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JESUS IN THE QUR'AN: SELFHOOD AND COMPASSION—AN AKBARI PERSPECTIVE

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Ibn ʿArabī refers to Jesus as a "symbol of engendering" (*mathalan bi-takwīn*). It is my intention in this paper to show that, in the metaphysical perspective of Ibn ʿArabī's school, one of the most important principles of which the "Qur'anic" Jesus stands forth as a "symbol," sign, and concrete embodiment, is the following: mercy and compassion are the fruits of the realization of the true Self—or the Self of the Real, the *Nafs al-Ḥaqq*, as Ibn ʿArabī calls it. Compassion, in turn, should be understood not only morally *but* also, and *a priori*, metaphysically, in terms of the bestowal of life: God gives life to the cosmos out of compassion for His own hidden qualities that long to be known; and man participates in this process both positively—through being compassionate towards his own self, as well as towards others—and inversely, by enlivening his own soul and that of others through the knowledge of God. The Qur'anic narratives concerning Jesus, together with the esoteric interpretations thereof from the Akbari perspective, illuminate these intertwined realities of selfhood and compassion in a particularly fruitful manner. Jesus is described in the Qur'an "as a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us."[1] Ibn ʿArabī draws out in a most instructive way how these two aspects of Jesus can be spiritually understood: what Jesus is a sign of, and how this relates to mercy or compassion.

I shall begin this paper by referring to the Qur'anic passages in the *Sūra Maryam* that relate the stories of the birth of John and Jesus. One

[1] He is, according to Qāshānī, "a spiritual form of divine compassion" (*ṣūra al-raḥma al-ilāhiyya al-maʿnawiyya*). This comes in his comment on the words in verse 21 of *Sūra Maryam* (chap. 19) ". . . a mercy from Us." See his *Tafsīr*, mistakenly attributed to Ibn ʿArabī, *Tafsīr al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (Cairo, 1283 AH), vol. II, p. 6.

observes a number of remarkable similarities in these two passages.[2] There is in both cases—to Zachariah, the father of John, and Mary, mother of Jesus—the apparition of an angel to announce the news of the imminent birth of a son; the words addressed to them by the angel, and the responses given by them are similar; several of the phrases used to describe John and Jesus are identical; a vow of silence is observed by both Zachariah and Mary after their vision of the angel, etc. But there are also notable differences between the two narratives, in particular the following one: whereas it is the angel who describes John, it is Jesus who describes himself, through the miraculous words uttered by him as a baby still in his cradle. Indeed, it is the degree of miraculousness that, in general, distinguishes the two narratives: the birth of Jesus to the Virgin was a more absolute kind of miracle as compared with the lesser prodigy of John's being begotten by Zachariah, though "my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age" (19:8). But one should pay particular attention to the words at the end of Jesus' discourse: "Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised up alive." In the case of John, it is the angel who invokes peace upon him: "Peace be on him the day he was born, the day he dies and the day he shall be raised up alive."

The reader is struck by the contrast between the invocation of peace upon oneself, and the invoking of peace on another. Furthermore, it is peace with the definite article, *al-salām*, that Jesus invokes upon himself, whereas it is the indefinite form, *salāmun*, that is invoked by the angel on John. It is as if there is a deliberate juxtaposition here between the divine attribute of peace, in respect of Jesus, and the general quality of peace—ultimately divine, in its essence, but considered here at the level of its formal manifestation—in regard to John. This contrast might be interpreted as an allusion to the fullness of divine life, and the totality of supreme Self-consciousness that infused the human substance of Christ from his very inception, this substance itself being the very Word of God. In this connection, Ibn ʿArabī alerts our attention to an extremely important analogy. The Qurʾan tells us that Jesus was indeed God's Word, "cast unto Mary, and a spirit from

[2] *Sūra Maryam* (chap. 19): verses 1-15 give the story of Zachariah/John; and 16-33, that of Mary/Jesus.

