

*Traces of Panentheism in Islam:  
Ibn al-‘Arabi and the Kaleidoscope  
of Being*

*Meena Sharify-Funk and William Rory Dickson*

At the dawn of the fourteenth century CE, the Ottoman dynasty emerged out of the Turkish migrations into Anatolia. Migrating Turkish peoples were organized into small groups of warriors, led by clan chieftains (*beys*) or Sufi holy men known as *babas* (Lapidus 2002, 248). One of these warrior groups, led by Osman I (d. 1324), would eventually form one of history’s largest empires and most durable dynasties: the *Osmaniyya*, or Ottomans as they were known in Europe. The Ottoman empire was only dissolved in 1923, after six centuries as a world power. Ottoman sultans conquered the Byzantine capital Constantinople in 1453 and laid siege to Vienna in 1529, with an empire that spanned southeastern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. Throughout the history of their rule, the Ottomans maintained a deeply Sufi understanding of Islam, and as a result, a mystical undercurrent permeated Ottoman culture, politics, and religion. Even the sultan’s elite troops, the Janissaries, were members of a “heterodox” Sufi order, the *Bektashiyya*. *Panentheism* is a term not likely to be readily associated with the Ottoman empire, and yet the Ottomans, as a consequence of their Sufi-infused religiosity, often perpetuated a profoundly panentheistic understanding of Islam.

The panentheism of the Ottomans in particular can be traced to Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 1240), a Sufi metaphysician who became, in a sense, the patron saint of the Ottoman realm. Ibn al-‘Arabi was born in 1165 CE in Murcia, a town in southeastern Spain, or Andalusia as it was known under Muslim rule. Andalusia was a cultural “isthmus” where West met East. Under a relatively tolerant Muslim rule in Spain, intellectual, cultural, and

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religious multiplicities coalesced, creating a remarkably cosmopolitan culture (Menocal 2002). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Ibn al-'Arabi was also known as Ibn Flatun, "Plato's son." He became a synthesizer of theological and philosophical paradoxes; he sought to reconcile opposite positions while giving legitimacy to their contradictions. His many works, which conservative estimates place at around four hundred, provide a comprehensive explication of the different levels of reality, the relationship between God and the world, and the significance of the human being in the universe. Some of these works were quite short, while others, such as his famous *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* ("Meccan Revelations") are several thousand pages long. Besides the *Futuhāt*, Ibn al-'Arabi's most famous work is his *Fusus al-Hikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom"). In the *Fusus*, a text that Ibn al-'Arabi says was given to him by the Prophet Muhammad, Ibn al-'Arabi explores the metaphysical meaning of prophets mentioned in the Koran, such as Abraham, Noah, Moses, Aaron, and Jesus. Taken as a whole, Ibn al-'Arabi's works preserve and synthesize the first six centuries of Islamic spirituality, law, psychology, cosmology, and mystical philosophy (Chittick 1994, 1). He is most famously associated with the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, or the "oneness of being." Although Ibn al-'Arabi never used the term *wahdat al-wujud*, most scholars agree that his works imply the term's unitary ontology. It was this grand synthesis of previous centuries of Sufi learning in terms of a metaphysics of unity that earned Ibn al-'Arabi the title of *shaykh al-akbar*, or the "Greatest Master."

Ibn al-'Arabi was particularly favored by the Ottoman elite. The second ruler of the Ottoman dynasty, Orhan, established a religious school in Inzik and appointed Dawud al-Qaysari, a fourth-generation disciple of Ibn al-'Arabi, as its director (Hirtenstein 1999, 241). Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, had an adviser who was schooled in Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, and Mehmet even commissioned commentaries on the writings of Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, one of Ibn al-'Arabi's closest disciples and expositors (Hirtenstein 1999, 241). The close Ottoman relationship with Ibn al-'Arabi is perhaps best exemplified by Selim I, who, in 1516, defeated the Mamluks in Syria. Ibn al-'Arabi's tomb in Damascus had been inconspicuously visited by devotees for three hundred years, hidden away in a family cemetery. Upon entering Damascus, however, Selim himself visited Ibn al-'Arabi's tomb and commissioned the building of a mosque next to it. The new mosque was opened with great ceremony, indicating a renewed public recognition of Ibn al-'Arabi in the Arab world. Finally, in 1534, the Ottomans released a *fatwa* (religious decree) that "henceforth the works of Ibn al-'Arabi should be officially studied

throughout Ottoman lands” (Hirtenstein 1999, 242). Islam’s most prolific and explicit proponent of what in many respects may be called panentheism now had the official support of one of history’s most powerful empires. As a result, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works were widely studied and commented on throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in the Ottoman realm, and his philosophy infused the heart of the Muslim world.

