

AL-Mahajja³⁶

SPECIAL ISSUE: Chittick on Sufism, Love, and Man

Interview with Professor William Chittick

William Chittick

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Interview with Professor William Chittick

I. Character and Project

1. *You are considered one of the eminent scholars who have approached Sufism and 'irfān academically by translating myriad Islamic texts and letting them speak for themselves. This background serves as a starting point for many questions. For instance, what attracted you to this particular subfield? Was it related to a personal experience that served as a starting point to your journey or were you motivated by academic and scholarly curiosity? How would you evaluate this cognitive journey and what are the conclusions that you gleaned from it?*

Thank you for your interest in my work and for posing these questions, which address many of my long-time concerns.

I spent an undergraduate year at the American University of Beirut (AUB), having chosen to go there simply because my college had a program to send students there for a “junior year abroad” and I was happy to leave Ohio (the College of Wooster) for a change of scenery. Since I was a history major, I took several course on Middle Eastern history. I was required to write papers for an independent project in history, so I chose the only topic from the textbooks of my AUB courses that spiked my interest, and that was “Sufism.” I began studying the secondary literature on Sufism early in the first semester. A few weeks later Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who was a visiting professor at the time (this was 1964-65), began a series of lectures (eventually published as *Ideals and Realities of Islam*). When he reached the topic of Sufism, I realized that the Orientalist approach that I had been studying was largely missing the point. His lecture opened up an inner dimension that I had not been able to see on my own. Then I began auditing his courses. At the end of the year, I returned to Ohio, spent one more year finishing my BA, and then went to Tehran, where I enrolled in a PhD course on the Persian language and its literature in Tehran University. Once I finished three years of course work, I undertook a dissertation with Dr. Nasr as my advisor. The topic was an edition and study of `Abd al-Rahman Jami's *Naqd al-nusûs fî sharh Naqsh al-fusûs*. This 300-page book is two-thirds Arabic and one-third Persian. I spent much of my research tracking down Jami's sources, which were not only Ibn Arabi himself, but also Sadr al-Din Qunawi, Sa'id al-Din Farghani, Mu'ayyid al-

Din Jandi, and other well-known scholars. Most of these texts had not yet been published, so I was working mainly with manuscripts. I finished my PhD in 1974 and kept on working on *Naqd al-nusus*, finally publishing it in 1977. By this time, I had native fluency in Persian and a fairly good mastery of the Arabic writings of Ibn Arabi's followers.

When I returned to America in January 1979, I was able to live in my mother's house along with a large library brought back from Iran. I published a couple of translations that I had started in Iran (*A Shi'ite Anthology* and *Fakhrud-din Iraqi: Divine Flashes*) and spent most of my time reading all of Rumi's poetry and prose (leading to the book *The Sufi Path of Love*). For two years I was an editor for the *Encyclopedia Iranica* at Columbia University, and then from 1983 my wife (Sachiko Murata) and I were hired to teach Religious Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

By this time, it was obvious to me that despite many good books on Sufism, some of which were written by practitioners, the original texts tended to be misrepresented by the secondary literature. Part of the reason is that the scholars who wrote the books had never spent significant time embedded in the living intellectual culture, which was still very strong in Iran in the years before the revolution. There were good books in English about Rumi, for example, and Nicholson's translation of the whole Mathnawi, but the Western scholars were unaware of the traditional picture of Rumi drawn within the intellectual circles in Iran. The wholeness of his work and its focus on explicating *tawhīd* in the language of the common people was not brought out. It was my dissatisfaction with existing books on Rumi that led me to write *The Sufi Path of Love*, in which I tried to explain exactly what he was talking about in the context of his own theological vision.

In short, the basic conclusion that I have reached is that the studies carried out by the majority of scholars trained in modern academic methodologies are not concerned with the motivations of the original authors, nor do they take seriously the intellectual vision that infused the works of the great masters of the tradition. Modern scholars believe instead in various critical methodologies that drive the academic business throughout the university system all over the world. It has always seemed to me that we need to understand the worldview presented by pre-modern Muslim scholars, a worldview that deals with the entirety of reality. In contrast, the worldview that drives contemporary society and scholarship is bound up with an illusion of the reality of the here-and-now and an utter disregard for the transcendent realms that actually determine the nature of things.

2. One of your recent works is a translation from Persian to English of Aḥmad al-Sam'ānī's *Rawḥ al-Arwāḥ*, which is a 600-page

commentary on the divine names. Can you describe this project for us? How is al-Sam‘ānī’s commentary different from other works? What does this commentary consist of? What are some of its features that attracted your attention for their novelty?

Aḥmad al-Sam‘ānī (d. 534/1140) was practically unknown in the history of Islamic thought until Najib Mayil Herawi published *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā’ al-malik al-fattāḥ* in 1989. Arabic books by Sam‘ānī’s father Mansūr and his grandfather Muhammad were known to scholars, and some have been published. The most famous member of this scholarly family from Merv, however, is Abu Sa’d ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Muhammad al-Sam‘ānī (d. 562/1166), author of many books including the five-volume biographical dictionary *al-Ansāb*. Abu Sa’d was the son of Ahmad’s elder brother, and Ahmad was his teacher in *fiqh*. Practically everything we know about Ahmad’s life, which is very little, comes from the writings of Abu Sa’d.

Despite its Arabic name, *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a Persian text (perhaps 10% of the book is in Arabic). It is one of the most beautiful examples of early Persian prose ever written, which makes it especially surprising that the book was almost forgotten. When I first saw the book thirty years ago, I was astounded not only by the beauty of the prose, but also by the profundity of the message. Although it is presented as a commentary on the divine names and follows Abu Hurayra’s list of ninety-name names, the author devotes relatively little space to actually explaining the names, so it is not at all similar in contents, for example, to al-Ghazālī’s *Maqṣad al-asnā* or al-Qushayrī’s *Sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-husnā*. In fact, it takes each divine name as the beginning of extensive discussions of the divine reality, the human soul, the stations of the path to God, and many other issues that are fundamental to Islamic thought over history. Ahmad was known to his contemporaries as a *faqīh* (Ibn ‘Asākir refers to him as such in *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* and mentions that he received hadiths from him in Merv). But *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* represents perhaps the most detailed explication of the relationship among the three levels of the religion—Shariah, Tariqah, and Haqiqah—to be found in the twelfth century. It is survey of the broad range of Islamic teachings, with constant reference to the Quran and the Sunnah, always in exquisite Persian prose and illuminating discussions of the inner meanings of Islamic teachings. Most books in this period are specialized—Quran commentary, Hadith, jurisprudence, Kalam, *falsafa*, *tasawwuf*. But Sam‘ānī’s book weaves together the whole range of Islamic learning in an extremely readable and enjoyable fashion.

