The Signs of a Hidden God

Dialectics of Veiling and Unveiling God in Islam

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1. Sharia Law and Negative Theology

It is a common assertion that God in Islam does not reveal Himself (as He does in Christianity), but He does reveal His will in the form of a religious-moral guidance that provides the basis for legal regulations. In this sense, many Muslims prefer to talk about Sharia (understood as the revealed way) and not of theology (understood as reflections on God's nature). Islamic dogmatics, based on a *tawhid* doctrine (the teaching of the unity of God), used to be presented in concepts of a negative theology, as it corresponds with the Qur'anic idea of a transcendent God, who is – in His essence – inaccessible to human beings.

The first theological school within Islam – Mu'tazila, developed in the 8th to 9th centuries – was also a clear expression of a negative theology. It is right to say that Mu'tazila, as well as the other schools from the early period, were under the influence of Neo-Platonic ideas. In this regard, Plotinus's *Enneads* had a particular significance as it was received as a philosophical-theological source of universal validity. Plotinus's idea of the One as a supreme, transcendent "One", without any division, multiplicity or distinction, was very attractive to Muslims as it confirmed and explained the idea of transcendent God as the source and cause of everything. Likewise, the ideas of the active intellect as creative and divine, and correspondingly, the passive intellect as an expression of human consciousness, served as inspiration in terms of the interpretation of the relationship between God and the world. However, Muslim philosophers and theologians, including those who followed al-Farabi and his (Islamic) theory of emanation, had to struggle to reconcile a God of absolute unity and perfection with a multiple universe full of imperfections.[1] The challenge was no less in the

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[1] Oliver Leaman sees a principle problem with the justification that Neo-Platonism, which is not religious or theologically founded in any way (many Neo-Platonists were atheists), can serve as an inspiration for a religion such as Islam, which maintains the creation of the world out of nothing, and dichotomy between the unity of God and the diversity of the world. Contrary to that, Neo-Platonism identified creation with emanation understood as a continual process of generation that has no beginning and that is automatic. However, it is nevertheless understand-

discussions about understanding God's will. Yet, this question was crucial for the development of Islamic orthodoxy. Attempts to formulate a comprehensive law that would express God's will (including God's intentions with the revelations) and serve to regulate the wholeness of human life was a main occupation of Muslim scholars, and legal interpretation of the sacred text was the basis for establishing the first and fundamental Islamic discipline – jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Looking back at the historical context after the death of Prophet Muhammad, which was characterized by the lack of a coherent socio-political system, it is quite understandable that this task was a priority for Muslim society. However, by neglecting, or most often refusing, to discuss God as such (theological issues), and solely focusing on legal issues, the establishment of orthodoxy ran a risk of ending in a self-contradictory position, maintaining that nothing can be said about God, but everything can be said about His will. A partial agreement that it is still possible to talk about God in an indirect way, by speaking of His attributes (reflected by His names), does not solve the problem because the attributes of God were also linked to the same undifferentiated unity and transcendence. Moreover, interpretation of God's attributes should in no way contest the concept of God's unity. Conversely, there was a broad theological consensus that God is active and manifesting. In that sense, the main problem was to understand the relationship between God and the world through the interpretation of God's manifestations (*tajalli*).

2. Understanding God's Presence

Some of the initiating questions were the following: How to reconcile a transcendent and inaccessible God with a manifest and personal God? How to understand God's revelation; that is, the word of God in the Qur'an? In what way it is possible to talk about the meeting between God and man?

