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"... Except His Face"

The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn 'Arabi's Legacy

James Winston Morris

The aim of this brief survey¹ is to examine the reception and the influences of Ibn 'Arabi's work in the past – both in the Islamic world in the seven centuries following his death, and in the West over the past century – in order to discover what that long and eventful history may suggest about the future of his legacy as his works continue to become more widely translated and accessible to much broader audiences in years to come. To anticipate its conclusions, a closer look at what we now know of that history reveals a remarkable continuity in the locus of Ibn 'Arabi's appeal and the nature of his primary audiences across all sorts of historical, cultural and religious boundaries. In this respect, the extraordinary breadth and continuity of Ibn 'Arabi's influence remains a striking historical mystery, in ways that closely parallel the equally far-reaching and surprisingly lasting influences of such Spanish near-contemporaries as Moses of Leon (the presumed compiler of the *Zohar*), Averroes and Maimonides. As the citation of such figures suggests, perhaps one of the essential roots of that mystery lies in the way the situation of 12th- and 13th-century Spain already prefigured so many of the civilizational and religious conflicts, encounters, and possibilities that are such a predominant feature of global life at the dawn of the 21st century.

1. The beginning of the title alludes to a famous Qur'anic verse (28:88, "... every thing is perishing, except for His/its Face") which is frequently cited by Ibn al-'Arabi. We would like to thank the organizers of the IV Congreso Internacional sobre Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi held in Murcia, Spain (November 1996), on the general theme of "The Legacy of Ibn 'Arabi: Thought Without Frontiers", for the original occasion for preparing this paper.

In any event, it is essential to note that there was nothing in the outward, visible aspect of Ibn 'Arabi's life and activities, during his own lifetime, that could possibly have suggested the extent and duration of his subsequent influences. He was not the founder of a Sufi *tariqa* or an outwardly charismatic "leader" surrounded by many influential disciples; nor – despite the important literary qualities of his poetry and other writing – was he an incomparable, world-class poet or mystical storyteller like Rumi, Attar, Hafez or so many other masters of that quint-essential Islamic art. Indeed, his own writings were apparently little known at the time of his death, scattered in manuscript copies from the Maghreb to the East of the Islamic world, and composed in an extremely difficult Arabic, destined for a tiny elite of religious scholars and presupposing a rare mastery both of esoteric Sufi traditions and of all the complex religious and cosmological sciences of his time. And finally, his works make no secret of his unambiguously Sunni Muslim allegiances and presuppositions – a constant theological and rhetorical emphasis which makes his widespread later influence among both Shiite scholars and even non-Muslims all the more surprising.

Keeping in mind this apparently quite unpromising historical situation at the time of Ibn 'Arabi's own death, there can be little doubt that the extraordinary appeal and spread of his ideas in subsequent generations was due not simply to certain intrinsic features of his own thought, but also to new historical situations and their intellectual and spiritual demands which helped to highlight the relevance of the ideas articulated in his works. If we evoke here some of the key figures in that process of transmission and development of his ideas, it is only to help bring out the three essential dimensions that, taken together, can help to explain the mystery of the perennial appeal of Ibn 'Arabi's writing throughout later centuries: These are (a) the relevant unique features of Ibn 'Arabi's own ideas and their expression; (b) the particular, recurrent historical situations where their appeal – one might almost say, the "need" for them – was particularly evident; and (c) the corresponding audiences and interpreters who were particularly affected by that need and the appeal of those ideas.

To begin with the most visible, historical dimension of this process: the four centuries following Ibn 'Arabi's death were marked above all by the definitive creation of Islam as a truly "world" religion, no longer limited to or defined by the Arabic-speaking lands and social groups with which it could still largely be identified even in Ibn 'Arabi's own day. Most obviously, this remarkable historical transformation – which is still relatively unstudied – involved the spread and creative development of new forms of popular piety and devotional life centering on the proliferating Sufi tariqas and especially on popular devotion to the "saints" or *awliya*, developments which were transmitted throughout the vast Eastern *oikumene* opened up by the Mongol conquests through trade and new forms of poetic and devotional expression (originally in the New-Persian *koine* of that realm). On the political level, the chaos and creative decentralization created by the combined Mongol and Crusader invasions – when the "*dar al-Islam*", in the political sense, almost disappeared in the decades immediately following Ibn 'Arabi's death – eventually led to the development of the three vast, multi-confessional empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Moguls, along with the even wider spread of Islamic faith, practice and cultural models throughout Central and Southeast Asia and much of Africa. This, then, was the essential historical backdrop to the period of the most creative, multi-faceted appropriation of Ibn 'Arabi's work and ideas throughout the Eastern Islamic world.

