

## XX. Ibn Al-'Arabi and Vedanta

By Gopal Stavig, *Vedanta Kesari* 86 (Feb. 1999), pp. 67-71

Advaitic mysticism was introduced into the Muslim religion by the Iranian Sufi Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874/78). His teacher Abu Ali al-Sindi was a religious convert to Islam who probably hailed from the Sind in Northwest India. Abu Yazid live an extremely ascetic life for thirty years and was familiar with the Indian yogic practice of breath control. In ecstatic states he uttered the Upanishadic dictum "Thou art That" implying a state of mystic identity with the Absolute Essence. He considered the phenomenal world to be a deceit which equates with the Indian concept of maya. Similes that are foreign to Islam, but are found in the Indian Upanishad's and Bhagavad Gita, were used by him. It is possible that the monistic doctrines that he taught were inspired by the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara, who according to the traditional dates died in 820, but might have lived earlier.<sup>1</sup>

While Abu Yazid taught a mystical path to God, a more comprehensive advaitic religious philosophy was developed by Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240), who was born in Muslim Spain and died in Damascus in Syria. His writings were inspired by his spiritual communications with prophets of the past. He asserted that his book the *Fusus al-Hikam*, was dictated to him by the Prophet Muhammad in a visionary dream.<sup>2</sup> An Arabic version of an Iranian translation of a Sanskrit work on Tantric yoga has been ascribed to him. After his death his philosophy of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Oneness of

Being) continued to flourish in Turkey (Anatolia), Iran and India.<sup>3</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabi's philosophy was mediated into India by the writings of the Iranian poet and mystic Fakhr al-Din Iraqi (1213-89). These doctrines were the dominant Sufi philosophy in India until the seventeenth century, when Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) led an ambivalent dualistic orthodox opposition against these teachings. Dara Shukoh's (1615-59) whose guru belonged to the Ibn al-'Arabi school, discovered a number of Sufi terms that correspond to Sanskrit concepts. The influential Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi (1703-62) created a Muslim theology of synthesis, accepting the views of both Ibn al-'Arabi and Sirhindi. Swami Vivekananda mentioned that the educated Sufi Muslims of India are almost indistinguishable from the Hindus.<sup>4</sup>

### Ibn al-'Arabi's Advaitic Philosophy

According to Ibn al-‘Arabi the Absolute Essence (Nirguna Brahman)<sup>5</sup> is Being-Itself (Satta), the one unity that is the foundation of multiplicity and the reality behind the phenomenal appearance (maya, abhasa). It exists in a state of transcendence without substance, attributes, quantity, relations, name (nama), form (rupa), differentiation, space, time, or subject-object duality, yet it is the source of all of these. The Absolute Essence cannot be comprehended through reason, comparison or analogy, since it is ineffable (acintya) and completely incomparable with all human knowledge. It is free from all limitations (upadhis) and is attained only by a process of negation (neti, neti). One can only specify “that” it exists, not “what” it is. Conversely, Personal God (Ishvara) is related to creation by Divine attributes (tatastha-laksana) and names that are understandable through revelation. The Lord is comprehended by ascribing positive attributes to God, based on experiences in the phenomenal world.<sup>6</sup>

The Essential Self (Atman) of each person is identical with the Absolute Essence since all existence is a single unity. The Essential reality of a person appears through its attributes as the empirical self. In spiritual intuition, mystics contemplate the form of their true inner being realizing their identity with God. All people are eternal in their inner and Absolute being and temporal in their external and mundane manifestation.<sup>7</sup>

To experience existence from the standpoint of the Absolute Essence (paramarthika-drst) is a state of oneness and unity and from the viewpoint of the phenomenal world (vyavaharika-drst) is plurality and differentiation. The Essence of God is everywhere and

in everything as the unity of knowledge, knower and known. Divine Essence has two aspects, one with (savishesa) and another without attributes (nirvishesa). Its Essence is one and its attributes and names are many, manifesting as unity in diversity. To view the reality from only one of these two standpoints is one-sided and incomplete.<sup>8</sup>