For many Muslim mystics (Sufis), the main challenge was not to explain God as such, but to experience His presence. Since the experience of God remains an indescribable mystery, they claimed that one does not feel the need to talk about God after one has experienced Him. Nevertheless, the majority of Muslim theologians perceived revelation as an invitation to reflect on God. In this regard, Islam – as a religion of revelation – is in the same position as the other religions of revelations, for example Christianity. However, in the case of Christianity, it is hard to have an excuse not to talk about God after he entered into the history and shared his existence with people. In the case of Islam, it is a little more com-

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able that Neo-Platonism was of use to Muslims because it provided a "suitable set of principles" related to a single (and absolute) source, which served as the basis for the establishment of a "rational structure behind the universe" (Oliver Leaman, *Key Concepts in Eastern Philosophy* [London: Routledge, 1999], 4).

plicated due to the idea that God remains in the afterlife, even though He had to be involved in this world. This essay is an attempt to give voice to Ibn Arabi, the great Muslim thinker from the 12th to 13th century, who dedicated himself to the understanding of revelation and the relationship between the transcendent (non-manifest) and the manifest God, and who had a significant influence on his posterity, especially in the field of Sufi philosophy.[2]

Like many other Muslim thinkers from the classical period, Ibn Arabi was preoccupied by the concepts of *tanzih* and *tashbich*, which relate to the incompatibility and compatibility of God to the created word, and which had a crucial role in Muslim discussions on transcendentalism and anthropomorphism in the Qur'an. *Tanzih* is linked to the doctrine of *tawhid* and denotes otherness and incompatibility of God with the created world, affirming God's distance from humanity. Contrary to this, *tasbih* denotes similarity, nearness and the accessibility of God.

According to Ibn Arabi, these two aspects must be observed in all descriptions of God, because God is at the same time transcendent and immanent; Allah is hidden and inaccessible, but also manifest and recognizable. This tension is reflected in the Qur'an (42:11): "Nothing is like Him" and then immediately declaring that "He is the hearer, the seer".

However, Ibn Arabi clearly distinguishes between the external and internal meaning of the Qur'anic text. In one of his main works, *Fusus al-Hikam*, he emphasizes the metaphoric meaning of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, but stresses that God Himself does not look like man with hands and feet, but that He is essentially hands and feet of all that have hands and feet.[3] Similarly, God is essentially present in all creatures, and it is only He who exists in an absolute way.

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[2] It was initially Ibn Arabi's disciples Saddrudin al-Qunawi (who was actually his stepson) and Ibn Sawdakin who spread his teachings in Syria, already known as an area where several well-known Sufis worked (e. g. Suhrawardi, Attar). He quickly became known, and studied in different Islamic centers in the eastern part of the Muslim world: Anatolia, Central, and South Asia, which later developed a complete tradition of interpreting Ibn Arabi (Aqbarian Sufism), but also in North Africa where his Sufi teachings significantly affected the area's Sufi orders. Ibn Arabi has served as a main reference in Sufi philosophy for many centuries, and researchers have placed him in relation to Christian and European thinking (e. g. Master Eckhart and Dante, who might be influenced by him). In the early 20th century, some of his most important works were translated into European languages, creating a renewed and increased interest in him, among both Muslims and non-Muslims. Cf. Isobel Jeffery-Street, *Ibn 'Arabi and the Contemporary West Beshara and the 'Ibn Arabi Society* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 5–14.

[3] Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* transl. R. W. J. Austin (London: SPCK, 1980), 55–56. According to Ibn Arabi, God is absolute and beyond all limitations. On the same basis, Ibn Arabi rejects the Christian doctrine of incarnation, accepting however the statement that Christ is God as true, but rejecting the statement that God is Christ the son of Mary, because the latter will be a limitation as it indicates that God is only Christ and nothing else. Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* 177; Abu 'l-'Ala Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyd Din-Ibnul 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 20.

Many will argue that Ibn Arabi's idea on God's presence in everything does not harmonize with Islamic orthodoxy, and more resembles a pantheistic philosophy, but his aim is not just to explain that God is everywhere, but rather to understand the relationship between transcendence and immanence as two simultaneous principles of God's presence in the world.

