Sufi Hermeneutics of Ibn 'Arabī and its Application for Interfaith Dialogue

By Syafaatun Almirzanah

Ibn Arabī's Life

Ibn `Arabī, whose full name is Muhammad b. 'Alī b. Muhammad b. `Arabī al-Ṭā`ī al-Ḥātimī, is acclaimed as one of the greatest Sufi masters of all time. By all informed accounts, he was "a towering figure in human spirituality"[1] and thus came to bear the *laqab* or honorific epithet of *al-sheikh al-Akbar* or "the Greatest Master." He was born in 1165[2] in the beautiful township of Murcia, inland from the Mediterranean Costa Blanca between Valencia and Almeria, in the *qiblah* of Andalus, at the beginning of the Almohad reign. His father exercised military duties in the service of Ibn Mardanish,[3] an ex-Christian warlord.

Ibn `Arabī's family descended from one of the oldest, noblest, and most pious[4] Arab lineages in Spain of the time -- the Banū Ṭā`ī. Ibn `Arabī stated, "I am al-`Arabī al-Ḥātimī, the brother of magnanimity; in nobility we possess glory, ancient and renowned."[5] Ibn 'Arabī's family belonged to the *khāṣṣa* of his society, meaning the cultural elite that consisted of the ruling class and the highest officials in the Andalusian administration and army.[6]

Ibn 'Arabī's foray into Sufism is significant due to the nature of the narrative material we have about his experiences. Not only are they decidedly hagiographical, as one might suspect, but they are also auto-hagiographical. In other words, the large percentage of material at the center of Ibn 'Arabī's hagiographical portrait comes from the pen of the master himself. The significance of this is not entirely clear. One might imagine, for example, that such attestations about oneself might bring more scorn and derision than admiration and adulation. If so, this would not have been the first time a Sufi has sought to engender the scorn of potential admirers. Indeed, the entire tradition of the Malāmatiyya is based on the performance of antinomian acts as an effective means of acquiring the public derision necessary to keep the ego (i.e., *nafs*) under tight control.

At the same time, these accounts are celebrated and carefully preserved for posterity. Perhaps Ibn 'Arabī's auto-hagiography is a way of grounding the admiration for the master among those who recognize his gifts and are open to his teachings, while simultaneously working to dismiss those who are closed to what he has to offer. In any case, this genre of auto-hagiography we find in the writings of Ibn Arabī seems to convey that Ibn 'Arabī understands all of his writings not to be the product of his own isolated consciousness, but rather as revelations he received in visions and for which he could not take any ultimate credit. Henri Corbin argues that Ibn Arabī's imaginal[7] epistemology was composed of abstract intellectual distillations of mystically perceived truths, even farther from reality than the visions of the imagination.[8]

If, according to Islamic tradition, the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad by the angel Gabriel, so was the *Al-Futūḥāt* said Stephen Hirtenstein, which,

explains the esoteric meaning of the Qur'an was revealed to Ibn 'Arabī by the Youth with no name. And like the Qur'an, which is said to have descended in its totality upon the heart of Muḥammad and then been revealed to him piece by piece, so the *Al-Futūḥāt* although present in its entirety within the Youth, would also take many years to write down.[9]

Some of the themes in the *Fuṣūṣ,* Ibn 'Arabī's other book, have become the focus of attacks through the present day, such as the unity of being, the notion of pre-existence of the human soul, the final salvation of Pharaoh, the perfect man, and the non-eternity of infernal punishments, though they are not absent from the *Futūḥāt*. For this reason, Claude Addās argued, "due allowance being made for the intellectual laziness of the jurists, who were generally happy simply to cite the 'condemnable propositions' already catalogued by Ibn Taymiyya -- the *Fuṣūṣ* lent themselves to criticism far more readily than the al-*Futūḥāt*."[10]

During the last years of his life, Ibn 'Arabī composed a number of works, revised the *Al-Futūḥāt* and taught his disciples. He claimed that one day God commanded him: "Tell your disciples: 'Make the most of my existence before I go!'"[11] It seems his disciples did just this; they never tired of gathering around the *sheikh* to study his works. In November 1240, at the age of seventy-five, Ibn 'Arabī passed away. "The pilgrim," Addās wrote, "arrived at the end of his long terrestrial journey…the Shaykh al-Akbar left his disciples to perform a *mi`rāj* from which there would be no return: one that would lead him to the *Rafīq al-A`lā*, the Supreme Friend."[12]

Controversy and the Example of Ibn Taymiyya

Much of Ibn Arabī's works have triggered attacks from jurists. The question that must be addressed in any assessment of his legacy is why his teachings aroused so much hostility among certain Muslims. In his monograph on the subject, Alexander Knysh studied the disagreement in the Islamic world over the legacy of Ibn 'Arabī. He analyzed the intense theological and intellectual debates about Ibn 'Arabī, including the doctrinal disagreement and factional differences among the *'ulamā'*, whose interests were by no means resemble those of other strata of medieval Islamic society. To understand the fierce disputes over Ibn 'Arabī, it is crucial to understand the place and role of the *'ulamā'* in medieval Islamic society.[13] Now, why was Ibn 'Arabī condemned?

No discussion of the controversial legacy of Ibn 'Arabī would be complete without the mention of the systematic attacks against him and his school that culminated in the writings of the famous Ḥambalī jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who articulated one of the most scathing and subsequently influential critiques of Ibn 'Arabī and his teachings. That Ibn Taymiyya was a Ṣūfī, there can be no doubt.[14] But as a conscientious Ṣūfī, Ibn Taymiyya felt obliged to defend orthodox/orthoprax Ṣūfīsm against corrupting innovations in Ṣūfī belief and practice.

Contemporary scholarly assessments of Ibn Taymiyya's perspectives on the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī vary to a certain degree. Some, such as the work of Muḥammad 'Umar Mīmūn, are polemical, echoing and even magnifying the negative sentiments of Ibn Taymiyya.[15] Others, such as the work of Alexander Knysh on this topic, are more balanced and insightful. Ibn Taymiyya is the author of numerous tractates and legal opinions (*fatāwā*) that rely on quotations from scripture, condemning the theses of Ibn `Arabī. Knysh noted that while Ibn Taymiyya appeared to have excellent knowledge of the works he refuted, curiously enough his critiques were not aimed at Ibn 'Arabī's entire corpus, but rather at certain of the master's works, especially *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. In this regard, Ibn Taymiyya wrote:

At first, I was among those who held a good opinion of Ibn `Arabī and praised him highly for the useful advice he provides in his books. This useful advice is found in pages of "Revelations" [*al-*

Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah], the "Essence" [*al-Kunh mā lā budda minhu li al-murīd*], the "Tightly Knit and Tied" [*Kitāb al-amr al-muḥkam al-marbūṭ*], the "Precious Pearl" [*al-Durrat al-fākhira fī dhikr man intafaʿtu bi-hi fī ṭariq al-ākhira*], and the "Position of the Stars" [*Mawāqiʿ al-nujūm*], and similar writings. At that time we were unaware of his real goal, because we had not yet studied the *Fuṣūṣ* and suchlike books.[16]

Apparently, at one time or another, Ibn Taymiyya appreciated ideas of Ibn ʿArabī's. He obviously read the al-*Futūḥāt* and admired it. Sometime, however, between his reading of this and other works, Ibn Taymiyya's opinion changed. According to Ibn Dawādarī, the change occurred in 1303 when Ibn Taymiyya read *Fuṣūṣ* and found it highly problematic.[17] Ibn ʿArabī did not make a perceived departure from orthodoxy in *Fuṣūṣ* that one could not impute to the al-*Futūḥāt* as well. Instead, Ibn Taymiyya seemed to read *Fuṣūṣ* through a distinctly different interpretative lens than he read the al-*Futūḥāt*. By all indications, he perceived a dangerous combination of popularized and concomitant distortion of the teachings of Ibn ʿArabī, the proliferation of sectarian phenomena such as that of the *Nuṣayriyya*, and a bastardization of classical Ṣūfīsm to include all manner of popular beliefs and practices deviating from what Ibn Taymiyya understood to be orthodox Islam. Knysh wrote:

Using his notion of "correct Ṣūfīsm" as his measuring stick, Ibn Taymiyya singled out what he viewed as Ibn ʿArabī's tendency to obfuscate the critical God-man demarcation as his main target and as the starting point of his antimonistic critique. In his view, this tendency put the Greatest Master amid the cohort of "heretics" and "grave sinners," responsible for such "vices" as the excessive influence on the Muslim state of its Christian and Jewish subjects, suggestive female dress, popular superstitions, the game of backgammon, the spread of the Mongol customs among the *Mamlūks*, the miracle-working of the dervishes, minor pilgrimages to saints' shrines, Shīʿī heresies, the exotic garments of wandering Ṣūfī, *ḥashīsh*-smoking, the chivalric cult of *futuwwa*, state control of food prices, rationalist philosophy, and *kalām*.[18]

In simple terms, then, Ibn Taymiyya did not present an objective and comprehensive review of Ibn ʿArabī's thinking because he did not see this as his task. Rather, he understood his role as a defender of orthodox/orthoprax Islam and orthodox/orthoprax Ṣūfīsm at a time he believed both to be under a tremendous pluralist cultural assault.

