

Chapter 20: Ibn `Arabi

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Life And Works

A fair and critical account of the life and thought of Shaikh Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi (or Ibn 'Arabi as he was known in the East) presents certain difficulties. Biographical material is not lacking; he is given great prominence in many of the biographical and historical books, both in Arabic and Persian. Some whole books and chapters of books have been written in defence of his orthodoxy or against his alleged heterodoxy. Many of his own works, particularly the *Futuhat*, *Risalat al-Quds*, and the "Memorandum" in which he enumerates his works and describes the conditions under which they were written, throw abundant light on some of the obscure aspects of his life as a man, and above all as an eminent Sufi and Sufi author.

But the account we derive from all these various sources is conflicting, and the real problem that faces us lies in drawing a true picture of his personality, his pattern of thought, and his works, based on such account. Yet as far as his personal life and his mental and spiritual make-up are concerned, our best source should be his own works to which we have already referred; for in such works we have first-hand information about his mental and spiritual progress.

There are also abundant details concerning his early masters in the Sufi Path, his personal contacts with the men and women he encountered on his vast travels. Here and there we come across a vivid description of his mystical experiences, visions, and dreams. Without the help of such material which has hitherto been neglected, Ibn 'Arabi's true personality, both as a thinker and a mystic, would remain considerably unknown to us.

The task is by no means easy. It means hunting through his voluminous *Futuhat* and other works for the biographical details we have just described. An outline of the main historical facts of his life is easy enough to give, but it would be no complete or scientific biography in the full sense of the word.

Ibn 'Arabi was born at Murcia – South-east of Spain – on the 17th of Ramadan 560/28th of July 1165.

His *nisbah* – al-Hatimi al-Ta'i – shows that he was a descendant of the ancient Arab tribe of Tayy – a fact which proves that Muslim mysticism was not the exclusive heritage of the Persian mind as some scholars maintain. He came from a family well known for their piety. His father and two of his uncles were Sufis of some renown.

He received his early education at Seville which was a great centre of learning at the time. There he remained for thirty years studying under some of the great scholars of that city such as Abu Bakr b. Khalaf, Ibn Zarqun, and Abi Muhammad 'Abd al-Haqq al-Ishbili. At Seville he also met a number of his early spiritual masters such as Yusuf b. Khalaf al-Qumi who was a personal disciple of Shaikh Abu Madyan,¹ and Salih al-'Adawi whom he describes as a perfect ascetic. He refers to such men in terms of admiration and gratitude in his *Futuhat* and *Risalat al-Quds*, and acknowledges, his debt to them for the initiation he had received from them into the Path of Sufism.

While making Seville his permanent place of residence, he travelled widely throughout Spain and Maghrib establishing wherever he went fresh relations with eminent Sufis and other men of learning. He visited Cordova, while still a lad, and made acquaintance with Ibn Rushd, the philosopher, who was then the judge of the city.²

In 590/1194 he visited Fez and Morocco. At the age of 38, i.e., in 589/1193, he set out for the East during the reign of Ya`qub b. Yusuf b. 'Abd al-Mu'min, the Sultan of Africa and Andalusia. His apparent intention was to perform his pilgrimage, but his real aim was perhaps to seek settlement in another country far away from the very much troubled West. The political and religious atmosphere there was stifling, and men like Ibn 'Arabi were looked upon with suspicion both by the narrow-minded theologians and the ruling monarchs. The Sultans of the Muwahhids and Murabits feared them for the influence they had over their followers and the possible danger of using these followers for political purposes as was the case with Abu al-Qasim b. Qasi, head of the Muridin, who was killed in 546/1151.

The Malikite theologians of the West were most intolerant towards the new school of thought that was beginning to take shape at the time. Even al-Ghazali's teaching was rejected and his books committed to the flames. The East, on the other hand, was more tolerant and more ready to accept new ideas and movements. Yet not the whole of the East can be said to be so, for when Ibn 'Arabi visited Egypt in 598/1201, he was ill-received by some of its people and an attempt was made on his life.

After leaving Egypt he travelled far and wide throughout the Middle East visiting Jerusalem, Mecca (where he studied and taught Hadith for a time), the Hijaz, Baghdad, Aleppo, and Asia Minor. He finally settled down in Damascus until he died on the 28th of Rabi al-Thani 638/17th of November 1240. He was buried in Mount Qasiyun in the private sepulchre of Qadi Muhyi al-Din b. al-Dhaki.³

Ibn 'Arabi is one of the most prolific authors in Muslim history. He is adequately described by Brockelmann ⁴ as a writer of colossal fecundity. There are at least 140 extant works which bear his name, varying from short treatises of some few pages to voluminous books like the *Futuhat*. The exact

number of his works is uncertain. Sha`rani gives the figure of 400, [5](#) and the Persian author Jami, the much exaggerated figure of 500. [6](#) Muhammad Rajab Hilmi, in a book entitled *al-Burhan al-Azhar fi Manaqib al-Shaikh al-Akbar*, enumerates 284 books and tracts.

In the "Memorandum" which Ibn 'Arabi himself drew up in the year 632/1234, six years before his death, he gave the titles of 251 of his writings and said that that was as far as he could remember. The writing of the "Memorandum" has its significance. It provides a written evidence against anyone who might attempt to forge books in his name; and there must have been many amongst his enemies in the East who made such attempts.

To establish the identity and authenticity of all the works that have been ascribed to him is a task which has not been undertaken by any scholar yet. But we know within limits the genuineness of most of his major works, although doubt might arise with regard to certain parts of their contents. If what Sha`rani says about the *Futuhāt* is true, it would make us wonder how much of this most important book is genuinely Ibn 'Arabi's and how much of it is foisted upon him. [7](#)

When he tried to summarize the *Futuhāt*, Sha`rani said, he came across certain passages which he thought were in conflict with the established opinions of the orthodox Muslims. He omitted them after some hesitation. One day, he was discussing the matter with Shaikh Shams al-Din al-Madani (d. 955/1648) who produced a copy of the *Futuhāt* which had been collated with Ibn 'Arabi's own MS. of the book at Quniyah. On reading it he discovered that it contained none of the passages which he had omitted. This convinced him, he goes on to say, that the copies of the *Futuhāt* which were in current use in Egypt in his time contained parts which had been foisted upon the author as done in the case of the *Fusus* and other works. [8](#)

This may very well have been the case, but having not yet read the Quniyah MS. of the *Futuhāt* which is still extant, one is unable to say how it compares with the printed texts of our time. A critical edition of the book based on the Quniyah MS. is of utmost importance. Indeed it might considerably alter our knowledge of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical philosophy.