3. The Motive of Hidden Treasure

Ibn Arabi's starting point in the interpretation of God's manifestations is a famous hadith *qudsi* (word of God, which is not part of the Qur'an, but part of hadith, nevertheless holding the status of sacred tradition), as follows: "I was a hidden treasure[4] and wanted to be known, so I created the world", or in a more correct translation, as follows: "I was a Treasure unknown then I desired to be known so I created a creation to which I made myself known to myself; then they knew me."[5] What can we read from this hadith? Firstly, that the creation is related to, and rooted in God's consciousness of Himself and is a result of God's wish to be manifest and known. Thus, there is no doubt that God is interested in being known.

Secondly, the hadith gives us a picture of a lonely and even "compassionate" God who felt the need to overcome His loneliness, and for that reason He created man. This is the idea of a God who needs man, which is well known both in Sufism and Christian mysticism (e. g. in Master Eckhart), and which, with variations, has been developed into a theory of mutuality between God and man. God created man, and if man did not exist, God would remain unknown.[6]

God's desire to become known is a central point in Ibn Arabi's cosmology and anthropology. According to him, acknowledgment of God has to be understood as a kind of self-acknowledgement, in a way that God mirrors Himself in

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[4] Parable of the hidden treasure also occurs in the New Testament (Matthew 13:44) and Apocrypha (Thomas 109), associated with the (Father's) Kingdom of Heaven.

[5] Text from: Ibn Arabi, *Les Illuminations de La Mecque. The Meccan Illuminations. Selected Texts*, ed. by W. Chittick, C. Chodkiewicz, D. Gril and J. Morris (Paris: Sindbad, 1988); cf. also Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone. Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 114. The hadith is not included in standard hadith collections, but it is widely quoted by many Sufis and especially Ibn Arabi in his work *The Meccan Illuminations*.

[6] Ibn Arabi argues for this by referring to the aforementioned hadith that designates God's dependence on being known, and by referring to the Qur'an: "I created jinn and man only to worship Me" (51:56) which also indicates a relationship of independence. He emphasizes the inter-mutuality of the Islamic concept of worship, exemplifying it by the ritual prayer, which is prescribed with the meaning that God and man could meet each other. God, in his transcendent unity, as the absolute reality, is thus independent, as stated in the Qur'an (3:97), but this does not apply to the manifest God, who has made himself dependent on the created world. Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 304; 316 f.

the created. On the other hand, the created is not necessarily a passive mediator in which God recognizes Himself.[7] This applies at least to man – the creation that has an exceptional position among others creations by having the ability to know God. In addition, man is also interested in establishing a relationship with his creator – God. However, man is not able to acknowledge God directly, but only indirectly through self-acknowledgment and by understanding his role as a mirror.[8]

By discussing the interrelationship between God and man, Ibn Arabi often refers to two hadiths. In the first of them God says, "The human being is the secret of Me, and I am the secret of it". In the second hadith, the prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, "Who knows his (true) self, knows his Lord (as manifested in himself)".[9] Those who achieve a full self-understanding also know the deeper reality and denote, in the view of Ibn Arabi, the perfect manifestation of God in the form of "the perfect human being" (*al-insan al-kamil*).[10]

Since God created man according to His own image (as it is said in a hadith), this means that man potentially reflects all of God's attributes, unlike the other creatures that only reflect the more particular attributes. However, "the perfect human being" is not a given reality, but a human potential and a spiritual ideal. The realization of this potential is linked to a gnostic experience of God, and according to Ibn Arabi, it is reserved for prophets and holy men (*awliyya*).[11]

4. The Metaphysics of Unity and Diversity

Ibn Arabi distinguishes between God as such (*Haqq*), i. e. God in His absolute reality, and the manifest God (*Khalq*). God in His eternity (as *Haqq*) remains untouched and hidden; on the contrary, the revealed God (as *Khalq*) is available and recognizable.

