Article

Rethinking the *Unio Mystica*: From McGinn to Ibn ʿArabī

Arjun Nair

Religion, University of Southern California, University Park Campus, 825 Bloom Walk, Building: ACB, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA; arjunnai@usc.edu

Abstract: Research into the *unio mystica* has revealed what seems to be an area of "real discussion" between scholars of different traditions of mysticism, particularly those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although this research serves as a promising start to the dialogue among scholars, it has also raised many questions about a "shared moment" that is nevertheless expressed in "irreducibly diverse" and distinct ways in each tradition. What purpose, for instance, can generic cross-cultural categories serve when they mean little or nothing to scholars in each tradition? By contrast, tradition-specific vocabularies are profuse and often difficult to represent in interlinguistic contexts without significant explanation. The challenge of translating mystical texts, imagery, and ideas across cultures and linguistic traditions raises obvious concerns about the misrepresentation and distortion of traditions in an environment of post-colonial critique. Nevertheless, the continued promise of dialogue calls for specialists of these traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—to approach, assess, re-formulate, and even challenge the categories of mysticism from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of the traditions that they research. The present study models such an approach to scholarship in mysticism. It offers a (re)formulation of the *unio mystica* from within the theoretical frame of the 12th/13th-century Muslim/Sufi mystic, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and early members of his school of thought. By unpacking the primary terms involved in such an account—"God", the "human being/self", and "union"—from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of that tradition, it problematizes the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* constructed from the writings of specialists in Christian mysticism. More importantly, it illustrates the payoff in terms of dialogue (incorporating the critique of existing theories) when each tradition operates confidently from its own milieu, developing its own theoretical resources for mysticism rather than prematurely embracing existing ideas or categories.

Keywords: *unio mystica*; mystical consciousness; Bernard McGinn; Muḥyī ʾl-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī

1. Introduction: The *Unio Mystica* and the Dialogue Among Traditions

Research into the *unio mystica* has revealed what seems to represent an area of "real discussion" (McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–93 at 186) between scholars of different traditions of mysticism, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A 1996 study (Idel and McGinn 1996) conducted by Bernard McGinn, Moshe Idel, and colleagues researching these three traditions[1] revealed that the *unio mystica*[2] represented a "moment" of convergence (Dupré 1996, pp. 3–23 at 3) shared by the three traditions that was "deep and long" (McGinn 1996b, p. vii), and one in which specialists in each tradition could, therefore, engage in "ecumenical dialogue" (McGinn 1996b, pp. vii–ix at viii). The findings of the study, summarized a decade later by McGinn in an entry for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, revealed that the mystical literatures across these traditions expressed the two basic poles of the *unio mystica*: (1) that of "uniting" (*unitas spiritus*)—an intentional union between God and the

human being/self—which emphasized the continued distinction between the two; and (2) "identity" (*unitas indistinctionis*), which expressed rather the indistinction between God and the human being/self (Dupré 1996, pp. 17–18; McGinn 2005, p. 6335). These two aspects of the *unio mystica* could, it seems, account for and coherently explain the dizzying variety of statements pertaining to "union" found in diverse mystical texts across the three traditions.

Although the study represented a promising start in the dialogue among specialists of these three traditions, it also raised countless questions[3] about a putative convergence that is nevertheless expressed in irreducibly diverse ways within each tradition (Dupré 1996, p. 3). Since the term "*unio mystica*" has meant nothing to most mystics and only remains useful today as a generic cross-cultural category chosen by scholars to facilitate dialogue, its value may be questioned by those who reject the very possibility of dialogue across radically incommensurable traditions. By contrast, the terminology developed *within* traditions has been richly elaborated, achieving precise meaning "within the religious language worlds of which" it is part (Sells 1996b, pp. 163–73 at 163). For this reason, specialists naturally worry that generic terms used by scholars today—like "God"—though certainly useful for dialogue, risk erasing many of the vital connections that tradition-specific vocabularies desire to convey in their own contexts—words like *Allāh*, *al-Ḥaqq*, *Wājib al-Wujūd*, and *khudā* in Islamic(ate) traditions, or Brahman, Eiyn Sof, YWHW, Son, and Logos in other languages and linguistic traditions.[4]