In reality the finite world is nonexistent (asat) since only Absolute Essence exists (ajativada). The world is an appearance, a dream and a mental construction (kalpana) without any real existence. There is but one Reality, yet conceptually there appears to be a duality of a transcendent Absolute and the phenomenal world of multiplicity. Everything except the Absolute Essence undergoes change from one form to another and is without real existence. It is an illusion to think we are separate from God and are aspiring to become one with Him. The sensible veil of darkness (avidya maya) conceals the Divine Essence while the spiritual veil of light (vidya maya) unfolds it.<sup>9</sup>

From another standpoint, the cosmos is neither existent nor nonexistent (anirvacaniya-khyati, mithya) and is like a reflected image in a mirror, which is veridical yet it is not the real object. Only God exists, yet the world possesses some reality, or we could not think of it. Phenomenal objects are unreal in-themselves, but real in the sense that they express both the oneness of the Absolute and the multiplicity of the Divine names.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the Absolute Essence is reflected (pratibimba) onto diverse mirrors which are the objects of the phenomenal world. According to another conception, the intelligible ideas in the Divine

Mind manifesting as Divine attributes and names, are reflected onto the mirror of the world. God reveals Himself like an image in a mirror, each person and object reflecting the Divine names according to their nature and capacity as a recipient. Still, another idea is that the mirror is the Absolute Essence on which the phenomenal objects are reflected. God is the mirror in which you see your true self, and you are the mirror in which he knows and perceives His attributes and names (anyonya-pratibimba).<sup>11</sup>

### Creation of the Cosmos

For Ibn al-'Arabi the initial self-expression of the Absolute Essence (Nirguna Brahman) is the Universal Consciousness (Chit), the self-revelation of God becoming conscious of Himself and experiencing His own reality. At this stage the Divine attributes and names are undifferentiated, and there is an identity of knower, knowledge and known. In the second self-expression of the Absolute Essence, God as the Universal Spirit (Ishvara) knows Himself as an infinity of intelligible ideas and potential determinate forms. The intelligible ideas are discerned by God apart from their created manifestation, as the prototypes (bimba) of all entities. The phenomenal world exists in a state of potentiality, until the Divine attributes and names objectify through predication of external entities. Intelligible ideas in the Divine Consciousness manifest as individual entities and not as universals.<sup>12</sup>

At the third level, the world is created by the intelligible ideas in a logical process and not a temporal sequence. Divine names of

the Universal Spirit, externalize and actualize as the Universal Mind-Soul (Hiranyagarbha, Mahat). God is conscious of Himself as a whole and of the individual souls that are His modes (upadhis). The creation is not ex nihilo, but a product of the intelligible ideas in the Divine Mind. Forms of the intelligible ideas manifest as phenomenal objects and events at a particular time and place in world history. All entities are predetermined to follow the predispositions of their own internal nature (svabhava). God spontaneously created the universe for the purpose of becoming conscious of Himself as an object and to actualize His infinite creative possibilities (lila).<sup>13</sup>

Allah (Om) is the most universal of all the names of God and contains the qualities of all the Divine attributes. Divine names are eternal but limited expressions of the Absolute Essence, with each name representing one of God's infinite attributes. The names are both an ontological and epistemological bridge between God and the phenomenal world. Each person and object has a special role to play (svadharma) in the cosmos, each fulfilling the function of the name's God has bestowed upon them. The universe is created through the breath of the Supreme Being, who uttered the name kun (i.e., be) and the cosmos came into existence.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth objectification is the Universal Body (Virat) composed of nature and passive prime matter (prakriti). Matter is that which receives form, consisting of the four elements of air, fire, water and earth (bhutas). Humans are a microcosmic spirit (karana-sharira, anandamaya-kosha), mind-soul (linga-sharira) and physical body (sthula-sharira, annamaya-kosha) that are particular modes, not parts of the macrocosmic God which is the Universal Spirit, Mind-

Soul and Body. Existence is an organic whole where each microcosm is significant only in relation to the macrocosm, analogous to the sea and its waves and the sun and its rays. This unity of plurality is conceptually distinguished from the unity of the Absolute Essence.<sup>15</sup>