Since everything in the world appears as a manifestation of God (*tajalli*), we only experience particular aspects of God, but not God in His essence and His unity. "If you look on God through Him", Ibn Arabi says (i. e. if you regard Essence from the point of view of the Essence), then He regards "Himself by

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[7] All creatures have a definite level of active relationship with God because they are constituted by the combination of the principles of passive (*mahmul*) and active *(hamil)* relationships to God. As manifestations of God, all of them have a form (*sura*), body (*jism*) and spirit (*ruh*). They are able to praise the Creator consistently in a manner that is not necessarily understandable to humans. However, man has a special role and level of activeness: He was created in the form of God and was assigned the role of God's deputy, and he has assumed a trust to testify to God before the rest of the world (Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 102–104).

[8] Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 233.

[9] Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 92–93.

[10] Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 54–56.

[11] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*.

Himself", which is the state of unity; but "if you look on Him through you" (i. e. from your point of view as a form), than the unity "vanishes".[12]

As pointed out by Affifi, this statement sounds like an echo of Plotinus's idea of the One as present everywhere and nowhere. However, Ibn Arabi's *Haqq* is everywhere as a universal Essence (not as an Absolute Cause as in Plotinus), while He as an Absolute Reality is nowhere, which means above all "where" and "how".[13]

As the absolute reality, God is one, but as the manifest reality, He is empirical diversity. In the words of Ibn Arabi: "Unity has no other meaning than two (or more) things being actually identical but conceptually distinguishable the one from the other; so in the sense the one is the other; in another, it is not".[14]

Ontologically, there is only one reality, but epistemologically there are two aspects: a reality that transcends the phenomenal world and a multiplicity, which find its explanation and foundation in the essential unity of the real.[15]

According to Ibn Arabi, multiplicity is due to diversity of different points of view, not to an actual division of the reality. In that sense, one could compare *Khalq* (the phenomenological world) to a piece of glass. Provided that it is transparent, light passes through it (God), and the light always assumes the colour of the glass. Light itself cannot be seen, but everything else is discernable because of the light. Hence, man cannot reach God in His Absolute Unity (*ahadiyah*), only observe and experience His manifestations in the world, which convey a plurality of "coloured lights".

Ibn Arabi often emphasizes that people only can see "images of God", while God remains forever absent behind the forms that are manifest in existence.

5. Interpretation of God's Signs

As already mentioned, God as such is not the subject of knowledge, but it is His manifestations. For Muslims, these manifestations are present both in the

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[12] Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 107.

[13] Cf. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy*, 11 (relates to *Fusus al Hikam*, Quash. Comm. Cairo, 1309, 117).

[14] Cf. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy*, 11 (quotes taken from *Fusus al Hikam*, Quash. Comm. Cairo, 1309, 117).

[15] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 85; 87. In many presentations of Ibn Arabi, Muslims as well as non-Muslims presented him as a kind of pantheist. This is because he is considered to be the originator of the doctrine *wahdat al-wujud* (interpreted as "oneness of Being" or "unity of existence"), which was considered a philosophy of pantheism. As pointed out by Chittick, one might argue that Ibn Arabi, in many of his texts, supports *wahdat al-wujud* or speaks directly about the ontological unity of existence, but it is important to remember that he emphasizes just as strongly the diversity of being/existence, thus *wujud* in its entirety is both One and many at the same time (*al-wahid al-kathir*). In addition, the very term *wahdat al-wujud* is not found in his works. See C. William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 15 and Michel Chodkiewicz, "The Diffusion of Ibn 'Arabi's Doctrine," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 1991, 35–57.

form of natural signs in the cosmos[16] and in the form of linguistic signs in the Holy Scripture. The Qur'an is thus nothing else but a collection of signs of God. The standard Arabic word for these signs is *ayat*. There are more than 6000 *ayat* in the Quran and they used to be translated as verses (probably because of the poetic style of the Qur'anic text).[17]

Within the mainstream Sunni Muslim tradition, the exegetes interpret *ayat* as divine statements formulated in the Arabic language, and they confirm that the majority of these statements are expressed in a clear fashion, whereas the minority are stated in terms of ambivalence. Certain Shiite and Sufi traditions emphasize the symbolic meaning of *ayat*, and the exegetes confirm that every *aya* has an outer and an inner meaning, whereby these two meanings can be very different and even contradictory.

