

Ibn ‘Arabi and Religions

I’m going to start by giving some information on Ibn ‘Arabi, for I do not know what level of knowledge you might have and as he is not a very well known figure even today, I find it best not to take anything for granted. Then we are going to have to do a bit of metaphysics before we move on to look at what he says about religion at an external level, that is, about the way in which the different religions of the Semitic tradition have developed and will develop; we will see that Ibn ‘Arabi regards this as a single, unified revelation in which every religion has a place, and that his doctrine leads naturally to an attitude of tolerance and respect for all the different modes of worship. Then I am going to look at what he advocates as the best attitude towards religions and religious laws, and very briefly consider what he says about the nature of belief.

Ibn ‘Arabi and his influence

Ibn ‘Arabi was one of the great thinkers of the Islamic tradition – and really needs to be acknowledged as one of the great thinkers of the world. His thought is complex, and he wrote a great deal, and I do not think that anyone would claim to encompass everything he wrote. He has often been classified as a philosopher by western interpreters because he wrote in a very metaphysical way, but he was not a philosopher; he was a mystic, a follower of the Sufism, which is the esoteric tradition of Islam, who followed the path of a religious man as it was lived in the Muslim world of the 12th and 13th centuries. He was a visionary who had many intimations and experiences of Divine, immaterial realms, and who emphasised the role of the imagination on the spiritual path.¹

He was born in Spain, in Moorish Andalusia in 1165, to a well-placed family and appears to have had a normal kind of childhood and education in a culture which had long been a

¹ There are two good biographies available, both of which also give an account of the main works and ideas: Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, Cambridge, 1993. Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier*, Oxford, 1999.

point of convergence for Muslim Christian and Jewish people. When he was in his teens, he had a sudden and direct conversion by God, and entered into a period of retreat in which, as he described it, he was blessed with attaining the highest degree of spiritual realisation. During this period, he received a vision of the three prophets of the Abrahamic tradition, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, and took particular instruction from each of them. Of the encounter with Jesus, he was to say later in his life:

“I have had many meetings with him in visions, and at his hand turned to God. He prayed for me that I be established in the religious life (*din*), both in this world and in the hereafter, and he called me beloved (*habib*). He ordered me to practice renunciation (*zuhd*) and detachment (*tajrid*).²

Accordingly, under the direct influence of Jesus, he renounced material possessions and entered the Sufi path; there was an unusual problem involved, as normally people entered formally upon a path with a Shaykh, and their property was given over to him. But Ibn ‘Arabi had no Shaykh in this world and eventually the difficulty was resolved by passing his property on to his father.

In fact Ibn ‘Arabi never did take just one Shaykh, but studied and learnt from many. Nor did he or his followers ever set up a formal Sufi order, with an institutionalised structure. Rather his way was one of taking directly from God, without intermediary. He said of his own disciples, later, that even though they studied with him, even when they were studying the works he had written, they did not take their knowledge from him or through him, but directly from God. And the ‘tradition’ has continued in this way. Even so, he was called in his life-time *shaykh al-akbar*, meaning the greatest shaykh, or the greatest teacher.

In mid-life, Ibn ‘Arabi left Spain as it struggled under the increasing pressure from the Christian Franks, and travelled East to Cairo, Mecca, Jerusalem, Baghdad, etc., where he

² From *Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Dâr al-sâdar, Beirut. II: 49. Translated in *Unlimited Mercifier*, p. 53.

studied further with the masters of his time, took disciples, taught and lectured and wrote most of his very many books. He also married and raised a family. He settled for some years in Anatolia, in the lands of the Seljuk Turks which had been newly taken from the Byzantine Christians, and spent his last 12 years in Damascus, where he is buried. His legacy is of a certain spiritual way, and a vast quantity of writings, the majority of which have survived. He was an intellectual genius, a great synthesiser who harnessed all the intellectual disciplines of Islam – *Qur'ân* and *hadith* scholarship, theology, philosophy, poetry – to explain and describe the spiritual path. His writings provided a structural underpinning – a coherent cosmology – to the knowledge of the Sufis which had been developed by practice over four centuries, and constitute what can perhaps be called a comprehensive map of the spiritual landscape to guide the person seeking union with God.