It is important to note at the outset that we are not attempting to classify Ibn al-‘Arabi as a panentheist in any ultimate sense. As William C. Chittick, one of the foremost scholars of Ibn al-‘Arabi, rightfully notes, his oeuvre does not lend itself to easy classification. However, we propose that *panentheism* is a term that represents Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought with far more accuracy than previous labels, such as *pantheism*, even as we acknowledge the limitation of any label in representing his perspective(s). As such, in this chapter, we wish to illustrate those elements of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought that directly correspond to panentheism. We neither limit his thought to these correspondences nor underestimate their significance.

In 1939, A. E. Affifi published the first dissertation on Ibn al-‘Arabi written in a Western university (Cambridge), *The Mystical Philosophy of Mubid Din-Ibnul ‘Arabi*. In the work’s preface, Affifi writes: “It may be remarked that mystics have no philosophical systems of fixed doctrines; that Mysticism is essentially an eclectic subject. This, I should say, is generally true, but Ibnul ‘Arabi is an exception to the rule. He had a definite philosophical doctrine of pantheism, the bearing of which is shown in every part of his system” (Affifi 1939, xi). According to Affifi, unlike most mystics, Ibn al-‘Arabi has a clear philosophy, and it is pantheism. The problem, however, lies in his inability to articulate it clearly: Ibn al-‘Arabi “was certainly conscious of a complete pantheistic philosophy, but, lacking philosophical training, he did not know how to express it” (xi). Affifi complains of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “unintelligible,” “disorderly,” and “haphazard” writing style. One soon gets the impression that Affifi was not a particularly sympathetic interpreter of Ibn al-‘Arabi. He proposed that Ibn al-‘Arabi took Islamic monotheism, summarized as “there exists but one God,” and transformed it into pantheism, “there is nothing *in existence* except God” (55–56). It is important to note that Affifi’s thesis on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s pantheism has since been almost universally rejected by scholars of Ibn al-‘Arabi. Affifi is correct in noting that Ibn al-‘Arabi held that ultimately, nothing exists except God. As we will see in what follows, however, this perspective is better represented by the term *panentheism* than by *pantheism*.

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In the introduction to this volume, Loriliai Biernacki remarks that “panentheism is about mapping relationships: the relationship between the self and the world, between the self and God, and between God and the world.” In what follows, we will discuss three aspects of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought that correspond closely with the way in which panentheism deals with these relationships, namely his understanding of (1) the unity of being, (2) the transcendence and immanence of God, and (3) the dynamic self-disclosure of God in the world. All three topics explore the relationship between God and the world/self, although with this third aspect, we will explore Ibn al-'Arabi's radically dynamic understanding of the Absolute, one that reflects Biernacki's appraisal of panentheism's “inestimable richness”: the dynamism inherent in its conception of God's relationship with phenomenal existence.

*Tasting Oneness: The Heart of Ibn  
al-'Arabi's Ontology*

The universe is neither pure Being nor pure nothingness. It is total magic: it makes you think that it is God and it is not God; it makes you think that it is creation and it is not creation, for in every respect it is neither this nor that....Regarding the realities of the universe, one cannot say that they are God nor that they are other than Him.... Everything we perceive is the Being of God in the essences of the possible. From the point of ipseity, it is His Being; from the point of view of the diversity of forms, it is the essences of the possible.... In respect to the unicity of its existence...., it is God, for He is the One, the Unique; in respect to the multiplicity of its forms, it is the universe. (Addas 2000, 83–84)

Paradox is at the core of Ibn al-'Arabi's visionary thinking about the relationship between God and his creation. As reflected in the above quotation, for Ibn al-'Arabi, God and existence both manifest absolute status. On the one hand, nothing can be before or outside existence; being itself is prior to temporality. On the other hand, the totality that is God (the Absolute Being) “is and nothing is with Him.” Therefore, Ibn al-'Arabi promotes a contradictory or paradoxical ontology: a multifaceted understanding of existence that in many respects can be characterized as panentheistic.

In Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, unity and multiplicity are different aspects of one reality. Multiplicity is not an illusion; rather, it is the result of a single reality being filtered through different points of view that are in states of perpetual transformation. The image of a continually turning kaleidoscope can help us visualize Ibn al-'Arabi's paradoxical affirmations concerning the nature of reality and the role of the "knowing subject" as a participant in this reality. The kaleidoscope works with balanced relations; every part has to fit and comply with the next part to remain functional. Each part contains its own center or "absolute" within itself; each of these centers is capable of either supporting all other centers and thereby serving as keystones or denying all other centers and thereby being false to the truth it contains. Here lies the crucial observation: if a center holds all centers as a part of its own "absolute," then it is truly Absolute; it truly recognizes the pattern of transformation, connection, and integration from one instantaneous center to another; however, if the center negates all other absolutes and walls itself off from the world, then it falls into the trap of idolatry, proclaiming a pretentious absolute, making the kaleidoscope nonfunctional, static, incapable of creating. Ultimately, this state would limit the Creator and his creation.

