaqq* can be used in opposition to *al-bāṭil* when referring to propositions. Ibn ʿArabi also sometimes uses *al-ḥaqq* in opposition to *al-khalq* (creation): God, as al-Ḥaqq is what confers existence (*wujūd*) to all creation. The term designates God in His creative aspect since it is by Him and through Him that all beings acquire their reality. That is why for Ibn ʿArabi the created world is "He/Not He";[85] from the perspective of created beings, who are the many determinations (*taʿayyunāt*) of Being, the world is a manifestation of Absolute Being, without implying any multiplicity in Him since God's incomparability (*tanzīh*) is also upheld. At the same time, the world (including man) is a manifestation of God and is created in God's image. Despite man's special place in the cosmological hierarchy, a continuity is established between man and the cosmos as both are manifestations of the divine, albeit in different ways.[86] This ambivalence as to God's relation to the world explains why Ibn ʿArabi's thought has often been assimilated to several forms of pantheism. Absolute Being can mean two things in this context. The term "absolute" is sometimes used in opposition to the "relative"—the same way *al-ḥaqq* is used in opposition to *al-khalq*—while at other times it refers to Pure Being (*al-wujūd al-maḥḍ*).[87] We refer to this second meaning when speaking of God's unknowable Essence. In the *Prolegomena*, al-Attas provides a detailed description of "the ontological descent of Absolute Being."[88] Absolute Being in this movement of descent goes from the purely indeterminate to the most determinate, all the way down to the level of the world of empirical things or "sense and sensible experience." According to the "essentialist" view (as defined by al-Attas), there are multiple realities (existences), each corresponding to the things that constitute our phenomenal world.

Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence played a pivotal role in both the history of Western and Islamic philosophy. According to al-Attas, "The philosophical controversy pertaining to the problem of essence and existence, which has been brought to the fore in the West in contemporary times by the upholders of essentialism and existentialism respectively, derives its origin from this basically common view of the nature of reality."[89] The "common view" al-Attas refers to is probably the "ordinary," "everyday" experience referred to earlier. By "existentialism" in this context, of course al-Attas is not referring to the school of Ibn ʿArabi (which he elsewhere characterises as *existentialist*). In the case of Ibn ʿArabi's understanding of *wujūd*, for example, there is a distinction between the "concept" (*mafhūm*) and the "reality" of existence, whereas the Latin Scholastics' understanding of existence—as well as that of some Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Rushd, for example—followed a different course whose consequences have survived in Western thought up till our present times, from al-Attas's perspective. To al-Attas, the Scholastics interpreted Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence as real and not just conceptual. Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of Unity of Being proclaims the primacy of existence.

One could compare his definition of Being to a plain, white sheet of paper that is folded, like an origami,[90] into a specific shape, a bird, for example. The bird has a wing, a beak, and several other parts that have different shapes but are nonetheless all made of the same sheet of

85
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 113.

86
Both man and the cosmos are manifestations of the Names of God. For more details on the divine Names, see Part IV of this article.

87
Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ibn ʿArabi: the Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 152.

88
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 260, provides a schema summarising this "ontological descent of Absolute Being."

89
Al-Attas, 181.

90
I should specify here that origami indicates the Japanese art of folding paper into specific shapes as well as (by metonymy) the byproduct or resulting shapes of that art. This is also interesting for our analogy since the process and the result (or the cause and effect) are indistinguishable from one another.

paper. Like that origami, in the phenomenal world, that chair or that person appears as having separate existences but according to the Sufis they do not. Of course, a person's existence is not the same as the chair's existence (there is a hierarchy between the chair and the person but it is an intensive relation[91]). Also, the origami analogy is limited because a two-dimensional paper becomes three-dimensional, so it involves other elements than a simple sheet (space, for example).

One could also add that "something external" must have shaped and folded that origami in such a way, an external cause. This does not hold in the doctrine of the Unity of Being as only God is, and that God is the cause of all things. But according to this doctrine, the Unity of Being can only be explained by way of analogy precisely because it is supra-rational and meant to be experienced (and therefore understood) at higher spiritual states. We could also see how that doctrine can easily be confused with all sorts of pantheistic ideas.[92] The point is not to say that God is this or that existent, nor that a given existent is Being, but rather that, all perspectives considered, only God *is*, and the existent (or creation in general) is only existent in so far as God is. In its essence, every existent is non-existent. It is only said to "exist" in as much as it is a determination or manifestation of Being in a restricted form.

To push the analogy further, we can now imagine a set of origamis, organised or graded based on their level of intricacy. The more details and folds an origami has, the lower it is in the hierarchy of being, and the farther away it is from the plain sheet of paper which represents the Pure, Absolute Being. Here again, the analogy is limited since in the doctrine of Unity of Being, we are not dealing with distinct sheets of paper nor with different origamis. The existents are all different manifestations of the same substance.

As indicated earlier, in the Akbarian system, the whole of creation is a manifestation of God, and the world of empirical things constitutes the last level in the degrees of existence. In his interpretation of God's signs (*āyāt*) as found in the great Book of Nature, man deals with many objects which vary in their clarity. Just as there are *āyāt muḥkamāt* (clear verses of the Quran) and *āyāt mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses), so the objects that make up our world constitute clear signs or ambiguous and obscure signs.[93] This analogy is derived from the parallel established by al-Attas between the Book of God and the Book of Nature, as mentioned earlier. According to that perspective, the things or existents that sciences take as their objects of study, for example (as illustrated with the geocentric *versus* heliocentric models), become part of that graded hierarchy. The laws of physics would then represent but an aspect or a level of the reality of those objects. They may express a truth about them, but they do not represent their ultimate *truth* in the sense of *ḥaqīqa*. Additionally, as the verses of the Quran are united by being written in the same book, so are the existents that constitute the whole cosmos, including the world of sense and sensible experience. Al-Attas specifies that:

> The word as it is is a sign, a symbol; and to know it as it really is means knowing what it stands for, what it symbolises, what it means. To study the word as word, regarding it as if it had an

91
Also, man holds an exalted station amongst creation, but it is by virtue of the breadth of his being which can likewise cause him to be amongst the lowest of creation as indicated by verses (95:4–5): "*Laqad khalaqnā al-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm*, *thumma radadnāhu asfala sāfilīn*" (Verily, We have created man in the best of moulds, Then, We returned him to the lowest of the low).

92
On accusations of pantheism, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

93
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 135–36.

> independent reality of its own, is to miss the real point of studying it; for regarded as such it is no longer a sign or a symbol, as it is being made to point to itself, which is not what it really is.[94]

The words he is discussing here are the words of the Quran (the *āyāt*). In his view, the essentialist view of existence, where things are considered in their "alleged independence" and self-subsistence, leads to the same conclusion as to the meaning of the object considered. Objects (including man) are made to point to themselves, which can lead to deviation.[95]

Now one may ask the very legitimate question of how the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* can respond to the "correspondence theory of truth." After all, the former deals with ontology and the latter with epistemology. What is more, the metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabi are far from being universally endorsed by Muslims: what then should we make of the metaphysics of *kalām* (and *falsafa*) that are also classified as essentialistic?

The answer to the first question is that in the "ordinary" level of everyday experience, there is a subject-object relation that still holds (as mentioned earlier). As there are different levels of existence, correspondingly, there are different levels of knowledge. Knowledge of objects at the level of ordinary experience consists in "the soul's intussusception of the *meanings* of such objects and not of the objects *themselves.*"[96] By intussusception, al-Attas most probably means that the soul somehow "absorbs" the intelligible forms of the object of knowledge. At the higher spiritual states, where there is direct tasting (*dhawq*) and inner witnessing (*shuhūd*) as well "other interrelated states of trans-empirical awareness (*aḥwāl*),"[97] the subject-object (or the knower and the known) dichotomy no longer holds. There is a unification of the knower and the known, or a " 'unification' (*tawḥīd*) of the soul with the very Truth that underlies all meaning." Al-Attas makes sure to specify that the Truth or al-Ḥaqq does not mean God's Essence, or the divine mystery, which is unknowable to man. The Truth here is Absolute Being in its relative sense. At those higher levels of experience and knowledge, there is "identity of thought and being or existence."[98]

As to the second question (on the role of the "essentialistic" *kalām* and *falsafa*), we will deal with it in the conclusion to this article, since it ties in with the general question of the role Sufi metaphysics can play in a world where Ibn ʿArabi remains a controversial figure. For now, we can say that though "essentialistic" *kalām* and *falsafa* seem to be classified alongside the modern philosophical systems al-Attas is challenging, the matter is not as simple as it appears. By retracing the common origins of that history of existence (and essence), al-Attas is then able to put in place his comparative approach, following Jami, as well as delineate the consequences of that divergence through to the world of sense and sensible experience. One of those major points of divergence for al-Attas, which is also rooted in a different understanding of being, has to do with certain definitions of the concept of "change," which we examine in the next and final part of this article.

94 Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 17.

95 Al-Attas, 17.

96 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 183.

97 Al-Attas, 183.

98 Al-Attas, 183n193.

Progress, Change, and the Fixed Essences

Al-Attas views the inexorable march of secularisation as problematic because it threatens the very existence of religion, which in turn starts to align with the programme of secularisation conceived as an ideology instead of a simple process. Additionally, he criticises evolutionary views of religion whereby man is considered as undergoing a process of maturation, one which religious doctrine is supposed to keep up with. From that perspective, which al-Attas considers to be problematic, revelation is considered as something which must allow for this development, this passage from the simple to the complex, from "infancy" to "maturity."[99] Secularisation ceases to be a process for al-Attas, and becomes an ideology, when it presupposes that history develops along teleological lines and is a goal-oriented process. Furthermore, he considers that secularisation is largely conceived "not merely as a historical process in which man is passively immersed, but that man himself is ever engaged actively in creating the process."[100] Secularisation conceived as such also involves a specific understanding or reinterpretation of religion which is likewise understood to move along evolutionary lines. This echoes critiques directed against positivism and the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in particular, whose ideas about the concept of progress al-Attas discusses early on in *Islām and Secularism*: "Already in the earlier half of the 19th century the French philosopher-sociologist, Auguste Comte, envisaged the rise of science and the overthrow of religion, and believed . . . that society was 'evolving' and 'developing' from the primitive to the modern stages."[101]

Similarly, in the *Prolegomena*, he alludes to the Hegelian dialectic whereby ideas emerge in succession and in opposition to one another continually. According to al-Attas's interpretation of Hegel, ideas or even systems of thought follow and even supplant one another, leading to often radical and profound shifts in worldviews. For al-Attas, the Islamic worldview does not undergo these transformations:

> It is not a worldview that undergoes a dialectical process of transformation repeated through the ages, from thesis to antithesis then synthesis, with elements of each of these stages in the process being assimilated into the other, such as a worldview based upon a system of thought that was originally god-world centered, and is now world centered and perhaps shifting again to form a new thesis in the dialectical process.[102]

It seems that when al-Attas writes about these transformations, he is not merely describing how Western thought evolved but, more importantly, how this dialectical process becomes an issue when it becomes an imposition. When the distinction between "secularism" and "secularisation" is abolished—the former describing an ideology and the latter a process—that is, when secularisation turns into an "*inevitable* process,"[103] it becomes an ideology, one whose effects must necessarily be actualised according to al-Attas. In the same manner, these dialectical shifts taken as an imperative or a philosophical programme become problematic for him. The common basis that he posits for these various ways of conceiving religion and the evolution of ideas is that *change*

99 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 24–25.