Him" (4:171): Ibn ʿArabī comments upon this, saying that Gabriel transmitted this Word to Mary just as a prophet transmits God's Word to his community.[3] Ibn ʿArabī thus shows that there is something in the very substance of Jesus that is, in and of itself, a revelation, "a sign for mankind," as the Qur'an says (19:21). Such a view of Jesus narrows, in certain respects at least, the gap that separates a Muslim from a Christian conception of the "message" of Christ.[4]

In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* we find Ibn ʿArabī commenting on this contrast between the two greetings of peace. In the chapter on John we read:

> If the speech were that of the spirit: Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised up alive—that is more complete as regards the reality of union and as regards doctrine, and more lofty in interpretation.[5]

ʿAbd ar-Razzāq Qāshānī provides just such a "lofty interpretation" with his comment on this invocation of peace upon oneself:

[3] *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Cairo, 1321), p. 173; see the English translation of the *Fuṣūṣ* by Ralph Austin, *Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 175.

[4] Meister Eckhart may be said to have made the inverse movement, by coming close to an "Islamic" conception of Christ, in some of his pronouncements. For example: "Now you might ask me, since I have everything in this (human) nature that Christ can perform according to his humanity, why then do we praise and magnify Christ as our Lord and our God? That is because he was a messenger from God to us and has brought our blessedness to us. The blessedness he brought us was our own" (*Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, translated and edited by M.O'C. Walshe [Longmead: Element, 1979], vol. I, p. 116).

[5] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 220. In the *Futūḥāt* (Cairo, 1911), Ibn ʿArabī writes: "One who praises himself is more authoritative and more complete than one who is praised, as in the case of John and Jesus. . ." (I:109.4). This sentence was cited by Layla Shamash in "The Cosmology of Compassion or Macrocosm in the Microcosm," in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society*, XXVIII, 2000, p. 31. (I have slightly modified the translation.)

> God bestows on Himself the salutation of peace, because of His own Self-determination within the ʿ*Īsawī* substance; and this also shows the perfection of Jesus' station in the witnessing of this oneness.[6]

In other words, it is God Himself who greets Himself within and through the very form of Jesus. Now this touches on many key themes of Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysics, but let us note the following point: the greeting offered to God by Himself through another can be taken as a symbol of the principle that God reveals Himself to Himself through the whole of creation. As we saw earlier, Ibn ʿArabī says that Jesus is a symbol of *takwīn*, of engendering, or of creative activity. This comes in the following poem, which opens the chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* on Jesus:

> From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel,
> In the form of a mortal fashioned of clay
> The Spirit came to be in an essence
> Purified of nature, which you call *Sijjin*.
> . . . A Spirit from God, not from anything else.
> Thus he raised up the dead and made birds from clay.
> . . . God purified him in body and exalted him in spirit,
> And made of him a symbol of engendering.[7]

Let us briefly consider this "symbol of engendering" in four ways. First, the creation of Jesus himself—by means of a breath, a word, a spirit, cast into Mary—is a miraculous sign of God's creativity in general, of the way in which the spirit enlivens matter. Secondly, the creation of Jesus is a recapitulation of the specific miracle of the creation of Adam. Thirdly, at the level of cosmogenesis, the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary expresses the principle by which the cosmos itself is brought into being: according to Ibn ʿArabī the universe originates in the epiphany of the "Muhammadan Reality" (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*), this reality being the most receptive of all realities—contained within the

[6] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 220.

[7] *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 170-172. I benefited from, but did not follow, R. Austin's English rendition of the poem in *Bezels of Wisdom*, pp. 174-175.

primal "Cloud"—to the creative Light of God.[8] It is by virtue of the Prophet's total receptivity to this Light that his passivity (*infiʿāliyya*) is transformed into activity (*fāʿiliyya*):

> Muhammad was created as a slave, in principle; he never raised his head seeking leadership, nay, he ceaselessly prostrated in humility, standing [before his Lord] in his condition of passivity, until God engendered (*kawwana*) from him all that He engendered, bestowing upon him the rank of activity (*fāʿiliyya*) in the world of Breaths. . . .[9]

One is reminded here of the words addressed to Mary in the Qurʾan by the angels:

> O Mary, truly God has chosen you and purified you, and preferred you above all the women of creation. O Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrate to Him and bow with those who bow (3:42-43).