As in the great debates regarding the relationship between the universal and the particular, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, there is no separation between these approaches, no need to limit oneself to one or the other. *Both/and* is the constant state, not *either/or*; yet, paradoxically, *either/or* is not excluded from the *both/and* scenario. In a convergence of opposite qualities in which each opposite quality becomes "the safeguard and guarantor of the other," the visible allows the invisible to manifest, and the invisible allows the visible to exist (Corbin 1998, 211).

As Ibn al-'Arabi notes, the Arabic word for "existence," *wujud*, derives from the trilateral Arabic root verb *wajada*, "to find." By implication, then, existing and finding are deeply interrelated. For Ibn al-'Arabi, to exist is to find, and vice versa. *Wujud* is ultimately related to the continual search for origin and relation (Chittick 1989).

The famous expression "oneness of being" or "unity of existence" (*wahdat al-wujud*), which is often said to represent Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrinal position, might also be translated as the "oneness" or "unity of finding." Despite the hundreds of volumes on ontology that have been inspired by Ibn al-'Arabi's works, his main concern is not with the mental concept of being but with the experience of God's Being, the "tasting" (*dhawq*) of being, that "finding" that is at one and the same time to perceive and to be that which truly is. No doubt, Ibn al-'Arabi possessed one of the greatest philosophical minds

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the world has ever known, but philosophy was not his concern. He wanted to bask in the constant and ever-renewed finding of the Divine Being and Consciousness (Chittick 1989, 3)

The concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (translated usually as “the unity of existence”) is commonly recognized as the unifying force throughout Ibn al-'Arabi's works.<sup>1</sup> This doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* can be limited to the belief in one God, but to Ibn al-'Arabi, it meant an “absolute, [yet] all-inclusive principle, encompassing all beliefs and doctrines” (Hirtenstein 1999, 18). This open-ended worldview is found in the following quotation from Ibn al-'Arabi:

If a gnostic is really a gnostic he cannot stay tied to one form of belief. That is to say, if a possessor of knowledge is cognizant of the being in his own ipseity, in all meanings, he will not remain trapped in one belief. He will not decrease his circle of belief. He is like *materia prima* [*hayula*] and will accept whatever form he is presented with. These forms being external, there is no change to the kernel in his interior universe.

The knower of God [*arif bi'llah*], whatever his origin is, remains like that. He accepts all kinds of beliefs, but does not remain tied to any figurative belief. Whatever his place is in the Divine Knowledge, which is essential knowledge, he remains in that place; knowing the kernel of all belief he sees the interior and not the exterior. He recognizes the thing, whose kernel he knows, whatever apparel it puts on, and in this matter his circle is large. Without looking at whatever clothing they appear under in the exterior he reaches into the origin of those beliefs and witnesses them from every possible place. (Ibn 'Arabi 1980, 1)

Although, like his predecessor the great Muslim theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Ibn al-'Arabi often states that God (as the Absolute) is independent of creation (including time), he often differs from al-Ghazali in recognizing the paradox of God's determinism: the properties of creation are determined by its Creator (God), and the Creator's properties are the determined properties of creation and cannot be separated from his creation. Therefore, as we will discuss further below, being for Ibn al-'Arabi was also inextricably connected to both a transcendent God and an immanent creation.

Existence for Ibn al-'Arabi comes from eternity without beginning, expanding on Averroës's concept of “continuous production” by promoting the ideas that (1) God never discloses himself twice in the same form, and (2) creation is God in the making. This reality of God's dependent embeddedness in

creation is reflected in the following statement: “For they have given Him knowledge of their situation from eternity without beginning, and in that form they come to exist” (Ibn al-‘Arabi, translated in Addas 2000).

In Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought, the concept of *wujud* is intimately intertwined with one of the foundational and overarching Koranic principles of *tawhid*, the unity of God, of humanity, of the universe, and of truth itself. *Tawhid* is all-Oneness, the Whole before and after existence, thus, the One who transcends all duality and plurality and yet is the creator of all duality and plurality. *Tawhid* is based on the affirmation within the first tenet of Islamic doctrine, the *shahadah*—the first article of faith—which is the profession of *La ilaha illa Allah*, “There is no god but God,” “There is no divinity but God,” or “There is nothing to be worshiped but God.”<sup>2</sup> With these definitions, *tawhid* can also imply perfection, or *kamal*, that which is beyond partiality and limitation. This sense of *tawhid* is to be found in Koranic statement “Nothing is like Him.”<sup>3</sup>

*Tawhid* allows for reconciliation within multiplicity at cosmic and microcosmic (human) levels and affirms that the manyness of reality is itself a pattern of connectedness. In other words, multiplicity has to be seen within the context of divine Oneness that both transcends and includes created things. Thus, Muslim philosophers and mystics, like Ibn al-‘Arabi, have emphasized that within multiplicity, there is a connection to the incomparable One, who transcends all plurality and duality. While the Whole is greater than the parts, the parts subsist through their relations with the Whole and reflect its qualities and attributes.<sup>4</sup>

