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Chapter 7

The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue: Sufi Perspectives on the Universality of the Quranic Message

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> Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve.
>
> Quran 2:62

This paper is focused upon the Quran as a source of inspiration for interfaith dialogue. The Quran is indeed unique among the revealed scriptures of the world in the explicit manner in which it refers not only to dialogue between adherents of different faith-communities, but also to the divine ordainment of religious diversity, and, in consequence, to the spiritual validity of these diverse religious paths, which are presented in the Quranic discourse as so many outwardly divergent facets of a single, universal revelation by the unique and indivisible Absolute.

It would be a relatively straightforward task to let the Quran speak for itself, by citing one after the other such verses as that used in our epigraph, verses which relate to these universal themes; the result would be, we believe, a compelling argument in favor of religious dialogue, based on the metaphysical premise that the different revealed religions are truly and effectively paths to salvation. But such a presentation, however immediately intelligible it might be to some, would leave out of account the diverse ways in which the verses in question are, and have been, interpreted.

What follows, therefore, is a presentation of these key verses from a particular point of view, that adopted by those most steeped in the spiritual and mystical tradition of Islam, Sufism. For Sufi expositions of the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of the Quranic revelation can be of inestimable value to all those

engaged in religious dialogue, and to those, in particular, who see the different religions not so much as mutually exclusive and inevitably antagonistic systems of dogmatic belief, but rather as so many "paths to the heart", as the title of the present volume of essays puts it.

The most eloquent and compelling contemporary expression of such a view of the religions of the world is to be found in the corpus of Frithjof Schuon (d.1998).[1] In asserting the validity of Schuon's principle of the "trancendent unity of religions", from the point of view of the Islamic tradition as a whole, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "Islam and the Encounter of Religions" is an important point of reference.[2] After describing the encounter between Islam and other religions on different planes—historical, legal, theological, philosophical, and scientific—Nasr writes that it is on the level of Sufi esoterism that

> the most profound encounter with other traditions has been made, and where one can find the indispensable ground for the understanding in depth of other religions today. The Sufi is one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to Unity, and from the particular to the Universal. He leaves the many for the One, and through this very process is granted the vision of the One in the many. For him all forms become transparent, including religious forms, thus revealing to him their unique origin.[3]

This unique origin is described as the "Centre where all the radii meet, the summit which all roads reach. Only such a vision of the Centre," Nasr continues, "can provide a meaningful dialogue between religions, showing both their inner unity and formal diversity."[4]

The present paper takes this affirmation as its point of departure. Specifically, in the first part of the paper, the aim is to show the ways in which key Sufi themes of gnosis or *ma'rifah* arise organically out of meditation and reflection upon particular Quranic verses,

1. See especially his seminal work, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London, 1953). T. S. Eliot wrote of this book that "I have met with no more impressive work on the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religion" (quoted by Huston Smith in his Introduction to the revised edition of the book [Wheaton, IL, 1993]).
2. Published in his work, *Sufi Essays* (London, 1972), pp. 123-151.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

and to allude briefly to some of the implications of these themes for interfaith dialogue or simply dialogue as such. In the second part of the paper, the aim is to show how a spiritual appreciation of the essence of Islam, based on Sufi exegesis of particularly direct Quranic verses, opens up a path leading to the heart of religion as such, and how such a conception, in turn, helps to situate particular religious traditions within a spiritual universe defined by "quintessential Islam"—that is, Islam understood as universal submission to God, rather than only as a particular religious denomination. In the process, we hope to stress the importance of those Quranic verses which deal with the universality of the religious phenomenon, to show that it is in the hands of the Sufi commentators that the deeper meanings and implications of these important verses are brought to light, and to relate the principles derived from this encounter between Sufi spirituality and Quranic universality to themes germane to dialogue.

As regards spiritual exegesis of specific verses, we shall be drawing from a small number of eminent representatives of the Sufi tradition, such as Ibn Arabi, Ghazzali, and Rumi, but our principal source of esoteric commentary is that written by Abd al-Razzaq Kashani (d.730/1329), a distinguished representative of the school of Ibn Arabi. This commentary has played a role of great importance in the tradition of esoteric commentary in Islam, its renown having been amplified in recent times as a result of its erroneous attribution to Ibn Arabi.[5] Its value lies principally in the fact that it presents a complete exegesis, chapter by chapter, of the Quran, and it does so from an uncompromisingly esoteric perspective. It thus leads us, according to Pierre Lory, "to the very root of the Sufi endeavour: the encounter with the holy word, and the spiritual force proper to it, not only on the level of meaning, but in the most intimate dimension of the meditating soul."[6]

5. The commentary was published under the name of Ibn Arabi, with the title *Tafsîr al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, in Cairo (1866), and in Cawnpore (1883); and under his name, with the title *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân al-Karîm*, in Beirut (1968). We are using the Cairo 1283/1866 edition.
6. P. Lory, *Les Commentaires ésoteriques du Coran d'après 'Abd ar-Razzâq al-Qâshânî* (Paris, 1980), p. 7. It is also noteworthy that Kashani was a "Shi'i Sufi", and that his work thus constitutes, as Abdurrahman Habil writes, "one of the several points where the Shi'ite and Sufi commentary traditions meet each other". See his very useful essay, "Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran", in *Islamic Spirituality*, Vol. I: *Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr (London, 1987). See also

The Metaphysics of Oneness and Dialogue with the Other

What is meant by the phrase "the metaphysics of oneness" is the metaphysical interpretation given by the Sufis to the fundamental message of the Quran, the principle of *tawhîd*, expressed in the creedal formula: *Lâ ilâha illâ'Llâh* —no god but God. Whereas theologically the statement is a relatively straightforward affirmation of the uniqueness of the Divinity, and the negation of other "gods", metaphysically the formula is read as an affirmation of the true nature of being: no reality but the one Reality. Kashani comments as follows on one of the many verses affirming the central principle of *tawhîd*, namely, 20:8: "Allâh, there is no god but Him": "His unique essence does not become multiple, and the reality of His identity derives therefrom, and does not become manifold; so He is He in endless eternity as He was in beginningless eternity. There is no He but Him, and no existent apart from Him."[7] We have here not only an affirmation of the oneness of God to the exclusion of other gods, but also, and more fundamentally, the affirmation of a unique reality, which is exclusive of all otherness, or rather in relation to which all otherness is unreal.

The shift from "theological" *tawhîd* to "ontological" *tawhîd* is one of the hallmarks of another great representative of the school of Ibn Arabi, Sayyid Haydar Amoli (d. 787/1385), in whose works one observes a remarkable synthesis between Shi'ite gnosis and Sufi metaphysics. He refers to the "folk of the exterior" (*ahl al-zâhir*) who pronounce the formula *Lâ ilâha illâ'Llâh* in the sense conveyed by the following Quranic verse, an exclamation by the polytheists of the strangeness of the idea of affirming one deity: "Does he make the gods one God? This is a strange thing" (38:5). This monotheistic affirmation is, for Amoli, the essence of the *tawhîd* professed by the folk of the exterior, and is called "theological" *tawhîd* (*at-tawhîd al-ulûhiyy*). In contrast, the "folk of the interior" (*ahl al-bâtin*) negate the multiplicity of existences, and affirm the sole reality of Divine being; their formula is: "There is nothing in existence apart from God (*laysa fi'l-wujûd siwa'Llâh*)", and they cite the verse "Everything

the excellent work by Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, *The Book of Certainty* (Cambridge, 1992), which offers a concise and profound exposition of Sufi gnosis based principally on Kashani's commentary on certain Quranic verses.

7. Kashani, *Tafsîr*, Vol. II, p. 17.

is perishing save His Face" (28:88) in support. This, Amoli maintains, is "ontological" *tawhîd* (*at-tawhîd al-wujûdiyy*).[8]

Despite appearing to be the concern only of mystics with an otherworldly and introspective orientation, such metaphysical perspectives on the central Quranic message of *tawhîd* are in fact highly pertinent to the theme of dialogue. In particular, the implications of *tawhîd* with respect to notions of "self" and "other" are potentially of considerable value in helping to overcome one of the key obstacles to authentic and fruitful dialogue in today's multi-religious world. This obstacle consists in a notion of "identity" or "selfhood" that has become opaque, congealed, or reified. When the self is regarded as the absolute criterion for engaging with the other, there arises a suffocating notion of identity which feeds directly into chauvinism, bigotry, and fanaticism—qualities that are expressed by the Arabic word *ta'assub*. In its root meaning, this word graphically conveys the self-indulgence that constitutes the life-blood of all forms of fanaticism; the verb *ta'assaba* primarily signifies binding a cloth around one's head.[9] One becomes literally self-enwrapped, each fold of the cloth compounding the initial preoccupation with one's own congealed frame of identity; one becomes imprisoned within a mental "fabric" woven by one's own prejudices, and as the head swells, the mind narrows.

If the "I" be identified in a quasi-absolute manner with the ego, the family, the nation, or even the religion to which one belongs, then the "other"—at whatever level—will likewise be given a quasi-absolute character. It is precisely such exclusivist notions of "self" and "other" that contribute to the dynamics of suspicion and fear, fanaticism, and conflict. The metaphysics, or science, of oneness, on the other hand, does not so much abolish as attenuate, not equalize but situate, all limited conceptions of identity. It serves to relativize every conceivable degree of identity in the face of the Absolute; in other words, it ensures that no determinate, formal conception of the self is absolutized, or "worshipped", however unconsciously, as an "idol". The metaphysics of integral *tawhîd* can

8. Sayyed Haydar Amoli, *Jâmi' al-asrâr wa manba' al-anwâr*, ed. H. Corbin, O. Yahia (Tehran and Paris, 1969), p. 72.
9. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol.2, p. 2058. Needless to say, in the Islamic tradition, the turban is also, and pre-eminently, endowed with a positive value, indicating nobility, dignity, and grace, as attested by numerous sayings of the Prophet.

be regarded as the most complete and effective antidote to fanaticism insofar as it undermines this idolatry of selfhood, a type of idolatry tersely summed up in the Quranic question: "Hast thou seen him who maketh his desire his god?" (25:43; almost identical at 45:23).

In the Quran, God says to Moses at the theophany of the burning bush, *Innî ana'Llâh*—"Truly I, I am God" (20:12). The following extremely important comment is made on this by Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), Shi'ite Imam, regarded also in the Sufi tradition as one of the "poles" (*aqtâb*) or supreme authorities of the early generations. This comment comes in a *tafsîr* that was to have a profound influence both on the unfolding of the genre of esoteric exegesis, and on the articulation and diffusion of Sufi metaphysical doctrines:

> It is not proper for anyone but God to speak of Himself by using these words *innî anâ*. I [that is, Moses, according to al-Sâdiq's commentary] was seized by a stupor and annihilation (*fanâ'*) took place. I said then: "You! You are He who is and who will be eternally, and Moses has no place with You nor the audacity to speak, unless You let him subsist by your subsistence".[10]

This expresses a theme of fundamental importance in Sufi metaphysics, or in that dimension of the Sufi tradition that pertains directly to gnosis, *ma'rifah*. The primary focus of *ma'rifah* is God conceived of as *al-Haqq*, the True or the Real,[11] in the face of which the individual "I", on its own account, is reduced to naught. Human subjectivity is strictly speaking nothing when confronted by the divine "I". Another important early Sufi, al-Kharraz, defines *ma'rifah* in relation to this principle of the one-and-only "I-ness" of God: "Only God has the right to say 'I'. For whoever says 'I' will not reach the level of gnosis."[12]

10. Quoted in C.W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany, 1985), p. 10.
11. As regards the increasing use by Sufis of the name *al-Haqq* for God, which is of profound significance for the shift from "theological" to "ontological" oneness, Massignon argues, in his essay on the lexicography of Islamic mysticism, that "it was from the *tafsîr* of Jafar and the mystic circles of Kufah that the term *al-Haqq* spread, through Dhul-Nun al-Misri and others, to become the classic name for God in *tasawwuf*" (cited in John Taylor, "Jafar al-Sadiq: Forebear of the Sufis", *Islamic Culture* [Vol. XL, No. 2, 1966], p. 110).
12. Cited in A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina, 1975), p. 55. Also Abu Nasr al-Sarraj makes the statement that none can say "I" but God, because "I-ness" (*al-anniyya*) pertains only to God. See the chapter on

It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this perspective in both the speculative metaphysics and the spiritual realization proper to Sufism. If the Quranic presentation of the principle of *tawhîd* predominantly stresses the objective truth of the message, Sufi spirituality finds its apotheosis in the realization of the subjective concomitant of this message, this subjective element being, paradoxically, the very extinction of individual subjectivity, expressed by the term *fanâ'*.[13] One might almost say that the truth of *tawhîd* is realized in direct proportion to the realization of *fanâ'*, or to the realization of the realities that flow from the attainment of this state;[14] on the other hand, to the extent that one falls short of the realization of one's nothingness, one cannot escape the "sin" of idolatry (*shirk*): the setting up of "another" as a "partner" or "associate" of the one-and-only Reality, the "other" being one's own self.

