



Ibn Al-cArabi, Shaykh Muhyiddin (1165–1240)

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Al-cArabi is called Muhyiddin (rejuvenator of religion) and Al-Shaykh Al-Akbar (the Greatest Master) in recognition of the strong influence of his teachings throughout the Muslim world. Born in Murcia (Al-Andalus), now a part of Spain, he traveled extensively in North Africa and what is now Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, before settling in Damascus. Ibn Al-cArabi lived an extraordinary spiritual life, studied under numerous scholars and mystics, acted as a spiritual mentor to innumerable disciples, and produced some of the most sophisticated treatises on Islamic mysticism, cosmology, psychology, and metaphysics. Ibn Al-cArabi was essentially a sage, who expressed the contents of his spiritual “unveilings” or “openings” by using all the rhetorical and theoretical tools at his disposal, including poetry, while grounding his insights in the Qur’an and Sunnah. The most famous of his several hundred works include *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyyah* (The Meccan Openings), *Fusus Al-Hikam* (Bezels of Wisdom), and *Turjuman Al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desire).

Ibn Al-cArabi has been a controversial figure in Islam, revered and criticized with almost equal zeal. Much of this controversy can be traced to the inherent complexity of Ibn Al-cArabi’s writings; unable to study him directly, opponents have often formed hasty views based on misleading secondary sources. While this tendency crept into early Orientalist approaches, more recent Western scholarship on Ibn Al-cArabi is yielding increasingly refined understandings of his visions, insights, and intuitions.

One facet of Ibn Al-cArabi’s thought is what came to be known as *Wahdat Al-Wujud* or Unity of Being. Despite superficial resemblances, Unity of Being is very different from Pantheism, Panentheism, or Monism. It is a highly sophisticated and subtle exposition of the meaning of Tawhid, or divine unity. According to Ibn Al-cArabi, God is sheer Being, Absolute Reality, the only being that truly exists. Everything other than God is in an ambiguous state, halfway between Being and nonexistence. The perceptible universe consists of the manifestations, reflections, or modalities of Being.

According to a divine saying often quoted in the Islamic tradition: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order that I might be known.” For Ibn Al-cArabi, the universe may be seen as

countless mirrors in which the one true Being is reflected, and through which it becomes known. Since all the reflections in the mirrors cannot exist without what they reflect, each reflection can be taken as divine in its essence; at the same time, each reflection is nothing more than a mere image that has no independent reality. The mystery of existence is a paradox between affirmation and negation – everything is God/not God – a paradox that cannot be resolved in either direction without falling into error.

Ibn Al-cArabi’s ontology is rooted in his epistemology. Human beings have been endowed with two “eyes” or ways of knowing. Each provides a valid but limited view; both have to be taken at the same time in order to arrive at truth. Where the eye of intellect and reason (*aqil*) sees multiplicity and difference (*takthir*), the eye of imagination and unveiling (*khayal* and *kashf*) finds unity and sameness (*tawhid*). The former can affirm God’s distance and transcendence from creation, but the latter experiences God’s nearness to and immanence in creation. Full realization of truth requires balance and harmony between these two epistemic modes; yet the latter enjoys a degree of precedence.

Ibn Al-cArabi’s ethics revolve around his view of human nature. For him, the foremost ethical imperative is the actualization of the entire range of potentialities inherent in the human being’s primordial nature (*fitrah*). These human potentialities correspond to divine attributes, and the imperative to actualize them is based on the saying of Prophet Muhammad: “Assume the character-traits of God.” The Islamic tradition provides ninety-nine divine names, each of which describes an attribute or character-trait of God. These names are often divided into “names of majesty” (e.g., Mighty, Inaccessible, King, High, Wrathful, Slayer, Harmer) and “names of beauty” (e.g., Beautiful, Near, Merciful, Compassionate, Forgiving, Life-Giver, Bestower). These two categories of divine names are sometimes seen as “masculine” and “feminine,” terms that should not be understood as having any direct or necessary link with biological gender.