100 Al-Attas, 47.

101 Al-Attas, 2.

102 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 2.

103 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 5.

is taken as an absolute, an inevitability. While for him, "change" is an inalienable component of reality, he likewise considers that "permanence" is an equally essential component of that same reality. Here again, his Akbarian metaphysics allows us to understand more clearly what he means by that.

Secularisation as a "philosophical programme" poses change not only as an inevitability, according to al-Attas but furthermore, "in its attempt to correspond with the reality that is considered as absolute change, advocates change in all aspects of life, denies finality in worldview and propagates the belief in an open future."[104] This most probably refers to "process philosophy"[105] which takes change as the substratum of all things. Still, al-Attas also draws a parallel between that position and more ancient ones: "Contemporary science has evolved and developed out of a philosophy that since its earliest periods affirmed the coming into being of things out of each other. Everything existent is a progression, a development or evolution of what lies in latency in eternal matter."[106] Al-Attas here refers to the natural philosophy of the Presocratics as well as Aristotle, for whom "the coming into being of things out of each other" invokes a necessary causality between things, which can be contrasted with Ibn ʿArabi's notion of ontological descent of Absolute Being. On the other hand, by "everything existent is a progression," al-Attas most probably means the world of generation and corruption, given that Aristotle's Prime Mover is pure actuality. This understanding of being as pure actuality, however, does not encompass being as a dynamic reality undergoing graded manifestation, as is the case with Ibn ʿArabi. These various definitions of change are therefore insufficient for al-Attas, for whom "reality is at once both permanence and change, not in the sense that change is permanent, but in the sense that there is something permanent whereby change occurs."[107] The understanding of secularisation described above is but one of the consequences of this reification of change for al-Attas. We should clarify that he is not positing change as the *only* nor *main* component of secularisation, or the Hegelian dialectic (or other notions such as progress and development). Change seems to be a core element of the ontology of process philosophy for him. And since, in his view, process philosophy dominates modern ways of thinking, its conception of reality is therefore bound to affect those concepts that are part of this "super-structure." As previously shown, this conception of change impinges on various disciplines such as history, science, etc. The dual aspect of reality as "both permanence and change" is explained by al-Attas through the concept of *aʿyān thābita* as examined below.

104 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 139–40.

105 Al-Attas, 127.

106 Al-Attas, 115.

107 Al-Attas, 139–40.

Aʿyān thābita or Fixed Essences

God, in his Essence, is only known and knowable to Himself. He also has knowledge of all things, and all things subsist in God's knowledge. In Akbarian ontology, the multiple beings that constitute the created world—that is, both "the visible world as well as the invisible world";[108] that is, everything save God—are the many determinations (*taʿayyunāt*), and individuations (*tashakhkhuṣāt*)[109] of Being without Being undergoing any division, multiplication, nor change: "It remains

108 Al-Attas, 268.

109 Al-Attas, 273.

One as ever."[110] The beings of the world subsist as objects of God's knowledge or "intelligibles in the Divine knowledge." These objects which dwell therein "in a state of pure possibility"[111] are called the "*aʿyān thābita*" which can be translated as "*fixed* essences or *permanent* archetypes."[112] Though the term "archetype" may suggest something akin to the Platonic Forms, this is not the case here, for the *aʿyān* do not represent a model that sensible things seek to mirror or emulate. Without getting into the labyrinthian details in which questions of quiddity could lead us, we can say that though we are using the term "essences" (or *aʿyān*) here, in reality, we are referring to quiddity (*māhiyya*) as a reality (assimilated to *wujūd*) and not simply to quiddity as a concept that is a mode of existence.[113] This is why al-Attas describes Ibn ʿArabi's position as "existentialist" and not "essentialist." The *aʿyān thābita* in fact represent the essence or reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of things. It is by the mediation of the Divine Names (*al-asmāʾ*) that these realities become manifest:

> What is it that brings beings out of this Cloud, from this state of possibility into a state of manifestation? It is the Divine Word calling things into existence. According to Ibn ʿArabī, it is through the agency of what he calls the "Divine Names" that manifested beings are organised and arranged. "Names" here should not be taken to mean the specific terms (e.g., the "Merciful" or the "Almighty") which we utter in human language. Rather, they are the "names of these names" (asmāʾ al-asmāʾ), the various modalities through which God impels and organises existence in the universe.[114]

As stated, the Divine Names in this context do not refer to "specific terms"; additionally, they are innumerable.[115] When considered in their distinctness—and not with respect to the Divine Essence—"each Divine Name is an Attribute."[116] The concept of *aʿyān thābita* was mainly used by Ibn ʿArabi to solve the problem of the relation between divine unity and the multiplicity of the phenomenal world. The *aʿyān* are therefore the many manifestations and aspects of the Divine Names. As mentioned in a previously cited passage whose meaning was not fully elucidated, in contrast to the concept of existence, "the reality of existence is active; it is a conscious, dynamic, and creative entity, articulating from within itself infinite possibilities of self expression."[117] The Absolute Being, in His first manifestation of Himself *to* Himself, becomes cognizant of those essences or Realities which are none other than the "forms of the Names and Attributes."[118] The *ʿayn thābit* can therefore be succinctly defined as "a form of a Divine Name naming a special aspect of the Essence, which form is manifested in the Divine consciousness."[119] Because the *aʿyān thābita* remain in the Divine consciousness, not even getting so much as a whiff of "external existence," they are considered non-existent.[120] External existence means here their outward manifestation as concrete realities, given that the *aʿyān* remain present in the divine consciousness (*al-ḥaḍrat al-ʿilmiyya*)[121] or in the interior condition of Being. From that perspective they are non-existent (that is, to outward reality): "What is actualized or externalized are the forces or controlling powers conforming to the nature of the archetype

110 Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ibn ʿArabi: the Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," 153.

111 Pierre Lory, "The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ʿArabi," *Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* (March 31, 2021) https://ibnarabi-society.org/symbolism-of-letters-and-language-pierre-lory/. "Possibility" here is "*istiʿdādāt*," a term that literally means "preparednesses" and that al-Attas translates as "potentialities."

112 Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 38.

113 Cf. diagrams p. 247 and p. 250 of *Prolegomena.*

114 Lory, "The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ʿArabi."

115 Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 37.

116 Al-Attas, 37.

117 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 268.

118 Al-Attas, 277.

119 Al-Attas, 253.

120 Al-Attas, 248.

121 Al-Attas, 250.

(*aḥkām*), its concomitants and effects (*lawāzim* and *āthār*) inherent in the potentialities (*istiʿdādāt*) in the archetype."[122] On the other hand, since the archetypes subsist as intelligibles in God's knowledge, their being is more "real" than the being of concrete existents, which are part of the phenomenal world and derived from the fixed archetypes: "In relation to the world that they project they [i.e., the fixed essences] are more real than the world."[123] Al-Attas therefore describes them as a "third metaphysical category between existence and nonexistence."[124] The *aʿyān* allow al-Attas to offer what he considers an adequate alternative to these other understandings of change, which are problematic for him, since if the things of the phenomenal world are changing all the time, this implies their continued subsistence as they undergo that change: "The implication underlying the concept of change is that the diverse things that constitute the world of phenomena somehow persist in existence and undergo movement or transformation."[125] This contradicts his position according to which things are in a constant state of renewal or perpetually undergoing new creation (*khalq jadīd*). According to the Qurʾan (55:26–27), everything is ever-perishing or in a state of *fanāʾ* save "God's *wajh*" which remains in perpetual existence. The word *wajh* means both face and aspect (or facet). For al-Attas, "the Reality-Truth is the Aspect (*wajh*) of God which remains (*yabqa*, i.e., *baqāʾ*) after the perishing (*fanāʾ*) of created things."[126] Created things are therefore in a constant state of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and renewal: "We maintain that phenomenal things do not persist in existence, but perish upon coming into existence, being continually replaced by new similars in a perpetual process."[127] This discontinuance is inherent in the phenomenal world. Change, on the other hand, is to be located at the level of the *aʿyān* since they contain all the possible "future states"[128] of the realities that manifest them. As the potentialities within the fixed essences are actualised or unfold, this translates as change in those essences because the phenomenal things which actualise them are continually ever-perishing.[129] At the same time, however, "the realities [i.e., the *aʿyān*] are ever-regaining continuance in existence."[130] This continuance in existence is identified with this "aspect (*wajh*) of God" characterised by *baqāʾ*. As to Absolute Existence Himself, even though we speak of His Reality as being dynamic—as expressed a couple of verses later in *sura* al-Rahman (55:29), "*kull yawm huwa fī shaʾn*," which al-Attas translates as "He is always in act"[131]—al-Attas explains how "He is far too exalted to be conceived as being immersed in a process descriptive of becoming or transformation."[132]

It is interesting to note how al-Attas utilises the categories of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* not merely as spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) that man undergoes, but as actual ontological states, therefore linking these various states of the soul to the realities ever-present in God's consciousness. The *aʿyān thābita* as a "third metaphysical category between existence and non-existence" therefore also possesses a "dual aspect"[133] involving both permanence and change. This metaphysics of permanence and change is, according to al-Attas, a superior alternative to an ontological system that only posits change and *a priori* excludes permanence as a feature of reality. We can see the logic behind such reasoning for it corresponds to the traditional view of metaphysics as the highest science, which contains the principles of all lower sciences. From that

122 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 248.

123 Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 38.

124 Al-Attas, 38.

125 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 139.

126 Al-Attas, 237.

127 Al-Attas, 139.

128 Al-Attas, 140.

129 Al-Attas, 140.

130 Al-Attas, 140.

131 Al-Attas, 239.

132 Al-Attas, 140.

133 Al-Attas, 140.

perspective, metaphysical concepts are bound to "trickle down" into other sciences and affect the way other concepts will be formulated. This approach, however, is not without challenges.

Conclusion

Despite al-Attas not being a structuralist thinker, he does adopt a somewhat structuralist approach. One may therefore criticise him for using the same arguments which are usually directed at structuralists. Isn't it somewhat reductive to tie several concepts to one given *overarching* concept (such as how progress, secularisation, development, etc., are all tied to change)? Yet, al-Attas never really reduces them to change *only* (to the exclusion of other elements).

Another more important challenge to his philosophical programme may perhaps lie in the question of method. Al-Attas considers that one may borrow methods from modern sciences and philosophy so long as they do not contradict Islamic orthodoxy and his Sufi metaphysics. Just as al-Ghazali introduced logic into *kalām*, other approaches from other systems can thus be used. The question here is whether a given method is separable from the science within which it developed. Richard Frank, for example—and Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) before him—has raised the question of the compatibility of Aristotelian logic with Ashʿarism in the context of al-Ghazali's writings.[134] Likewise, is the structuralist approach separable from the ontological system that underpins it?

The question of the role of *kalām* especially (and to a lesser extent *falsafa*) posed earlier is also one that merits attention. If the metaphysics of *kalām* are just as essentialistic as modern philosophical systems (albeit in a different way) according to al-Attas, then why does *kalām* not lead to the same "deviations" in meaning as those other systems do? An obvious answer would be that even though al-Attas thinks that *kalām* "essentialism" is not the correct system to adopt, Muslim theologians still refer to the Quran as the veritable standard and source of knowledge. *Kalām* as a dialectic science is meant to protect the religion and preserve orthodoxy. Its essentialism would therefore be of little consequence. Also, the *mutakallimūn* uphold God's incomparability and their definition of the world as *everything other than God* which would still allow for an interpretation of the objects of the world along the lines suggested by al-Attas: as signs pointing to their Creator.