Within this new historical situation (already partially prefigured in the Andalusia of Ibn 'Arabi's own youth), we can identify essentially *four different contexts* – and four corresponding audiences and groups of "users" – where Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and writings found a fertile reception. (To anticipate our conclusions below, it would seem that today, and in the future as well, the appeal of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas is likely to continue to be divided among four comparable groups.) In each of these cases, as one might expect, there is an immense gamut of appropriation and adaptation of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas, ranging from rote citation and outright plagiarism (rarely avowed) to remarkable heights of creativity and subtle inspiration.

(1) To begin with, the broadest range of uses and influences of Ibn 'Arabi's work was among those Muslims directly involved in practical spiritual life and guidance – for example, Sufi shaykhs, preachers, jurists, Qur'an commentators from all parts of the Islamic world – who found in his magnum opus, the *Futuh al-Makkiya* ("The Meccan Illuminations"), a sort of all-encompassing encyclopedia of Islamic thought, especially in the domain of spiritual practice, and perhaps the most penetrating and profound of all commentaries on the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet. As the recent researches of Michel Chodkiewicz, Denis Gril, and other younger scholars have shown, teachers and guides from every region and almost every school of Islamic thought quickly recognized the depth and inspiration of Ibn 'Arabi's insights and interpretations in this vast work and turned them to practical use in their own domains – generally without acknowledging the often somewhat "suspect" source of their borrowing and without being particularly concerned with the systematic philosophic or theological dimensions of the Shaykh's ideas. In this domain, the *indirect* influences, through repetition, popularization, and simplification, soon came to predominate over the direct use and citation of Ibn 'Arabi's stubbornly difficult and challenging writings themselves. (One could compare this process to the equally widespread popularization of Avicenna's theological and philosophic language throughout later Islamic thought.)

The other three groups attracted to Ibn 'Arabi's writings and ideas are considerably easier to isolate, since in each case they tended to focus – at least in their own writings and borrowings – on his highly controversial, later book, the *Fusus al-Hikam* ("The Bezels of Wisdom"), and on the long series of philosophical commentaries which quickly grew up surrounding that work. In all three of these tendencies, there is a strong *political* dimension to the study and citation of Ibn 'Arabi, alongside the spiritual and intellectual processes of more creative and philosophic appropriation of his thought.

(2) One tendency, which already finds one of its most distinguished and influential exponents in Ibn 'Arabi's disciple and stepson, Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, sought to develop on the basis of Ibn 'Arabi's writings what came to be by far the most elaborate Islamic "philosophy of religion" and religious life, a comprehensive metaphysics which offered an all-encompassing justification and explanation for the observed diversity of religious, philosophic, and spiritual "paths" to God – whether within the multiple sects and schools of later Islamic culture, or in the even wider, multi-confessional context of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mogul empires. (The key "Akbarian" *leitmotifs* in such writers are such familiar unifying themes as the Unicity of Being, the "Muhammadan Reality" and the "Complete Human Being" (*al-insan al-kamil*), the degrees of divine Presence, the relations of prophecy and sainthood, and the relations of the One divine Reality to the multiple prophetic Revelations.) Here it is relatively easy to trace the lines of intellectual affiliation and inspiration leading from Qunawi on to the celebrated Persian poet Jami, or to such later philosophic masters as Mulla Sadra (in Safavid Iran), Shah Waliullah (in Mogul India), or Raneri (in Malaysia) – to mention only a few of the most famous and influential figures in this group. If most of these writers were originally concerned with situations of religious conflict and diversity within the broader Muslim community, the extension of their insights to wider, *inter-religious* situations – as in many of their more recent Western interpreters – requires little more than a shift of emphasis and application.

(3) A second tendency and domain of influence involves the use of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas by creative writers (such as the Persian poets 'Iraqi and Jami) and religious scholars to provide commentaries and explanations for the aims and presuppositions of the incomparable mystical poets (Rumi, Ibn al-Farid, etc.) whose creations had such a profound effect in shaping the "Islam" of the vast regions and diverse peoples who were entering into the wider predominant Islamic civilization and culture (even if not always formally Muslim

themselves) during this period. Here this remarkable adaptation of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas (such key themes as the spiritual Ascension, the perpetually renewed Creation, and the perennial, essential links of each soul to Revelation) and earlier Sufi developments came to provide what one might very roughly compare to the multiple intellectual and political functions of artistic and literary "criticism" in the modern West. In particular, it is clear that this articulation and adaptation of Ibn 'Arabi's insights often served to provide an indispensable political or ideological "justification" for the activities of Muslim artists and poets as much as a direct creative inspiration in itself. Here again, the widespread modern Western interest – among writers, poets, artists and psychologists – in Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the "creative Imagination" can be understood as another direct adaptation of a familiar tendency in earlier Islamic uses of his writing.

