
ISLAMIC MYSTICISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

M o h a m m a d S a e e d i m e h r

My heart is capable of every form,
a cloister of the monk, a temple for idols,
a pasture for gazelles, the votary's Ka'ba,
the tables of the Torah, the Koran.
Love is creed I hold: wherever turn His camels, love is still my creed and faith
Ibn 'Arabi

Introduction

Dialogue between Muslims and the followers of other religions, as a practice in reality, has a long history. During the early centuries after the emergence of Islam, especially the Abbasid period, many meetings for debates took place between Muslim scholars and the representatives of other religions who lived under the rule of Islamic states. Though these debates might seem to lack some conditions of what nowadays is typically seen as an ideal dialogue, they embedded initial forms of interreligious or interfaith dialogue¹ in its broad sense. This situation has continued to the extent that currently many Muslim intellectuals are motivated to engage seriously in dialogue with Christians, Jews, and the adherents of other religions. Nevertheless, theoretical discussion about the nature, goals, and conditions of interreligious dialogue

¹ Some writers use “interfaith dialogue” and “interreligious dialogue” differently; the former applies to a dialogue with the followers of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and the latter applies to a dialogue with the followers of other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In this paper, I use “interreligious dialogue” in a broad sense, namely a dialogue between the followers of all major religions.

is a modern endeavour. Despite the current rich literature on these topics many more issues remain that need thorough and deep attention of scholars who believe in the fruitfulness and even necessity of interreligious dialogue and are interested in making a positive contribution to the contemporary discourse on it.

In this paper I investigate Islamic Mysticism to find out how and to what extent the mystical views can build theoretical bases for a productive and fruitful interreligious dialogue. After some clarifications about the two keywords of this research, i.e., “interreligious dialogue” and “Islamic mysticism,” three mystical principles as the metaphysical-theological, the anthropological, and the hermeneutical bases of interreligious dialogue are discussed. In this section, regarding the unique status of Ibn ‘Arabi² in Islamic mysticism, I mostly deal with his views. Finally, I show how these principles can construct a plausible ground for the legitimacy and the utility of interfaith dialogue.

Interreligious Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue has been defined in several ways. “Cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, at both the individual and institutional level” seems to be a rather appropriate description. “Interaction,” in its broad sense, embraces the exchange of religious heritage including theological beliefs and religious experiences as well as joint enterprises to increase peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

The participants in interreligious dialogue are expected to seek a diversity of goals such as acquiring more profound knowledge of their own tradition and a more authentic and sympathetic understanding of others’ religious beliefs and practices. In order to be sufficiently successful, this dialogue should take place within some specific conditions. The participants should be totally honest and sincere in striving

² Abu Abd al-Allah Muhammad ibn al-Arabi (560/1165-630/1165) known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master). He wrote numerous books, among them these two are the most well-known: *The Meccan Illuminations or Revelations [al-Futūḥat al-Makkiya]* (Beirut: Dar al-Sader, n.d.) and *The Bezels of Wisdom [Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam]* (Beirut, 1946).

to come closer to the Truth. They also should have mutual trust and religious tolerance.³

To be sure, we can propose a more comprehensive list of what one may call “the prerequisites” of profound and productive interreligious dialogue. First, these can be divided into inner (individual) and outer (social) prerequisites. By the former, I mean those preconditions which should exist in the personality of individual participants in the dialogue. The social preconditions relate to the whole environment of the dialogue, including financial support of governmental and private organisations. Individual preconditions are of several types, including moral and doxastic ones. Humility is one of the most significant individual preconditions, which is considered as both a moral and an epistemic or intellectual virtue. Intellectual humility “involves having an appropriate, modest, and non-haughty view of our mental abilities, advantages, and disadvantages, that we have the ability to properly evaluate, and evaluate various ideas and positions in a way that includes respect for others who disagree with us. etc.”⁴ Moral humility “includes the understanding and genuine experience of oneself as merely one of the morally important beings whose interests and well-being are as worthy of equal consideration and care as the interest of others.”⁵ The positive role of humility in fostering interreligious dialogue seems beyond any doubt. A humble religious individual does not believe in any a priori moral and full-scale doxastic privilege for himself over the followers of other religions. Instead, he can easily assume that he is morally on a par with the adherents of other religions and that, through a sincere and effective dialogue, he can share his religious knowledge with them to gain a deeper understanding of his own as well as others’ traditions.

Humility, in the above sense, typically amounts to a remarkable degree of tolerance towards the people of other faiths. Tolerance is sym-

³ For a more detailed explication of the nature of interreligious dialogue and its rules, areas, and goals see: Leonard Swidler, “Interreligious and Interideological D: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today,” in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 6–30.