The truth which *tawhîd* declares is thus, from this perspective, radically different from the truth of dogmatic theology, of proposi-

tawhîd in his *Kitâb al-Luma'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (E. J. Gibb Memorial Series XXII, London, 1963), p. 32 (of the Arabic text).

13. It ought to be said that in fact the ultimate "apotheosis" of Sufism is not *fanâ'*, but *baqâ'*, or subsistence, which follows the state of extinction, as is indicated in the sentence quoted above from al-Sadiq's commentary. The "return" to the world of phenomena, and to the individual condition, after having realized one's nothingness in the state of *fanâ'*, is deemed a "higher" or more complete attainment than the state of absorption, extinction, or annihilation. Ibn Arabi distinguishes between those "sent back" (*mardûdûn*) and those "absorbed" or effaced (*mustahlikûn*); the former are deemed "more perfect" and are in turn sub-divided into those who return only to themselves, and those who return with the mandate to guide others to the Truth, these latter being the highest of all. See his *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*—this being a translation of his treatise entitled *Risâlat al-anwâr fimâ yumnah sâhib al-khalwa min al-asrâr*, which is literally a "treatise on the lights in the secrets granted to the one who enters the spiritual retreat". Trans. R. T. Harris (New York, 1981), p. 51. See also our forthcoming publication, *Paths to Transcendence: Spiritual Realization according to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (State University of New York Press), where the theme of the "existential return" is discussed in comparative context.

14. Ghazzali mentions various gnostic sciences (*ma'ârif*, pl. of *ma'rifah*) that are revealed only in the state of *fanâ'*, the reason for which is given as follows: the operations of the individual faculties act as obstacles to this mode of inspired disclosure, being tied to the sensible world which is "a world of error and illusion". See No. 56 of his treatise *al-Arba'în*, quoted in F. Jabre, *La Notion de la Ma'rifa chez Ghazali* (Paris, 1958), p. 124. He also speaks of the ultimate degree of *ma'rifah*, the revelation of the sole reality of God, which comes about only through the state of *fanâ'*. See *ibid.*, p. 65.

tional logic, or of empirical fact: this truth is the intelligible face of an infinite Reality, a Reality which cannot be exhaustively defined or confined by any words, a Reality before which the individuality as such is extinguished.[15] Thus the greatest of all sins is identified by the Sufis not in moral but ontological terms: it is the sin of one's own separative existence. Commenting on the words of the Quran which describe the qualities of the believers, those who avoid the worst of sins (42:37), Kashani writes, "Those sins are constituted by their existence (*wujûdâtihim*), and this is the most despicable of the qualities of their souls, which manifest through actions in the station of effacement."[16] In relation to the plea for forgiveness at 2:286, Kashani comments, "Forgive us the sin of our very existence, for truly it is the gravest of the grave sins (*akbar al-kabâ'ir*)." He then offers the following couplet, referring to a statement by the famous woman saint of Basra, Rabiah:

> When I said I have not sinned, she said by way of response, "Thine own existence is a sin to which none can be compared."[17]

The relationship between the "truth" of *tawhîd* and the soul of the individual is thus elevated beyond the spheres of morality, theology, and all formal thought as such. The soul does not "acquire" some cognitive content that is called "knowledge of divine unity"; rather, its very manifestation as soul precludes or contradicts the full, mystical realization of that unity. Ibn Arabi quotes Junayd: "When He is there, thou art not, and if thou art there, He is not."[18]

15. The Arabic root *ha'-qâf-qâf* represents very clearly this relationship between truth and reality: *haqq* means both "true" and "real" as well as "right", "due", "worth", *etc.*, with the emphasis on true; while *haqîqah* means both "reality" and "truth", with the emphasis on reality.
16. Kashani, *Tafsîr*, Vol. II, p. 213.
17. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 100. For a discussion of this theme in the context of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujûd*, see the chapter "Oneness of Being" (pp. 121-130) in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1971). The statement attributed to Rabi'ah is found on p. 125, n.2. See also the discussion of Kashani's treatment of evil by Pierre Lory in Chapter 8, "La Nature du Mal" (pp. 88-97) of his *Les Commentaires ésoteriques*. He cites the reference to Rabi'ah at p. 90, but translates the words *mâ adhnabtu* as a question, *quelle faute ai-je commise*? ("what sin have I committed?") instead of as an affirmation, "I have not sinned". Both are possible readings, but the context favors the latter, to which Rabi'ah's words are a fitting riposte: you have indeed sinned, inasmuch as your very existence is a sin.
18. *The* Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: *A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi*, trans. R. Nicholson (London, 1978), p. 90.

The exoteric notion of a conceptual truth which, *qua* notion, is appropriated by the individual is here inverted: according to Sufi gnosis, it is the reality alluded to by conceptual truth that assimilates the individual to it.[19] On the one hand, there is the effacement of the individual before a truth whose fulgurating reality infinitely transcends all conceptually posited notions, principles, and dogmas; and on the other, there is the entrenchment of the individuality by the appropriation of a truth whose very conceptual form can become a veil over the reality it is supposed to reveal, and which is its *raison d'être*. In relation to the words of the verse describing the hypocrites as those who are wandering blind in their rebellion (2:15), Kashani refers to one of the characteristic properties of hypocrisy as being "the acquisition of *gnoses* (*ma'ârif*) and sciences (*'ulûm*) and realities (*haqâ'iq*) and words of wisdom (*hikam*) and Divine laws (*sharâ'i'*), only in order to adorn the breast with them, so that the soul might be embellished thereby".[20] All knowledge and wisdom, even if Divine in origin, can be so many veils if they contribute not to the effacement but to the glorification of the individual soul.

We have here the definition of hidden, as opposed to overt, *shirk*, polytheism, or "associationism": this is the *shirk* that, even while affirming theological *tawhîd*, violates ontological *tawhîd*. Overt, evident, or legalistically defined *shirk* means simply associating other gods with God, attributing "partners" to Him in Divinity; while hidden, subtle, and spiritually defined *shirk* means implicitly attributing to God a "partner" in being, namely, oneself. The only remedy for this subtle form of polytheism is *fanâ'*. It is *fanâ'*, ultimately, which enables one to see through the artificial walls—individual and collective—that surround the ego, and which allows one to perceive in all its plenitude the truth that there is nothing real but God. It is not difficult to appreciate what the implications of this principle are in relation to the requirements for effective dialogue with the "other"; in the light of these absolute values, it becomes dif-

19. It is difficult to refrain from mentioning here the words of a Christian mystic whom most Sufis would have no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing as an *'ârif bi'Llâh*, a "knower of God", namely, Meister Eckhart. He said in one his sermons: "The bodily food we take is changed into us, but the spiritual food we receive changes us into itself" (*Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O'C. Walshe [Dorset, 1979], Vol. I, p. 50).

20. Kashani, *Tafsîr*, Vol. I, 17.

ficult to shut oneself up within the blindingly evident relativity of one's ego, this diminution of egocentricity being essential for really engaging with, and opening oneself up to, the "other", defined both in terms of the human and the divine.

It might however be objected here that such sublime metaphysical ideals and the spiritual states they call forth can be the concern only of a small number of mystics, and highly accomplished ones at that. Can ordinary people concerned with dialogue and coexistence in the modern world really benefit from such perspectives? We would readily answer in the affirmative. For not only do the principles in question—even on the discursive plane—help dissolve the fixations on selfhood that give rise to pride and arrogance, on the individual and collective levels, but also, more directly, the key Quranic verses from which these principles and perspectives flow can bring about, in the heart of the receptive reader, a penetrating sense of the ephemerality of all things, including, crucially, the ego and its manifold extensions.

Two of the most important of these verses are the following:

> Everything is perishing except His Face [or Essence] (28:88).
>
> Everything that is thereon is passing away; and there subsisteth but the Face of thy Lord, possessor of Glory and Bounty (55:26-27).

It should be noticed here that the words indicating the ephemeral nature of all things—*hâlik*, perishing", and *fân*, "passing away" or "evanescing"—are both in the present tense: it is not that things will come to naught or perish at some later point in time; they are in fact, here and now, "extinguishing" before our very eyes. In the treatise entitled *Kitâb al-fanâ' fi'l-mushâhadah* ("The Book of Extinction in Contemplation") Ibn Arabi writes that the elimination of "that which never was" is tantamount to realization of "that which never ceased to be".[21] That which will not be is already "not", in a certain sense, and one grasps this not only in the ineffable moments of mystical experience, but also in the very measure that one understands

21. This pinnacle of contemplation, which is predicated on extinction, is discussed in relation to the prophetic definition of *ihsân*, or spiritual excellence: "that you should worship God as if you could see Him, and if you see Him not, He sees you". By effecting a stop in the phrase "if you see Him not" (*in lam takun: tarâhu*), the phrase is changed into: "if you are not, see Him". See pp. 48-49 of the French translation of M.Valson, *Le Livre de l'Extinction dans la Contemplation* (Paris, 1984).

the following principle: Reality is not subject to finality, cancellation, extinction, non-being. That which is absolutely real is That which is eternal: it is the Face of thy Lord that, alone, subsisteth. Conversely, all that which is impermanent is, by that very fact, unreal in the final analysis.

Reflection on the verses above, then, can heighten the sense of the relativity of all things—and, pre-eminently, of the ego, with all its pretensions and extensions—in the face of the one, sole, exclusive Reality. Instead of allowing an egocentric conception of selfhood to be superimposed onto religion and even onto God—both of which are then "appropriated" by the ego[22]—such a perspective helps to engender the opposite tendency: to see the ego itself *sub specie aeternitatis*. What results from this perspective on the ego is a more concrete apprehension of its essential limitations: the contours that delimit and define the ego are more vividly perceived against an infinite background. Thus, what is in question here is not so much a vaguely mystical notion of universal illusion, but a concrete, realistic and effective sense of spiritual proportions. The existential limitations and the psychological pretensions of the ego are cut down to size, and a consciously theocentric focus replaces the all too often unconsciously egocentric one: nothing is absolute but the Absolute. Herein lies the first major lesson given by Sufi gnosis to those engaged in dialogue, a negative one, that is, the negation of egocentricity as a source of pride, exclusivity, and fanaticism.

As for the second lesson, this is the positivity which flows from the complementary aspect of gnosis. For the verses quoted above not only assert the exclusive reality of God; they also contain a subtle allusion to the inclusive reality of God. The Face of God, which alone subsists, is not only the transcendent, Divine Essence, in relation to which all things are nothing; it is also the immanent presence which pervades and encompasses all things, constituting in fact their true being. Before focusing on the verse "Everything

22. This is one meaning of Ibn Arabi's daring phrase "God created in beliefs" (*al-haqq al-makhlûq fi'l-i'tiqâdât*); see his *Fusûs al-hikam* (Cairo, 1306 AH), p. 225; and p. 224 of the English translation, *Bezels of Wisdom*, by R. Austin (New York, 1980). What is in question here are conceptions of God that are pre-determined by the contours of an inherited confessional faith; as such they are more indicative of the believer's own mind than of the Reality of God. See the chapter entitled "Transcending the Gods of Belief" in W. C. Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, 1989), pp. 335-356.

perisheth except His Face", and in particular on the important and illuminating interpretation of it given by Ghazzali, one should take careful note of the following verses, which refer to this complementary, inclusive dimension of the Divine reality.