     The premier aspect of Ibn ʿArabī's teaching most troublesome for Ibn Taymiyya was his teaching on the "oneness of being" (often referred to in Arabic as *waḥdat al-wujūd*,[19] although Ibn ʿArabī never used this expression). Within this teaching, Ibn Taymiyya saw particular difficulty in Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of *al-aʿyān al-thābita* or the "immutable entities."[20] For Ibn ʿArabī, the Arabic word `*ayn* refers to an "entity," whether existent in the created order or in a state of non-existent potentiality in the mind of God. Herein, creative activity of God occurs as God actualizes any combination of the entities that are established in the divine consciousness. According to this schema, everything brought into existence has its full and complete origin in the Godhead. To say otherwise would, for Ibn ʿArabī, be tantamount to *shirk*.

     For Ibn ʿArabī, God does indeed create *ex nihilo*, but not in the sense that any reality is beyond God's imagination and the scope of God's knowledge. Therefore, the "nothingness" of everything that God brings into existence is not, for Ibn ʿArabī, a literal nothingness -- as it is for Ibn Taymiyya -- a void that does not relate to and thus is the opposite of, being. Rather, for Ibn

'Arabī the "nothingness" out of which God creates is the nonexistence or "pre-existence"[21] of all those myriad and unlimited "things" that are established in the mind of God.

Ibn 'Arabī insisted, for example, that God's "seeing all things" before they exist does not in any way contradict the fact that He creates what exists out of nonexistence. In fact, the distinction between any type of "existence" on the one hand, and "thing-ness," on the other hand, is a crucial component of Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics. In other words, for Ibn 'Arabī, the Qur'anic equivalent of the Christian doctrine of 'creation out of nothingness' can more precisely be termed as 'creation out of nonexistence.' Of all things ever brought into existence or in the future, Ibn 'Arabī declared, "He [i.e., God] never ceases seeing it. He who holds that the cosmos is eternal does so from this perspective. But he who considers the existence of the cosmos in relation to its own entity and the fact that it did not possess this state when the Real saw it maintains that the cosmos is temporally originated."[22]

In sum, Ibn 'Arabī intended his teaching with respect to *al-aʿyān al-thābita* ("immutable entities") as an attempt to maintain fidelity to the Qur'anic doctrine of the temporality of the cosmos alongside an unqualified assertion that nothing -- especially God's creation -- can possibly be "new" or "alien" to God . Because of his historical context, however, and the vocation he embraced as a defender of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, Ibn Taymiyya did not receive this teaching in the mode it was intended, but instead as part of a larger threat to mainstream Islamic teaching in which Ibn 'Arabī himself had no appreciable role during his lifetime. Speaking of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching with respect to *al-aʿyān al-thābita*, Ibn Taymiyya wrote:

…[H]e brought together two [heretical] theories, namely the negation of God's existence, on the one hand, and the negation of His [status as the] originator of the creaturely world, on the other. Thereby he denies that the Lord is the maker [of the world] and affirms that there is neither the existence of God, nor the act of creation. In so doing, he invalidates [the Qur'anic notion of] "the Lord of the worlds." [For him,] there exists neither the Lord, nor the world over which He holds sway. In other words, there is nothing but the immutable entities and the existence that sustains them.[23]

Despite such a strong condemnation of Ibn 'Arabī, Ibn Taymiyya refrained from the *ad hominem* attacks that could be found on the lips or flowing from the pens of so many of Ibn Taymiyya's disciples in subsequent generations. Of all those who profess what Ibn Taymiyya interpreted as heretical doctrines of the oneness of being, Ibn Taymiyya said of Ibn 'Arabī that the latter is

 …the closest to Islam among them….He at least distinguished between the manifest One and the concrete forms of His manifestation. Moreover, he affirmed the validity of Divine Command and Prohibition and the Divine Laws as they stand. He also instructed the travelers on the [mystical] path how to acquire high morals and the acts of devotion, as is common with other Ṣūfīs and their disciples. Therefore, many pious worshippers (*ʿubbād*) have learned [the rules of] their path through his instruction and thus have greatly benefited from him, even though they sometimes failed to understand his [mystical] subtleties.[24]

By recognizing the moral and ritual rectitude of his fellow Ṣūfī, Ibn Taymiyya located himself squarely in a mainstream Ṣūfīsm that has always valued right behavior as an absolute *sine qua non* of the spiritual quest. Indeed, what impressed the great Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī and drew him

to Ṣūfīsm during his years searching for the truth was that the Ṣūfīs teach about truth, first and foremost, by living example:

Their life is the best life, their method the soundest method, their character the purest character; indeed, were the intellect of the intellectuals and the learning of the learned and the scholarship of the scholars, who are versed in the profundities of revealed truth, brought together in the attempt to improve the life and character of the mystics, they would find no way of doing so.[25]

Through his praise for Ibn ʿArabī's lived example, Ibn Taymiyya evidently esteemed him and realizes that while Ibn ʿArabī's teachings may be misinterpreted as challenging the practical distinction between God and the world, paradise and hellfire, and threatening the rigorous observance of the sharīʿa, in his own life, Ibn ʿArabī was a scrupulously pious Sunnī Muslim. By the same token, Ibn Taymiyya's comment on the tendency for people to "fail to understand [Ibn Arabī's mystical] subtleties" should not be overlooked. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya responded to precisely these misunderstandings, and Ibn Taymiyya by no means would countenance the *takfīr* (i.e., declaring to be an unbeliever) of Ibn ʿArabī that one finds among so many of Ibn Taymiyya's followers in today's world.

Although ongoing polemics prevail against Ibn ʿArabī and his teaching, he is nonetheless very influential in the development of contemporary Ṣūfīsm, in both its intellectual and popular forms. However, differences of circumstance and context will determine not only the mode and scope of the dissemination of Ibn ʿArabī's teaching, but also the ways of understanding it. On certain occasions -- as we saw in the case of the causal factors behind Ibn Taymiyya's polemic -- the doctrine of "the unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), for example, has been interpreted in ways approaching monism or pantheism. Accordingly, some saw the mystic path as a personal striving to become one with the only Being -- a striving that has no use for so-called organized religion. Such relativistic and anti-religious[26] interpretations depart radically from the teachings of Ibn ʿArabī in the way that they blur all distinctions between Islam and other religions (something Ibn ʿArabī never did), and generally revised all legitimate notions of heresy.

For many centuries, the teachings and legacy of Ibn ʿArabī have held a special attraction for those who strongly feel the mysterious dimensions of God's presence in all human experience. Many find Ibn ʿArabī's spirituality -- one of deep piety and moral conviction and an expansive notion of what is true and real -- uniquely compelling, especially in a context where the importance of embracing cultural, ethnic, political, and religious plurality is only matched by the importance of rooting oneself in what it is one believes.

Ibn ʿArabī's Scriptural Hermeneutics and Perspective on Religious Diversity

As a controversial figure, Ibn Arabī is also a source of understanding of religious diversity and dialogue. The greatest and most creative minds in the history of religions have always been at the center of some controversy. From Maimonides to Augustine to Shankara to al-Shāfiʿī and Ibn Rushd, the historical record is replete with stories about the trouble caused by particularly gifted religious geniuses.[27] If, in the process of mining the riches of our tradition, we wish to fairly and accurately assess the orthodoxy of a religious thinker, we need to do so on the basis of a fair and open analysis of his teachings and not on whatever propaganda may exist for or against the figure in question. With regard to Ibn ʿArabī and the way his teachings can be

seen as expressions of Islamic orthodoxy on the issues of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, this process of fair analysis may be simpler and more straightforward than many would suspect.

In one of his well-known essays on biblical hermeneutics, Michael Fishbane noted that the tradition of rabbinic mystical exegesis known as *Sod*[28] turned on the principle that the words of sacred scripture speak to the reader "without ceasing." Thus, "There is a continual expression of texts; and this reveals itself in their ongoing reinterpretation. But *Sod* is more than the eternity of interpretation from the human side. It also points to the divine mystery of speech and meaning."[29] Fishbane spoke of the "prophetic task" of "breaking the idols of simple sense" and restoring "the mystery of speech to its transcendent role in the creation of human reality." He asserted that one of the primary functions of the mystical exegete – an individual such as Ibn 'Arabī -- is "to continue this prophetic mission." It is "in the service of *Sod* [i.e., mystical exegesis]," that mystical exegete mediates "a multitude of interpretations" as "he resists the dogmatization of meaning and the eclipse of the divine lights of speech." Taking Fishbane's lead, we can assert that, as a mystical exegete, our master seeks to "transcend the idolatries of language" and to condemn "hermeneutical arrogance in all its forms…."[30]

In his approach to canonical scripture, Ibn 'Arabī fulfills the role of mystical exegete as Fishbane interprets it for us. He believed unequivocally in an infinitely readable text, and championed this infinite readability in hopes of combating the "idolatries of language" and "hermeneutical arrogance." According to Ibn 'Arabī, each word of the Qur'an has unlimited meanings, all intended by God. Correct recitation of the Qur'an allows readers to access new meanings at every reading.[31] "When meaning repeats itself for someone reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance."[32] In fact, Ibn 'Arabī regarded words as symbolic expressions, subject to interpretive efforts, which he called *ta'bīr* (the act of "crossing over"). Thus, for him the truth of the interpretive effort presents itself in the act of crossing over from one state to another, and difference becomes the root of all things since for something to be in a constant state of crossing, it is constantly differentiated, not only from other things, but also from itself. [33]

Thus, with respect to scriptural hermeneutics, Ibn 'Arabī appeared convinced of the infinite potential for meaning inherent in divine revelation, especially in sacred scripture. Such an understanding of the nature of scripture can be invaluable in dialogue because it demands that the person of faith not only take a stance of conviction within the teachings of his or her sacred texts, but also that they realize this conviction, however deep, does not restrict or exhaust in any way the potential meaning of these texts. In addition, the insights of the masters with respect to the infinite readability of scripture are particularly relevant to dialogue. If dialogue is authentic and brings about authentic transformation, then the encounter with the religious other should have some effect on our religious self-understanding, and therefore on our own readings of our own texts.