⁴ Vojko Strahovnik, “Humility, Religions, and Dialogue,” *Poligrafi* 22, no. 87/88 (2017): 4–5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

pathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or even conflicting with one's own. To be sure, religious tolerance does not in itself imply that the tolerant person accepts the content of conflicting beliefs or the appropriateness of dissimilar practices of the adherents of other religions. Instead, what it requires is to accept their holding that belief or performing that practice. Tolerance, then, is not an attitude towards religious beliefs and practices but believers and practitioners.⁶

Another point regarding interreligious dialogue is that it can be realized in different modes or levels. According to some classifications, it has four different levels: 1. The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joy and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. 2. The dialogue of action, in which persons of all religions collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. 3. The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. 4. The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.⁷ It should be noted that in what follows I am mostly concerned with the third and fourth levels of interreligious dialogue.

Islamic Mysticism

English texts usually use the phrase "Islamic mysticism" to refer to a specific part of the Islamic tradition. This term commonly is taken to mean the same as what is meant by the Arabic/Persian word 'irf ān. In order to show the status of Islamic mysticism within the Islamic tradition, many scholars used to distinguish between the exterior and interior dimensions of Islam. Islamic mysticism here comprises the interior

⁶ For a detailed discussion on the meaning and implications of religious tolerance see: Tay Newman, "The Idea of Religious Tolerance," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1978): 187–195, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009713>.

⁷ M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 95–96.

dimension of Islam compared to the Shari‘a as the exterior dimension. For example, Sayyid Hossein Nasr writes:

In the Islamic context mysticism means the esoteric dimension of Islam identified for the most part with Sufism but also with Shi‘ite esotericism, both Twelve-Imam and Isma‘ili. Moreover, Islamic mysticism understood in this sense is primarily a path of knowledge (*al-ma‘rifah*, *‘irfān*) to which the element of love is attached in accordance with the structure of the Islamic revelation...⁸

This distinction is also expressed through the distinction between esoterism (outward religion) and exoterism (inward religion). To be more illustrative, this distinction is sometimes expressed using the metaphor of the circle:

In Islam these two domains - outward and inward - are more or less distinct, though they bear a clear relationship to one another. This relationship is traditionally described as follows: the outward religion, or “exoterism” (known in Islam as the *Shari‘a*), may be likened to the circumference of a circle. The inner Truth, or “esoterism” (known as the *ḥaqīqa*) that lies at the heart of the religion, may be likened to the circle’s centre. The radius proceeding from circumference to centre represents the mystical or “initiatic” path (called the *tariqa*) that leads from outward observance to inward conviction, from belief to vision, and, in scholastic terms, from potency to act.⁹

As indicated in Nasr’s words, in the Islamic context, “mysticism” and *Sufism* (*taṣawwuf*) are frequently taken as having the same referent. In this view, *Sufism* “is the name given to the mysticism of Islam.”¹⁰ However, these two terms are not synonyms; they don’t have the same meaning. “Mysticism” is derived from the Greek *muein*, which means “to close the eyes and lips.” Therefore, “mysticism” literally connotes the meaning of knowledge of the Truth not by mere reason or other ordinary means but by heart.

Sufism is the English translation for the Arabic word *taṣawwuf*, which means “being a *sufi*.” Yet there has been a disagreement over the

⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Introduction to the Mystical Tradition,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy* (part 1), ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (Oxon: Routledge, 1996), 367.

⁹ William Stoddart, *Outline of Sufism: The Essentials of Islamic Spirituality*, foreword R. W. J. Austin (Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2012), 4–5.

¹⁰ A. J. Arberry, *Sufism, An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

meaning of *sufi* in this context. Among the several proposed morphologies, two are more common. According to the first, *sufi* is derived from the Arabic passive verb *ṣufīya*, which means “it was purified.” “The Sufi is thus the perfect initiate, the yogi of the Hindu tradition, the being who has succeeded in climbing back the arc of divine manifestation and who has “reached God” (*waṣīl*).”¹¹ According to the second view, which seems less plausible, *sufi* is derived from the Arabic word *ṣuf* (wool). This morphology is in harmony with the fact that since a real mystic must live a highly spiritual life he must be an ascetic and wearing coarse-grained woollen robes is a symbol for having an ascetic style of life.¹²

These etymologies aside, the exact meaning of *sufism* (*taṣawwuf*), as used nowadays in the Islamic and Western texts, has not been so clearly determined:

As Carl Ernst has pointed out in his excellent introduction to the study of Sufism, the word was given prominence not by the Islamic texts, but rather by British Orientalists, who wanted a term that they found attractive and congenial and that would avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the religion of Islam stereotypes that they themselves had often propagated.

In the Islamic texts, there is no agreement as to what the word *sufi* means, and authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy...