> And unto God belong the East and the West; and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God (2:115).
>
> He is with you, wherever you are (57:4).
>
> We are nearer to him [man] than the neck artery (50:16).
>
> God cometh in between a man and his own heart (8:24).
>
> Is He not encompassing all things? (41:54).
>
> He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward (57:3).

Each of these verses contains the seeds of the most profound spiritual doctrines;[23] and each has given rise to the most fecund meditation upon that most mysterious of all realities, the immanence of the Absolute in all that exists—the inalienable presence of the transcendent, one-and-only Reality within the entire sphere of relativity, of all that which is, from another point of view "other than God". Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shi'ite Imam and one of the primary sources of what later crystallized as Sufism, sums up the mystery in these terms: God is "with every thing, but not through association; and other than every thing, but not through separation".[24] Nothing that exists can be altogether separate from the all-encompassing reality of God; and yet this reality has no common measure with anything that exists. His Oneness both includes and excludes all things; hence the affirmation of God's immanence within the world—His

23. See the article "The Qur'ân as the Foundation of Islamic Spirituality", by S. H. Nasr in *Islamic Spirituality*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-10. Frithjof Schuon cites the following relevant verses: "The Hereafter is better for thee than this lower world" (94:4); "The life of this world is but sport and play" (29:64); "In your wives and your children ye have an enemy" (44:14); "Say: Allah! Then leave them to their vain talk" (6:91); "Whoso feareth the station of his Lord and restraineth his soul from desire" (79:40). Then he adds, "When the Quran speaks thus, there emerges for the Moslem a whole ascetic and mystical doctrine, as penetrating and complete as any other form of spirituality worthy of the name" (*Understanding Islam* [Bloomington, 1994], p. 60).

24. *Ma'a kulli shay' lâ bi muqârana; ghayr kulli shay' lâ bi muzâyala.* This sentence is found in the first sermon of the *Nahj al-Balâgha*. See the English translation of the sermon in *Peak of Eloquence*, by Sayed Ali Reza (New York, 1996), pp. 91-97.

being "with every thing"—does not imply any diminution of His transcendence; and conversely, the affirmation of God's transcendence above the world—His being "other than every thing"—does not imply His absence from the world.

Returning to the last of the verses cited in the group above, "He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward", the Sufi shaykh Mawlay al-Arabi al-Darqawi relates the following incident, which we can take as an indirect commentary on the verse. He writes that he was "in a state of remembrance" when he heard a voice recite the words of the verse. "I remained silent, and the voice repeated it a second time, and then a third, whereupon I said: 'As to the First, I understand, and as to the Last, I understand, and as to the Inwardly Hidden,[25] I understand; but as to the Outwardly Manifest, I see nothing but created things.' Then the voice said: 'If there were any outwardly manifest other than Himself, I should have told thee.' In that moment I realized the whole hierarchy of Absolute Being."[26]

The voice declaring that there is nothing outwardly manifest in the world of "created things" other than the being of God can be seen here as providing a commentary on the meaning of God as *az-Zâhir*, "the Outward", or "the Evident". Likewise, the following remarkable affirmations by Ibn Ata'illah al-Iskandari, an earlier Sufi master in the same *tarîqah* as Mulay al-Arabi, the Shadhiliyya, can also be read as an exegesis on the meaning of God's name, *az-Zâhir*:

> The Cosmos (*al-kawn*) is all darkness. It is illumined only by the manifestation of God (*zuhûr al-Haqq*) in it. He who sees the Cosmos and does not contemplate Him in it or by it or before it or after it is in need of light and is veiled from the sun of gnosis by the clouds of created things (*al-âthâr*). That which shows you the existence of His Omnipotence is that He veiled you from Himself by what has no existence alongside of Him.[27]

If, in one respect, God veils Himself from His creatures by Himself, in another, more fundamental respect, He reveals Himself to Himself through His creatures. The central idea here is that of the manifestation (*zuhûr*, *tajallî*) of Divine reality in, through, and as the

25. This is the translation of *al-Bâtin* in the text in which this report is translated by Lings; likewise, *az-Zâhir* is rendered as "the Outwardly Manifest".
26. Cited in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi* (London, 1971), p. 131.
27. Ibn Ata'illâh's *Sufi Aphorisms* (*Kitâb al-Hikam*), trans. V. Danner (Leiden, 1973), p. 25.

forms of created things, the cosmos in its entirety. Every phenomenon in creation thus constitutes a locus of manifestation, a *mazhar* for the *zuhûr* or *tajallî* of the Real, the means by which the Real discloses itself to itself through an apparent "other". Herein, one might venture to say, lies the ultimate metaphysical archetype of all dialogue. What we have here is a kind of "dialogue" or communication between different aspects of the Absolute, a dialogue mediated through relativity.

The idea of the self-disclosure of the Absolute to itself by means of the relativity of "the other" lies at the very heart of Ibn Arabi's metaphysics.[28] The whole doctrine of this disclosure of God to Himself is summed up in the opening lines of Ibn Arabi's most commented text, *Fusûs al-hikam*. The chapter entitled "The Ringstone of the Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam" (*Fass hikmat ilâhiyya fî kalimat âdamiyya*) begins:

> The Real willed, glorified be He, in virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities (*a'yân*)—if you so wish you can say: to see His Identity (*'ayn*)—in a comprehensive being that comprises the entire affair due to its having taken on existence. His Mystery is manifest to Himself through it. The vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which will serve as a mirror for it.[29]

Man alone reflects back to the Absolute all, and not just some, of the Divine qualities; it is for this reason that man is the "valid interlocutor", the receptacle and the mirror of the Divine qualities, the "other" to whom and through whom these qualities are revealed. The function, then, of an apparent "other", at the level of Divine self-disclosure of itself to itself, is to make possible a particular mode of self-knowledge. One recalls here the holy utterance, or *hadîth qudsî*,[30] so fundamental to Sufi spirituality: "I was a hidden

28. "The term *self-disclosure* (*tajallî*)—often translated as 'theophany'—plays such a central role in Ibn al-Arabi's teachings that, before he was known as the great spokesman for *wahdat al-wujûd*, he had been called one of the Companions of Self-Disclosure (*ashâb al-tajallî*)" (W. C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* [Albany, 1998], p. 52).
29. This is cited from a new translation of the *Fusûs al-Hikam* by Caner Dagli, which is due to be published by Kazi Press, Chicago, in 2001, and which is the most accurate and reliable commented translation of this major text in the English language.
30. That is, a saying in which God speaks in the first person, on the tongue of the Prophet, but which is not part of the Quran.

treasure, and I loved to be known (*fa ahbabtu an u'raf*), so I created the world." If the creation of the world springs from a Divine love for a distinct mode of self-knowledge, the Quran indicates that the differentiation, within mankind, in respect of gender, tribe, and race, likewise serves an essentially cognitive function:

> O mankind, truly We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Truly the most noble of you, in the sight of God, is the most Godfearing (49:13).

Distinction and difference are here affirmed as Divinely willed,[31] and as means by which knowledge is attained. One should note that the word used in the phrase "that ye may know one another" is *ta'ârafû*; and the word for being "known" in the *hadîth* of the "hidden treasure" is *u'raf*—both words being derived from the same root, *'arafa*. There is thus a clear connection with *ma'rifah*, spiritual knowledge or gnosis, the essence of which is expressed in the famous *hadîth*, "Whoso knows himself knows his Lord" (*man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*). Thus, knowledge of self, knowledge of the other, and knowledge of God are all interwoven, and should be seen as complementary and mutually reinforcing, each element having a role to play in the plenary attainment of *ma'rifah*.

The verse cited above is often given as a proof-text for upholding the necessity of dialogue, establishing the principle of peaceful coexistence, and indicating the divine ordainment of human diversity. Now while it does indeed support such principles, the import of the verse is deepened, its message is made the more compelling, and its scope more far-reaching insofar as it is consciously related to the metaphysical principle of self-knowledge through self-disclosure. Thus, dialogue here-below—a dialogue rooted in the sincere desire for greater knowledge and understanding both of "the other" and of oneself—can be seen as a reflection of, and participation in, the very process by which God knows Himself in distinctive, differentiated mode; that is, not in respect of His unique, eternal essence, but in respect of the manifestation of the "treasure" comprised or "hidden" within that essence, yielding the perpetually renewed theophanies of Himself

31. Cf. "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colors. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know" (30:22).

to Himself through an apparent "other", the "seeing of Himself as it were in a mirror".

Another Quranic verse that can be given as a support for this perspective on the cognitive function of creation is the following:

> I only created the jinn and mankind in order that they might worship Me (51:56).

In his *Kitâb al-Luma'*, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 378/988) reports the comment on this verse given by Ibn Abbas: the word "worship" here means "knowledge" (*ma'rifah*), so that the phrase *illâ li-ya'budûni* (except that they might worship Me) becomes *illâ li-ya'rifûni* (except that they might know Me).[32] This interpretation is given also by several other prominent Sufi authorities, as well as some exoteric scholars.[33] The very purpose of the creation of man thus comes to be equated with that knowledge of God which constitutes the most profound form of worship. But it is not just man that, in coming to know God, participates in the Divine dialogue, that is, the Divine self-disclosure of itself to itself; in fact, there is nothing in creation that does not obey the ontological imperative of "making known" the Divine treasure, even if it is the prerogative of man alone to "know" the Divine treasure, which he does in two ways: through correctly reading all the signs of God or the manifestations of the "hidden treasure"; and through knowing the essence of his own soul:

> We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own souls, so that it become clear to them that He is the Real (41:53).

As regards the objective signs on the horizons, the Quran refers repeatedly to the universal law of "making known" the hidden treasure, doing so in reference to a broadly conceived notion of praise and glorification:

> All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth God; and He is the Mighty, the Wise (57:1).

32. *Kitâb al-Luma'*, p. 40 (of the Arabic text). Ed. R. A. Nicholson, E. J. Gibb Memorial Series XXII (London, 1963).
33. See for example Hujwiri's (d. 456/1063) *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, one of the most definitive of the classic manuals of early Sufism, trans. R. A. Nicholson (Lahore, 1992), p. 267; and Qushayri (d. 465/1074) in his famous *Risâla*, trans. B. R. von Schlegell as *Principles of Sufism* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 316. As regards exoteric scholars, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, for example, cites the *hadîth* of the "hidden treasure", as well as the interpretation *illâ li-ya'rifûni*, at the end of his commentary on 51:56. See *Tafsîr al-kabîr* (Beirut, 2001), vol. 10, p. 194.

> The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise, but ye understand not their praise (17:44).
>
> Hast thou not seen that God, He it is Whom all who are in the heavens and the earth praise; and the birds in flight: each verily knoweth its prayer and its form of glorification (24:41).
>
> He is God, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise (59:24).[34]

Thus we see that in the Quranic perspective, every single thing, by dint of its very existence, "praises" and "glorifies" its Creator: its existence constitutes its praise. Every created thing bears witness to, and thus "praises", its Creator; the existence of every existent "glorifies" the bestower of existence. But, more fundamentally, the existence of every existing thing is not its own; this existence "belongs" exclusively to that reality for which it serves as a locus of theophany (*mazhar*); there is no "sharing", "partnership", or "association" in being—no ontological *shirk*, in other words. Thus we return to the metaphysics of oneness: nothing is real but God. Each thing in existence has two incommensurable dimensions: in and of itself a pure nothingness; but in respect of that which is manifested to it, through it, by means of it—it is real. This is the import of the interpretation given by Ghazzali to the verse cited above, "Everything is perishing except His Face" (28:88). It is worth dwelling on the commentary he provides upon this verse; for it contains, arguably, some of the most radically esoteric ideas of his entire corpus, and also sums up many of the themes expressed thus far.