Of course, the translation of mystical texts, imagery/symbols, and ideas from (pre-modern) traditions into modern languages faces serious challenges that should not be underestimated. Tradition-specific vocabularies are usually difficult to represent in shared/interlinguistic contexts where most readers have no prior access to the tradition. Added to this is the well-founded fear of distorting, misrepresenting, or even destroy-ing[5] non-western/non-Christian traditions in an era of post-colonial[6]/de-colonial critique (Hernández 2021, p. 177; Doniger 2000, pp. 63–74 at 64). Although these challenges might prevent some from taking up the task, the continued promise of dialogue calls for specialists of different traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—to approach, assess, re-formulate, and even challenge the very categories of mysticism from within the theoretical and conceptual horizons of the traditions they research/represent.

Since the categories of modern mysticism have their roots in the academic study of *Western Christian* mysticism (Schmidt 2003; McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–86), and since those categories also typically purport to embrace the teachings of a variety of non-Christian/non-western traditions, it is particularly vital that each tradition of scholarship deploy its own theoretical resources for mysticism from a position of "epistemic sovereignty"[7], and not through a curated process with some already determined theoretical agenda (Hallaq 2018, pp. 179–228; Lumbard 2024). Finally, it is crucial that the dialogue between traditions proceed through the disciplined practice of translation, the assimilation of different per-spectives, and the deployment of the ideas of each tradition toward the formulation of new "mystical theory"; and not through the more indeterminate, imaginative, and "magical" art of comparison, which might content itself with a superficial recognition of similarities over a deeper exchange of ideas and perspectives.[8]

The present study models an approach to mysticism that incorporates the above criteria. It offers a (re)formulation of the *unio mystica* from within the conceptual horizons or "worldview"[9] of the 12th/13th-century Muslim/Sufi mystic, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), and early members of his school of thought.[10] It also responds to ideas presented by scholars of Christian mysticism—Bernard McGinn, Louis Roy, and Dom Sebastian Moore—from whom a generalized account of the *unio mystica* expressed in terms of the "mystical consciousness" may be constructed. In doing so, it shows where an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker

today might take issue with the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* in the study of mysticism. The second aim of the paper—the response to McGinn and colleagues (hereafter McGinn et al.)—should be taken as a provocation more than a substantive critique, since it is not directed toward any individual scholar, each of whom has a unique approach to the problem.[11] I am no scholar of Christian mysticism myself to presume to have understood their ideas perfectly, and my primary aim is rather to illustrate a type of critique that could be performed in the service of dialogue between traditions.

A more specific reason for incorporating critique into this study is to demonstrate how the acceptance of prevailing theories can risk distorting the perspectives of another tradition. In order to avoid potential mis-readings and mis-applications of Ibn ʿArabī's ideas (or those of his followers), this paper problematizes the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* before turning to an Ibn ʿArabīan account. I have pointed to specific problem areas in the writings of McGinn et al. in my footnotes for those who might wish to pursue a more sustained critique of their ideas. This would be a valuable exercise, and another way of extending dialogue between two traditions of scholarship. However, more valuable for nurturing such dialogue is the introduction of new ideas and perspectives from different (non-western) traditions, and my principal aim has been to offer an alternative (more robust) theory of the *unio mystica* developed from an Ibn ʿArabīan theoretical framework. Taking these goals together, this paper reveals some of the payoffs—(1) the introduction of new ideas into an existing conversation, and (2) the critique of a potentially destructive hegemony[12]—that are likely to accrue to those who are willing to engage the categories of mysticism from within their own traditions of scholarship, assiduously working to achieve and maintain their theoretical independence.