Although his circle was quite small during his lifetime, his influence was extended by his early followers such that his vision became one of, if not *the*, dominant ‘paradigm’ of the Islamic world from the 15th to 18th or even 19th century. His spiritual heir was a man called Sadr al-din al-Qûnawi, who wrote commentaries upon his works which became as famous as the originals, and drew around him a circle of disciples, including the poet Fakhruddin ‘Irâqi, who re-expressed the ideas in Persian in such a way that they spread like wild-fire. Works based upon Ibn ‘Arabi’s vision became the standard curriculum for the Iranian and Turkish Sufi orders, and as Islam spread East, his ideas were carried as far as China, and India, where they formed an integral part of the developing Islamic tradition.³ David Singh’s book, being a study of the influence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas regarding prophecy and sainthood on an Indian order, attests to this.⁴

In Christianity, those who have expressed mystical knowledge have been pretty marginalised figures; writers such as Meister Eckhart, St John of the Cross, Julian of

³ For a summary of the spread of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, see my own article ‘Early Best-sellers in the Akbarian Tradition’ in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, Volume 33, 2003, pp. 22-53.

⁴ David Singh, *Sainthood and Revelatory Discourse: An Examination of the basis for the authority of bayan in Mahdawi Islam*. Oxford and Delhi, 2003.

Norwich, have been read and cherished down the centuries but they have not been mainstream cultural influences even within their own churches. In Islam, the situation was for many centuries very different; Sufism and the Sufi orders were major cultural forces, and their ideas became the norm. Rulers and leaders attached themselves to shaykhs and took their advice on both spiritual and secular matters. The Moghul emperors in India were certainly followers in some way of Ibn ‘Arabi, taking members of the Chisti Order as their masters. A convincing case has been made that the design of Taj Mahal is based upon a diagram in the *Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Ibn ‘Arabi’s great compendium of mystical knowledge, a copy of which was in Shah Jehan’s library.⁵

Even more so with the Ottoman Emperors. The attachment to Ibn ‘Arabi seems to have been formed early, by the founder of the dynasty, Osman himself within a hundred years of the Shaykh’s death, and it continued through the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmet II, through the heyday of the Empire under Suleyman the Magnificent, and continued into the 19th century when Sultan Abd al Hamid is said to have used a quotation from the *Fusûs* on the mosque he built in Yildiz.⁶ Under this kind of patronage, the Ottoman regime provided a safe haven where followers of Ibn ‘Arabi could settle and study without too much interference from their detractors and his ideas spread into all the lands that they conquered. Coupled with his influence upon the Eastern lands of Islam, it meant that in the finest years of the Empire, Ibn ‘Arabi was studied, respected and followed from Morocco to India, and from Russia to Sudan and Indonesia.

This does not mean that he went unchallenged. From as early as the 13th century, he was fiercely criticised by some sections of the intellectual community, and even regarded as a heretic; in Egypt his books were burned. These sections of Islamic society, which these days we tend to call, rather inaccurately ‘the fundamentalists’, have come to prevail in the last couple of hundred of years, and Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence has accordingly waned, so that

⁵ Wayne Begley ‘The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of its Symbolic Meaning’. *Arts Bulletin*, 1979, Volume 61, No. 1, pp. 7-38.

⁶ See again Jane Clark, *Early Bestsellers...*

he is hardly known in many Muslim countries now; and in many is actively banned. But this is another story.⁷

I wanted to give a glimpse of ‘the wider picture’ to point out that his extremely compassionate and tolerant attitudes are not the work of some marginalised medieval figure, an isolated idealist; for many centuries these were the mainstream tendency of Islam, and despite their contemporary occlusion, are deeply ingrained in the culture. And his ideas had effect on cultural and political levels. The Moghul Emperor Akbar’s famously failed attempt in the 16th century at ecumenical dialogue at Fatehpur Sikri, and his project to introduce a ‘universal religion’, clearly show the influence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought.⁸ In Ottoman lands, many people have suggested it was essentially the adoption of Akbarian⁹ principles which enabled them to rule a vast territory consisting of many different communities, of many different ethnicities and religion, for more than 500 years. Their form of government allowed them to maintain a stable, unified state whilst allowing individual communities to retain their special identity and to flourish¹⁰.

Multiple identity, says the historian Philip Mansell,¹¹ was the essence of Constantinople, the Ottoman capital; it contained almost as many Christians and Jews as Muslims, and most trades were open to everyone, so all populations flourished. The city was full of churches and synagogues as well as mosques and it is only in modern times, with the advent of Turkish nationalism, that non-Muslim population has dwindled; there are almost no Greek Christians now in Istanbul. In Ottoman times, people of other religions

⁷ The story is well told in several places. See in particular Knysh *Ibn ‘Arabi and the Later Islamic Tradition*, New York, 1999, and Michel Chodkiewicz ‘Le proces posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabi’, in *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, ed. Jong and Radtke, Leiden, 1999, pp. 93-123.