The commentary comes in his treatise entitled *Mishkât al-anwâr* ("The Niche of Lights"), which takes as its point of departure the famous "light verse":

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. [The lamp is] kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guideth to His light whom He will. And God striketh similitudes for mankind. And God knoweth all things (24:35)

34. This theme is expressed in several other verses. See for example, 13:13; 59:1; 61:1; 62:1; 64:1, *et passim*.

Ghazzali's commentary on this verse identifies the one, true light of God as the one, true Being: darkness is nonexistence. The following statement on the nature of existence forms the backdrop for the commentary on 28:88, which is our focus here:

> Existence can be classified into the existence that a thing possesses in itself, and that which it possesses from another. When a thing has existence from another, its existence is borrowed and has no support in itself. When the thing is viewed in itself, and with respect to itself, it is pure non-existence. It only exists inasmuch as it is ascribed to another. This is not a true existence. . . . Hence the Real Existent is God, just as the Real Light is He.[35]

Then comes the section entitled *Haqîqat al-haqâ'iq* ("The Reality of realities"), which describes the ascent of the gnostics, the knowers of God, "from the lowlands of metaphor to the highlands of Reality". They are given a direct vision of the truth

> that there is none in existence save God, and that everything is perishing except His Face. [It is] not that each thing is perishing at one time or at other times, but that it is perishing from eternity without beginning to eternity without end. It can only be so conceived since, when the essence of anything other than He is considered in respect of its own essence, it is sheer nonexistence. But when it is viewed in respect of the "face" to which existence flows forth from the First, the Real, then it is seen as existing not in itself but through the face turned to[36] its giver of existence. Hence the only existent is the Face of God. Each thing has two faces: a face toward itself, and a face toward its Lord. Viewed in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent; but viewed in terms of the Face of God, it exists. Hence nothing exists but God and His Face.[37]

Ghazzali then makes an important distinction within the category of these gnostics who "see nothing in existence save the One, the Real". One group is said to arrive at this vision "*irfânan 'ilmiyyan*, that is, as a mode of cognitive knowledge; and another group pos-

35. Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Provo, Utah, 1998), p. 16.
36. We are following Hermann Landolt's translation of *yalî* as "turned to" rather than Buchman's "adjacent to". See Landolt, "Ghazali and 'Religionswissenschaft': Some Notes on the *Mishkât al-Anwâr* for Professor Charles J. Adams", *Études Asiatiques*, XLV, No. 1, 1991, p. 60. Kashani refers to two faces of the heart: the *sadr* (the breast) as the "face of the heart which is turned to (*yalî*) the soul, just as the *fu'âd* is the face of the heart which is turned to the spirit" (*Tafsîr*, Vol. I, p. 17).
37. *The Niche of Lights*, pp. 16-17.

sess this vision *dhawqan*, that is, as a mystical state of "tasting".[38] The essential vision is the same, but the depth of assimilation, the mystical attunement to the reality perceived, differs. This distinction helps to underscore the epistemological value of affirming principles of a metaphysical and mystical order, even if the plenary realization of those principles eludes the rational faculty. Reflection and meditation on the principles alluded to can bring about at least some degree of cognitive apprehension of the ultimate realities in question; realities that remain ineffable inasmuch as they are predicated on the extinction of the individuality, and thus on the transcendence of all modes of cognition proper to the individual subject as such. Ghazzali continues with a description of those who experience this transcendent extinction. Plurality disappears for them, as they are plunged in "sheer singularity" (*al-fardâniyyat al-mahda*):

> They become intoxicated with such an intoxication that the ruling authority of their rational faculty is overthrown. Hence one of them says, "I am the Real!" (*ana'l-Haqq*), another, "Glory be to me, how great is my station!"[39]. . . When this state gets the upper hand, it is called "extinction" in relation to the one who possesses it. Or rather, it is called "extinction from extinction", since the possessor of the state is extinct from himself and from his own extinction. For he is conscious neither of himself in that state, nor of his own unconsciousness of himself. If he were conscious of his own unconsciousness, then he would [still] be conscious of himself. In relation to the one immersed in it, this state is called "unification" (*ittihâd*) according to the language of metaphor, or is called "declaring God's unity" (*tawhîd*) according to the language of reality.[40]

We return to the relationship between *fanâ'* and *tawhîd*, between extinction and, not only "declaring God's unity", which is but one aspect of *tawhîd*, but, more essentially, the "making one", according to the literal meaning of the verbal noun *tawhîd*. One might also translate *tawhîd* as "the realization of oneness", the "making real" of the actual reality of oneness, through the elimination of all multiplicity.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
39. See Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, for a good discussion of these *shathiyyât*, or theopathic utterances, by Hallaj and Bayazid al-Bastami, respectively.
40. *The Niche of Lights*, pp. 17-18.

Earlier, the divinely willed plurality within the human race was referred to: it is God who divided mankind up into nations and tribes, "so that ye may know one another". Is there not a contradiction, it might be asked, between the extinction of phenomenal multiplicity presupposed by the deepest level of *tawhîd*, and the affirmation of human plurality called forth by the will of God? One way of transforming this apparent contradiction into an expression of spiritual profundity is by returning to the notion of the "face" within each thing that constitutes the real being of that thing. Those Sufis who are extinguished to their own particular "face"—extinguished from their own non-existence—come alive to the Divine face that constitutes their true reality, the immanence of God's presence within them, and also within all that exists: "Wherever ye turn there is the Face of God." Now it is precisely that Divine aspect—in all things, and in all other nations and tribes—that comes into focus when this level of *tawhîd* is grasped aright. One does not have to experience the grace of mystical annihilation to comprehend this principle; as Ghazzali put it, one can arrive at this principle not only *dhawqan*, by way of "taste", or mystical experience, but also *'irfânan 'ilmiyyan*, as a mode of cognitive knowledge. If the mystical realization of this principle bestows a "taste" of *tawhîd*, we might say, following on from Ghazzali, that an intellectual assimilation of the principle bestows a "perfume" of *tawhîd*. As Ibn Arabi puts it, the gnostics cannot explain their spiritual states (*ahwâl*) to other men; they can only indicate them symbolically to those who have begun to experience the like.[41] A conceptual grasp of these deeper aspects of *tawhîd* might be said to constitute just such a beginning. If the ultimate, mystical degree of *tawhîd* is realized only through extinction, the lower, conceptual degrees imply at least that "beginning" or prefiguration of mystical extinction, which consists in self-effacement, in humility. Now an intellectual assimilation of this vision of unity, together with a moral attunement to the humility that it demands, is certainly sufficient to dissolve the egocentric knots that constitute the stuff of *ta'assub*, of all forms of fanaticism.

41. We have slightly modified this sentence, which Nicholson translates in *The* Tarjumán al-Ashwáq, p. 68. The sentence is part of Ibn Arabi's commentary on one of the poems.

Elsewhere, Ghazzali gives this telling description of *ta'assub*. He writes that it "usually comes together with man's disregard of his neighbor, and of his opinions, and the taking root in his heart of certain ideas which become so much a part of him that he fails to distinguish between right and wrong".[42] What results, on the contrary, from an apprehension of the deeper implications of *tawhîd* is a heightened, spiritual discernment: that is, not just a moral judgment between right and wrong, but also a presentiment both of one's own nothingness before the Divine reality, and also of the innate holiness, the Divine "face", within the neighbor. The transcendent, Divine reality before which one is extinguished is known to be mysteriously present within the "other". One observes here the spiritual underpinning of that crucial relationship, so often stressed in Sufi ethics, between humility and generosity, between self-effacement and self-giving; the first being a kind of *fanâ'* in moral mode, and the second being a moral application of *tawhîd*. Respect for one's neighbor is thus deepened in the very measure that one is aware of the Divine Presence, which is at once within and beyond oneself, and within and beyond the neighbor. Herein, one might say, resides one of the spiritual foundations of *adab*, or "courtesy", understanding by this word the profound respect, if not reverence, for the "other" that constitutes the true substance of all outward, socially conditioned forms of etiquette, good manners, and propriety towards the neighbor. One sees that it is not so much "religious pluralism" as "metaphysical unity" that establishes a deep-rooted and far-reaching tolerance, one which is not only formulated as a rule, to be obeyed or broken as one will, but which is organically related to an awareness of the Divine Presence in all things, an apprehension of the inner holiness of all that exists.

Islam: Quintessential and Universal Submission

In this second part of the paper we would like to begin by stressing one aspect of the meaning of the word "Islam", its literal meaning, that of submission, and to show how, from a Sufi perspective on the Quran, this meaning is tied to a conception of the essence of reli-

42. Quoted by H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in Ghazzali* (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 197-198.

gion, or to "religion as such",[43] which takes precedence over such and such a religion.

According to one of the most highly regarded translators of the Quran, Muhammad Asad, the word "Islam" would have been understood by the hearers of the word at the time of the revelation of the Quran in terms of its universal, and not communal, meaning. In a note on the first use of the word *muslim* in the chronological order of the revelation (68:35), he writes:

> Throughout this work, I have translated the terms *muslim* and *islam* in accordance with their original connotations, namely, "one who surrenders [or "has surrendered"] himself to God", and "man's self-surrender to God". . . . It should be borne in mind that the "institutionalized" use of these terms—that is, their exclusive application to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad—represents a definitely post-Quranic development and, hence, must be avoided in a translation of the Quran.[44]

He asserts that when the Prophet's contemporaries heard the words *islam* and *muslim*, they would have understood them in this original sense, "without limiting these terms to any specific community or denomination".[45] This meaning emerges clearly from many verses containing the words *muslim* and *islam*. In the following verse, the principle of universal submission is equated with the religion of God:

> Seek they other than the religion of God (*dîn Allâh*), when unto Him submitteth whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly? And unto Him they will be returned (3:83).

Kashani helps to situate with the utmost clarity the nature of this religion of God. He does so in his esoteric exegesis on two sets of verses. First, in relation to a verse which declares that the religion bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad was the very same religion which was bestowed upon his predecessors:

> He hath ordained for you of religion (*min ad-dîn*) that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee [Muhammad], and that which We commended unto Abraham and

43. A key distinction, stressed throughout his works by Frithjof Schuon.
44. *The Message of the Qur'an: Translated and Explained* by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar, 1984), p. 885, n. 17.
45. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

> Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein (42:13).

Kashani comments:

> He hath ordained for you of the religion, [that is] the absolute religion (*ad-dîn al-mutlaq*), which God charged all the prophets to establish, and to be unanimous, not divided, with regard to it. This is the principle and root of religion (*asl ad-dîn*), that is, *tawhîd*, justice, and knowledge of the Resurrection, as expressed by [the phrase] "faith in God and the Last Day". This is other than the details of the revealed Laws, by which they [the prophets] differentiate this [root of religion]; this differentiation occurs in accordance with what is most beneficial in [the different situations]—such as the prescription of acts of obedience, worship, and social intercourse. As God Most High says, "For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way (5:48).[46]

The difference between the "absolute" or unconditional religion (*ad-dîn al-mutlaq*) and the different forms this unique essence may take is then described by Kashani in terms of permanence and immutability. He continues: "So the right religion *(ad-dîn al-qayyim*) is tied to that which is immutable within knowledge and action; while the revealed Law is tied to that which alters in respect of rules and conditions." The nature of this unchanging religion, together with its essential connection with the primordial nature of the human soul, the *fitrah*, is expounded by Kashani in an illuminating commentary on the following crucial verse:

> So set thy purpose for religion as one with pure devotion—the nature [framed] of God, according to which He hath created man. There is no altering God's creation. That is the right religion (*ad-dîn al-qayyim*), but most men know not (30:30).

Kashani comments:

> So set thy purpose for the religion of *tawhîd*, and this is the path to the Real . . . or religion in the absolute sense (*ad-dîn mutlaqan*). That which is other than this is not "religion", because of its separation from the [way which leads to] attainment of the goal. The purpose [or "face", *al-wajh*, in the verse being commented on] refers to the existent essence, with all its concomitants and accidental properties; and its being set for religion is its disengagement from all that which is other than the Real, its being upright in *tawhîd*, and stopping with the Real, without heeding its own soul

46. Kashani, *Tafsîr*, Vol. II, p. 109.

> or others, so that his way will be the way of God; and his religion and his path will be the religion and path of God, for he sees nothing but Him in existence.[47]

Then follows this comment on the primordial nature, the *fitrah*, fashioned by God:

> That is, they cleave to the *fitrat Allâh*, which is the state in accordance with which the reality of humanity was created, eternal purity and disengagement, and this is the right religion (*ad-dîn al-qayyim*) in eternity without beginning or end, never altering or being differentiated from that original purity, or from that intrinsic, primordial *tawhîd*.[48]

The *fitrah* is described as being the result of the "most holy effusion" (*al-fayd al-aqdas*) of the Divine Essence; and no one who remains faithful to this original nature can deviate from *tawhîd*, or be veiled from God's reality by the presence of phenomena. Kashani cites the *hadîth*, "Every baby is born according to the *fitrah*; its parents make it a Jew, a Christian." But then he adds this important point: "It is not that this underlying reality changes in itself, such that its essential state be altered, for that is impossible. This is the meaning of His words: there is no altering God's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not."