For some, religious diversity may be viewed as a problem, but certainly not for Ibn 'Arabī and his school of thought. In fact, Ibn 'Arabī has an *explicit* theology of religions. In Ibn 'Arabī's own words, "There are as many paths to God as there are human souls." The reality, however, of how religious diversity has been dealt with in Islamic history varies from context to context. To generalize, much the same as the case of Christianity (which tended, at least in the medieval period, to be significantly less tolerant of intra- and interreligious diversity than Islam), some Muslim scholars have emphasized an exclusivist approach, while others emphasized a

more open and inclusivist one. Ibn `Arabī seems to be the most sophisticated and profound thinker of this second category.

Ibn 'Arabī's discussion of religious pluralism begins with the assertion that God Himself is the source of all diversity in the cosmos. Thus, divergence of beliefs among human beings ultimately stems from God:

God Himself is the first problem of diversity that has become manifest in the cosmos. The first thing that each existence thing looks upon is the cause of its own existence. In itself each thing knows that it was not, and that it then came to be through temporal origination. However, in this coming to be, the dispositions of the existent things are diverse. Hence they have diverse opinions about the identity of the cause that brought them into existence. Therefore the Real is the first problem of diversity in the cosmos.[34]

According to Ibn 'Arabī, this diversity of opinion is one of the many signs that, to paraphrase the famous ḥadīth qudsī, God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath. Thus, "since God is the root of all diversity of beliefs within the cosmos, and since it is He who has brought about the existence of everything in the cosmos in a constitution not possessed by anything else, everyone will end up with mercy."[35]

In addition, for Ibn 'Arabī, religious diversity is a natural consequence of the infinity of God's self-disclosure[36] and the concomitant degree of preparedness of any element of the phenomenal world to be a maḥal or "locus" of self-disclosure. In other words, diversity in the phenomenal world is a direct function of the varying "preparedness" or capacity of creatures to receive the divine self-disclosure. For Ibn `Arabī, God's self-disclosure (tajallī) is very much connected with the "receptivity" (qabūl) and "preparedness" (isti`dād) of the creatures or the vessels (maḥal). Thus, when God discloses God self, the degree to which a thing receives God's self-disclosure is determined by its "preparedness" to bear it. In Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, receptivity "must be taken into account not only on the cognitive level, but also on the existential level."[37] About preparedness, Ibn 'Arabī writes:

God says, "the giving of thy Lord can never be walled up (Q 17:20). In other words, it can never be withheld. God is saying that He gives constantly, while the loci receive in the measure of the realities of their preparedness. In the same way we say that the sun spreads rays over the existence of things. It is not miserly with its light toward anything. The loci receive the light in the measure of their preparedness.[38]

According to the quotation above, the essence of God never manifests in the universe. Rather, God's specific attributes and Names manifest themselves. Ibn 'Arabī refers to God in God's manifestation as the divine presence (al-ḥadra al-ilāhiyya), and he distinguishes this from God as non-manifest which Ibn 'Arabī refers to as the primordial presence (al-ḥadra al-qadīma).[39] This distinction plays an important role in Ibn `Arabī's understanding of spiritual attainment. The master claims that no human being can go beyond the realm of God's self-disclosure because the absolute in its essence is absolutely unknowable. The only and the highest possibility for the human being comes in seeking the absolute within the parameters of a particular instance of divine self-disclosure within the human self.

Now the viability of any particular instance of divine self-disclosure is ultimately determined by the receptivity or preparedness of the existent entity. For this reason, there is a distinction between God's prophets and "friends" (awliyā' or akhillā'), and ordinary people. The prophets and friends of God are loci of the manifestation for all the divine names, but other people are more limited in their receptivity and can only make certain names manifest. Although

God's self-disclosure depends on the receptivity and preparedness of the locus or vessel (*maḥal*), this does not mean that God's self-disclosure, which is God's mercy, is suspended.

For Ibn 'Arabī, the concepts of receptivity and preparedness are closely connected to the question of the divine measuring out of human "destiny" (*qadar*). Before it comes into existence, God knows the qualities and characteristics of each entity, because its "treasuries are with Him." Then, in the process of creation, God measures out these qualities and characteristics, including one's destiny (which ultimately is identical to one's capacity to receive divine manifestation), according to the creature's preparedness to receive. To illustrate this point, Ibn 'Arabī had recourse to one of his favorite ontological metaphors, the metaphor of the mirror: "Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so. So much is this the case that some have concluded that the image perceived is situated between the mirror and the eye of the beholder."[40] Thus, the recipient sees nothing other than his own form in the mirror of reality. Therefore, the existent entity, fixed forever in God's knowledge, can never receive anything beyond what it demands in itself and according to its own capacity. This is one of the foundational principles behind Ibn 'Arabī's approach to the diversity of destiny among human beings, but also in his approach to the diversity of religions.

When God brings the cosmos into existence, God, the One, discloses itself in the diversity of modes, which means that the One, the unlimited, delimits itself in its delimited *wujūd*. The diversity of human beings is an expression of the infinite potentiality of being, underscored by the unrepeatability of the human soul. For Ibn `Arabī, diversity of religions results from the non-redundant diversity of human souls as they are brought into existence by the One. As constituent elements of the phenomenal world, each human being is by nature, as mentioned above, a *maḥal* ("place") or *maẓhar* (locus of manifestation) in which the One discloses itself in and to the phenomenal realm. Because religious traditions manifest in the lives of human individuals who constitute any religious community, the diversity of persons as distinct and particular manifestations of the One being is reflected in the particular traditions as a whole. Speaking directly to the issue of religious diversity, Ibn 'Arabī wrote:

You worship only what you set up in yourself. This is why doctrines and states differed concerning Allah. Thus, one group says that He is like this and another group says that He is not like this, but like that. Another group says concerning knowledge (of Him) that the color of water is determined by the color of the cup. . . . So consider the bewilderment that permeates (*sariyya*) every belief.[41]

Ibn 'Arabī was very fond of quoting the great ninth-century mystic master of Baghdād, Abū l-Qāsim Muḥammad al-Junayd (d. 910) who once used the metaphor of water colored by its container as a metaphor for unity in diversity: "The color of the water is the color of its container."[42] Ibn 'Arabī's fondness for this metaphor, however, should not suggest that he considered all religions to be equally valuable, but that, like every other constituent element of the existing order, all religions have their origin in God. One might paraphrase Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation of Junayd's water metaphor by asserting that if the water represents the divine being, the differences between religions is represented by the color or colors of the container. The color or colors, therefore, are directly related to the "preparedness" of a given religion to receive its particular manifestation of the real.

There are some religions that may be monochromatic or whose colors are strictly limited or faded. Other religions may have more distinct colors, but all of the same basic hue. "He who discloses Himself," wrote Ibn 'Arabī, "in respect to what He is in himself, is One in entity, but the self-disclosures -- I mean their forms [e.g. the various religions] -- are diverse because of the

preparedness of the loci of self-disclosure."[43] As always, Ibn ʿArabī rooted this idea in the Qur'an, with specific reference to Q 11:118-119: "If your Lord had willed [it], He would have fashioned humanity into one community, but they will not cease to differ, except those upon whom your Lord has been merciful."[44]

Just as God never ceases to love or desire to be recognized, or to be manifest, God's self-manifestation also takes an infinite multiplicity of loci or receptacles (*maḥallāt*). Thus, phenomenal multiplicity, which is rooted in divine infinity, in fact has only one ontological entity, but because God's self-manifestation never ends, the loci of manifestation (*maẓāhir*) are infinitely diverse. This logic carries straight over to the phenomenon of the diversity of religions. In more direct terms, Ibn ʿArabī wrote, "every observer of God is under the controlling property of one of God's Names. That Name discloses itself to him or her and gives to him or her a specific belief through its self-disclosure."[45]