While the principle of *tawhid* affirms the presence and priority of unity, it does not deny the experience of duality. According to Islamic metaphysics, the Unity or Oneness of God precedes and underpins the existence of created things, yet dualities of Creator/created and knower/known remain. As revealed by the Hadith Qudsi, the sacred sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, God—the “hidden treasure”—compassionately wished to be known, and from this desire, duality manifested: “I was hidden treasure and I desired (loved) to be known. Therefore, I created the creatures so that I might be known.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Unity requires duality in order that Unity may be known.<sup>6</sup> God needs creation if he is to be God, just as creation needs God if it is to be created.<sup>7</sup> God is the mirror, and we, as creation, are his reflection in form and spirit, also becoming mirrors to one another. As explained by Sachiko Murata, “Unity does not erase the effect of polarity, quite the contrary, establishing unity shows how polarity is itself the primary principle through which unity manifests itself.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Ibn al-‘Arabi, unlike his

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predecessor al-Ghazali, expounded that God's Unity, not his Absoluteness (herein lies the paradox) is dependent on the temporal duality of existence.

The nature of this created duality is polar and complementary rather than opposite and contradictory. This understanding stresses the priority of patterns of connection over differentiation and distance (Murata 1992, 52). The polarity, "two complementary dimensions of a single reality," evolves into the *kathra*, "the Manyness of reality" (Chittick 1994, 15). The "Manyness," however, remains inwardly connected to its source and reflects the attributes of its creator. Ibn al-'Arabi went so far as to state that "God is your mirror in which you contemplate yourself [i.e., your own innermost nature] and you are His mirror in which He contemplates His divine attributes" (Freke 1998, 14). This is another way of stating that perfection extends into limitation and that magnanimous and compassionate Oneness embraces the many.

A fundamental principle of Sufi practice found in Ibn al-'Arabi's writings on attaining human perfection is *al-takhalluq bi akhlaq Allah*, "assuming the character traits of God." According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the seeker aspires to assimilate aspects of the divine character as manifested through God's many intelligible and revealed qualities (connected to the *Asma' Allah al-Husna*, also known as the ninety-nine names of Allah).<sup>9</sup> The spiritual seeker approaches God by means of God's qualities, which must be consciously cultivated and invoked. Consequently, the seeker actively surrenders to mirror God and to become a channel for God's creative expression. Although God in his essence remains transcendent beyond anything in this world, his qualities can be made immanent in the world through the purified human being, who acts as a means of expressing these divine qualities.

*Affirming God's Incomparability and Similarity*

In chapter 3 of this volume, Catherine Keller suggests that feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson offers the best contemporary definition of panentheism. According to Johnson, "If theism weights the scales in the direction of divine transcendence and pantheism overmuch in the direction of immanence, panentheism attempts to hold onto both in full strength." This simultaneous affirmation of transcendence and immanence, holding "onto both in full strength," describes very well a hallmark of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, one that distinguishes it from pantheism. As articulated by a variety of theologians and other scholars, pantheism tends toward an equation of God with the world, the two being coeval. Panentheism, however, is distinguished in its assertion that although the world is a dynamic manifestation of God, God



is ultimately beyond the reality of the world. In other words, although the world is nothing but God, God is not limited to the world.

In the following excerpt from his ode *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (“The Interpreter/Translator of Ardent Desires”), Ibn al-‘Arabi asserts:

If you affirm transcendence you bind.  
If you affirm immanence you define.  
If you affirm both you hit the mark.  
You are an Imam in knowledge and a master. (Sells 1994, 100)

In these pithy statements, we find Ibn al-‘Arabi asserting our inability to “bind” or “define” God. If we assert that God is transcendent above all things, we limit or “bind” him to transcendence. On the other hand, should we affirm his presence within all things, or his immanence in the world, we “define” God according to the things of this world, failing to appreciate his unknowable nature beyond what we can see or conceive. In either case, we attempt to delimit God, whether positively or negatively. According to Ibn al-‘Arabi, God’s transcendence and immanence must be simultaneously affirmed if one is to accurately acknowledge the utterly unique, ubiquitous, and ultimately unknowable nature of the Reality, or *al-Haqq*, a favored name of God for Sufis. That being said, Ibn al-‘Arabi never tires of emphasizing that the reality of God escapes the conceptual frameworks we create to understand God. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (d. 1883), a student of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works and leader of the Algerian resistance against the French invasion of 1830, commented on this aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought. In keeping with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s dynamic discursive style, al-Jaza’iri writes that Muslims believe in “that which epiphanizes itself to us, namely the God exempt from all limitation, transcendent in His very immanence, and, even more, transcendent in His very transcendence, who, in all that, still remains immanent” (al-Jaza’iri 2011, 39).