The following verse (30:31) reads: "Turning to Him; and do your duty to Him, and establish worship and be not of those who ascribe partners." The "turning" to God implies for Kashani a turning away from all otherness, from the "demons of fancy and imagination" and from "false religions"; it implies also the disengagement and detachment from the "shrouds of created nature, bodily accidents, natural forms, psychic properties". As regards the last part of the verse, he comments as follows: "'Be not of those who ascribe partners [or 'be not of the polytheists']. . . . through the subsistence of the *fitrah*, and the manifestation of I-ness (*zuhûr al-anâ'iyyah*) in its station."[49] Here the ontological limitation of the *fitrah* and its "station" is indicated by Kashani. For the *fitrah* presupposes an individual soul, of which it is the most fundamental model, pattern, or prototype; as such, it cannot but uphold that I-ness or egoic nucleus that must, from the point of view of absolute oneness,

47. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 131.
48. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 132.
49. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 132.

be transcended; and it is only transcended by *fanâ'*. Despite this ontological shortcoming attendant upon the operative presence of the *fitrah*, it is clear that for Kashani it is only through fidelity to the *fitrah* that one can open oneself up to that ultimate form of Islam which is constituted—or rather sublimated—by *fanâ'*.

At the level of human knowledge, however, the *fitrah* is conceived as a fundamental, or "constitutional", affinity between the deepest dimension of the human soul and the ultimate realities expressed through Divine revelation; it is the purest texture of the substance of the soul that resonates harmoniously with the most profound truths conveyed by the revealed word. This harmonious reverberation translates spiritual affinity into mystical unity—the realization, through *fanâ'*, of the ultimate degree of *tawhîd*, as described above in reference to Ghazzali's exegesis of "everything is perishing except His Face" (28:88).

The mystery of this affinity between primordiality and revelation—between the knowledge divinely embedded *a priori* within the soul, and the knowledge divinely bestowed *a posteriori* upon the soul—seems to be alluded to in the following verse: "Truly there hath come unto you a Prophet from yourselves" (9:128). The literal meaning here, as addressed to the immediate recipients of the revelation, is that the Prophet is one of them: a man, not an angel, an Arab, not a foreigner, and so forth. But the word *minkum*, "from you", also carries a deeper significance. One also has this verse: "The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves" (33:6) Again, the literal meaning refers to the precedence of the Prophet, his greater right or claim over the believers than they have over themselves. But the deeper meaning emerges as a different, and equally legitimate, reading of the word *minkum*. The word also appears, as noted earlier, in a verse with a similar import: "For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way (*shir'atan wa minhâjan*)" (5:48). Not only the Prophet, but the revealed Law and the spiritual Way he brings—all seem already to be, in essence, within the human soul. To follow the Prophet, to abide by the Law, to follow the Way he traces out is to follow, not some rules arbitrarily imposed from without, but a call from within; it is to follow one's own deepest nature. It is for this reason that the Quran refers to itself in several places as a "reminder" or as a remembrance (*dhikr*):

> And it is nothing but a reminder to creation (68:52 and 81:27).

> We have not revealed unto thee this Quran that thou shouldst be distressed, but as a reminder unto him that feareth (20:2-3).
>
> Nay, verily this is a reminder, so whoever will shall remember it (74:54-55).

This understanding of the meaning of the word *minkum* is a possible but by no means exclusive one. It does flow naturally, however, from a fundamental principle of Sufi spirituality. For our purposes here it suffices to cite the engaging simile offered by Rumi, by which he explains the verse:

> In the composition of man all sciences were originally commingled so that his spirit might show forth all hidden things, as limpid water shows forth all that is under it . . . and all that is above it, reflected in the substance of water. Such is its nature, without treatment or training. But when it was mingled with earth or other colors, that property and that knowledge was parted from it and forgotten by it. Then God Most High sent forth prophets and saints, like a great, limpid water such as delivers out of darkness and accidental coloration every mean and dark water that enters into it. Then it remembers; when the soul of man sees itself unsullied, it knows for sure that so it was in the beginning, pure, and it knows that those shadows and colors were mere accidents. Remembering its state before those accidents supervened, it says, This is that sustenance which we were provided with before.[50] The prophets and the saints therefore remind him of his former state; they do not implant anything new in his substance. Now every dark water that recognizes that great water, saying, "I come from this, and I belong to this", mingles with that water. . . . It was on this account that God declared: Truly there hath come unto you a Prophet from yourselves.[51]

Near the end of the *Discourses*, this theme is expressed again, this time in more intimate terms:

> Those who acknowledge the truth see themselves in the prophet and hear their own voice proceeding from him and smell their own scent proceeding from him. No man denies his own self. Therefore the prophets say to the community, "We are you and you are we; there is no strangeness between us."[52]

50. 2:25. This verse is given as the words uttered by the souls in Paradise upon being given fruits of the heavenly garden.
51. We have slightly modified Arberry's translation of 2:25 and of 9:128, which concludes the paragraph from Rumi's *Discourses*, pp. 44-45.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

It is clear from these passages that Rumi, referring to the prophets in the plural, regards the prophetic mission as one and the same, despite the different forms taken by that message. In the *Mathnawî*, this principle is expressed in many different places. One striking example is his poetic comment upon the words of the Quranic verse "We make no distinction between any of them [God's prophets] (2:136; and at 3:84). Under this verse as a heading come the following couplets:

> If ten lamps are present in (one) place, each differs in form from the other:
>
> To distinguish without any doubt the light of each, when you turn your face toward their light, is impossible.
>
> In things spiritual there is no division and no numbers; in things spiritual there is no partition and no individuals.[53]

*
* *

The conception of essential or absolute religion, explicitly affirmed by Kashani and implicit in so much of Rumi's writing, is predicated on a clear vision of the spirit of faith which transcends all the forms that religious traditions assume. Before elaborating upon this vision with reference to particular Quranic verses, it is important to mention very briefly the Quranic encounter between Moses and the mysterious personage, not mentioned by name in the Quran, but identified by tradition with al-Khidr. Even in its literal aspect, the story alludes to the distinction between the form of religion and its transcendent essence, between exoteric and esoteric knowledge. In this encounter certain forms of the law and social convention are violated by al-Khidr, who is questioned and criticized as a result by Moses. After committing three acts that flout outward norms, al-Khidr tells Moses of the realities hidden beneath the surface of each of the situations in which the acts take place, realities revealed to al-Khidr by direct, Divine inspiration.[54]

53. *Mathnawî*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (London, 1926), Book I, 678-679. Nicholson does not include the heading, consisting of the verse, which is given in the Persian. See the edition by Abd al-Hamid Mashayikh Tabataba'i, published by Nashr-i Tulû', in Tehran (n.d.), p. 35.
54. See 18:60-82.

One of the uses to which Ibn Arabi puts this story reinforces its already esoteric nature. Al-Khidr becomes the personification of the station of nearness (*maqâm al-qurba*), a station which is identified with plenary sanctity (*walâyah*),[55] while Moses personifies the law-giving prophet, or prophecy as such (*nubuwwah*). In Ibn Arabi's perspective, sanctity as such is superior to prophecy as such, because, as he explains in the chapter of the *Fusûs* under the heading of Seth, "The message (*ar-risâlah*) and prophecy (*an-nubuwwah*)—that is, law-giving prophecy and its message—come to an end, but sanctity (*al-walâyah*) never comes to an end."[56] Sanctity is higher because the knowledge proper to it is universal, and prophecy is lower insofar as the knowledge comprised within it is delimited by a particular message: "Know that *walâyah* is the all-encompassing sphere, thus it never comes to an end, and to it belong [the assimilation and communication of] universal tidings; but as for law-giving prophecy and the message, they terminate."[57] But it is a question of principial priority and not personal superiority: sanctity is more universal than prophecy, but the prophet is always superior to the saint. For, on the one hand, the prophet's sanctity is the source of the sanctity of the saint; and on the other, every prophet is a saint, but not every saint is a prophet:

> When you observe the prophet saying things which relate to what is outside the law-giving function,[58] then he does so as a saint (*walî*) and a gnostic (*'ârif*). Thus his station as a knower and a saint is more complete and more perfect than [his station] as a messenger or as a legislative prophet. . . . So if one says that that the saint is above the prophet and the messenger, he means that this is the case within a single person, that is: the messenger, in respect of his being a saint, is more complete than he is in respect of his being a prophet or messenger.[59]

55. This station "represents the ultimate point in the hierarchy of the saints" (M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabî*, trans. Liadain Sherrard [Cambridge, 1993], p. 58).
56. *Fusûs*, p. 34. See R. Austin's translation, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 66.
57. *Fusûs*, p. 167; in *Bezels*, p. 168.
58. Kashani comments on the domain which is said to lie beyond the scope of the law-giving function: "The explanation of 'adornment of the soul with the qualities of God' (*takhalluq bi akhlâq Allâh*), the proximity [attained through] supererogatory and obligatory devotions; and the stations of trust, contentment, submission, realizing oneness, attaining singularity, extinction, union and separation, and the like" (*Fusûs*, p. 168).
59. *Fusûs*, p. 168; *Bezels*, pp. 168-169.

According to Ibn Arabi, then, the encounter between Moses and al-Khidr is understood microcosmically: al-Khidr represents a mode of universal consciousness within the very soul of Moses, one which surpasses his consciousness *qua* prophet, whence the disapproval by the prophet of the antinomian acts of the saint: "He [al-Khidr] showed him [Moses] nothing but his [Moses's] own form: it was his own state that Moses saw, and himself that he censured."[60] Ibn Arabi's conception of *walâyah* is a complex and controversial one, but it does cohere with the esoteric implications of the Quranic narrative of the encounter between Moses and the mysterious person who was given "knowledge from Us". This narrative, together with its amplification in Ibn Arabi's conception of sanctity, clearly alludes to the relativity of the outward law in the face of its inner spirit, and the limitations proper to the law-giving function as opposed to the universal dimensions of sanctity. There is a clear and important relationship between this universal function of sanctity and the "absolute" or "unconditional" religion referred to above, that religion which is above and beyond all the particular forms—legal, confessional, social, cultural, and psychological—that it may assume.

Now, to consider more explicit Quranic verses describing or alluding to this quintessential religion:

> Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted (3:84).

Then comes this verse:

> And whoso seeketh a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter (3:85).

Now whereas this last verse is understood, from a theological point of view, as upholding the exclusive validity of "Islam", defined as the religion revealed to God's last Prophet, and, as will be discussed below, as abrogating other verses which point to a different conclusion, it can also be seen as confirming the intrinsic validity of all the revelations brought by all the prophets mentioned in the previous

60. *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, II. 261. See the French translation of the chapter on the station of nearness (Chapter 161) by Denis Gril in "Le terme du voyage" (pp. 339-347) in *Les Illuminations de La Mecque*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz (Paris, 1988).

verse. "Islam" thus encompasses all revelations, which can be seen as so many different facets of essentially one and the same self-disclosure of the Divine reality. Both senses can in fact be maintained as "valid" interpretations, according to a key hermeneutical principle of Ibn Arabi: namely, that it is not tenable to exclude the validity of an interpretation of a verse which is clearly upheld by the literal meaning of the words.[61] It is one of an indefinite number of meanings that are all "intended" by God to be derived from the words of the verse. No one interpretation is right and true to the exclusion of all others. Furthermore, applying a distinctively Akbarian metaphysical principle, we could say that to exclude the exclusivist reading is in turn to fall into a mode of exclusivism.[62] Thus a truly inclusivist metaphysical perspective must recognize the validity of the exclusivist, theological perspective, even if it must also—on pain of disingenuousness—uphold as more compelling, more convincing, and more "true", the universalist understanding of Islam.

