
Imamate and Love: The Discourse of the Divine in Islamic Mysticism

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In the Christian tradition, Charles Williams championed the idea of a “romantic theology,” where romantic love becomes a means of understanding and gaining knowledge of God. Dante was the main inspiration for this work, for whom the figure of Beatrice became a theophany and vision of God. The idea of a romantic theology is not new to the Islamic tradition, with thinkers such as Ibn ‘Arabī exploring the meaning of love in the context of an overall theology of Divine love. This article seeks to explore the way that some Islamic mystics (particularly the theosophists Ibn ‘Arabī and Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Aḥsā’ī) have grappled with this question, and how in the Shi’a context the theophanic function of beauty becomes a means of approach to the Hidden Imām.

THE WAY OF AFFIRMATION AND THE WAY OF REJECTION

THE ANGLICAN THEOLOGIAN CHARLES WILLIAMS (d. 1945) set himself the ambitious task of elucidating the bases of a “romantic theology,” a novel way of understanding human love and the sacrament of marriage. Though sharing similarities with certain schools of mysticism, Williams sought to distinguish his project of a romantic theology from previous theologies that attempted to chart a way toward mystic communion with God (Williams 1990: 37). Rather than seeking such experience through rigorous asceticism (as was often, though certainly not always, the way such mystical experience was sought in the Catholic and Anglican communities), Williams’s romantic

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theology endeavored to find the seeds of such an experience in the realm of ordinary human relationships. It should be noted that Williams was not *rejecting* the ascetic mysticism of Catholic saints such as St. John of the Cross and *opposing* his ideas of a romantic theology to that system. Rather, he was merely presenting an alternative experience of God, which locates God both “above” and “below,” in a way that transfigures ordinary human experience into a mystical communion with God. This path, he writes, is as equally necessary and legitimate as those world-renouncing ascetics who attempted to achieve union with God through the abandonment of marriage and the satisfaction of physical desire (Williams 1994: 10–11).

Williams devoted several of his works to this subject. Two of the most significant were his manuscript *Outlines of Romantic Theology* and his exploration of Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice*. Romantic theology was, certainly, not Williams’s only interest: he was a prolific author who wrote in many intellectual disciplines and media, spanning theology, literary criticism, poetry, and fiction. But one can see the seeds of his theory of romantic theology in some of his other works as well. He was a member of the famous Oxford literary circle known as the “Inklings,” whose luminaries included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Like these two well-known authors, Williams wrote a number of fantasy stories. But what differentiated Williams’s style of fantasy from many other writers was the role of the supernatural. Rather than focusing his stories on strictly “fantastic” tales of mythical worlds, Williams was much more concerned with the ways the supernatural could explode onto the scene of everyday living. When Williams turns to romantic theology, one can see how he finds human, romantic love to be a seminal example of such an “explosion” of the supernatural, where the lines between human and Divine become blurred.

The possibility for such a transfiguration of human relationships is intimately linked to the distinction Williams draws between what he calls the Way of Affirmation and the Way of Rejection, a taxonomy that lies at the heart of his study *The Figure of Beatrice* (1994: 8–10). This classification was an attempt broadly to interpret two ways that the God/world relationship has been understood in Christian theology. The former methodology is able to locate God within the realm of created beings in a way that one can experience God through His creation without identifying God with His creation in the manner of pantheism. Williams finds the best expression of this Way in the words of St. Athanasius: “Not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God” (quoted in Williams 1994: 9). The Way of Rejection takes the opposite tack; it is that which posits an incredible and insurmountable

gap between God and creation, which can lead to a kind of *contemptus mundi* (“world hatred”).

On these issues, the school of the great Andalusian mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (b. 1165/d. 1240) can be of incomparable assistance. The school of Ibn ‘Arabī (known as the Akbari or Akbarian school) has had nearly unparalleled influence over the development of Islamic mystical theology. His work was voluminous, covering perhaps hundreds of books, including the mammoth *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*. His school, which was later dubbed the *madhhāb waḥdat al-wujūd* (the school of the unity of existence), opens up the way for approaching the universe primarily as a Divine *discourse*, which then makes the question about mystical/Divine experience versus ordinary/profane experience far less important. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the communications of the Divine are not something that come purely through esoteric, ecstatic experience. As Abū al-‘Alā ‘Affīfī, the great commentator on Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikām* (the Bezels of Wisdom),¹ writes, “everything in creation is a Messenger [*rasūl*].” The letter-mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabī, so reminiscent of Kabbalah, is instructive in this regard. Ibn ‘Arabī goes to great lengths to create a new taxonomy of cosmic reality, with each level or component of the esoteric universe signified by certain letters of the Arabic alphabet. By choosing to depict the cosmological hierarchy as one of a series of letters, we are led to an idea whereby the *entirety of the universe* is structured as a language, parallel to Lacan’s famous maxim that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (161–193). Mysticism, then, does not consist in seeking out ecstatic experiences that are beyond the pale of everyday life. Rather, it is based upon a kind of listening, whereby the gnostic pays attention to the discourse that is all around him but, hitherto, he has been heedless of. It is a matter of finding God in His immanence to Creation, which means taking the Creation as nothing less than a Divine communication, a discourse between God and humans that demands to be heard.

One should understand that Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief in the “unity of existence” is not the same as a pantheism that makes a complete identity

¹ *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikām* (Bezels of Wisdom) is Ibn ‘Arabī’s most famous and commented upon work, alongside of his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (The Meccan Revelations). The latter text is a massive encyclopedia stretching over thousands of pages, while the *Fuṣūṣ* is far more concise and spans only a few hundred. The *Fuṣūṣ* is divided into a series of “bezels,” each bezel being the gnostic wisdom associated with a specific Prophet (the first chapter is the “wisdom of Adam,” the second is “the wisdom of Seth,” and so on until the Prophet Muḥammad). Most of the major themes of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work are contained in this work, albeit in a very concise and often abstruse form. It has spawned a vast literature of commentaries, the notable being that of Kashānī, Qaysari, and Affīfī.

between God and Creation. The relationship is much more fluid and, as Ian Almond correctly points out, “bewildering” to all of our rational faculties (516–517). The mystical realization of God’s immanence is *not* a type of “reintegration” into the all-encompassing monadic One of Neoplatonism. Rather, it is to *sense* the explosion of the supernatural into the realm of the natural, the type of bursting in that one can find in many of Williams’s works (such as his *War in Heaven*, where the Holy Grail is discovered to have been residing in a small English church). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, however, it is not so much that the Divine suddenly enters into the human realm, in the way of a historical Incarnation. Rather, the Divine is always-already present in creation, and creation is always-already present in the Divine. This is because the God/servant distinction is always, at its very essence, fundamentally chaotic (as will be discussed below), and the mystic only realizes that which has always been in front of his eyes. This is why the followers of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school always refer to the *realization of the unity of existence* as the spiritual state that separates the true mystic from the rest of humanity.