In which case, we may then ask what the purpose of Sufi metaphysics is. The answer to this question is perhaps less obvious. First, we should note that for al-Attas, Sufi metaphysics is the correct model of interpretation of reality. This is not mere rhetoric, but a model he actually adheres to based on his own spiritual experiences. The idea here is not to put forward a model that "corresponds" to phenomena (the same way the "correspondence theory of truth" operates), but one that is actually *true* in the sense of *ḥaqīqa.*

Still, we may ask, regardless of whether Sufi metaphysics constitutes the "truth" or not, isn't *kalām* as a dialectic science sufficient to respond to the "correspondence theory of truth" or the threat of secularisation? Here the example given above of Jami's *Durra* becomes useful: as explained earlier, Sufi metaphysics is deemed superior to

134 Richard Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ashʿarite School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 17.

kalām and *falsafa*, due to its simultaneous conformity to orthodoxy, reliance on unveiling, and (most importantly) because its logical proofs are considered superior. It may be posited that Sufi metaphysics, by providing solutions that are superior to some doctrinal problems, has supplanted *kalām* in its function of a dialectic science which in turn has rendered Sufi metaphysics perhaps just as necessary for the preservation of religion. But al-Attas's Sufi metaphysics is meant to *subsume* rather than *replace kalām*. He views their relationship as intensive rather than purely hierarchical (although some hierarchy remains). In other words, Sufi metaphysics should both align with *kalām* and provide a deeper interpretation of reality. In keeping with his rejection of the notion of change or progress when applied to religion, al-Attas does not see Sufi metaphysics as a more complex form of previous, more "primitive" "versions of Islam." Therefore, *kalām* remains just as essential to the preservation of the religion as Sufism is. Also, the relationship of Akbarian metaphysics to older Sufi concepts and ideas may be viewed as a clarification of what already lay in latency, an ontology that was formulated in a more "basic" form but whose contents were just as rich and complex. This, at least, is how I interpret al-Attas's system, although there remain many questions and challenges to be addressed.

I wish to conclude that understanding Ibn ʿArabi is essential to appreciate the works of al-Attas in their full depth. Conversely, al-Attas's works constitute an invaluable contribution for a better understanding of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's thought. This article represents but a modest analysis of some aspects of his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi. To give just one example: al-Attas has extensively written on education and developed his own philosophy of education. In *Islām and Secularism*, he utilises the concepts of "*al-insān al-kāmil*" and "*al-insān al-kullī*" (universal man) to develop his idea of the university (*kullīya*).[135]

Al-Attas does not limit himself to an explanation of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas, however. He also puts forward his own theories and builds upon that Akbarian heritage through contemporary questions. Furthermore, Ibn ʿArabi's thought constitutes but one aspect of the Malay philosopher's works, which are difficult to classify for various reasons. Indeed, al-Attas draws from a wide variety of sources (both pre- and post-Akbarian) that belong to both the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions, displaying profound mastery of both.

Though al-Attas has been compared to many contemporary scholars, and indeed parallels can be drawn between his ideas and those of postcolonial and postmodern theorists who seek to question classical epistemic models, this comparison can only be made at the surface. His work is rooted in an altogether different conception of the world, reality, and the objects that constitute them. Most importantly, his *oeuvre* highlights that *the reason* one adopts an idea is perhaps just as important as the idea itself, and the full depth and breadth of his works can truly be appreciated as one follows that ontological descent and explores the various levels of his writings that seek to address those different degrees of existence.

135 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 154.

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Heterography 1:

"Looking for Muhyiddin" Nacer Khemir

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With *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2013), Khemir delves into the life and work of the mystic Ibn ʿArabi through a deeply personal journey woven into daily life. The film tells the story of a man who must return to his homeland to bury his mother. The protagonist makes a promise to his father, which leads him on a journey in pursuit of a certain Sheikh Muhyiddin. Through this quest, he encounters people who introduce him to Ibn ʿArabi's teachings. Guided by his master, the protagonist travels from Oxford to Granada, Seville to Fez, Murcia to Istanbul, Cordoba to Konya, New York to Sanaa, and finally from Tunis to Damascus. At each stop, he meets friends of the Sheikh, who speak of him in their own languages. Thus, the film flows seamlessly from Arabic to Spanish, English to French, Italian to Turkish. This documentary, blending history and spiritual pursuit, reflects Khemir's profound admiration for the great Sufi masters. In this heterography, the filmmaker recounts how the film came to be.

"My homeland is a suitcase... My suitcase, my homeland"
Mahmoud Darwich, Palestinian poet

Click on the image for the trailer.

My suitcase is a red suitcase, which I drag like a thread through my film *Looking for Muhyiddin*. The first time I left Tunisia by boat, I carried with me a large red suitcase. In my first film, *L'histoire du pays du bon Dieu*, the young man who wished to leave his country also had a suitcase, but back then, it was made of wood. Today, my old wooden suitcase is where I keep all my correspondence.

It all began one afternoon in a Parisian café. My wife and I were seated at a sunlit table. Since my arrival in Paris a few years earlier, sunny days had become a true blessing for me. During the winter months, the city was often shrouded in a gray veil for weeks. Between the subway and the absence of light, I felt as though I were living underground. For years, until I adjusted, I noted in a small notebook the cafés that had sun in the morning and those that did in the afternoon. The sun, and especially light, was for me a precious gift. I come from a country where the light is so exceptional that it inspired the great painter Paul Klee, who once declared in front of the city of Kairouan: "Color and I are one; I am a painter." So there I was, sitting in the sunlight one winter afternoon in 2006, with a depressed look on my face after nearly all the European festivals had declined to screen my film *Bab'Aziz*, as if they had coordinated their rejections. My wife, noticing my state, asked me what my deepest desire was. Without hesitation, I replied: to change career. She then said:

– You don't want to be a filmmaker anymore?

– I do, but I no longer want to spend ten years begging for money to produce a film, like *Bab'Aziz*, only for no one to see it in the end!

– You're exaggerating, she said. Let's make a list of films you'd like to create, but on a smaller scale, within our means, with resources we can gather ourselves.

I had almost always filmed on celluloid, mostly 35mm. I thought to myself that maybe it was time to switch to digital . . .

So, we made a list, and she asked me:

– Which film would you like to start with?

– The one about Ibn ʿArabi.

That's when I found out there was a symposium on Ibn ʿArabi in Cairo. She said:

– Let's get tickets and go!

It was expensive for my budget, between the flight and accommodation!

We eventually found an affordable place to stay at the Dominican friars' convent, which carried a particularly meaningful connection: Osman Yahia had spent fifteen years there working on the text of *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, the central work of the Great Master. The coincidence was a remarkable one to note. During my stay, with my small camera, I filmed a few scenes in the room where he had worked all those years, guided by the elderly caretaker who had known him.

In Cairo, I met around ten specialists, including Denis Gril and others. It was then that I realized the complexity of making a film about *shaykh al-akbar*. I didn't want to create a study, a popularized explanation, or a lecture. For me, this had to be a true film. I was convinced that the best approach was to interview those who had dedicated themselves to his work, especially since each person had their own unique way of approaching Ibn ʿArabi, as if he were a precious diamond with countless facets, each one unveiling a hidden meaning.

I realized that I, too, needed to find the particular facet that would guide me to him as a filmmaker. Each person had their reasons for loving the Master; it was enough to ask them a single question: how did they discover Ibn ʿArabi, and what had they found in that encounter? I didn't want to simply string together interviews but to engage in a genuine exploration. It was well known that the Master was deeply elusive, difficult to access.

I wanted to convey the feeling that the Master was still with us, alive, especially since I wasn't searching for him in the past but in our present. This wasn't just an idea; it was the sensation I experienced myself while reading his texts in the present. However, as with any narrative, I had to begin with myself to embark on the journey. At the time, my mother had recently passed away, a loss that had deeply affected me. I decided to start from that point to build the story. The chance encounters and opportunities that each day brought played a crucial role.

The film required four years of intermittent shooting. We had no production support or budget, so we had to seize every opportunity that arose. For instance, when I was invited to Spain to present my film *Le Collier perdu de la colombe*, with travel and hotel expenses covered by the event organizers, I took a small crew along. This allowed me to film the segment set in Granada while fulfilling my speaking engagements and hosting conferences. In this way, the film gradually came together, shaped by invitations and opportunities. I often set aside part of my time in a country or city to film a few sequences.

The film was truly pieced together with scraps and threads. During a symposium in Oxford, the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society invited me to present my film *Bab'Aziz*. This opportunity also allowed me to film James Morris, Stephen Hirtenstein, and others. I remember approaching James in the garden of one of Oxford's colleges, asking if he could talk to us about Ibn ʿArabi. He replied that he only had about half an hour before speaking at the symposium. So, I had to film him immediately, right there in the garden. But as soon as he began speaking about the Master, time ceased to matter. . .

Each person carried within them a treasure, a secret love for Ibn ʿArabi. The challenge was to find a cinematic way to capture all that love, to make it palpable and, above all, to quietly transmit it to the audience. It was essential to move beyond the traditional concept of interviews and intermediaries, to transform the viewer into a privileged witness of this encounter, like a gesture of hospitality, a yearning, a reunion with the Master. In this way, narration needed to fade into the background, allowing the audience to experience the desire to approach him.

As I journeyed through the film, dragging my suitcase, I became nothing more than the thread connecting all these stories, transforming them into a living, non-explanatory discourse. I had to make myself nearly transparent, creating a sense of tension, like an arrow whose only purpose is to move toward its target, even if it remains unaware of it. And that target was the Master. This is why I introduced a fictional concern for my character—the worry about waiting for his father's response regarding the sale of the family home.

When I first considered how to make a film about Ibn ʿArabi, the question of *amāna* (trust or responsibility) quickly came to the forefront. It was crucial to avoid creating a film that would betray the complexity and vastness of the Master's vision. I did not want to depict the classic image of a *murīd* (spiritual disciple) in search of his master. This is why, from the very beginning of the film, I established a certain distance between the character and the quest. It was as though I were saying: *I am not undertaking this journey for my own interest in Ibn ʿArabi, but out of loyalty to a promise made to my father in a dream,* as he had passed away long ago. Thus, I made the journey without being directly invested in the subject, thereby bridging the gap between the audience and the voices of those who recount the Master. This approach created such tension that, during discussions after screenings, some audience members asked me about the sale of the family home and whether I had finally received an answer from my father!

This perfectly illustrates that the journey I undertook had achieved its purpose. A small motif transformed into a grand quest, and the man with the red suitcase was merely a pretext, unaware of the significance of his own journey. He became, for many viewers, a mirror of themselves, enabling them to move step by step toward the center—like concentric circles drawing closer to their core. These circles evoke the dance of the whirling dervishes. . .

Over four years of traveling, I filmed in fragments, taking advantage of "accidents" that, to me, were not accidents at all but winks from *shaykh al-akbar* himself. One such moment occurs near the end of the film: a little boy climbs the steps in front of the Zitouna Mosque in Tunis, chanting, *"bayt Allāh, bayt Allāh"*—"House of God, House of God." The child unknowingly crossed the frame during a take and continued on his way without noticing us. Each time something like this happened, I felt as though the Master was sending us small signs.