This universalist conception of religion is linked to the innate knowledge of God within all human souls, or within the soul as such, and to the universal function of revelatory "remembrance"—that innate knowledge which is re-awakened within the forgetful soul by Divine revelation. The following verse establishes with the utmost clarity the fact that knowledge of the Divine is inscribed in the very substance of the human soul at its inception, and is thus an integral dimension of the *fitrah*:

61. As M. Chodkiewicz writes, in his excellent study of Ibn Arabi's hermeneutics, "Given the extremely rich polysemy of Arabic vocabulary, rigorous fidelity to the letter of Revelation does not exclude but, on the contrary, implies a multiplicity of interpretations. Ibn al-Arabi insists on this point on a number of occasions, emphasizing that there is a general rule applicable to all the revealed Books: 'Any meaning of whatever verse of the Word of God—be it the Qur'ân, the Torah, the Psalms, or the Pages—judged acceptable by one who knows the language in which this word is expressed represents what God wanted to say to those who interpreted it so.' As a corollary, none of these meanings is to be rejected. To deny the validity of this rule is to limit divine knowledge" (*An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law*, trans. D. Streight [Albany, 1993], p. 30).
62. This accords with the principle, expressed in a variety of paradoxical ways throughout the Akbarian corpus, that "part of the perfection of being is the existence of imperfection within it; for were it otherwise, the perfection of being would be imperfect because of the absence of imperfection within it" (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 296).

> And when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves [saying], Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. [That was] lest ye say on the Day of Resurrection: Truly, of this we were unaware (7:172).

At the dawn of creation, then, knowledge of the Divine lordship, the reality of the Absolute, and all essential truths deriving therefrom is infused into the human soul—into all human souls, all Children of Adam, without exception. Another way of presenting this universal fact, with the stress on the spiritual substance of these principial truths, is given in these verses:

> And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Verily I am creating a mortal from clay of black mud, altered. So, when I have made him and have breathed into him of My Spirit, fall ye down, prostrating yourselves before him (15:28-29).[63]

Thus, it is this spirit of God, breathed into man, that constitutes, according to the Quran, the fundamental, irreducible substance of the human soul. It is for this reason that the angels are commanded to prostrate to him. The act not only proceeds from obedience to the command of God, but also is an acknowledgement of the breath of God that articulates the Adamic substance—the reason for the command, one might say.

One can understand the truths comprised within the Divine Spirit, which is "breathed" into the soul, in terms of the "names" taught to Adam by God, in virtue of which his knowledge transcends that of all other beings, including the angels. The story of the creation of Adam, the transcendent knowledge proper to the human soul, the Fall, and the means of overcoming the consequences of the Fall—all these fundamental principles are given in the following verses in a manner which succinctly presents both the universality and necessity of Divine revelation:

> And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Verily I am placing a viceroy (*khalîfah*) on earth, they said: Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not.

63. Identical to 38:72. Cf. also the verse "Then He fashioned him and breathed into him of His Spirit" (32:9).

> And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform Me of the names of these, if ye are truthful.
>
> They said: Be Thou glorified! We have no knowledge save that which Thou hast taught us. Truly Thou, only Thou, art the Knower, the Wise.
>
> He said: O Adam, inform them of their names, and when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which ye disclose and that which ye hide.
>
> And when We said unto the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He refused and waxed proud, and so became a disbeliever.
>
> And We said: O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat freely thereof where ye will; but come not near this tree lest ye become wrong-doers.
>
> But Satan caused them to slip therefrom, and expelled them from the state they were in. And We said: Fall down, one of you a foe unto the other! There shall be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a time.
>
> Then Adam received words from his Lord, and He relented toward him; verily He is ever-Relenting, all-Merciful.
>
> We said: Go down, all of you, from hence; but verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance; and whoso followeth My guidance, no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve.
>
> But they who disbelieve, and deny Our revelations, such are rightful owners of the Fire. They abide therein (2:30-39).

Adam is therefore not just the first man, but also the first prophet, the first to have received words from his Lord. The guidance promised by God—the means by which the primordial human condition is restored to its plenary state—is, it is to be noted, immediately defined in terms of Our revelations, or Our signs, that is, *âyâtinâ*. One is given a sense here of a single religion, Divine guidance, which comprises diverse forms of expression, different "signs".

The universality of this guidance through revelation is clearly stressed in the following verses. First, "For every community (*ummah*) there is a Messenger" (10:48). As noted above, the Quran makes explicit reference to several prophets, but the scope of prophetic guidance extends far beyond those mentioned, for "Verily, We sent Messengers before thee; among them are those

about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee" (40:78). Moreover, that which was revealed to the Prophet in the Quran does not differ in essence from what was revealed to all the prophets:

> And We sent no Messenger before thee but We inspired him [saying]: There is no God save Me, so worship Me (21:25).
>
> Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee (41:43).[64]

This single, unique message of guidance is always revealed to the Messenger in the language of his folk (14:4).

To appreciate more fully the relationship between the substance of the message and its form, one can benefit from a distinction found in Ibn Arabi's writings. This is the distinction, within the Speech of God, between the "necessary Speech" (*al-qawl al-wâjib*), which is not subject to change, and the "accidental Speech" (*al-qawl al-ma'rûd*), which is subject to change.[65] It is the former, the necessary Speech, which one can identify with the unchanging substance of the Divine message. This view is articulated more explicitly in the following comment on the oneness of the religious path. It is, he writes,

> that concerning which Bukhari wrote a chapter entitled, "The chapter on what has come concerning the fact that the religions of the prophets are one". He brought the article which makes the word "religion" definite, because all religion comes from God, even if some of the rulings are diverse. Everyone is commanded to perform the religion and to come together in it. . . . As for the rulings which are diverse, that is because of the Law which God assigned to each one of the messengers. He said, "To every one (of the Prophets) We have appointed a Law and a Way; and if God willed, He would have made you one nation" (5:48).[66] If He had done that, your revealed Laws would not be diverse, just as they are not diverse in the fact that you have been commanded to come together and to perform them.[67]

64. Cf. "Say: I am no innovation among the Messengers" (46:9).
65. See "Le Livre du Nom de Majesté", trans. M. Valsan, *Études Traditionelles*, No. 272, December, 1948, p. 345.
66. We quote here Chittick's rendition of the verse. Our preferred translation of the first part of the verse is: "For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way". The importance of translating the phrase literally, together with the mysterious word *minkum*, "from you", has been noted above in connection with Rumi's illuminating comments.
67. Quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 303.

Thus, on the basis of scriptural and exoteric orthodoxy, Ibn Arabi points to the substantial content of religion, which both transcends and legitimizes the various revelations; the key criteria of this substance are centered on two elements: Divine command and human response. In other words, however diverse the particular rulings pertaining to the different religions may be, the substance or principle of these rulings remains the same: to submit to that which has been divinely instituted. The inner reality of religion is thus unfolded for the individual, of whatever religion, in the course of his submission to God and the practice of the worship enjoined upon him.

Returning to the verse "We never sent a Messenger save with the language of his folk", one can apply Ibn Arabi's distinction and assert that the essence of the message, the necessary Speech, is one, whereas the "languages", the accidental Speech, are many. Needless to say, the distinction in question is not to be understood as relating to a merely linguistic difference with identical semantic content, but rather by "language" should be understood the whole gamut of factors—spiritual, psychological, cultural, and linguistic—that go to make the message of the supra-formal Truth intelligible to a given human collectivity. Herein lies an important aspect of the message conveyed by Ibn Arabi's *Fusûs al-hikam*: the nature of the jewel (Revelation) is shaped according to the receptivity—conceptual, volitive, affective—of the bezel (*fass*, singular of *fusûs*), that is, the specific mode of prophetic consciousness as determined by the particular human collectivity addressed by the Revelation.

The above considerations lead one to posit the distinction between religion as such, on the one hand, and such and such a religion, on the other. While such and such a religion is distinct from all others, possessing its own particular rites, laws, and spiritual "economy", religion as such can be discerned within it and within all religions—religion as such being the exclusive property of none, as it constitutes the inner substance of all. It must be carefully noted here that this view of a religious essence that at once transcends and abides within all religions does not in the least imply a blurring of the boundaries between the different religions on the plane of their formal diversity; rather, the conception of this "essential religion" presupposes formal religious diversity, regarded not so much as a regrettable differentiation but a divinely willed necessity. The following verses uphold this calibrated conception, which recognizes

the inner substance of religion inherent in all revealed religions, on the one hand, and affirms the necessity of abiding by the dictates of one particular religion, on the other:

> For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way (*shir'atan wa minhâjan*). Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed (5:48).
>
> Unto each community We have given sacred rites (*mansakan*) which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with thee about the matter, but summon them unto thy Lord (22:67).[68]

These diverse laws, paths, and rites, however, ought not obscure the fact that the religion ordained through the last Prophet is, in essence, the very same religion as that ordained through all previous prophets:

> He hath ordained for you of the religion (*min ad-dîn*) that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee [Muhammad], and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein (42:13).

This is the verse quoted by Ibn Arabi in the citation above; after quoting it, Ibn Arabi refers to a passage in the Quran which mentions the prophets Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Elias, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot, and which ends with the words: "Those are they whom God guideth, so follow their guidance" (6:91). Ibn Arabi adds: "This is the path that brings together every prophet and messenger. It is the performance of religion, scattering not concerning it and coming together in it."[69] Again, what is being stressed here is quintessential religion, *ad-dîn*.

The "Islam" revealed to the Prophet Muhammad is unique, and thus a religion; but at the same time, it is identical in its essence to all religions, and is thus *the* religion; in other words, it is both such and such a religion, and religion as such. "Establish the religion, and be not divided" (42:13), for "naught is said unto thee

68. Cf. "And each one hath a goal (*wijha*) toward which he turneth" (2:148).
69. Quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 303.

[Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee" (41:43). In another important verse, used above as our epigraph, we are given a succinct definition of what constitutes this inner, essential religion. The verse also stands out as one of the most significant proof-texts in the Quran for upholding the principle that access to salvation is not the exclusive preserve of the particular religion of Islam, that is, the specific Law and Way ordained through the last Prophet. On the contrary, the description given here of that which is necessary for salvation gives substance to the universal definition of Islam that we are trying to bring out here:

> Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:62).

It was seen above that the number of prophets is given indefinite extension by verses which mention several by name and then add, "We sent Messengers before thee; among them are those about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee" (40:78). Likewise, in the preceding verse, the explicit mention of four distinct groups—those who believe, referring to Muslims in the particular sense, alongside the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabeans—is indefinitely prolonged by the universal category comprising "whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and is virtuous". In a moment, we shall return to this crucial, and controversial, position, one which holds out the possibility of salvation beyond the confines of Islam *qua* particular religion. At this point, however, attention should remain focused on the ramifications of this "essential religion" of faith in God and in the Hereafter, allied to virtue.

The following verse is akin to a veritable creedal affirmation:

> The Messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord, and [so do] the believers. Every one believeth in God and His angels and His scriptures and His Messengers—we make no distinction between any of His Messengers (2:285).[70]

What should be underscored here is the fact that belief in all the revealed scriptures is followed by the declaration that no distinction

70. The phrase "We make no distinction between any of His Messengers" also comes earlier in the same *Sûrah*, at 2:136, which we cite below.

can be made between any of God's Messengers. Again, there is the recognition of the formal diversity of revelation combined with the affirmation of a unique message.

In the Quran, this universal religion, or religion as such, which resists any communal specification, is often referred to as the religion of Abraham, *al-hanîf*, "the devout".[71] Abraham stands forth as both the symbol and the concrete embodiment of pure, monotheistic worship: "he was not one of the idolators". In the following verse, also from the *Sûrat al-Baqara*, we read:

> And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say Nay but [we are of] the religious community (*millah*) of Abraham, the devout (*hanîfan*), and he was not one of the idolators (2:135).