What seems more certain is that many works or parts of works were written by later disciples of Ibn 'Arabi's school and attributed to him; and many others were extracted from his larger works and given independent titles. All these exhibit the same strain of thought and technique which characterize his genuine works. Such facts account, partly at least, for the enormous number of works which are usually attributed to him.

Although his output was mainly in the field of Sufism, his writings seem to have covered the entire range of Muslim scholarship. He wrote on the theory and practice of Sufism, Hadith, Qur'anic exegesis, the biography of the Prophet, philosophy, literature, including Sufi poetry, and natural sciences. In dealing with these diverse subjects he never lost sight of mysticism. We often see some aspects of his mystical system coming into prominence while dealing with a theological, juristic, or even scientific problem. His

mystical ideas are imperceptibly woven into his writings on other sciences and make it all the more difficult to understand him from a mixed and inconsistent terminology.

The dates of only ten of his works are definitely known, but we can tell, within limits, whether a work belongs to his early life in Spain and al-Maghrib, or, to his later life in the East. With a few exceptions, most of his important works were written after he had left his native land, principally at Mecca and Damascus; and his maturest works like *Futuhāt*, the *Fusus*, and the *Tanazzulat* were written during the last thirty years of his life.

His earlier works, on the other hand, are more of the nature of monographs written on single topics and show no sign of a comprehensive philosophical system. It seems that it is his contact with the resources and: men of the East that gave his theosophical speculations their wide range, and his mystical system of philosophy its finality.

His *opus magnum*, as far as mystical philosophy is concerned, is his celebrated *Fusus al-Hikam* (Gems of Philosophy or Bezels of Wisdom) which he finished at Damascus in 628/1230, ten years before his death. The rudiments of this philosophy are to be found scattered throughout his monumental *Futuhāt* which he started at Mecca in 598/1201 and finished about 635/1237. The general theme of the *Fusus* was foreshadowed in the *Futuhāt* in more places than one, and more particularly in Vol. II, pp. 357–77.

Pattern Of Thought And Style

The extraordinary complexity of Ibn 'Arabi's personality is a sufficient explanation of the complexity of the manner of his thinking and his style of writing. It is true that sometimes he is clear and straightforward, but more often – particularly when he plunges into metaphysical speculations – his style becomes twisted and baffling, and his ideas almost intractable. The difficulty of understanding him sometimes can even be felt by scholars who are well acquainted with the characteristic aspect of his thought. It is not so much what he intends to say as the way in which he actually says it that constitutes the real difficulty.

He has an impossible problem to solve, viz., to reconcile a pantheistic theory of the nature of reality with the monotheistic doctrine of Islam. His loyalty to both was equal, and indeed he saw no contradiction in holding that the God of Islam is identical with the One who is the essence and ultimate ground of all things. He was a pious ascetic and a mystic, besides being a scholar of Muslim Law, theology, and philosophy. His writings are a curious blend of all these subjects.

He is for ever trying either to interpret the whole fabric of the teaching of Islam in the light of his pantheistic theory of the unity of all being, or to find justification for this theory in some Islamic texts. The two methods go hand in hand, with two different languages, i. e., the esoteric language of mysticism and the exoteric language of religion, used concurrently. Logically speaking, Islam is irreconcilable with any form of pantheism, but Ibn 'Arabi finds in the mystic experience a higher synthesis in which Allah and the pantheistic One are reconciled.

Interpretation within reasonable limits is justifiable, but with Ibn 'Arabi it is a dangerous means of converting Islam into pantheism or vice versa. This is most apparent in the *Fusus*, and to a certain extent in the *Futuhat*, where the Qur'anic text and traditions of the Prophet are explained mystically or rather pantheistically. Furthermore, while he is thus occupied with eliciting from the Qur'anic text his own ideas, he gathers round the subject in hand material drawn from all sources and brings it all into the range of his meditation. This accounts for the very extensive and inconsistent vocabulary which makes his writings almost unintelligible.

Whenever he is challenged or he thinks he would be challenged about the meaning of a certain statement, he at once brings forth another meaning which would convince the challenger. He was asked what he meant by saying:

“O Thou who seest me, while I see not Thee, How oft I see Him, while He sees not me!”

He replied at once, making the following additions which completely altered the original sense, by saying.

“O Thou who seest me ever prone to sin, While Thee I see not willing to upbraid: How oft I see Him grant His grace's aid While He sees me not seeking grace to win.”⁹

Similarly, when his contemporaries read his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, which is supposed to be written on divine love, they could see in the *Diwan* nothing but erotic poems describing beautiful women, lovely scenes of nature and ordinary human passions. They accused the Shaikh of being in love with Shaikh Makin al-Din's daughter whose physical and moral qualities he describes in the introduction of the *Diwan*.

On hearing this he wrote a commentary on the work explaining it all allegorically. He did not deny that he loved al-Nizam, the beautiful daughter of Makin al-Din. What he denied was that he loved her in the ordinary sense of human love. For him she was only a symbol, a form, of the all-pervading beauty which manifests itself in the infinite variety of things.

“Every name I mention,” he says, “refers to her; and every dwelling I weep at is her dwelling ... Yet the words of my verses are nothing but signs for the spiritual realities which descend upon my heart. May God guard the reader of this *Diwan* against entertaining thoughts which do not become men with noble souls and lofty aspirations, for the hearts of such men are only occupied with heavenly things.”¹⁰

It is not improbable that Ibn 'Arabi made a deliberate effort to complicate the style, as Professor E. G. Browne remarks, in order to conceal his ideas from the narrow-minded orthodox and the uninitiated. He certainly succeeded, partly at least, in covering his pantheistic ideas with an apparel of Qur'anic texts and Prophetic traditions – a fact which is largely responsible for the controversy which raged throughout the Muslim world regarding his orthodoxy. But it is also possible, as we have already remarked, that he was equally convinced of the truth of Islam and of his own philosophical system which was verified by

his mystical experience. In this case there is no need to talk about concealment of ideas or intentional complexity of style.