One notable anecdote took place while we were filming at Ibn ʿArabi's tomb in Damascus. A group of Turkmen pilgrims, led by their sheikh, bypassed security, pushed open the door, and sat around the tomb without noticing that we were filming. These little winks, these unexpected gifts, enhanced the feeling that *shaykh al-akbar* was with us throughout those four years of shooting. Often, we filmed without any permits, always afraid of having our equipment or camera confiscated. We lacked the time and resources for costly administrative procedures, making production almost entirely improvised. I opted for a small semi-professional camera to pass as a tourist shooting discreetly at the Alhambra or the Great Mosque of Córdoba in Andalusia.

We also had some wonderful encounters, such as with the late Gabriele Mandel Khan. While we initially proposed filming him in Milan, where he lived, he preferred to shoot in Istanbul, Bursa, and Konya. He even secured the funding for the trip to Turkey and covered the expenses of a small filming crew. That experience felt like a moment of grace, where *shaykh al-akbar*'s presence infused every conversation, guiding us step by step and, perhaps, opening doors that might otherwise have remained closed.

Thanks to the intervention of Mahmut Erol Kiliç, the former director of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul, we filmed in the museum on a Saturday—a day it is usually closed. He was passing through Istanbul and had only that morning available to discuss Ibn ʿArabi. We were determined to capture the manuscript of *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* with him. As he held the manuscript, written by the Master's own hand, he was deeply moved. He confided that it was the first time he had ever held it in his hands. Moments like these were nothing short of extraordinary.

In Konya, thanks to Gabriele Mandel Khan, we spent nearly an entire night alone in the mausoleum of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, filming together. For me, it was a profoundly initiatory journey, especially as I had to be both in front of and behind the camera. In the end, this dual role turned out to be the simplest solution. I found a way to move beyond mere commentary by embodying the figure of the traveler. Hiring someone to play this role was out of the question due to the unpredictability of the shoot, so I had only myself to rely on to carry the character for four years. Throughout the film, I was accompanied by the small red suitcase that made me instantly recognizable, even in a large crowd, and infused the story with a touch of fiction. It was precisely this liminal space between reality and fiction—what might be called the *barzakh*—that brought us closest to the Master. I also followed Ibn ʿArabi's method of using dreams to transcend reality. This was the narrative structure I chose for the film, invoking my long-deceased father to entrust me with the *amāna*—a sacred trust—thereby initiating my journey out of love and loyalty to him.

Making a film is, above all, about encounters. Yet, I was unable to film everyone I hoped to meet. Some didn't respond, others declined, believing it impossible to make a film about the Master. A few were hindered by circumstances, and certain appointments fell through. Over time, I came to believe that the Master himself chose who would speak about him. . .

At times, his presence seemed to guide us, even through unexpected turns. One day, Denis Gril and I were stuck in front of the mosque in Tunis because we hadn't obtained filming permission in time. In a last-minute effort, we sent someone to the ministry. By a providential twist, this person ran into someone in the hallway who, after hearing about our situation, immediately issued the permit. That man turned out to be the minister himself!

The anecdotes are countless, but here's another: in Damascus, we almost didn't receive permission to film in the tomb of the Master. Despite being co-produced by the Syrian Ministry of Culture's cinema organization, we were required to meet the official in charge in person. During this meeting, he explained that he had "withheld" the authorization deliberately to ensure we would come see him. He was intrigued by these people who had traveled so far to make a film about Ibn ʿArabi. He also revealed that his own name was Muhyi al-Din and that his father had spent his entire life serving as the caretaker of the Master's mausoleum!

There were also situations that seemed impossible yet somehow materialized—like filming in Fez, Morocco. It was too expensive, and obtaining filming permits seemed unfeasible. I still believe in the unseen intervention of the Master. Armand Amar, the musician for my film *Bab'Aziz*, contacted me urgently. He was preparing to open the Fez Festival of Sacred Music with an oratorio titled *Layla and Majnun*. Facing a significant issue with the performance, he asked me to rewrite the libretto and begged me to perform as the storyteller during the festival's opening night in the presence of Morocco's queen! And so, I found myself in Fez, almost as if summoned. Once there, I hired a cameraman, and we began filming in search of the mosque where Ibn ʿArabi had once resided. But soon, the police arrested me. Luckily, I was set to perform that very evening before the queen, and that fact got me out of trouble!

Later, Stephen Hirtenstein told me he was going to New York to organize a symposium on Ibn ʿArabi—at Riverside Church! At the time, I was filming *Shéhérazade ou la parole contre la mort* in southern France. By reallocating part of that film's budget, I managed to finance my trip with a small team, allowing me to capture footage in New York as well!

Another coincidence: a friend of mine was appointed Tunisia's ambassador to Yemen. I asked if he could host me and my cameraman in Sanaa, and with just the two of us, we managed to film the entire Yemen sequence, including the bustling market and the mosque. I carried my red suitcase in front of the camera while also handling the sound recording myself!

Much like filming in the garden of an Oxford college, it was a matter of reacting and improvising on the spot, all while maintaining a connection to the overarching narrative. Time was always against us, and

the biggest challenge was chasing the light, especially since we didn't use a single artificial lamp throughout the entire shoot. I relied solely on natural light, carefully positioning the camera to make the most of it. Whether it was the soft glow of a library where I was accompanied by a great poet or the breathtaking interior of the mosque in Sanaa, I adapted to the ambient light. Occasionally, we had to stop filming as night fell and the light was no longer sufficient.

The entire three-hour film was made with a small semi-professional camera and a Zoom recorder for sound. Whenever possible, and when I could afford it, I hired a cameraman and a sound engineer. At times, I took on the role of either sound recorder or cameraman myself. For the rest, instead of asking for payment for my appearances—whether at the University of Granada or during presentations of *Bab'Aziz* at Sufi gatherings—I requested coverage for two team members: one for image and one for sound.

There were also setbacks. For instance, we had barely two hours of daylight to film Pablo Beneito in a cloister, and we were constantly interrupted by the noise of a jackhammer nearby!

This is how *Looking for Muhyiddin* came to life—four years of improvisation and resourcefulness. I'm not even talking about the editing process or the revolving door of editors. In the end, I hired an assistant editor and took on much of the editing myself.

One of the great difficulties was the six languages in the film: Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, French, English, and Italian. These mixtures were a real challenge. In addition, it was even more complicated to move from one place to another, since I had filmed in ten countries and more than fifteen cities. I was also evolving with a narrative that did not take into account reality, moving from the city of Cordoba to that of Fez, then to New York. All this complicated the apparent logic of the editing work; it was like a game, both visible and invisible, to maintain the presence of Ibn ʿArabi throughout the film.

Finally, regarding the length of the film, I wondered who would want to watch three hours of footage. In the end, I convinced myself that the Master deserved much more, and that those who wanted to approach him should at least make the effort to spend three hours in his company. Later, during the screening, I realized that these three hours had passed quickly. Some spectators remained in the room, as if the film had to continue, for them, beyond the end of the screening.

In summary, *Looking for Muhyiddin* is a three-hour documentary-fiction that offers an investigation in the footsteps of *shaykh al-akbar*. During this almost initiatory journey, the character crosses a dozen countries and stops in nearly fifteen cities, including Murcia, where the Master was born in 1165; Cordoba, Granada, and Seville in Spain; Fez in Morocco; Tunis in Tunisia; Istanbul, Konya, and Bursa in Turkey; Damascus in Syria; Sanaa in Yemen; as well as London and Oxford in England; not to mention New York in the United States and a few cities in France.

But all this filming and all these words were not easy to gather. It was necessary to find another way to do the editing. Here, I would say it is rather a weaving, because each of these words represents a thread, a color of the Master's thought. It was necessary to intertwine them, to interweave them to create the image of a carpet, that is to say, a garden.

You know, in the Eastern tradition, the carpet makes you travel, like Aladdin's flying carpet. But originally, the carpet symbolized a garden. In the desert, when the nomad unrolls a carpet, it is a garden that he unfolds, based on this symbolic language of Arab culture.

So I wove the film instead of editing it, the difference being that the threads overlap, intertwine, mingle, disappear, and reappear, all the while trying to remain clear. I didn't want a film that was only for believers, but for everyone, for everyone. This editing-weaving gave *Looking for Muhyiddin* such fluidity that some even told me they felt the three hours were still too short to talk about the Master. It's true, my project was not to lock him in a film, but to approach his essence. It was not a question of asserting a truth, but of making one feel a certain taste that the Sufis call *dhawk*.

Sufis taught me not to try to touch things with the mind, but with the heart. The representation is not that of the visible, but of the invisible. This is why I chose for my film to wear my father's burnous, thus symbolizing the presence of the Master, without resorting to an actor who would lend his body and face. Indeed, writing will always be a screen, a form of theatrical play at best, but it will never be able to embody the Master.

This notion of abstraction implies the presence of someone we cannot see. He is there, on the screen, but he transcends the decor; because he is before our eyes, we feel his presence without seeing him. This feeling, reinforced by this abstraction, makes his presence exceed that of a figure borrowed from an actor or another person. In this way, we preserve the right distance that makes this presence possible, while abolishing the game.

One of the questions that touched me the most in the debates after the screenings was: is the Master alive? Where does he live? Have you met him?

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A few words about Nacer Khemir

Nacer Khemir is a multidisciplinary Tunisian artist renowned for his poetic and spiritual works. Born in 1948 in Korba, he stands out as a filmmaker, writer, storyteller, and calligrapher, infusing each of his creations with a deep sensitivity to Sufi tradition and Islamic cultural heritage. His films, such as *Les Baliseurs du désert* (1984) and *Bab'Aziz* (2005), offer visual and narrative explorations of a world where mysticism, inner quests, and poetry intertwine. His distinctive style, often described as dreamlike, echoes the aesthetic of *One Thousand and One Nights* and initiatory tales.