⁸ See ‘The Story of a Town’ in *Addresses II* by Bülent Rauf, Roxburgh, 2001, pp. 97-106.

⁹ ‘Akbarian’ is a modern term used to refer to the school of Ibn ‘Arabi, derived from the name by which he was commonly known, Shaykh al-Akbar.

¹⁰ See Mahmud Kiliç, ‘The Ibn ‘Arabi of the Ottomans: Sheikh ‘Abdullah Íalâhaddin al-Ushshâqi (1705-82)’, in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, Vol. 26, 1999, pp. 110-120.

¹¹ Philip Mansell, *Constantinople*, London, 1995, pp. 48-9. According to Mansell, the population of most Ottoman cities was 58% Muslim and 42% Jewish and Christian.

were positively welcomed; when the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, the Ottoman sultan offered them refuge, and they set up communities which flourished into the 20th century, retaining their own version of the Spanish language and developing a unique spirituality and literature. It is reported that Sultan Beyazid II commented: ‘They say Ferdinand is a wise monarch. How could he be, who so impoverishes his country to enrich mine?’¹². Similarly, within Islam, Ottoman lands became a refuge for sects such as the Bektashi’s, who drank wine and admitted women to their ceremonies and were persecuted elsewhere. In these respects, it was a very liberal and tolerant culture.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas

Ibn ‘Arabi and his school are most famous for what is called ‘*wahdat al-wujûd*’ which translates as the unity of being, or the unity of existence. His detractors have interpreted this in such a way as to impute all sorts of heretical ideas to its followers, such as incarnationism and pantheism. For his followers, such as myself, unity of being as understood by Ibn ‘Arabi means nothing more than exploring in the greatest depth and rigour, taking to its logical conclusion, the truth ‘God is One’, which is the central tenet of Islam and indeed, many other philosophical and religious traditions.¹³ For Ibn ‘Arabi, nothing exists except God, and all that we see and experience as being separate from Him, as multiplicity and otherness, is, in reality, if only we had the eyes to see it, a manifestation of the One, who constantly reveals Himself in all the different forms.

In order to make clear that in appearing in form God, or the One Reality, does not become divided or substantially altered, Ibn ‘Arabi uses the metaphor of the mirror, and the mirror image. When we look into a mirror, we see an image which corresponds to our own form in every detail, it is as if we have doubled ourselves. But the image does not

¹² See Jason Goodwin *Lords of All the Horizons*, London, 1999, pp. 99-100.

¹³ William Chittick has pointed out that *wahdat al-wujûd* took on a specific meaning within the later Islamic tradition and came to imply certain heretical notions, which in turn became associated with the Akbarian school. For a good discussion, see ‘The Central Point: Qûnawi’s Role in the School of Ibn ‘Arabi’, in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*, Vol. 35, 2004, pp. 25-45.

take anything away from us, nor does it have an existence separate from us, and if we cease to show ourselves to it, it ceases to exist.¹⁴

This is how he understands God's relationship to the world and everything in it; they, and we, are like images. And the fact that things appear as different, as more or less good, more or less complete, arises not from the subject, from God, but because the mirrors have different shapes and sizes, or different degrees of reflectivity, or different degrees of polish, so that in some mirrors the image is seen upside down or back to front, or it is seen very indistinctly because the mirror is dirty or unpolished; or it is seen clearly because the surface has been burnished. But the essential situation – that it is an image – is unchanged; nothing, not even the most realised human being, is existent through itself, all 'things' are essentially dependent upon God. And at the same time, nothing is separate from God. He is the essence, the *ipseity* or itselfness, of everything. So that our return to God, on the spiritual path, is not a return from real separateness; it is more an realisation of the already existing situation that we are 'no other' than God.

As for the underlying motivation of creation, Ibn 'Arabi draws upon a holy saying, i.e. a saying in which it as if God Himself speaks: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world that I might be known.' So the purpose of creation is that God should see Himself reflected in the different images – see His face as if it were outside of Himself, just as we desire to see our own faces in the mirror. Except that God is infinite, and so the possibilities of reflection are equally infinite. As we shall see, for Ibn 'Arabi, this has important implications for his understanding of revelation. And the motivating force for creation, and all coming into being, is Divine Love, which for Ibn 'Arabi is **the** overriding, over-arching principle.