One might also note that, from a slightly different angle, Ibn ʿArabī's teaching on the diversity of religions can be inferred from his statements on perpetual creation. His teaching emphasized, "the Real does not manifest Itself twice in one form, nor in a single form to two individuals."[46] He strongly asserts that creation is a never ending process and that God never manifests in a single form twice. Thus, the belief of believers is the cognitive manner in which self-disclosure of the real is understood or misunderstood, cognitively conceived or misconceived.[47] In a similar vein, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), who appears to have been highly influenced by Ibn ʿArabī, asked: "If you pour the ocean into a jug, how much will it hold?"[48] Thus, every believer worships God the real according to the particular "Lord" (*rabb*) whom she or he recognizes in her or himself.[49] "Since there are as many cups as drinkers at the Pool which will be found in the abode of the hereafter," Ibn ʿArabī wrote, "and since the water in the cup takes the form of the cup in both shape and color, we know for certain that knowledge of God takes on the measure of your view, your preparedness, and what you are in yourself."[50] This statement is very similar to the words of Thomas Aquinas: "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower."[51] "Although the Real is One," said Ibn ʿArabī,

beliefs present Him in various guises. They take Him apart and put Him together, they give Him form and they fabricate Him. But in Himself, He does not change, and in Himself, He does not undergo transmutation. However, the organ of sight sees Him so. Hence location constricts Him, and fluctuation from entity to entity limits Him. Hence, none becomes bewildered by Him except him who combines the assertion of similarity with the declaration of incomparability.[52]

This explanation is based on the opinion that the God of belief is Being (*wujūd*),which manifests itself to every believer. Because every one of God's self-manifestations is single and never repeats, every belief is single and exclusive. Furthermore, because the object of every belief is single, the "God of belief" or the "God worshipped by each believer" differs from the God of every other believer. Ibn ʿArabī attempted to emphasize this point by discussing a multiplicity of "Lords" manifesting the one God:

Every believer has a Lord in his heart that he has brought into existence, so he believes in Him. Such are the People of the Mark on the day of resurrection. They worship nothing but what they themselves have carved.[53] That is why, when God discloses Himself in other than that mark, they are confounded. They know what they believe, but what they believe does not know them, for they have brought it into existence. The general rule here is that the artifact does not know the artisan, and the building does not know the builder.[54]

Ultimately, for Ibn 'Arabī, the believer must transcend the "God created in belief."[55] The path ultimately leads one to transcend the color of religious affiliation. This is not, however, a prescription for a relativistic approach to religion. We should remember that in Ibn 'Arabī's mind, God's law (Sharī'a) is crucial for the realization of the real (*lā ḥaqīqa bi lā sharī'a*). Thus, the path to God must be facilitated by the purest and most correct beliefs and practices possible. For Ibn 'Arabī, these are found in the proper interpretations and practices of the Sunnah of Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets -- i.e., the religion commonly referred to as "Islam."

Ibn 'Arabī does not conclude, like many Muslims, that certain exclusive verses in the Qur'an abrogate (*naskh*) certain inclusive verses in the Qur'an -- thereby asserting that Islam abrogates previous religions. Instead,

All the revealed religions (*sharī'a*`) are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muḥammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. They being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muḥammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null (*bāṭil*) by abrogation -- that is the opinion of the ignorant.[56]

Ibn 'Arabī suggested it is encumbent on Muslims to follow the path of their Prophet Muḥammad and adhere to the guidance of the Qur'an. At the same time, he also emphasized that the Qur'an is inclusive of the paths of all the prophets preceding Muḥammad:

Among the path is the path of blessing. It is referred to in God's words, "To every one of you We have appointed a right way and a revealed law" [57](5: 48). The Muḥammadan leader chooses the path of Muḥammad and leaves aside the other paths, even though he acknowledges them and has faith in them. However, he does not make himself a servant except through the path of Muḥammad, nor does he have his followers make themselves servants except through it. He traces the attributes of all paths back to it, because Muḥammad's revealed religion is all-inclusive. Hence the property of all revealed religions has been transferred to his revealed religion. His revealed religion embraces them, but they do not embrace it.[58]

In the *Futuḥāt* Ibn 'Arabī further explored the phenomenon of the diversity of religions. For him, God self-discloses in numerous ways, infinitely diverse and thus unique and different from one another. Although God is immeasurably greater than all God's manifestations, God also manifests in the form of every belief. But God does not constrain Godself within one particular belief. One belief may well be more accurate than another (e.g., "I believe there is only one God" versus "I believe there is no God"), but God is too glorious to delimit Godself to one form of belief rather than another.

Ibn 'Arabī plays with the root `QL to convey the inherent potential of discursive language and rationalist thought to delimit that which cannot be limited. The trouble with speculative thinking, especially when taken to the extreme, is that the `aql or "intellect" that enables us to engage in such thought, acts like a "fetter" (`iqāl -- from the same root), which at times is very useful (i.e., in helping us to develop categories to better understand ourselves and our world), but at other times can be very dangerous. The danger lies in the capacity of the intellect to attempt to fetter and pin down that which is beyond fettering. Ibn 'Arabī criticized speculative thinking and formulation when it acts to confine the infinite essence of God. He strengthened this argument by

reflecting on the word roots of "creed" (`aqīda`) and "belief" (`i`tiqād`). The root is `QD, which has to do with "binding" and "tying" a knot. He did not attack creeds and beliefs because they have their place in the life of faith. He did criticize the attempt to absolutize creeds and statements in the futile (and perhaps even blasphemous) attempt to 'tie a knot' around God. He wrote:

God is known through every knotting. Although the beliefs are totally diverse, their aim is one. He is a receptacle for everything that you tie Him to and every knotting you make concerning Him. And within that He will disclose Himself on the day of resurrection, for it is the mark which is between you and Him.[59]

For Ibn 'Arabī, only the `ārif ("gnostic") who has attained the station and state of the perfect human can see God as manifested in every belief, and as unconstrained by any belief. The true `ārif identifiesthe truth in any belief and understands that any belief involves a self-disclosure of the real. He or she understands that, while some beliefs may be true and others false, all beliefs are delimitations of the non-delimited *wujūd,* which embraces reality on whatever level it is envisaged.[60] As the locus of manifestation of the all-comprehensive Name of God (i.e, Allāh), and thus as one who stands in the "station of no station," the perfect human acknowledges any station and any belief insofar as it corresponds to one of the infinite multiplicities of the self-disclosure of God.

Perhaps the Qur'anic text Ibn 'Arabī quotes most frequently in support of his argument that all religions are manifestations of the real is: "Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115).[61] Commenting on this and other similar verses, Ibn 'Arabī wrote, "God has made it clear that He is in every direction turned to, each of which represents a particular doctrinal perspective regarding Him."[62] Indeed, for Ibn 'Arabī, because God is the *wujūd* or essential reality of all phenomenal multiplicity, no path is essentially distorted or warped; every path according to him essentially brings believers to God. Quoting "To Him all affairs shall be returned" (Q 11:123), Ibn 'Arabī wrote, "certainly, all roads lead to Allāh, since He is the end of every road."[63] Thus, every believer serves God based on God's self-disclosures and their own preparedness, so all beliefs in fact are rooted in God the infinite. This does not mean that all beliefs are similar and have the same effect on the transformation of human consciousness toward God.[64] Instead, each belief manifests truth and then is part of the path to human perfection in service to God.

One of the most touching and profound aspects of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching on the diversity of religions can be found in the al-*Futūhāt* where he refers to God as "taking care of the needs of misbelievers" and "giving them to drink."[65] According to Ibn `Arabī, all those who worship God, even if they do so falsely by attaching the name 'God' to their idols, are nonetheless the loci of God's self-disclosure, and as such are de facto recipients of God's mercy. "God takes care of their need and gives them to drink," Ibn `Arabī wrote, "He punishes them if they do not honor the Divine Side in this inanimate form."[66] Here Ibn 'Arabī's phrase "giving them to drink" echoes his discussion of "the drinking places," a discussion in which he refers to many Qur'anic verses:

The drinking places have become variegated and the religions diverse. The levels have been distinguished, the divine names and the engendered effects have become manifest and the names the gods have become many in the cosmos. People worship angels, stars, Nature, the elements, animals, plants, minerals, human beings and jinn. So much is this the case that when the One presented them with His Oneness, they said, "Has He made the gods One God? This is indeed a

marvelous thing" (23:117)…There is no effect in the cosmos which is not supported by a divine reality. So from whence do the gods become many? From the divine realities. Hence you should know that this derives from the names. God was expansive with the names: He said, "Worship Allāh (4:36), Fear Allāh, your Lord (65:1), and Prostate yourself to the All-merciful (25: 6). And He said, "Call upon Allah or call upon the All-merciful; whichever," that is Allāh or the All-Merciful," you call upon, to Him belong the most beautiful names" (17: 110). This made the situation more ambiguous for the people, since He did not say, "Call upon Allāh or call upon the All-merciful; whichever you call upon, the Entity is One, and these two names belong to it." That would be the text which would remove the difficulty; God only left this difficulty as a mercy for those who associate others with Him, the people of rational consideration -- those who associate others with Him on the basis of obfuscation.[67]

In fact, one of the most important and striking features of Ibn ‘Arabī's teachings on the nature of the real (*al-Ḥaqq*) and its connection to religious pluralism is that they are thoroughly grounded in Qur'anic exegesis. One of the most important verses upon which he bases these teachings is: "Then high exalted be God, the King, the Real! There is no God but He, the Lord of the noble Throne" (Q 23:116). Commenting on this verse, Ibn ‘Arabī said:

This is the *tawhīd* of the Real, which is the *tawhīd* of the He-ness. God says, "We created not the heavens and the earth and all that between them, in play" (21:116, 44:38). This is the same meaning as His words, "What do you think that We created you only for sport?" (23:115). Hence, "there is no God but He" [in the above passage] is a description of the Real.[68]

Here Ibn ‘Arabī described how the verse in question (Q 23:116) speaks about a particular expression of the divine oneness. In doing so he made two critical points for understanding his teaching on religious diversity. First, the Qur'an reveals multiple dimensions of the divine oneness -- the Qur'an discusses more than one type of *tawhīd*. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, there are thirty-six different types of *tawhīd* in the Qur'an. The dimension of divine oneness expressed in Q 23:116 is that of the "He-ness" of God or the degree to which the real is God and God alone. Second, Ibn ‘Arabī suggested in this brief commentary on Q 23:116 that every element of phenomenal existence is a purposeful expression of the divine oneness (i.e., no aspect of creation exists as play or sport.) For Ibn ‘Arabī, this included the diversity of religions, and the abundant Qur'anic references to the plurality of religions is by no means a reference to an accident of fate, but is rather the nineteenth type of *tawhīd* that the Qur'an most directly addresses in the following verse: "We never sent a messenger before thee [i.e., Muḥammad] except that We revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so worship Me!'" (Q 21: 25). Commenting on this verse, Ibn ‘Arabī said:

This is a *tawhīd* of the I-ness…It is like God's words, "Naught is said to thee but what was already said to the messengers before thee" (41:43). In this verse God mentions "worship" (`*ibāda*), but not specific practices (*a`māl*), for He also said, "To every one [of the prophets] We have appointed a Law and a way" (5:48), that is, We have set down designated practices. The period of applicability of the practices can come to an end, and this is called "abrogation" (*naskh*) in the words of the learned masters of the *Sharī`a*. There is no single practice found in each and every prophecy, only the performance of the religion, coming together in it, and the statement of *tawhīd*. This is indicated in God's words, "He has laid down for you as Law what He charged Noah with, and what We have revealed to thee [O Muḥammad], and what We charged Abraham with, and Moses, and Jesus: "Perform the religion, and scatter nor regarding it'" (42:13). Bukhārī has written in a chapter entitled, "The chapter on what has come concerning

the fact that the religion of the prophets is one," and this one religion is nothing but *tawhīd*, performing the religion, and worship. On this the prophets have all come together.[69]

What distinction did Ibn ʿArabī make between Qur'an 23:116 and 21:25? He distinguished between two expressions of *tawhīd*. The first is an expression of *tawhīd* where God refers to Godself in the third person (as "He") and where He mentions Himself as "King" (*al-malik*) and "The Real" (*al-ḥaqq*), and also makes reference to His "Noble Throne" (*al-ʿarsh al-karīm*). In a sense, this can be interpreted as the Qur'an's own use of the language of discursive or speculative theology that can only speak of God in the third person, and thus takes as its appropriate object the divine "He-ness" (*huwiyya*). In 21:25, however, God expresses His oneness in the first person (as "I"). In this context, God refers to the Prophet Muḥammad himself (the recipient of this specific revelation) in the second person singular, to all the messengers sent before Muḥammad, and to acts of worship.

For Ibn ʿArabī, this verse makes a direct connection between the succession of messengers (and by extension the different forms that authentic religion takes) and acts of worship which ideally mediate a direct experience of the "I-ness" of God in which God acts as the subject beyond objectification. Thus, when one juxtaposes the two verses, one sees the divine oneness expressed in two very different verbal modalities that reflect two very different human activities: the cognitive activity of speculative thought and the more affective experience of ritual worship. One modality is not a more authentic expression of *tawhīd* than the other, but rather both represent two very important dimensions of *tawhid*.

As Ibn Arabī more explicitly developed his teaching on religious diversity, he derived a key insight conveyed by the second of the two verses analyzed above. The succession of prophets and messengers, culminating in the messengership of Muḥammad, which characterizes all orthodox Islamic perspectives on the history of revelation, is one where an underlying unity of encounter with the one and only God (and the one immutable religion for which all of humanity for all time has been created) is historically expressed in a multiplicity of forms: "The 'path of Allāh' is the all-inclusive path upon which all things walk, and it takes them to Allāh."[70] Thus, commenting on Bukhārī's title, mentioned above, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religion of the prophets is one," in which Bukhārī uses an article in the word "religion" ("the religion," instead of a "religion"). Ibn ʿArabī wrote,

He brought the article which makes the word "religion" definite, because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it…As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each of one of the messengers. He said, "To everyone (of the Prophets) We have appointed a Law and a Way [*shir`a wa minhājan*]; and if God willed, he would have made you one nation" (5:48). If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse, just as they are not diverse in the fact that you have been commanded to come together and to perform them.[71]

Thus, Ibn ʿArabī differentiated between *dīn*, which means primordial ideal religion and "path," or *shir`a wa minhājan* ("law" and "way"; or contextualized/historicized religion"). Although the *din* is always singular and unitive, the various "paths" or "laws" are numerous. "The paths to God are numerous as the breaths of the creatures," he wrote, "since the breath emerges from the heart in accordance with the belief of the heart concerning Allāh."[72] Such approach endorsed

by Ibn 'Arabī is very essential in enhancing interfaith dialogue and acceptance of different religious perspectives.

The careful reader of Ibn 'Arabī will see that his teachings on the underlying unity of all human systems of belief and practice are part of an elaborate esoteric commentary on the first article of Islamic faith *La ilāha illā Allāh* (there is no God except God). We can see a very direct example of this by returning briefly to his exegesis of Qur'an 23:115.

That within which the existence of the cosmos has become manifest is the Real; it becomes manifest only within the Breath of the All-Merciful, which is the Cloud. So it is the Real, the Lord of the Throne, who gave the Throne its all-encompassing shape, since it encompasses all things. Hence the root within which the forms of the cosmos became manifest encompasses everything in the world of corporeal bodies. This is nothing other than the Real Through Whom Creation Takes Place. Through this receptivity, it is like a container within which comes out into the open (*burūz*) the existence of everything it includes, layer upon layer, entity after entity, in a wise hierarchy (*al-tartīb al-ḥikamī*). So It brings out into the open that which had been unseen within It in order to witness it.[73]

Another verse central to understanding Ibn 'Arabī's teaching on religious diversity is: "Everything is perishing except His Face [or Essence] (Q 28:88). This verse refers to the sense of the relativity of all things in the face of God, which is helpful in cultivating the humility necessary for openness to other perspectives and other stories of encounters with the divine. Equally important are references such as:

And unto God belong the East and the West; and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God (Q 2:115).
He is with you, wherever you are (Q 57:4).
We are nearer to him [man] than the neck artery (Q 50:16).
God cometh in between a man and his own heart (Q 8:24).
Is He not encompassing all things? (Q 41:54).
He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward (Q 57:3)

These verses express a profound sense of the immanence of the divine which, Ibn `Arabī rightly argued, are set in balance with those preeminent verses such as we find in Surat *al-Ikhlās* (Q 112)and the famous "Throne Verse" of Surat al-Baqara (Q 2:255)For Ibn Arabī, the balance between the *tanzīh* (transcendence) and *tashbīh* (immanence) of God plays a major role in his thinking about religious diversity. *Tanzīh* involves the fundamental assertion of God's essential and absolute incomparability "with each thing and all things."[74] It involves the assertion that His being transcends all creaturely attributes and qualities. At the same time, however, "each thing displays one or more of God's attributes, and in this respect the thing must be said to be "similar"(*tashbīh)* in some way to God."[75] Thus, a certain similarity can be found between God and creation. Unlike traditionalist theologians, who opine that these two concepts are diametrically opposed and cannot exist together in harmony, for Ibn 'Arabī, both *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are in this sense compatible with each other and complementary. *Tanzīh* and *tashbīh* "derive necessarily from the Essence on the one hand and the level of Divinity on the other."[76]

Out of this distinction, Ibn 'Arabī challenges, that anybody who exercises and upholds *tanzīh* or *tashbīh* in its extreme form is either an ignorant man, or one who does not know how to behave properly toward God, because such extremes are attempts to delimit God's Absoluteness. To deny completely the authenticity of other religious "ways" is to insist that there is no divine

self-disclosure to be found there. In doing so, one sets limits on God much in the same way as those who only know God through cognitive activity (which tends to place emphasis on transcendence) and not through affective experience (which can convey a profound sense of divine immanence). Only when one combines *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* in one's attitude can one be regarded as a 'true knower' (*`ārif*) of the Absolute.[77] Ibn 'Arabī said,

When the Gnostics know Him through Him, they become distinguished from those who know Him through their own rational consideration (*naẓar*), for they possess nondelimitation, while others have delimitation. The Gnostics through Him witness Him in each thing or in the entity of each thing, but those who know Him through rational consideration are removed far from Him by a distance which is required by their declaration of His comparability. Hence they place themselves on one side and the Real on the other. Then they call Him "from a far place" (Qur'an 41:44).[78]

Ibn 'Arabī's Hermeneutics and Modernist Thinkers

Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* relates to his teaching regarding the underlying unity of all religions, and is by no means restricted to medieval esoteric hermeneutics. The highly influential Salafī modernist thinker Rashīd Ridā interpreted the meaning of the word *islām* in the Qur'an, which complements and supports Ibn `Arabī's approach to the question of religious diversity. The Qur'an declares, "Do they seek other than the religion of God, when unto Him submit whoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly? (Q 3:83). Here the Qur'an uses the word *aslama* based on the fourth form of the root *SLM* which has to do with the act of "submitting" to God. The word *islām* is the *maṣdar* or verbal noun from this same form and thus literally means "submission."