It is not Jesus alone who was made a "sign" but he and his mother together:

> And We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign (23:50).

Thus Jesus here can be seen as a symbol of the cosmos itself, the "fruit" of the activity that is rooted in total, virgin receptivity to the Word from above, Mary's role here mirroring that of the Muhammadan Reality.

Finally, continuing this process of *fāʿiliyya*, Jesus' own activity positively reflects this divine creativity: his healing of the blind, the

[8] See Chodkiewicz's illuminating discussion of this theme in the chapter entitled "The Muhammadan Reality," in *Seal of the Saints*, translated by Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); and the fascinating description of the origination of the cosmos in *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*, Gerald Elmore (Leiden: Brill, 1999), the chapter entitled "The Emergence of the World out of the Muḥammadan Reality."

[9] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 275; see *Bezels*, p. 278.

leper, his creating a bird from clay, and most importantly, his raising up of the dead. As the Qur'an tells us, Jesus says:

> Truly I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Truly, I create for you out of clay the shape of a bird, and I breathe into it, and it becomes a bird, by God's permission. I heal him who was born blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead, by God's permission (3:49).

It is very instructive to see how Qāshānī draws out the esoteric meaning of these miraculous acts. In his *Tafsīr* he gives the following commentary:

> *Truly I create for you*, through spiritual discipline and purification and realized wisdom, from the clay of souls still deficient but nonetheless receptive, *the shape of a bird*, one that flies to the realm of holiness through the intensity of its longing. *Then I breathe into it* the breath of divine knowledge and true life, through the influence of my presence and my teaching. *And it becomes a bird*, that is, a living soul, flying with the wings of longing and aspiration towards the Real. *I heal the blind*, the one who is veiled from the light of the Real, one whose eye of insight had always been closed, and had never seen the sun of the face of the Real, nor its light . . . *and the leper*, the one whose soul is disfigured by the disease of vices and corrupt beliefs, blemished by the love of this world and besmirched by the stain of concupiscence. *And I give life* to the death of ignorance with the life of knowledge.[10]

In the spirit of this kind of commentary, one might venture to add that the words of the Qur'an, *by God's permission*, which qualify the miraculous acts of Jesus, can be understood, esoterically, as meaning that these acts were performed by Jesus in perfect conformity with his knowledge of who the agent really is; who the true Self is, within him, that is performing these acts. In other words, Jesus was not veiled from the Divine reality by his own performance of these acts: he knew that God was acting through him. The fact that God is the sole

[10] *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, p. 113.

agent emerges in the Akbari perspective as an inescapable subjective corollary of the objective oneness of being, or, to use Ibn ʿArabī's own words, of the reality "that there is nothing in Being but He."[11] Ibn ʿArabī comments in many places on the ontological implications of the verse in the Qurʾan which states: "You did not throw when you threw, but God threw" (8:17). The following few instances will suffice for our purposes:

> *You did not throw*, so He negated, *when you threw*, so He affirmed, *but God threw*, so He negated the engendered existence (*kawn*) of Muḥammad, and affirmed Himself as identical (*ʿayn*) with Muḥammad. . . .[12]

Such ambivalent negations and affirmations give rise to bewilderment:

> You are not you when you are you but God is you.[13]

But they reveal the truth that it is God alone who is the agent of all acts, the agent who acts through all the faculties of man. This truth is affirmed by Ibn ʿArabī by reference to the words of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, known as the *ḥadīth al-taqarrub*, "drawing near," in which God says that when He loves His servant, He is "the hearing with which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he strikes, and the foot whereon he walks." Ibn ʿArabī draws attention to the important fact that God speaks in the present tense, saying "I am his hearing, his sight, and his hand":

> God's words "I am" show that this was already the situation, but the servant was not aware. Hence the generous gift which this nearness gives to him is the unveiling of the knowledge that God is his hearing and his sight.[14]

[11] *Futūḥāt*, IV 272.22; as cited by W. Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) p. 327.

[12] Ibid., II 216.12; as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 114.