Toward these interrelated aims, this paper proceeds in the following manner. In Section 2, I present an account of the *unio mystica* generalized from the writings of McGinn et al. on the topic, which I subsequently problematize from the point of view of a contemporary Ibn ʿArabīan thinker. In Sections 3–5 (the three core sections of the paper), I develop an account of the *unio mystica* (or re-formulate the prevailing one) from within an Ibn ʿArabīan theoretical frame by elaborating the meanings of its three primary terms: "God", the "human being/self", and "union". Throughout my discussion in Sections 3–5, I show how an Ibn ʿArabīan approach to the *unio mystica* improves upon that of McGinn et al., solving problems/puzzles that are unexplained by that account. In the main text of these three sections, I present the basic outlines of an Ibn ʿArabīan theory of "union", which should be legible to any patient and committed reader. However, since that account relies on the specialized vocabulary developed by Ibn ʿArabī and his early followers, I have also explained some of the terminology used to develop that account in my footnotes. These constitute something like a running commentary on the main text of the paper. Finally, in my conclusion, I reiterate why a dialogical approach to scholarship in mysticism, proceeding through the confident and self-assured independence of each tradition, will enrich the contemporary study of mysticism, more than existing approaches that tend to focus on the construction of typologies and classifications.

2. Problematizing the *Unio Mystica* in McGinn et al.

The *unio mystica*—the "union" between "God" and the "human being/self"—in its most popular meaning might seem to refer to the vague and subjective feeling of "proximity" periodically felt by certain individuals (mystics) toward some higher "reality". Experts in mysticism today no longer believe the naïve view that the term refers primarily to an "experience" of that reality, one characterized by "ineffability" and the loss of individual awareness in the face of that overwhelming "presence".[13] In fact, there is nothing at all vague or subjective about the *unio mystica*, which has been explained in rigorous detail by

the great theorists of the Abrahamic traditions and surely by theorists of other traditions as well. Since the expression—"union" or the "*unio mystica*"—finds its origin and development in Western Christian sources, we should not be surprised to see that specialists of that tradition have most thoroughly developed its meaning.

Scholars of Christian mysticism—e.g., the Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore, the Dominican scholar Louis Roy, and the Chicago Divinity School historian of religions, Bernard McGinn—have presented in some of their writings, an approach to the *unio mystica* grounded in a theory of *consciousness*, specifically in what some of them have termed the *mystical consciousness*.[14] In other words, they have explained the meaning of "union" between "God" and the "human being/self" as a meeting ("uniting") of "human consciousness" with "divine consciousness",[15] and the overcoming of the former by the latter ("identity"). Their discussions of the *unio mystica* also draw from and seek to coherently and self-consistently explain the multitude of statements of Christian mystics[16] pertaining both to the pole of "uniting" as well as to the pole of "identity".

Bernard McGinn presented a useful summary of a theory of the mystical consciousness in his 2008 article-length study, "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal". As he clarifies there, the mystical consciousness is characterized by a continual "uniting" with "God" (the *unitas spiritus*),[17] the latter understood as a "co-presence" found within the mystic's consciousness; or rather as a kind of "consciousness-beyond" or "meta-consciousness" (to use a term offered by Thomas Merton) (McGinn 2008, pp. 44–63 at 47, 48). Whereas ordinary human consciousness involves acts of loving and knowing together with the self-awareness (and intentionality) of the human subject who acts and knows, the mystical consciousness adds a further element, namely an "infinite other", who/which is not grasped as another object of consciousness[18] but an "infinite ground"[19] of knowing and an endless source of loving that transforms the mystic's consciousness and becomes evident in his actions (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 51–53; Roy 2003, p. xv).

Basing itself on the "transcendental method" of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, the account presented by McGinn has the apparent advantage of being agnostic toward any specific theological understanding of God. In the mystical consciousness, God is not verified, intuited, or apprehended as an existing real object "out there", nor as an existing real object "within". Whatever the word "God" could possibly mean in such an understanding, no positive claims (none of the contentious claims of theology) can be made about "Him". Nevertheless, as McGinn avers, the meaning of "union" is that the self-transcending subject, transformed by this mysterious co-presence, and motivated by an infinite desire to know and love, pursues the right values in life, makes correct judgments about the nature of reality, and acts lovingly and wisely toward others.