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Filmography

1972 - "Le Mulet." Short animated film.
1975 - "Histoire du Pays du Bon Dieu." Télévision français, Antenne 2.
1977 - "L'Ogresse." Télévision Suisse Romande.
1984 - "Les Baliseurs du Désert." Feature film. Grand Prix du Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes, France. Palme d'Or du Festival Méditerranéen de la Mostra de Valence, Spain. Prix de la première œuvre au Festival de Carthage, Tunisia.
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2007 - "Voyage à Tunis." Feature film in the footsteps of the painter Paul Klee, by Bruno Moll with

Nacer Khemir.
2008 - “L’Alphabet de Ma Mère.” Medium-length film, Jeonju International Film Festival, South Korea.
2010 - “En Passant, avec André Miquel.” Feature film.
2011 - “Shéhérazade, ou la Parole Contre la Mort.” Feature film.
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Exhibitions

1976 - Musée d’Arts Modernes de Paris.
1980 et 1987 - Beaubourg Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.
Between 1992 and 1998 - “Les 60 Noms de l’Amour” in Grenade, Milan, Avignon, Genève etc.
April 2002 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisia.
January 2003 - Musée de Clermont-Ferrand, France.
May 2003 - Palais Landzi, Florence, Italy.
2003 - Galerie Amar Farhat, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia.
2005 - Festival International du Film d’Amour de Mons, Belgium.
2006 - Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, Austria.
2007 - Painting exhibition, Carthage,Tunisia.
2009 - Exhibition “La Mort Bleue,” Palais Abdalya, Tunisia.
2011 - Exhibition “Le Burnous,” Palais Abdalya, Tunisia.
2013 - Painting exhibition, Galerie de la Médina, Tunisia.
2023 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisia.
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Heterography 1:

«Looking for Muhyiddin» (original French version)

Nacer Khemir

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Avec *Looking for Muhyiddin* (2012), Khemir explore la vie et l'œuvre du mystique Ibn ʿArabi, à travers une quête personnelle dans la vie quotidienne. Ce film raconte d'un homme qui doit rentrer dans son pays pour enterrer sa mère. Le protagoniste fait une promesse à son père qui va l'entraîner derrière un certain Shaykh Muhyiddin. Dans sa quête de cet homme il découvre à travers ses rencontres l'enseignement d'Ibn ʿArabi. Guidé par son maître, il va ainsi passer d'Oxford à Grenade, de Séville à Fès, de Murcie à Istanbul, de Cordoue à Konya, de New York à Sanaa et enfin de Tunis à Damas. Il rencontre à chaque étape des amis du Shaykh, qui lui parlent de lui chacun dans sa langue. Ainsi on passe de l'Arabe à l'Espagnol, de l'Anglais au Français, et de l'Italien au Turc. Ce film documentaire, à la croisée de l'histoire et de la quête spirituelle, reflète la profonde admiration de Khemir pour les grands maîtres soufis. Dans cette hétérographie le cinéaste raconte comment le film est né.

«Ma patrie est une valise... Ma valise, ma patrie»
Mahmoud Darwich, poète palestinien

Cliquez sur l'image pour la bande-annonce.

Ma valise est une valise rouge que je traîne comme un fil dans mon film *Looking for Muhyiddin*. La première fois que j'ai quitté la Tunisie par bateau, j'avais emporté avec moi une imposante valise rouge. Dans mon premier film «L'histoire du pays du bon Dieu,» dès le départ du jeune homme qui souhaitait quitter ce pays, il portait également une valise, mais à l'époque, celle-ci était en bois. Aujourd'hui, ma vieille valise en bois me sert à conserver toute ma correspondance.

Tout avait commencé un après-midi, dans un café parisien. Ma femme et moi étions installés à une table ensoleillée. Depuis mon arrivée à Paris quelques années plus tôt, les journées ensoleillées étaient pour moi une véritable bénédiction. Pendant les mois d'hiver, la ville se trouvait plongée sous un voile gris pendant des semaines. Entre le métro et l'absence de lumière, j'avais l'impression de vivre sous terre, à tel point que pendant des années, avant de m'acclimater, j'avais marqué dans un petit carnet les cafés ensoleillés le matin et ceux de l'après-midi. Le soleil, pour moi, et surtout la lumière, étaient une sorte de don précieux. Je viens d'un pays où la lumière est si exceptionnelle qu'elle a inspiré le grand peintre Paul Klee, qui avait déclaré devant la ville de Kairouan: «La couleur et moi faisons un; je suis peintre.» Ainsi, je me retrouvais assis au soleil, un après-midi de 2006 en plein hiver, avec un air déprimé, suite aux refus de presque tous les festivals européens de projeter mon film «Bab'Aziz,» comme s'ils s'étaient donné le mot. Ma femme me demanda alors quel était mon désir le plus profond, et je lui répondis sans hésitation: changer de métier. Elle me dit:

– Tu ne veux plus être cinéaste ?

– Si, mais je n'ai plus envie de passer dix ans à mendier de l'argent pour produire un film, comme «Bab'Aziz,» pour, qu'à la fin, personne ne le voie !

– Tu exagères, me dit-elle, dressons une liste des films que tu aimerais réaliser, mais avec des petits moyens, à notre hauteur, que l'on peut rassembler.

J'ai presque toujours tourné en pellicule, surtout en 35 mm. Je me suis dit qu'il était peut-être temps de passer au numérique... Nous avons donc établi une liste, et elle m'a posé la question:

– Par quel film souhaites-tu commencer ?

– Par le film sur Ibn ʿArabi.

C'est alors que j'ai découvert qu'il y avait un symposium sur Ibn ʿArabi au Caire. Elle me dit:

– Prenons des billets, nous y allons !

C'était cher pour ma bourse, entre le vol et l'hébergement!

Nous avons finalement trouvé un logement peu onéreux dans le couvent des frères Dominicains, d'autant plus qu'un certain Osman Yahia y avait passé quinze ans de sa vie à établir le texte des «*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*,» l'ouvrage central du Grand Maître. La coïncidence est belle à signaler. Pendant mon séjour, avec ma petite caméra, j'ai filmé quelques scènes dans la pièce où il avait travaillé tout ce temps, guidé dans ma visite par le vieux gardien qui l'avait connu.

Au Caire, j'ai rencontré une dizaine de spécialistes, dont Denis Gril et d'autres. À ce moment-là, j'avais pris conscience de la complexité de réaliser un film sur le *shaykh al-akbar*. Je ne voulais pas une étude, une vulgarisation, ou un discours. Pour moi, il s'agissait d'un véritable film. J'étais convaincu que la meilleure approche consistait à interroger les personnes qui avaient travaillé sur son œuvre, surtout que chacun avait sa manière d'approcher Ibn ʿArabi, comme s'il était un diamant précieux aux multiples facettes, et que chacun s'est appliqué à découvrir le sens caché d'une de ces facettes.

J'avais pris conscience qu'il me fallait aussi trouver la facette qui allait me guider vers lui, en tant que cinéaste. Chacun avait ses raisons d'aimer le Maître; il suffisait de leur poser une seule question : comment avaient-ils découvert Ibn ʿArabi et qu'avaient-ils trouvé dans cette rencontre ? Je ne voulais pas simplement enchaîner les interviews, mais plutôt engager une véritable approche et exploration, car il était connu que le Maître était très difficile d'accès.

J'avais envie de donner le sentiment que le Maître était encore avec nous, vivant, surtout que je ne le cherchais pas dans le passé, mais dans notre présent. D'ailleurs, ce n'était pas une idée mais la sensation que j'avais moi-même en lisant ses textes aujourd'hui. Mais, comme dans tout récit, il fallait partir de soi pour entreprendre un voyage. À l'époque, ma mère venait de décéder, ce qui m'avait profondément affecté. J'ai donc décidé de partir de ce point-là pour construire le récit. Le hasard des rencontres et les possibilités que chaque jour nous offrait ont joué un rôle crucial.

Le film a nécessité quatre années de tournage par intermittence. Nous n'avions ni production ni budget, et nous avions dû saisir les occasions qui se présentaient. Ainsi, lors d'une invitation en Espagne pour présenter mon film «Le Collier perdu de la colombe,» bénéficiant d'une prise en charge des voyages et de l'hôtel par les organisateurs de l'évènement, je me suis fait accompagné par une petite équipe et c'est ainsi que j'ai réalisé la partie du film tournée à Grenade, tout en assurant mes interventions et conférences. Et le film, au gré des invitations, s'est construit petit à petit. Je détournais une partie du temps de ma présence

dans un pays ou une ville pour filmer quelques séquences.

C'est véritablement avec des bouts de ficelle que le film s'est constitué. Lors d'un symposium organisé à Oxford, la Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society avait souhaité que je vienne pour présenter mon film «Bab'Aziz.» Cette occasion m'avait également permis de filmer James Morris, Stephen Hirtenstein et d'autres. J'avais d'ailleurs abordé James dans le jardin d'un des collèges d'Oxford, lui demandant s'il pouvait nous parler d'Ibn ʿArabi. Il m'avait répondu qu'il avait à peine une demi-heure devant lui avant d'intervenir au symposium par la suite. Et j'ai dû le filmer, sur le champ, sur place, dans ce jardin. Cependant, dès qu'il s'est mis à évoquer le Maître, le temps n'avait plus d'importance...

Chacun portait en lui un trésor, un amour secret pour Ibn ʿArabi. Il fallait trouver le moyen filmique de recueillir tout cet amour, de le rendre palpable et, surtout, de le transmettre discrètement aux spectateurs. Il était essentiel d'enjamber l'idée traditionnelle de l'interview et de l'intermédiaire, afin de faire du spectateur le témoin privilégié de cette rencontre. Comme une hospitalité, un désir, des retrouvailles avec le Maître. Ainsi, la narration doit être oubliée pour laisser aux gens le goût de l'approcher.

Moi-même, en voyageant à travers le film et en trainant ma valise, je n'étais que le fil rouge reliant tous ces récits, les transformant en une parole vivante et non explicative. Je devais donc devenir presque transparent, jouant à créer une tension, comme une flèche qui n'a de raison que d'avancer vers son but, même inconsciente, et ce but est : le Maître. C'est pour ça que j'ai créé cette fausse inquiétude, pour mon personnage, celle d'attendre la réponse du père pour vendre la maison familiale.

Il est vrai que lorsque j'avais réfléchi à la manière de réaliser un film sur Ibn ʿArabi, la question de la *amāna* s'était rapidement imposée à moi. En effet, il n'était pas question de produire un film qui trahirait la complexité et l'immensité de la vision du Maître. Je ne souhaitais pas représenter l'image classique d'un *murīd* en quête de son maître, d'où la distance que j'ai instaurée, dès le début du film, entre le personnage et la quête. Cela équivalait à dire : je n'entreprends pas ce voyage pour mon propre intérêt vis-à-vis d'Ibn ʿArabi, mais par fidélité à une promesse faite à mon père en rêve, car il était décédé depuis longtemps. Donc, je fais ce voyage sans être vraiment concerné par le sujet, afin de mieux réduire la distance entre le spectateur et la parole de ceux qui racontent le Maître. Cette approche a créé une tension telle que, lors des débats qui suivaient la projection du film, certains spectateurs m'avaient interrogé à propos de la vente de la maison familiale, et si j'avais enfin reçu une réponse de mon père !

Cela illustre parfaitement que le voyage que j'avais fait a atteint son but. Un petit motif se transforme en une grande quête, et l'homme à la valise rouge n'était qu'un prétexte, inconscient lui-même de l'importance de ce périple. Il représente, pour la majorité des spectateurs, leur propre image, permettant une progression, étape par étape, vers le centre, à l'instar de cercles concentriques qui se rapprochent progressivement de son milieu. Ces cercles évoquent la danse des derviches tourneurs...

Durant quatre années de voyages, j'avais filmé par fragments, tirant parti des «accidents» qui, à mes yeux, n'en étaient pas vraiment, mais plutôt des clins d'œil du *shaykh al-akbar*, comme, vers la fin du film, ce petit garçon qui monte les marches devant la mosquée de la Zitouna à Tunis et qui dit: «*bayt Allāh, bayt Allāh*,» «Maison de Dieu, maison de Dieu.» Cet enfant, sans se rendre compte, avait traversé le cadre en pleine prise de vue, puis avait continué son chemin, sans nous voir. Chaque fois, j'avais la sensation que le Maître nous envoyait des petits signes.