To speak of the cosmos as a Divine discourse, especially in the framework of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, also means avoiding the privileging of any given readings of that discourse. If everything in this universe is a *rasūl*—a Messenger bearing a message to the individual who experiences it—this does *not* assume that every message (*risālah*, the message of the *rasūl*) is the same, nor that it is experienced in the same way by different people. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the way in which the Divine epiphany (which is nothing other than a communicative discourse) becomes particularized for individual people is described by the saying of the great Sufi Ibn Junayd: “The water takes on the color of the cup” (Ibn ‘Arabī 1946: vol. 1: 32). When the water is understood here to refer to the Light of Divine self-disclosure, we are led to the important concept of “capacity” (*istiḍād*), whereby the Divine epiphany is received by the heart of any person according to that person’s particular receptive capacity (Ibn ‘Arabī 1946: vol. 1: 61 and vol. 2: 23) and will be “colored” by that person’s nature. According to this line of thought, people cannot help but understand God in accordance with their capacity. Everything that exists is a mirror for the Divine, but the Divine Effulgence is colored and shaped, we can even say distorted, by the imperfections and irregularities inside each particular mirror.

All of this is the Islamic “Way of Affirmation,” which stands in contrast to a long tradition that is similar (though not identical) to the Christian Way of Rejection analyzed by Williams. In Islamic terms, the Way of Rejection would fall under the classification of what is known as

tanzih, which literally means exaltation, but indicates a negative theology that casts God entirely beyond the world. The school of Ibn ‘Arabī, although acknowledging God’s Transcendence, nonetheless seeks to balance this with a doctrine of God’s immanence. With this, the universe becomes so many “words” of God becoming manifest, and it is this way that God makes Himself known. The textuality of this Divine discourse lies in the nature of the cosmic mirror of discourse, and the impossibility of reaching some kind of “absolute truth” is foreclosed. This is for a very simple reason: *There is no other way for the Godhead to manifest Himself, to partake in this discourse, except through these mirrors, which “corrupt” that discourse.* No one is able to “see” God except through this discourse, a discourse that constantly shifts under the weight and pressure of the signifiers that make that discourse possible, alongside of the interpretation that any given person gives (consciously or unconsciously) to that discourse.

Here, it is important to realize how the Divine discourse becomes corrupted when it reaches human beings—and the fundamental, essential cause underlying that distortion. It is not so much that the subject “reads” into the Divine discourse that which he wants to hear. It is rather the subject *qua* subject that causes this distortion. It is something implicit in the subject’s very subjectivity, in his existence as a being that is simultaneously a sign and manifestation of the Divine discourse (for everything in the universe, including the subject himself, is a “word” in that Divine discourse), and at the same time marks the entry of a fundamental negativity within the Divine being, as a not-God that assures him no other role except as servant (*‘abd*) to the Divine being. This dual situation, these “two natures” (a union that exists in a non-hypostatic fashion) that are united inside the servant, is made clear in Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of the universe as *Huwa/Lā Huwa*, “Him, not Him.” Charles Williams also makes ample use of a similar expression, borrowed from previous Christian theologians, in his study of Dante’s beloved Beatrice as an epiphanic form of the Divine: “This is Thou, this also is not Thou.”

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

In order to lay out this middle way between absolute negation and absolute affirmation, one must study the exact nature of the Divine discourse. For most Sufis, the question of *why* the universe was created is “answered” by the *ḥadīth* of the Hidden Treasure, where Allāh says that “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the creatures, so that I would be known through them.” Yet, unlike other Sufis, Ibn ‘Arabī is emphatic that the Divine Essence itself can never become

manifest. When Allāh created the universe, He sought to manifest all of Himself that could be made known. But owing to the infinity of the Divine being, there is always a leftover after this process of cosmic signification, that which can never be named and yet is the cause of the cosmos coming into being.

We find “preceding” (we must be very careful about reading too much temporality and sequence into these events, as in many ways they have always-already occurred) the creation of the Universe a moment of what Ibn ‘Arabī calls Divine *sadness*. This is what Henry Corbin describes as the sadness of the hidden God yearning to be known. Yet it is not just creation *in actu* that God longs toward; even more importantly is His longing toward every being’s *potential* or relative existence within the Divine Being. Before creation existed, it still existed as the beloved of God. How is it possible to love that which does not exist? This is because nothing in the cosmos was ever truly nonexistent. It is impossible to bring the absolutely nonexistent into being, for otherwise it would not be absolutely nonexistent but still have some kind of existence *in potentio*. Rather, everything that exists already existed “inside” of God (though we should also be careful about using words with spatial indications, because we are not speaking of inside or outside in anything approaching a physical sense) before they existed. Here we find Ibn ‘Arabī thoroughly rejecting any idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Everything comes from God and subsists through Him, and the unity of existence will allow no other understanding of the situation. To imply that there was a creation *ex nihilo* implies beings that have their origin in an Other, even if that Other is nothing but the *nihilo* from which they were born.

These pre-creation existents are what are known in Ibn ‘Arabī’s school as *al-‘ayān al-thābitah*, the “fixed entities.” But even though they already existed within God, they remained sealed inside the crypt of His Unknowability, His Hiddenness. The Divine Sadness is, ultimately then, the Sadness of these fixed entities, which are nothing other than Divine Names, yearning to be free and to burst into the world of manifest existence.

Part of the reason that these Divine Attributes remain hidden is the fact that there is no locus for their manifestation. A name such as the Creator (*al-khāliq*, one of the ninety-nine Names) cannot be said to exist so long as there is no creation. Until the act of creation is done, until this Name has gone into act, it remains hidden. The same can easily be seen to apply to Names like the Forgiver (if there is no sin, there can be no forgiveness) or the Destroyer (if nothing exists, there is nothing to destroy). The word for potential in Arabic (*bi’l-quwwah*), which literally means “something with the strength” or “something with the ability,” stands in opposition to the word for actuality (*bi’l-f‘il*), which literally means

“with act” or “with action.” It is only that action that brings these Names into manifest being, which brings them into existence as such.

The universe, then, is the discourse that seeks to appease this sadness. It creates a locus whereby the activity of the Divine may become real. The need for such a discourse is felt by all of the Divine Names, including the name Allāh itself. For God to be God, he must have being over which he is God. His sovereignty is not established without a kingdom. Just as a Creator (*khāliq*) requires creation (*khalq*), so a God (*ilāh*) requires a servant. Such a created being Ibn ‘Arabī calls *ma’lūh*, from the passive participle of the word *ilāh*, which means God. There is no adequate translation for this word in English—literally meaning “God-ed” (like “create-ed”)—but what is important to realize is that the only way that one term (God) can be established is by the existence of the other term, that every subject (*fā’il*) requires an object (*ma’fūl*) to be constituted as such. This is what Corbin refers to as a *unio sympathetica*, a “sympathetic union” whereby each term in the signifying chain guarantees and protects the existence of the other. This is found memorably in one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s poems: “By knowing Him, I give Him Being” (quoted in Corbin 1997: 124), but even better expressed in the words of the seventeenth century Christian poet and controversialist Angelus Silesius: “I know that without me, the life of God were lost. Were I destroyed, he must perforce give up the ghost” (quoted in Corbin 1997: 130).