[13] Ibid., II 444.13; as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 115.

[14] Ibid., III 67.29; as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 326.

What this implies is that there is no change of ontological agency: God does not "become" the faculties of the servant after having allowed the servant to enjoy, in his previous condition, the prerogative of autonomous agency. God is and cannot but be the true agent of all the servant's actions and perceptions. The only change is in the awareness of the servant, his assimilation of the truth that God's sole reality includes all other agencies and excludes all ontological alterity, a truth from which the servant had been veiled by his own faculties. But it is important to add that, if one must not be veiled by the creature and its activities from true Selfhood, one must also avoid the opposite veil; that is, one must not allow the Real to veil the creature from the property that accompanies him perpetually, the property of slavehood. The relationship between the receptivity of pure slavehood and the activity of engendering was noted above; but at this point, what should be stressed is that one of the fruits of this paradoxical combination of realized Selfhood and immutable slavehood is compassion, as the following lines from the chapter on Jesus tell us:

> I worship truly, and God is our Master;
> and I am His very identity, so understand.
> When I say "man," do not be veiled by man,
> for He has given you proof.
> So be the Real and be a creature.
> You will be, by God, compassionate.[15]

The last line expresses the essence of the argument of this paper: "being" the Real—while remaining a creature—means "being" compassionate, merciful, kind. The one cannot "be" without the other. When Ibn ʿArabī writes *takun bi'Llāhi raḥmānan*, this sounds rather like an oath: by God, you will be compassionate—in the measure that you realize the true Self, which is veiled by your outer self, your ego. It should be noted that it is not a question here of realizing "*one's* true Self," inasmuch as the Self cannot be the property of any individual; the only thing that the individual can be said to possess is the property of essential poverty. In this perspective, no individual owns anything;

[15] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 180. See the translation in *Bezels*, p. 179, which I have not followed.

on the contrary, all individuals "belong" to the Self. This point emerges clearly from the following *taʾwīl* by Qāshānī of the verses in the Qurʾan in which God addresses Jesus: "O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say unto people: worship me and my mother as two gods beside God? He said: Glory to You, never could I say what I had no right to say. . ." (5:116).

> *Did you* invite people to your own soul and to your mother—or to the station of your heart and your soul; for truly he in whom subsists the reality of egoity (*anāʾiyya*) and the residue of the soul and passion, or in whom there takes place the fluctuations of the heart and its manifestation through its quality—such a one invites the creature to the station of his soul or to the station of his heart, not to the Real. *He said: Glory to You, never could I say what I had no right to say*, for indeed I have no being in reality, nor is it appropriate or correct for me to utter speech which I do not really possess; for truly speech and act, quality and being—all of this belongs to You.[16]

If, then, compassion flows from the creature, this is nothing but the compassion of God, not that of the creature; and this compassion flows all the more strongly in the measure that the creature does not

[16] *Tafsīr*, p. 194. It is interesting to note a similar principle expressed in the *Tafsīr* attributed by the Sufis to the sixth Shiʿite Imam, Jaʿfar aṣ-Ṣādiq; the following is his commentary on the words addressed to Moses by God: ". . . when he came to it [the burning bush on Mount Sinai], he was addressed, O Moses, I, I am your Lord" (20:11-12): "It is not proper for anyone but God to speak of himself by using these words *innī anā*, 'I am I.' I [that is Moses, according to aṣ-Ṣādiq's commentary] was seized by a stupor (*dahsh*) and annihilation (*fanāʾ*) 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 (*baqāʾ*)'" (Quoted in C.W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1985]), p. 10). One finds an echo of this formulation in al-Kharrāz: "Only God has the right to say 'I.' For whoever says 'I' will not reach the level of gnosis" (Cited in A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975], p. 55). Also, as-Sarrāj, in the chapter on *tawḥīd* makes the statement that none can say "I" but God, adding that "egoity" (*al-anniyya*) pertains only to God (*Kitāb al-Lumāʿ*, ed. R.A. Nicholson [London: E.J. Gibb Memorial Series XXII, 1963], p. 32 [Arabic text]).

