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IBN ‘ARABI AND THE AKBARĪ TRADITION

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Introduction

Not to be confused with the Mālikī jurist Qāḍī Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1148), there is little exaggeration in stating that the Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) is the most influential and, at the same time, the most controversial mystic in the Islamic world. To those favorable of his teachings, he is referred to as “the greatest master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), known by the moniker “the reviver of the religion” (*muḥyī al-dīn*), and is seen to express the deepest realities of Islamic theology and spirituality. To his opponents, he is not “the reviver of religion” but rather “the destroyer of religion” (*mumīt al-dīn*), advocating esoteric heresies that subvert the very basis of the *sharī‘a*.

In the centuries following his death, Ibn ‘Arabī’s reputation has largely been positive. His teachings have shaped the direction of Islamic empires, numerous intellectual schools, as well as the piety of countless Muslims through Sufi orders that adopted aspects of his teachings.

Outline of Ibn ‘Arabī’s life¹

Ibn ‘Arabi was born Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-‘Arabī al-Ṭā‘ī al-Hātimī in Murcia, Spain on the 17th of Ramaḍān 560, corresponding to 27/28 July 1165. He was of noble Arab lineage, tracing his ancestry to the famous Hātim al-Ṭā‘ī, a pre-Islamic poet who lived in the latter half of the sixth century, known for his magnanimity and chivalry. When Ibn ‘Arabī was born, his father was serving in the army of Ibn Mardānīsh, the king of Murcia who held out against the spread of the Almohads. When Ibn Mardānīsh died in 1172 the notables (including Ibn ‘Arabī’s father) transferred their allegiance to the Almohad sultan Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (r. 1184–1199). Ibn ‘Arabī’s family then settled in Seville, his father serving as a military advisor in the new court.

At the age of 15, Ibn ‘Arabī went into a spiritual retreat (*khalwa*) and had a mystical experience that set the course of his life. As a result, instead of following in his father’s footsteps serving in the army, he devoted his life entirely to the spiritual path. Word of his experience spread among his father’s associates and reached the jurist-philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), who was the personal physician of sultan Abū Ya‘qūb. Ibn Rushd was the famous champion of Aristotle, writing refutations of the views of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) as

well as Avicenna (d. 1037) on a number of accounts, including the value accorded to spiritual unveilings (*kashf*). Intrigued by what he heard of Ibn 'Arabī's experience, Ibn Rushd asked to meet the young man. Ibn 'Arabī records the famous exchange that occurred in their meeting. Rising to greet the young man, Ibn Rushd proclaimed, "Yes," to which Ibn 'Arabī replied, "Yes." Seeing Ibn Rushd's delight at his response, Ibn 'Arabī then stated, "No." Ibn Rushd's composure changed. He then asked if illumination and mystical experience conformed to the knowledge that speculative thought yielded, to which Ibn 'Arabī responded, "Yes and no; between the yes and no, spirits take flight from their matter and necks are severed from their bodies." Ibn Rushd's face turned pale and he muttered, "There is no power or strength save from God."

This remarkable beginning highlights a number of features that are characteristic of Ibn 'Arabī's thought. The first is the tension between Ibn 'Arabī's teachings and the problems debated by philosophers and theologians, two trends that he would subsume under the broader category of *ahl al-naẓar* ("the people of speculative thought"). While there is much that is shared between speculative thought and spiritual openings (the "yes" in the above exchange), there is much that is not (the "no" in the above exchange). The final remark from Ibn 'Arabī ("between the yes and no...") is indicative of the grave consequences for erring in these matters.

A second feature worth noting is that Ibn 'Arabī's experience inverts the normal itinerary that an aspirant embarks upon. That is to say that rather than being initiated into learning particular doctrines and taking on a regimented set of spiritual exercises to shape one's soul to be receptive to divine disclosure, Ibn 'Arabī experienced a spiritual opening first and then sought out theoretical knowledge. Ibn 'Arabī's knowledge of the theoretical aspects of Islam's spiritual traditions thus came after and not before formally embarking on the path. In this way, he was unlettered not unlike the Prophet, whose spirituality permeates all of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings.

Ibn 'Arabī shares many of his visionary experiences and one of the most significant dating from this early period of his life was his dream-vision of three prophets, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. Each of them offered him a particular form of guidance: Jesus to asceticism, Moses to mystical knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ladunī*), and Muḥammad to follow in his path. Jesus held a unique place in Ibn 'Arabī's spiritual formation and he referred to him as his first teacher. But it was the path of Muḥammad where Ibn 'Arabī's spiritual formation was realized.

For Ibn 'Arabī, following the path of Muḥammad meant following the path of scholarship (*ʿilm*), as the Prophet had stated, "Scholars are the heirs of prophets." His education focused on the study of the core texts of the Islamic tradition, namely, the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, and works of law. In Qur'ānic studies he mastered the various recitations (*qirā'āt*) of the sacred scripture. In the study of ḥadīth, he read the main canonical texts as well as the ancillary disciplines under ḥadīth masters of his time. Intimately detailing the life and way of the Prophet, ḥadīth became a central focus of Ibn 'Arabī's scholarly activity and he sought out ḥadīth wherever he traveled. Related to this, Ibn 'Arabī studied the Zāhirī school of law, which had a following in Andalusia at the time. While scholarship has debated the extent of his adherence to Zāhirism, what can be stated for sure is that he was an admirer of Ibn Ḥazm, Zāhirism's foremost Andalusian representative, and studied his vast legal corpus. It is worth noting too that though Ibn 'Arabī did not disparage the practice of *ra'y* (juristic reasoning) to the extent Ibn Ḥazm was famous for, he too gave precedence to ḥadīth over other sources of Islamic law, thus prioritizing the words and deeds of the Prophet.