The universe, then, is the creation of a symbolic order whereby signifiers such as “God” have meaning. Here we find the meaning of the universe being structured like a language, like the Lacanian unconscious. It is not merely that the universe is a discourse, a communicative act that is part of the Divine self-contemplation. Rather, it is that every signifier comes into being only because it is *not* another signifier. This is the differential semiotics at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis, whereby a signifier’s existence is always predicated on its negative relationship to another. The Lord is only the Lord because of His servants; they make Him Lord, they give Him *existence* as Lord, while He gives them existence as servants. This is the meaning of Angelus’s words: Creation heralds the beginning of a relationship between God and humanity that is based upon the symbolic order and the bounds of negativity therein.

If we are to view the universe as a Divine discourse, then it behooves the listener to adopt some sort of analytical framework by which to listen to that discourse, in order to understand what is being communicated. Religion becomes the means by which this Divine revelation becomes intelligible; but nonetheless the entire discourse will be “colored” by this religious framework. Ultimately, there seems to be no escape from this dilemma; it is part of the very essence of the Divine discourse (or any

other signifying discourse) that there is a certain “signal loss” in every communication, that the act of observation inevitably corrupts the observed to some degree or another, and that the signified is constantly slipping under the thumb of the signifier. This “semiotic violence,” then, becomes impossible to avoid, and this is the meaning of the famous dictum of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers that God is only manifested by things that veil Him.

The interdependence of God and creation is, ultimately, the “source” of the various contradictions between religions, and the fact that God’s communication to humanity is always colored by the individual imperfections of the individuals being communicated to. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the experience of the Divine within humanity is not the result of a sudden arrival of the Divine on the human scene, and it is here that the Muslim Ibn ‘Arabī parts ways with a Christian theologian like Charles Williams, for whom the *historical* event of the Incarnation was so important. Corbin, in the introduction to his *History of Islamic Philosophy* (1993: 2–4), has attempted to differentiate between traditional Christian understandings of the Crucifixion and the mystical theology of thinkers like Ibn ‘Arabī. For Incarnationists, God “comes” to humanity at a specific historical time. There is a rupture, similar to the sudden rupture of the supernatural into the natural that occurs in so many of Charles Williams’s fantasy and science fiction novels. But Islam, he argues, is “meta-historical,” and this intermixture between Divine and profane is always-already a part of our reality as created beings.

In this way Almond finds the theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī close to that of Derrida: Derrida’s deconstruction is not an attempt to introduce chaos into texts that are already static, which is what we would normally understand from the phrase “deconstructing a text.” The text is not an edifice that is then broken down to its elements; rather, Derridan deconstruction is an attempt to *reveal* (as a kind of phenomenology) the contradictions, confusions, and bewilderment that are always-already present in the text (Almond: 518). The text is always in a state of disarray, subject to the shifting patterns of language, and its appearance as an edifice is fundamentally a veil over its own confused reality. This state, however, is not limited to works of literature: Even God Himself is caught up in this confusion.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the bewilderment that a mystic may experience when realizing the unity of existence is not brought on by a sudden entry of God into human life, in the way that Kierkegaard describes the Incarnation as a fundamental “absurdity” that suddenly thrust itself on the conscience of humanity and demands faithful acceptance. Rather, this bewilderment is the result of a fundamental chaos in the very concept and idea of God. The Divine Essence may transcend this confusion, and

it is here the comparison between Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabī breaks down (Almond: 524), but God is not the same as the Divine Essence. God is the Divine Essence as related to man, whereas the Essence in itself is God removed from any relationship to humanity. This is God as the *Theos Agnostos*, the fundamentally unknowable deity. Indeed, the Divine Essence is not confused precisely because it is unknown and always unknowable. From the Lacanian standpoint, we have seen how the very concept of God already presupposes entry into a differential system (the semiotic system that gives the word “God” meaning) that always lacks “fixed points,” where semiotic chains are formed through *negation*, devoid of positive content. As such, it is only the process of knowing that creates the confusion, that distorts the Divine Essence by attempting to fit it to the signifier “God,” a signifier that is always opposed to “creation.”

Almond’s analysis of Derrida’s reading of the incident of Babel in the Hebrew Bible is telling in this regard. The story of Babel, where God thwarts the Shemite people’s attempt to build a tower to the heavens by scattering them into myriad different peoples with myriad different languages, is not merely a story of a jealous God demonstrating his power to an arrogant humanity. Rather, the Shemite project was doomed to fail because it was seeking to find that which cannot be found: a transcendent, monadic One. The Shemites’ attempt to reach the heavens was based upon a belief in the ultimate “simplicity of God” (Almond: 521); but what they found was nothing but confusion, nothing but negative *lack*. The collapse of their project was not so much thwarted by this Monadic One, but rather the Divine revealed to them the confusion that was inherent in all conceptualizations, theologies, and belief-systems ascribed to Him. Almond writes,

What is even more interesting than this contemporary allegorizing of biblical pride is the way Derrida sees God as a synonym for deconstruction . . . God is the arch-deconstructor of the story – it is He who confounds the sign system of the Shemites by fissuring it, fracturing it, and causing it to double and triple until the Shemites no longer know who they are or what it is they were planning to do. For all this humbling, abasing, and confounding, however, Derrida’s God is not simply an agent of deconstruction but also a God who deconstructs Himself . . . *When God delivers confusion and chaos upon the designs of the Shemites, He actually is inflicting Himself on them.* (521)

From here, we can now turn toward the concepts of prophecy, sainthood, and imamate in Islamic mysticism, doctrines that seek to understand the way in which God has “inflicted Himself” on humanity through history. In spite of the fact that Muslim theosophists have always

rejected the idea of the Incarnation and the hypostatic union, this does not mean that there is absolutely no sense of sudden “rupture” of God onto the human stage. God may always be immanent in Creation, and Creation may always be immanent in Him, but the majority of human beings are entirely unaware of this and are comfortable in the clarity of an unquestioned God/world dichotomy (Almond: 527-528). But in order to awaken people from this, God does create such “ruptures” on his own, through the form of sending *theophanic* (God-revealing) figures in the forms of Prophets and saints. These figures serve a dual purpose: their exoteric function of bringing a message from God but also their fundamentally theophanic function whereby they serve to manifest God in human form. Such figures do not mark an entry of God into history; they only serve to deconstruct, for their own sake, human beings’ comfortable belief in the God/world dichotomy. Ironically, one of the singularly most important theophanic figures for Ibn ‘Arabī, who perhaps most highlighted the interdependence of God and man, was Jesus himself.

THE FIGURE OF JESUS: BETWEEN DIVINITY AND HUMANITY

The special place of Jesus within Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought is instructive. Ibn ‘Arabī always considered himself to have a special relationship with Jesus. It has been said that every gnostic forms a particular attachment with a particular Prophet or saint, and it was the figure of Jesus that seems first to have “initiated” Ibn ‘Arabī into the mystical tradition. It was Jesus who first appeared to him and instructed him to cling to asceticism and remembrance of Allāh throughout his life, and so it was this figure who first placed him on the Path. In his *Fuṣūṣ* Ibn ‘Arabī devotes an extensive discussion to Jesus as the embodiment of prophecy, arguing that Jesus is the ultimate source of the esoteric *walāyah* (sainthood) that lies at the core of exoteric prophecy, giving it its energy and efficacy.