appropriate it to himself. Ibn ʿArabī tells his readers to be the Real *and* a creature, only then will compassion flow from them; and then, not from them in respect of their own creaturely properties, but from them *biʾLlāh*, by or through God. If the consciousness of being the Real is not balanced by the consciousness that one is a creature, a slave, at the same time and for as long as one persists as an individual, then the result is in fact far from compassion, it is pride, self-delusion, and self-divinization. In other words humility and compassion are two complementary virtues that flow from a proper awareness of reality: a "proper" awareness being one that puts each thing in its right place, knowing that the creature is nothing *but* the Real, in respect of Its Self-manifestation within and through it, and that the creature is nothing *before* the Real. In both cases, the individual as such is reduced to nothing: self-effacement is the *conditio sine qua non* of Self-realization.

If one only has an awareness of being a creature, however, with no sense of the inner reality of divine Selfhood, then one's virtues, compassion included, will lack that all-embracing totality and that infinite depth which comes from realized spiritual knowledge. The more one is aware of the sole reality of God as the true ontological agent, the only true Self, the more naturally and spontaneously will compassion flow forth. In other words, the closer the individual comes to the source of compassion, the more fully will compassion be manifested through him; that is, such a one becomes not only a *marḥūm*, one upon whom compassion or mercy is bestowed, but also a *rāḥim*, one who bestows mercy to others. This is what distinguishes the "veiled ones" (*al-maḥjūbūn*) from the "folk of unveiling" (*ahl al-kashf*). As Ibn ʿArabī says:

> The veiled ones, in accordance with their belief, ask the Real to have compassion upon them, while the folk of unveiling ask that the compassion of God abide through them. They ask for this with the name *Allāh*, saying "O *Allāh*, have compassion upon us," and He only has compassion upon them by causing compassion to abide through them. Compassion has a property which in reality belongs to the essence of "that which abides through a locus" (*al-qāʾim biʾl-maḥall*).

Qāshānī comments:

> The property of compassion rules over them, for that which abides through a locus exercises its ruling property over the receptacle, in accordance with its reality; so He only has compassion upon them by causing compassion to abide through them, thus making them compassionate ones (*rāḥimīn*). . . .[17]

Those who have been rendered compassionate in this way are said to find the property of compassion by way of mystical "taste" (*dhawqan*);[18] their spiritual intuition not only gives them a taste of the essence of compassion, but shows them also that compassion is the very essence of the Real. There are many indications that compassion expresses the fundamental nature of God. The Qurʾan tells us that "My compassion encompasses all things" (7:156). The name of God, *ar-Raḥmān*, is practically synonymous with *Allāh*: "Call upon *Allāh* or call upon *ar-Raḥmān*" (17:110). Repeatedly in the Qurʾan *ar-Raḥmān* is referred to as the divine creative force from which all things arise.[19] Now according to Ibn ʿArabī, it was precisely because of His compassion that God created the world: the whole of creation is thus itself a *marḥūm*, an object of compassion. Every *mawjūd* is a *marḥūm*: every thing that is made existent is an object of compassion.[20] This perspective on creation might be seen as a commentary on one of the most important "explanations" of the reason behind the creation of the world by God. According to a famous holy utterance, a *ḥadīth qudsī*, which Ibn ʿArabī often cites, God says: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created." Here the purpose of creation

[17] *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 225-226. See Austin's translation, p. 225, which I have not followed. See also Izutsu's illuminating discussion of mercy as a key theme of Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysics, in the chapter "Ontological Mercy" in *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[18] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 226.

[19] For example, the chapter of the Qurʾan named *ar-Raḥmān* (chap. 55) begins thus: "*Ar-Raḥmān*, taught the Qurʾan, created man."