II. Details and Basics

3. Anyone who surveys your work notices a guiding line of thought beginning with Ibn ‘Arabī and extending to Shams al-Tabrīzī and Rūmī to reach Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī in the end. Are you outlining a

particular intellectual project? If so, what are its basics and where is it today?

My intellectual route has been a bit more complicated than you suggest. After discovering at AUB that Sufism represents the inner realm of Islamic teachings, a realm that deals with issues that I had met in studying other religions like Christianity and Buddhism, I set out to learn more on the topic. Back at my college in Ohio, I spent most of my senior year studying Rumi by reading his works in translation, since I knew only elementary Arabic at this time, and by studying books on comparative religion. Eventually I wrote a senior thesis called “The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi” (in 1966). I published the thesis in Tehran in 1973, and an illustrated version appeared in Indiana in 2005.

When I published my PhD dissertation, I had in mind to make Ibn Arabi’s school of thought better known in the West. Hence, I translated the *Lama`ât* of Fakhr al-Dîn `Irâqî, a short Persian classic on love written after `Irâqî had attended Qunawi’s lectures on the *Fusus* (this appeared as *Divine Flashes* in 1982). When my wife and I arrived in America in 1979, we had no job prospects, but we were able to stay in my mother’s house. I spent my ample free time studying Rumi, because I was not happy with my first book on him, which is not only too short, but which is also based on the translations of Nicholson, which have serious shortcomings. The result was my long book on Rumi, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (1983).

After publishing this book, I decided to go back to Ibn Arabi, since I did not think anything in English did a good job of explaining his teachings. I then spent about five years studying the *Futuhat*, eventually publishing *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-`Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* in 1989. I was able to read and understand Ibn Arabi’s writing only because of the many years I had spent studying the writings of his followers. When I set out to write the book, I had naively thought that I could summarize all of his teachings in one volume, but when I finished, I had to promise another volume to complete the project. The second volume was published in 1998 as *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-`Arabi’s Cosmology*. But there were many issues that I had not yet addressed, and I hope one day to put together a long study on the details of his cosmology, rather than simply the principles.

As for Sadr al-Din Qunawi, I became fascinated by his writings while I was working on my PhD dissertation. After completing the dissertation, I began writing a book on Qunawi, but after 100 pages I decided that I did not understand him well enough to complete the book, so that has remained one of my unfinished projects. Over the years I have written several more books and scores of academic articles, all of them concerned with explicating and translating the worldview of Sufism and Islamic philosophy. The Western world has plenty of scholars

interested in jurisprudence because of its importance to legal systems, society, and ideologies—a primary concern of modern man—but not enough who can see into the inner world of Islamic thought and the manner in which it shaped the Islamic world well into the twentieth century. Even now, without recovering that inner realm of meaning, Muslims risk becoming imitation Westerners, driven by ideology and consumerism. If anything guides my work more than anything else, it is the understanding that a rich tradition of explaining the meaning of reality has been forgotten by Muslims and is ignored by non-Muslims, so those of us who are aware of it have the moral and intellectual duty to make it known.

Currently I am working on Sa`id al-Dīn al-Farghānī, one of Qūnawī's most important disciples and author of a number of books, the most famous of which is his commentary on the *Tā'iyya* of Ibn al-Fārid. Called *Muntaha'l-madārik*, this book has been published three times in mediocre editions, but I have several good manuscripts, so I am confident about the text. Farghani is a master of complicated Arabic prose, but he is also systematic and repetitive (as a good teacher needs to be), which makes him easier to understand than his teacher Qunawi. I hope to publish a translation of the whole text of his commentary. The result will be an extremely detailed explication of theoretical Sufism in the style of Qunawi. Farghani's book has the added virtue of clarifying the meaning of Ibn al-Farid's poem, which is extraordinarily difficult to decipher and which has three rather misleading translations into English.

4. *You say, "Foremost among the technical terms of philosophy that Ibn 'Arabī employs is wujūd, existence or being, a word that had come to the center of philosophical discourse with Avicenna. In its Koranic and everyday Arabic sense, wujūd means to find, come across, become conscious of, enjoy, be ecstatic. It was used to designate existence because what exists is what is found and experienced. For Ibn 'Arabī, the act of finding - that is, perception, awareness, and consciousness - is never absent from the fact of being found. If on the one hand he speaks of wujūd in the standard Avicennan language of necessity and possibility, he simultaneously talks of it - in terms long established by the Sufi tradition - as the fullness of divine presence and human consciousness that is achieved in realization." It seems your approach considers that Ibn 'Arabī reinvigorated Avicenna's views on wujūd. In doing so, was Ibn 'Arabī restoring Avicennan peripatetic philosophy to its erstwhile position? Isn't there a difference between conceptual existence as presented in peripatetic philosophy and between existence as sketched out by Ibn 'Arabī to mean entities (a'yān) and their movement?*

Your question begs many questions. What was Avicenna's "erstwhile

position” and on what basis do you make that claim? Why do you say that Peripatetic philosophy deals with “conceptual existence,” as if the reality of existence and the understanding of existence are completely separate? And what do you say about other Peripatetic philosophers, like Afdal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. ca. 1220), who understands *wujūd* as the fullness of being and the fullness of finding/consciousness (on Kashani, see my *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*). And who says that Ibn ‘Arabi says that the meaning of existence is “entities and their movement?” That is a massive oversimplification.