After a period of lapse (*fatra*), Ibn 'Arabī dedicated himself entirely to the spiritual path in 1184, taking as a master Abū Ja'far Aḥmad al-'Uryanī. He committed himself to a life of

renunciation, detachment, and learning. Under 'Uyanī's guidance, Ibn 'Arabī had his first meeting with Khidr, the mysterious figure in the story of Moses mentioned in the Qur'ān (Q. 18: 65–82).

In 1190 while in Cordoba, Ibn 'Arabī experienced a vision of all of the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad. The Arabian prophet Hūd addressed him regarding the gathering, informing him of his function as the “seal of the Muḥammadan saints” (*khatm al-walāya al-muḥammadiyya*). In the same year, 'Uryanī passed away and the young Ibn 'Arabī started to frequent the gatherings of the students of Ghawth Abū Madyan (d. 594/1198), the foremost teacher of *taṣawwuf* in North Africa at the time. It is curious that for all of their mutual admiration, they seemingly accepted that they were not destined to meet in this life and Ibn 'Arabī made no effort to meet the master. Instead he sought out Abū Madyan's students, including Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf al-Kūmī, Abū Muḥammad al-Mawrūrī, and Abū 'Imrān al-Sadrānī. It is in their circle that Ibn 'Arabī began to learn the theoretical aspects of *taṣawwuf*; he remarks that he did not know of the famous *Risāla* of Qushayrī (d. 1074) or that there were writings on the terminology of the spiritual path. In 1193, he made his way to North Africa, settling in Tunis in order to meet with two more of Abū Madyan's students, 'Abd al-'Azīz Mahdawī and Abū Muḥammad 'Abdallāh al-Kinānī. A year later, he returned to Andalusia and while on his journey back he met Khidr for a second time, and then a third time after reaching Andalusia.

Upon returning to Andalusia, both of his parents passed away within months of each other, leaving Ibn 'Arabī responsible for his two sisters. He settled his family affairs and then based himself out of Fez. In Fez, he had a number of remarkable spiritual experiences, culminating in his own mystical ascension (*mi'rāj*), mirroring that of the Prophet's. Where the Prophet's ascension was physical, Ibn 'Arabī's was purely spiritual. In Fez too, he realized the station of “seal of Muḥammadan sainthood.” At this time, he met 'Abdallāh Badr al-Ḥabashī, an aspirant that took Ibn 'Arabī as his master. Ḥabashī kept Ibn 'Arabī's company for the rest of his life and was his intimate companion for decades. Ibn 'Arabī made a final trip to Andalusia with Ḥabashī and records that in 1198 they attended the funeral of Ibn Rushd in Cordoba.

Ibn 'Arabī set out for the central Islamic lands from the Maghrib intending to perform the Pilgrimage. As he began his journey, he attained “the station of proximity” (*maqām al-qurba*) a station between truthful sainthood (*ṣiddīqiyya*) and prophethood, the existence of which many previous Sufis denied. In his journey east, he visited the major urban centers along the way, including the grave of Abū Madyan in Tlemcen. He finally reached Mecca in 1202.

Mecca was the culmination of Ibn 'Arabī's spiritual journey and a turning point for his life. While in the Sacred Precinct of the Ka'ba and gazing at the Blackstone, he met a mysterious person that he refers to simply as a “Youth” (*fatā*). He describes the Youth as “steadfast in devotion, who is both speaker and silent, neither alive nor dead, both complex and simple, encompassed and encompassing.”² Struck by the spiritual state of the Youth, Ibn 'Arabī requested his companionship and a desire to speak his unique language. As a result of this encounter and the knowledge bequeathed to him by the Youth, Ibn 'Arabī began to compose what would become the most important work on Islamic spirituality, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*.

Also in Mecca, Ibn 'Arabī had a vision of the Prophet that confirmed his place as the seal of the saints. This vision draws on a *ḥadīth* where the Prophet strikes a likeness for his being the seal of prophethood. The *ḥadīth* states:

Truly, my likeness and that of the Prophets before me is that of a man who built a house, completed it, and perfected it with the exception of one brick. People walk around it and are amazed saying, “If only this one brick were placed!” I am that brick and I am the seal of the Prophets.³

Ibn 'Arabī describes his vision as follows:

When I was in Mecca in the year 599, I had a dream in which I saw the Ka'ba built of bricks of silver and gold, placed alternately. The construction was complete, and there was nothing left to add. I contemplated it and admired its beauty. Then I turned to the side between the Yemenite and Syrian corners. Near the Syrian corner I noticed that there were two bricks missing, one gold, one silver, on two rows of the wall. The missing gold was on the upper row, the missing silver on the lower. I saw myself being put into the place of these two bricks.⁴

In addition to these mystical experiences, in 1204 Ibn 'Arabī met Majd al-Dīn Ishāq ibn Yūsuf al-Rūmī (d. 1221). Majd al-Dīn was a fellow traveler of the spiritual path who was connected to the Seljuq court, having ties with Kaykhusraw (r. 1192–1196; 1205–1211) and later his son Kaykā'ūs (r. 1211–1220). In his company Ibn 'Arabī departed from the Hijāz and traveled north. For the next 22 lunar years, Ibn 'Arabī traveled throughout the central Islamic lands, visiting the major urban centers of the region, including Baghdad, Mosul, Konya, Malatya, Aleppo, Damascus, Hebron, Jerusalem, and the Hejaz. In this itinerant period of his life, Ibn 'Arabī continued to have visionary experiences and produced a number of his core works. This continued until 1221 when Majd al-Dīn passed away in the city of Malatya in central Anatolia. Ibn 'Arabī took Majd al-Dīn's son as his ward, a decision that would prove fateful for the future articulation and transmission of Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine and writings. Shortly after that, Ibn 'Arabī's long-time companion Badr al-Ḥabashī also passed away in Malatya.