[20] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 225; *Bezels*, p. 224.

is explicitly tied to God's desire to be known; He wished to manifest His inner perfections; and this is one way of becoming known, that is, knowing Himself outwardly, as distinct from knowing Himself inwardly. As the opening lines of the chapter on Adam in the *Fuṣūṣ* have it:

> The Real willed, by virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities—if you wish you can say: to see His identity—in a comprehensive engendered being that comprises the entire affair. . . . His mystery is manifest to Himself through it, for the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision it has of itself in another thing, which will serve as a mirror for it.[21]

One of Ibn ʿArabī's most startling declarations comes, though, when he says that the first object of God's compassion was not in fact the creation, it was God Himself. In other words, God had compassion[22] for His own Names and Qualities that wished to manifest themselves, but were hidden in His own essence. In other words, He had compassion for His own hidden "treasures." As Ibn ʿArabī writes:

> Through the breath of the All-Merciful, God gave relief (*tanfīs*) to the divine names. . . . He relieved the divine names of the lack of displaying effects.[23]

So the supreme archetype or model of all compassion, of all love and feeling for the "other," is this love of God's Essence for Its own

[21] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 8. I am following Caner Dagli's translation of *ʿayn* as "identity" rather than using the other available translations, "entity," "essence," "archetype," etc. See the convincing reasons he gives for using this term, in the introduction to his translation of the *Fuṣūṣ* (The Great Books of the Islamic World, 2002).

[22] The root of the word "com-passion" expresses well this aspect of the creative function of divine *raḥma*: "to suffer with."

[23] *Futūḥāt*, II 487.34, 123.26; *Sufi Path,* p. 130. See Corbin's inspiring exploration of this theme in "Divine Passion and Compassion," chapter 1 of *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, (Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press, 1969).

Self-manifestation, for Its own theophany to an "other," and through the "other": everything is ultimately manifested by compassion, is woven of compassion, and returns to compassion: "My compassion encompasses all things," as we saw earlier. Ibn ʿArabī stresses that everything returns to mercy and compassion, but this does not deny the terrible reality of hell nor does it preclude the wrathful side of God. Ibn ʿArabī often cites the *ḥadīth* in which it is stated that God's compassion takes precedence over His wrath, but he does not deny the reality of this wrath: he attributes it, though, not to God's intrinsic nature, but to the creature's willful rejection of the mercy that is being offered to him "ontologically," that is, by virtue of the compassion that inheres in the very nature of being. As Qāshānī says, in his commentary on the opening line of the chapter on Zachariah:

> For compassion is of the Essence, as it is generous by nature, overflowing with generosity from the treasury of compassion and bounty. Being is the first effusion of the all-embracing compassion which encompasses everything. But as for wrath, it does not essentially pertain to the Real, rather, it consists in a property of a non-existential nature (*ḥukm ʿadamī*), arising out of the absence of receptivity (*ʿadam qābiliyya*), on the part of certain things, to the perfect manifestation of the effects of Being and its properties within them. . . . This absence of the effusion of compassion over a given thing, resulting from its lack of receptivity, is called "wrath" in relation to that thing, in the face of the compassionate one (*ar-rāḥim*).[24]

Therefore the compassion of being not only takes precedence ontologically over the non-existential property of wrath, it also prevails, ultimately over the accidental properties of evil and suffering, the concomitants of non-being: "Everyone will end up with mercy."[25] This truth is grasped in the measure of one's awareness—spiritually and not just notionally—of the absolute and infinite reality of goodness and the relative and limited reality of evil.

[24] *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 222.

[25] *Futuḥāt*, III 465.26, as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 338.

Returning to the theme of selfhood and compassion, the following affirmation by Ibn ʿArabī is of great importance:

> God is qualified by love for us, and love is a property that demands that he who is qualified by it be merciful towards himself.[26]

We have seen how God has mercy upon His own Names and Qualities; on the human plane, this "self-compassion" implies radical objectivity towards one's own self. This idea is expressed in a most incisive manner by Ibn ʿArabī in the following dialogue with his own soul: the very fact of the dialogue itself implies the "otherness within," the objectivity that one must have towards one's own soul. The dialogue involves two of the greatest saints of Islam, Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj and Uways al-Qaranī. Ibn ʿArabī's soul argues that al-Ḥallāj surpassed the degree of Uways because, while Uways satisfied his own needs before giving away his surplus in charity, al-Ḥallāj was prepared even to sacrifice his own needs for the sake of others. To this argument of his own soul, Ibn ʿArabī replies:

> If the gnostic has a spiritual state like al-Ḥallāj, he differentiates between his soul and that of others: he treats his own soul with severity, coercion, and torture, whereas he treats the souls of others with preference and mercy and tenderness. But if the gnostic were a man of high degree . . . his soul would become a stranger to him: he would no longer differentiate between it and other souls in this world. . . . If the gnostic goes out to give alms, he should offer it to the first Muslim whom he meets. . . . The first soul to meet him is his own soul, not that of another.[27]

To digress a little, although the focus in this paper is on the "Qur'anic" Jesus, the perspectives opened up by Ibn ʿArabī enable one

[26] *Futuḥāt*, III 429, as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 132.

[27] Quoted on pp. 56-57 of "Excerpts from the Epistle on the Spirit of Holiness (*Risāla Rūḥ al-Quds*)," translated by R. Boase and F. Sahnoun. In *Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Longmead: Element Books, 1993).

to see the Biblical message of Jesus, also, in quite a new light. Through the Akbari perspective on ontological compassion, one comes to appreciate deeper aspects of Christ's biblical injunctions: For instance, in Mark:

> The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (12:29-31).

The meaning of "loving oneself" is altogether transfigured in Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysics of Self-compassion. It is also significant that the second commandment is described as "like" the first. In Ibn ʿArabī's perspective, it is likely that the word ʿ*ayn* would be used: it is identical to the first. For he would stress that there is but one God, one reality; thus love of God must be directed to the divine nature in itself, above and beyond all creatures, but also to the divine nature immanent *within* all creatures, the divinity that constitutes the true being of the creatures. Both modes of love relate to the one and only Beloved. One recalls here another of Christ's sayings:

> Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matthew, 25:40).

And this saying in Luke, after taking a child's hand:

> Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth Him that sent me (9:48).

The idea that every *mawjūd* is by definition already a *marḥūm* raises the pitch of Christ's message of charity and compassion, a message which is so often limited to a purely moral application. For example:

> Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you. . . . Ye shall be the children of the Highest: for He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful as your Father is merciful (Luke, 6:27-28; 35-36).

This verse from Matthew evokes with particular clarity the universal compassion which embraces all things by virtue of giving them life:

> Your Father . . . maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust (5:45).

It was stated above that it is not just compassion but also humility that flows from an understanding of true Selfhood. Returning to the verses in the *Sūra Maryam* with which this discussion began, it is important to note that the first words of Jesus in the cradle were "Truly I am the slave of God" (19:30). Now it might seem at first sight that creaturely slavehood and divine Selfhood are diametrically opposed, yet in Ibn ʿArabī's perspective, as we have observed above, only he who knows that he is a slave of God will come to know that God is the only true Self of all. In his description of the climax of his own spiritual ascension, Ibn ʿArabī makes clear the relationship between slavehood and Selfhood:

> God removed from me my contingent dimension (*imkānī*). Thus I attained in this nocturnal journey the inner realities of all the Names, and I saw them all returning to One Subject (*musammā wāḥid*) and One Entity (*ʿayn wāḥida*): that Subject was what I witnessed and that Entity was my being. For my voyage was only in myself and pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure "slave" without a trace of lordship in me at all.[28]

Again, let us note that the first thing that he says after this remarkable experience of *tawḥīd* in subjective mode, that is, the realization of the oneness of true Selfhood, is that he came to know his own slavehood. What this shows clearly is that self-effacement is the consequence of true Self-realization. When the subjective core of individuality is effaced, there can be nothing to which pride can attach

[28] *Futūḥāt*, III 350.30; what we cite here is the translation given by James Morris, "Ibn ʿArabī's Spiritual Ascension," p. 380 in *Les Illuminations de La Mecque—The Meccan Illuminations, selected texts* (under the direction of M. Chodkiewicz) (Paris: Sindbad, 1988).

itself: with the effacement of individuality, there is the uprooting of pride, and the consummation of a humility that is as ineradicable as the knowledge upon which it is based is indubitable.

