

## Looking at Ibn 'Arabi's Notion of *Wahdat al-Wujud* as a Basis for Plural Path to God

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### Abstract

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, often presented an inclusive version of faith that extended beyond the strict worldview of medieval jurists. In this sense, the acceptance of diversity of paths to God is a crucial feature of many Sufi doctrines. This paper attempts to look at Ibn 'Arabi's approach towards the diversity of religious traditions and practices. The paper argues that Ibn 'Arabi's notion of "Oneness of Being" or "Unity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*) provides the foundation of his emphasis on the multiple paths that one is able to take for approaching God. In fact, the paper argues that by reading Ibn 'Arabi's idea of "Oneness of Being", the path towards God becomes inherently multiple. These multiple paths do not only include the existence of various religious traditions or beliefs, but also consist of various interpretations that every Sacred Scripture, including the Quran, is able to carry within itself. This emphasis on multiplicity of the path towards God and interpretation of His Words show that the discourse resources of Sufism are rich in the potential for promoting religious pluralism in the present context.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Ibn Arabi, Oneness of Being, Religious Traditions

### Introduction

One of the best known and yet the most controversial Sufis of all time was Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi whose works had a great impact on Muslim mystics from the thirteenth century onwards. He wrote many books and treatises; the number of which, according to some accounts, were 289 and according to others, reached more than four hundreds (Samer Akkach, 1997:97). This paper argues that Ibn 'Arabi's advocacy of the existence of multiple paths or roads that could inherently lead individuals to God has its origin in his notion of "Oneness of Being". In this respect, the paper begins with the analysis of the notion of "Oneness of Being." The paper then shows how this notion leads to Ibn 'Arabi's idea that all religious beliefs could be "true" and "legitimate" in the sense that they are various manifestation of God. In this context, the paper demonstrates that Ibn 'Arabi's analysis of the Quranic accounts concerning polytheists casts more lights on his ideas about the existence of multiple paths towards God. Finally, the paper shows that Ibn 'Arabi's emphasis on the notion of "Oneness of Being" results in the idea that any Sacred Scripture including the Quran has the ability to deliver different meanings and interpretation to its various readers.

### A Short Background of Ibn 'Arabi's Life

Ibn 'Arabi is one of the most influential figures in the history of Islam. Some contemporary scholars of Islam argue that, with the possible exception of Ghazali, no figure has been more influential in the history of Islam than Ibn 'Arabi (Mohammad Hassan Khalili, 2012:54). Born in the city of Murcia located in al-Andalus into an elite family in 560/1165, Ibn 'Arabi had the privilege of eminent scholars of Spain and the zone of North Africa, before moving to the eastern Mediterranean in his late thirties (Nile Green, 2012:77). He experienced a number of mystical moments in his youth time, in one of which he is claimed to meet with Jesus together with Moses and Muhammad.

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During his circumambulating the Ka'ba in 598/1201, he is even claimed to receive revelation from God which resulted in his magnum opus, *al-Futuh al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings*), a work containing his major Sufi doctrine. During these years, Ibn 'Arabi came into occasional conflicts with some jurists, and was occasionally threatened (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1969:96). After a life spent in travelling, in 620/1223, he finally decided to settle in Syria until his death. Here, he revised the *Futuh* and produced another influential book, *Fusus al-hikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*). He had a great impact on subsequent mystics to a degree that, according to Green (2012:79), "Sufism after 1300 was extraordinarily indebted to the profundity and productivity of this son of Muslim Spain".

### **The Theory of "Oneness of Beings"**

In Ibn 'Arabi's thought, there is no place for the classical theory of creation (*creatio ex nihilo*), according to which God created the Universe out of nothing. Creation for Ibn 'Arabi does not mean that God as a prime cause brought some things into existence. When God creates the creatures, He makes their *entities* apparent, bringing them from the state of immutability into existence in their material form. This is why, the existence of a thing which had no existence before its creation, or any type of creative operation which has come to an end is meaningless for Ibn 'Arabi (Henry Corbin, 1998: 200; John T. Little, 1987:47). Instead, creative beings have "pre-eternal" and "post-eternal" essences that are manifested at every moment in innumerable forms of beings. In this sense, the process of creation is a continuous movement and does not take place only once; it is dynamic, not static. In order to discuss the theme of the renewal of creation at each moment, Ibn 'Arabi uses the term 'variegation' (*talwin*) which signifies "the constant transferal from one colour to another colour or one state to another state" (Hossein Moradi, 2014:181). In this sense, "God in His self-disclosure repeats Himself and He remains the One". (*Ibid*)