What makes the figure of Jesus so important is, perhaps more than anything else, the miraculous nature of his birth. All Muslims believe in the Immaculate Conception, though the Qur’an adamantly denies any notion that Jesus the Son of God, an idea that Muslims generally consider to be a logical absurdity. But the fact remains is that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and as such has a much closer relationship to God than any being who is born by the intermediary of a physical father. The absence of the father figure and its replacement by the Divine spirit elevates the status of Jesus and then begs the question: If Jesus was conceived directly by God’s Spirit, then in what way is Jesus *not* God?

We find that the answer that Ibn ‘Arabī and his school give is reminiscent of the dictum that Charles Williams finds so important: “This is Thou, this also is not Thou.” Al-Qaysirī, one of the most important commentators on Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*, takes up this discussion with regards to the *verse* of the Qur’an: “They have disbelieved when they say Jesus the son of Mary is God” (5:7). Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Qaysirī’s analysis of this verse hinges upon the phrase: “Jesus the *son of Mary* . . .” and initiates a discussion on the two natures of Christ, a discussion that was of paramount importance in early Christianity, giving impetus to the entire monophysite controversy and leading to the doctrine of hypostatic union.

The method of *tafsīr* (Qur’anic commentary) that Ibn ‘Arabī employs throughout his work is quite important here, and is worth a brief digression before returning to the question of Jesus. Ibn ‘Arabī has been called the “grammarian” of Islamic mysticism, owing to his constant attempt to focus on the absolute letter of revelation. From this standpoint, we can say that Ibn ‘Arabī is the ultimate literalist, but not in the way we would associate with the crude “traditionalism” of some Muslim jurists. Rather, Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of *tafsīr* hinges on the idea that the Qur’an, being written by God Himself, was written the way it was for a reason. God could have chosen to construct the text in any way, yet for some reason he chose to use the words and phrases that He has in this Qur’an. The main reason for this, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, is the way in which the Qur’anic text can *deconstruct itself*. Ibn ‘Arabī argues, explicitly, that any meaning that can be read into the text that is not grossly blasphemous or contradictory to the general spirit of the text is a *correct reading*. For this reason, we find him continually focusing on the exact words used in the Qur’an and in the *ḥadīth* literature. One of the supreme examples of this is his discussion of the Prophet Muḥammad in his *Fuṣūṣ*, where the bulk of the discussion focuses on a seemingly innocuous grammatical mistake in a narration of the Prophet. That mistake, that gap in the discourse, opens up the space for an entire discussion on gender relationships within Islam, and on the nature of sexual desire and human love. It is only because the text (in this case the *ḥadīth*) lends itself to that interpretation by the precise way in which it is written that Ibn ‘Arabī finds space for discussion and embarks on an attempt to unfold the manifold meanings hidden in this text. This methodology applies to the text as such, the revealed word, as well as the cosmos that is equally an act of Divine revelation and self-disclosure.

In regard to Jesus, what is important for Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Qaysirī is the fact that Allāh has used the phrase: “Jesus *the son of Mary*.” At first glance, one could easily dismiss this as a type of formalism that is common

to Arabs, the use of patronyms (*kunyah*) to refer to people, in the same way one would refer to Ali the son of Abū Ṭālib as a mark of respect, or the Prophet Muḥammad son of `Abdullāh. This is something common to the Semitic tradition, Hebrew as well as Arab. But one thing we immediately notice is that Allāh is not using a *patronym*, but rather a *matronym*, something that is usually not done. One would always refer to Imām Ḥusayn (the third Shi'ite Imām) as Ḥusayn the son of Ali (the First Imām), but one would never refer to him as the son of Fāṭimah (the Prophet's daughter), in spite of the immense reverence given to her in the Shi'ite tradition. In the case of Jesus, it is impossible to use the patronym as there is no *pater* as far as Islam is concerned, since it would be blasphemy to refer to God as the Father of Jesus. So why not abandon the tradition of using patronym instead of using a matriarchal substitute for the profoundly absent Name of the Father?

Al-Qaysirī does not analyze this question, but his *tafsīr* of the *verse* is instructive in giving an answer: The use of the phrase "Jesus the son of Mary" refers first and foremost to the *human* nature of Christ, what is known in Arabic as his *nasūt* (from the Arabic word for humanity, *nas*). The reason for this is that referring to Jesus as the physical offspring of Maryam posits him in his utmost humanity, as having been a child born and raised by a mother, as being brought into this world through the medium of a human form. This stands in contrast to his Divine nature, his *lahūt* (coming from the Arabic word for God, *ilāh*, which is the same root for the word Allāh). This *lahūt* stands above his human nature, beyond the physical reality of his birth, the world of spirit that existed before that birth and will continue to exist after his death (which has not occurred and will not occur until the Day of Judgment, according to Islam's Docetic understanding of the crucifixion) (Corbin 1983: 62–65). On the basis of this distinction, which is fully drawn out by Ibn 'Arabī's commentators, Ibn 'Arabī's analysis of the *verse* runs as follows: The statement that Jesus is God is *not* blasphemy. It is, in fact, correct. Al-Qaysirī writes explicitly that the statement that Jesus is God *is correct and true* insofar as Jesus is a specific epiphanic manifestation of the Divine Being (*al-ḥaqq*). And the statement that he is the son of Mary is true without any doubt. The act of disbelief, according to Ibn 'Arabī, *is the union of the two statements*, that is, that Jesus the son of Mary (meaning his *nasūt*) is God. It is the confusion of the human nature of Jesus (symbolized by referring to him as the son of Mary) and the Divine that is the source of the problem, not the idea that Jesus as a theophanic being is identical to God.

The conjunction of these two statements collapses the distinction between the Way of Rejection and the Way of Affirmation. Another word

in the *verse* is important here: The word “disbelieve” as in “they disbelieved.” As is well known, the word for disbelief in Arabic (*kufṛ*) also means to “cover” something up. For this reason legal penalties that require expiation (such as having to feed ten poor people when one breaks an Islamically recognized oath) are referred to as *kafārah*, meaning that they cover up the sin one has done. The act of *kufṛ* in this *verse* refers, fundamentally, to covering up the Divine (Almond: 534). The Christians, as far as Ibn ‘Arabī is concerned, have covered up God by reducing Him, literally confining Him, as al-Qaysirī writes, to the physical aspect of Jesus, physicality, which is nothing other than the not-God, the *Lā Huwa*. They have located God within the space created by the negation within the Divine that brings forth the created universe and affirms His Existence as a god (*ilāh*).

Whether or not this is a fair accusation against Christianity (it probably is not, because the Father always has his own independent existence on some level and the Incarnation is not total in that sense) is another issue. What is important here is to recognize the importance of the way that the Akbarian scholars understand the split in the subjectivity of Jesus between his *lahūt* and *nasūt*. The problem is not that Jesus is God; this is accepted on face value. The problem is rather that Jesus as a physical being is also a negation of God, because by bringing God out in a particular form (in the case of Jesus, a particularly high form), Jesus *qua* Jesus is a negation of God, that space in which the Manifest God may come into being.

It is this not-God, this negation that constitutes the “space” where the subject comes into being that constitutes the distortion in the Divine discourse. The nature of his role as a gap in the Divine discourse is that which constitutes his very being, and this is related to the fundamental nature of the Divine discourse. We find, then, the subject poised upon a precipice: The servant is the gap in the signifying structure; yet we have already seen how there is no other way for the Divine to initiate his discourse, to come into being, without the servant. The servant becomes a death-bearer from one perspective, and yet it is that being which gives “life” to the Manifest God.