I bring this because unless we have some idea of how Ibn 'Arabi treats the matter of unity and multiplicity, we cannot understand his theory of religion and revelation.

¹⁴ A good introduction to Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics is given in *The Twenty Nine Pages*, Roxburgh, 1998. A much more detailed outline of his metaphysics, with substantial sections of translation, is given in a series of books by William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, State University of New York, 1989, and *The Self Disclosure of God*, State University of New York, 1998.

Underpinning everything he writes is the understanding that these are two aspects of a single reality; if we look at the truth in one way, we see the images, multiplicity, things emerging and disappearing in time, things interacting with each other, being in conflict. If we look at it another, then we see the unity which underlies the multiplicity and how taken all together, the world is a single, interconnected whole. Both ways of seeing are true, but neither is exclusively true, as they are each an aspect of One Reality which, in the end, is beyond our understanding or our vision.

Furthermore, there are two aspects to the unity of God which are summarised by the double Divine Name, *al-wâhid al-ahad* in the Islamic tradition. God is the One, and He is the also the Unique. By oneness, is meant that fact that God is the unity within or behind the multiplicity. Ibn ‘Arabi writes within the ancient tradition of *cosmos*, as formulated by Plato and Aristotle, and elaborated throughout antiquity to the time of neo-Platonists. This understanding that God manifests the universe as one entity – a uni-verse, one turning – entered into the Islamic tradition just as it did the Christian, although of course quite a bit later. Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the created world as one interconnected whole, arranged in an ordered hierarchy in time and space, spanning both heaven and earth, will be entirely familiar to anyone who has studied the Christian scholastics. Some of you may have seen the work of dom Sylvester Houédard who wrote so much about the common ground between Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart and Ibn ‘Arabi.¹⁵ From this point of view, then, God’s oneness is manifested by the universe as a whole, and each separate thing, each part, participates by virtue of having a real place and function within the whole. For Ibn ‘Arabi, just as for medieval Christianity and Judaism, this aspect of God’s unity can only be known by human beings of all the creatures of the world, and this is because it is the special characteristic of the human being to be a reflection of the universe in its entirety; ‘man is made in the image of God’ by his very constitution; he or she is the microcosm, whereas the universe is the macrocosm. This is a central understanding for Ibn ‘Arabi, for whom Adam, whom he designates as a

¹⁵ See for instance dom Sylvester Houédard *Commentaries on Eckhart Sermons*, Roxburghshire, 1995. Most of his work is in the form of articles, which are currently being gathered into a book which will be published in 2006.

prophet, represents the archetypal man who knows himself to be the complete image, and worships God accordingly.¹⁶

As for God the Unique; this is the understanding that everything in the universe is ‘no other than God’; that every part, every seemingly separate thing, is nothing other, in reality, than a unique manifestation of the whole, of God Himself. This is a mystical perception, memorably indicated by Blake when he said: ‘To see the universe in a grain of sand, and eternity in an hour’. The principle has also been shown in modern mathematics, where we now have the example of ‘fractals’ which, if one splits them up, each part, however small, remains the whole. Ibn ‘Arabi calls this the ‘private face’, *al-wajh al-khass*, through which each of us is tied to the essence of God through an entirely interior and secret connection which represents our own uniqueness. And the other face, in which we are each bound in a particular place and time in the great structure of the universe, has been called the ‘way of concatenation’ the way of cause and effect, where one thing follows on from another in an ordered chain of events. And as *al-wâhid al-ahad* is a double name, not two separate ones, then it is necessary for us to understand that these two aspects are simultaneous, happening always together so that we cannot choose between them. Together they give an indication of what the unity of existence means, and what adherence to such a principle implies.