Parmi d'autres anecdotes, nous étions en train de filmer dans le tombeau d'Ibn ʿArabi à Damas, quand un groupe de Turkmènes, guidé par leur cheikh, a franchi la sécurité, poussé la porte et s'est assis autour du tombeau sans remarquer que nous étions en train de filmer. Ces petits clins d'œil, ces cadeaux fortuits, renforçaient la présence du *shaykh al-akbar*, qui nous accompagnait tout au long de ces quatre années de tournage. Bien souvent, nous filmions sans aucune autorisation, avec la crainte de voir notre matériel ou notre caméra confisqués. Nous n'avions ni le temps ni les moyens de nous occuper des démarches administratives, qui coûtaient cher, et c'était presque un tournage improvisé. J'avais choisi une petite caméra semi-professionnelle pour passer pour un simple touriste filmant à la sauvette à l'Alhambra ou à la Grande Mosquée de Cordoue, en Andalousie.

Nous avons également fait de belles rencontres, notamment celle du regretté Gabriele Mandel Khan. Nous lui avions proposé de le filmer à Milan, où il vivait, mais il avait préféré que les prises aient lieu à Istanbul, à Bursa et à Konya. Il avait même trouvé les financements nécessaires pour le voyage en Turquie ainsi que pour la prise en charge d'une petite équipe de tournage. Ce fut un véritable moment de grâce, où

la présence du *shaykh al-akbar* imprégnait chacune de nos discussions, nous accompagnant, pas à pas, et, peut-être, nous ouvrant bien des portes habituellement closes.

Aussi, grâce à l'intervention de Mahmut Erol Kiliç, ancien directeur du Musée des Arts Turcs et Islamiques d'Istanbul pendant trois ans, nous avions pu filmer au musée un samedi, jour où il est normalement fermé. Il était de passage à Istanbul et n'avait que cette matinée disponible pour parler d'Ibn ʿArabi. Nous tenions absolument à filmer le manuscrit des «*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*» en sa compagnie, et il a été profondément ému de tenir ce manuscrit rédigé de la main même du Maître. Il nous avait confié que c'était «la première fois qu'il le tenait dans ses mains!»

A Konya, grâce à Gabriele Mandel Khan, nous avions passé presque toute une nuit, seuls, dans le mausolée de Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi pour filmer en sa compagnie. Pour moi, ce fut un véritable voyage initiatique, d'autant plus que je devais être à la fois devant et derrière la caméra, ce qui, en fin de compte, s'était révélé la solution la plus simple. J'avais trouvé le moyen de sortir du commentaire en incarnant cette figure du voyageur. J'étais surtout dans l'impossibilité d'engager quelqu'un, vu les aléas du tournage et je n'avais que moi-même sous la main pour jouer le personnage jusqu'au bout pendant quatre ans. Tout au long du film, j'étais avec cette petite valise rouge, qui me rendait immédiatement identifiable même dans une grande foule, insufflant ainsi une part de fiction. C'est précisément cette zone intermédiaire entre réalité et fiction, qu'on pourrait appeler le *barzakh*, qui nous rapprochait le plus du Maître. J'ai également suivi Ibn ʿArabi qui recourait souvent aux rêves pour transcender le réel. C'était le même modèle que j'avais choisi pour porter mon récit. J'avais fait appel à mon père, mort depuis longtemps, pour me confier la *amāna*, déclenchant ainsi mon voyage par amour et fidélité envers lui.

Faire un film, c'est avant tout des rencontres. Pourtant, je n'avais pas filmé tous les gens que je souhaitais rencontrer. Certains n'ont pas répondu, d'autres ont décliné l'invitation, pensant qu'il était impossible de réaliser un film sur le Maître. Quelques-uns avaient été empêchés, et certains rendez-vous avaient été manqués. À force, j'avais fini par croire que le Maître lui-même choisissait ceux qui parleraient de lui...

Parfois, sa présence semblait nous guider, même dans les imprévus. Un jour, bloqués devant la mosquée de Tunis avec Denis Gril, nous n'avions pas pu obtenir l'autorisation de tournage à temps. Nous avons alors envoyé d'urgence quelqu'un au ministère. Par un hasard providentiel, il a croisé dans le couloir un homme qui, ayant écouté notre situation, nous a délivré l'autorisation sur-le-champ. C'était le ministre lui-même !

Les anecdotes sont innombrables, mais en voici une autre : à Damas, nous avions failli ne pas recevoir l'autorisation de tourner dans le tombeau du Maître. Bien que nous soyons co-produits par l'organisme du cinéma du ministère syrien de la culture, il nous avait fallu rencontrer le responsable en personne. Lors de cette rencontre, il nous avait expliqué qu'il avait «retenu» l'autorisation pour nous obliger à venir le voir, intrigué qu'il était par ces gens venus de loin pour réaliser un film sur Ibn ʿArabi. Il nous avait également révélé que son propre nom était Muhyi al-Din, et que son père avait été toute sa vie le serviteur du mausolée du Maître !

Il y avait eu même des choses qui ne devaient pas arriver et qui sont arrivées, comme le tournage au Maroc dans la ville de Fès. Trop cher et impossible d'avoir les autorisations. Je crois encore à l'intervention occulte du Maître. Armand Amar, le musicien de mon film «Bab'Aziz» avait fait appel à moi en urgence. Il devait faire l'ouverture du Festival des Musiques Sacrées de Fès, avec un oratorio intitulé : «Layla et Majnun.» Il avait eu un grand problème avec le spectacle et m'avait demandé de réécrire le livret et m'a supplié de jouer le conteur dans le spectacle qui devait être présenté à l'ouverture du festival à Fès, en présence de la reine du Maroc ! Et me voilà à Fès, malgré moi, comme convoqué. Encore une fois j'avais engagé un caméraman et nous voilà dans la ville en train de tourner, à la recherche de la mosquée où Ibn ʿArabi s'était installé un certain moment. Et très vite je me suis fait arrêter par la police. Heureusement, pour moi, que je devais présenter le spectacle le soir-même devant la reine, et c'est ainsi que j'étais tiré d'affaire !

Plus tard, Stephen Hirtenstein m'avait annoncé qu'il se rendait à New York où il avait organisé un symposium autour d'Ibn ʿArabi... à l'église Riverside! À ce moment-là, j'étais en train de tourner mon film «Shéhérazade ou la parole contre la mort,» dans le sud de la France. J'ai réussi à faire financer mon voyage avec une petite équipe, sur le budget de ce film, ce qui m'avait permis de filmer à New York !

Autre coïncidence, un ami à moi avait été nommé ambassadeur de Tunisie au Yémen. Je lui avais demandé s'il pouvait nous héberger à Sanaa, moi et mon caméraman. C'est à deux qu'on avait réalisé toute la séquence du Yémen, à travers le marché et la mosquée. Je trainais, à la fois, ma valise rouge devant la

caméra, et je m'occupais de la prise de son !

Comme dans le jardin d'un collège d'Oxford, il fallait réagir et improviser sur le champ, tout en préservant un lien avec l'ensemble du récit. Le temps nous était toujours compté, et la grande difficulté c'était la course derrière la lumière, surtout que nous n'avions pas employé une seule lampe d'éclairage pendant tout le tournage du film. Je m'étais débrouillé avec la lumière naturelle en prenant soin de bien positionner la caméra. Je me contentais de l'éclairage ambiant, qu'il s'agisse de la bibliothèque, où j'étais accompagné du grand poète, ou de la majestueuse mosquée de Sanaa. Parfois, nous arrêtions de filmer parce que nous étions rattrapés par la nuit.

La totalité des trois heures du film ont été réalisés avec une petite caméra semi-professionnelle et un enregistreur Zoom pour le son. Lorsque cela était possible et que je pouvais les payer, j'engageais un cameraman et un ingénieur de son. J'étais même parfois responsable soit du son, soit de la caméra. En ce qui concerne le reste, plutôt que d'être rémunéré pour mes interventions, que ce soit à la faculté de Grenade ou lors des présentations de «Bab'Aziz» dans des rencontres soufies, je demandais, en contrepartie, la prise en charge de deux personnes : quelqu'un pour l'image et une autre pour le son.

Puis il y a eu les contretemps. Nous avions à peine deux heures de lumière de jour pour filmer Pablo Beneito dans un cloître, et nous étions constamment dérangés par le bruit d'un marteau-piqueur dans les parages !

C'est dans de telles conditions que j'avais réalisé «Looking for Muhyiddin,» qui m'avait demandé quatre ans de bricolages. Je ne parle même pas du montage, ni de la valse des monteurs. J'ai fini par engager une assistante-monteuse, procédant moi-même au montage.

Une des grandes difficultés c'était les six langues dans le film : l'Arabe, le Turc, l'Espagnol, le Français, l'Anglais et l'Italien. Ces mélanges constituaient un véritable défi. De plus, il était encore plus compliqué de passer d'un endroit à l'autre, puisque j'avais filmé dans dix pays et plus de quinze villes. J'évoluais également avec un récit qui ne tenait pas compte de la réalité, passant de la ville de Cordoue à celle de Fès, puis à New York. Tout cela compliquait la logique apparente du travail de montage, c'était comme un jeu, à la fois visible et invisible, pour conserver la présence d'Ibn ʿArabi tout le long du film.

Enfin, en ce qui concerne la longueur du film, je me suis interrogé sur qui pourrait vouloir regarder un film de trois heures. Finalement, je me suis convaincu que le Maître méritait bien plus, et que ceux qui souhaitaient l'approcher devaient au moins faire l'effort de passer trois heures en sa compagnie. Plus tard, lors de la projection, j'ai réalisé que ces trois heures s'étaient écoulées rapidement. Certains spectateurs restaient dans la salle, comme si le film devait se poursuivre, pour eux, au-delà de la fin de la projection.

En résumé, «Looking for Muhyiddin» est un documentaire-fiction de trois heures qui propose une enquête sur les pas du *shaykh al-akbar.* Au cours de ce voyage presque initiatique, le personnage traverse une dizaine de pays et fait escale dans près de quinze villes, dont Murcie, où le maître est né en 1165, Cordoue, Grenade et Séville en Espagne, Fès au Maroc, Tunis en Tunisie, Istanbul, Konya et Bursa en Turquie, Damas en Syrie, Sanaa au Yémen, ainsi qu'à Londres et Oxford en Angleterre, sans oublier New York aux États-Unis et quelques villes en France.

Mais tout ce tournage et toutes ces paroles n'étaient pas faciles à marier. Il fallait trouver une autre manière de réaliser le montage. Ici, je dirais plutôt qu'il s'agit d'un tissage, car chacune de ces paroles représente un fil, une couleur de la pensée du Maître. Il était nécessaire de les entremêler, les entretisser pour créer l'image d'un tapis, c'est-à-dire d'un jardin.

Vous savez, dans la tradition orientale, le tapis fait voyager, à l'image du tapis volant d'Aladdin. Mais à l'origine, le tapis symbolise un jardin. Dans le désert, lorsque le nomade déroule un tapis, c'est un jardin qu'il déploie, en s'appuyant sur ce langage symbolique de la culture arabe.

J'ai donc tissé le film au lieu de le monter, la différence étant que les fils se superposent, s'entrecroisent, se mêlent, disparaissent et réapparaissent, tout en cherchant à rester clair. Je ne voulais pas d'un film qui s'adresse uniquement aux croyants, mais à tout un chacun, à tout le monde. Ce montage-tissage a conféré à «Looking for Muhyiddin» une fluidité telle que certains m'ont même dit qu'ils avaient le sentiment que les trois heures étaient encore trop courtes pour parler du Maître. C'est vrai, mon projet n'était pas de l'enfermer dans un film, mais d'en approcher l'essence. Il ne s'agissait pas d'asséner une vérité, mais de faire ressentir un certain goût que les soufis appellent *dhawk.*

Les soufis m'ont enseigné de ne pas chercher à toucher les choses par l'esprit, mais par le cœur. La représentation n'est pas celle du visible, mais de l'invisible. C'est pourquoi j'avais choisi pour mon film de revêtir le burnous de mon père, symbolisant ainsi la présence du Maître, sans recourir à un acteur qui prêterait son corps et son visage. En effet, l'écrit sera toujours un écran, une forme de jeu théâtral au mieux, mais il ne pourra jamais incarner le Maître.