It would be a mistake to judge Ibn 'Arabi by the ordinary canons of logic. He is undoubtedly a thinker and founder of a school of thought, but he is pre-eminently a mystic. His mystical philosophy, therefore, represents the union of thought and emotion in the highest degree. It is a curious blend of reasoned truths and intuitive knowledge. He is also a man of colossal imagination. His dialectical reasoning is never free from forceful imagery and mystic emotions. In fact, his thought seems to be working through his imagination all the time. He dreams what he thinks, yet there is a deep under-current of reasoning running through.

He does not always prove his ideas with a formal dialectic, but refers his readers to mystic intuition and imagination as the final proof of their validity. The world of imagination for him is a real world; perhaps even more real than the external world of concrete objects. It is a world in which true knowledge of things can be obtained. His own imagination was as active in his dreams as in his waking life.

He tells us the dates when and the places where he had the visions, in which he saw prophets and saints and discoursed with them; and others in which a whole book like the *Fusus* was handed to him by the Prophet Muhammad who bade him "take it and go forth with it to people that they may make use thereof."¹¹ He calls this an act of revelation or inspiration and claims that many of his books were so inspired.¹²

"All that I put down in my books," he says, "is not the result of thinking or discursive reasoning. It is communicated to me through the breathing of the angel of revelation in my heart."¹³ "All that I have written and what I am writing now is dictated to me through the breathing of the divine spirit into my spirit. This is my privilege as an heir not as an independent source; for the breathing of the spirit is a degree lower than the verbal inspiration."¹⁴

Such claims point to a supernatural or supermental source by which Ibn 'Arabi's writings were inspired. Yet in discussing the problem of revelation (*kashf* and *wahi*) in general, he emphatically denies all outside supernatural agents, and regards revelation as something which springs from the nature of man. Here are his own words:

"So, if any man of revelation should behold an object revealing to him gnosis which he did not have before, or giving him something of which he had no possession, this 'object' is his own *'ain* (essence) and naught besides. Thus from the tree of his 'self' he gathers the fruit of his own knowledge, just as the image of him who stands before a polished mirror is no other than himself."¹⁵

Revelation, therefore, is an activity of man's, soul, when all its spiritual powers are summoned and directed towards production. It is not due to an external agent, neither is it the work of the mind as we usually know it. What is sometimes seen as an "object" revealing knowledge to an inspired man is nothing but a projection of his own "self."

Ibn 'Arabi is quite consistent with himself when he denies an outside source of divine inspiration, for man, according to him, like everything else, is in one sense divine. So there is no need to assume a duality of a divine revealer and a human receiver of knowledge.

Another very important aspect of his thought is its digressive character. He has offered the world a system of mystical philosophy, but nowhere in his books can we find this system explained as a whole or with any appreciable degree of unity or cohesion. He goes on from one subject to another with no apparent logical connection, pouring out details which he draws from every conceivable source. His philosophical ideas are widely spread among this mass of irrelevant material and one has to pick them up and piece them together.

That he has a definite system of mystical philosophy is a fact beyond doubt. It is hinted at in every page in the *Fusus* and in many parts of the *Futuhat*; but the system as a complete whole is to be found in neither. It is extraordinary that he admits that he has intentionally concealed his special theory by scattering its component parts throughout his books and left the task of assembling it to the intelligent reader. Speaking of the doctrine of the superelect (by which he means the doctrine of the Unity of all Being), he says:

“I have never treated it as a single subject on account of its abstruseness, but dispersed it throughout the chapters of my book (the *Futuhat*). It is there complete but diffused, as I have already said. The intelligent reader who understands it will be able to recognize it and distinguish it from any other doctrine. It is the ultimate truth beyond which there is nothing to obtain.”¹⁶

The third aspect of his thought is its eclectic character. Although he may rightly claim to have a philosophy of religion of his own, many of the component elements of this philosophy are derived from Islamic as well as non-Islamic sources. He had before him the enormous wealth of Muslim sciences as well as the treasures of Greek thought which were transmitted through Muslim philosophers and theologians. In addition, he was thoroughly familiar with the literature of earlier Sufis.

From all these sources he borrowed whatever was pertinent to his system; and with his special technique of interpretation he brought whatever he borrowed into line with his own ideas. He read into the technical terms of traditional philosophy and theology – as he did with the Qur'anic terms – totally different meanings. He borrowed from Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo, and the Neo-Platonists terms of which he found equivalents in the Qur'an or in the writings of the Sufis and Scholastic Theologians. All were used for the construction and defence of his own philosophy from which he never wavered.

Controversy About His Orthodoxy

There has never been in the whole history of Islam another man whose faith has been so much in question. The controversy over Ibn 'Arabi's orthodoxy spread far and wide, and occupied the minds of the Muslims for centuries. We may even say that some traces of it are still to be found. Muslim scholars

in the past were not concerned with his philosophy or mysticism as such, but with how far his philosophical and mystical ideas were in harmony or disharmony with the established dogmas of Islam. Instead of studying him objectively and impartially, and putting him in the place he deserves in the general frame of Muslim history, they spent so much time and energy in trying to prove or disprove his orthodoxy. No work could have been more futile and unrewarding.

The difference of opinion on this subject is enormous. By some Ibn 'Arabi is considered to be one of the greatest figures of Islam as an author and a Sufi, while others regard him as a heretic and impostor. His peculiar style perhaps is largely responsible for this. The ambiguity of his language and complexity of his thoughts render his ideas almost intractable, particularly to those who are not familiar with his intricate ways of expression. He is a writer who pays more attention to ideas and subtle shades of mystical feelings than to words. We must, therefore, attempt to grasp the ideas which lie hidden beneath the surface of his conventional terminology. Again, we must not forget that he is a mystic who expresses his ineffable experience – as most mystics do – in enigmatic language. Enigmas are hard to fathom, but they are the external expression of the feelings that lie deep in the heart of the mystic.

People who read Ibn 'Arabi's books with their eyes fixed on the words misunderstand him and misjudge him. It is these who usually charge him with infidelity (*kufr*) or at least with heresy. Others who grasp his real intention uphold him as a great mystic and a man of God. A third class suspends their judgment on him on the ground that he spoke in a language which is far beyond their ken. They have nothing to say against his moral or religious life, for this, they hold, was beyond reproach.

It seems that the controversy about his religious beliefs started when a certain Jamal al-Din b. al-Khayyat from the Yemen made an appeal to the *'ulama'* of different parts of the Muslim world asking them to give their opinion on Ibn 'Arabi to whom he attributed what Firuzabadi describes as heretical beliefs and doctrines which are contrary to the consensus of the Muslim community.