The modern studies of Sufism reflect the disagreement over the word found in the primary texts. Scholars do not agree among themselves as to what the name means, and any number of definitions and descriptions can be culled from their studies.¹³

Some scholars used to divide Islamic mysticism/sufism into two main sub-branches: Theoretical and practical. The former consists in the theoretical exposition of the Truth, and the latter is nothing but the realisation of the Truth via spiritual practice.¹⁴ Theoretical mysticism consists in the Knowledge of the Absolute Being or Reality (God), His

¹¹ Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, transl. Roger Gaetani (Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2010), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 2–3.

¹⁴ See: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 32.

attributes, names, and manifestations and the features of the Beginning and the End. Practical mysticism, on the other hand, is the knowledge of how one can travel one's spiritual journey (*sulūk*) towards God. Mysticism, in both these applications, is a certain kind of knowledge. However, "practical mysticism" is sometimes used to convey another meaning, namely a kind of human practice or a form of life in accordance with mystical knowledge – a practical process of intentional ascension towards God. It seems that, in the following passage, David Cook is considering this last meaning of "Islamic Mysticism."

Mysticism in Islam is understood in terms of a process (*tariq*) that is guided by the direction of a spiritual mentor (called a *shaykh* or a *pir*) having the goal of eventual union with God (Allah). This process is usually a life-long one, during the course of which it is crucial that the initiate combat his or her baser impulses located in the soul (Qur'an 12:53). To complete this process, the initiate must place himself or herself completely under the spiritual supervision of the mentor and carry out an ever-increasing series of spiritual (and sometimes physical) exercises. These exercises have the goal of emptying out the personality of the initiate and filling it with the remembrance of the divine and, ultimately, preparing the person for union. Additional exercises can include mortification of the body and deprivation of sleep and food, but interestingly not chastity, which is not seen as a value by Muslims. The initiate proceeds through a series of levels or stations that progress toward the promised union.¹⁵

What would be, then, the position of Islamic mysticism towards issues like religious diversity and interreligious dialogue? Some contemporary scholars of Islamic mysticism assume that among different Islamic sciences, mysticism can provide a more positive and sympathetic explanation of the diversity and prepare a productive way for the dialogue. Nasr's view seems to be a good example. After a very absorbing discussion of Islam's positive encounter with other religions (Christianity, Judaism, as well as the eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism) on different levels such as jurisprudence, theology, history,

¹⁵ David Cook, "Mysticism in Sufi Islam," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion*, May 4, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.51>.

science, and philosophy¹⁶, he concludes that it is only on the level of Islamic mysticism (or Sufism, in his own words) that “the most profound encounter with other traditions has been made and where one can find the indispensable ground for the understanding in depth of other religions today.” He continues:

The Sufi is one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to Unity, and from the particular to the Universal. He leaves the many for the One, and through this very process is granted the vision of the One in the many. For him all forms become transparent, including religious forms, thus revealing to him their unique origin. Sufism or Islamic gnosis is the most universal affirmation of that perennial wisdom which stands at the heart of Islam and in fact of all religion as such.¹⁷

In the rest of this paper, I shall defend this view through explaining some principles or doctrines of Islamic mysticism which directly or indirectly can pave the path for promotion and enhancement of inter-religious dialogue. This topic, it must be emphasized, is too broad to be exhausted in a short paper. Thus, what follows should be seen just as a small part of what should be done in this respect.

A Metaphysico-Theological Basis

The metaphysical problem of “unity and plurality” is usually seen as one of the most complicated problems of philosophy which can be traced back to the ancient era. During the history of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, three main views have been presented. According to the first view, apparently endorsed by the so-called Muslim peripatetic philosophers like Avicenna (370/980-429/1037), the universe consists of numerous distinct entities or existents. The theological implication of this view is that God and His creatures are metaphysically distinct entities while God, as the creator, is the efficient cause of them. The second view, proposed and defended by Mulla Sadra (979/1572-1050/1640), is based on the metaphysical principle of the gradation of existence

¹⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam and the Encounter of Religions,” in *Sufi Essays*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1999), 143–146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

(*tashkik al-wujūd*). Existence has a unique reality that embraces a hierarchy of grades or levels. The highest level which is infinite in itself belongs to God, and other levels of existence which are more or less finite pertain to His creatures. On the one hand, existence, as the single reality common among hierarchical levels of beings, provides a real unity. On the other hand, the multiplicity of levels provides a real plurality. This view is usually called “unity in plurality and plurality in unity.”