To complete our reflections on the relationship between Selfhood, slavehood, and compassion, let us consider the following remarkable commentary by Qāshānī on verses in the *Sūrat al-Insān*. Here, self-extinction is seen as inextricably tied to self-giving. In the verses in question we are presented with a distinction between the righteous (*al-abrār*) and the slaves of God (*'ibād Allāh*):

> Truly the righteous shall drink from a filled cup [containing a drink] flavored with Kāfūr—a fountain from which the slaves of God drink, making it flow with greater abundance (74:5-6).

Qāshānī interprets this fountain as a symbol of the divine Essence, beyond the divine Qualities. The righteous, he writes,

> are the joyous ones who have gone beyond the veils of traces and actions, and are now veiled by the veils of the divine Qualities. But they do not completely stop at this level, rather, their orientation is towards the Fountain of the Essence . . . they are midway along the Path.

The slaves, on the other hand, who drink directly from the fountain itself, without diluting the drink at all, are distinguished by their exclusive devotion to the unity of the Essence.

> Their love is for the Fountain of the Essence beyond the Qualities, not differentiating between compulsion and kindness, gentleness and harshness. . . . Their love abides in the midst of contraries, their joy remains in the face of graces and trials, compassion and distress.

The important point comes now. It shows the clear relationship between slavehood, selfhood, and self-giving: for these slaves not only love the Fountain of the Essence, they are submerged in it, totally and indistinguishably one with it. The words of the Qur'an powerfully evoke this identity, *yufajjirūnahā tafjīran*, they make the fountain

flow all the more abundantly, the more they drink from it. Why is this? Because, according to Qāshānī, the slaves

> are [themselves] the sources of this Fountain; there is no duality or otherness. . . . Were it otherwise, it would not be the Fountain of Kāfūr, because of the darkness of the veil of egoity (*anāʾiyya*) and duality.[29]

There is no ego-consciousness in the Essence, for there are no distinct egos, although all are nonetheless mysteriously contained by the Essence, in absolute non-differentiation; there is but the one Self, the *Nafs al-Ḥaqq*, the Self of the Real, and there are no distinctions, no *tafāḍul*, therein. It is only in the Paradises that one finds such ranking in degrees between the prophets, saints, martyrs, and righteous ones. In the *Futūḥāt* one finds Ibn ʿArabī making this point by means of distinguishing between "essential (*dhātī*) perfection" and "accidental (ʿ*araḍī*) perfection," the first pertaining to pure "slavehood" (ʿ*ubūdiyya*), the second to "manliness" (*rajuliyya*):

> The degree of the essential perfection is in the Self of the Real (*Nafs al-Ḥaqq*), while the degrees of accidental perfection are in the Gardens. . . . Ranking according to excellence (*tafāḍul*) takes place in accidental perfection, but not in essential perfection.[30]

In other words, "accidental perfection" pertains to the individual, whether in the world or in the heavens—this mode of unavoidable self-affirmation is thus "manly," in contrast to the ontological effacement of the individual in the highest realization, such effacement being evoked by the term "slave." Thus, to return to Qāshānī's *taʾwīl*, the drinking of the "slaves of God" at the fountain of the Essence—together with the fact that such drinking only increases the flow of the fountain—symbolizes their inner identity with the Essence, but as persons they remain distinct in the various levels of Paradise. And, one might venture to add, in the spirit of this perspective, this is not just the case in the

[29] *Tafsīr*, vol. II, pp. 360-361.

[30] *Futūḥāt*, II 588.10, 13; as cited in *Sufi Path*, p. 366.

Hereafter, it is also the situation herebelow: the prophets and the saints are inwardly at one with the Essence, while outwardly, as slaves, they imbibe from this fountain, the source of essential identity, the one and only Self of the Real; and this is why they are not just slaves, but veritable streams of grace by which the infinite compassion of *ar-Raḥmān* flows through the veins of the entire cosmos:

> And We sent you not save as a mercy to all the worlds (21:107).

"Jesus In The Qurʾan: Selfhood And Compassion—An Akbari Perspective" by Reza Shah-Kazemi

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