In 1221 Ibn 'Arabī made his way to Damascus where he spent the remainder of his life. He had the patronage of a prominent family that had served as judges for generations, the Banū Zakī. They provided him a home in the Ṣālīhiyya neighborhood on the slopes of Mount Qaṣyūn. In this phase of his life, Ibn 'Arabī took to the task of collating the works that he had already written as well as completing the works that were in progress. In 1229, he wrote one of his most important texts, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. In 1231, he completed the first draft of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, which he began almost 30 years before in Mecca. In 1238, he completed the second and final draft. On November 10, 1240, Ibn 'Arabī passed away in the home of his patrons and was buried in a cemetery on mount Qaṣyūn.

Doctrines⁵

The term *waḥdat al-wujūd* is almost exclusively associated with the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī and the Akbarī school. One will look in vain however to find Ibn 'Arabī actually use the term. Scholars have noted that later generations and even opponents of Ibn 'Arabī were instrumental in the development of this phrase to characterize his teachings. The question of *wujūd* (being) and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unicity of being) has dominated metaphysical thinking in later Islamic thought. At the root of the problem is accounting for the ontological status of God, man, and the universe. For some *waḥdat al-wujūd* is essentially pantheism, equating the existence of all three; others understand it as panentheism, the notion that God is greater than man and the universe but somehow penetrates and participates in the two; for others still it is monism of different kinds (existential or pantheistic). For some *falāsifa* and *kalam* theologians, it is simply noting that God's existence is necessary while all of creation, man included, is merely possible. To greater or lesser degree, these formulations correspond to

some aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings but they ultimately fall short. In Ibn 'Arabī's diagnosis, this is because they suffer from essentially the same fault, namely, binding (*taqyīd*) God to categories of the mind. In doing so, this binding precludes the agent from perceiving the changing manifestations of God through His attributes.

Ibn 'Arabī is fundamentally a visionary mystic and not a philosopher or theologian. The starting point for Ibn 'Arabī is not reasoning from creation to the creator, but in the other direction, reasoning from the creator to creation. Seen in this light, Ibn 'Arabī prioritizes the insights attained through spiritual openings (*fath*)—what the Sufis term *kashf* (unveiling), *shuhūd* or *mushāhada* (direct witnessing), or *dhawq* (tasting)—over those attained through speculative reasoning (*naẓar*) employed by philosophers and theologians. Accordingly, Ibn 'Arabī prioritizes the heart (*qalb*) as a faculty of knowledge over the rational intellect. Where the latter can only try to bind God to its categories, the heart is able to receive (*qābil*) God's ever-changing manifestations. Further, the heart has the feature of plasticity in that it can change (*taqallub*) and conform to the particular manifestations of God's names.

What then is the relationship between God, the universe, and man? A *ḥadīth qudsī* states, "I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known, so I created creatures that I might be known." This *ḥadīth* has been a central text for Muslim mystical thought and is so for Ibn 'Arabī as well. What it draws attention to is the desire of the Real to disclose (*tajallī*) Itself to Itself, from the unseen (*ghayb*) to the seen (*shahāda*). Ibn 'Arabī refers to the various levels of disclosure as "presences" (*ḥadrāt*). The Real in and of Itself is non-manifest as the "absolute unseen" (*al-ghayb al-muṭlaq*). As it descends to the presence of divinity, this is the plane of the names and attributes, wherein there is multiplicity in unity. The next disclosure is in the plane of act, which is the presence of divinity (*rubūbiyya*), then the plane of images and imagination, and finally to the senses (*mushāhada*).

The universe and man, the final level of divine disclosure, are two mirrors that reflect the attributes of God. To use the language of *ahl al-naẓar*, God exists modally as a necessary being, independent, with no need for another. The universe by contrast has no existence in and of itself, rather it derives its existence entirely from the necessary existent, God. The universe—as Muslim scholastics define it, everything other than God—is the mirror in which the effects of the Divine Names are reflected. This reflection however occurs in a general sense. Man, as part of the universe, also reflects the attributes of God but does so in a particular manner. The universe is thus the macrocosm that reflects God's names in a differentiated manner whereas man is a microcosm that reflects God's names in a non-differentiated manner. Stated yet another way, the universe reflects the Names in their multiplicity, whereas Man is the locus of the unity of the Names as a single reality. Man's relation to the universe, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is like the spirit to the body. Without the spirit (i.e. without man), the universe is incomplete and imperfect. Man is thus the ultimate telos of creation as no other creature can truly know God in the way that the man does.

When Ibn 'Arabī speaks of man, however, he does not mean what the philosophers would term "rational animal" (*al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq*). This conception of man refers not to his perfection, but rather the most basic form of man that distinguishes him from other creatures. Ibn 'Arabī is concerned primarily with "the perfect man" (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the man that reflects the names and attributes of God. Ibn 'Arabī speaks of the Perfect Man in two different ways. The first is as an archetype of man's perfectibility, what he calls the Muḥammadan Reality, man's primordially as manifesting the attributes of God in a single reality. The second is the Perfect Man as a *telos*, as the ultimate point of human existence. This is manifest in the world in particular individuals referred to as the prophets (*anbiyā'*) and saints (*awliyā'*).