The reaction caused by the appeal was extraordinarily varied. Some writers condemned Ibn 'Arabi right out; others defended him with great zeal. Of this latter class we may mention Firuzabadi, Siraj al-Din al-Makhzumi, al-Siraj al-Balqini, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, Qutb al-Din al-Hamawi, al-Qutb al-Shirazi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and many others. Both Makhzumi and Suyuti wrote books on the subject. They could see no fault with Ibn 'Arabi except that he was misunderstood by people who were not of his spiritual rank.

Suyuti puts him in a rank higher than that of Junaid when he says that he was the instructor of the gnostics (*'arifin*) while Junaid was the instructor of the initiates (*muridin*). All these men are unanimous in according to Ibn 'Arabi the highest place both in learning and spiritual leadership. They recognize in his writings a perfect balance between *Shari'ah* (religious Law) and *Haqiqah* (the true spirit of the Law), or between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of Islam.

The greatest opposition appeared in the eighth and ninth/fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when an

open war was declared against speculative Sufism in general and that of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn al-Farid in particular. The Hanbalite Ibn Taimiyyah (d. 728/ 1328), with his bitter tongue and uncompromising attitude towards the Sufis, led the attack. He put these two great mystics in the same category with Hallaj, Qunawi, Ibn Sab'in, Tilimsani, and Kirmani as men who believed in incarnation and unification. In this respect, he said, they were even worse than the Christians and the extreme Shi'ites.¹⁷

He does not even distinguish between the mystical ravings of Hallaj, the deeply emotional utterances of Ibn al-Farid, the cold-blooded and almost materialistic pantheism of Tilimsani, and the monistic theology of Ibn 'Arabi. They were all guilty of the abominable doctrines of incarnationism and pantheism.

Curiously enough, he was less violent in his criticism of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine which, he said, was nearer Islam than any of the others.

By far the worst enemy of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn al-Farid and most insolent towards them was Burhan al-Din Ibrahim al-Biqā'i (d. 858/1454). He devoted two complete books to the refutation of their doctrines, not sparing even their personal characters. In one of these books entitled *Tanbih al-Ghabi 'ala Takfir Ibn 'Arabi* ¹⁸ (Drawing the Attention of the Ignorant to the Infidelity of Ibn 'Arabi) he says:

“He deceived the true believers by pretending to be one of them. He made his stand on the ground of their beliefs; but gradually dragged them into narrow corners, and led them by seduction to places where perplexing questions are lurking. He is the greatest artist in confusing people; quotes authentic traditions of the Prophet, then twists them around in strange and mysterious ways. Thus, he leads his misguided followers to his ultimate objective which is the complete overthrowing of all religion and religious beliefs. The upholders of such doctrines hide themselves behind an outward appearance of Muslim ritual such as prayer and fasting. They are in fact atheists in the cloaks of monks and ascetics, and veritable heretics under the name of Sufis.”¹⁹

These accusations are unjust as they are unfounded. Ibn 'Arabi, it is true, does interpret the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions in an esoteric manner, and he is not the first or the last Sufi to do it, but his ultimate aim is never the abandonment of religious beliefs and practices as Biqā'i maintains. On the contrary, he did his utmost to save Islam which he understood in his own way. The charge of pretence and hypocrisy is contradicted by the bold and fearless language in which Ibn 'Arabi chooses to express himself. He does not pretend to be a Muslim in order to please or avoid the wrath of true believers to whom Biqā'i refers.

He believes that Islam which preaches the principle of the unity of God could be squared with his doctrine of the unity of all Being, and this he openly declares in the strongest terms. He may have deceived himself or expressed the mystical union with God in terms of the metaphysical theory of the unity between God and the phenomenal world, but he certainly tried to deceive no one.

In contrast to Biqā'i's terrible accusations, we should conclude by citing the words of Balqini who had the highest opinion of Ibn 'Arabi. He says

“You should take care not to deny anything that Shaikh Muhyi al-Din has said, when he – may God have mercy upon him – plunged deep into the sea of gnosis and the verification of truths, mentioned towards the end of his life in the *Fusus*, the *Futuhat*, and the *Tanazzulat* – things which are fully understood only by people of his rank.”

Influence On Future Sufism

Although Ibn 'Arabi was violently attacked by his adversaries for his views which they considered unorthodox, his teachings not only survived the attacks, but exercised the most profound influence on the course of all future Sufism. His admirers in the East, where he spent the greater part of his life, called him al-Shaikh al-Akbar (the Greatest Doctor), a title which has never been conferred on another Sufi since. It pointed to his exceptional qualities both as a great spiritual master and a Sufi author – and it is held to be true of him to this-day. He marks the end of a stage where speculative Sufism reached its culminating point.

The centuries that followed witnessed the rapid spread of Sufi orders all over the Muslim world; and Sufism became the popular form of Islam with much less theory and more ritual and practice. The founders of the Fraternities were better known for their piety and spiritual leadership than for their speculation. This is why Ibn 'Arabi's theosophy and mystical philosophy remained unchallenged. They were in fact the only source of inspiration to anyone who discoursed on the subject of the Unity of all Being, whether in Arabic-speaking countries or in Persia or Turkey.

Some writers of his own school, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili and 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani, did little more than reproduce his ideas in a different form. Other schools of Sufis were not entirely free of his influence, at least as far as his terminology was concerned. The tremendous commentary of Arusi on Qushairi's *Risalah*, which is the classical model of Sunni Sufism, abounds with ideas and terms borrowed from Ibn 'Arabi's works.

His influence seems to show itself most markedly in the delightful works of the mystic poets of Persia from the seventh/thirteenth to the ninth/fifteenth century. 'Iraqi, Shabistari, and Jami were all inspired by him. Their wonderful odes are in many respects an echo of the ideas of the author of the *Fusus* and the *Futuhat*, cast into magnificent poetry by the subtle genius of the Persian mind. They overflow with the ideas of divine unity and universal love and beauty.

God is described as the source and ultimate ground of all things. He is for ever revealing Himself in the infinite forms of the phenomenal world. The world is created anew at every moment of time; a continual process of change goes on, with no repetition and no becoming. The divine light illuminates all particles of Being, just as the divine names have from eternity illuminated the potential, non-existent realities of things. When these realities become actualized in space and time, they reflect, like mirrors, the divine names which give them their external existence. The phenomenal world is the theatre wherein all the divine names are manifested. Man is the only creature in whom these names are manifested collectively.