As is the case in Q 3:19,[79] in this verse *islām* is identified as "the religion of God." According to Rashīd Ridā, understanding the word *islām* in the proper sense (i.e., writ large as "Islam") to refer to the doctrines, traditions, and practices observed by Muslims, is a post-Qur'anic phenomenon according to which *al-dīn* is understood in its social and customary form.[80] For Ridā, these forms of Islam, writ large, "which [vary] according to the differences which have occurred to its adherents in the way of uncritical acceptance, have no relationship with true *islām*. On the contrary, Ridā wrote, "it is subversive of true faith."[81]

Ridā's interpretation of the Qur'anic usage of the word *islām* is helpful in understanding the distinction Ibn 'Arabī made between the form and essence of revealed religion. Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation of the scriptural story of Noah is clearly rooted in this distinction. In the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn 'Arabī said that the people of Noah are not entirely mistaken. For Ibn 'Arabī, the idols that were worshiped by the people of Noah were in fact 'the diversity of the names' understood by Ibn 'Arabī as the Divine Names through which human beings become aware of the self-disclosure of God. The people of Noah committed "the sin of idolatry" not because they recognized the divine in a plurality of forms, but because of their ignorance that these forms are not deities in themselves, but rather concrete forms of the one God's self-manifestation. Their sin, therefore, was in their worship of these forms as independent entities apart from God. According to Ibn `Arabī, the idols are nothing other than God's self manifestations.[82] For Ibn 'Arabī, the Qur'anic verse: "And Thy Lord hath decreed that you should worship none other than Him" (Q

17:23) does not mean, as it is usually understood, "that you should not worship anything other than God," but rather "that whatever you worship, you are thereby not (actually) worshiping anything other than God."[83]

In this sense, "idolatry" -- as serious a sin as it is -- can be nothing more than a matter of the worshipper's awareness and intention. Since there is no God but God, it is actually impossible to worship anything other than He. Some may well ask what impact such a distinction might have on the approach to the whole question of religious diversity. Does it matter, in other words, whether one asserts that idolaters are sinning because they are actually worshipping something other than God, or because, though they worship God and cannot do otherwise, they sin in their lack of awareness of the true nature of their worship? The answer seems to be "yes." By locating the sin in the human being's intent, rather than in objective reality, one retains the necessity of discernment in intent and the meaningfulness of true worship versus idolatry, without the arrogance of believing that some human beings have an authentic relationship to God and others do not. In this way, not only is it possible to perceive degrees of authenticity in different forms of worship, but it also no longer guarantees that just because an individual or group adopts a particular form of worship, they are immune to idolatry.[84]

There are many other aspects of Ibn 'Arabī's thought that are directly relevant to his words about religious diversity, but which, unfortunately, are too numerous to mention here.[85] Although Ibn 'Arabī's teaching on religious diversity is not in the least bit relativist (i.e., it never denies the superiority of Islam over the other religions of humanity), it abhors the arrogance and idolatry of suggesting that other religious ways are not somehow themselves manifestations of authentic human connections to the one source of all being.

In the final analysis, Ibn 'Arabī warns his fellow Muslims against restricting God to the form of one's own belief, a warning that is entirely in accordance with the thrust of so much Qur'anic discourse:

Beware of being bound up by a particular creed and rejecting others as unbelief! Try to make yourself a prime matter for all forms of religious belief. God is greater and wider than to be confined to one particular creed to the exclusion of others. For He says, "Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God."[86]

He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.[87]

In light of certain key Qur'anic verses, Ibn 'Arabī maintained that Muslims are commanded to believe in all revelations and not just in that conveyed by the Prophet of Islam. He wrote:

All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muḥammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muḥammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*bāṭil*] by abrogation -- that is the opinion of the ignorant.[88]

Thus, Ibn 'Arabī insisted that one should not delimit God within just one of the many possible modes of divine self-disclosure. Instead, the true Muslim is a person who recognizes God in all revelations:

So turn your attention to what we have mentioned and put it into practice! Then you will give the Divinity its due and you will be one of those who are fair toward their Lord in knowledge of Him. For God is exalted high above entering under delimitation. He cannot be tied down by one form rather than another. From here you will come to know the all-inclusiveness of felicity for God's creatures and the all-embracingness of the mercy which cover everything.[89]

Ibn 'Arabī alerted the believers not to fall into particularism -- an admonition that resonates with the Qur'anic dictum: "And they say: 'None enters paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian.' These are their own desires. Say: 'Bring your proof if you are truthful.' Nay, but whosoever surrenders his purpose to God while doing good, his reward is with his Lord; and there shall be no fear upon them, neither shall thy grieve."[90]

The Application of Ibn 'Arabī's Hermeneutics to Interfaith Dialogue

One of the larger problems facing participants in Christian-Muslim dialogue is the interpretation of certain biblical and Qur'anic verses that are generally interpreted in highly exclusivist ways and often cited by the opponents of dialogue. Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics can provide a framework for a more fruitful dialogue grounded in orthodox/mainstream tradition than those currently available. Let us begin with a review of these verses and then move on to envision an application of the hermeneutics.[91]

The Qur'an does not only contain verses that clearly declare the divine ordainment of religious diversity, exhortations to engage in dialogue, and the presence of piety and righteousness in religions other than Islam. It also contains polemical verses. For example, the Qur'an says:

O ye who believe, take not the Jews and the Christians for friends [or guardians.] They are friends [or guardians] one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends [or guardians] is (one) of them. Truly, God guideth not wrongdoing folk (5:51).

And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of God. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. God fighteth them. How perverse are they! (9:30).

A common radically exclusivist interpretation of these verses is that Jews and Christians are corrupted peoples practicing corrupted traditions of worship and belief. As such, they can never be trusted to be "friends" to the believers. Moreover, these peoples are understood to be the enemies of the faithful since God himself curses them.

The New Testament has its own fair share of verses that have conventionally been interpreted in highly exclusivist ways. Such verses include those that: present Jesus as the 'one [and only] mediator' between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5); that there is 'no other name under heaven' by which persons can be saved (Acts 4:12); that "no one comes to the Father except through me [i.e., Jesus] (John 14:6); that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God (John 1:14); and that whoever sees him sees the Father (John 14:7).[92] Hence Jesus is viewed as the only one

who truly and fully reveals God. Based on verses such as these, Jesus is claimed to be the particular and unique savior of the world.

The traditions of exclusivist interpretation of both these verses tend to be uninformed from within as well as from without, meaning they are usually deaf to alternative interpretative possibilities from within their own tradition. By uninformed from without, they are usually articulated with little to no experience of genuine encounter with the other, or if there is experience of the other, it is short-lived and highly negative.

By applying some of the key points of Ibn 'Arabī as a framework for exploring the significance of these verses, we can more clearly see the ways this orthodox teacher can foster a more fruitful dialogue on this subject. At this juncture, however, the Ibn `Arabī hermeneutics proposed here by no means provide the only promise of fruitfulness for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Rather, this way is one among many possibilities.

Central to the problem of the Qur'anic and biblical verses cited above is the *infinite potential for meaning* inherent in the nature of divine revelation. In the context of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, this important hermeneutical principle would by no means require an *a priori* dismissal of the more exclusivist interpretations of these verses. It would be a misuse of the matrix to load it with a particular political or philosophical agenda other than the foundational conviction that interfaith (and intra-faith) dialogue is inherently good and necessary for the welfare of the participating traditions as well as for the welfare of the human family. Rather, this principle would be a reminder of these verses and their exclusivist interpretations that other possibilities for interpretation exist that may well be equally defensible within the context of the larger tradition and thus, depending on the authoritative consensus of the community of believers, may be equally or even more orthodox in nature.

Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, especially its infinite potential of scriptural meaning, would encourage two complementary activities regarding any scriptural text that posed a challenge (either positive or negative) for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding and trust. The first of these activities would be to imitate the master himself by delving as deeply as possible into all the contextual resources available for interpreting these texts. This involves not only reading Qur'anic or biblical passages in light of other proximate and otherwise related Qur'anic or biblical passages, but also using all available tools of historical research to uncover key elements of the original context of a given passage's revelation (in the case of the Qur'an) and a given passage's composition (in the case of the Bible).

The second would also involve a certain imitation of Ibn 'Arabī's valorization of experience and its importance in interpreting sacred scripture. In this case, the most significant experience would be the encounter with the religious other. The concept of infinite potential for meaning of scripture would encourage interpretations of all scripture -- especially passages that purport to speak about the religious other -- to be rooted in actual experience of that other. Simple reason dictates that any interpretation of what the Qur'an, for example, says about Jews and/or Christians is de facto faulty if it cannot stand in the face of a given Muslim's authentic relationships with Jews and/or Christians.