The third view, usually called “*wahdat al-wujūd*” (unity of existence) and mostly reflected in the mystical works, has been interpreted in different ways.¹⁸ According to one standard interpretation, this view contends that there is no existent in the reality except God and thus, the so-called “creatures” are not real existents but mere manifestations of Him. It is widely believed that the first Muslim mystic who theoretically developed this view was Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), though according to some scholars, he never used the term “*wahdat al-wujūd*.”¹⁹

With regard to the principle of the unity of existence, Ibn ‘Arabi distinguishes between two dimensions of existence; hidden or interior and unveiled or exterior. In the first dimension, there is no plurality and no determination and thus, God, in this respect, is totally unknown and epistemologically inaccessible. The second dimension is the realm of

¹⁸ For a deep and detailed exposition of the most significant interpretations see: Mulla Mohammad Mahdi Naraqī, *Qurrat al-'Oyoon* in *Muntakhabati az Athar-e Hukama-ye Ilahi-e Iran*, ed. Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Qum: Markaz-e Intisharat-e Daft-e Tabliqat-e Eslami, 1378/1999), 534–601.

¹⁹ A few Sufis – like Ahmad Sirhindi – believe that Ibn ‘Arabi’s authentic view was not a metaphysical thesis about the unity of existence but an exposition of what we may call “*wahdat al-shuhūd*” (the unity of witnessing). According to this interpretation, what is claimed here is that during the final stages of his or her spiritual journey, the real mystic or *sufi* ascends to a very high level so that whenever he/she looks at the whole universe via the heart, she/he witnesses nothing real but God. It is obvious that according to this construal “*wahdat al-wujūd*” would not be a metaphysical but an anthropological and epistemological thesis. For a survey of this view see: Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1971).

Ibn ‘Arabi’s endorsement of this view has provoked negative reactions in the Islamic world, especially among some Muslim jurists (*mufti*). For example, the *hanbali mufti*, Ibn Timiyyeh, accused Ibn ‘Arabi of heresy because of his support of *wahdat al-wujūd*.

God's manifestations in the sense that His multiple attributes manifest in the form of multiple creatures.²⁰

Following Ibn 'Arabi, Sayyid Haydar Amoli (d. 787/1385), a distinguished Shi'ite mystic, made a distinction between theological monotheism (*al-tawhīd al-ulūhī*) and ontological monotheism (*al-tawhīd al-wujūdi*). The former is the monotheistic view of the "folk of the exterior" (*ahl al-zāhir*), which merely means that there is no god but Allah. The latter, however, is the view of the "folk of the interior" (*ahl al-bātin*), who do not believe in the plurality of existents but accept just one single being; i.e., the Divine being.²¹

The quintessence of the metaphysics of *wahdat al-wujūd* – i.e., the explanation of unity in respect to the unicity of existence or the highest Reality (God) – and interpretation of plurality in respect to its multiple manifestations or theophanies (*tajalliāt*) has a great impact on the mystic's whole picture of God, man, creation, religion, prophethood, etc.

The first question is about the creation; how the One came to manifest Himself in the multiplicity of the world. According to the Muslim mystics, this multiplicity initially was present in God's knowledge in the form of archetypes or "permanent entities" (*al-a'yān al-thabita*). Though the very essence of God was eternally hidden, His Different Names and Attributes (*al-Asmā' wa al-Sifāt*) had an ontological request for being manifested via creation. Thus, God revealed the whole creation by his cosmic order (*al-amr*) and brought about the creatures as signs and mirrors, reflecting Him in a limited manner. The ground of this cosmic emergence is nothing but Divine love as is divulged in the sacred tradition (*al-hadith al-qudsī*)²²: "I was a hidden treasure. Then I loved to be Known, Thus, I created the creation to be known."²³ Among all God's other manifestations, man enjoys the highest status.

²⁰ Majid Fakhri, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 258.

²¹ Reza Shah-Kazemi, "The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue: Sufi Perspectives on the Universality of the Qur'anic Message," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Indiana: World Wisdom, inc., 2004), 143.

²² "*Al-hadith al-qudsī*" refers to those sayings of the prophet Muhammad whose wording is of the Prophet but the content is attributed to God. Because of this, they are not included in the Qur'an.

²³ Fakhri, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 259.

The so-called “perfect man” (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) is the compendium of the whole creation in which all the possible perfections are instantiated. Thus, the perfect man is the microcosm as opposed to the created universe as the macrocosm.

How can we, then, explain the undeniable fact that different religious people have different conceptions of God in their minds and consequently worship different deities? Ibn ‘Arabi accepts this fact and emphasises that ordinary people (who have not reached the stage of the perfect man) first create a god in their imagination and then worship this “believed god.”²⁴

God is created in the belief of His bondsmen. For, when a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through his consideration. Hence, he worships only a god that he has created through his consideration. He has said to it “Be!”, and it has come into existence. That is why God commanded us to worship the god brought by the Messenger and spoken of in the Book. For if you worship this God, you will be worshipping your creator, and you will have fully given worship its due.²⁵

Nevertheless, according to *wahdat al-wujūd*, even these different gods are the One’s manifestations in different minds and imaginations. Yet, there is no mistake in believing in these gods; the main mistake is committed when one takes these “believed gods” as the Absolute Reality and denies others. A perfect mystic is able to believe in God in all His manifestations.