These are but a few of the many ideas which the mystic poets of Persia borrowed from Ibn 'Arabi and to which they gave an endless variety of poetical forms. It is said that 'Iraqi wrote his *Lama'at* after hearing Sadr al-Din Qunawi's lectures on the *Fusus*, and Jami who commented on the same book wrote his *Lawa'ih* in the same strain. The following is an extract from 'Iraqi's *Lama'at* which sums up Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the microcosm (man):

“Though Form,” he said, “proclaims me Adam's son,
My true degree a higher place hath won.
When in the glass of Beauty I behold,
The Universe my image doth unfold:
In Heaven's Sun behold me manifest
Each tiny molecule doth me attest...
Ocean's a drop from my pervading sea,
Light but a flash of my vast Brilliancy:
From Throne to Carpet, all that is doth seem
Naught but a Mote that rides the sunlit Beam.
When Being's Veil of Attributes is shed,
My Splendour o'er a lustrous World is Spread ... “.20

Doctrines

Unity of All Being

The most fundamental principle which lies at the root of Ibn 'Arabi's whole philosophy, or rather theologico-philosophical and mystical thought, is the principle of the “Unity of All Being” (*wahdat al-wujud*). Perhaps the word “pantheism” is not a very happy equivalent, partly because it has particular associations in our minds, and also because it does not express the full significance of the much wider doctrine of the Unity of All Being as understood by our author. From this primordial conception of the ultimate nature of reality all his theories in other fields of philosophy follow with an appreciable degree of consistency.

Much of the criticism levelled against Ibn 'Arabi's position is due to the misunderstanding of the role which he assigns to God in his system – a fact which attracted the attention of even Ibn Taimiyyah, who distinguishes between Ibn 'Arabi's *wahdat al-wujud* and that of other Muslim pantheists. He says that “Ibn 'Arabi's system is nearer to Islam in so far as he discriminates between the One who reveals Himself and the manifestations thereof, thus establishing the truth of the religious Law and insisting on the ethical and theological principles upon which the former Shaikhs of Islam had insisted.”²¹ In other words, Ibn Taimiyyah does not wish to put Ibn 'Arabi in the same category with Tilimsani, Isra'ili, and Kirmani whom he condemns as atheists and naturalists.

Ibn 'Arabi's pantheism is not a materialistic view of reality. The external world of sensible objects is but a fleeting shadow of the Real (*al-Haqq*), God. It is a form of acosmism which denies that the phenomenal has being or meaning apart from and independently of God. It is not that cold-blooded pantheism in which the name of God is mentioned for sheer courtesy, or, at the most, for logical necessity or consistency. On the contrary, it is the sort of pantheism in which God swallows up everything, and the so-called other-than-God is reduced to nothing. God alone is the all-embracing and eternal reality. This position is summed up in Ibn 'Arabi's own words

“Glory to Him who created all things, being Himself their very essence (*'ainuha*)”;

and also in the following verse:

“O Thou Who hast created all things in Thyself,
Thou unitest that which. Thou createst.
Thou createst that which existeth infinitely
In Thee, for Thou art the narrow and the all-embracing.”²²

Reality, therefore, is one and indivisible. We speak of God and the world, the One and the many, Unity and multiplicity, and such other terms when we use the language of the senses and the unaided intellect. The intuitive knowledge of the mystic reveals nothing but absolute unity which – curiously enough – Ibn 'Arabi identifies with the Muslim doctrine of unification (*tauhid*). Hence the further and more daring identification of his pantheistic doctrine with Islam as the religion of unification.

“Base the whole affair of your seclusion (*khalwah*),” he says, “upon facing God with absolute unification which is not marred by any (form of) polytheism, implicit or explicit, and by denying, with absolute conviction, all causes and intermediaries, whole and part, for indeed if you are deprived of such *tauhid* you will surely fall into polytheism.”²³

This, in other words, means that the real *tauhid* of God is to face Him alone and see nothing else, and declare Him the sole agent of all that exists. But such a view points at once to a fact long overlooked by scholars of Muslim mysticism, i.e., that Muslim pantheism (*wahdat al-wujud*) is a natural – though certainly not a logical – development of the Muslim doctrine of *tauhid* (unification). It started with the simple belief that “there is no god other than God,” and under deeper consideration of the nature of Godhead, assumed the form of a totally different belief, i. e., there is nothing in existence but God.

In Ibn 'Arabi's case, the absolute unity of God, which is the monotheistic doctrine of Islam, is consistently interpreted to mean the absolute unity of all things in God. The two statements become equivalent, differing only in their respective bases of justification. The former has its root in religious belief or in theological or philosophical reasoning or both; the latter has its final justification in the unitive state of the mystic. We have a glimpse of this tendency in the writings of the early mystics of Islam such as Junaid of Baghdad and Abu Yazid of Bistam, but they speak of *wahdat al-shuhud* (unity of vision) not of *wujud* (Being), and attempt to develop no philosophical system in any way comparable to that of Ibn 'Arabi's.

It is sufficiently clear now that according to Ibn 'Arabi reality is an essential unity – substance in Spinoza's sense; but it is also a duality in so far as it has two differentiating attributes: *Haqq* (God) and *khalq* (universe). It can be regarded from two different aspects. In itself it is the undifferentiated and Absolute Being which transcends all spatial and temporal relations. It is a bare monad of which nothing can be predicated or known, if by knowledge we mean the apprehension of a thing through our senses and discursive reason. To know in this sense is to determine that which is known; and determination is a form of limitation which is contrary to the nature of the Absolute. The Absolute Monad is the most indeterminate of all indeterminates (*ankar al-nakirat*); the thing-in-itself (*al-shai*) as Ibn 'Arabi calls it.

On the other hand, we can view reality as we know it; and we know it invested with divine names and attributes. In other words, we know it in the multiplicity of its manifestations which make up what we call the phenomenal world. So, by knowing ourselves and the phenomenal world in general, we know reality of which they are particular modes.

In Ibn 'Arabi's own words “we” – and this goes for the phenomenal world as well – “are the names by which God describes Himself.” We are His names, or His external aspects. Our essences are His essence and this constitutes His internal aspect. Hence reality is One and many; Unity and multiplicity; eternal and temporal; transcendent and immanent. It is capable of receiving and uniting in itself all conceivable opposites.