(4) Finally, a third recurrent influence of Ibn 'Arabi's writings was in a vast tradition of polemic writings, extending down to heated political disputes in many parts of the Islamic world even in our own day, where the underlying issues at stake – when historians look at each case more closely – most often turned on the relative influence of groups connected with the growing Sufi orders and their related practices and socio-political demands. This particular theme of support for the "innovations" and intentions of earlier generations of Sufis, which is certainly implicit throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writings, took on heightened importance as it became applied to all the new social and religious movements and tendencies of subsequent centuries. In this polemic context, Ibn 'Arabi's writings provided an almost ready-made defense not only of the historical Sufi tariqas, but indeed of the diversity and creativity inherent in all spiritual life – a defense that has continued to be necessary (in the Islamic world as elsewhere) against the reductionist attacks and exclusivist claims common to powerful social and political movements and their accompanying ideologies, whether or not explicitly "religious", in any age. In those controversial contexts, such

central features of Ibn 'Arabi's thought as his uncompromising "spiritual realism", his universality, and his focus on the irreducible centrality of the individual spiritual relationship to God have continued to provide inspiration – and formidable rhetorical and theological ammunition – to those threatened by political, social or theological forms of totalitarian reductionism. (And if those challenges happen to be most evident in some areas of the Islamic world today, even a moment's reflection should be sufficient to remind us of the perennial temptation and universal attraction of such tendencies, in every religion and area of life.)

As a particularly dramatic illustration of this recurrent dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's influence, inherently both political and intellectual, we can mention the long literary tradition of books of philosophic "trials" or "adjudications" (*muhkamat*), in the centuries following his death, of the competing claims of the rationalist philosophers, traditionalist theologians, and the practical mystics – the competing religious "paths" of *'aql*, *naql* and *kashf*. The interest of this long literary tradition, which originally grew out of real-life theological disputations in court or *madrasah* settings, lies less in the originality of the ideas expressed than in the particular (and yet perennial) political and social alternatives, the contrasting religious conceptions of human perfection and the ideal state, which are reflected in these controversies. It should not be surprising if the proponents of the necessity and preeminence of the path of *kashf*, of spiritual illumination and creative inspiration, throughout later Islamic thought, inevitably draw their arguments from the writings and ideas of Ibn 'Arabi, which they view as clarifying the proper balance and relationship between these three equally indispensable elements of human social, religious, and spiritual life. This tradition of theological writing is itself the most overtly political expression of the more philosophic and aesthetic interests in Ibn 'Arabi's work discussed above, and many writers who contributed to those more creative elaborations of Ibn 'Arabi's influence (e.g., Jami, Mulla Sadra, Shah Waliullah) were also active in these controversies.

In fact, a closer examination of these controversial writings and the typical intellectual "representatives" of the different alternative perspectives at issue (i.e., *'aql*, *naql* and *kashf*: rationalism, religious traditionalism, and spiritual "unveiling") is an excellent way to approach the truly distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabi's own intellectual and rhetorical approach, which can help to explain the mystery of his ongoing appeal and influence. To put it most directly, we could say that Ibn 'Arabi is inseparably a "religious *and* mystical philosopher" or a "mystic philosopher-theologian": to leave out any one of those elements would be to misrepresent completely his actual approach and outlook. What that means is already clearer when we contrast his outlook with the radically different approaches of two of his most vehement critics in the line of later controversies we have just mentioned: with the far-sighted, pragmatic rationalism of Ibn Khaldun, or the fiercely consistent "traditionalism" of an Ibn Taymiya. In making that contrast – at least for those familiar with either of those famous Islamic thinkers – it is immediately apparent that much more is involved here, whether socially, intellectually or spiritually, than the addition of a simple "mysticism" or another "mystical philosophy".