Moreover, the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* entails the unity and universality of Divine revelation. Each Divine prophet is a specific manifestation of the universal Divine logos, or God’s word, which is commonly named by the mystics “the reality of Muhammad” (*al-haqiqat al-muhammadiyya*). Accordingly, each religion reveals a specific aspect of Divine Names and Attributes.²⁶ Therefore, the diversity of religions

²⁴ Ghasem Kakaie, “Interreligious Dialogue: Ibn ‘Arabi and Meister Eckhart,” The Muhyidin Ibn Arabi Society, accessed September 7, 2017, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/interreligious-dialogue.html>.

²⁵ Ibn ‘Arabi, *al-Futūḥat al-Makkiyya*, Beirut: Dar al-Sader, vol. IV, 142–143. The translation is quoted from: Ghasem Kakaie, “Interreligious Dialogue.”

²⁶ Nasr, “Islam and the Encounter of Religions,” 149.

as a socio-historical fact never means that they are totally opposite ways to opposite aims. Instead, there are different ways that are supposed to guide man to the same objective.

Diversity of religions is occasionally expressed differently using a specific mystical jargon; the unity of the religion and the diversity of the Divine law (*Shari'a*). Commenting on the Qur'anic verse "And We sent no messenger before thee but We inspired him, (saying): There is no God save Me (Allah), so worship Me" (21:25), Ibn 'Arabi writes:

In this verse God mentions "worship," but no specific practices, for He also said: "For each [of the prophets] We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out 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 Law (*Shari'a*). There is no single practice in each and every prophecy, only the performance of the religion, coming together of it, and the statement of the monotheism (*tawhid*). This is indicated in God's words, "He hath ordained for you that religion which He commended unto Noah, and that which We inspire in thee (Muhammad), and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish religion, and be not divided therein" (42:13).²⁷

According to this view, one may say, the unique Divine religion is the single spirit which, over the history of mankind, has become immanent in various bodies as different Divine laws. But how can we explain the diversity of *Shari'a* while *religion* is the same? Why God did not fix the same *Shari'a* for all human beings through the history of revelation? Ibn 'Arabi's response is clear: The inner constitutions, as well as mental and spiritual capacities of humans, are not the same; some are less knowing and some others are more knowing, some are less vicious and others are more vicious. These natural differences lead to people's different images of God. Few of them can gain a (pure mystical) knowledge of God beyond any limitations while others picture God just through His attributes. It seems that, to understand this explanation in a more rational fashion, we should apply these natural differences to nations and societies too. Consequently, the idea would be that each specific Divine law accords with the dominant cognitive and spiritual capaci-

²⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥat al-Makkiya*, vol. II, 414.

ties of a specific nation during a certain period of time. Regarding these differences among different nations, each Divine law emphasized some specific aspects of religious doctrines and practices which were more fitting to the society.

It is noteworthy that one should not conclude from the foregoing remarks about Ibn ‘Arabi’s point of view that he advocates religious pluralism in the sense that all different religions are totally *equal* in respect to presenting the Truth for mankind. Using the metaphor of “sun and stars” he, as a Muslim mystic, endorses the view that Islam, as the final manifestation of Divine religion, has abrogated the previous forms (Divine laws) without annulling them:

All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of 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 take place through Muhammad’s revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of 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 revealed religions. They are not rendered null by abrogation, that is the opinion of the ignorant.²⁸

Understood in this way, Ibn ‘Arabi’s view of the diversity of religions is commonly labelled by the contemporary traditionalists as “transcendental unity of religions.”²⁹

This attitude toward the unity of the quintessence of Divine religion and the diversity of its manifestations has been adopted by other great Muslim mystics. Kashani, for instance, put the difference in terms of the permanency of the “absolute” or unconditioned religion and the mutability of its different forms: “So the right religion (*ad-dīn al-qayyim*) is tied to that which is immutable within knowledge and

²⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi, *al-Futuḥat al-Makkiyah*, vol. III, 153.

²⁹ For a classical exposition of the idea of “transcendent unity of Religions” see: Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, introduction Huston Smith (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1984).

action; while the revealed Law is tied to that which alters in respect of rules and conditions.”³⁰

The relevant implications of the mystical principle of *wahdat al-wujūd* for interreligious dialogue are not limited to what has been mentioned so far. More scrutiny may lead one to discover new implications. For example, as William Chittick has shown, we may concentrate on how for Ibn ‘Arabi *wahdat al-wujūd* can lead to the truth of opposite religious beliefs. On the face of it, this conclusion may look, especially for professional philosophers and theologians, absurd and irrational. Nevertheless, if one sees a belief as a specific manifestation of the Truth, then every belief will have its own contribution to truth. Chittick elucidates this line of thought as follows:

“God,” after all, is *wujūd*, and *wujūd* embraces all of reality on whatever level it is envisaged. In respect to its manifestation, *wujūd* is named by every name in the cosmos. Thus every knowledge possessed by every knower ... is in fact knowledge of God...