Cette notion d'abstraction implique la présence de quelqu'un que l'on ne peut pas voir. Il est là, à l'écran, mais il transcende le décor, car il est devant nos yeux, nous sentons sa présence sans le voir. Ce sentiment, renforcé par cette abstraction, fait que sa présence dépasse celle d'une figure empruntée à un acteur ou à une autre personne. Ainsi, nous préservons la juste distance qui rend possible cette présence, tout en abolissant le jeu.

Une des questions qui m'avait touché le plus dans les débats après les projections était : est-ce que le Maître est vivant ? Où habite-il ? L'avez-vous rencontré ?

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Quelques mots sur Nacer Khemir

Nacer Khemir est un artiste multidisciplinaire tunisien reconnu pour son œuvre poétique et spirituelle. Né en 1948 à Korba, il se distingue comme cinéaste, écrivain, conteur et calligraphe, insufflant dans chacun de ses travaux une profonde sensibilité à la tradition soufie et à l'héritage culturel islamique. Ses films, tels que *Les Baliseurs du désert* (1984) et *Bab'Aziz* (2005), sont des explorations visuelles et narratives d'un univers où se mêlent mysticisme, quête intérieure et poésie. Son style singulier, souvent qualifié d'onirique, fait écho à l'esthétique des contes des Mille et Une Nuits et aux récits initiatiques.

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Filmographie

1972 - "Le Mulet." Court métrage, film d'animation.
1975 - "Histoire du Pays du Bon Dieu." Télévision français, Antenne 2.
1977 - "L'Ogresse." Télévision Suisse Romande.
1984 - "Les Baliseurs du Désert." Long métrage. Grand Prix du Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes-France. Palme d'Or du Festival Méditerranéen de la Mostra de Valence, Espagne. Prix de la première œuvre au Festival de Carthage, Tunisie.
1990 - "Le Collier Perdu de la Colombe." Long métrage. Prix Spécial du Jury, Festival de Locarno-Suisse. Grand Prix du Festival de Belfort - France. Prix Spécial du Jury, Festival francophone de Saint-Martin.
1991 - "À la Recherche des Mille et une Nuits." Téléfilm, Télévision Française, FR3.
2001 - "Contes Soufis." 15 téléfilms pour la télévision tunisienne.
2005 - "Bab'Aziz, le Prince qui Contemplait son Âme." Long métrage. Prix Henri Langlois, France. Golden Dagger, Muscat, Sultanat d'Oman.

2007 - “Voyage à Tunis.” Long métrage sur les pas du peintre Paul Klee, un film de Bruno Moll avec Nacer Khemir.
2008 - “L’Alphabet de Ma Mère.” Moyen métrage, Festival de Jeonju, Corée du Sud.
2010 - “En Passant, avec André Miquel.” Long métrage.
2011 - “Shéhérazade, ou la Parole Contre la Mort.” Long métrage.
2012 - “Looking for Muhyiddin.” Long métrage. Prix Barzaj, Espagne.
2013 - “Yasmina, ou les Soixante Noms de l’Amour.” Long métrage.
2014 - “Par Où Commencer?” Long métrage.
2017 - “Whispering Sands.” Long métrage. Best Film Award, Delhi International Film Festival.
2019 - “Loving Wallada.” Long métrage.
2022 - “Le Nuage Amoureux.” Court métrage, film d’animation.

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1975 - “L’Ogresse,” Edition Maspero puis Editions La Découverte, réédition Syros 2001.
1978 - “Le Soleil Emmuré,” Editions La Découverte.
1984 - “Le Conte des Conteurs,” Editions La Découverte, réédition Syros 1997 et 2001.
1985 - “Grand-père est Né,” Editions du Mascaret.
1986 - “Le Nuage Amoureux,” textes de Nazim Hikmet, Editions La Découverte.
1987 - “Chahrazade,” Editions du Mascaret.
1988 - “Le Chant de l’Amour et de la Mort du Cornette Christophe Rilke,” illustration du texte de R. M. Rilke, Editions La Découverte.
1995 - “Paroles d’Islam,” Albin Michel
1998 - “L’Alphabet des Sables,” Editions Syros, réédition en 2006.
2000 - “J’avale le Bébé du Voisin,” Editions Syros.
2000 - “Le Juge, la Mouche et la Grand-mère,” Edition Syros.
2001 - “Le chant des Génies,” Editions Actes Sud.
2002 - “Le livre des Djinns,” Editions Syros.
2003 - “Le Voyage de Hassan de Samarkand,” Editions Actes Sud.
2019 - “Le Livre des Marges,” Editions De L’œil.
2021 - “*Ichk*, ou les 60 noms de l’amour dans la langue Arabe,” auto-edition Nacer Khemir.

Expositions

1976 - Musée d’Arts Modernes de Paris.
1980 et 1987 - Beaubourg Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.
Entre 1992 et 1998 - “Les 60 Noms de l’Amour” à Grenade, Milan, Avignon, Genève etc.
Avril 2002 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisie.
Janvier 2003 - Musée de Clermont-Ferrand, France.
Mai 2003 - Palais Landzi, Florence, Italie.
2003 - Galerie Amar Farhat, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisie.
2005 - Festival International du Film d’Amour de Mons, Belgique.
2006 - Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innsbruck, Autriche.
2007 - Exposition peinture, Carthage,Tunisie.
2009 - Exposition “La Mort Bleue,” Palais Abdalya, Tunisie.
2011 - Exposition “Le Burnous,” Palais Abdalya, Tunisie.
2013 - Exposition peinture, Galerie de la Médina, Tunisie.
2023 - Musée de la Ville de Tunis, Palais Kheir el-Din, Tunisie.
2023 - Exposition “Ichk,” Galerie Alain Nadaud, Tunisie.

Heterography 2:

The Dot and the Saint

Michele Petrone and Eyas Alshayeb

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Centro Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate
fondazione Giorgio Cini onlus

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Note by the Editors

This heterography is the result of the collaboration between the calligrapher Eyas Alshayeb and the scholar Michele Petrone. Alshayeb selected a book by the contemporary Sufi master Shaykh ʿArif al-Khatib al-Hasani on Islamic calligraphy which contains some important Sufi theological reflections. The choice of this book has been guided by a personal, spiritual relation between the calligrapher and the author. Petrone translated key passages of this book for this heterography and helped Alshayeb to elaborate his ideas on Sufism and calligraphy.

This heterography offers traditional Islamic calligraphies, highlighting how they are structured from a theological perspective (see Petrone's translation) and from a technical perspective (see the lines/trajectories on which the proportions are based). Finally, Alshayeb drew a new and innovative calligraphy: a homage to Saint George, which is the logo of the Giorgio Cini Foundation, based on the isle of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. This transmutation has been inspired by the same trans-cultural and trans-religious figure of Saint George, who overlaps with the Islamic figure of Al-Khidr and with the Biblical prophet Elijah. This phenomenon, that includes also Saint George in certain contexts, is not just an artistic intuition created by Alshayeb, but something that exists in reality in several shared sacred sites around the Mediterranean.[1]

1. Karen Barkey et al., ed. Shared Sacred Sites (New York: New York Public Library, 2018). https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/sharedsacredsites/.

A Note on the Translated Text: the *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāmiyya* by Shaykh al-'Arīf al-Ḥasanī

This is a compendious text that collects commented quotations about the spiritual meaning of single letters of the Arabic alphabet. Authors quoted include not only seminal figures of Medieval Sufism, like Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240) and ʿAbd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1356), but also less known authors, at least to Western audience, like the *shiʿi* Rajab al-Bursi (d. 1411) or Shyakh al-ʿAlawi of Mostaghanem (d. 1934). Al-ʿArif's aim in compiling this work is to collect in a single place all the essential notions of the discipline called *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters, specifically for what concerns the so-called "separated letters" (*ḥurūf muqaṭṭaʿa*) that are found at the beginning of twenty-nine of the 114 *sūra*s of the Qurʾan.[2] The literature on this topic, especially from Sufi authors, is enormous. The interpretations vary from anagrams, to specific meanings of certain letters, based on their shape or their articulation point when pronounced.[3] An example of these various interpretations is in the so-called commentary of Ibn ʿAbbas (d. 687), referred to the opening letters of the second *sūra* (The Cow), *alif*, *lām*, and *mīm*:

> *Alif* stands for Allah, *lām* for the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl) and *mīm* for Muhammad. It is also said *alif* stands for Allahʾs blessings (*ʿalāʾuh*), *lām* for His kindness (*luṭfuhu*) and *mīm* for His dominion (*mulkuhu*). It is also said that *alif* stands for the beginning of the Name Allah, *lām* for the beginning of His Name the Kind (*al-Laṭīf*) and *mīm* for the beginning of His Name the Glorious (*al-Majīd*).[4]

Letters, according to Sufis, are eternal, as it is God's speech in the Qurʾan.[5] Therefore, the discussion of the science of letters is not simply grammatical, but essentially a form of spiritual interpretation of the cosmos as just an image of the *logos* that is the Qurʾan. This notion is at the basis of the selection made here, where much space is given to the dot as the source of all letters. The oft-quoted tradition, attributed to ʿAli b. Abi Talib, that every science is in the Qurʾan, and the whole Holy Book is in the Opening *sūra* (*al-Fātiḥa*), which is contained in the formula *biʾsmiʾLlāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, in the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. Finally, everything is in the dot under the letter *bāʾ*, with which the formula begins. Starting from this tradition, Shaykh al-ʿArif illustrates, through the words of ancient Sufi masters, how the dot is not only the measure of the letters, as evident in the calligraphies, but also the true metaphysical source of all of them. The passages here are focused essentially on these two aspects, and on the manifestation of the dot in two letters, the *alif* and the *wāw*. These are two of the three long vowels of Classical Arabic (the third being the *yāʾ*), with the peculiarity that they are ligated to the preceding letter, and not to the following one. A technical aspect that must be underlined is the realization of the letters through the pen (*qalam*). The form of the dot is defined by the dimension and the inclination of the pen, that, in its turn, determines all the letters. Each calligraphic style has specific characteristics, that derive primarily from the *qalam* and its use.