It is within this line of thought that Ibn 'Arabi takes up the theme of multiplication and proposes his doctrine of "Oneness of Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*), the idea which many Sufis subsequently summed up in the epithet, "All is He". Although it is not clear whether Ibn 'Arabi himself explained this theory in a systematic method, as Annemarie Schimmel noted, it provides the key to most of Ibn 'Arabi's theories (Annemarie Schimmel 1976:267). Central to the theory of "Oneness of Being" is the idea that the ultimate reality of everything in the whole of existence is Divine. This is to say, all things in the entire universe is one inasmuch as it reflects God's oneness; God's creatures are merely reflections of his *wujud* (Being). In this sense, while God in its essence is unchanging, absolute, and transcendent, he is present in everything in the world: "all reality in the world is a sign that directs us toward a divine reality that is the starting point of its existence and the place of return when it comes to term" (Michel Chodkiewicz, 1993:36).

In a similar vein, in his *Treatise on Unity*, Ibn 'Arabi writes: "His Prophet (God's Prophet) is He (God), and His sending is He, and His world is He. He sent Himself with Himself to Himself". (Nasr, 1969:107) And in his *Fusus al-hikam*, he similarly asserts "He (God) regards Himself through Himself, which is the state of unity; but if you regard Him through yourself, then the unity vanishes" (A. E. Affifi, 1964:10-11). As Alexander Knysh noted (1999:14), Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of Oneness of Being implies that God is "no longer the absolute otherworldly and impregnable entity of mainstream Muslim theologians. He rather becomes part and parcel of, and immanent to, His creation". For Ibn 'Arabi, many accounts of God presented by Muslim theologians failed to realize the unity that exists between God and creatures. He emphasized the mutual dependence of God and the world, focusing on the complete reciprocity between the two; this dependence, according to him, is continuous: "without the world of creation, God cannot be known as Creator; without living things, God cannot be recognized as the Living." (Stephen Hirtenstein, 2005:4258; Nasr, 1969:116) In this sense, "God becomes the mirror in which the spiritual man contemplates his own reality and man in turn becomes the mirror in which God contemplates His Names and Qualities." (Nasr, 1969:116)

Therefore, as stated, the doctrine of "Oneness of Being" does not simply claim that the world and the things in it are God, rather, states that the essence of everything found in the world is nothing other than His. The immediate corollary of this idea is that everything in the universe is a sign or even locus of God and reflects Him in some way, and thus God should not be limited to any one of existents in the universe. Although there are many objects in the world, there is only one thing since everything is merely a reflection of the One. This is human beings who see multiplicity, and not unity: "in accordance with their preparedness within themselves, the entities of thingnesses of the cosmos display properties within that which is Manifest within them as is given by their own realities...but there is nothing other than God" (Moradi, 2014:186).

Although this idea at the first sight echoes Plotinus' doctrine that the Primal One is everywhere, it should be noted that the major difference between them is that Plotinus' One is everywhere "as a *Cause*" whereas Ibn 'Arabi's One is everywhere "as an *Essence*" (Affifi, 1964:11). Ibn 'Arabi's notion of "Oneness of Being" is also different from pantheism because pantheism implies "a substantial continuity between God and the Universe" whereas Ibn 'Arabi never questions God's unity, constantly claiming His "absolute transcendence over every category, including that of substance" (Nasr, 1969:105).

### Multiple Paths towards Divinity

The purpose in bringing attention to Ibn 'Arabi's conception of *wahdat al-wujud* is to highlight the potential values it holds. To begin with, given that the Truth manifests itself through every form and that God's signs should not be limited to any specific existent in the universe, all religious traditions and beliefs must be seen as various manifestations of the One. In fact, since the essence of everything is ultimately God's, every religious tradition or belief reflects an aspect of divinity. From this perspective, any form of religious idea that denies all other beliefs denies the common root or essence of all religions (Michael A. Sells, 1984:291). In his *Bezels of Wisdom*, following the Quranic verse indicating that "wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God" (Q2:115), Ibn 'Arabi states that:

"Beware lest you restrict yourself to a particular tenet and so deny any other tenet (equally reflecting Him) for you would forfeit much good, indeed you would forfeit the true knowledge of what is (the Reality). Therefore, be completely and utterly receptive to all doctrinal forms, for God, Most High, is too All-embracing and Great to be confined within one creed rather than another". (Ibn 'Arabi, 1980:137) In another passage in his *Bezels of Wisdom* Ibn 'Arabi asserts that God can be worshipped in any direction since every place and direction reflects manifestation of the One: "Do not tell yourself that He is in that direction only, but rather maintains both your particular attitude of worship in facing the Sacred Mosque and your more universal attitude of knowledge to the impossibility of confining His face to that particular direction, it being merely one of many points toward which men turn".