If everyone has a belief, can we say that all beliefs are true?... He [Ibn ‘Arabi] would most likely say that the answer depends on what we mean by “true.” If “true” means that a knotting corresponds to reality, then of course all beliefs are true, since each belief represents some aspect of reality, however limited and distorted that aspect might be. If a belief did not correspond to reality in some way, it would not exist... Hence, we can reach a preliminary conclusion that beliefs are true, no matter what their content.³¹

In order to explain the diversity of human pictures of God, Ibn ‘Arabi sometimes uses the metaphor of a mirror. The Real, or God, is like a single mirror in which everyone sees his or her own image: “It is as if someone sees in the mirror his own image or the image of the others. In both cases, the mirror is a single object and the forms are many for the seer.” And what brings about the people’s controversy over the true image of God is that “every believer believes in God only through what he creates in his own soul. Thus, in their beliefs, God is made. That

³⁰ Shah-Kazemi, “The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue,” 162.

³¹ William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 138.

is, they see not other than their own souls and what they have made within it.”³²

Fītra: The Anthropological Basis

The theory of *fītra*, applied to the very nature of the man as originated by God, has been more or less accepted by many Islamic schools of thought. However, mystics usually develop this theory and interpret it in a mystical fashion. The Arabic root “*f-t-r*” initially means “to split or cleave” and in its secondary usage means “to create” as if the act of creation is essentially like splitting the curtain of non-existence and bringing out the creatures into existence. The Qur’an calls God *fātir* since He is the Creator of the world. When the human nature is involved, different English translations are proposed for the Arabic word *fītra* such as “primordial or original constitution” and “innate or archetypal nature.” Generally speaking, the theory of *fītra* claims that due to the Divine creation and in terms of their original constitution, human beings have a certain kind of inclination to and knowledge of God and religion. The proponents of this theory have been typically inspired by the following famous Qur’anic verse:

So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith – God’s original (*Fītrat Allah*) upon which He originated mankind. There is no change in God’s creation. That is the right religion; but most men know it not. [30:30]

According to this verse, God has created man in a permanent original state which is directed towards the permanent Divine religion. Moreover, according to a very well-known hadith (saying of the prophet Mohammad), every new-born child is born in accordance with this primordial nature.³³

Understood in this way, *fītra* provides man with innate knowledge of monotheism and the initial inclination to worship God and to choose the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqim*) towards Him. Of course, during the life of man this primordial state can be reshaped and even dis-

³² Ghasem Kakaie, “Interreligious Dialogue.”

³³ For an informative description of *fītra* see: Nevad Kahteran, “Fītra,” in *The Qur’an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

torted by many factors including the social and cultural environment and educational systems, etc. This can justify the fact that many adults fail to deploy their own *fiṭra* and consequently go astray in their lives.

What would be then the relation between man's primordial knowledge of God and what God reveals to him through prophetic revelation? The answer is that there is a deep affinity between these two to the extent that to follow the prophet and the revealed law is in itself nothing but to follow the requirements of the human primordial nature. Thus, the prophetic message as the outward guide is in full accordance to the primordial inclination and knowledge as the inward guide.³⁴ In other words, Divine revelation helps man to develop his *fiṭra* in the best possible way.

In its metaphysical sense, Ibn 'Arabi interprets *fiṭra* as the Light by which the darkness of possible beings is split and the difference between them takes place. Regarding the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, this means that *fiṭra* is identical with God, who, according to the Qur'an, is both the *Fatir* (creator) and the Light of the heavens and the earth [35:1 and 24:36]. In its anthropological sense, Ibn 'Arabi provides different characterizations of *fiṭra*. Sometimes he takes *fiṭra* to be the "knowledge and confession of the existence of the Lord (*rabb*)."³⁵ In other cases, he claims that man's worship of the unique God and his belief in God's unity are in accordance with human primordial nature.³⁵

The Hermeneutic Basis

In the view of all Muslims, the glorious Qur'an as the speech of God revealed to the prophet Muhammad, is the main source of Islamic

³⁴ Shah-Kazemi explains the Qur'anic view on the affinity between *fiṭra* and *Shari'a* (revealed law) appealing to some verses of the Qur'an which allude to the fact that the Divine prophets are *from* the people and the verses which take the Qur'an as a *reminder* for mankind. See: Shah-Kazemi, "The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue," 164–165.