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s insistence on affirming both God’s similarity to and his difference from what we can see and imagine was an attempt on his part to balance the tendency of Muslim theologians to emphasize the transcendence of God above creation. Islamic theology, a discipline known as *kalām*, long asserted God’s transcendence, or incomparability (*tanzih*), reflecting the perspective of conventional theism. *Tanzih* is derived from the Arabic verb *nazzaha*, which means to keep something away from any contaminant or impurity (Izutsu 1983, 48). Muslim theologians declared God absolutely free of any imperfection, including any resemblance to creatures whatsoever. In keeping with the theological meaning, Ibn al-‘Arabi defines *tanzih*

as affirming “the Real [God] as having no connection with the attributes of temporally originated things” (Chittick 1989, 70).

The opposite of *tanzih* in Islamic theology is *tashbih*, a term derived from *shabbaha*, which means to consider something similar to something else (Izutsu 1983, 49). This term was often applied to those theologians who tended to interpret the Koran’s description of God’s “hearing” or “seeing,” his “hands” or “face,” literally, drawing accusations of anthropomorphism or a belief in God’s corporeality. Hence theologians instrumentalized *tanzih* and *tashbih* as weapons of polemic, accusing one another of being either transcendentalists or anthropomorphists. Ibn al-'Arabi, however, provided a somewhat novel reading of these opposing terms that allowed him to affirm both.

He agrees with Muslim theologians that God is ultimately incomparable to any phenomenal existence, and yet he suggests that the Koran unequivocally asserts both the transcendence and the immanence of God and that theologians err in ignoring the literal meaning of verses in the Koran that assert God’s similarity to phenomena and manifestation in the world. In numerous places, the Koran proclaims that existent things are God’s signs (*ayat*), and the Koran even goes so far as to state that “wherever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115) and that God is, in fact, closer to us than our jugular vein (50:16). Although Muslim theologians tended to interpret these verses in a metaphorical fashion (*ta'wil*), Ibn al-'Arabi claims rather that such verses of the Koran should be taken at face value, just as for those that declare his incomparability. God has no connection with the attributes of creation, and yet creation is nothing but the face of God. The Absolute is beyond the world, and yet “the Absolute has an aspect in which it appears in each creature” (Izutsu 1983, 52). Although these two assertions may appear to be contradictory, Ibn al-'Arabi asserts that they are complementary, that the Koran is communicating the truth of the matter: God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. This simultaneity is best represented by the Koranic names of God, in particular *al-Batin* (the Hidden) and *al-Zahir* (the Apparent). The *batin* is that which is hidden, invisible, imperceptible, the inward. The *zahir*, in contrast, is that which is apparent, visible, obvious, the outward. The Koran declares that God is both the inward and the outward, the manifest and the unmanifest. For Ibn al-'Arabi, these names indicate the necessity of acknowledging God’s transcendence and immanence.

Besides the Koranic basis for affirming God’s incomparability and similarity, the problem with asserting either of these alone is that one inevitably ends up asserting the opposite of what one intends. The reality of God is not an *either/or* but rather a *both/and*. This perspective is articulated incisively

by one of Ibn al-'Arabi's most important commentators, 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani (d. 1330): "He who 'purifies' God purifies Him from all bodily attributes, but by that very act he is (unconsciously) 'assimilating' (*tashbih*) Him with non-material spiritual beings. What about, then, if one 'purifies' Him from 'limiting' (*taqyid*) itself? Even in that case he will be 'limiting' Him with 'non-limitation' (*itlaq*), while in truth God is 'purified' from (i.e., transcends) the fetters of both 'limitation' and 'non-limitation'" (Izutsu 1983, 50). Hence attempts to declare God transcendent beyond any sensible form delimit God and even liken him (*tashbih*) to nonsensible, spiritual forms. Attempts to declare God free of any limitation whatsoever, in fact, limit him by this very declaration, by nonlimitation. This difficulty cannot be evaded by moving away from *tanzih*: just as declarations of transcendence limit God, so, too, do affirmations of immanence. The forms of the world are nothing but God, and yet God is not simply the sum total of these forms. This maintenance of God's transcendence in view of his immanence is expressed explicitly by al-Qashani, who notes that the whole of creation, "though it is nothing other than the Absolute, is not the Absolute itself. This is because the One Reality that manifests itself in all the individual determinations is something different from these determinations put together" (Izutsu 1983, 54).

Hence any position on God, whether affirming his likeness to or his difference from phenomena, can be deconstructed as inherently limiting and as inevitably implying its opposite. Although appreciating both God's immanence and his transcendence is the best humans can do, even this position combines limiting perspectives in respect to the reality of God.

Ibn al-'Arabi's "positionless position" is not one that is arrived at through the intellect, but it must be encountered existentially as a state of being, rather than as a conceptual framework. He explains that the theologians tend to err on the side of transcendence as they rely on the intellect (*'aql*) in interpreting the Koran. Ibn al-'Arabi maintains that one's intellect naturally affirms the transcendence of the Absolute beyond the relative. If one is to perceive God's immanence, however, one must use the imagination (*khayal*). His emphasis on the imagination is one of the unique characteristics of his thought (Chittick 1994, 11). Unlike contemporary understandings that limit the semantic field of the term *imagination* to the fundamentally illusory, Ibn al-'Arabi grounds imagination in objective reality, proposing that the forms that make up the universe are to God as the imaginary forms of a dream are to a dreamer (Chittick 1994, 11). We are God's dream, and our own minds and imaginations are dreams within a dream.