Abu Said a1-Kharraz (d. 277/890) had already discovered this truth when he said that God is known only by uniting all the opposites which are attributed to him. “He is called the First and the Last: the External and the Internal. He is the Essence of what is manifested and of that which remains latent.... The Inward says no when the Outward says I am; and the Outward says no when the Inward says I am, and so in the case of every pair of contraries. The speaker is One, and He is identical with the Hearer.”²⁴

Thus, Ibn 'Arabi's thought goes on moving within that closed circle which knows no beginning and no end. His thought is circular because reality as he envisages it is circular. Every point on the circle is potentially the whole of the circle and is capable of manifesting the whole. Looking at the points with an eye on the centre of the circle (the divine essence), we can say that each point is identical with the essence in one respect, different from it in another respect. This explains the verbal contradictions with which Ibn 'Arabi's books abound.

Sometimes he comes nearer the philosophers than the mystics when he explains the relation between God and the universe. Here we have theories reminiscent of the Platonic theory of ideas and the Ishraqi doctrine of intelligible existence (*al-wujud al-dihni*) and the scholastic theory of the identification of substance and accidents (the theory of the Ash`arites).

“Before coming into existence,” he says, “things of the phenomenal world were potentialities in the bosom of the Absolute.” They formed the contents of the mind of God as ideas of His future becoming.

These intelligible realities are what he calls “the fixed prototypes of things” (*al-a`yan al-thabitah*). God's knowledge of them is identical with His knowledge of Himself.

It is a state of self-revelation or self-consciousness, in which God saw (at no particular point of time) in Himself these determinate “forms” of His own essence. But they are also latent states of His mind. So they are both intelligible ideas in the divine mind as well as particular modes of the divine essence. Hence the *a`yan al-thabitah* are identified, on the one hand, with the quiddity (*mahiyyah*) of things, and, on the other hand, with their essence (*huwiyyah*). The former explains the first aspect of the *a`yan* as ideas; the latter, their second aspect as essential modes.

He calls them non-existent in the sense that they have no external existence, on the one hand, and no existence apart from the divine essence, on the other. They are the prototypes and causes of all external existents because they are the potential relations between the divine names as well as the potential modes of the divine essence. When these potentialities become actualities we have the so-called external world. Yet, there is no real becoming, and no becoming in space and time. The process goes on from eternity to everlastingness.

This complicated relation between the One and the many is nowhere systematically explained in Ibn 'Arabi's works, not even in the *Fusus*. A certain formal dialectic can be detected in the *Fusus* where the author attempts to explain his metaphysical theory of reality, but the thread of the formal reasoning is often interrupted by outbursts of mystic emotion. Ibn 'Arabi is essentially a mystic, and in the highest degree a dreamer and fantast as we have already observed. He often uses symbols and similes in expressing the relation between the multiplicity of the phenomenal world and their essential unity.

The One reveals Himself in the many, he says, as an object is revealed in different mirrors, each mirror reflecting an image determined by its nature and its capacity as a recipient. Or it is like a source of light from which an infinite number of lights are derived. Or like a substance which penetrates and permeates the forms of existing objects: thus, giving them their meaning and being. Or it is like a mighty sea on the surface of which we observe countless waves for ever appearing and disappearing. The eternal drama of existence is nothing but this ever-renewed creation (*al-khalq al-jadid*) which is in reality a perpetual process of self-revelation. Or again, he might say, the One is the real Being and the phenomenal world is its shadow having no reality in itself.

But beautiful as they are, such similes are very ambiguous and highly misleading. They are at least suggestive of a duality of two beings: God and the universe, in a system which admits only an absolute unity. Duality and multiplicity are illusory. They are due to our incapacity to perceive the essential unity of things. But this oscillation between unity and duality is due to confusing the epistemic side of the issue with its ontological side.

Ontologically, there is but one reality. Epistemically, there are two aspects: a reality which transcends the phenomenal world, and a multiplicity of subjectivities that find their ultimate explanation in the way we

view reality as we know it. To our limited senses and intellects the external world undergoes a process of perpetual change and transformation. We call this creation but it is in fact a process of self-unveiling of the One Essence which knows no change.

Notion of Deity

In spite of his metaphysical theory of the nature of reality, Ibn 'Arabi finds a place for God in his system. His pantheism, like that of Spinoza, is to be distinguished from the naturalistic philosophy of the Stoics and the materialistic atheists. God that figures in his metaphysics as an unknowable and incommunicable reality, beyond thought and description, appears in his theology as the object of belief, love, and worship. The warmth of religious sentiment displayed in his writings attaches itself to his conception of God in the latter sense which comes close to the monotheistic conception of Islam. Indeed he tries his utmost to reconcile the two conceptions; but his God is not in the strict religious sense confined to Islam or any other creed. He is not the ethical and personal God of religion, but the essence of all that is worshipped and loved in all religions

“God has ordained that ye shall worship naught but Him.” [25](#)

This is interpreted by Ibn 'Arabi to mean that God has decreed that nothing is actually worshipped except Him. This is an open admission of all kinds of worship, so long as the worshippers recognize God behind the external “forms” of their gods. They call their gods by this or that name, but the Gnostic (*al-'arif*) calls his God “Allah” which is the most universal of all names of God. Particular objects of worship are creations of men's minds, but God, the Absolute, is uncreated. We should not, therefore, confine God to any particular form of belief to the exclusion of other forms, but acknowledge Him in all forms alike. To limit Him to one form – as the Christians have done – is infidelity (*kufra*); and to acknowledge Him in all forms is the spirit of true religion.

This universal religion which preaches that all worshipped objects are forms of One Supreme Deity is the logical corollary of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical theory that reality is ultimately one. But it has its deep roots in mysticism rather than in logic. It is nowhere better expressed than in the following verse:

“People have different beliefs about God
But I behold all that they believe.”[26](#)

And the verse:

“My heart has become the receptacle of every 'form';
It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks.
And a temple for idols, and pilgrims' Ka'bah,
And the Tablets of the Torah, and the Book of the Qur'an.
I follow the religion of love whichever way its camels take,
For this is my religion and my faith.”[27](#)

So, all paths lead to one straight path which leads to God. It would be a gross mistake to think that Ibn 'Arabi approves of the worship of stones and stars and other idols, for these as far as his philosophy is concerned are non-existent or mere fabrications of the human mind. The real God is not a tangible object; but one who reveals Himself in the heart of the gnostic. There alone He is beheld.