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's view on *fiṭra* see: Reza Akbari and Mohammad Qafurinezhad, "Fetrat dar Andisheye Ebn Arabi wa Ertebate An ba E'teqad be Wajude Khoda [Ibn 'Arabi on *Fiṭra* and Its Relation to the Belief in God], *Pazhuheshnameye Erfan* (Spring and Summer 1389/2010), 23–42.

teachings.³⁶ Due to its miraculous language and extraordinary semantic depth, the Qur'an is usually assumed to need interpretation or exegesis (*tafsir*). According to a well-known tradition (*hadith*) from Mohammad, the Qur'an has a hidden aspect (*batn*) which in its turn has another hidden aspect and so on up to seven (or as it was mentioned in some citations, up to seventy) aspects. Inspired by this *hadith*, Muslim scholars typically believe that the Qur'anic verses have hierarchical (vertical) layers of meaning and the ideal interpretation of the Qur'an should undertake the task of penetrating the surface of the outward layer of meaning to reach the deeper ones. From the very beginning years after the revelation, the need for interpretation gave birth to a branch of Islamic sciences known as the science of exegesis (*'ilm al-tafsir*). From a historical perspective, one finds that many different schools with diverse methods of *tafsir* have gradually developed.³⁷ In what follows I shall very briefly explore the mystical approach to the Qur'anic exegesis with an emphasis on Ibn 'Arabi's approach.

Generally speaking, the main presupposition of the mystical approach to exegesis of the Qur'an is that while the exterior meaning (*zahir*) of the Qur'anic verses is authentic, one should not limit oneself to it. Instead, he should go further to unveil the numerous interior meanings (*batin*) of the Qur'an. In order to disclose the deeper layers of meaning, the mystics believe, the exegete cannot merely employ his reason. Instead, he should traverse the path of "unveiling" (*kashf*) the truth behind the Qur'anic letters.³⁸ The word *ta'wil*, as opposed to "tafsir," is sometimes used to refer to the mystics' hermeneutical method of interpreting the Qur'an. In different sources of the Qur'anic studies, *ta'wil* is

³⁶ To be sure, besides the Qur'an, the authentic Islamic traditions (sayings of Mohammad, for the Sunnis, and sayings of Mohammad and the Imams, for the Shi'ite) are seen as the secondary source of Islam.

³⁷ For a short sketch of different genres and diverse historical schools of Qur'anic exegesis see: Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 28–30, 147–168. The author classifies the historical schools into four: the Makkah, the Madinah, the Kufa, and the Basrah schools. The different genres of Qur'anic exegesis include paraphrastic, narrative, legal, linguistic, thematic, and scientific.

³⁸ For an in-depth and detailed explanation of Ibn 'Arabi's view on the roles of reason and unveiling in interpreting the Qur'an see: William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 232–239.

used in very divergent meanings.³⁹ Some scholars hold that in the early centuries of Islam these two words were used interchangeably to denote any type of the Qur’anic exegesis. After that time “tafsir” began to be applied only to those interpretations mostly inspired by the first generations of Muslims, while *ta’wil* became a term referring to other types of interpretations. Eventually, some mystics, like al-Nisaburi, used *ta’wil* and “tafsir” for esoteric and exoteric commentary, respectively.⁴⁰

Ibn ‘Arabi takes the Qur’an as the main source of whatever he speaks of and whatever he writes. It is due to this absolute dominance of the revelation over his thought that we find almost all of his works full of numerous references to the Qur’anic verses. Corresponding to the distinction between esoteric and exoteric aspects of the universe as the macrocosm and of the man as the microcosm, Divine revelation too has apparent or exterior meaning (*zāhir*) and hidden or interior meaning (*bāṭin*). In contrast to the so-called *bāṭiniyya* (esotericists) who totally dismiss the literal meaning and only take the symbolic and allegorical meanings into account, Ibn ‘Arabi sees both types of meaning essential and indispensable. Thus, making any change in the words and even letters of the Qur’an would count as *tahriif* (alteration of God’s words) which is religiously forbidden. As Chittick points out:

Ibn ‘Arabi never denies the literal and apparent meaning. But he frequently adds to the literal sense an interpretation based upon an opening which transcends the cognitive limitations of most mortals. He often tells us that God may unveil meanings of the text to the gnostic which others never perceived, and these unveilings can be trusted as long as they do not gainsay or contradict the literal meaning... We cannot replace one word with another and say that this is what was really meant.⁴¹

It should be noted that Ibn ‘Arabi’s emphasis on the unchangeability of the Qur’anic words after being revealed to the Prophet doesn’t entail that each Qur’anic verse only has one single meaning forever. Here Ibn ‘Arabi unfolds a mysterious fact about the Qur’an: Some reciters of the

³⁹ For a detailed discussion of the tafsir/ta’wil dichotomy see: Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur’anic Exegesis*, 84–109.