Since human beings have been created in the “form of God,” they must develop their inherent divine character-traits in the most appropriate and harmonious manner, thereby becoming increasingly better “mirrors” in which God may be reflected and thereby known. While every creature or phenomenon of nature reflects a limited configuration of a few attributes of God, the human being has the unique capacity to reflect all of God’s attributes in their fullness – to reflect God as God. This also means that

human beings are not apart from nature; there is a certain kinship between the two, for the same God who is manifested in the created universe is the one who is revealed in the human being, the latter representing the universe in miniature (microcosm). This perspective can have a sobering effect on the human sense of separateness from and superiority over nature.

The writings of Ibn Al-cArabi have hardly lost their value during the last seven centuries. They have probably acquired new and unforeseen relevance in view of the increasingly apparent contradictions of the modern age. In this regard, the environmental crisis can be analyzed in thought-provoking ways when approached from a perspective that is informed and inspired by Ibn Al-cArabi's works. There are many ways to undertake this project; one would be to see the environmental crisis as rooted in modernity's tendency to view reality with only one eye, that of intellect and reason. The environmental predicament can therefore be viewed as coming out of a partially valid but incomplete epistemology that sees multiplicity in nature but is blind to its underlying unity. For Ibn Al-cArabi, the realization that God is not identical with nature and that everything has its own reality is only one side of the truth. The equally important other side is that everything is a mode of God's self-disclosure through which God becomes known, and that the reality of everything is in essence God's Reality. To grasp this side of the truth, human beings must bring about a basic change in their way of knowing – they must open the other eye. Only then will human beings know that they cannot treat nature as their eternal "other" without becoming alienated from God and without betraying the most sublime aspects of their own primordial nature. Only then will they realize that the humanly caused extinction of a single plant or animal species is tantamount to shattering a divine mirror.

Ibn Al-cArabi's ethics provides another possible way of approaching the environmental crisis. The roots of the crisis may be traced to the fact that human beings have become dangerously unbalanced in their self-actualization. Anthropocentric hubris results when human beings give an abnormal amount of emphasis to the traits of majesty, while ignoring the traits of beauty. Modern culture emphasizes the "masculine" side of the human self at the cost of its "feminine" side. Consequently, the human attitudes toward nature have been characterized more by domination and control and less by love and compassion. Ibn Al-cArabi's prescription would be to reverse this trend.

Ibn Al-cArabi believes that God's "feminine" aspects have a greater reality than the "masculine" aspects. In the final analysis, divine names of beauty enjoy precedence over divine names of majesty, in accordance with the divine saying: "My Mercy precedes My Wrath." In other words, God is more merciful than wrathful. This precedence of beauty over majesty, or "femininity" over "masculinity," in the case of God must also reflect in the

character-traits of human beings striving for perfection. In other words, the element of love and compassion in the human attitude toward nature must precede the element of domination and control, as a necessary requirement for self-realization.

In order to actualize Ibn Al-cArabi's relevance to the environmental movement, his extensive writings will have to be approached and appropriated from an ecologically informed perspective; the resulting insights will have to be made the basis of ecological education among those mystical and intellectual traditions in which Ibn Al-cArabi is revered as the greatest master.

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Further Reading

- Addas, Claude. *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn cArabi*. Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993.
- Chittick, William C. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-cArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- Coates, Peter. *Ibn cArabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*. Oxford, UK: Anqa Publishing, 2002.
- Murata, Sachiko. *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islam*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Ibn cArabi and the Sufis." In *Three Muslim Sages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, 83–121.
- See also: Islam; Islam and Eco-Justice; Islam and Environmental Ethics; Islam on Man and Nature; Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection; Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam; The Qur'an; Tawhid (Oneness of God).

Ifá Divination

Ifá is a sophisticated and complex system of divination developed by the Yoruba people of today's southwest Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Ifá is based on 16 major *odù*, or chapters, and 240 minor *odù*, making a total corpus of 256, which is known as *odù Ifá*. The *odù Ifá* is comprised of literally thousands of stories, myths, verses, songs, prayers, proverbs, ritual sacrifices and offerings (*ebo*), cultural history, social and cultural taboos, medicinal preparations, and dietary recommendations, among other themes. The repository of this literature, which nowadays is frequently in written form but in the past was entirely oral, is in the hands of priests of Ifá called *Babalawo*. They and other adepts of Ifá believe the entire literary corpus to be the message of the creator God, *Olodùmare*, as witnessed by the all-wise, all-knowing deity (*Òrìshà*) named *Òrúnmilà* or *Òrúnla*, who presides spiritually over the