Ibn ‘Arabī’s hagiology rests on the different ways in which man can know God’s self-manifestations. Ibn ‘Arabī sees the Qur’ān’s prophets not only historical personages but archetypes of ways of knowing God. Based on the hadith that scholars are heirs of prophets and the prophets bequeath knowledge, Ibn ‘Arabī sees the saints as inheriting different prophetic ways of knowing God. In his own experience, Ibn ‘Arabī received from Moses, Jesus, and the Prophet, thus inheriting the Abrahamic legacy. Saints are thus described as being ‘Isāwī (Christ-like), Mūsawī (Moses-like), Nūhī (Noahic), Muḥammadī (Muḥammaden), etc. Further, Ibn ‘Arabī provides the richest typology of saints in the Islamic tradition. These include the *abdāl* (the “substitutes”), the *nuqabā’* (the “leaders”), the *nujabā’* (the “nobles”), and so on, each with their own function as well as a unique way of knowing the Real. One group that receives particular attention by Ibn ‘Arabī are the Malāmatiyya, a group of Khurasanian mystics that focused on censoring the lower-self and incurred blame on themselves.

An important tension emerged in reading Ibn ‘Arabī on the relationship between prophethood and sainthood. This was a problem in the early development of Sufism and a number of prominent figures such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 760) were accused of giving priority to saints over prophets. Critics that are often unaware of the complex structure of his hagiology accuse Ibn ‘Arabī of this and in fact disparaging the status of prophets.

One of the most controversial aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s hagiology is his notion of the seal (*khatm*). The seal functions as closing a particular epoch, often with eschatological consequences. If sainthood works on the pattern of prophethood and the Prophet Muḥammad is the seal of prophethood, it would follow that there are seals within his path. These seals are not of legislative prophethood, which was Muḥammad’s role and function, but are instead of sainthood. Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of different seals, in particular the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood (*khatam al-walāya al-muḥammadiyya*) and the seal of universal sainthood (*khatam al-walāya al-‘amma*). The latter is the function of Jesus, upon whose return at the end of time the door for sainthood is entirely closed. Concerning the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood however Ibn ‘Arabī is deliberately obscure about throughout his texts, stating that he met the seal in Fez and took his companions to meet him. In other place however he makes allusion to his function as a seal.

Major writings

Reading Ibn ‘Arabī can be a daunting task and requires one to be grounded in the various Islamic discourses current in his time. A contemporary Algerian expositor of Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ notes six areas of learning that one must be familiar with to understand Ibn ‘Arabī’s literary production.⁶ (1) The first is a deep understanding of the Arabic language, in particular its rhetorical and etymological dimensions. Ibn ‘Arabī is an able *belles-lettrist* in his own right. He regularly uses rhymed prose (*saj’*) and verse (*shi’r*) to express his doctrines even after lengthy discursive prose expositions. It is common to find him draw on the vast semantic field of meaning that the Arabic language affords in order to push the bounds of interpretation. (2) Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings are centered on the Qur’ān, drawing on its language and imagery, giving preference to qur’ānic terms over philosophical ones. One must have an intimate familiarity not only with the Qur’ān but also its various sciences, particularly its variant readings as well as its exegesis. (3) Related to this, *ḥadīth* and rulings from sacred law are also a key part of Ibn ‘Arabī’s language and thought world. He regularly gives the full chain of narrators (*isnād*) for *ḥadīth* and other materials that are transmitted. (4) In addition to the scriptural sources of the Islamic tradition, a discourse that Ibn ‘Arabī regularly employs

is lettrism (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*). This science is based on the numeric properties of letters and was one of the central discourses of Muslim esoteric thought. (5) Ibn 'Arabī was immersed in the thought world shaped by medieval Islamic theological and philosophical traditions. Though it is incorrect to characterize him as a speculative theologian (*mutakallim*) or philosopher, he engages their ideas extensively, drawing on different schools (primarily Ash'arī and Mu'tazilī) but not bound to one in particular. (6) Finally, in numerous texts, we find Ibn 'Arabī employing the language of astronomy. To this list, one should add the most obvious, namely the key mystical discourses in the Islamic world. Ibn 'Arabī drew on the Western mystics, the Mu'tabirūn (such as Ibn Qaṣī, Ibn Barrajān, etc)⁷ as well as the Baghdadī-Khurasanian Sufis. Of the latter, the writings of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī are uniquely influential in shaping key doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī.

In terms of his literary output, Ibn 'Arabī is the most prolific Arabic mystical author. In the last stage of his life, Ibn 'Arabī composed a list of his writings (*fihrist al-mu'allafāt*), then a second list in his license (*ijāza*) written to Malik Muẓaffar, providing 248 and 290 titles respectively. The range of topics that Ibn 'Arabī wrote on included Qur'ānic exegesis, ḥadīth, *belles letters*, metaphysics, law, and theology.

Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (*The Meccan Openings*)

The *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* is arguably the most monumental mystical treatise in Islamic civilization. The manuscript in our possession of Ibn 'Arabī's handwritten final draft contains over 10,500 pages of written text. Ibn 'Arabī began writing the text after his encounter with the Youth in Mecca in 1202. He recounts the exchange that led to the writing of the *Futūḥāt* as follows:

I said to him, "Reveal to me some of your secrets that I may be one of your scribes!" He replied, "Observe the details of my constitution and the arrangement of my form, and you will find the answer to your question inscribed within me. For I am neither speaker nor spoken to. My knowledge is not other than Me, and My essence is no different to My names. For I am knowledge, the Known, and the Knower. I am Wisdom, the giver of Wisdom and the Wise." Then he said to me, "Circumambulate in my footsteps, and observe me in the light of my moon, so that you may take from my constitution that which you write in your book and transmit to your readers."⁸

The text was finally completed in Damascus 30 years after this event and includes a number of his shorter treatises. It is divided into six sections and 560 chapters as follows:

- on spiritual knowledge (*ma'ārif*), chapters 1–73;
- on behavior (*mu'āmalāt*), chapters 74–188;
- on spiritual states (*aḥwāl*), chapters 189–269;
- on spiritual abodes (*manāzil*), chapters 270–383;
- on spiritual encounters (*munāẓalāt*), chapters 384–461;
- on spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*), chapters 462–560.

Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam (*The Ringstones of Wisdom*)

The *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* is substantially shorter than the *Futūḥāt*; in modern print it is merely 200 pages. The *Fuṣūṣ* is Ibn 'Arabī's most famous text, receiving the greatest number of

commentaries, as well as the greatest number of detractors. Osman Yahia lists over 200 texts written as either commentaries, refutations, or in defense of the *Fuṣūṣ*.⁹ The *Fuṣūṣ* dates to the later years of Ibn ‘Arabī’s life and was also the product of a visionary experience. At the end of Muharram 627/December 1229, six years after settling in Damascus, Ibn ‘Arabī had a vision (*mubashshira*) of the Prophet Muhammad who had in his hand a book. The Prophet said to him, “This is *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, take it and spread it among the people that they might benefit from it.”

The highly esoteric text contains 27 chapters on prophetic figures that are mentioned in the Qur’ān (with the exception of Seth and Khālīd ibn Sinān). Each chapter (*fuṣṣ*) is an exploration of the wisdom (*ḥikma*) manifest in the word (*kalima*) of that prophetic figure. For those figures that are mentioned in the Qur’ān, there are Qur’ānic verses that seemingly serve as the source of Ibn ‘Arabī’s inspiration, while for others the main source is a hadith of the Prophet. The *Fuṣūṣ* reflects the quintessential deployment of Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutic of Islamic scriptures. Each chapter pushes the possible meanings that a text might carry to offer radical interpretations tied to Ibn ‘Arabī’s particular metaphysics.

Tarjumān al-ashwāq (*The Interpreter of Desires*)

While Ibn ‘Arabī was in Mecca, he stayed at the home of a scholar of ḥadīth, one Makīn al-Dīn Abū Shujā‘ Zāhir ibn Rustam, under whom he read the *ḥadīth* collection of Tirmidhī. Makīn al-Dīn’s young daughter Nizām (‘Ayn al-Shams wa al-Bahā’) was known for her beauty and piety, and Ibn ‘Arabī was so taken by her that he began composing a series of lyric poems. These poems draw on the *nasīb* genre of classical Arabic lyric poetry and were collected later under the title *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires). Years later, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s disciples, Badr al-Ḥabashī and Ibn Sawdakīn, heard of a jurist in Aleppo censoring the *Tarjumān* and speaking ill of their master. They mentioned this to Ibn ‘Arabī who then wrote a commentary (titled *Dhakhā’ir al-ā’lāq*) that ostensibly explained the mystical allusion (*ishāra*) underlying the poems. Perhaps the most famous lines of this collection are as follows:

My heart can take on
any form:
a meadow for gazelles,
a cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka’ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah,
the scrolls of the Qur’ān.
I profess the religion of love;
wherever its caravan turns along the way,
that is the belief,
the faith I keep.

Ibn ‘Arabī and his contemporaries

Ibn ‘Arabī lived in an age that produced some of the seminal figures of Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism. Traveling from Andalusia to the central Islamic lands, he was able to meet a number of these figures or their direct students. We noted earlier that he met the philosopher Ibn Rushd in his youth. Ibn ‘Arabī had links to some of the most prominent figures of mystical thought in Andalusia, including Ibn ‘Arīf, Ibn Qaṣī, Ibn Barrajān, and Ibn

Mujāhid. Though Ibn 'Arabī came after these figures, he is connected to each through their students. As we noted earlier, this was the case with Ghawth Abū Madyan, whose students Ibn 'Arabī earnestly sought out despite the two being contemporaries.

In the East, there were numerous figures whose lives overlapped with that of Ibn 'Arabī. We have a record of a correspondence that Ibn 'Arabī sent to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, the foremost Sunni theologian, jurist, and exegete of his age, though we cannot be sure whether Rāzī in fact read it or composed a response.¹⁰ Ibn 'Arabī was born in the year that 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī died and when he visited Baghdad he was able to meet 'Abd al-Qādir's successors. It is said too, that he received investiture from 'Abd al-Qādir's line while in Mecca. The illuminationist philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (*shaykh al-ishrāq*) was put to death in Aleppo before Ibn 'Arabī departed Andalusia. However, the life of the other Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, the author of *'Awārif al-ma'ārif*, overlapped with that of Ibn 'Arabī. Some sources state that the two met in Baghdad but the evidence seems inconclusive. The celebrated Arab poet, 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ too was a contemporary of Ibn 'Arabī. The later Sufi tradition would see the two as expressing fundamentally the same teaching, Ibn al-Fāriḍ as “the sultan of lovers” (*sultān al-'āshiqīn*) and Ibn 'Arabī as the “sultan of gnostics” (*sultān al-'ārifīn*). Though the latter passed through Egypt a few times, we do not have a record of the two meeting. Another poet from Muslim Spain, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī, also overlapped with Ibn 'Arabī. Shushtarī however was a disciple of Ibn Sab'īn and is not known to have met Ibn 'Arabī.