The Shi’a theosophists have made similar analogies to God and His Creation, based upon the *ḥadīth* of the Hidden Treasure quoted above. The monolithic Oneness of the Divine Entity remains always hidden. When God desired or loved to be Manifest, this led Him to will the Creation of the Cosmos. In doing so, He makes Himself manifest through beings, but nonetheless, none of these beings ever capture the purity of the Divine Essence. The Divine Essence is absolutely One, it can never be touched or grasped by even the highest gnostics or Prophets. This is

because it can *never* become Manifest by definition, for Manifestation entails limits (*ḥūdud*) and differentiation, something possible in the physical cosmos but impossible in regard to the Divine Essence itself. This “station” (*maqām*) is known as the Station of Essence (*maqām adhdhāt*), the state of absolute undifferentiation and unity. It is that Thing that is lost in the discourse of Divine self-disclosure, that which the gnostics and Prophets hunger for but are always forbidden to achieve.

It is in this way that the Shi’ite Imams discuss the need for Prophets and Imāms. The Imāms are said to be the “Proofs of God” (*ḥujjaj Allāh*), the beings by which he is able to be known. In spite of the fact that these Imāms are “the overwhelming proof” (*al-ḥujjat al-bālighah*), nonetheless they are not God in Himself, without any aspect of non-Divinity intermingled. The error that the Shi’ite Imāms and the Akbarian school of mysticism find with Christianity is the (perhaps alleged) belief that God can be entirely known through the figure of Jesus, that there is a complete Incarnation by which it is proper to say that “Jesus is God.” The Imāms make God known but they, themselves, also function as veils. They “limit” the Divine Effulgence in a way that makes it known.

The doctrine of the “primordial cloud” is important to this discussion. There is a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet where he was asked “Where was your Lord before creation?” To which he responded: “In a cloud, with neither air above it or below it.” Ibn ‘Arabī examines this *ḥadīth* and finds the phrase “with neither air above it or below it” indicating something very different than a cloud in the sky. This cloud is the original, primordial Divine Manifestation, the “Merciful Breath” by which Allāh received the “sadness” of His potential modes of existence as a manifest being. This breath is referred to as a cloud, because it is nebulous and unformed. It is an epiphany, but not one that actually manifests anything. Some theosophists, such as Shaykh Aḥmad al-‘Aḥsā’ī or Khomeini, have identified this cloud with the Divine Will, which none can grasp. In order to make this cloud signify something, there must emerge a being within the cloud that makes it limited and defined; and through its delimited existence it becomes a locus of Divine Manifestation (*mazhar*). This original being, the first limited entity (*at-ta`yyun al-’awwal*) is the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqqīqat al-muḥammidiyah*), the soul of the Prophet Muḥammad or his “body of light,” his being as *logos*. For this reason the Prophet becomes the perfect and most supreme manifestation of the Divine.

At this point we must consider the figure of the Imām in Shi’ite mysticism. The science of letters used in Islamic mysticism (referred to above) and Kabbalah is also instructive here. The original cloud is referred to as the letter *alif*, the “A” sound, which consists of a vertical,

single straight line. All other letters are formed from this line, as it is bent or twisted in ways to make the shapes of the rest of the alphabet. The first limited being, the first individuation, is represented by the letter *bā*, consisting of a concave curved line with a dot underneath. These, then, are the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet: a vertical straight line and a horizontal concave line with a dot underneath. There is, however, an intermediary stage between the *alif* and the *bā*, which is the *bā muhammilah* (undotted *bā*) or the *alif mabsūt* (the “laid out” *alif*). The reality of the Prophet can be said to consist of this undotted *bā*. It is something now different from the primordial cloud, but an undotted *bā* does not indicate any meaning. The third and fourth letters, *tā* and *thā*, have a similar shape and are only distinguished from the *bā* by the number of dots. What makes this first individuation properly individuated, then, is the placing of this dot, and in this regard there is a famous *ḥadīth* of Imām ‘Alī: “I am the dot under the *bā*.” With the addition of the support and *wilayat* of Imam ‘Alī, the Muḥammad-reality or *logos* takes on its form, becomes properly distinguished from the cloud, and serves as the first manifestation of the Divine.

This “dottedness” with regards to the Imām indicates that the Imām’s function is to *differentiate* between the worshiper and the worshipped, between God and His Creation, in order that God may Manifest Himself. He allows God to Manifest Himself, for a god (*ilāh*) cannot be a god without a servant (*ma’lulh*, the one who is “lorded” over). It is this distinction and separation, made possible by the creation of the Prophet and Imām ‘Alī, that allows the world to exist and allows God to be manifest. Without the introduction of this “dot,” which in a very real sense corrupts the Divine epiphany, God would remain in the Station of Essence as an unknowable, Hidden Treasure. This accounts for the absolutely privileged place of knowing one’s Imām in Shi’ism, which becomes the center point of faith and its most important pillar. This is in line with the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet: “He who does not know the Imam of his time dies the death of ignorance.”

THE IMĀM: EPIPHANY OF THE EPIPHANY

This doctrine, however, begs the question about how one is to have knowledge of the Imām during the period of his Occultation. The doctrine of the “Hidden Imām” is perhaps the most famous idea of Twelver Shi’ism and that which has come to differentiate it from other Shi’ite sects. The main sectarian difference between Sunni Islam and Shi’ism is the Shi’a belief that, after the death of the Prophet, God continues to send theophanic, infallible figures. Shi’ism is founded on the belief that there

is always a “proof” (*ḥujjat*) of God on Earth, and this figure is the Imām. A *ḥadīth* of the sixth Imām Jaʿfar aṣ-Ṣādiq states, “If the Earth were to be free from the Imām, it would be destroyed” (Kulaynī: 179). There are twelve such figures after the Prophet, the first being his cousin ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib. The final Imām, Muḥammad Ibn Ḥasan al-Mahdī, went into a state of Occultation over a thousand years ago and continues to live in that state until he will return at the end of time.

The idea that there is always such a figure on Earth is also of crucial importance in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, in spite of his Sunni background. In his *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom* he writes,

In the prophets whom God has sent since the creation of humanity, and especially in the last and seal of them, Muḥammad (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him), we are given a clear voice that speaks guidance to our souls. And although prophethood has ended now until the end of time, in every age the world will contain a spiritual Pole [*qutb*]. His name and place may not be known to all, yet he is the guide of the time, the divine representative in whom God’s ordinances are manifest. All outer and inner, material and spiritual decisions in the governance of life come finally from him. Some he blesses with love and compassion and protection. Some he punishes. *He is both inside and outside of you.* When you meet him you will know him. If you do not know him, then he is not there. (16)

The Imām is not merely a political or pontifical successor to the Prophet. Corbin describes his role as being fundamentally *initiatic* (1994: 131–134). He guides those who are able to accept the bewilderment that occurs when the God/man relationship is deconstructed and brings them to higher levels and experiences of God. The task of the Prophet was to bring the exoteric revelation and establish the bases for the Sacred Law; but the Imām is tasked with the interpretation (*ta’wīl*) of this sacred text (Corbin 1993: 11–13), which in many ways is nothing but a deconstruction of that text.