Then, in the verse immediately following this one, one finds a description of what affiliation to this *millah*, or religious community, entails:

> Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted (2:136; this verse is almost identical to 3:84).

After this comes another important verse, which reinforces the interpretation of religion as universal submission:

> And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then they are rightly guided. But if they turn away, then they are in schism (2:137).

The next verse is also highly relevant to our theme. It begins, mysteriously, with a reference to the color of God (*sibghat Allâh*). Pickthall renders the verse thus, making explicit what he sees as intended by the ellipse: "[We take our] color from God; and who is

71. We translate this word as "devout" on the basis of the following explanation of Asad: "The expression *hanîf* is derived from the verb *hanafa*, which literally means 'he inclined [towards a right state or tendency]'. Already in pre-Islamic times, this term had a definitely monotheistic connotation, and was used to describe a man who turned away from sin and worldliness and from all dubious beliefs, especially idol-worship; and *tahannuf* denoted the ardent devotions, mainly consisting of long vigils and prayers, of the unitarian God-seekers of pre-Islamic times" (*The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 28, note 110 on 2:135).

better than God at coloring? And we worship Him" (2:138).[72] The verses immediately following this one suggest what this "color" might mean:

> Say: Dispute ye with us concerning God, when He is our Lord and your Lord? Ours are our works, and yours your works. We are devoted purely to Him.
>
> Or say ye that Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: Do you know best or doth God? (2:139-140).

Here we are given a strong sense of the need to view religious affiliation in the light of absolute values, rather than allowing religious affiliation to determine the "color" or nature of the Absolute: "We are devoted purely to Him"; it is not religion, but God Who is worshipped. "And we worship Him." One is reminded here of the image given by Junayd, and so often quoted by Ibn Arabi: "Water takes on the color of the cup."[73] The imperative of 'transcending the gods of belief', mentioned earlier, can be seen as concordant with the need to go beyond the "color" imparted by religious dogma or affiliation, to the pure Absolute, at once surpassing all color and assuming every color. As Rumi puts it:

> Since colorlessness (pure Unity) became the captive of color (manifestation in the phenomenal world), a Moses came into conflict with a Moses.
>
> When you attain unto the colorlessness which you possessed, Moses and Pharaoh are at peace.[74]

And again:

> The religion of Love is separate from all religions: for lovers, the religion and creed is—God.[75]

It might be objected here that the Quranic verses cited above could just as easily be interpreted as an affirmation of Islamic exclu-

72. The Arabic here is *nahnu lahu 'âbidûn*, which can also be translated as "we are His worshippers"; the strong implication, in both senses of the phrase, is that God is the sole object of worship, and that for this reason true worshippers "belong" to God alone, this being made explicit in the verses which follow 2:138.
73. See *Sufi Path*, pp. 149, 229, 341-344.
74. *Mathnawî*, I, 2467-8.
75. *Mathnawî*, II, 1770.

sivism, the "Islam" revealed by the Quran being the purest form of that primordial religion of Abraham that was subsequently distorted by the Jews and the Christians. It must readily be conceded that such a view would indeed be upheld, in differing degrees, and with varying implications, not only by traditional theological and exoteric authorities, but also by their mystical and esoteric counterparts, including those cited here, Ibn Arabi, Rumi, Kashani, and Ghazzali. For all such Sufis—those belonging to what one might call the "normative" Sufi tradition, in which the *Sharî'ah* is scrupulously upheld—Islam in the particular sense would be regarded as the most complete religion, *qua* religion, and thus the most appropriate one to follow.[76] This belief, however, on the plane of religious form, does not translate into chauvinism, and still less, intolerance. For the metaphysical vision of the religious essence that transcends all forms leads directly to an appreciation of the possibility of salvation and sanctification through diverse, and unequal, religious forms. Even if other religious forms be regarded as less "complete" than Islam, or in a certain sense superseded by it, all believers in God can nonetheless be regarded as belonging to the same community, the same *umma* defined in terms of essential faith, rather than as a confessionally delimited community. In the *Sûrah* entitled "The Prophets", the following verse is given, after mention is made of several prophets, finishing with a reference to the Virgin Mary: "Truly, this, your *umma*, is one *umma*, and I am your Lord, so worship Me" (21:92). Just as our God and your God is one,[77] so all believers, whatever be the outward, denominational form taken by their belief, are judged strictly according to their merits, and not according to some artificial religious label:

> And those who believe and do good works, We shall bring them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever—a promise of God in truth; and who can be more truthful than God in utterance? (4:122).

76. For example, Kashani, after pointing out the flaws in the religions of Judaism and Christianity, avers that Islam is "altogether true; indeed, it is the truth of truths. It is the supreme and most brilliant truth" (cited in Lory, *Commentaires ésoteriques*, p. 132).
77. The verse in which these words are given is as follows: "And only discourse with the People of the Book in a way that is most excellent, save with those who do wrong. And say: We believe in that which hath been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender" (29:46). We shall return to this verse below.

Lest one think that the category of "those who believe and do good works" refers only to the Muslims in the specific sense—one possible reading, admittedly—the very next verse establishes the universal scope of the promise. This verse, indeed, is of the utmost importance for the perspective or "reading" being expounded here:

> It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor the desires of the People of the Scripture. He who doth wrong will have the recompense thereof (4:123).

One can read this verse as implying that insofar as the Muslim "desires" that salvation be restricted to Muslims in the specific, communal sense, he falls into exactly the same kind of exclusivism of which the Christians and Jews stand accused: "And they say: None entereth paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires" (2:111). It should be noted that the very same word is used both for the "desires" of the Jews and the Christians, and the "desires" of the Muslims, *amâniyy*. As noted above, the logic of these verses clearly indicates that one form of religious prejudice or chauvinism is not to be replaced with another form of the same, but with an objective, unprejudiced recognition of the inexorable and universal law of Divine justice. This universal law is expressed with the utmost clarity in the following two verses, which complete this important passage from the *Sûra al-Nisâ':*

> And whoso doeth good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such will enter paradise, and will not be wronged the dint of a date-stone.
>
> Who is better in religion than he who submitteth his purpose to God (*aslama wajhahu li'Llâh*), while being virtuous, and following the religious community of Abraham the devout? (4:124-125).

In these four verses, taken as a whole (4:122-125), the Divine "promise" of salvation is starkly contrasted with confessional "desires"; on the one hand, there is an objective and universal criterion of wholehearted submission to God, and on the other, a subjective and particularistic criterion of formal attachment to a specific community. To return to the verse cited above, one should note the riposte that follows the unwarranted exclusivism of the People of the Book:

> And they say: None entereth paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires. Say: Bring your proof if ye are truthful.

> Nay, but whosoever submitteth his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:111-112).

Verse 112 thus comes as a concrete rebuttal of unwarranted exclusivism. It does not contradict the exclusivist claims of the Jews and the Christians with an exclusivism of its own, that is, with a claim that only "Muslims", in the specific sense, go to Paradise. Access to salvation, far from being further narrowed by reference to the privileged rights of some other "group", is broadened, and in fact universalized: those who attain salvation and enter paradise are those who have submitted wholeheartedly to God and are intrinsically virtuous. Faithful submission, allied to virtue: such are the two indispensable requisites for salvation. Thus it is perfectly justified to argue that the verse does not respond "in kind" to the exclusivism of the People of the Book, but rather pitches the response on a completely different level, a supra-theological or metaphysical level, which surpasses all reified definitions, confessional denominations, communal allegiances, and partisan affiliations.

It is also important to note that the words cited earlier, "Unto God belong the East and the West, and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God", come two verses later, at 2:115. This verse is referred to by Ibn Arabi at the end of the following well-known warning to Muslims against restricting God to the form of one's own belief, a warning that is entirely in accordance with the thrust of the Quranic discourse:

> Beware of being bound up by a particular creed and rejecting others as unbelief! Try to make yourself a prime matter for all forms of religious belief. God is greater and wider than to be confined to one particular creed to the exclusion of others. For He says, Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God.[78]

78. Quoted by T. Izutsu in his *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 254. We have modified somewhat Izutsu's translation of this passage from the *Fusûs* (pp. 135-16). In particular, the word *'aqîda*, should, we believe, be translated as "creed" and not, as Izutsu has it, "religion". Izutsu's translation nonetheless adequately conveys the clear intention behind this warning to believers not to restrict God to the form of their own belief, whether this is a doctrinal form *vis-à-vis* other possible forms within the same religion, or a religious belief *vis-à-vis* the beliefs of other religions. But, as has been discussed in the previous section, for Ibn Arabi, there is but one religion, which comprises diverse modes of revelation and different rulings, according to the requirements of different human collectivities addressed by the one and only Divinity.

We can also turn to Ibn Arabi for a useful Sufi means of overcoming one of the obstacles to wholesome dialogue between Muslims and members of other faiths: the traditional legal notion of the abrogation of other religions by Islam. Before doing so, however, it is important to situate the principle of abrogation in relation to the verse cited above, 2:62, in which salvation is promised not just to Muslims in the specific sense, but also to Jews and Christians and Sabeans, whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds. A great deal hinges on the meaning attributed to this verse. Its literal meaning is clear enough: all believers who act virtuously, in consequence of their faith, are promised that their reward is with their Lord, and "no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve". But it is held by many of the traditional commentators, based on a report from Ibn Abbas, that this verse is abrogated by 3:85—"And whoso seeketh a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter." Among the classical commentators, however, it is noteworthy that Tabari (d. 310/923) and the Shi'ite commentator Tabarsi (d. 548/1153) both reject the idea that the verse can be subject to abrogation. In general, as regards the principle of abrogation (*naskh*), Tabari writes, in his commentary on verse 2:106—"We abrogate no verse, nor do We cause it to be forgotten, but that We bring one better than it or like it":

> Thus, God transforms the lawful into the unlawful, and the unlawful into the lawful, and the permitted into the forbidden, and the forbidden into the permitted. This only pertains to such issues as commands and prohibitions, proscriptions and generalizations, preventions and authorizations. But as for reports (*akhbâr*), they cannot abrogate nor be abrogated.[79]

In regard to verse 2:62, he writes that the literal meaning of the verse should be upheld, without being restricted in its scope by reference to reports of its abrogation, "because, in respect of the bestowal of reward for virtuous action with faith, God has not singled out some of His creatures as opposed to others".[80] Tabarsi, in his commentary *Majma' al-bayân fî tafsîr al-qur'ân*, argues that "abrogation cannot apply to a declaration of promise. It can be allowed

79. *Jâmi' al-bayân 'an ta'wîl ay al-qur'ân* (Beirut, 2001), Vol.1, p. 546.
80. *Ibid.*, Vol.1, p. 373.

only of legal judgments which may be changed or altered with change in the general interest".[81]

Nonetheless, as regards the specifically juristic point of view, it is almost universally upheld that Islam "abrogates" the previous dispensations, in the sense that its revealed law supersedes the laws promulgated in pre-Quranic revelations, with the concomitant that it is no longer permissible for Muslims to abide by those pre-Quranic revealed laws, the *Sharî'ah* brought by the Prophet being henceforth normative and binding. How, then, can a Muslim today, concerned with dialogue, reconcile the idea of salvation being accessible to non-Muslims who faithfully follow their religions, on the one hand, with the principle that Islam abrogates or supersedes all previous religions? One answer is given by Ibn Arabi, for whom the fact of abrogation does not imply the nullification of those religions which are superseded, nor does it render them salvifically inefficacious. In a brilliant dialectical stroke, Ibn Arabi transforms the whole doctrine of abrogation from being a basis for the rejection of other religions into an argument for their continuing validity. For one of the reasons for the pre-eminence of Islam is precisely the fact that Muslims are enjoined to believe in all revelations and not just in that conveyed by the Prophet of Islam:

> All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*bâtil*] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant.[82]

81. Quoted by M. Ayoub, *The Qur'ân and Its Interpreters* (Albany, 1984), Vol. I, p. 110. In the contemporary period, both Rashid Rida and Allamah Tabataba'i likewise uphold the literal meaning of the verse, and reject the possibility that it is subject to abrogation. See the discussion of this issue in Farid Esack, *Qur'ân, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 162-166; and in Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 29-34.