This shows that Ibn 'Arabi's theory of religion is mystical and not strictly philosophical. It has its root in his much wider theory of divine love. The ultimate goal of all mysticism is love; and in Ibn 'Arabi's mystical system in particular, it is the full realization of the union of the lover and the Beloved. Now, if we look deeply into the nature of worship, we find that love forms its very basis. To worship is to love in the extreme. No object is worshipped unless it is invested with some sort of love; for love is the divine principle which binds things together and pervades all beings. This means that the highest manifestation in which God is worshipped is love. In other words, universal love and universal worship are two aspects of one and the same fact. The mystic who sees God (the Beloved) in everything worships Him in everything. This is summed up in the following verse

“I swear by the reality of Love that Love is the Cause of all love.
Were it not for Love (residing) in the heart, Love (God) would not be worshipped.”²⁸

This is because Love is the greatest object of worship. It is the only thing that is worshiped for its own sake. Other things are worshiped through it.

God, as an object of worship, therefore, resides in the heart as the supreme object of love. He is not the efficient cause of the philosophers or the transcendent God of the Mu'tazilites. He is in the heart of His servant and is nearer to him than his jugular vein.²⁹ “My heaven and my earth contain Me not,” says the Prophetic tradition, “but I am contained in the heart of My servant who is a believer.”

God and Man

It was Husain b. Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309/922) who first laid down the foundation for the theory that came to be known in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili as the Theory of the Perfect Man. In the final form in which Ibn 'Arabi cast it, it played a very important role in the history of Muslim mysticism. Hallaj's theory was a theory of incarnation based on the Jewish tradition which states that “God created Adam in His own image” – a tradition which the Sufis attributed to the Prophet.

He distinguished between two natures in man: the divine (*al-lahut*), and the human (*al-nasut*). The two natures are not united but fused, the one into the other, as wine is fused into water. Thus for the first time in the history of Islam a divine aspect of man was recognized, and man was regarded as a unique creature not to be compared with any other creature on account of his divinity.

The Hallajian idea was taken up by Ibn 'Arabi, but completely transformed and given wider application. First, the duality of *lahut* and *nasut* became a duality of aspects of one reality, not of two independent natures. Secondly, they were regarded as actually present not only in man but in everything whatever;

the *nasut* being the external aspect of a thing, the *lahut*, its internal aspect. But God who reveals Himself in all phenomenal existence is revealed in a most perfect and complete way in the form of the perfect man, who is best represented by prophets and saints.

This forms the main theme of the *Fusus al-Hikam* and *al-Tadbirat al-Ilahiyyah* of Ibn 'Arabi, but many of its aspects are dealt with in his *Futuhat* and other works. Each one of the twenty seven chapters of the *Fusus* is devoted to a prophet who is both a Logos (*kalimah*) of God and a representative of one of the divine names. They are also cited as examples of the perfect man. The Logos par excellence is the Prophet Muhammad or rather the reality of Muhammad, as we shall see later.

So man in general – and the perfect man in particular – is the most perfect manifestation of God. The universe which, like a mirror, reflects the divine attributes and names in a multiplicity of forms, manifests them separately or analytically. Man alone manifests these attributes and names collectively or synthetically. Hence he is called the microcosm and the honoured epitome (*al-mukhtasar al-sharif*) and the most universal being (*al-kaun al-jami'*), who comprises all realities and grades of existence. In him alone the divine presence is reflected, and through him alone God becomes conscious of Himself and His perfection. Here are Ibn 'Arabi's own words:

“God, glory to Him, in respect of His most beautiful names, which are beyond enumeration, willed to see their *a'yan* (realities), or if you wish you may say, His (own) *'ayn*, in a Universal Being which contains the whole affair – inasmuch as it is endowed with all aspects of existence – and through which (alone) His mystery is revealed to Himself: for a vision which consists in a thing seeing itself by means of itself is not the same as that of the thing seeing something else which serves as a mirror... . Adam was the very essence of the polishing of this mirror, and the spirit of this form (i.e., the form in which God has revealed Himself: which is man).”[30](#)

Here Ibn 'Arabi almost repeats the words of Hallaj who says:

“God looked into eternity, prior to all things, contemplated the essence of His splendour, and then desired to project outside Himself His supreme joy and love with the object of speaking to them. He also created an image of Himself with all His attributes and names. This image was Adam whom God glorified and exalted.”[31](#)

Yet, the difference between the two, thinkers is so fundamental. Hallaj is an incarnationist; Ibn 'Arabi, a pantheist. On man as the microcosm he says:

“The spirit of the Great Existent (the Universe)

Is this small existent (man).

Without it God would not have said:

'I am the greatest and the omnipotent.'

Let not my contingency veil thee,

Or my death or resurrection,

For if thou examinest me,
I am the great and the all-embracing.
The eternal through my essence,
And the temporal are manifested. [32](#)

This is why man deserves the high honour and dignity of being God's vicegerent on earth – a rank which God has denied all other creatures including the angels. This superior rank goes not to every individual man, for some men are even lower than the beasts, but to the perfect man alone, and this for two reasons:

- a) He is a perfect manifestation of God in virtue of unity in himself, of all God's attributes and names.
- b) He knows God absolutely through realizing in some sort of experience his essential oneness with Him.

Here Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical theory of man coincides with the theory of mysticism.

Ethical and Religious Implications

We have already pointed out that Ibn 'Arabi's pantheistic theory of the nature of reality is the pivot round which the whole of his system of thought turns. Some aspects of this philosophy have been explained; and it remains now to show its bearing on his attitude towards man's ethical and religious life.

Everything in Ibn 'Arabi's world is subject to rigid determinism. On the ontological side we have seen that phenomenal objects are regarded as the external manifestations of their latent realities and determined by their own laws. Everything is what it is from eternity and nothing can change it, not even God Himself. "What you are in your state of latency (*thubut*) is what you will be in your realized existence (*zuhur*)," is the fundamental law of existence. It is self-determinism or self-realization in which freedom plays no part either in God's actions or in those of His creatures.