Recognizing the manifest God and interpreting the revealed *ayat* (signs, miracles) is, according to Ibn Arabi, not an easy task since all God's manifestations and the revealed signs have a double meaning: As mirrors they serve to unveil God's presence and, at the same time – by being ontologically different from God – they veil His essence. Everything, including the names of God and the human desire to look behind the veil, is a veil,[18] but because everything discloses God's existence it appears as a sign of God. This is like a paradox: What conceals God's essence reveals His existence, in a form that is not Him.[19]

In other words, God's creatures function as both signs (*ayat*) and veils (*hijab*). They disclose and veil God at the same time. This corresponds to the simulta-

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[16] According to Ibn Arabi, the cosmos represents loci of manifestations of God (*mazahir*) and unlike the human being (microcosm), who expresses the unity of God's names, the cosmos (macrocosm) expresses the multiplicity of His names. There is a parallel between the perfect human and the cosmos, because both reflect the entirety of God's names/attributes in different ways. While *microcosm* reflects all of God's attributes in a concentrated and "relatively undifferentiated mode" (*ijmal*), *macrocosm* does it in a dispersive and "differentiated mode" (*tafsil*). The main difference is that *macrocosm* is an object that passively reflects God's self-manifestations, while microcosmic is at once an object and subject, being a conscious actor who has knowledge of himself as well as of the cosmos. Cf. Safet Bektovic, "Det fuldkomne menneske og troens dialektik hos Ibn 'Arabi" *Tidsskrift om islam & kristendom* (2015), 25–32 (27); Chittick, "The Diffusion of Ibn 'Arabi's Doctrine," 33–34.

[17] Etymologically *aya* (pl. *ayat*) corresponds to Syriac âtha and Hebrew ôth, and means a "visible sign of a transcendental reality". One of the original meanings of *aya* is *miracle*. Within the ancient Arab worldview, as it is expressed in poetry for example, natural phenomena were considered miracles, but later, the Qur'anic revelations (e. g. 41:53; 57:1) told people that these miracles are *ayat* from the creator/God, and they should be interpreted in order to understand the cosmos.

[18] "The names are veils over the Named, just as they are signifiers of Him […]. There is no veil and no curtain. Nothing hides Him save His manifestation […]. Were souls to halt with what has become manifest, they would know the situation as it is in self. However, they seek something that is absent from them, so their seeking is identical with their veil." Cf. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 104.

[19] This is very much in line with Master Eckhart's view of the relationship between God and the world as expressed in the following: "God overflows into all creatures, and yet he remains untouched by all" (See Almond, 2003, 32).

neous identity of God with the world and the difference. Thus God is hidden behind exactly what reveals Him; or as Ibn Arabi says, "God becomes manifest by being veiled".

William Chittick, a leading contemporary scholar of Sufism and Ibn Arabi, also emphasizes the centrality of the paradox of the veil in Ibn Arabi: "The veil, the thing, the creature, is not God, no way to see God, except in the veil, which will always conceal Him."[20]

6. A Sufi Deconstructive Approach

There is no doubt that Ibn Arabi has a unique position in Islamic intellectual history: He is critical of the main Islamic theological directions like Mu'tazila and Ashari; he differs from most Muslim philosophers (the rational as well as the mystical); and he does not belong to any particular school of thought.

He stands somewhere between the apophatic theology, represented by those who favour the so-called *tatil* approach, which denies God's attributes as real manifestations, and the cataphatic theology, represented by those who regard God's attributes in positive terms and highlight the compatibility of God with His creatures.[21] It is impossible to position him because, on the one hand, he is inclined to recognize different views and schools as legitimate approaches to God, but on the other hand, he opposes all of them as inadequate and reductive. Some would say he is neither the one nor the other; others would claim that he is both.