(Ibn 'Arabi, 1980:138) Therefore, the doctrine of "Oneness of Being" entails that all things in the world including all systems of thought and religious beliefs reflect one aspect of the divine and inherently lead to the divine. The Truth indeed does not travel in specific line. For Muslims, the path leading to God looks differently from that of the followers of other religions, but the essence of all paths are basically identical. All systems of thought include beliefs about God. For Ibn 'Arabi, the perfect mystic should believe in God in all His manifestations. (Ghasem Kakaie, 2009) He must realize that people are not called to God by the same road. He should become conscious of the fact that the knowledge of God is not restricted to any particular class of mankind and thus must acknowledge the diversity of human understanding of divinity.

This is to say, all religious traditions and beliefs could be "true" at least in one sense because they are of divine origin, manifesting one aspect of the Truth: "people have formed different beliefs about God, and I behold all that they believe." (Affifi, 1964:151) Ibn 'Arabi likens God's manifestation in different religious traditions to a single mirror in which everyone sees his own image (Kakaie, 2009) He goes on to say that everything worshipped in the world is an aspect and a form of the One and thus these individual forms (or manifestations of the One) should not be taken as fixed and absolute principles. Ibn 'Arabi writes "everyone has a kind of belief in his Lord through which he approaches Him, and Him in that belief. Thus, if the Real discloses Himself to him according to it, he recognizes Him and affirms Him, whereas if He discloses Himself in any other form, he denies Him, flees from Him and treats Him disrespectfully."

(Kakaie, 2009) From what has been stated so far, we can conclude that, from the notion of "Oneness of Being" Ibn 'Arabi develops the doctrine of the unity of religions. According to Nasr, this doctrine offers the "unity of the inner contents of all religions". (Nasr, 1969:116) For Ibn 'Arabi, the central message of all religious traditions is essentially one. The corollary of such idea is that Ibn 'Arabi, unlike the *ulama* of his time, refused to accept the outward aspect of religious traditions, attempting to transcend the external forms of religion in order to reach their inner meaning. Like Rumi after him, Ibn 'Arabi believes that the essence of religion takes precedent over outward dimensions of religious traditions and their rituals. Rumi states "Know that the outward form passes away, but the world of reality remains forever.

How long will you play at loving the shape of the jug? Leave the shape of the jug; go, seek water. You have seen its outward form, you are unaware of the reality; pick out from the shell a pearl, if you are wise" (Rumi, 1972: 1020-1022).

In this sense, the diversity of various religions laws in the world is the inevitable result of the variability of individuals and nations in terms of their capacity, nature and understanding. In *Fusus*, Ibn 'Arabi writes "the sects and religions may vary because of the variety of the nations". (Kakaie, 2009) This is why, as Ibn 'Arabi asserts, "the prophets use the language of the exterior world to speak to the generality of the people they address, and they trust to the understanding of any knowledgeable person who may be listening" (Jane Clark, 2005). The basic message of all prophets sent by God to humanity is identical and the superficial difference between them is only due to the fact that God reveals His message under different aspects and in varying levels of perfection.

In short, various divine laws are manifestations of the same essence, just as various religious traditions are the reflections of the One. In addition, the social teachings of religions, or what Ibn 'Arabi refers to outward aspect of religions, have varied since the needs of every age in which a prophet appears differ. As a result, the diversity of religious traditions is absolutely natural or inevitable because it is impossible that all people have a single constitution. Ibn 'Arabi goes on to say that God has revealed various divine laws so that "Divine generosity may embrace all people". (Kakaie, 2009) As Kalil (2012: 61) argues, we may speculate from this that 'Arabi's soteriology suggests that righteous non-Muslims who accept at least one form of God's message will be among the inhabitants of Paradise in the next life.