Pervading phenomenal existence there is an immutable unitary substratum that underlies all of the changing forms. God's Absolute existence (paramarthika) is necessary meaning it is self-caused and must exist, while the creature's empirical existence (vyavaharika) is possible and contingent and might exist or not exist. Conceptually there is also an impossible existence which is a nonentity that is without empirical reality (pratibhasika). Feminine terms are used to explain the creative process since nature is the mother of the cosmos that gives birth to all things. She is receptive to Divine activity, being acted upon by God's command and words. The world is eternal and infinite, in a continuous process of transformation and annihilation.<sup>16</sup>

### Religion and Mysticism

Ibn al-'Arabi regarded all religions as partial aspects of one universal religion (sanatana dharma), which has been revealed to various communities at particular times and places, according to their needs, beliefs and temperaments. God exists in all forms of worship as their Essence, and each revealed religious path provides a unique way of looking upon the Divine and the world. The Supreme Being transcends all limitations and is too great to be confined to a particular religion and excluded from all others. All people will be

saved and liberated (sarvamukti) and eventually experience the light of paradise. Bondage is temporary since evil is the privation of the good and is not a positive entity, just as darkness is the absence of light and ignorance is lack of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The most sublime objectification of God is the Perfect Man (Avatar), which is the logos and the Word of God. It is an active principle of Divine knowledge that manifests in all the prophets (ishvarakotis, rishis), revealing the scriptural tradition (shruti, agama). In the Perfect Man the spiritual perfection of the Divine is realized, and God becomes conscious of Himself and His perfection. Jesus and Muhammad are incarnation's of the Divine, but not God Himself.<sup>18</sup>

Intuitive understanding (anubhava) that illumines the being of a spiritual aspirant, is derived from the Divine effulgence that lies dormant in the deepest recesses of the human heart. When the veil is lifted, the “eye of the heart and soul” see all things as they really are with clarity and certainty. In the experience of immediate vision (samadhi), one becomes identical with God and He becomes the hearing and sight of the mystic. Knowledge (jnana) burst forth in the passive, tranquil and pure soul, bringing about an illumined unity of consciousness perceiving God’s presence in all things. Knowers of God while subsisting on earth, live in the higher realm and already are saved (jivanmukta). The theologians and philosophers follow the rational approach stressing God’s inaccessibility, otherness, majesty, justice and wrath while the mystic experience God’s accessibility, nearness, humility, mercy and gentleness.<sup>19</sup>

Love (bhakti) is the highest form of religious worship that



binds things together in the essential oneness of existence. Sufis seeks union with God by remembering Him, becoming His intimate companion (sakhya) and servant (dasya). The goal is to renounce the human attributes of self-will, desires and aversions, through the practice of self-surrender (prapatti) to God. In traveling the religious path one must have a spiritual guide (guru) to avoid the dangers and pitfalls which lie along the way. The proper teacher is an heir to the prophet and belongs to the spiritual chain of transmission of a religious order.<sup>20</sup>

The first aspect or mode of Divine volition is God's Divine will, the eternal creative power that brings the creation into existence. Second is the Divine wish, God's obligating and normative command. The Divine will is determined and cannot be disobeyed, while the Divine wish is subject to freedom of choice and may be obeyed or disobeyed. Improper conduct is disobedience to God's wish but not His will.<sup>21</sup>

## References

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: Athlone Press, 1960), pp. 93-134.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam)*, (hereafter the sections written by Ibn al-'Arabi are cited as *Fusus*), R. W. J. Austin, tr. (New York, Paulist Press, 1980), p. 45; Saiyid Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (2 vols., Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983), ii, p. 38; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), p. 27. The majority of references used in this article from *the Futuhat al-Makkiyya* are in this book.

<sup>3</sup> Austin, p. 23; Rizvi, i, pp. 103-09.