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It is only when we perceive God through a harmonization of reason and imagination that we gain true knowledge of him. Reason rightfully perceives God's transcendence beyond the forms of the world, and yet imagination affirms that these forms are nothing but God. Hence all things are simultaneously God/not God (*huwa la huwa*), an affirmation that can only be maintained by utilizing the fullness of human perceptive faculties.

The dialectical paradox of transcendence and immanence is an inevitable condition for the Sufi, who must integrally engage both the mind and the imagination if God is to be apprehended to the greatest degree possible for human beings. In reference to the heart, Ibn al-'Arabi affirms that the Sufis perceive the necessity of transcendence and immanence as a result of their utilization of a "divine faculty that is beyond the stage of reason" (Chittick 1989, 75); it is through the knowing heart that one harmonizes reason and imagination and rightfully perceives the reality of God in oneself and on the horizon.

### *Dynamic Transformation and the Self-Disclosure of God*

He who restricts the Reality [to his own belief] denies Him [when manifested] in other beliefs, affirming Him only when He is manifest in his own belief. He who does not restrict Him thus does not deny Him, but affirms His Reality in every formal transformation, worshipping Him in His infinite forms, since there is no limit to the forms in which He manifests Himself. (Ibn 'Arabi 1980, 149.)

For Ibn al-'Arabi, the unicity of being is intertwined with the perpetual fluctuation and transmutation of an absolute time. This property of time as perpetual transformation is known as *taqallub*. The word *taqallub* is an intransitive verbal noun derived from the root *qalaba*, which is also connected to *qalb* ("heart"). The heart is a vehicle and also the focal point of constant fluctuation, motion, endless transformations. The heart is also the locus of two eyes: "the modality of awareness that discerns God's undisclosability" (as connected to human reason) and "the modality of understanding that grasps his self-disclosure" (as connected to imagination): "People are able to maintain the balance between incomparability and similarity by seeing with 'both eyes,' that is both reason and imagination. If we do not see God, the world, and ourselves with full vision of both eyes, we will not be able to see things

as they are. The locus of such a vision is the heart, whose beating symbolizes the constant shift from one eye to the other, made necessary by divine unity, which precludes a simultaneously dual vision” (Chittick 2005, 20).

The latter modality of understanding God through imagination is intimately connected to another panentheistic element found in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s writings: *tajalli*, usually translated as “self-disclosure.” For Ibn al-‘Arabi, *tajalli* connotes the continual manifestation of God’s being in terms of his names (Chittick 1998, 53). Simply put, *tajalli* is the “Self-manifestation of the Absolute,” or the “Self-disclosure of God.” As defined by Toshihiko Izutsu, “*Tajalli* is the process by which the Absolute, which is absolutely unknowable in itself, goes on manifesting itself in ever more concrete forms” (Izutsu 1983, 152). Our day-to-day experiences, both internally, in terms of thoughts and emotions, and externally, in terms of encounters with the world, are, according to Ibn al-‘Arabi, the continual manifestation of the Absolute in particular forms. These manifestations occur at various levels of reality. According to the philosophical school that developed around Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought, these degrees of reality can be classified in terms of the Five Planes of Being:

1. Essence (*dhat*), the Absolute Mystery (*al-ghayb al-mutlaq*).
2. Divinity, attributes, and names (*uluhiyah*).
3. Lordship, actions (*rububiyah*).
4. Images (*amthal*) and imagination (*khayal*).
5. Sense experience (*mushahadah*).

Anything in the sensible world is a “form (*surah*) in which a state of affairs in the higher plane of Images directly reveals itself, and indirectly and ultimately, the absolute Mystery itself” (Izutsu 1983, 12). What we see in the world is a manifestation of higher planes of reality, including the very essence of God. To be able to perceive these higher realities in the phenomenal world is what Ibn al-‘Arabi describes as *kashf*, or “unveiling.” As Izutsu puts it, “‘Unveiling’ means, in short, taking each of the sensible things as a locus in which Reality discloses itself to us” (Izutsu 1983, 12).

Perhaps the most important thing to take from Ibn al-‘Arabi’s articulation of *tajalli* is the radical dynamism inherent in the process. According to Ibn al-‘Arabi, God never manifests himself in the same way twice or to two people in the same way. Each person, at each moment, has a unique experience of Reality. Or, put alternatively, God manifests himself to each person, at each moment in a new and different way. Creation is forever new; God’s self-manifestation is forever changing. This idea later became a Sufi axiom,

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*La takrar fi'l-tajalli*, "There is no repetition in self-disclosure" (Chittick 1989, 103).