Another pertinent element of scriptural interpretation is the teaching of the *oneness of being*. This concept dictates that God's presence and influence can be found in all traditions; thus, any interpretation of sacred scripture that suggests otherwise would be suspect. From the perspective of Ibn 'Arabī and the orthodoxy he represents, no passage of the Qur'an should be interpreted to suggest that any group of people, by virtue of their beliefs and practices, live outside of a relationship with God. This does not mean that, according to this concept, no

distinction can be made between "believers," for example, and "unbelievers." It also does not mean that one tradition cannot be perceived as superior, in certain ways, to another. It does mean that the hubris of decreeing God to be "here" and not "there," or "with us" and not at all "with you" cannot be accepted.

Of course, there are many other challenges encountered in the dialogue besides those of interpreting apparently exclusivist scriptural passages. Another example might be problems of interpreting either our own or others' doctrinal formulations. A primary illustration of this in Christian-Muslim dialogue is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and/or the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Muslim doctrine of *tawhīd*. Although some expect the dialogue to resolve such fundamental doctrinal differences as this one, this is by no means the purpose of the matrix. Here is where the master's idea of the "naming of God" can be helpful. Given the importance of our doctrinal formulations to the integrity of our respective traditions, we must never fall into the arrogance of believing either that these formulations are equivalent with the reality (i.e., God) of which they speak, or the arrogance of believing that they amount to little more than disposable conjecture in our quest for the truth.

Ibn 'Arabī's teaching regarding the "naming of God" asks us never to lose sight of our creaturely limitations -- especially the inherent inadequacy of our modes of discourse to convey an understanding of God. Another way of putting this is to say that we do not preserve the integrity and sanctity of our doctrinal formulations by absolutizing them in such a way as to exclude all others. Rather, we preserve this integrity and sacredness precisely by humbly recognizing that the deepest understanding of these inherently limited linguistic formulations must leave room for validating and dignifying the religious experiences and formulations of others, no matter how different they may be from our own.

Also, to the extent that we lose a sense of humility with respect to our doctrinal formulations, we also lose a sense of humility as we stand before our traditions and thus run the risk of lapsing into idolatry by mistaking our traditions for God. Ibn 'Arabī's teaching of the distinction between "God created by the believer" and the "Godhead" reminds us that however passionately we may believe in the articles of our faiths or however passionately and devoutly we may perform our rituals, the moment we begin to use these beliefs and practices as weapons to establish the dominance of the self over others is the moment we mark ourselves as servants of our own egos rather than of God.

By interpreting scripture with a hermeneutic of the infinite potential of meaning, by never forgetting the oneness and ubiquitousness of the divine Being, by recognizing the limitation of our theological language and our success distinguishing between the "God" we create and the ultimately ineffable Godhead, we truly plumb the depths of our relationship to God by opening ourselves to the goal at the heart of both Islam and Christianity. This goal is to transform the believers into better and better beings, more deeply committed to the service of God and one another.

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[1] Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Merciful, The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn `Arabi* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999), p.9.

[2] Cf. Khalīl ibn Aybak Safadī, *al-Wāfī bi al-Wafāyāt* (Weisbaden, 1966, vol.4), p.178. See also Al-Muḥadarāt, I:34 (Cairo, 1906), where Ibn 'Arabī said: "I was born in Murcia when it was under sultan Abī 'Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Mardanish's reign, in Andalus," cited by Miguel Palacios, *Ibn 'Arabī, ḥayātuhu wa-madhhabuh*, al-Isbaniyah `Abd al-Rahsan Badawī, trans. *El-Islam Christianizado*; *estudio del "sufismo" a través de las obras de Abenarabi de Murcia* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjlu al-Misriyah, 1965), p.6.

[3] Muh. B. Sa'd b. Muh. B. Aḥmad Ibn Mardanish.

[4] Ibn 'Arabī had at least two uncles who were on the path (*zāhid*). Ibn 'Arabī said in *Futuḥāt*, "One of my family who was *zāhid*, or who withdrew from the world, was from Tunis. He used to stay in the mosque praying for God and his tomb was a place for *ziyārah* (visit)." See Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn `Arabī,*al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiya II*, `Uthmān Yaḥya, ed. (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyat al-`Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1972, vol.12 dated 1989), p.23.

[5] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Diwān al-akbar* (Bulaq, 1271 AH), p.47, cited by Addās, Claude, *Ibn `Arabī, ou, La quete du sourfre rouge* (*Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn `Arabi*), Peter Kingsley, trans. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p.17.

[6] See Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya I*, p.506 and pp.588--89; cited by Claude Addās, *Ibn `Arabī: The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000), pp.11--12; see also Addās, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, pp.48--49.

[7] I borrow the term "imaginal" from William Chittick (see his *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn 'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity*.Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), who uses it as an alternative for "imaginary" primarily because the latter connotes a sense of the false or unreal in colloquial English. By "imaginal," Chittick coined an adjective to describe a phenomenon closely connected to the imagination, but which is understood to be uniquely real.

[8] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn `Arabī* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p.377.

[9] Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Merciful,* p.152.

[10] 'Abbās, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, p.278.

[11] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyyah I*, p.723; Abbas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur,* p.287.

[12] Abbās, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, p.287.

[13] See Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[14] See George Maqdisī, "Ibn Taymiyya: A Ṣūfī of the Qādiriya Order," *The American Journal of Arabic Studies*, vol.1, 1973, pp.118--129, quoted in Muḥammad Umar Mimūn, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p.10.

[15] Muḥammad 'Umar Mimūn, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

[16] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū`at al-rasā'il wa l-masā'il*, four volumes, Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā, ed. (Cairo: Maṭba`at al-Manār, 1922-1930), vol.4, p.179, quoted in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, p.96.

[17] Ibn al-Dawādarī, *Kanz al-durar wa l-jāmi` al-ghurar* (Wiesbaden: Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Islamiyya, al-Ma`had al-Almani li al-Athar bi al-Qahira, 1960-1982), p.143, quoted in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, p.96.

[18] Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, p.89.

[19] On *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see William Chittick, "*Waḥdat al-Wujūd* in Islamic Thought," *Bulletin of the Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*, 10 (1991), p.7--27; C. William Chittick, "Rūmī and *Waḥdat al-wujūd*," in Amīn Banūnī, Richard G. Hovannisian, and Georges Sabāgh, eds., *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and C. William Chittick, "Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunāwī on the Oneness of Being," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1981), 171--184.

[20] This is Chittick's translation of *al-a`yān al-thābita* from C. William Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.7 and *passim*. Knysh also adopts this translation.

[21] All terms, like "pre-existent" -- which are not direct English translations of an expression used by Ibn `Arabī and thus depart significantly from his primary discourse -- can be problematic. This is because, as Knysh points out, Ibn 'Arabī's discourse is "deliberately crafted so as to obfuscate its essence" (9). This does not mean Ibn 'Arabī is being deliberately obscurantist, but rather reminds us that Ibn 'Arabī recognizes the limitations of language in any attempt to describe the Real. In this particular instance, Ibn `Arabī is trying to distinguish between absolute nothingness and the absolute non-existence out of which God creates the phenomenal world. Insofar as "pre-existence" suggests any type of "existence" -- however *potential* and not *actual* it may be -- this is not what Ibn 'Arabī is trying to evoke when he describes something as a truly nonexistent "thing." From Ibn 'Arabī's perspective, the danger of a term like "pre-existent" is that it makes his cosmology more susceptible to the charge that he is denying *creatio ex nihilo*.

[22] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiya II,* p.666.34 in Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, p.85.

[23] Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū`āt*, vol.4, pp.21--22 quoted in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, p.102.

[24] Ibid., vol.1, p.183, in Knysh, *Ibn `Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition*, p.98.

[25] William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Ghazālī* (Edinburgh, University Press, 1963), p.60 See also Al-Ghazālī, *Al Munqid min al-dalāl* (Lahor: Hay'ah al-Awqāf bi-Ḥukumāt al-Bunjab, 1971).

[26] Especially in the contemporary sense in which "spirituality" is set up in opposition to "religion."

[27] For orthodoxy and heresy in medieval Islam, see Alexander Knysh, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment," *The Muslim World*, vol.83, no.1, January 1993.

[28] In his essay, "The Teacher and the Hermeneutical Task: a Reinterpretation of Medieval Exegesis," Michael Fishbane makes reference to the four-fold typology of medieval scriptural interpretation common to both the Jewish and Christian traditions. For Jewish exegetes, this typology took the form of the acronym PaRDeS, where P=*Peshat* (the literal meaning); R=*Remez* (the allegorical meaning); D=*derash* (the tropological and moral meaning); and

S=*Sod* (the mystical meaning). See Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.113.