Furthermore, the very substance of the Imām is theophanic. It is not merely his teachings that direct the believers forward but his very reality. Shi’ite theologians never understood the Imām in the limited way that the traditional doctors of law have, as being merely an explicator of dogma and laws. For this reason they have been continually challenged by Sufis and other groups (such as the Shaykhis) who believed that the Imām was more than meets the eye. Rather than being a mere physical being, he is also a being of Light, and is described in many *ḥadīths* as being the Light of God. Recognizing the Imām in his reality as a being of Light is of crucial importance to the mystic seeking closeness to God.

A *ḥadīth* quoted by Shaykhis and Ismailis is instructive in this regard. A companion of Imām ‘Alī narrates,

I was sitting once in the presence of the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, Peace be on him, when there entered Salmān and Jundub (Abū Dharr al-Ghaffārī), may God be satisfied with them. They greeted and sat down. Alī said, “You are welcome, you, who both are faithful and sincere, and who promised their God to remain so. Verily this is necessary for every faithful (*mu`min*), for no one will accomplish his faith until he recognizes me really in my Luminous Substance. If he only knows me in this way, his heart will be tested by God as to the strength of his faith, and he will be content; thus he will become one knowing and seeing. The one who fails is he who doubts and is obsessed by doubts.”

The Imām, then, represents a type of rupture, whereby the Light of God becomes manifest in a physical form. The Imām furthers this rupture through his own teachings, his own *ta`wīl*. Certainly this is not always the case. Sometimes this interpretation of the sacred texts is itself very exoteric in nature, such as those *ḥadīths* where the Imām explains how a certain verse of the Qur’an indicates a legal ruling. But many other *ḥadīths* actually seem to “play” with the Qur’anic text in a deconstructive way, often in a way that threatens orthodoxy. An example would be the *tafsīr* of the verse; “The Earth that day [the Day of Judgment] will be illuminated with the radiance of its Lord (*rabb*)” (39:69). In the early collection of *tafsīr*-related *ḥadīths*, the *tafsīr* of Qummī, the sixth Imām aṣ-Ṣādiq is reported as saying that the Lord of the Earth is not God, as would be expected by many “orthodox” believers, but the Imām himself. In another *ḥadīth*, the same Imām is asked about the vision of God by one of his most important companions, Abū Baṣīr. Abū Baṣīr states in the *ḥadīth*:

I said to Abū `Abdillāh [aṣ-Ṣādiq]: “Tell me about the vision of God the Exalted and Glorified. Will the believers see Him on the Day of Judgment?” The Imām said: “Yes, and they have already seen Him before the Day of Judgment.” I so asked: “When?” To which he said: “When Allāh said to them: ‘Am I not your Lord, and they said ‘Yes, Indeed!’”² He then paused for a while and said: “Indeed, the believers see him in the world before the Day of Judgment. *Do you not see Him right now?*” [i.e., right now while he is sitting with the Imām]. I said: “May I be your sacrifice! May I tell others about what you have said?” The Imām said: “No. If

² This refers to a verse of the Qur’an (7:172) where Allāh took all the souls of the children of Adam, before they were placed in bodies, and asked them to testify to the Lordship of God.

you tell this to people, the ignorant deniers will not understand it the way you would tell them.” (Aṣ-Ṣadūq: 118)

A number of Shi’ite *ḥadīths* where the Imām’s status is discussed and elaborated are distinctly unorthodox, if not anti-orthodox, and seemed to be written as a provocation. The infamous *Khuṭbat al-Bayyān* is one such *ḥadīth*. This *ḥadīth* is very important to the “Malang” community of Twelver Shi’as in the subcontinent, who are characterized by their extreme devotion and love towards the Imāms, even though this *ḥadīth* has generally been rejected as a forgery by the orthodox *‘ulamā* (scholars). It is a sermon of the First Imām, Imām ‘Alī, where he explains the exalted status that he has before Allāh. A selection of this *ḥadīth*, as recorded in the book *Nahj al-Asrār*, reads as follows:

I am the one who has a thousand books from the books of the Prophets. I am the one who speaks every language of the world. I am the Lord (*ṣāhib*) of Noah, and the one who rescued him. I am the Lord of Jonah, and the one who saved him. I am the companion of the Trumpet. I am the raiser of those who are in the graves. I am the Lord of the Day of Resurrection. I have raised the heavens by the permission and power of my Lord. I am the Forgiving, the Merciful (*raḥīm*), and indeed my punishment is most painful . . . I am the companion of the dominion and all that exists. I am the creator. I am the one who forms the beings in their wombs. I am the one who gives vision to the blind. I know what lies inside the minds, and I can tell you what you have eaten and what you have stored in your homes. I am the mosquito, by which Allāh casts his example. I am the one whom Allāh raised up, and the Creation was in darkness, and they were called to my obedience, but when I appeared they denied me. This, just as Allāh – May He be Exalted and Glorified – said: “And when there came to them what they already knew, they disbelieved in it.” I am the one who fashions meat upon the bones, and then causes it to grow according to its measure. I am the one who carries the Throne of Allāh, alongside of the Pure Ones from my children. I am the bearer of knowledge. I am the knower of the Qur’an’s interpretation, and all the books from before. I am the one made firm in knowledge. I am the face of Allāh in the heavens and Earth, just as Allāh the Exalted said: “Everything perishes, save for the face of Allāh.” I am the Lord of the Despots and the Tyrants, and the incinerator of both. I am the gate of Allāh, of which Allāh the Exalted said: “Indeed, those who denied our signs and held themselves proud, for them the doors of the heavens shall never be open.” (Riḍā: 119–128)

Almond discusses this type of “blasphemous” language and its role in deconstruction. He discusses how mystics such as Dionysius, the

(Pseudo-)Areopagite, (an important Christian mystic of the sixth century) argued that it was preferable to refer to God with seemingly absurd terms like “drunk” or “hungover,” because such terms better represent the bewildering and distant nature of God better than traditional terms like “the Almighty” or “the Wise” (525–526). Though the Imāms are not applying such terms and names to God, they are in a sense doing something more blasphemous from the Islamic standpoint: arrogating for *themselves* traditional terms like “the Almighty,” “the Wise,” and even “the Creator.” To use “blasphemous” terms to describe God may upset orthodox conceptions of God, but it does not deconstruct the dichotomy of God/man in a way that most Islamic mystics have sought. But for the Imām himself to describe himself as “the Creator” threatens that edifice in an unprecedented way.

In both his words and his very being the Imām threatens the orthodox distinction between God and humans. As such, the Imām is of nearly infinite importance in the spiritual development of the believer, and it is he who helps further the process of “theological deconstruction.” Pivotal in the development of a mystical “Imamology” was the figure of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā’ī, who sought to redress one of the most important issues facing Twelver Shi’ism: The issue of how one is to have contact with the Imām, who is the means of approach toward God at all times, when the Imām is in a state of prolonged Occultation. Some of Shaykh Aḥmad’s followers have inspired great controversy by opting for an understanding of the Occultation by which the Imām has been “ravished” (in the way of Enoch and Jesus) to the realm of archetypal images, the world named by Suhrawardī as Hurqalyā (Walbridge and Hossein: 160), which is situated on the plane of imagination (*‘ālam al-khayyāl*). These groups have generally been regarded as heterodox, and a kind of orthodoxy has been established: the believers form their relationship with the Hidden Imām by obeying the jurists (*fuqahā*), who indirectly “represent” the Imām by explicating (and, for some, enforcing) his law. The fact that an orthodoxy was established, however, does not mean that the official position proved satisfactory to Shi’as throughout history.