### **Ibn 'Arabi's Views on Polytheists**

As stated, Ibn 'Arabi's notion of Oneness of Being results in the idea that all religious beliefs could be "true" in the sense that they of divine origin and reflects one aspect of divinity. In this respect, the perfect mystic should see every object of worship including idols and images as a manifestation of the One and as a site of the Divine. Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of Q17:23 ("And your Lord has decreed that you will worship no one but Him") is that "every worshipper, whatever the apparent object of his worship, in fact only worships Allah". (Michel Chodkiewicz, 1995:19) It is within this context that Ibn 'Arabi asserts that God's mercy, beauty and kindness toward his creations is not limited to one locus or one specific abode; rather, "the abode of (God's) mercy is the abode of existence". (William Chittick, 2000:158) In fact, for Ibn 'Arabi, since God is imminent, there is no specific place for worshipping God and thus He can be worshipped everywhere. (Alexander Knysh, 2005:155) God could be found in an idol temple as much as the mosque.

As Hassan Khalili noted, it is in this context that Ibn 'Arabi sees even "a temple for idols" as containing the worth of love. (Khalili, 2012:58) In one of his most well-known poetical passages, Ibn 'Arabi composes "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, and the Quran. Love is the creed I hold: whenever turn His camels, love is still my creed and faith."<sup>2</sup> In this respect, God's mercy does not only belong to certain groups of people, rather, Jews, Christians, Muslims and even idolaters could equally benefit from His mercy. It is worth mentioning here that this line of thought is also found in the writings of mystical figures of other Abrahamic religions. For instance, Meister Eckhart, the well-known medieval Christian mystic, asserts that God's manifestations are to be found everywhere even in a temple. (Kakaie, 2009)

A more in-depth examination of Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of Quranic accounts relating to polytheists illustrates the radical position he took on this issue. For instance, with regard to the Quranic narrative of Noah, Ibn 'Arabi states that one should not simply consider the community of Noah as necessarily misguided for their act of idol-worshipping. The idolaters were only "unconscious" since they failed to recognize what they worshipped as manifestations of the One. They, only, became, in the words of Ibn 'Arabi, "perplexed in the face of the apparent multiplicity of the One in respect of His aspects and attributions". (Ibn 'Arabi, 1980:79; Sells, 1984:301-306; William Brinner, 2005:540-543) This line of thought coheres with Ibn 'Arabi's idea that God must be distinguished from "believed gods", i.e. the gods who appear in human beliefs and in whom humans believe. As Kakaie noted (2009), Ibn 'Arabi asserts that a great mistake occurs when people's belief in "believed gods" is considered as the "absolute Truth".

<sup>2</sup> This is possibly the most well-known poem of Ibn 'Arabi, cited by a number of contemporary scholars. For comprehensive bibliography of where this poem has been cited see: (Sells, 1984:288)

In regards with the Quranic account of Noah, Ibn 'Arabi even criticized Noah, asserting that "had Noah temper his extreme transcendentalism with a little concession to divine immanence, his people might have been more responsive to his exhortations". (Austin, 1980:72) This interpretation of Noah's narrative places Ibn 'Arabi in sharp contrast with the usual Islamic explanation of idolatry. In a similar vein, in referring to the tale of Moses and the golden calf, Ibn Arabi proclaims that the golden calf as a site of divinity was not an inappropriate object of worship for those who considered it manifestation of the One. (Ronald Nettler, 2003:53) This idea stems from his theory of "Oneness of Being."

As Nettler noted, "God and the forms are both necessary as they are the two sides of the same coin. And the calf here is one of the forms." (Ronald Nettler, 2003:68) It is within this context that Ibn 'Arabi occasionally refers to idolaters as "wise", "saints" and "Gnostics". (Austin, 1980:72; Nettler, 2003:67) Ibn 'Arabi acknowledges here that the variety of forms of human worship, even those concerning images and objects, is nothing but the manifestation of the One. This idea is in complete harmony with the concept of the "Oneness of Being". Given that, God manifests Himself through each thing in the universe; these images are the locus of divinity. Therefore, the usual condemnation of idolatry in Islamic tradition is absolutely inverted here by Ibn 'Arabi.