Moral and religious phenomena are no exception. God decrees things in the sense that He knows them as they are in their latent states, and pre-judges that they should come out in the forms in which He knows them. So He decrees nothing which lies outside their nature. This is the mystery of predestination (*sirr al-qadar*).[33](#)

Belief and unbelief, sinful and lawful actions, are all determined in this sense and it is in this sense also that men are the makers of their own destiny for which, Ibn 'Arabi says, they are responsible. "We are not unjust to them," says God, "but it is they who are unjust to themselves." "I am not unjust to My servants."[34](#)

On this Ibn 'Arabi comments as follows: "I (God) did not ordain infidelity (*kufir*) which dooms them to misery, and then demand of them that which lies not in their power. Nay, I deal with them only as I know

them, and I know them only as they are in themselves. Hence if there be injustice they are the unjust. Similarly, I say to them nothing except that which My essence has decreed that I should say; and My essence is known to Me as it is in respect of My saying this or not saying that. So I say nothing except what I know that I should say. It is Mine to say, and it is for them to obey or not to obey after hearing My command.”[35](#)

There is, therefore, a difference between obeying one's own nature and obeying the religious command, a distinction which was made long before Ibn 'Arabi by Hallaj. On the one hand, all men – indeed all creatures – obey their own law which he calls the creative law (*al-amr al-takwini*). On the other, some obey and others disobey the religious Law (*al-amr al-taklifi*). The first is in accordance with God's creative will (*al-mashiyyah*) which brings things into existence in the forms in which they are eternally predetermined. The second is something imposed from without for some ulterior reason, ethical, religious, or social.

Everything obeys the creative commands in response to its own nature, and by so doing obeys God's will, regardless of whether this obedience is also obedience or disobedience to the religious or ethical command. When Pharaoh disobeyed God and Iblis (Satan) refused the divine command to prostrate himself before Adam, they were in fact obeying the creative command and carrying out the will of God, although from the point of view of the religious command they were disobedient. To express the same thing in different words, an action-in-itself, i. e., irrespective of any form whatever, is neither good nor evil, neither religious nor irreligious. It is just an action pure and simple. It comes under one or another of these categories when it is judged by religious or ethical standards.

The whole theory reduces obedience and disobedience in the religious sense to a mere formality, and denies moral and religious obligations. It tells us that man is responsible for his actions, but affirms that he is not a free agent to will his actions. Responsibility and complete absence of freedom do not go together. Theoretically, there are different alternatives out of which man may choose his actions, but according to this theory he is so created that he chooses the only alternative which is determined by his own necessary laws. So he actually chooses nothing and has no more freedom than a stone falling down to the earth in obedience to its own law.

Thus, we go on moving within that closed circle of thought which is so typical of Ibn 'Arabi's reasoning. He has one eye on his pantheistic doctrine with all that it entails, and the other on Islamic teachings, and oscillates between the two all the time. His pantheistic doctrine implies that God is the Ultimate Agent of all actions, and Islam insists on the moral and religious responsibility of man for his actions. The two conflicting points of view cannot be reconciled, and Ibn 'Arabi's way of reconciling them is full of paradoxes.

He is more consistent when he says that all actions are created by God and there is no real difference between the Commander and the commanded.[36](#) There is no real servanthip (*ubudiyyah*), for the servant is one who carries out the commands of his master. But in reality the servant of God is a mere

locus (*mahall*) through which God's creative power acts. So the servant is the Lord and the Lord is the servant.³⁷

This seems to contradict what we have already said, i. e., that, according to Ibn 'Arabi, actions belong to man and spring directly from his nature in a determined way. Actually, there is no contradiction when we think of the distinction he makes between the One and the many. In fact, all his paradoxes can be solved when considered in the light of this distinction. When he says that God is the doer of all actions, he is regarding the question from the point of view of the One, for God's essence is the essence of men to whom actions are attributed. And when he asserts that men are the doers of their actions, he is regarding the question from the point of view of the many.

Having reduced obligation, obedience, disobedience; and similar other concepts to mere formal relations, it was natural enough for him to give the concepts of punishment and reward a positive content. Heaven and hell and all the eschatological matters connected with them are described in the minutest details, but no sooner does he give a constructive picture of one of them than he uses his allegorical method of interpretation to explain it away.

His method bears some remarkable resemblance to that of the Isma'ilians and the Carmathians, used for the same purpose. All eschatological terms such as punishment, reward, purgatory, the Balance, the Bridge, intercession, heaven, hell, and so on, are regarded as representations of states of man, and corporealizations of ideas. What we learn from Tradition, he says, are words, and it is left to us to find out what is meant by them,³⁸ i.e., to read into them whatever meaning we please.

This is precisely what Ibn 'Arabi himself has done. Heaven and hell, according to him, are subjective states, not objective realities. Hell is the realization of the individual "self"; it is selfhood. Heaven is the realization of the essential unity of all things. There is no real difference between the two. If any, the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Salvation is the ultimate end of all. Speaking of the people of hell and heaven, Ibn 'Arabi says: –

“Nothing remains but the Fulfiller of Promise alone;
The threat of God has no object to be seen.
When they enter the Abode of Misery they experience
Pleasure wherein lies a bliss so different
From that of the Gardens of Everlastingness.
It is all the same: the difference is felt at the beatific vision.”³⁹

This means that when the truth is known and God reveals Himself as He really is, everyone, whether in heaven or in hell, will know his position, i.e., will know how near or how far he is from the truth. Those who fully realize their essential oneness with God are the blessed ones who will go to paradise. Those who are veiled from the truth are the damned ones who will go to hell. But both parties will enjoy in their respective abodes happiness proportionate to their degree of knowledge.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to give a bird's-eye view of a tremendously vast field. We have concentrated on the most important features of Ibn 'Arabi's life and thought; many important facts have of necessity been omitted for lack of space. If Ibn 'Arabi experienced – as we must assume he did – some sort of strain while writing his mystical philosophy, we are placed under greater strain while writing about him. There is more than one way of interpreting his ideas and fathoming his intricate and obscure style. This makes it possible for scholars to give not only different but conflicting accounts of his teachings.

The present account deals with him as a thorough-going pantheist who tried his best to reconcile his pantheistic doctrine with Islam. In doing so he had to read new meanings into the traditional Muslim concepts, and change Islam from a positive into a mystic religion. It is true he never lost sight of the idea of Godhead, but his God is not the transcendent God of revealed religions, but the Absolute Being who manifests Himself in every form of existence, and in the highest degree in the form of man.

People may agree or disagree with some of his theories, but the fact remains that in production and influence he is the greatest Arabic-speaking mystic Islam has ever produced. It has been said that he has annulled religion in the orthodox sense in which it is usually understood. This is not altogether true. He has done away with a good many concepts which were so narrowly understood by Muslim jurists and theologians, and offered in their place other concepts which are much deeper in their spirituality and more comprehensive than those of any of his Muslim predecessors. His ideas about the universality of everything – being, love, religion – may be considered landmarks in the history of human thought.

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