It was not until the coming of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā’ī in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that a recognized scholar of the traditional clerical mold began to question and offer a reformulation of this doctrine, based on philosophical and theological developments from the Isfahan School of Iran and the spread of Akbarian theosophy. Shaykh Aḥmad appears relatively late in the history of Shi’ite thought, and even though he was of Arab origin, we can see him as one of the last flowerings of the Persian intellectual renaissance that began during the Safavid period and was exemplified by theosophists

like Mullā Ṣadrā and Ḥaydar `Amūli. Even though Shaykh Aḥmad is clearly a part of the tradition started by Ibn `Arabī (Cole 2001: 85-87), one can view his work as an attempt to bring Shi'ism back to its roots, by reemphasizing the esoteric and cosmic function of the Imām. Juan Cole describes him as offering the “the ‘warm heart’ of Sufism while re-affirming a Shi’a nativism” (2001: 91), and this is an apt description. Unlike the Persian theosophist Ḥaydar `Amūli (b. 720/1320), who in his *Jāmi`u al-Asrār*, seemed to be driven by a need to legitimate Sunni Sufism in a Shi’a way (al-`Amūli: 224).

One of the main tasks Shaykh Aḥmad and his followers set for themselves was the attempt to find a “place” whereby a believer could have contact with the Imām, could experience the Imām, and receive the teachings and guidance that were the Imām’s task to spread. Shaykh Aḥmad advanced a reformulation of the idea of Imāmate as it had been accepted and popularized by Shi’a orthodoxy. The Imām was not merely a physical being, a person who may have received inspiration (*ilhām*) but was nonetheless chained to the same mortal coils as ourselves. Instead, the Imām was a being of light as well, with a supra-physical, luminary existence. His physical body was merely one aspect of him; alongside this, he is possessed of a body of light that transcends physicality and any kind of Occultation that occurs on the physical plane. In this reformulation Shaykh Aḥmad was only following a theme that is present throughout the Shi’a corpus of *ḥadīth*, which asserts that the Imāms were the first created beings, dwelling with bodies of light by which they praised God for millennia, the light from which all the rest of creation was drawn (Amir-Moezzi: 29–44). Here he found recourse to the concept of Imagination as found in Ibn `Arabī and elaborated by Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā. It was in this realm, given the name of “Hurqalyā” by some, that the Shaykhis believed that this encounter between the spiritually-seeking believer and the luminous reality of the Imām was to take place.

The previous discussion about the nature of the Divine epiphany should open a way to understand how the Shaykhis understood the “epiphany” of the Imām during the *ghaybah* and its relationship to the imaginal faculty: Just as the Divine epiphany takes on the color of its “cup,” so the epiphany of the Imām to an individual believer should always be something highly individualized and personal, taking place within the believer’s “eye” of mystical and imaginal perception. In spite of the hierarchical tendencies of the Shaykhi movement after Shaykh Aḥmad, Shaykh Aḥmad did not seem to be interested in creating yet another mystical *ṭarīqah* where the masses were subordinated to a single Shaykh who was due absolute obedience. Rather, he seemed to be

working toward the creation of a highly individualized conception of Imamate during the *ghaybah*, where each believer struggled for this extremely personal association with the Imām of his time, unmediated by any others. This pure, spiritualized community is what Corbin refers to when he writes: “The idea of the occultation of the Imām forbids all socialization of the spiritual, all materialization of the spiritual hierarchies and forms which would identify these with the constituted bodies of the external, visible history; this idea is only compatible with the structure of a spiritual sodality, a pure *ecclesia spiritualis*” (quoted in Arjomand: 163).

This idea of a personal relationship with the Imām is not new, when we understand that the “Imām” in this context does not refer to the mere physical personage but rather to the Muḥammad-*Logos* briefly discussed above, the Imām in his “Luminous Substance.” This Muḥammad-*Logos* is referred to by many names in the works of Muslim theologians: The First Light, the Pen, Light of the Prophet, the First Individuation, and so forth. But the term that is of most interest here is the one referred to in many *ḥadīths*: The Universal or First Intellect (*al-`aql al-kull* or *al-`aql al-awwal*). Though a number of *ḥadīths* state that the Prophet and the Imāms were the first to be created, a number of others state that the *`aql* was the first being. The theologians do not consider this to be a contradiction but have instead argued that this proves that the Universal Intellect and the Muḥammad-*Logos* are two terms for the same thing. This Universal Intellect seems to perform the same function as the Active Intellect of Muslim Aristotelians. It is the source of all knowledge, the means by which the Hidden Divine communicates to His Being. The true believer, it is stated in another *ḥadīth* in *āl-Kaḥfī*, is the one whose “*`aql* is complete,” and he is “on the level of the Prophets, Imāms, and saints” (Kulaynī: 23). This idea of *`aql* seems to be very similar to the Avicennan idea of the “Holy Intelligence” possessed by the Prophets, the perfect *`aql* that allows one to receive Divine Revelation.

The dream of obtaining some kind of unity with the Universal Intellect was the motive force in a great deal of Hellenic philosophy, especially in the Islamic world. Al-Farābī devotes some attention to it in his *The Virtuous City*. There he argues that spiritual and intellectual purification and the pursuit of philosophy as mystical *praxis* will allow the philosophical sage to receive revelation (Walzer: 245). But he does not go into great detail about how a contact with this celestial entity can be made, only remarking that this is the fruit of philosophy. The only thinkers that made a conscious endeavor in charting out a specific path toward this Universal Intellect were the *fedeli d'amour*, of who Dante was the most famous member.

Dante's "mysticism," if we may discuss such a thing, ultimately focused on the way that the Universal Intellect could be "discovered" through a physical, sensuous apparition. For the *fedeli d'amour*, the means of making contact with and obtaining the wisdom of the Universal Intellect was based on two pillars. The first was philosophy as understood in the Neoplatonic sense, and in this way the *fedeli* were no different from the Hellenized philosophers of the Islamic world like al-Farabi and even Ibn Sina. But the second revolved around the "theology of romantic love," charted out by Charles Williams: The Universal Intellect becomes "typified" in the form of a physical beloved, a real being in the sensual world (the *`ālam al-ḥissah* in Islamic terms), who is exalted by the heart and imagination of the lover to such an exalted point that they become the locus of the Universal Intellect's manifestation. We discussed above the words of St. Athanasius, quoted by Charles Williams: "Not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God." In light of the semiotic violence inherent in the Divine disclosure it may not be possible to speak of "taking the Manhood into God" in any complete sense. But what may be possible, in a way acceptable to Ibn 'Arabī or the Shi'ite theosophists, is the taking of the "humanhood" (the *nasūt*) up to the level of the highest Divine epiphany, which is the Universal Intellect, the Muḥammad-Logos, and the "luminous body" of the Imām.