Your questions illustrate my basic objections to the detached study of the history of philosophy, in which scholars deal with hugely complex issues by classifying authors into categories, imagining that the authors are then understood. Dimitri Gutas claims that Avicenna was probably the “greatest philosopher after Aristotle.” Aristotle is still a living presence in philosophy, and neither historians nor philosophers have anything like a unanimous understanding of what he accomplished. Avicenna was likewise a hugely complex figure, offering different perspectives on essential ideas and entering into subtle discussions not only in his great works like the *Shifā’*, but also, for example in *al-Isharat wa’ltanbihat* and *al-Ta’liqat*. To dismiss his discussions of *wujūd* as simply “conceptual” does injustice to him. That may be the opinion of some historians, but it is certainly not the understanding of many great figures in the later Islamic tradition.

But I am no expert on Avicenna. What I object to on the basis of my own work is the attempt to categorize Ibn Arabi’s notion of *wujūd* in one phrase (or even one book). I wrote two long books (and two short books) about the significance of *wujūd* in Ibn Arabi’s writings. Both *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* and *The Self-Disclosure of God* are attempts to bring out Ibn Arabi’s basic teachings about *wujūd*, a word that is used to designate, after all, both the absolute reality of God, and the infinite reality of the divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*), which is everything other than God (*mā siwa’llāh*). In terms of Ibn Arabi’s comprehensive presentation of this sweeping panorama of all that exists, no one can rival him except perhaps Mullā Sadrā.

III- Methodology, Islamic Heritage, and Shari‘a in Light of Orientalist and Modernist Studies on Islam

This section focuses on Sufism and its tripartite relationship to scripture, ‘irfān, and philosophy.

- 5. Your intellectual output is characterized by the use of the term “Sufism” in the titles of your book. Does this mean that you hold ‘irfān and Sufism to be identical? If not, is Sufism superior to ‘irfān in your view?**

The use of the word ‘irfān to designate a field of knowledge developed

gradually in Iran, mainly, I think, for social and political reasons. I am fairly familiar with Sufi literature up through the 8th/14th century, and I do not think anyone used the word *ʿirfān* in the later sense. In the Safavid period, the word came to mean a respectable field of study that *ʿulamaʿ* can undertake, a field that is different from both Kalam and *falsafa* because of its methodology, especially its acknowledgement of the possibility of a stage of knowledge *warāʾ tawr al-ʿaql*. Those who used the word *ʿirfan* in this way were especially interested in metaphysics, theology, cosmology, psychology—fields that the philosophers also dealt with—and they respected figures like Ibn Arabi. But they also tended to criticize *tasawwuf* as a way of deceiving the common people. Among the reasons for this use of the word *ʿirfān* in this manner was the fact that the Safavid Dynasty began as a Sufi order, so the Safavid kings were well aware that Sufi teachers had a broad popular appeal. Once they were established as a full-fledged monarchy with Shiʿism as the state religion, they considered the Sufi teachers as potentially dangerous rivals, so they actively discouraged the study and practice of Sufism. Hence the ulama could study *ʿirfan*, but they could not show respect for *tasawwuf*.

In short, I think that the distinction between Sufism and *ʿirfān* pertains to late Iranian intellectual history. It does not apply in the earlier period that I usually study. In the texts that I deal with, the word *ʿirfān* is not much used, and when it is used, it means the same as *maʿrifa*. It is never used to designate a “school of thought” as the word does in modern Iran.

So, I use “Sufism” because it is arguably better than the alternatives. I am happy to refer to my studies as focused on *ʿirfān* when I am speaking Persian, but we do not have an equivalent word in English. If we call it “mysticism,” we are using a word that has too much historical baggage in the Western tradition. The same problem arises with “esoterism” and “spirituality.” Scholars often say things like “Islamic mysticism” or “Islamic spirituality,” but Sufism as I understand the term is both much broader and much more specific in meaning than these general words. I discuss some of these issues in my book *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide*.

6. *You say, “Ibn ʿArabī, and even more so his followers like Qūnawī, focused on the Real Wujūd as the one, unique reality from which all other reality derives. On the rare occasions when his immediate followers used the expression waḥdat al-wujūd, they did not give it a technical sense. The first author to say that Ibn ʿArabī believed in waḥdat al-wujūd seems to have been the Hanbalite polemicist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who called it worse than unbelief. According to him, it means that no distinction can be drawn between God and the world. His attack set in motion a long controversy over the term, often with little or no attempt to define it. At least seven different*

meanings were ascribed to it in the later literature, and Orientalists followed suit, declaring that Ibn ‘Arabi invented the doctrine.” Where did Ibn Taymiyya go wrong here? How did the repercussions of his understanding manifest in the writings of Orientalists?

Ibn Taymiyya was opposed to all ways of expressing Islamic teachings that were not, in his understanding, based squarely on the Quran and the Sunna. He attacked the philosophers, many of the *mutakallimun*, and the Sufis who presented their teachings in theoretical terms drawn from philosophy and kalam, but he was not opposed to Sufi teachers like Qushayri. He attacked Ibn Arabi, whose teachings he called generally “*wahdat al-wujud*,” but he also acknowledged that Ibn Arabi’s works are permeated with Quran and Hadith. He was much more strongly opposed to authors like Qunawi and al- Tilimsani, who strayed further into the territory of philosophical speculation, or so he thought.

I am not sure that Ibn Taymiyya “went wrong.” He had an agenda, which seems to have been to protect the common people from dangerous innovations. After all, Sufism was omnipresent in Islamic society, and the theoretical sort of Sufism that is represented by Ibn Arabi and his followers was gaining more and more adherents, while Qushayri-style Sufism was gradually declining. I think that Ibn Taymiyya was well-intentioned, but that he had no taste (*dhawq*) for the exposition of *ilâhiyyât* in the philosophical, cosmological, and psychological terms that had been developed extensively in the previous century. It is certainly obvious when you read his critiques of Ibn Arabi’s writings that he is careful to quote him out of context and to make his statements seem scandalous.

As for Orientalists - before the studies of Henry Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu - almost none of them actually studied Ibn Arabi, so what they said about him reflected what they read about him in various later sources. For example, practically all of their writings say that Ibn Arabi believed in “*wahdat al-wujud*,” but, as I show in the article you just quoted, Ibn Arabi’s position was not characterized by this expression before Ibn Taymiyya. In later times, some Muslim scholars criticized *wahdat al-wujud* and others praised it, in each case defining the expression in a way that proved on the one hand, unbelief, and on the other, pure *tawhid*. Most Orientalists had no sympathy for what they called “pantheism” - a common expression they used, always in a critical sense, to translate *wahdat al-wujud*, and they dismissed Ibn Arabi as so much meaningless “mysticism.” In this way, these Orientalists adopted the position of Ibn Taymiyya.