Perhaps the most enticing suggestion is that Ibn 'Arabī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī met, as the two were active in the same region, even the same cities (Konya, Aleppo, and Damascus), at very similar times. Tempting as it is to think that the two of the most influential authors of the Arabic and Persian mystical traditions actually met, it seems that they never did. Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī however are connected in different ways. The first is through Shams al-Tabriz, Rūmī's mentor, who was in Damascus during Ibn 'Arabī's final residence there. Shams recognized Ibn 'Arabī's accomplishments but maintained some reservations of him. The most significant connection is through Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, Majd al-Dīn's son and Ibn 'Arabī's ward. Ṣadr al-Dīn settled in Konya and was close to Rūmī, even leading Rūmī's funeral prayer by request.

Akbarian line

Ibn 'Arabī's life came at the end of the classical Islamic world and the foundation of new political and culture realities. The Mongol empire rose in the East during his lifetime and within 20 years of his death Hulagu seized Baghdad and executed the Abbasid caliph, al-Mu'tasim, putting an end to the classical caliphate in 1258. In the wake of the Mongol invasion, the seeds for new Muslim empires were sowed, culminating in the Timurid, Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal dynasties. The line of Ibn 'Arabī's intellectual and spiritual heirs was influential in shaping the religious and intellectual life of these empires. What follows highlights only aspects of the Sunni-Arab reception of Ibn 'Arabī. One can write at length about Ibn 'Arabī's reception in the greater Persianate world and within Shi'ī intellectual circles.

The “Akbarī school” can be thought of as forming in two ways. The first is through master-disciple relationships and the second is through the establishment of a canon of texts that are invoked and expanded upon through commentary. Though Ibn 'Arabī kept the company of numerous masters, he was not affiliated with any particular Sufi order. Likewise, he did not initiate an order himself, despite the fact that by his time Sufi orders were a prominent social institution of Muslim society. Ibn 'Arabī had a number of close disciples dating

to his time in North Africa, such as Badr al-Ḥabashī and Ibn Sawdakīn. He, in fact, authored books dedicated to the two and we have commentaries by both on their master's work. They however were not the ones to take his teachings to a new generation. Ḥabashī predeceased Ibn 'Arabī, and while Ibn Sawdakīn settled in Aleppo while Ibn 'Arabī was in Damascus. If we were to designate one person as the central pivot in the formation of a "school of Ibn 'Arabī," this would undoubtedly be Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī.

Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī was born in 606/1210 and took the spiritual path under his father Majd al-Dīn, Ibn 'Arabī, and Awḥad al-Dīn al-Kirmānī. When Majd al-Dīn passed away, Ibn 'Arabī saw to raising Qūnawī and it is said that he married Majd al-Dīn's widow. In the Damascus phase of Ibn 'Arabī's life as he collated his works, he used this opportunity to transmit to the teenaged Qūnawī the corpus of his writings. Qūnawī records having read over 40 of Ibn 'Arabī's books under him, including the *Futūḥāt* and the *Fuṣūṣ*.

Qūnawī was pivotal in teaching Ibn 'Arabī's ideas to a new generation as well as in shaping a canon of the school. Based out of Konya but traveling to the Levant and Egypt, Qūnawī was the master of a number of the key figures that expounded Ibn 'Arabī's teachings. We can trace a direct line of master-disciple relationship from Qūnawī to Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300), to 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kāshānī (d. 730/1330), and finally Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350).

Further, each of these figures wrote commentaries on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ*. While Qūnawī did not compose a commentary of his own, he collected his own teachings in a text titled *al-Fukūk*. He also regularly gave lessons on the *Fuṣūṣ* and one of his attendees, Fakhr al-Dīn al-'Irāqī (d. 1289), composed verse summaries in Persian, compiled under the title *Lama'āt*. The earliest commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* comes from another of Qūnawī's disciples, 'Aḥf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 1291), an Algerian emigre to Damascus, though this seems to be a brief gloss. The most important and authoritative of the early commentaries on the *Fuṣūṣ* is by Jandī, while Kāshānī's commentary articulated the ideas underlying the *Fuṣūṣ* in a more rigorous philosophical language. Qayṣarī's commentary, coming after a number of distinguished commentaries, was able to provide the verification (*taḥqīq*) of problems brought up by his predecessors. Moreover, Qayṣarī's commentary is prefaced with a lengthy introduction that offers an exceptional summary of the philosophical underpinnings to the worldview of Ibn 'Arabī and this new school.

The other body of texts that was central to the canon of the Akbarī school were the poems of 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ, particularly his *Naẓm al-sulūk* (also referred to as *Tā'iyyat al-sulūk*) and his *Khamriyya*. Qūnawī taught the former text and his disciple Sa'īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 1300) wrote a Persian commentary based on Qūnawī's lectures. Farghānī translated his commentary to Arabic under the title, *Muntahā al-madārik*. Qayṣarī wrote a commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Khamriyya*.

We thus see a cluster of authors inter-related through master-disciple relationships, with Qūnawī as a central node. In the textual production of this set of scholars, Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ* and Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Tā'iyya* as well as *Khamriyya* were of paramount authority. In this textual production too, Qūnawī's voice is prominent.