[29] Fishbane, *Garments*, p.120.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Muhammad Shaḥrūr, a professor of civil engineering who was born in Damascus in 1938, asserts in his 800-page book *Al-kitāb wa'lqur'ān: qirā'a mu'āsira* (*The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Interpretation*) (1990) the timelessness of the Qur'an, that there is a direct conversation between the reader and the text, "If Islam is sound for all times and places," and that Muslims must not neglect historical developments and the interaction of different generations. Just as the Prophet, his contemporaries, and his immediate successors understood the text of the Qur'an in the light of their intellectual capacities and of their perception of the world, so we should read and understand it in the light of ours. We should reinterpret sacred texts and apply them to contemporary social and moral issues. The Qur'an should be read as if the Prophet Muḥammad had only recently died, [and] informed us of this Book (p.41).

[32] Ibn Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah IV*, p.367.3.

[33] Ibid., *II*, p.518.12. Indeed, Ibn 'Arabī was what Bruce Lawrence calls "a deep-sea diver in the Ocean of the Qur'an." (See Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an, A Biography* (New York: Broadway, 2006), p.109.

[34] Ibn Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah III*, p.465.23 in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.4.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Divine self-disclosure or self-manifestation is one of the most central teachings of Ibn 'Arabī's ontology. It is rooted in Ibn 'Arabī's reflection on a well-known *ḥadīth qudsī*[36]: "I was a Hidden Treasure [lit., "a treasure which was not recognized"] and desired [*out of love*] to be recognized, so I created the creatures and introduced Myself to them, and thus they recognized me." Ibid., *II*, p.322.29; II, p.310.20; II, p.232.11; II, p.399.29; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, pp.66,126,131,204,250). According to this concept, creation is God's self-disclosure to Godself through the veils and signs of the creatures. For Ibn Arabī, everything that exists in the world is, after all, nothing but the self-manifestation of the Absolute. In this case, Ibn Arabī uses the term "hidden treasure" to refer to God's Being before it manifests itself and comes to be known by means of creation. Ibn Arabī insisted, "through the universe [which means by the creation of universe] God comes to be known." (Sachico Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, p.11.)

[37] Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, p.91.

[38] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah I*, p.287.10; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, pp.91--92.

[39] Samer Akkāch, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam, An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), p.67.

[40] Ibn 'Arabī, Muḥyi al-Dīn. *The Bezels of Wisdom*. R.W.J. Austin, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p.65.

[41] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah II*, p.212.1-7, quoted in Salmān Bashīr, *Ibn 'Arabī's Barzakh, the Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p.123.

[42] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah II*, 316.10; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, pp.149,229,341--344.

[43] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah I*, p.287.19; and Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.141.

[44] *Wa law shā'a rabbuka la-ja`ala al-nāsa ummatan waḥidatan wa la yazālūna mukhtalifīn illā man raḥima rabbuka.*

[45], Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah II* p.85.14; and Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.141.

[46] Ibid., *II*, p.657.13.

[47] Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path of Knowledge*, p.340; and see Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah II*, p.509.31.

[48] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.163.

[49] From the hadith: "He who knows himself knows his Lord."

[50] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, *IV*, p.443.33; II, p.597.35; and Cp.342.

[51] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, 2.2ae.1.2, in John Hick, "Ineffability," *Religious Studies* 36, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.40.

[52] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah IV*, p.393.6; and Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.163.

[53] According to Chittick, Ibn 'Arabī alluded here to the words of Abraham quoted in the Qur'an, "Do you worship what you yourselves carve, while God created you and what you do?" (Q 37: 95-96. See Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.185. no.7.

[54] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyyah IV*, p.391.12, in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.151.

[55] Ibn 'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p.282.

[56] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah III*, p.153.12 in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.125.

[57] This translation should read: "a revealed law and a way (*shir`atan wa minhājan*)."

[58] Ibid., *III*, p.410.21, in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.145.

[59] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya IV*, p.416.29; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.164.

[60] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.139.

[61] *Wa li-llāhi al-mashriqu wa al-maghribu fa aynama tuwallū fa thamma waju Allāh*;see for example Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, A. Afīfī, ed. (Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1946)*, p.113, and Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.137.

[62] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.138.

[63] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya II*, p.148.11; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path to Knowledge*,p.303.

[64] On the transformation process in Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching, see William C. Chittick, “Belief and Transformation: Sufi Teaching of Ibn ‘Arabī,” *The American Theosophist* 74 (1986).

[65] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya II*, p.661.27; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*, p.381; also cited by Dom Sylvester Houedard, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Contribution to the Wider Ecumenism,” in *Muḥyi al-dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, A Commemorative Volume*, Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael Tiernan, eds. (Shaftesbury: Element, 1993), p.295.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya III*, p.94.19; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path to Knowledge*,pp.363--364; also cited by Dom Sylvester Houedard with slightly different translation in “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Contribution,” p.295.

[68] Ibid., *II*, p.415.18; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*,p.134.

[69] Ibid., p.414.13; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*, p.171.

[70] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya III*, p.410.25, 411.22; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*,pp.302-3.

[71] Ibid., p.413.15; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*, p.303.

[72] *Ibid.*, p.411.22; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*,p.303.

[73] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya II*, p.415.20; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*,p.134.

[74] Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path to Knowledge*,p. 9.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid., p.69.

[77] Toshihiko, Izutsu, *Ṣūfīsm and Taoism*, *A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*.(Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983), p.54.

[78] Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah III*, p.410.17; Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path to Knowledge*, p.110.

[79] Ibn ‘Arabī offers his own interpretation of 3:19 as follows: “Verily the true *dīn* with God is this *tawhīd* which He has prescribed for Himself. His *din* is, therefore, the *din* of the submission of one’s entire being . . . [to be a Muslim means that I have] severed myself from my ego and achieved annihilation in Him.” In Pseudo-Ibn ‘Arabī (`Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī), *Tafsir Ibn ‘Arabī*, vol.1 (Beirut: dār al-Ṣadr, nd), p.105, cited by Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, *An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, Oneworld, 1997), p.127.

[80] Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah), vol. 3, p.361, cited by Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism*, p.130.

[81] Ridā, *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, p.361.

[82] A.E. Afīfī, *Fuṣūṣ, Com*, p.39; see Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p.76, “The Wisdom of Exaltation in the Word of Noah.”

[83] Affīfī, *Fuṣūṣ*, *Com*, 39, Cf.; also Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam,* A. Afīfī, ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub ‘Arabī, 1946), pp.55--72; also cited by Isutzu, *Ṣūfīsm and Taoism*, pp.59--60.

[84] Nurcholis Madjid (1939-2005), one of Indonesia’s most respected Islamic scholars, graduated from the University of Chicago, was dubbed the icon of reform of the Islamic movement in Indonesia, and expressed concern that Islamic parties have become a new "Allāh" for Indonesian Muslims who regard them as sacred and who regard Muslims who do not vote for them as sinful.

[85] E.g., in the *Al-Futuḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī gives a more explicit explanation for the esoteric unity of all revelation, which is, for him, is innate. He quotes the verses 42:13, which affirm that the law with which Muḥammad is charged is the same used to charge Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Then, Ibn Arabī quoted from other verses, which mentioned further prophets, and concluded with verse 6:90: “Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance.” Then God says, “This is the Path that brings together every prophet and messenger. It is the performance of religion, scattering not concerning it and coming together in it. Bukhārī wrote a chapter “on what has come concerning the fact that the religion of the prophets is one’” (Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* III, p.413.12 in Chittick, *The Ṣūfī Path to Knowledge*, p.303). Ibn ‘Arabī also recommended to the seeker of God not to become fascinated with any one form of belief, but rather to try seeking the “knowledge that is inherent in God” (*‘ilm ladunī*), and not to be imprisoned within ideologically closed ways of viewing the phenomenal world. This is why Ibn al-`Arabi could convey the following in a poem in his *Tarjumān al-Aswāq* (*The Interpreter of Ardent Desires*): “My heart has become capable of every form.” According to Peter Coate, this aspect of Ibn `Arabī’s worldview reflects “the perfect immensity of his metaphysics which makes it intrinsically antithetical to all forms of

fundamentalism, cognitive or metaphysical" (Peter Coates, *Ibn 'Arabī and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously* (Oxford, Anqā Publishing, 2002), p.15.

[86] Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, p.113, cited by Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.176.

[87] Ibid., *II*, p.85.11 in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.176.

[88] Ibid., *III*, p.153.12 in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, p.125.

[89] Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah II*, p.85.20; Chittick, *The Sufi Path to Knowledge*, pp.355--356.

[90] Qur'an 2:112.

[91] My aim is *not* to create such a matrix. This can only be done in the context of actual praxis and, therefore, will obviously be influenced by many more interpretations of Ibn 'Arabī, Eckhart, and the two traditions (i.e., Islam and Christianity) than I, as an individual scholar/practitioner, could possibly bring to bear. My aim here, rather, is to try to envision *provisionally* what such a matrix might "look like," i.e., how it might function to enhance the dialogue.

[92] See this discussion in Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (New York: Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1985); Paul Knitter, "The World Religion and the Finality of Christ: A Critique of Hans Kung's On Being A Christian," in *Interreligious Dialogue*, Richard W. Rousseau, ed. (Ridge Row Press, 1981); Hans Kung, et al., *Christianity and The World Religions, Path of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1982); Frances Young, "A Cloud of Witness," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick, ed. (London: SCM Press, 1977).