7. You say, “According to Ibn ‘Arabi, the heart has two eyes, reason and imagination.” What are the consequences of such a view? Why did you not follow Sufi literature in mentioning the heart as having eyes and ears as well? When you speak of imagination here, do you mean by it the sensus communis (al- ḥiss al-mushtarak) or does it

connote something deeper? If we accept Ibn 'Arabi's premise that you mentioned, what are its consequences?

Like most Sufi teachers, Ibn Arabi uses the word *qalb* in the Quranic sense as the seat of the self. The heart needs to be unblemished (*salim*). So, the task of the human being is to cleanse the heart of impurity. Only then will «reason» or «intellect» function correctly. *Lahum qulub lâ ya`qilûn bihâ*. People will not be able «to intellect» until the rust (*rayn*) and disease (*marad*) is cleansed from the heart.

If I have not addressed the «ears» of the heart, it is because I am drawing the discussion from Ibn Arabi's writings about «the two eyes», which often occur in his explanations of the verse, «Did We not appoint for him two eyes?» (90:8). In keeping with Quranic usage, Ibn Arabi considers the heart the seat of our awareness, consciousness, and selfhood, and he understands it as having «two eyes.» One «eye» of the heart is *'aql*, which understands through the divine light; it sees innately that «there is no light but God,» and that this light is one. It is the faculty through which we differentiate *haqq* from *bâtil* and come to understand that God is one. A truly functioning intellect established with certainty God's *tanzîh*, the fact that He is incomparable with all of creation, transcendent, and one in every respect. This is the faculty that the *ahl al-nazar* (philosophers and *mutakallimun*) try to perfect in themselves. Their arguments constantly strive to show, with strong proofs, that God is utterly «other.»

The second eye of the heart is called imagination (*khayal*). Imagination is, in brief, an innate capacity to see that «He is with you wherever you are.» It is this capacity that needs to be developed in order to understand the complement of *tanzîh*, which is *tashbîh*, the assertion that we are somehow similar to God. To understand the function of *khayal*, we need to understand the broad way in which Ibn Arabi explains the word's meaning. Before Ibn Arabi, the word was much discussed by the philosophers, who typically described it as a faculty (*quwwa*) of the soul. They discussed the general notion of imagination with words like *hiss mushtarik* (sensus communis), *khazînat al-khayâl*, and *al-mutakhayyila*. And they did not think that imagination could be a source of reliable knowledge.

Ibn Arabi sometimes uses the word *khayâl* in the sense understood by the philosophers, but for him the word has three other meanings that need to be understood. The first two of these meanings remind us that the word *khayâl* in Arabic designates not only one of the *hawâss bâtiniyya*, but also an image in the outside world, like what we see in a mirror. Here the word is often used as a synonym for *mithâl*.

As Ibn Arabi explains it, the broadest meaning of *khayâl* is everything other than God (*mâsiwa'llâh*). The entire universe is an image in the mirror of

nonexistence. Just as all the sun's rays make the sun manifest while no single ray is identical with the sun, so also the rays of the Necessary Existence make all existent things manifest while no existent thing is identical with God. The cosmos in its entirety is God's self-disclosure (*tajallî*), God's display of images, and all the images illustrate His reality, because there is no other true reality. These images are the "signs" that play such an important role in the Quran. They are the words of God "that never run out," even if all the oceans were ink and all the trees were pens. In brief, the entire universe and each thing within it are images of God. Each thing is a *barzakh*, standing between *al-wujud al-mutlaq*, which is God, and *al-'adam al-mutlaq*, which has no existence whatsoever. Everything other than God displays the light of God, so all things are images of God's light, but all things are also mixed with darkness, so they veil his light. Everything is simultaneously God's face (*wajh*) and His veil (*hijab*). In short, the cosmos is *al-khayâl al-mutlaq*— everything other than God is both image of the Real and an image of the unreal.

Within the cosmos there is a hierarchy of worlds, as acknowledged by practically all Muslim scholars. The briefest way to describe the worlds is in terms of three levels, which are, in Quranic terms, heaven, earth, and "what is between the two." Heaven is the high realm of angels, earth is the low realm of bodies, and the in-between is the realm of jinn and souls. These three basic worlds are often called '*alam al-arwah*', *alam al-khayal* (or *al-mithâl*), and '*alam al-ajsam*'. This '*alam al-khayal*' indicates the second meaning of imagination in Ibn Arabi's vision. It is the world of the *barzakh* between bodies and spirits. The World of Imagination is neither bodily nor spiritual, or it is both bodily and spiritual.

The third meaning of imagination is the entire realm of the soul. As a microcosm of the universe, the human being is created with a spirit, a soul, and a body. The soul is an image of both the spirit and the body. It is a *barzakh* between the spirit and the body. It is neither the body nor the spirit, but it is both bodily and spiritual.

Ibn Arabi acknowledges that the intellect has myriad levels. He would agree with Rumi, who says that the intellect is light—the light of awareness, consciousness, and understanding. This light is always just light, nothing else, but some light is brighter and some is darker. There is an intellect like a spark, an intellect like a candle, an intellect like a lamp, and intellect like a star, an intellect like the moon, and an intellect like the sun. The sun-intellect is actualized by the prophets. Other human beings actualize intellect in lesser degrees. Ignorant people have intellect, but in them it is like sparks and flickering candles.

The fact that intellect has degrees is self-evident. What is not self-evident is that imagination also has degrees. The human ability to imagine things is reducible, in Ibn Arabi's terms, to the human faculty of perceiving the self-

disclosure of God in the images in which He discloses Himself to us. For some of us, the only images we see are concrete, physical reality, and our imaginations perceive that through our outward senses and reproduce it through our inward senses—imagination, reflection (*fikr*), memory, etc. For some of us, our most intense images are found in dreams, some of which may be truthful (*sâdiqa*). For those who follow the prophetic models of cleansing the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs: qad aflaha man Zakkâhâ*), imagination gradually strengthens such that it perceives the images of the divine self-disclosure in higher realms of being, that is, in the various realms of the World of Imagination (which is far vaster than the World of Bodies) and even, for a few, in the World of the Spirits. Words like *kashf* and *shuhûd* as Ibn Arabi uses them, refer to this vision of the images of self-disclosure, that is, the perception of God's presence in all things. Notice that Ibn Arabi often refers to *ahl al-kashf wa'l-wujûd*, using the word *wujûd* in its basic sense of finding and perceiving.