This understanding of God and the world has profound implications in understanding different beliefs, religions, and philosophies, laying the groundwork for a radical pluralism. If God manifests himself in all things, in all beliefs, to all people, in different ways, then the true worshiper of God worships God in all of these forms. Accordingly, Ibn al-'Arabi writes: "God discloses Himself perpetually, since changes are witnessed perpetually in the manifest things and the nonmanifest things, the unseen and the visible, the sensory and the intelligible. His task is self-disclosure, and the task of the existent things is change and passage from one state to another state. Among us there are those who recognize this and those who do not recognize it. Those who recognize it worship Him in every state. Those who do not recognize it deny Him in every state" (Chittick 1989, 103). The true knowers of God, then, those who are able to recognize *tajalli* and thus utilize "both eyes," have also attained the station of realization, or the "station of no-station," a metaphysical abode of time and space in which the knower comes continually to embrace and simultaneously negate all stations of human knowledge and experience. As is apparent in the following statement by Chittick, Ibn al-'Arabi, in a sense, is a true iconoclast, yet paradoxically, he smashes even his own iconoclasm: Ibn al-'Arabi "acknowledges the validity of every mode of human knowing, and at the same time he recognizes the limitations of every mode. Thus he considers every perspective, every school of thought, and every religion as both true and false. He does not offer a single, overall system that would take everything or most things into account, but he does present us with a way of looking at things that allows us to understand why things must be the way they are" (Chittick 1994, 10).

In this station of no station, of no distinction, of no position, Ibn al-'Arabi recognizes and understands the limitations of every perspective. This position-less position corresponds closely with the deconstructive aspect of panentheism. Biernacki asserts in this volume that panentheism's deconstructive impulse displaces hierarchical theologies and that panentheism is in some sense an "antitheology," opposing hegemonic truth claims. This description resonates strongly with Ibn al-'Arabi's deconstruction of all possible theological positions as inherently restrictive of the dynamic and paradoxical nature of God.

Ibn al-'Arabi nonetheless offers an "isthmus" on which to live: the principle of *wahdat al-wujud*, the unity of existence, an accommodation of both the Absolute and the relative, the One and the many. This "isthmus" of identity

is where creative imagination resides and is also the place of no boundaries (only infinite potential extension), a place of freedom from and within form. The bird (such as the *anqa*, the mystical phoenix) is a living symbol of this freedom. It has wings of faith to fly and knows no boundaries that deny, constantly being reborn from its own primordial dust.

In the station of no station, one continually encounters *fana*, the state of annihilation, nothingness; and yet (paradoxically) one also encounters *baqa*, the state of subsistence, presence. This combination avoids the conceptualized state of complete nihilism. The best symbol to represent such a state is the mirror: it is a vessel of separation; however, concomitantly, it is also a vehicle of synthesis. It is a metaphor of separation as reflected in the image of self as other; yet if approached from a different interpretation, it is a reflective tool uniting self and other into one image, one identity. The theory and practice of living “in between” is living in perpetual “subsistent” transformation in time and space.

“Binding” or attachment to any moment, form, concept, or image is idolatry at the highest level; it is the denial of presence, of unitive being as perpetuated by the constant cycle of annihilation and subsistence. Therefore, the relative is Absolute; yet it is also absolutely relative indefinitely, and the Absolute itself is relative; yet simultaneously, the Absolute is absolutely absolute. This placeless place is an all-comprehensive pluralism of contradictions: lost/found, known/unknown, existence/nonexistence, affirmation/negation, expansion/contraction. “The complete human encompasses both the hidden and the manifest”; he or she reconciles diversity and unity through the constant rebirth of “whole-archy,” where a human is an entry point for the Whole to manifest (Sells 1994, 85).

The concept of *tajalli* is closely connected to another term found in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works, *tabawwul* (“transmutation”). Humans live in an “unbound *wujud* [existence]” which is the locus of self-disclosure: the integrated moments of revealing and re-veiling, of knowledge and perplexity. This integrated dynamism is the polarity between known and unknown. To traverse duality in order to transcend duality is the passing of station by station, constantly arriving and departing from understanding until one reaches the complete station without a station, the ultimate paradox. For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the acknowledgment of dynamic paradoxicality allowed Sufis to avoid the presumption of “knowing” any other station but one’s own; ultimately, one’s knowledge of God is conditioned by one’s self, the water takes on the color of its container. This art of self-apprehension is also linked to the question of interpretation: “We cannot describe him by any quality unless we are that

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quality... When we know him in ourselves and through ourselves we attribute to him everything we attribute to ourselves. Thus divine sayings have come down to us through the tongues of their interpreters. He described himself to us, through us. When we witness him, we witness ourselves. When we witness ourselves, we witness him” (Sells 1994, 84).