But the real complexity and distinctive subtlety of Ibn 'Arabi's thought best emerges when he is compared with such figures as al-Ghazali and (the martyred philosopher-mystic) Suhrawardi – both of them likewise "mystics" and "philosopher-theologians" deeply grounded in Islamic theology. In this contrast, we can quickly grasp that what is unique in Ibn 'Arabi, in contrast with al-Ghazali, is the *explicit*, truly universal focus of his metaphysical framework and the *comprehensive* (and again universal) *spiritual realism* which flows from that metaphysical perspective. The appeal to Islamic tradition and the depth of familiarity with that tradition is equally central in both figures, but one could say that Ibn 'Arabi renders explicit what largely remains implicit in Ghazali's writing – and therefore becomes accessible and potentially useful to readers of every spiritual tradition, not

simply Muslims. With Suhrawardi's "illuminative wisdom" (*hikmat al-ishraq*), to take the other instructive contrast, the dimension of philosophic universality is at least as strongly emphasized – but in forms of expression and practice which are radically less visibly grounded in the concrete details of Islamic revelation, tradition, and spiritual practice. The obvious, recurrent danger in this case (with Suhrawardi) is that his teaching can readily become reduced to simply another philosophic system, cut off from the roots of spiritual practice (and their own indispensable historical and social context) which Suhrawardi himself never ceases to stress as the essential precondition for grasping his own approach.

To sum up, what remains absolutely distinctive about Ibn 'Arabi's thought and writing – and truly unparalleled within Islamic culture – is his unique and (from his own perspective) indissoluble emphasis on the necessity and ultimate coincidence of true spiritual universality and the proper apprehension and practical realization of the most concrete details of the "Muhammadan" (i.e., the truly all-inclusive and universal) revelation: one cannot separate either of these dimensions of his thought and writing without radically falsifying his thought and intentions. And if one cannot articulate these two inseparable dimensions of his legacy without immediately raising a certain uneasiness among non-Muslim readers and auditors, that is precisely because we are not at all used to taking seriously what is involved in Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive understanding of "true spiritual universality" and "comprehensiveness". The deepening realization and understanding of Ibn 'Arabi's thought necessarily proceeds through an ongoing dialectic, a sort of ascending spiral moving between these two poles (at once practical and intellectual) of all his writing.

Hopefully, what has been mentioned above about the four primary dimensions of the reception and transmission of Ibn 'Arabi's thought in the Islamic world has also been sufficient to suggest the parameters of his influence in Western thought

since the first translations of his work at the beginning of this century.²

In conclusion, if we may speak of the future of Ibn 'Arabi's legacy, it is only to draw attention to some of the lessons that can legitimately be drawn from that past we have so quickly surveyed here. To begin with those regions of the Islamic world where the ultimate questions of political and social life continue to be posed in terms drawn from Islamic tradition (which is an ever-increasing number of states in recent years), it is highly likely that the appeal of Ibn 'Arabi – and the appeal to his ideas and understandings of Islamic tradition – will continue to follow earlier models, suitably adopted to contemporary circumstances, both in the domains of politics and of what (for lack of a better term) we may call the "aesthetic" dimensions of existence. This is not so much because Ibn 'Arabi could easily be identified with any particular political or ideological tendency, but rather because there is simply no other Islamic thinker whose thought offers anything like the same combination of an acceptance of creativity and flexibility of interpretation combined with concrete, comprehensive faithfulness to the revealed historical Sources of that tradition. Ideologies and ideologues of whatever stripe, once they begin to question themselves and their true adherence to Islamic tradition, are almost inevitably forced to come to grips with Ibn 'Arabi. (Khomeini's revealing letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, with its emphasis on the fundamental role of Ibn 'Arabi and his Shiite interpreter Mulla Sadra in the understanding of Islam, was an extraordinary witness to this phenomenon, and surely not the last.)

2. For a general survey of the corresponding aspects of the influence of Ibn 'Arabi's thought in the West during the past century, see our article on "La Reception d'Ibn al-'Arabi dans la nouvel monde: voies visibles et voies cachées" (*istiqlal al-shaykh al-akbar fi al-maghrib al-aqsa: al-turuq al-zahir wa-l-batin*) to appear (in French and Arabic) in the collective volume of proceedings of the *Mawsimiyat de Marrakech* (Morocco): International Colloquium on "Le legs intellectuel et spirituel du maître Ibn 'Arabi" (May 1997).