About the Meanings of the Dot[6]

Says the *shaykh* ʿAbd al-Karim al-Jili (may God have mercy of him): Know, may God help you with His Sacred Spirit, that the dot is the inner reality (*ḥaqīqa al-ḥaqāʾiq*) of the letters, in the same way as the Essence is the inner reality of Existence. Its relation with the letters is the same as the Divine Essence with the Attributes. So, as the Essence manifests itself (*tatajallā*) in the Attributes and the Names accoding to the determination of their realities (*ḥaqāʾiq*), so the Attribute "Giver of Blessings" (*al-Munʿim*) is manifested in the benefits, "The Avenger" (*al-Muntaqim*) in revenge. In the same way the dot is manifested in every letter according to the determination of the letter itself. When you know this you should understand that every letter is a dot after another; they are made by the dot and there is not a letter that is not a compound of dots. Without the dot there would be no letter, and, without the Essence, no Attributes would be manifested, and without you, there would be no letter. Verily, were there no Essence, the attributes would not be manifested and were there no you, there would be none of those realities, universal and particular, higher and lower, Divine or created, because you are the most noble viceregent (*khalīfa*). Know that the dot, in its tininess' has an enormous value, uncountable, because every letter and word derives from it, and it does not diminish, nor it undergoes any alteration regarding of the letters or the words that are or will be manifested in existence, except when ink is dissolved in the sea. This is why al-Khidr told Moses (peace be upon him) when the ways parted: Moses' intuitive knowledge (*ʿilm ladunnī*) was comaprable to al-Khidr's. They were both on the sea shore and a bird came and started digging a hole with his beak. Al-Khidr told Moses: our knowledge, compared to Gods' is like the hole this bird dug compared to the sea. Know that the dot has the highest rank in existence, as Divinity is among the exclusive characters of Essence, the supreme rank among letters is one of the exclusive characteristics of the dot. It holds the most noble rank among them. [. . .] All the letters are the locus of manifestation for the dot, so that the act of producing the letters as a traced sign belongs to the dot. To God belong the highest metaphors! Know that to the inner aspects of the dot belong diverse dispositions that are the inner realities of the letters, of the words, and of the meanings existentiated as a whole. So the dot is a methaphor of those realities, like the ink for the written letters. That alludes to the activities of the Divine Essence: all existentiated beings are determined by an activity of the Essence and, due to this, the existence of all beings is a Divine Self-Disclosure (*tajallī*). The relation between the letters and the dot is the same as the one the Divine Attributes have with with the Essence. In the same way, words, that are made of letters, are like existentiated beings, and their relative meanings are like the Divine self-disclosure in created beings, without any form of incarnation: as the meaning is not incorporated in single letters, the same happens with Divine self-disclosure in His creatures; here there is no form of incarnation, and God is too High for this! Know that, even if there are several dots in one letter, they share the same inner reality, in the same way as you can count single human beings, but the human nature remains one in itself. Know also that the dot occurs twenty-two times in the letters of the alphabet [. . .]. If you multiply this number by the forms in which they occur on the letters (one, two or three), you get sixtysix, that corresponds to the numerical value of the word Allah. The essence of this is that the places of manifestation of the Divine Essence in existence are [divided in] three levels: the Names, the Attributes and the Actions. The totality is Allah, may He be exalted. So understand! Know, may God Most High help you, that the dot is, metaphorically, the spirit, and the letter is the body. So, when you write a single letter and put its dots over it, you are insufflating in it the spirit, making its inner nature complete. Know that the unification (*tawḥīd*) of the dot is a proof of God's unicity (*aḥadiyya*) in existence, as He is pure absolute existence (*maḥḍ al-wujūd muṭlaq*), as there is no other existent than Him. The duplication of the dot is a proof that, considering the whole manifested existence, God Most High has two places of manifestation: the first is real and eternal, and corresponds to His self disclosure in His Names and attributes; the second one is created and temporal (*ḥādith*) and it corresponds to His self disclosure in His created beings, without incarnation or fusion, but as it is in His own right. This is the reason why a second dot is manifested, alluding to the creation (*waḍʿ*) of these realities. The three dots indicate the Divine self-disclosures in all places of manifestation, that are divided in three categories:

1. self-disclosures of the Essence, which are the Divine Names that do not bring a descriptive meaning, like the One (*al-Aḥad*), the Everlasting (*al-Ṣamad*) and others among the Names of the Essence.
2. self-disclosures of the Attributes, that correspond to the rest of the Names, that bring a descriptive meaning, like the Living (*al-Ḥayy*) or the Potent (*al-Qādir*).

3. self-disclosures of the Acts, that consist in the manifestation of His Attributes in His creation and His Acts, like the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) and the Provider (*al-Rāziq*).[7]

On the Meaning of Letter *alif*

Ibn ʿArabi was asked whether the *alif* was a letter of the alphabet or not. He answered: the *alif* is not among the letters for those who smelled the perfume of inner realities (*ḥaqāʾiq*); nonetheless, the common people call it a letter, when the one who has reached spiritual realization (*muḥaqqiq*) says that it is a letter, it does it metaphorically and as a figure of speeech.

The *alif* of the Essence is transcendent. "Is there for you among created beings a spring and a barren land?" He replied: "Nothing else is united to me (*altafānī*) as I am a perpetuating letter (*taʾbīd*) joined with everlasting eternity" I am the feeble servant, the chosen one; I am from the Power of my Sultan, form His Might.

Ibn ʿArabi continues saying: the station of the *alif* is where the Name Allah is united (*jamʿ*) to the other Names. It has the attribute of self-subsistency (*qayyūmiyya*) and Names of action. [. . .] The Greatest Master Ibn al-ʿArabi says: the *alif* flows in the articulation points of all letters, in the same way as the the unit flows in all the degrees of the numbers… it is what keeps the letters straight (*qayyim*), and it is trascendent, without any comparison. [. . .] Know that the manifestation of the *alif* from the dot has no cause, as the dot, like a drop of sweat, runs overs its cheek, writing good tidings. The original *alif* is not a pen stroke or its similes. It is, indeed, the result of the bleeding of the dot from its original center. When the dot perspires, from it come the *alif*, not in any other way. Saying that it is not the result of a pen stroke means that there is no existentiation, no extention, no self-subsistence [in the *alif*]. Its transcendence is manifested when it is found in all the other letters, in their curves, upstroke and the other shapes they take. The *alif* in its essence is transcendent, but in its attributes it is immanent, resembling in this the other letters.[8]

On the Meaning of the Letter *wāw*

Your *Wāw* is more saint than my existence (*wujūdī*), and rarer It is the perfectioning spirit, the secret of the hexagon Until its source appears, calles the Sacred House Its home is the the Highets Lote-tree, with its roots in ourselves.[9]

The speaking image of the *wāw* is like this واو. The first *waw* is [Divine] Ipseity (*huwiyya*), where the *hāʾ* [before the *wāw*] is incorporated as the number five in the six, so it is independent from it. The other *wāw* is the *wāw* of the creations (*al-kawn*) and it is manifested in it and in the Creator (*al-Mukawwin*) as well, as the *wāw* of the Ipseity. This second *wāw* is also the intermediary between the Divine Ipseity and creation, being hidden in the command "Be!" (*kun*). Were it manifested in the command giving existence to the creation, the latter would have been able to contemplate Him (*al-Huwa*) directly: this would be the obliteration of the inner reality of Him, which does not allow contemplation, as Him is the Absolutely Concealed.[10]

2. See Keyth Massey, "Mysterious Letters," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 471–76.

3. For a synthetic, yet complete, introduction to the discipline see Denis Gril, "La science des lettres," in *Les illuminations de La Mecque*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz and William C. Chittick, La Bibliothèque de l'Islam (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), 165–282.

4. Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās: Great Commentaries of the Holy Qurʾan 2, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008), 5.

5. al-Shaykh ʿArīf ʿĀrif al-Khaṭīb al-Ḥasanī al-Shāfiʿī al-Tījānī, *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāmiyya fī asrār ḥurūf al-Qur'ān al-iḥsāniyya* (*Splendours of the lights of the imams about the secrets of the most noble letters of the Qur'an*), (Bayrūt: Dar Medad, 2016), 6–7.

6. The following are excerpts from the *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāniyya*, translated by Michele Petrone.

7. *Bawāriq*, 11–13, passim.

8. *Bawāriq*, 17.

9. *Bawāriq*, 181.

10. *Bawāriq*, 182.

Fig. 1. A Basmala in Dīwānī style according to the Ottoman calligraphic school of Istanbul. Made according to the manual respecting the golden proportions.

Fig. 2. A Basmala in Muḥaqqaq style according to the Baghdad calligraphic school. Made according to the golden ratio proportions.

Fig. 3. Calligraphic exercise of the letter *bā'* according to the proper proportions, also including the calligraphic trajectories of the *bā'* with different incidences.

Fig. 4. Calligraphic composition of the verse وجعلناكم شعوبا وقبائل لتعارفوا (We have appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another, Qur. 49:13).

Fig. 5. Calligraphic composition of the verse وقل رب اغفر وارحم وانت خير الراحمين (And say: My Lord, forgive and have mercy, for Thou art the best of the merciful, Qur. 23: 118).

Fig. 6. Calligraphy exercise in thuluth style of the letter *bā'* and various incidences of writing with other letters. Calligraphic trajectories of the word *bism* and the word *sirr*.

This **St. George** calligraphy is a homage to the saint in his most famous representation, that of a knight defeating the dragon. This image symbolizes the effort that human beings constantly make to fight the temptations of the *nafs*, the lower self, in its primordial nature symbolized by the dragon, and the spear symbolizing the instant of defeat. The figure of the horse includes a verse from the *sūra* of the Cave (*al-Kahf*, 18: 65), where the Qurʾan refers to al-Khidr, the mysterious figure whom Moses met at the "confluence of the two seas" of life and death. The verse reads: فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِندِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِن لَّدُنَّا عِلْمًا, meaning "Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us."[11] The figure of the dragon contains verses 7 and 8 of *sūra* of the Sun (*al-Shams*, 91:7-8) that refers to *al-nafs*, the lower soul that the Sufi must discipline through spiritual practice. It reads وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا, meaning "By the soul, and That which shaped it and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing![12] The dragon is representing the *nafs* that the Sufi is killing with the practice and the acquisition of knowledge, thanks to God's favor, the He bestows on his servants.

11. Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran*, Reissued, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 131.
12. Arberry, *The Koran*, 277.

Fig. 7. In the figure of the horse is written verse 65 of the *sūra* of the Cavern: فوجدا عبدا من عبادنا اتيناه رحمة من عندنا وعلمناه من لدنا علما (Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us). In the dragon are verses 91: 7–8, referring to the nafs: ونفس وما سواها فالهمها فجورها وتقواها (By the soul, and That which shaped it, and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing!). In the cloak it is written القديس جورجس الصوفي ابن وقته (Saint George. The Sufi is son of His instant).

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A few words about Michele Petrone and Eyas Alshayeb

Michele Petrone is post-doc fellow at the University of Napoli L'Orientale. His main research focus is the history of texts and their circulation, both in manuscript and printed form. His work on Sufism has been focused on the work of Ibn ʿArabi and on the Tijani Sufi order.
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The artist Eyas Alshayeb, born in the heart of Amman in the 1980s, was influenced from childhood by a family environment where art, poetry, and literature were seen as essential elements of daily life. He was drawn to the art of calligraphy through the passion and curiosity that led him, during his adolescence, to learn this wonderful art in the shop of a local calligraphy master. He later explored various calligraphy schools, such as the Egyptian school of master Khudair Bursaaidi. From the age of 15, he studied with some of the most important figures in Middle Eastern Arabic calligraphy, drawing from each of them the most sophisticated calligraphic techniques of the main Ottoman, Baghdad, and Cairo schools. The city of Istanbul has always been a destination for his travels, as it is considered the homeland of Islamic calligraphy. There, he followed the traces and works of the greatest calligraphy masters in history and learned new techniques and skills from contemporary masters. He has been living in Milan (Italy) since 1998, where he studied graphic arts.

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