So, the correct function of imagination is to perceive God's presence in His self-disclosure, to understand the reality of *tashbih*. Since the entire cosmos is God's self-disclosure, its role is to see the presence of God wherever you look in the outward realm or the inward realm. "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God." In contrast, the correct function of intellect is to perceive that God is absent from all things, for He is not identical with anything in the universe. This is the vision of *tanzih*. Both visions are correct, and both are visions of the heart. In order to see God, the universe, and the human self correctly, we must actualize the two eyes of our hearts, intellect and imagination.

Ibn Arabi's criticisms of the *ahl al-nazar* goes back to the fact that they correctly affirm the importance of *`aql*, but they deny the equal importance of *khayal*. Hence, they do not perceive reality correctly, and that holds them back from achieving the ultimate good of the human soul, which is to actualize the divine form, to remember all the names taught to Adam, to act as God's vicegerent in the earth, and to enter among the Foremost (*al-sâbiqûn*) in the afterlife.

**8. What do you think of Ibn 'Arabi's method in interpreting the Qur'ân?
And how can we strike a balance between what Ibn 'Arabi terms
tanzih and *tashbih*?**

I cannot say that Ibn Arabi has a specific method of interpreting the Quran other than "*fattaqu'llah, yu'allimukum allah*." He writes that anyone who recites the Quran without seeing a new meaning in each verse whenever he recites it has not recited God's word as it should be recited. He sees the Quran as the living presence of God. He does not have an academic method that someone else could follow—in contrast, for example, to `Abd al-Razzaq Kashani's *Ta'wilat*, which has been published in Ibn Arabi's name. If you read the *Futuhat* carefully, you realize that most of what he is saying is commenting on specific verses. And he claims

that the book was “opened up” to him, that is, it is a product of unveiling, not rational investigation. So, my brief answer is that Ibn Arabi does not offer us a method with which to study the Quran, because his method is to open himself up to unveiling and to let the knowledge that flows into him from God explain what the text is saying. As far as he is concerned, his commentary comes to him in answer to the prayer *rabbi zidni `ilman*. So perhaps his advice is to use that *du`a* to help us understand the Quran.

To strike a balance between *tanzih* and *tashbih* is to strike a balance between the two eyes of the heart. Somehow, we need to give equal weight to intellect and imagination. Ibn Arabi thinks that the philosophers and *mutakallimun* give too much weight to intellect and not enough to imagination. Studying the “Sufi” approach to Islamic learning is one way of striking a balance, especially if one has been studying the overly rationalistic approaches of other disciplines. In the end, it is up to each individual to find that balance in himself or herself, and that is a practical matter for which books can only provide a rough guide.

9. You say, “[T]he most important service we can render as scholars of Sufism is to make the subject available to those who want to access it, not to pile up analysis upon analysis, theory upon theory [...] In my own experience, the best way to open the door to the world of Sufi and Islamic thought is to provide access to texts, not analyses and descriptions and theoretical musings [...] so students are too often left with cold, one-eyed interpretations, slanted by the methodological prejudices that are built into academic work.”

Based on the above quotation:

a- Is your method while translating confined to rendering the texts without supplementing the material with personal analysis? Do you think the interpretations that a translator inserts may distort the import of the original text? If so, what measures have you taken to avoid such distortions when translating texts from their source language to your own?

I always provide analysis along with my translations, but my stress is to bring out what the author is getting at by explaining the meaning of words and concepts. Even when I don't provide much explanation (as in *Rawh al-arwah*), I do provide long introductions, both historical and conceptual, hundreds of footnotes, and detailed indexes. The paper you just quoted was delivered at a conference attended by specialists on Sufism, most of whom had spent their scholarly career writing about historical issues, methodology, and all sort of other issues while paying relatively little attention to the concerns of the authors of the books that they study. I am sure some of the scholars found my paper rather

offensive, because I was addressing what several of them do in their scholarship.

When I was a PhD student in Iran in 1969, we had a course taught by one of the last of the great scholars of the older generation. One day, he expressed wonder at the work done by the young scholars of Persian literature, Islamic studies, and Sufism. He declared that they performed amazing analyses of the old texts and could tell you anything at all about the texts and the authors, except what the author was saying. They read the texts but had no real interest in the contents and the meanings expressed therein. When I read modern scholarship on Islamic intellectual history, this is often what I see. Relatively few scholars think that the authors had anything significant to say. Instead, they analyze the writings with motives derived from modern theories of history and literature. In general, this is the way scholarship “moves forward” today—by ever-renewed analysis based on current literary and philosophical theories, theories that come and go like women’s fashion.

b- Does your translation method take into account modernist methodologies for studying religions, including Islam? Do you believe that your own intellectual project builds on the traditional accumulation of knowledge at the levels of cognition and the Shari‘a, falling in line with interpretive circles that employ modernist methodologies seeking to offer a modernist version of Islam?

I do not know which “modernist” methodologies you have in mind. If they are more or less what I was talking about in the previous answer, then I have little interest in such methodologies, because they largely ignore what was at issue for the Muslim scholars who wrote the books. Many of the current methods share the modern obsession with politics and the “reformation” of society—that is, they come at the source material with ideological goals. These goals are often couched in the jargon of “development”— words like progress, care, welfare, standard of living, and so on. These words are empty of denotation but have many seemingly benign connotations, so people think they are “good”. All ideologies use the same set of empty words to make people imagine that this new program will solve human ills. But year by year the ills get worse, with “progress” lurking just around the corner, or so we are told.