Two figures related to Qūnawī through master-disciple relationships were influential in shaping Ottoman intellectual life. The first was the aforementioned Qayṣarī who was active in the time of the founding figures of the Ottoman Empire, Osman and Orhan Ghazi, and was appointed by the latter to serve as the first *muderris* of the *madrassa* established in Iznik. The second was Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ḥamza al-Fanārī, known generally as Molla Fanārī (d. 1431). Fanārī's father was a disciple of Qūnawī and Fanārī served as the first Shaykh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Murad II. His *Miṣbāḥ al-uns* is a commentary

on Qūnawī's *Miftāḥ al-ghayb*, a treatise expounding on the notion of *al-insān al-kāmil*. Fanārī was a proponent of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

The connection between Ibn 'Arabī and the Ottomans was further cemented through a text falsely attributed to Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Shajara al-Nu'māniyya fī al-dawla al-'Uthmāniyya*. This text "predicts" a number of events including the conquests of the early Ottomans. To further relate the work to Ibn 'Arabī, there is also a commentary attributed to Qūnawī. This too is also a false attribution. The *Shajara* has a line that reads, "When the *sīn* enters the *shīn*, there will appear the tomb of Muḥyī al-Dīn." The *sīn* in this case was understood to be Sultan Selim I and *shīn* is *bilād al-shām* or *Dimashq*. In 1516, when Selim conquered Damascus and the grave of Ibn 'Arabī was uncovered, he had a mausoleum and mosque built on the site, which stands to this day.

Though not affiliated in a master-disciple relationship with this school, one of the culminating voices of this tradition is Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī (d. 1492) of Herat, Afghanistan. Jāmī was a polymath that shaped Persianate Islamic scholarly culture in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. He was a Naqshbandī Sufi that was devoted to the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī. To this end, he wrote a commentary on Ibn 'Arabī's own summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*, titled *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ Sharḥ Naqsh al-Fuṣūṣ*. More importantly, he wrote an extensive commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* that proved to be one of the most well-received by later generations. The Ottoman Sultan Fatih Mehmed requested Jāmī to write a compendium on the conflicting positions between the philosophers, theologians, and Sufis. In response, Jāmī composed *al-Durra al-fākhira* juxtaposing the views of the *kalam* theologians (the Timurid-era scholars Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī and al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī), the philosophers (Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī) against those of the Sufis from the Akbarī school (Qūnawī, Qaysarī, and Ibn 'Arabī himself).

Writing independently of this network of authors was 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī (d. 767/1365–832/1428). Little is known about his early life, but he is said to be a descendant of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī. Jilī was active outside the central Ottoman territories in Zabīd, Yemen, and authored an important text that at once systematized and simplified the doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī titled *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma'rifat al-awākhir wa'l-awā'il*. Like Ibn 'Arabī, Jilī was a visionary mystic and recorded his numerous visions. He also used verse extensively, akin to other Akbarī authors. Jilī, though devoted to Ibn 'Arabī, was not a mere imitator but posited his own positions on problems, at times breaking from Ibn 'Arabī.

'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (1492–1565) was perhaps the most prominent popularizer and apologist for the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī in the circles of Sunni 'ulamā'. A Sufi of the Wafā'i branch of the Shādhilī order, Sha'rānī studied with the premiere 'ulamā' of his day. Reconciling certain views of Ibn 'Arabī's with that of Sunni orthodoxy was a difficult task. One strategy deployed by Sha'rānī was to argue that the passages in Ibn 'Arabī's texts that conflict with the apparent teachings of the *sharī'a* were in fact interpolations and thus corruptions of the shaykh's texts. Sha'rānī notes when he summarized the *Futūḥāt* and excised a number of problematic passages, he then compared his summary to a copy from the original manuscript in Ibn 'Arabī's own handwriting housed in Konya to find that the original manuscript lacked precisely those unorthodox passages. Sha'rānī's strategy is invoked by later apologists for Ibn 'Arabī's orthodoxy to account for the seeming conflict between his doctrine and the regnant orthodoxy.

Sha'rānī's way of popularizing Ibn 'Arabī was through producing digests culled from Ibn 'Arabī's writings. His largest work in re-stating Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine is *al-Yawāqūt wa'l-jawāhir fī bayān 'aqā'id al-akābir*. This work is a summary of Islamic theology following the problems addressed by *kalām* scholars. Sha'rānī first gives the positions of the theologians, followed by lengthy quotes taken from Ibn 'Arabī's *Futūḥāt* on the same topic, sometimes

confirming the position of the *kalām* theologians but often providing Ibn ‘Arabī’s verification (*taḥqīq*) of the problem. In a similar manner, Sha‘rānī composed *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar fī bayan ‘ulūm al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, which is also largely culled from the *Futūḥāt*. An aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s oeuvre that was often neglected by the more philosophically inclined Akbarī school is Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach to Islamic law. Sha‘rānī’s *al-Mizān al-kubrā* uniquely develops this dimension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought accounting for the differences among the four Sunni schools. *Al-Mizān al-kubrā* was one of Sha‘rānī’s most lasting contributions, being read in Ottoman lands well into the nineteenth century.

Another prominent Ottoman era Arab scholar worthy of note was the Damascene ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731). Nābulusī was a polymath, a specialist in hadith, Hanafi jurisprudence, Qur’ānic exegesis, and a devoted disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī. Like Sha‘rānī, he was an apologist for Ibn ‘Arabī, and also like Sha‘rānī, did not rely on the works of the early Akbarī tradition, particularly the philosophizing line initiated by Qūnawī. Unlike many Arab authors who tended to focus on the *Futūḥāt*, Nābulusī wrote a commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ*. The purported purpose of this was to make the work accessible to newer audiences. In an effort to ensure a particular reading, it can come off as overburdening in its gloss. Nābulusī also commented on numerous manuals that reflected later summaries of Akbarī teachings. A key area where Nābulusī defended Ibn ‘Arabī from *kalām* scholars was on the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Nābulusī’s *al-Wujūd al-ḥaqq wa’l-khiṭāb al-ṣidq* is a detailed response to a criticism of *waḥdat al-wujūd* written by one of Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī’s students, ‘Alā al-Dīn al-Bukhārī.