It was precisely such an exaltation of the physical beloved that defines the *Divine Comedy*. The Beatrice of the *Divine Comedy*, especially the *Paradiso*, was an imaginal manifestation of the Universal Intellect. She acted as Dante's guide, bringing him through the realms of the Paradises and teaching him the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of what he saw there. This is precisely the function of the Imām in Shi'ite theosophy: disclosing the secrets of *ta'wīl*, the inner meanings of religion, whether we mean the Imam in the sense of the physical personage of the Imām or the "body of light," the Muḥammad-Logos, referred to in so many Shi'ite *ḥadīths*. The Imāmate is not merely a pontifical, magisterial office that teaches dogma; rather it is the means for obtaining an understanding of the esoteric teachings of Islam. Corbin writes in this regard: "Not even the Shi'ite Imāmate has the character of a dogmatic pontifical authority; it is the source, not of dogmatic definitions, but of the inspiration of the *ta'wīl* [interpretation, hermeneutics], and it is all the adepts, from degree to degree of the esoteric hierarchy, who form the 'Temple of light' of the Imāmate, which from degree to degree repeats the aspect of an initiatic companionship (that of Salmān the Persian with the Prophet)" (Corbin 1997: 83).

This is precisely the function that Beatrice filled for Dante. As a physical manifestation of the Universal Intellect, she became his "Imām" in a

very real sense. She was the Imām in the literal sense of the word, meaning “the one who comes before,” because she was the one who *leads* him on his journey, always standing in the forefront and teaching him as one who has already trodden the path. She is also the Imām in this specifically Shi’ite sense, as being the one who discloses the *ta’wīl* and who allows the believer to progress to higher stages of knowledge. It seems that it would not have been possible for Dante to have this communion with the Intelligence without the material intermediary of Beatrice. Ibn ‘Arabī writes that “There can be no witnessing (*shahādah*) without matter (*mādah*),” a reference to the fact that the Divine can never be known except through material manifestations (*mazhāhir*). Beatrice, thereby, became the “material support” by which Dante was able to witness the highest disclosure of the Divine, the Universal Intellect. From the standpoint of Shi’ite theosophy, this was *his* “personal relationship with the Imām,” which in spite of his Christianity, was still possible because of the luminous and celestial aspect of the Imām. The fact that the “Imām” in this case took the form of Beatrice was because of Dante’s own uniqueness as a person. Others in the entourage of the *fedeli d’amour*, such as Guido Cavalcanti, had their own unique beloved that was nonetheless a manifestation (or place of manifestation) for the same cosmic entity. The water takes on the color of the glass, whether it be the primal water of Divine epiphany, or the epiphany of the epiphany in the form of a mystical communion with the Imam.

Corbin argues that there is a long history to this “secret religion,” the religion of personal contact with the Universal Intellect that, for Shi’ism, is the heavenly aspect of the Imām. The epiphany of the epiphany takes on a unique, feminine form, combining both aspects of Divine Beauty (*jamāl*) and Divine Grandeur (*jalāl*). This “religion” spans denominational affiliations and has an internal unity and cohesion all its own:

The mystical Iranian ‘*Ushshaq* and the *Fedeli d’amore*, companions of Dante, profess a secret religion that, though free from any confessional denomination, is none the less common to them all. We must here confine ourselves to mentioning the delicate and accomplished studies that have shown how the Beatrice of the *Vita nuova* typifies the Active Intelligence or Wisdom-Sophia, and how the arguments that hold for Beatrice hold no less for all the “ladies” of the “Faithful in Love” [the *Fedeli d’amour*] who resemble her in every point – she, for example, who in Guido Cavalcanti takes the name of Giovanna, or in Dino Compagni appears as “l’amorosa Madonna Intelligenza, Che fa nell’alma la sua rezizenda, Che co la sua bielta m’ha’nnamorato.” (Corbin 1997: 267)

The mystical love-union, then, becomes an event taking place in the *‘ālam al-khayyāl*, the World of Imagination, or the *‘ālam al-mithāl*, the World of Archetypes. Dante was complying with the Shaykhi dictum to see one’s Imām in the Hurqalya, and the Heaven of the *Paradiso* was nothing other than this Hurqalyā. Dante’s *Mi‘rāj* was the result of his spiritual union with Beatrice, something that could occur in the World of Archetypes though it was denied to him in the physical world. Corbin writes,

Nothing could be clearer than the identity of this “amorosa Madonna Intelligenza who has her residence in the soul, and with whose celestial beauty the poet has fallen in love.” Here is perhaps one of the most beautiful chapters in the very long “history” of the Active Intelligence, which still remains to be written and which is certainly not a “history” in the accepted sense of the word, because it takes place entirely in the souls of poets and philosophers. The union that joins the possible intellect of the human soul with the Active Intelligence as *Dator formarum*, Angel of Knowledge or Wisdom-Sophia and experience as a love union. (Corbin 1997: 267)

Here, we see that the soul of the poet or philosopher is endowed with a special power: to exalt a physical beloved into the World of Archetypes, whereby it becomes capable of receiving epiphany or, more properly, an epiphany of the epiphany.

The figure of Beatrice within Dante’s writings was an imaginal epiphany of the Imām as “Luminous Substance,” which is nothing other than the Universal Intellect. The spiritual contact with the Imām is formed on what might be considered a very mundane level, a young man’s unrequited love for a girl. But this love has a fundamentally transformative aspect, turning the Beloved into something that she is not, something higher and more exalted, and yet still “her” in every sense. Beatrice was this luminous entity that Dante seemed almost to worship; and yet she still remained the same Florentine girl. Love causes a kind of transfiguration of the beloved, by which she becomes the vehicle for something infinitely higher than her mere physical reality. Ibn ‘Arabī writes in this regard:

If we love an existing being, we only love the manifestation of our [true] beloved which is within that sensible being from the world of dense matter. When we love that being, we “lighten” that being [i.e., make it into subtle matter], by raising it to the level of the imagination. There we clothe with a beauty that was above its beauty [as a physical being of dense matter], and we raise it to a plane where there is no possibility of

conflict with it nor separation from it. As such, one never ceases to be united with it . . . Because my beloved is in my imagination, then I will never cease being close to him. As such, my beloved is from me, in me, and with me. (1911: vol. 2, 337–338)

For all mystics, the real beloved is always God. But God can only be known in his manifestation, and his perfect manifestation for the Shi'a theosophists (of which the Shaykhis are the seminal example) is the figure of the Imām. The Imām becomes the actual beloved, then, because He is the perfect manifestation of the only God that can be loved, the manifest God who makes Himself (albeit incompletely) manifest in the form of the Imām. The creative power of love desires to make this Muḥammad-Logos, this Universal or Primordial Intellect, manifest in a form that may disclose its secrets. The Way of Affirmation finds the means by which the “manhood,” the *nasūt*, may be raised to this level, by which on an absolutely individual level, deep within the heart of the poet or the beloved, one discovers this unity with the Imām, is illuminated by his light, without the medium of *fuqahā* who are (in the eyes of the mystics at least) blind to such teachings.

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