Muslim philosophers and Sufis were focused on reformation, yes, but reformation of the soul, not society. They had very clear notions of the human self in the context of the entire cosmos and the soul’s ultimate perfection. They knew that the goal of human life could only be achieved by individuals engaging in a difficult quest for inner betterment. The idea that an ideological grid could be imposed on society—call it democracy, call it socialism, call it Islam—and that this would bring about “progress” would have been inconceivable to them, and in any case inane. “Progress” is an inner climb in the direction of God, the

philosophers' Necessary Being. It can only be achieved by exceptional individuals. For the Sufis, these individuals, after the prophets, were the *awliyā'*, those who followed the footsteps of Muhammad on the *mi'rāj*. Early philosophers in particular paid relatively little explicit attention to the Quran and Hadith, but their worldview and their understanding of the perfection that human souls must strive to achieve was closely allied to that of the Sufi teachers.

So, my objection to most “modernistic” interpretations of Islam and religion is that they take for granted that the modern West has achieved something admirable and desirable—if only its technological prowess—and they assume that human betterment lies in the direction of adopting the political and social techniques of mass coercion (through indoctrination by the media, for example) employed by modern governments to achieve their ideological ends, ends that can never be achieved. They forget what being human was considered to be in pre-modern times, or they reject that goal as “backward” and “impractical.”

IV- Themes

■ Wilāya

10. *What is your conception of wilāya and imāma, particularly as you dedicated a book for the topic? Where does wilāya stand in relation to the project of modern-day 'irfān?*

Perhaps you are referring to *A Shi'ite Anthology*, which was my first major translation project. That book is simply a presentation of texts, mainly by great early Muslims who happened to be counted among the Imams by the Shi'ites. Anyone who has read those texts knows that they have nothing to do with the Shi'ite/Sunni split over the question of leadership of the community.

As for *wilaya/walaya*, the word obviously goes back to the Quran. The question of what makes a *wali* and how he might be different from a *mu'min* or a *nabi* was often discussed by Muslim scholars, Sunni and Shi'ite. By juxtaposing the term with *'irfān*, I have the impression that you are thinking of modern discussions in Iran, and to my mind these are far too mixed with the politics and conflicting ideologies of modern-day Shiites to talk intelligibly about the issues. There is certainly no consensus, and I think that taking the modern debates into account makes us lose sight of the primary issue, which is how every human being should be striving to become a *wali'allah*.

■ Love

11. *Some scholars have noted that you focus extensively on the concept of love. You attempt to follow the traditional approach of Orientalists who attempt to offer a view of love from the outside looking in.*

In particular, you have spoken about Ibn ‘Arabi as learning about love from Jesus in your study on the former: “In his early teens he underwent a visionary conversion ‘at the hands of Jesus (’albeit the Jesus of the Koran), and this resulted in an ‘opening’ (futūh) of his soul toward the divine realm.” Based on that, what does love in Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception connote and how did he conceive of Jesus? Why have you afforded the concept of love in particular so much attention?

When I mentioned Ibn Arabi’s *tawba* at the hands of Jesus, I was simply citing his own words, and I believe that the sentence you quoted is the only place in my writing where I refer to Ibn Arabi’s spiritual relation with Jesus. So, you cannot place me among those Orientalists who seem to imagine that Sufism is some kind of hidden Christianity inside Islam. In my translations of Ibn Arabi’s writings, the name Jesus often appears, because Ibn Arabi frequently talks about him, especially in reference to the mentions of his name by the Quran. But he also talks a great deal about Abraham and Moses, so it is not as if Jesus play a bigger role in Ibn Arabi’s writings than he does in the Islamic tradition generally.

As for Ibn Arabi’s understanding of love, he certainly did not learn it from Jesus. He learned it from God. Inasmuch as he expressed it in words, he is basing himself mainly on the Quran and the Sunnah. His understanding of love is not much different from the understanding of most Sufi teachers, for whom love has been an important issue from early times. When I set out to write my book *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*, I had in mind to cover the topic from earliest times down at least to Mulla Sadra. Eventually, I found that there was far too much material to attempt a complete survey, so I ended this 450- page book with the 6th/12th century, leaving Ibn Arabi out of the picture.

In the *Futuhat*, the hadith that Ibn Arabi quotes or references more than any other is the famous hadith of *nawāfil*, especially the last part, where God says, “When I love My servant, I am his hearing with which he hears, the seeing with which he sees, the hand with which he holds, and the foot with which he walks.” In the literature of love generally, this hadith is understood as designating the goal of love, which is to achieve such proximity to God that it is difficult to differentiate between Lord and servant.

The most often cited Quranic verse in the literature of love is 5:54, usually in the short form, “*yuhubbuhum wa yuhubbunahu*.” This verse is understood as making four things perfectly clear: God is both lover and beloved, and human beings are also both lover and beloved. This is not an issue of choice. This is the reality of existence. It is the way things are. In actual fact, God loves human beings, and that explains why He created the universe. In actual fact human beings love God, and that explains why they can never settle down in love for anything else. They are constantly distracted by love for other things, but in fact, the other things are veils, concealing the omnipresent face of God. Love for God

is *haqīqī*, and love for anything else is *majāzī*.

God's universal love for all things, however, does not necessarily lead to happiness. Just as God is *al-rahman*, and "His mercy embraces everything," including Satan and hell, so also, He is *al-rahim*, and He specifies His mercy for certain people, thereby taking them to paradise. Just as God loves all human beings, so also, He loves some human beings in a special way. These are the prophets and the friends (*awliyā'*), and they are also the *muhsinin*, who are specified for God's love in several Quranic verses—not the *muslimin*, and not the *mu'minin*.

So how does one make oneself worthy for God's special love? This is explained by 3:31, the second most often cited verse about love: "Say: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.'" This verse is understood as instructions for those who understand the first verse on love. If you understand that in actual fact, you love God, you have taken a first step in actualizing *tawhid*, which is to recognize that "there is no beloved but God." However, it is enormously difficult to turn away from all the metaphorical beloveds that we constantly face in everyday life and to focus on the true Beloved. The way is clarified by the Sunnah—following Muhammad results in God's turning the second sort of love toward you. And when He loves the servant, "He becomes the ears with which he hears," etc. The goal of love is achieved.