Perhaps the most significant voice of Akbarī thought in the nineteenth century was Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1807–1883). Between 1830 and 1847 he was involved in a war of resistance against the French assault on his native Algeria. After surrendering and imprisonment in France, he was allowed to settle in Damascus in 1855 where he remained for the rest of his years. The Emir lived at a time when print was spreading in the Muslim world. Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt* was published for the first time in 1858 in Būlāq in four large volumes. Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir commissioned two of his students to compare the print edition to the manuscripts in Konya, written by Ibn ‘Arabī. The Emir however was not merely a popularizer of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works through print, as he was an original expounder of the core of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine. His three-volume *Kitāb al-mawāqif fī al-taṣawwuf wa’l-wa’z wa’l-irshād* consists of expositions of verses from the Qur’ān and ḥadīths of the Prophet. His method however is to do so not through speculation (*naẓar*) but rather through inspiration (*ilhām*), perhaps somewhat closer to Ibn ‘Arabī’s spirit than some of the more philosophizing authors. Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir thus offers a unique exposition of key teachings of the Akbarī school. When Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir passed away, he was buried at Ibn ‘Arabī’s mausoleum, at the feet of his spiritual master.

Opposition to Ibn ‘Arabī

Opposition to Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings began in Mamlūk Egypt and has resurfaced in the ensuing centuries. The most formidable opponent and critic of Ibn ‘Arabī was Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the doctrinal elements of the philosophizing Sufism should be seen in light of his broader critique leveled at all schools of thought that gave precedence to rationality against revelation when the two were perceived as being in conflict. This critique extends to *kalām* theologians of all schools, Peripatetic philosophers, and philosophizing Sufis. Ibn Taymiyya was a younger contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabī’s heirs and was also intimately familiar with Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. In a letter to a Damascene

adherent of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings, he provides a brief account of his own personal encounters with Ibn 'Arabi's writings and his assessment of them.

I used to be one of those that had a good opinion of Ibn 'Arabi because of the benefit that I saw in his books, such as what he wrote in much of the *Futuḥāt* [...] and the like. We did not know his true intent because we had not studied the *Fuṣūṣ*. We would gather with our brethren in the path of God, searching for the truth, trying to follow it, and trying to unveil the correct way. But when the matter became clear to us, we knew what it was that we had to do.¹¹

In the modern Muslim world, Ibn Taymiyya's criticisms are voiced by the Wahhābī movement as well as Muslim modernists. Not all of Ibn 'Arabi's critics were inspired by Ibn Taymiyya. The concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* came under criticism by numerous *kalām* theologians, including a prominent figure such as Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī.

Ibn 'Arabi's fate in recent decades, with the rise of Islamic modernism, reform, and revivalism over the past century and a half, has largely been negative, particularly in the Arab world. Emblematic of this, in 1979, an Egyptian member of parliament got the national assembly to withdraw Ibn 'Arabi's most influential text, *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyya*, from the market. His books still remain banned in many Gulf countries, and he is deemed a non-believer by the main scholars of Wahhābī Islam. Yet, Ibn 'Arabi seems to have made a come-back in popular culture in recent years. In 2017 a fictional biography of Ibn 'Arabi titled *al-Mawt al-Ṣaghīr* by a Saudi author Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Alwān won the Abu Dhabi national book award. Additionally, an internationally popular television series from Turkey *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, telling a fictionalized account of the founding of the Ottoman Empire, includes Ibn 'Arabi as a recurring character, guiding the progenitor of the Ottomans against Crusaders and Mongols. Outside the Arab world, his works are studied at length, particularly in Iran, Turkey, South Asia, and in Europe and America, where there are professional societies dedicated to the study of Ibn 'Arabi's life and teachings.

Notes

- 1 For biographies of Ibn 'Arabi in English, see Stephen Hirtenstein's *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1989); Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); idem., *The Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002). For a study of the image of Ibn 'Arabi in the later tradition, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).
- 2 For this translation see, Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier*, 151.
- 3 For this hadith and the various narrations and wordings, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Kitāb al-faḍā'il*, *bāb dhikr kawnihī khātam al-nabiyyīn*.
- 4 Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier*, 154.
- 5 There are numerous exceptional studies of aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's teachings. In particular, see Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); idem., *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book, and the Law*, trans. David Streight (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); idem., *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).
- 6 See 'Abd al-Bāqī Miftāḥ, *Buḥūth Hawla Kutub Wa-Mafāhīm Al-Shaykh Al-Akbar Muḥyī Al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabi* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2011), 45–64.

- 7 On the Mu'tabirūn, see Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 8 See *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, ed. Osman Yahia (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma li 'l-Kitāb, 1972), 1: 219.
- 9 See Osman Yahia and Henry Corbin's introduction to Sayyid Haydar Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt min Kitāb Naṣṣ al-Nuṣūṣ: Fī Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam li-Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī* (Tehran: Inṣtītū Īrān va Farānsah-i Pizhūhishhā-yi 'Ilmī), 16–48.
- 10 See Mohammed Rustom, "Ibn 'Arabī's Letter to Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Rāzī: A Study and Translation," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25:2 (2014), 113–137.
- 11 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu'at al-rasā'il wa al-masā'il*, ed. Rashid Rida (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1922–1930), 1:179.

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