82. Cited by W. C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994) p. 125.

Finally, one has to address the fact that the Quran not only contains verses that clearly assert the Divine ordainment of religious diversity, the exhortation to engage in dialogue, and the presence of piety and righteousness in religions other than Islam; it also contains verses of a polemical nature. For example:

> O ye who believe, take not the Jews and the Christians for guardians. They are guardians one to another. He among you who taketh them for guardians is (one) of them. Truly, God guideth not wrongdoing folk (5:51).
>
> And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of God, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of God. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. God fighteth them. How perverse are they! (9:30).

There are numerous such verses, which demonstrate the formal contradictions between different theological perspectives, and the consequent difficulties attendant upon the effort to engage in effective dialogue on the basis of theological perspectives alone. They also indicate, albeit indirectly, the necessity of elevating the mode of discourse to a metaphysical, supra-theological level, from the vantage point of which those formal contradictions are rendered less decisive as determinants of dialogue. The contradictions remain on their own plane; but the more challenging question is to determine the significance of that plane, and to make an effort to discern within the text of the Quran itself those openings that warrant a transition to a higher plane. This is what has been attempted in this paper, with the help of Sufi metaphysical perspectives on the Quran.

But one must also respond to the specific question: in the concrete context of interfaith dialogue, how is one to relate to the verses that severely criticize the dogmatic errors of the People of the Book? Apart from pointing out the need to examine carefully each such verse, to contextualize it, and to examine the degree to which the error in question is attributable to the orthodox theologies apparently being censured, one would respond immediately by referring to the following verse: "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and hold discourse with them [the People of the Book] in the finest manner" (16:125). One is urged to use one's judgment, one's own "wisdom" to debate with the "other" in the most appropriate manner, taking into account both

the particular conditions in which the dialogue is being conducted, and the principial priority that must be accorded to universal realities—so clearly affirmed in the Quran—over historical, communal, and even theological contingencies. In other words, insofar as one's orientation to the religious "other" is determined by spiritual, rather than theological or legal considerations, one should give priority to those verses which are of a clearly principial or universal nature, as opposed to those which are clearly contextual in nature.[83] By "contextual" is meant those verses which relate to the plane of theological exclusivism or inter-communal conflict, the very plane that is transcended by the vision that unfolds from the verses stressed and commented upon above.

Secondly, there is no warrant, even with an exclusivist reading of the Quran, for any brand of religious intolerance, and still less, persecution of non-Muslims. Far from it. In fact the Muslims are enjoined to defend churches and synagogues, and not just mosques—all being described by the Quran as places "wherein the name of God is much invoked" (22:40). One should also cite in this connection the historically recorded acts of tolerance manifested by the Prophet himself: for example, the treaty of Medina, in which the Jews were given equal rights with the Muslims;[84] the treaty signed with the monks of St Catherine's monastery on Sinai;[85] and,

83. It should be noted that this stress on certain verses—those which are universal in content, and which promote peace and harmony between the different faith communities, as opposed to those which are more aggressive in tone, and which reflect particular historical situations or specific theological controversies—is not totally unrelated to Ghazzali's principle of the "variance in the excellence of the Quranic verses". See his *Jewels of the Quran: Al-Ghazali's Theory*, trans. M. Abul Quasem (London and Boston, 1983), pp. 64-5. Needless to say, for Ghazzali, the Quran in its entirety is of a revealed substance, so each verse is equal to all others in respect of revelation; but some verses are of more profound import and of greater theurgic value than others, as attested to by the Prophet in many sayings. Ghazzali refers to the "light of insight" that helps us to see "the difference between the Verse of the Throne (2:255) and a verse concerning giving and receiving loans, and between the *Sura* of Sincerity (112) and the *Sura* of Destruction (111)" (p. 64).
84. See the useful discussion of the first Constitution of Medina in S. H. M. Jafri, *Political and Moral Vision of Islam* (Lahore, 2000), pp. 11-41.
85. A copy of the document is displayed to this day in the monastery itself, which is the oldest continually inhabited monastic establishment in Christendom, and which—it is of considerable interest to note—includes within its precincts a mosque, constructed by the monks for the local Bedouins. See J. Bentley, *Secrets of Mount Sinai* (London, 1985), pp. 18-19.

especially, the highly symbolic fact that, when the Christian delegation arrived from Najran to engage the Prophet in theological debate, principally over the Divine nature of Christ, they were permitted by him to perform their liturgical worship in his own mosque.[86]

One observes here a perfect example of how disagreement on the plane of dogma can co-exist with a deep respect on the superior plane of religious devotion. This example of the prophetic *sunnah* or conduct is a good background against which one can evaluate the following important passage from the *Discourses* of Rumi. In one part of the book, he clearly takes to task a Christian, Jarrah, for continuing to believe in certain Christian dogmas, in particular, the idea that Jesus is God,[87] but this disagreement on the plane of dogma does not blind Rumi from his majestic vision of the spirit above all religious forms—a vision so often evoked in his poetry—nor does it preclude discourse with Christians, or mutual inspiration. In Rumi's words:

> I was speaking one day amongst a group of people, and a party of non-Muslims was present. In the middle of my address they began to weep and to register emotion and ecstasy. Someone asked: What do they understand and what do they know? Only one Muslim in a thousand understands this kind of talk. What did they understand, that they should weep? The Master [*i.e.*, Rumi himself] answered: It is not necessary that they should understand the form of the discourse; that which constitutes the root and principle of the discourse, that they understand.[88] After all, every one acknowledges the Oneness of God, that He is the Creator and Provider, that He controls everything, that to Him all things shall return, and that it is He who punishes and forgives. When anyone hears these words, which are a description and commemoration (*dhikr*) of God, a universal commotion and ecstatic passion supervenes, since out of these words come the scent of their Beloved and their Quest.[89]

86. See A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishâq's Sîrat Rasûl Allâh* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 270-277.
87. *Discourses*, pp. 135-136.
88. We have taken the liberty of substantially altering Arberry's translation in this sentence. He translates the Persian *nafs-e în sukhan* as "the inner spirit of these words"; whereas Rumi's contrast between the *nafs* of the "words" and the *asl* of the "words" makes it clear that the latter is in fact the "inner spirit" and the former is something relatively superficial, the formal correlate of the *asl*, the supra-formal principle, or the "inner spirit".
89. *Discourses*, p. 108.

In this passage the notion of creative, spiritual dialogue is given clear definition. Receptivity to innate spirituality, such as is rooted in the *fitrah*, constitutes the inalienable substance of the human soul; and this innate spirituality recognizes no confessional boundaries. Rumi is not so much denying the fact that Muslims and non-Muslims disagree over particular dogmas, as affirming the ever-present validity of spiritual dialogue, a mode of dialogue which bears fruit despite theological disagreement, and which serves to limit the negativity arising out of that disagreement, while turning to spiritual account the underlying, devotional orientation to the transcendent Reality that defines the essential reality of all believers.

This mode of dialogue is possible because the receptivity proper to spiritual substance is of infinitely greater import than the limitations that circumscribe all mental conceptions. This is how one can understand the following statement, in which both faith and infidelity are transcended by something more fundamental than the plane on which this dichotomy exists: "All men in their inmost hearts love God and seek Him, pray to Him and in all things put their hope in Him, recognizing none but Him as omnipotent and ordering their affairs. Such an apperception is neither infidelity nor faith. Inwardly it has no name."[90] This perspective is reinforced by the following statements from the same work. Prayer, Rumi says, changes from religion to religion, but "faith does not change in any religion; its states, its point of orientation, and the rest are invariable."[91] "Love for the Creator is latent in all the world and in all men, be they Magians, Jews, or Christians."[92]

Now, to return to the polemical verses that the Quran contains, in addition to all that has been said above, one has also to counterbalance such verses with the Quranic order to engage in constructive dialogue, and to avoid disputation—an order which is given added depth by affirmations of the presence of piety and faith in other religious traditions. For example:

> They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of God in the watches of the night, falling prostrate.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 43. Arberry translates the word *qibla* as locus; but we prefer to translate this word as "point of orientation" in the above sentence.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

> They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie with one another in good works. These are of the righteous.
>
> And whatever good they do, they will not be denied it; and God knows the pious (3: 113-114).
>
> Thou wilt find the nearest of them [the People of the Scripture] in affection to those who believe to be those who say: Verily, we are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and they are not proud (5:82).
>
> I believe in whatever scripture God hath revealed, and I am commanded to be just among you. God is our Lord and your Lord. Unto us our works and unto you your works; no argument between us and you. God will bring us together and unto Him is the journeying (42:15).
>
> And only discourse with the People of the Book in a way that is most excellent, save with those who do wrong. And say: We believe in that which hath been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender (29:46).

And finally, it is worth repeating the following verse, which can justifiably be put forward as altogether definitive in respect of dialogue:

> Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and hold discourse with them in the finest manner (16:125).

For those wishing to engage in dialogue with other faiths and their representatives, the key question devolves upon the way in which one understands that which is "finest", "most excellent", or "most beautiful", the word *ahsan* comprising all these meanings. One is urged to use one's own intelligence, one's own "aesthetic" feel for what accords most harmoniously with the conditions of one's own "dialogical" situation. The verse also links the "call" to the way of God with holding discourse with adherents of other belief-systems. Thus dialogue can itself be seen, not as contrary to the Muslim duty of bearing witness to his faith, but as an aspect of that duty, and perhaps, in the modern world, the wisest way of performing that duty. In an age when, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, "the outward and readily exaggerated incompatibility of the different religions greatly discredits, in the minds of most of our contemporaries, all religion",[93] a "call to God" which is based on

93. F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL, 1993), p. xxxiii.

universal inclusivity rather than dogmatic exclusivity is much more likely to be heeded. The Quranic discourse explicitly refers to the fragility and illogicality of confessional or denominational exclusivity, and affirms truths of a universal nature, doing so, moreover, with an insistence and in a manner that is unparalleled among world scriptures. It is therefore uniquely situated, in intellectual terms, to assist in the resolution of the contemporary crisis precipitated by mutually exclusive religious claims.

Wisdom is explicitly called for in the verse we have cited above; and wisdom, by definition, is not something that can be laid down in advance of all the concrete and unique situations in which wisdom needs to be applied, as if it were a formal rule or a blueprint. On the contrary, it is, on the one hand, a Divine bestowal, and on the other, a quality that can be developed and cultivated only through intellectual, moral, and spiritual effort. In the Quran, wisdom is described as a gift from God: "He giveth wisdom to whom He will; and he to whom wisdom is given hath been granted great good" (2:269). But it is also a quality which can be cultivated, acquired, or learned, and this is implied in the following verse, where the Prophet is described as one who teaches and imparts not just the formal message, but the wisdom required to understand and creatively apply that message: "He it is Who hath sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger of their own, to recite unto them His revelations and to make them grow [in purity], and to teach them the Scripture and wisdom" (62:2).

One of the most important aspects of wisdom taught by the scripture of the Quran and the conduct of the Prophet is tolerance of those with belief-systems different from one's own, a tolerance grounded in a consciousness of the Reality which transcends all systems of belief, one's own included, but which is also mysteriously present in the depths of each human soul. Authentic dialogue emerges in the measure that this presence of God in all human beings is respected. For Muslims living at a time when the alternative to dialogue is not just diatribe but violent clash, the imperative of highlighting that which unites the different religions, of upholding and promoting the common spiritual patrimony of mankind, is of the utmost urgency. As we have seen, there is ample evidence in the Quranic text itself, and in the compelling commentaries on these verses by those most steeped in the spiritual tradition of Islam, to demonstrate that the Quran not only provides us

with a universal vision of religion, and thus with the means to contemplate all revealed religions as "signs" (*âyât*) of God, but also opens up paths of creative, constructive dialogue between the faithful of all the different religious communities, despite their divergent belief-systems. It provides us with the basis for dialogue and mutual enrichment on aspects of religious life and thought that go beyond the outward forms of belief, yielding fruit in the fertile fields of metaphysical insight, immutable values, contemplative inspiration, and spiritual realization.

The text above is from Chapter 7 of the book
M^qep ql qeb Eb^oq7 Prcfpj ^ka qeb @eofpqf^k B^pq)
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