When he criticizes Ashari and the Muslim anthropomorphists, who maintain the interpretation of God's attributes in positive terms, he emphasizes – as a negative theologian – the otherness of God compared to everything that is not God, and warns against the reduction of God to His manifestations. But when he criticizes Mu'tazila for their insistence on the unknowability of God, he appears as an anthropomorphist (or pantheist), emphasizing that God only can be known through His manifestations, which must be anthropomorphic because man can only recognize the things that correspond to his own ideas.

What is the point with Ibn Arabi's approach, since he criticizes everything and remains open to everything? According to Chittick, Ibn Arabi "[…] has no specific point to which he wants to get. He is simply flowing along with the infinity diverse self-disclosures of God, and he is suggesting to us that we leave aside our artificialities and recognize that we are flowing along with him. There is no 'point', because there is no end".[22]

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[20] Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 17.
[21] Ian Almond, "The Shackles of Reason: Sufi/Deconstructive Opposition to Rational Thought", *Philosophy East and West*, 53:1 (2003), 22–38.
[22] Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, xi.

Nevertheless, on the methodological level, Ibn Arabi maintains the principle of the simultaneousness of transcendence and immanence, and reminds us of the futility of any attempt to define God as He is in His eternity beyond the world, or as He is in the world in His manifestations:

> If you insist on His transcendence, you restrict Him,
> And if you insist on His immanence you limit Him.
> If you maintain both aspects you are right.[23]

Ibn Arabi's insistence on the simultaniousness of opposite principles and different interpretations can, according to Ian Almond, be put in relation to Derrida's deconstructive approach:

Probably the first feature that unites deconstructive/Sufi approaches to interpretation is a simple disbelief in any exclusive, conclusive secret to the text – a belief in the text not as a single communication to be reiterated endlessly but, rather, as a vehicle that constantly delivers new meanings according to the situation and moment of the reader.[24]

By emphasizing the impossibility of any rational or reflective approach to embrace the reality, and the danger of trying to isolate God (as the subject of reflection) in order to define Him, Ibn Arabi seems to anticipate Derrida's position regarding the critique of binary thought. One cannot define anything without saying what it is not. That is to say, that what is present always depends on implying what is absent, and vice versa.[25]

Binary thinking must therefore be rejected as an illusion regarding the achievement of God's truth. However, the achievement of the truth and the understanding of a deeper meaning to reality is not a goal for Derrida at all. Unlike Ibn Arabi, he does not care for the "fixed meaning", the creator's/author's intentions. Nor do they exist. But, this is a challenge for Ibn Arabi. Believing that God has created the world with a meaning, and has sent down a scripture to the people that informs them about it, he cannot stop reflecting on this "original" meaning, albeit being aware of the impossibility of achieving this (as it was with God), since it is mediated, and communicated as polyvalent.

One could point out other similarities between Derrida and Ibn Arabi regarding limitations on human reflection, including their positive view of confusion when it comes to understanding the world, but this should not be done at the expense of the fundamental difference concerning their starting hermeneutic positions. This refers to the foundation of the human production of meanings.

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[23] Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 75.
[24] Ian Almond, "The meaning of Infinity in Sufi and Deconstructive Hermeneutics: When Is an Empty Text an Infinite One?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 72:1 (2004), 97–117 (102).
[25] Cf. Almond, "The Shackles of Reason," 34; Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 86.

For Derrida, who argues for "nothingness" as the source of meanings, God's disclosure of this secret (the unveiling of the ultimate meaning) would be the end of all meanings.

For Ibn Arabi, God's disclosure, as it occurs as an unfinished process, mirrors both a nothingness (nothing is like God) and fullness/substance (everything is God), an absence (of the hidden God) and a presence (of the manifested God), and due to its hermeneutic openness, it is possible to have infinite interpretations/meanings.

In the first case, it is the 'emptiness' of the text and the infinity of contemporary contexts that enables the production of meanings; in the other case, it is also due to the 'infinite Mind of God' and the infinity of His re-veiled *ayat* (signs).[26]

7. The Infinity of Ways Leading to God

In spite of the assumption that human truth is plural and relative, it is a fact that seekers (of God) always try to formulate a universal truth about God. Many mystics and exponents of perennial philosophy, among others, have argued that there exists something common in the different forms of faith (on the personal and religious-theological level).