Secondly – and still remaining for the moment within the limits of the traditional “Islamic” world – nothing is more striking in modernist forms of Islamist ideology and rhetoric, as well as in the concrete social lives of Muslims living in the vast cities of impoverished new nation states, than the disappearance of traditional “*adabiyat*”, of the “Islamic humanities”, the elaborate *aesthetic* forms of art, culture, and social relations so central in every traditional Islamic culture – and the rhetorical substitution of a highly reductive, ostensibly “ethical” ideology which fails to conceal the new barbarism and raw relations of economic power, inequality, and arbitrary rule endemic in such situations. To the extent that this widespread phenomenon – already familiar in the evolution of fascist and communist responses to similar socio-economic circumstances in Europe and Latin America – eventually leads toward the reconstruction of a more balanced, humanly satisfying way of life that gives full weight to the “invisible”, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of our human being, Muslims attempting to justify (in political and theological terms) the reality and importance of those aesthetic concerns will inevitably be obliged to turn to the writings and teachings of Ibn 'Arabi, which are incomparably rich in this regard.

Given the extraordinary extent to which all of Ibn 'Arabi's writings are inextricably embedded in their Islamic scriptural and cultural matrix, it is difficult to predict the direction of his influence beyond the Islamic world in years to come. One would think, at first glance, that the very attempt to “translate” his ideas and inspirations into another cultural and religious context would, as with so many other philosophers and thinkers, quickly deteriorate into a vague, eclectic gesture once those ideas become separated from their Islamic roots. However, the remarkable degree and sustained duration of contemporary Western interest in his writings and teachings already suggests that something else, beyond the history of ideas and concepts, may be involved here.

To begin with, on the level of *spiritual practice* and “*practical spirituality*”, as interested seekers and practitioners from many religious backgrounds explore and discover the commonalities

of practice and experience underlying less familiar traditions, Ibn 'Arabi's works – and more particularly his massive *Futuhāt* – remain a uniquely rich and comprehensive encyclopedia of the accomplishments and approaches of many branches of Islamic tradition. The phenomenal wave of recent translations and studies drawing from the *Futuhāt* suggest that there is much that can be fruitfully communicated to interested seekers approaching Ibn 'Arabi from other traditions and religious backgrounds. The exploration of his writings from this perspective of practical spirituality is only in its earliest stages, and it offers rich prospects for spiritual rediscoveries and the sort of true communication and communion that is based on a shared ground of common spiritual experience.

If we can project forward from historical experience, there are at least two other domains in which the appeal and development of Ibn 'Arabi's heritage outside the Islamic world is also likely to grow in coming decades. In both those cases (as in the Islamic past), that potential interest in his work is likely to arise not from the study of Ibn 'Arabi's writings themselves, but rather from historical situations where the "need" for something like the Shaykh's ideas and conceptions will become increasingly apparent to people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. The first point has to do with Ibn 'Arabi's profoundly rooted explanation of the *inevitability* and *essential good* which is embodied and expressed in the *diversity* of human understandings and expressions of our spiritual nature (including, but by no means limited to, the diversities of what we arbitrarily call "religious" life and activity). The ultimate fruit – and practical challenge! – of Ibn 'Arabi's insight here is a *true mutual understanding* which goes far beyond what we ordinarily think of as "tolerance". This is an insight and perspective that is very hard for anyone to actually realize, and which is scarcely emphasized in the most visible representatives of any of the monotheistic religions, but which lies at the practical and metaphysical center of Ibn 'Arabi's worldview. It should be clear how world-historical developments will increasingly oblige people of every religious background to at least contemplate what Ibn 'Arabi has to teach in this regard.

The second domain in which Ibn 'Arabi's ideas are likely to have an increasing appeal is in some ways a wider practical extension of the point we have just made. The unprecedented global technological transformations in the human situation through which we are living, and their still largely unpredictable cultural and political consequences, have so far had as their universal consequences (a) a severing of essential relations with the natural world and natural orders which were presupposed in the ritual and symbolism of every traditional religion; (b) a worldwide "homogenization" and reduction of the traditionally rich and diverse local forms of social and cultural life; and (c) a strong corresponding political and ideological tendency to reduce the reality of human beings to a relatively narrow set of "social" and "ethical" needs – whether that is expressed in overt forms of totalitarianism or in more subtle forms of socio-economic conditioning.

Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of human beings and their place in the universe (along with any number of other wisdom traditions, to be sure) would suggest that each of these three global tendencies cannot ultimately be sustained, and that theomorphic beings will inevitably resist, revolt, and creatively move beyond those recent historical developments in one way or another. To the extent that such creative reactions do develop, growing numbers of people (and not only Muslims) are likely to continue to find inspiration and justification for their intuitions – and their personal creative revelations – in what Ibn 'Arabi has to teach about the spiritual necessity and complementarity of these invisible, "aesthetic" dimensions of human being.