Ibn ‘Arabi and Religions

Now, armed with this bit of metaphysics, we can at last come to what Ibn ‘Arabi says about religions. For Ibn ‘Arabi, there is only One God, One Reality, therefore, only One source of revelation, one Deity worshipped. In the end, there is only one real invitation, which is to come to know that God is One and that we are ‘no other’ than Him. Ibn ‘Arabi views the whole prophetic tradition, from Adam to Muhammad, and the

¹⁶ This is succinctly put in Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Fusûs al-hikam* (Bezels of Wisdom) which consists of 27 chapters, each devoted to the wisdom of one of the prophets of the Islamic tradition. The first chapter considers the nature of Adam, and the last the prophet Muhammad, covering in between such prophets as Noah, Idris, Elijah, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon and Jesus. Several translations into English are available; e.g. *The Wisdom of the Prophets*, trans. Titus Burkhardt and Angela Culme-Seymour, Gloucestershire, 1975: *The Bezels of Wisdom* trans. R W J Austin, London, 1980.

emergence of the different religions, as a single movement through which God time and again calls humankind back to Himself. This is of course the common understanding of Islam, which sees itself as the inheritor of the monotheistic tradition beginning with Abraham, who through his sons Isaac and Ishmael fathered the three Semitic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Like the rest of his community, Ibn ‘Arabi believes that Muhammad is the last of the monotheistic prophets; he calls him the Seal of the Prophets because in him the line both ends and is fully revealed as one movement; with his coming, its unity is made clear. There will not be another prophet after him bringing a religious law.

But unlike many of his fellow Muslims, Ibn ‘Arabi does not believe that revelation as such ends with Muhammad; he believes that God continues to reveal himself to humankind through his devoted servants, and that the process of clarification and further understanding continues, bringing out the real meaning of all that the prophets (plural) have brought. He makes a distinction between the function of a prophet, who brings news to a specific people, an envoy who brings a new religious law, and a saint, who does not necessarily have an external function but increases always in knowledge of God. Unlike that of the prophet and envoy, who have fixed durations in time, the saintly revelation continues potentially forever and is without limit, carrying on into the next world.

This process of drawing out the meaning of the revelation – what he calls ‘the prophecy of explanation’ – also has its own order. Ibn ‘Arabi saw himself as having a particular function for the revelation brought by Muhammad with the task of revealing its interior meaning. After him, there remains the process of drawing out the meaning of all the revelation for all humankind, and this will be completed by Jesus, whom he designated as the ‘Seal of Universal Sainthood’ in his second coming.¹⁷ This coming will not be as a law-giving prophet, but its quality will be of sainthood, such that every human being will have the real possibility of finding realisation. So we are situated now, all of us, between the final prophetic revelation of Muhammad, and the second coming of Christ when its

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of these matters see Michel Chodkiewicz *Seal of the Saints*, Cambridge, 1993.

full meaning will be made apparent. This whole *schema* is unique to Ibn ‘Arabi, as is the designation of Jesus as the Seal of Saints, and it is a further indication of his special affinity with the Christic aspect of the Divine wisdom. This, and the fact that in some ways his thought is close to some aspects of Christian doctrine, is one of the main sources of criticism against him within the Islamic community.

For Ibn ‘Arabi therefore, all the different religions have a place in the Divine Order, and every prophet has invited to the same reality. The differences between the prophecies he understands as being due to the differences between the peoples to whom the invitation was addressed, or the time at which the revelation occurred, or the way that the revelation was received (some of the people such as those of Noah, Hûd and Sâlih in the Qu’rân, were destroyed because of their refusal to accept their prophet.) Where there are discrepancies between accounts of the same event in the different religions – the story of Jesus, for instance, differs in the Qu’rân and the Bible, and indeed, between the different books of the Bible – he believes that these will become clear as the process of further explanation happens.

Therefore there is causal order to the emergence of the invitation, and the necessities of the Divine order dictate, for instance, that monotheism should supersede idol worship, that Jesus should follow Moses and Muhammad Jesus. At the same time, each religion is a unique manifestation of the revelation of God, and through the aspect of the private face, really leads to Him. From this aspect, Ibn ‘Arabi maintains that every believer worships the One God in reality, even those who are so castigated in the Qur’ân as worshippers of trees and stones. Because God is the essence of everything in the world, it is not possible to ever worship ‘another’, and everyone is ‘on the straight path’. From this point of view, there is no need, and never has been any need, to call people from one way of worship to another, and it would be tactless to do so. Ibn ‘Arabi discusses such questions in detail in many places, especially in his *Fusûs al-hikam* in the chapters of Noah, in relation to his people who worshipped the pagan gods, and in the chapter of Aaron in relation to the worship of the golden calf by the Israelites whilst Moses was up the mountain receiving the tablets of the Torah.