<sup>4</sup> Rizvi, i, pp. 205, 217, 250-55, 389-90; ii, pp. 1, 16-17, 36-38, 76-77, 90-91, 134-39, 169-70, 190-91, 209-13, 255-56, 268-70, 314-15, 417-24; William Chittick, "Notes on Ibn al-'Arabi's Influence in the Subcontinent," *The Muslim World*, 82, 1992, pp. 218-41; Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, ed. Advaita Ashrama (9 vols., Calcutta, 1959), v, pp. 190, 195.

<sup>5</sup> In order to facilitate comparisons with Indian advaita philosophy, the approximate Sanskrit term is given in parentheses when it first occurs.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-'Arabi, *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, (hereafter *Futuhāt*) (4 vols., Cairo, 1911), i, pp. 41, 289, 691; ii, pp. 57, 110, 257, 289, 579, 597, 619; iii, p. 164; iv, p. 196; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 58-62, 69, 81, 112; A. E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnul Arabi* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1979), pp. 4-11, 21-24, 37-44; S. A. Q. Husaini, *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-'Arabi* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1979), pp. 67, 133-51.

<sup>7</sup> *Fusus*, pp. 69, 107-08, 153, 191; *Futuhāt*, ii, pp. 67, 285, 468, 588; iii, p. 151; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 366-69; Husaini, pp. 99-108; Affifi, pp. 117-20; Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1984), pp. 104, 107, 233.

<sup>8</sup> *Fusus*, p. 107; Affifi, pp. 10-13; Izutsu, pp. 48-55.

<sup>9</sup> *Futuhāt* i, p. 279; Izutsu, pp. 7-11, 32-33; Husaini, pp. 186-88; Affifi, pp. 54, 62; Austin, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Futuhāt*, pp. iv, 151, 434; Affifi, pp. 10-12, 41-42, 54, 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Fusus*, p. 65; Izutsu, pp. 34-35; Affifi, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> ***Fusus***, pp. 53-54; Izutsu, pp. 40-45, 152-58; Affifi, pp. 47-53.

<sup>13</sup> Husaini, pp. 57-66; Izutsu, pp. 102, 147-48, 176-78, 198-201; Affifi, pp. 24-28; Austin, pp. 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> *Futuhāt*, i, p. 322; ii, p. 236; iii, p. 195; *Fusus*, pp. 68, 141, 181, 183; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 5, 19-20, 52-54, 84, 89, 302; Affifi, pp. 41-47.

<sup>15</sup> *Futuhāt*, ii, pp. 431-32; iii, p. 420; iv, p. 150; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 7, 25,

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139-43; Husaini, pp. 57-66, 93-94; Izutsu, p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> *Futuhāt*, ii, pp. 639, 677; iii, pp. 275, 420, 452; iv, p. 150; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 81-82, 97-98, 140-41; Izutsu, pp. 202-05.

<sup>17</sup> *Fusus*, pp. 137, 210, 247-48; *Futuhāt*, i, p. 266; iii, pp. 207, 373, 377, 528; iv, p. 142; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 28-29, 229, 290-91, 336-37, 347, 358; Izutsu, pp. 60-61, 82-85, 253; Affifi, pp. 166-67.

<sup>18</sup> Affifi, pp. 20, 66-89; Izutsu, pp. 236-43, 263-67.

<sup>19</sup> *Fusus*, pp. 148-51; *Futuhāt*, i, p. 305; ii, pp. 291, 644; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 235-38; Affifi, pp. 96-98, 106-09; Izutsu, pp. 253, 265-66, 275.

<sup>20</sup> *Futuhāt*, i, p. 91; ii, pp. 88, 316, 364, 528-29; iii, pp. 19, 147; *Fusus*, pp. 63, 209-10; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 147-53, 159, 270-74, 309-12, 317-23.

<sup>21</sup> *Fucus*, p. 204; *Futuhāt*, ii, pp. 342, 593; iv, p. 430; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 292-94; Austin, pp. 31-32; Affifi, pp. 153-56. According to Chittick's, "Subcontinent," pp. 221-22, special action must be undertaken to preserve the high quality writings of the Indian Sufis who expounded this advaitic philosophy or they will be unsalvageable. By preserving these writings Indian and Pakistani Muslims will gain more knowledge of their advaitists heritage.