And what is the goal of love? Every lover knows that he wants to be in union with his beloved. *Tawhid* means to establish oneness. Love is the divine energy that brings about the oneness between lover and beloved. And remember that love goes both ways, which is to say that God is lover, and hence He created human beings and He loves them, so human beings are His beloveds. And human beings are lovers, and God is their Beloved. So, both God and man are motivated by love to establish oneness and union.

The stress of Sufi teachers on love has everything to do with the fact that they understood that the goal of the religion is to achieve human perfection by transforming the soul and becoming close to, if not one with, God. Jurists talk about do's and don'ts, and they have the form of knowledge known as *fiqh*. Following the rules is necessary, so when the verse says "Follow me," that is, follow Muhammad, that means following the Shariah generally. But Muhammad was a perfect human being, and following him is much more than following the rules. If one wants to follow the rules, one needs to learn the rules from the jurists. To follow Muhammad, you also must have complete faith, which is codified as belief, the creed—*i'tiqād*, *'aqīd*—and this also is a form knowledge that everyone needs to know.

People understand that when you want to know about practice, you ask

someone who is an expert (a jurist). When you want to understand what you are supposed to believe, you ask someone who has the knowledge of the creed. But when you want to achieve oneness with God, how can you ask someone for help? Yes, you can receive instructions. But then you must act on your own, you must know on your own. Otherwise, you are simply a parrot, an ignorant *muqallid*.

In talking about love, the discussion is different. Someone can tell you about right practice and right doctrine, and you can very go to the experts and their books to learn this knowledge. But no one can tell you how to love. Everyone who has been in love with another human being knows that love is inexplicable; for far greater reason, loving God is also inexplicable. Talking about love is a waste of time. Consulting with the experts is nonsense. You yourself must be a lover. This is the basic message of Sufism. It may be someone else's business to tell you what you should know about your practice and what you should know about your God and His Prophet, but it is your business to love God. The general Sufi focus on love turns the discussion away from theory and imitation (*taqlid*) toward the transformation of the human soul through gaining proximity to the True Beloved.

12. a. In most of your articles, you stress the centrality of love, asserting that it is - alongside thinking well of God (*ḥusn al-ẓann*) - the most important element in having a close relationship with Him. Do you believe that this love is the origin of man's feelings toward God, which were expressed in the poetry of many Sufi orders, or is obeying God (in a voluntary religious way, not a compulsory ontological way) the condition for realizing this love? In other words, can a sinner who insists on sinning be described as a lover of God although he doesn't abide by the Shari'a?

First, I have a real problem translating the word "feelings" back into Arabic. Let us say that what we have in mind by "feelings" is the human soul (*nafs*) and its perception (*idrāk*) of reality. The soul is a fundamental topic of discussion in the Quran, the Hadith, and all the Islamic sciences, though some approaches pay much more attention to it than others. The questions "What am I?" and "Who am I?" are central to the approach of both philosophy and Sufism.

"Man's feelings toward God" - however we define "feelings" - rise up from our soul, and God created man in His form and taught him all the names. So, the human soul has the potential to make manifest every "feeling" that is designated by the divine attributes. There is a hadith to the effect that God has "300 *khulq*", a word I translate as "character trait". The hadith goes on to say that if a human being actualizes one of those character traits, he will enter paradise. Among those character traits, and among the names of God, is love. Each attribute, when reflected in a human soul, has a trace (*athar*) and a property (*hukm*). Some of these names are clearly manifest in all human beings. We are alive because God

is alive. We know because God knows. We desire because God desires. We have power because God has power. We speak because God speaks. As for love, we love because God loves. Is that a “feeling?” To call God’s love a “feeling” would be nonsense, given that it is identical with God himself, who is the Creator of the universe and the human soul.

Each divine attribute, when actualized in a human soul, has properties and traces. Which of the attributes brings about the urge to return to our Creator? Of course, knowledge is utterly basic. If we do not have any knowledge of God, we will have no reason to practice a religion, except perhaps social convenience (which is a form of *nifâq* and *riyâ’*). So, we need to have knowledge to begin with. But which divine attribute should we actualize if we want to be everything that God calls us to be? In order to achieve a goal, you must desire to do it. But “desire” (*irâda*), though a divine attribute, is rather too general and too inclusive to be specific to the human relationship with God. Love, in contrast, refers to a mutual relationship between the lover and the beloved, with the obvious goal of coming together and being “one”. “He loves them, and they love Him” means, in an interpretation found in most of the theorists of love, that God wants to be one with us, and we want to be one with Him. This is not a matter of feelings, but a matter of ontology. The Real *Wujûd* loves us human beings. Out of love for us, He gave existence to us. Once we come into existence, we love Him, because love is intrinsic to human nature. In fact, it is intrinsic to the nature of all created things, a point that Avicenna among others explains in detail.

Only human beings, however, who are created in “the form of God,” can love God as God. Other creatures love, but the object of their love will always be God’s blessings, not God Himself. This is why some Sufi teachers criticize those who practice the religion in order to reach paradise and avoid hell. In fact, such people love their own salvation, not God. They love themselves, not their Creator. Not that I am advocating this position. I am just pointing out that *shirk* is easy to understand in terms of love. When we have ulterior motives in love, we do not consider that true love. This is obvious in human relations, and it should be much more obvious in the human/divine relationship. But given God’s mercy and the fact that “*khuliqa al-insân da’ifâ*,” God is likely to excuse the ulterior motives and be more forgiving than a human lover might be.

To focus on love in discussions of Islam is to focus on the purpose and goal of religion. To focus on practice—Shariah and jurisprudence—is to focus on the means of achieving the goal. Those who think the Shariah is everything have lost sight of both the knowledge of God and the love of God that are necessary if we are to live up to the models provided by our father Adam, God’s first *khalifa*, and the other prophets, not least the prophet of Islam. The Quran makes explicit that the motivation of practice should be love for God. If that is not why you are

observing the Shariah, you are a hypocrite. “Say: ‘If you love God, follow me.’ God will love you.” This is the explicit commandment to observe the Sunnah in order to actualize God’s love, for the sake of which we were created.