Such a point of view was actually quite a prevalent understanding within Sufism, and there were some Sufi masters who maintained that having come to such an understanding, the person who knows God need no longer have regard for the prophetic revelation; that he or she could stand outside the religious law. Scholars who study Sufism talk about two different tendencies within it; the ‘ecstatic’ tendency, in which people emphasised the aspect of Divine Love, and the intoxication of union which takes one away from all considerations of the immanent world; and the ‘sober’ tendency, which emphasised the religious life and the need to restrain the ego through constant vigilance and practice. The *Maghbrebi* or western forms of Sufism developed in Spain and Africa had the characteristic of being a middle way between these two. And indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi maintained that both aspects are simultaneously true. Whilst a man of God may understand the already-existing unity of all things in a flash of intuition, his comprehensive knowledge of reality demands that he should also recognise the Divine Will as it is revealed through the order of the prophets. His knowledge does not therefore release him from the obligations of religious community, and he conforms to the external order under which he finds himself, according to the time and place of his own manifestation. There is a wonderful passage in the *Fusûs* which describes a meeting between Moses, who represents the wisdom of prophecy, and the spiritual guide Khidr, who represents the private knowledge of God which is the realm of the saints, in which the tact and delicacy required in acknowledging both sides properly is explored.¹⁸ This is an important theme for Ibn ‘Arabi, which we could perhaps go into another time.

Infinite Revelation

It is important to understand, though, that acknowledging the validity of external form does not justify over-emphasising the conflicts and differences which inevitably arise in relativity. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the purpose of revelation and religion is to guide all human beings towards real, not just theoretical, knowledge of God, so that they come to know themselves for what they really are – which is ‘made in His image’. It is in the heart of

¹⁸ The origin of the story is Qur’anic, see Q18: 60-82. Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussion can be found in Austin, pp. 259-60.

the realised person, what in the Islamic tradition is called The Perfected Person, *al-insân al-kâmil*, that the very purpose of creation is fulfilled, as indicated by the tradition we mentioned at the beginning: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known...” The person who knows him or herself is the *locus* in which this self-imagining of God can take place. Therefore the human being, for Ibn ‘Arabi, is of inestimable importance; even those who are ignorant contain within themselves the potential for knowledge, which should not be cut off. He writes in the *Fusûs*:

“The preservation of the human species should have a much greater claim to observance than religious bigotry, with its consequent destruction of human souls, even when it is for the sake of God and the maintenance of the law.”¹⁹

The person who destroys another human being is responsible for cutting off the manifestation of God not only in his victim, but in all his or her descendants through future generations. And this applies even to the prophets; and he cites the example of Moses, who was not allowed to enter the promised land because he killed the Egyptian, and David who was not allowed to build the temple.

Neither does he have any patience with those people who indulge in argument and conflict over what he understands to be inessential matters, such as minor matters of doctrinal difference, and ignore the spirit of the law. These people try to constrict the Divine revelation to their own limited understanding; they are like mirrors who are capable of reflecting only one aspect or characteristic of the Divine face. He calls them people of intellect, maintaining that the faculty of reason by itself can never comprehend the truth as it really is.²⁰

¹⁹ Translation from A. E. Affifi *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din Ibnul Arabi*, Lahore, 1964. p. 83.

²⁰ This does not of course mean that he disapproves of or dismisses the rational faculty *per se*. On the contrary. He does, however, maintain that the intellect should be the servant of the heart and not *vice versa*, as the intellect inevitably works at the level of duality and division, whereas the heart is capable of perceiving unity.

The real knowers of God are people of the heart, and real knowing consists in seeing God in all the forms in which He manifests Himself, and loving, worshipping and serving Him as appropriate to each of them. For them, the possibilities are limitless. God is infinite, so the forms of His Self-revelation are infinite, and the person who has become 'no other' has the capacity to receive them without limit. For Ibn 'Arabî therefore, knowledge of God has no end point, no final state or stage, but is a matter of travelling with God, in God, to God, without end.²¹

There is much more that can be said about this, but I am going to finish here by reading an extract from a poem which has become a kind of 'Ibn 'Arabi anthem because it sums up his vision so well. This is how he describes the final state of knowledge, after being cleansed of all limitation by the Abrahamic fire:

Oh marvel! A garden amidst the flames.

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture of gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kâ'ba and tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur'ân

I follow the religion of love; whatever way love's camels take me, that it is my religion and my faith.²²

²¹ This is discussed, for instance, in the Chapter on Shu'ayb in *Fusûs al-Hikam*. See Austin, pp 145-155.

²² From *Tarjumân al-Ashwâq*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, London, 1911, poem 11, p. 67.