### **Multiple Interpretation of the Quran**

The final repercussion of the notion of "Oneness of Being" is the idea that any Sacred Scripture inevitably carries within itself a variety of meaning for the community of believers. To begin with, in his *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi states: "As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in the language of certain people, and when those who speak this language differ as to what God meant...due to the variety of possible meanings of the words, each of them-however differing their interpretations may be-effectively comprises what God meant, providing that the interpretation does not deviate from the accepted meanings of the language in question". (Clark, 2005)

For Ibn 'Arabi, there are many interpretations of a given Sacred Scripture, each of which corresponds to a different level of understanding and knowledge of individuals. These possible interpretations range from literal meaning of the text to the extent of giving weight to the forms of the words and letters of the Sacred Scripture. The corollary of such position is that a "true" understanding of a sacred text can never be exclusive. Therefore, like the doctrine of "Oneness of Being" which states that there is only one God with many manifestations, Ibn 'Arabi's pluralism here claims that although there is only one Quranic scripture, there inevitably exist many commentaries or interpretations "flowing" or "emanating" from it, all of which could be "legitimate" in the sense that they reflect one manifestation of divinity. In fact, the theme of *one and the many* appears in Ibn Arabi's approach to interpretation of the Quran.

For Ibn Arabi, since no two human beings are the same images of God, no two interpretations or understandings of the Scripture can be seen identical. (Chittick, 2000:154) Ibn 'Arabi goes on to say that anyone who reads one verse of the Quran in the same manner twice has not understood it as it must be understood. (*ibid*) In fact, the process of interpretation of the Quran is endless since the Quran is "an ocean without a shore" which remains "perpetually new for any of those who recite it". (Chodkiewicz, 1993:25) As a result, there is not only a continuous relation between God and *the many*, but there is, in a similar vein, a continuous relation between the Quran and its many interpretations. In both cases, the latter is the manifestation of the former. This is to say, the belief of every person which is established on his interpretation of the Sacred Scripture is like a mirror in which the manifestation of the One is reflected. In sum, the interpreter of the Quran must always keep in mind that the text carries within itself innumerate possible interpretation, and thus the act of interpretation is an endless task.

### **Conclusion**

This paper showed that Ibn 'Arabi in his writings had much to say on multiplicity of paths towards God. The paper argued that the notion of "Oneness of Being" has been served throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writings as an enabling tool for religious harmony with various groups or communities whom Muslims encountered. This notion, as argued, is also served as strong mechanism for inter-religious harmony in the community of the believers who interpret the Sacred Scripture differently.

As stated, different religious traditions are various manifestation of the One, just as everything in the world reflects Him: "whether a religion conforms, as it inevitably must, to the divine Will, or more specifically to the divine Wish, it is, unavoidably, of God and of us in God".

(Ibn 'Arabi, 1980:112) This is to say, religions inherently serve to people shared goals. "The divinely revealed paths lead to the same summit. ...to have lived one religion fully is to have lived them all." (Nasr 1969:118) It is within the context of the notion of "Oneness of Being" that Ibn 'Arabi does not oppose the existence of different types of interpretations of the Quran, believing that each interpretation constitutes a path towards God since it is essentially a manifestation of the One. In other words, since everything in the world is the manifestation of divinity, everyone, to some extent, knows God through the act of interpretation of the Sacred Scripture.

In this sense, Ibn 'Arabi sees God's mercy as universal, believing that His mercy is not limited to certain groups of people and all humanity including the followers of various Muslim sects as well as non-Muslims could benefit from it. I should finally emphasize that notions of pluralism and religious tolerance, as we conceive them today in their maximalist sense<sup>3</sup>, are products of modernity. This paper did not attempt to argue that Ibn Arabi, himself, developed concepts of religious pluralism; instead, I argued that these notions are implicit in Ibn Arabi's writings and that they are mere outcomes of his philosophical mysticism, particularly the doctrine of oneness of beings. Indeed, Ibn Arabi's advocacy of religious tolerance has its origins in such doctrines rather than a mere intellectual approach raised by some supporters of inter-faith dialogue in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition, without going into details, it is important to note that there are some limitations on Ibn Arabi's religious tolerance which, in some instances, look different from the pluralistic perspective of our multicultural world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For a good definition of maximalist sense of tolerance see: Hashmi 2003:82

<sup>4</sup>Some of these limitations have been discussed by contemporary scholars. See: Khalil2012:57; Kakaie 2009, for instance, according to Kakaie, "Ibn Arabi believes in the truth of all divine laws but maintains hierarchical levels between them". For a primary source of the limits of Ibn Arabi's religious tolerance see: Ibn Arabi1980:111-112

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