As for the “sinner” who claims to love God. We are all sinners inasmuch as we accepted the Trust and have failed to live up to it, so we are *zalūman jahūlan*. There are clearly degrees of sin (*saghā’ir, kabā’ir*) etc., but in the end, *La taqnatu min rahmati Allah. Inna Allah yaghfuru al-dhunub kullaha*. It is better to let God be the judge of who is a sinner and who is not. And being a hypocrite (*munafiq*) is of course much worse than being simply a disobedient sinner. One of the great problems with putting all of the stress of a religion on outward, public observance is that it encourages *nifāq* and *riyā’*. So “abiding by the Shariah” itself guarantees nothing. The Shariah has no way to judge *nifāq*, and legislating the Shariah turns many people into hypocrites, since they have no choice but to follow the rules in public, even if they ignore them in private.

So, my position on this is that anyone who wants to be a lover of God in the Islamic context must be a follower of Muhammad (“Follow me. God will love you”), and that means observing both the Shariah (the outward Sunnah) and the Tariqah (the inward Sunnah). The politicization of the Shariah in modern times totally obscures the primary importance of the inward Sunnah throughout Islamic history. It is the soul that needs transformation, and mere attention to the rules (Shariah) or social conformity (*nifāq*) does not assist in *takhalluq bi akhlāq allāh*, which is the goal of the Tariqah.

b. In that same vein, is it accurate to call a Muslim who converts to another Abrahamic religion an apostate if he is a lover of God who decides to take another path to God out of love for Him and in search of salvation? This question is raised particularly as the Prophet’s stance from apostates is clear in historical sources and ḥadīth literature.

As for the issue of conversion, this is a complicated discussion, not least because in each case it will depend on the circumstances. Remember that Muslim authorities over the centuries have held that anyone who hears about Islam should convert to Islam, because he has been exposed to the truth and has a responsibility to accept it. But many of the same authorities have also pointed out—centuries ago, Ibn Arabi among them—that the Islam that is offered by the ulama is not in fact true Islam, so you cannot blame someone for not accepting the falsified Islam that is presented to them. This discussion was not about the time of the Prophet, when the truth had come, and falsehood had vanished away (*jā’ alhaqq...*). The discussion took place centuries after the Prophet, when the religion was no longer understood and practiced in its fullness. Now that we have reached the 21st century, it should be obvious to everyone that the public faces of most forms of Islam are distortions of the tradition. Why would anyone be

attracted to such a religion or have a moral and ethical responsibility to convert to it?

So, I look at the conversion of Muslims to other religions in the same way. If someone does convert, it is because he or she has not been exposed to authentic Islam, and if so, he or she is rightly rebelling against the religion's falsification. This is hardly *irtidâd*, because such people did not have the Islam of the Quran and the Prophet in the first place. Such "apostates" are not in fact apostates, because they were never exposed to the truth of Islam. Hence, they cannot leave it. Whether they will find a better path elsewhere is up to God, of course. And who are we to judge their motivations? God alone knows what is in people's hearts. It is best to leave others to God's mercy and to worry about our own souls, which are still *zalûm* and *jahûl* by definition.

■ Pluralism and Salvation

13. *a. You assert in various places that it is extremely difficult to prove that the Qur'ân is addressing itself exclusively to the followers of Islam when it employs the term "Muslims." You say, rather, that it's possible that such an address directs itself at the followers of all prophets. This means that any talk of Muslim salvation in the Qur'ân might actually mean the salvation of the followers of all Abrahamic religions, and of all people who have submitted to God even if they did so involuntarily by submitting to the ontological command. Such a salvation encompasses creation in its entirety. You also assert that mercy would not encompass some people, such as Hitler for instance, until they go through a period of punishment and that eternal existence in Hell does not have to be abolished for someone to be included in God's mercy.*

When I say that the words *islâm* and *muslim* in the Quran do not usually, if ever, designate "Islam" as the historical religion founded by the Quran and Muhammad, I am not saying anything other than what various commentators have said over the centuries. Nor do I say that *islâm* refers exclusively to "Abrahamic" religions. Of course, the Quran is addressed to the world where Abrahamic religions were predominant, but it also acknowledges, in various ways, that *li-kulli ummatin rasûl*. Nor are the *majûs* in the Quran "Abrahamic." So, you cannot declare that the Quran excludes non-Abrahamic religions. The common idea in classical texts, that God sent "124,000" prophets from Adam down to Muhammad makes clear that, in principle, Muslim scholars recognized that prophethood was not limited to the "Abrahamic" religions.

Also, I have not said that the ontological command brings about only salvation. It also brings about damnation. Only God's mercy can guarantee

salvation, and rejecting the prescriptive command as brought by the prophets (whether Abrahamic or not) can be a barrier to receiving God's mercy, though nothing can prevent the mercy of *wujūd*, given that "His mercy embraces everything." I think Ibn Arabi takes the wisest position on salvation when he maintains that, given the universality of ontological mercy, everyone will eventually be embraced by it, even if they have to suffer in hell for eons and eons before they reach it. But neither he nor any other Muslim thinker I am aware of rejects the reality of hell and its suffering. It is simply that God's mercy cannot allow for the suffering of hell to last forever. *Khālidūn fihā* refers to remaining in the Fire forever, not suffering forever. Those who belong in the Fire will eventually be happy where they belong.

b. How do you look at the difference between the centrality of salvation in Christian theology and the consequences of such a centrality that manifested in the emergence of interpretive trends such as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism on the one hand and the concept of salvation for Muslims on the other hand? Do you think that when the Islamic cognitive system discussed the idea of salvation it had the same conception of salvation in mind as Christian theology? In other words, can we discern some kind of Islamic interpretation that presents the three trends (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism) that have been highlighted in modern Christian theology?

I am no expert in Christian theology. But it seems to me that two of the three positions you mention are modern attempts to face the historical reality of a multiplicity of religions. The classical Christian position was exclusivism- "No salvation outside the church." My personal understanding is that the Quran is relatively inclusive and plural, especially when compared to classical Christian positions. The Quran's statements about divine mercy and the omnipresence of prophetic messages mean that God has made his guidance and forgiveness available to all human beings, whether or not they have been exposed to historical Islam. You can argue that Islam is the last and most perfect of these religions, but that cannot mean that other religions are therefore invalid. The idea of the *naskh* of other religions is an Islamic form of exclusivism that has no Quranic basis. All the verses that might be read to indicate *naskh* of previous prophetic messages have other possible interpretations.