Ibn Arabi was also preoccupied with the common metaphysics that he considered to be at the heart of all religions/ways to God. He took religious theologies into account, but was convinced that the ultimate truth goes beyond dogma and traditions. He wrote, "All that is left of tradition are words", and it is up to humans to uncover what lies behind the words. The path that leads one to God's truth is not guaranteed by a fixed theology (even though it is part of the path), but requires a deeper understanding of the human's own position in relation to God.

The accomplishment of God's truth is not possible by employing the intellect, but rather by using the imagination (*al-khayal*) to be able to establish connection between the spiritual and the material world, in the form of visions. This imagination should not be confused with fantasy and the ability to imagine non-existent objects since it refers to a power that enables man to communicate with the imaginal world (*alam al-khayal*) that is not available to sensual perception. According to Ibn Arabi, experience of the imaginal world is like a dream vision (he compares it to revelations in the form of a dream), and corresponds to the unveiling (*kashf*) of the symbols and images from the world of the Unseen:[27]

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[26] Interpretation of the Qur'an implies an engagement with infinite interpretative possibilities and the ambiguity of different forms, thus any interpretation leads to a new interpretation, so that the process is never completed. Cf. Almond, "The meaning of Infinity"; Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 153.

[27] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 99; 121; 196. According to Henry Corbin, *al-khayal* (imagination) is not just an ability to understand spiritual phenomena, but a creative power that

Imagination is the manifestation of meanings (*ma'ani*) in sensory frames (*qawalib his-siyya*), such as knowledge of milk, firmness in religion in the form of a fetter, Islam in the form of a pillar, faith in the form of a handle, and Gabriel in the form of a Bedouin [...].[28]

With Chittick's reading of Ibn Arabi, the general ability to understand God depends on a harmonious usage of reason and imagination as this is the way to understand the relationship between *tanzih* (by using reason) and *tasbih* (by using the imagination).[29] However, the unveiling of God's truth, which occurs in a gnostic experience, can be understood as a dialectical process. On one hand, it is God who removes veils between Him and humans; but on the other hand, it is said that man is able (by the ability of creative imagination) to experience the reality of God.[30]

In any case, the process of unveiling is unique as it takes place between God and the individual, and as such does not imply any universal understanding. Ibn Arabi states that God never un-veils Himself to two people in the same way, and He never appears twice in the same mode to the same person. His self-disclosure is infinite and non-repetitive.[31] Every moment of His existence represents a new self-disclosure and gives a new opportunity for man to know God. Consequently, the human paths to God are also infinite.[32]

To return to the original desire of the hidden treasure to be known: Assuming that this is like a process of God's self-acknowledgment, one can imagine that God has fulfilled His desire. He became known to Himself through His manifestations.

Whether God also became known by man, as He wanted, is another question, since man is still busy understanding himself (and thus understanding the secret of God).

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enables the manifestation of spiritual phenomena in the material world, or for man's sake, an ability to experience these phenomena in the physical sense, as Muhammad experienced Angel Gabriel in the form of a human being. At the same time, it refers to one's own participation in the imaginary world through the spiritualization of that material. In this regard, man's "creative imagination", which involves transforming his own position in relation to God and world, has a parallel to God's creativity as He transformed Himself from the hidden treasure to the manifest God in order to realize His desire for self-recognition. See Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone. Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[28] Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations,* 290. Ibn Arabi refers here to a series of episodes from Muhammad's life, such as a dream vision where he received a glass of milk, which he later interpreted as receiving knowledge, or the famous episode where he led a conversation with the Angel Gabriel, who came to him and his successor in the form of a Bedouin: Ibn Arabi, *The Meccan Illuminations*, 562–563.

[29] Cf. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 123.

[30] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* 126; 234.

[31] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* 152.

[32] Cf. Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom,* 94.