### *Conclusion: Panentheistic Traces*

To summarize, the human task according to Ibn al-'Arabi is to become a mirror that perfectly reflects the totality of God's qualities as they perpetually manifest. The human being then becomes the locus wherein the kaleidoscope of being is reflected back to itself. According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the names (qualities) of God (Reality) are scattered throughout the universe and are only brought together in the completed human being (*insan al-kamil*), who integrates the totality of existence in one place. The perfected human being gathers the range of realities found of the universe, being a creature in form and *al-Haqq* (the Reality/Absolute) in essence. The perfected or completed human being is thus a microcosm of the universe. As humans approach this state of perfection, they are able to reflect more and more of God's qualities, such as compassion, mercy, knowledge, and power, fulfilling the cosmic role of the vicegerent, or representative of God in the world.

Although the first Western dissertation written on Ibn al-'Arabi, by A. E. Affifi in 1939, proclaimed him a pantheist, scholars have since rejected the label as an inaccurate classification of Ibn al-'Arabi's perspective. As we have illustrated in this chapter, Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, though ultimately transcending any classificatory system, clearly shares significant emphases with *panentheism*, a term that can certainly be used with greater accuracy in reference to Ibn al-'Arabi's thought than *pantheism*. Panentheism's affirmation of the “divine-in-all” and the “all-in-the-divine” is reflected in Ibn al-'Arabi's radical vision of unity, according to which manyness and oneness are two aspects of a single reality, a position often referred to as the “unity of being” (*wahdat al-wujud*). This perspective, though positing existence's fundamental oneness, also acknowledges the importance of plurality within this oneness: it is only with multiplicity that singularity can be appreciated. Furthermore, Ibn al-'Arabi shares panentheism's acknowledgment of both the transcendence and the immanence of God. He explicitly states the need for both emphases, as either emphasis alone leads to a limiting perspective that conceptually reduces or falsely pins down the reality of God. Ibn al-'Arabi affirms that the world is nothing but God manifest (*tashbih*), and yet he simultaneously



maintains that God is ultimately beyond the world (*tanzih*). Finally, Ibn al-‘Arabi articulates God’s *tajalli*, or self-manifestation in the world, as an inherently dynamic process, proposing that God manifests himself in a unique way in each moment, never repeating his self-disclosures.

The true sage, then, is the one who recognizes the perpetually changing ways in which God reveals himself both within the self and without, in the world. The true sage appreciates each belief, philosophy, and religion as simultaneously God and not God, knowing the perfection and limitation of all possible perspectives on reality. With this understanding, Ibn al-‘Arabi shares panentheism’s profoundly pluralistic orientation, relentlessly deconstructing hegemonic truth claims, while remaining open to the possibilities of belief. In the thirteenth century, he concisely expressed this insight, one that becomes increasingly pressing as multiple human beliefs coalesce and converge around the globe:

Beware of being bound up by a particular religion and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that you will fail to obtain a great benefit. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of the reality. Try to make yourself a (kind of) Prime Matter for all forms of religious belief. God is wider and greater than to be confined to a particular religion to the exclusion of others. (Izutsu 1983, 254).

## NOTES

1. As William C. Chittick notes, the expression “oneness of being” is not found in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s many works, and yet “we are certainly justified in claiming that he supported *wahdat al-wujud* in the literal sense of the term” (Chittick 1994, 15).
2. These definitions of the first part of the *shahadah* were offered by Kabir Helminski at the conference “Two Sacred Paths: Christianity and Islam, a Call for Understanding” on November 7, 1998, at the Washington National Cathedral. In *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, Chittick discusses how *wujud* is connected to the concepts of *tawhid* as seen in the first part of the *shahadah*. “*Tawhid* is expressed most succinctly in the formula, ‘There is no god but God.’ God is *wujud*, so ‘There is no *wujud* but God.’ Everything other than God is not *wujud* and can properly be called ‘nonexistence’ (*‘adam*). *Wujud* is the Hidden Treasure, and all things derive their existence from it, for they possess none of their own” (Chittick 2005, 40).
3. Sura 4:2:11.
4. In *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook of Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, Sachiko Murata quotes Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thoughts on correlativity between God and

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- the cosmos: “Since the cosmos has no subsistence except through God, and since the attribute of Divinity has no subsistence except through the cosmos, each of the two is the provision (*rizq*) of the other” (Murata 1992, 58).
5. Murata notes that this hadith “epitomizes the metaphysical underpinnings of the Sufi school of thought” (ibid., 10).
  6. In *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, Henry Corbin describes this theophanic hadith as “the immanent necessity of Compassion, of divine Longing to reveal its own being” (Corbin 1998, 226).
  7. Murata phrases this thought in the following manner: “God needs the vassal if He is to be a God, and the vassal needs God if it is to be a vassal” (Murata 1992, 58).
  8. Murata’s point was taken from Ibn al-'Arabi’s comment on this cosmological phenomenon: “Nothing can come into existence—except between two things: the divine power and the possible thing’s reception of activity. Were one of these two realities lacking, no entity would become manifest for the cosmos” (ibid.).
  9. Koran 7:180: “The most beautiful names belong to Allah: so call on Him by them.”

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