⁴⁰ Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on The Qur’an in Classical Islam* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 42.

⁴¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xvi.

Qur'an are in a situation that the Qur'anic verses descend upon their hearts instead of their tongues. For these people the Qur'an is perpetually new, that is to say, "it continually brings new meanings to hearts prepared to receive it; none of these meanings annuls the preceding one, and all of them were inscribed from the beginning in the plenitude of the Qur'an's letter."⁴² Ibn 'Arabi writes:

The servant whose inner sight [*al-basira*] is enlightened – he who is guided by a light from his lord [Qur'an 39:22] – obtains with each recitation of a verse a new understanding, distinct from that which he had during the preceding recitation and that that he will obtain during the succeeding recitation... He whose understanding is identical in two successive recitations is losing. He whose understanding is new in each recitation is winning.⁴³

Ibn 'Arabi uses the word '*ishāra*' (allusion) instead of tafsir to convey the fact that the mystical exegesis consists in making allusions to the unveiling knowledge gained through reciting the Qur'an.⁴⁴

The Role of Mystical Teachings

Now it is time for considering how and to what extent the above-mentioned mystical principles can affect the mystic's position on interreligious dialogue. The productive role of the Islamic mysticism in fostering interreligious dialogue between Muslims and the adherents of other religions may be considered in two different, though interrelated, areas; doxastic and moral.

(I) Doxastic Area: As we considered, the metaphysical principle of *waḥdat al-wujūd* potentially has many notable implications for interreligious dialogue. Being the different manifestations of God's logos, all religions (or Divine laws) have their common root in Divinity. Therefore, the mystical insight leads to the firm belief that, instead of being crossing ways, different religions are parallel path which all end in

⁴² Michael Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore; Ibn 'Arabi, the Book and the Law*, transl. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 26.

⁴³ Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥat al-Makkiya*, vol III, 128–129.

⁴⁴ For an exposition of the difference between Ibn 'Arabi's approach and that of other Muslim mystics such as al-Sarraj and al-Ghazali see: Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on The Qur'an in Classical Islam*, 37–41.

certain knowledge of God. They are, as the renowned Muslim *sufi* Jal al-Din (1207–1273) Rumi has pictured, different ladders which all go to heaven.⁴⁵

Moreover, according to the mystical teaching that all beliefs, as different manifestations of the Truth, have their own contribution in truth, one is not justified in presupposing the falsity of beliefs endorsed by other religions. Instead, one should try to face them sympathetically and unveil the profound truth. This maxim encourages one to discover further truths by means of dialogue.

The theory of *fiṭra* teaches us that God creates all human beings, though different in race and religion, with a common Divine construction and primordial nature directed to the aim of knowing God and worshiping Him. This view creates an optimistic belief about the Divine nature of all human beings, in general, and the participants in the interreligious dialogue, in particular.

According to the mystical hermeneutics of the Qur'an, this Divine book is an inspiring source of infinite esoteric meanings. Thus, there is no such thing as the unique or final sense for a Qur'anic verse. Instead, in consonance with the existential stage of the interpreter, frequently, God descends new meanings to the reciter's heart. Through unveiling these novel meanings, the interpreter of the Qur'an finds himself plunging into an "ocean (of meanings) without a shore." Acquaintance with these interior meanings can potentially pave the way for a non-dogmatic approach to the beliefs and practices promoted by other religions.

(II) Moral Area: Due to the profound interior knowledge of God and the life-long spiritual journey towards Him, a mystic acquires the highest moral virtues such as generosity, patience, and gratitude. Among these, humility and tolerance have great significance for interreligious dialogue. The core of the principle of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is that all creatures, including human beings, lack real existence – they are nothing but God's affairs (*sho'un*) and the manifestations of His names

⁴⁵ Different telling metaphors are used to convey this mystical depiction of the diversity of religion. The metaphor of light bulbs is another example: "The various prophets and spiritual teachers are like the light bulbs that illuminate a room. The bulbs are different, but the current comes from one source, which is God." (James Fadiman and Robert Frager, *Essential Sufism* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1998), 4)

and attributes. Having a firm belief in this view, a mystic always finds himself or herself absolutely dependent to God just as a ray is dependent on the source of the light. This “existential” humility embedded in deep layers of the soul acts as a basis for moral (and intellectual) humility. Consequently, the mystic will avoid any type of egotism, selfishness and arrogance and there would be no space for overestimation about his (and his coreligionists’) advantages. As I already alluded, humility toward the adherents of other religions leads to religious tolerance which prepares the tolerant for an active participation in interreligious dialogue.

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