It is important to stress here that McGinn and his colleagues do not take it as a verifiable fact that the mystic has achieved any genuine contact with a higher reality, even though they speak of a mysterious presence ("God") that permeates the mystic's consciousness. To affirm a recognizable God would be to engage in theology, which they apparently wish to avoid, since here a Christian theology would come into conflict with the equivalent "theologies" of other traditions, wherever a positive concept or image of God (or equivalent) is articulated and affirmed.[20] A "critically realist" account of union must therefore be uneasy with the "God of theology". "Critical realism" would also have scholars direct their attention not to the objectivity of the mystic's consciousness, which it does not wish to verify by its own methods, but rather the objectivity of the mystic's way of life—which it can (apparently) verify as good, ethical, and desirable for human beings. It is the exemplary life of the mystic that then indirectly (and perhaps unoffensively) authenticates the mysteriously transformed subjectivity gained in "union" (McGinn 2008, p. 47).

Unfortunately, the "critical realism" offered by McGinn et al. turns much of the terminology of union into ambiguous apophatic "God talk". One might ask these scholars, for instance, how is it even possible to speak of "God" as a "co-presence" permeating the mystical consciousness, an "infinite other", the "final end" of his loving, and the "infinite ground" of his knowing, without affirming an "ontology of consciousness"[21] to ground these expressions? The flaw in this approach, from an Ibn ʿArabīan point of view, is that it fails to take seriously the reality of self-transcendence, since transcendence must be objectively real, and also irreducible to ethics—a weak foundation—for these thinkers.[22] The emphasis on the apophatic approach to God found in the theories of McGinn et al. instead works to flatten consciousness, rendering the unknowable "God" and "His" mysterious "co-presence" relatively meaningless or at least unoffensively ambiguous. The presence of this "God"—the "infinite other"—is simply accepted as an inexplicable gift that "in some way" emerges (McGinn 2008, p. 48) within an individual who is somehow destined to be a mystic. The authenticity of the mystic's subjectivity, for its part, is only explicable in terms of his exemplary comportment in this world, which possesses an unspecified but apparently semi-causal relationship to the emergence of the mystical consciousness. The problem here, for an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, is that without an ontology of consciousness, all that can be described as "beyond" ordinary consciousness vanishes into a cloud of unknowing, which is a fate that McGinn et al. seem to prefer for it, since it allows an empirically grounded ("critically realist") account to fill the vacuum.[23]

For these same reasons, McGinn et al. cannot rigorously explain the meaning of "uniting" or "identity" attested by Christian mystics in a compelling and self-consistent way, since the mystics would surely have believed that self-transcendence had a foundation in "reality", even if they did not express this idea as I do presently. The account of McGinn et al., in particular, has no way to take seriously the claim of "identity", which was sometimes articulated by mystics in terms of the substitution of the operations of "human consciousness"—sight, hearing, speech, etc.—by those of "divine consciousness".[24] By contrast, an Ibn ʿArabīan approach to the *unio mystica*, which grounds "authentic subjectivity" in "Real-True Being/Consciousness", is far more capable of weaving the statements of mystics together within a self-consistent narrative. It offers a "critically realist" account of the *unio mystica* rooted in "the Real" Itself, and not in the most contingent and evanescent ("unreal") dimensions of reality. Now it remains only to present that account. In what follows (Sections 3–5 of this paper), I offer an approach to the *unio mystica* developed from the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and early members of his school.[25]

3. An Ibn ʿArabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* I: The Meaning of "God"

A major obstacle to a robust and self-consistent account of the *unio mystica* is that the three basic terms that give meaning to such an account—"God", the "human being/self", and "union"—are all ambiguous interlinguistic expressions. As Michael Sells observes, for scholars of Islam and Sufism, the various meanings held together by these three expressions are embedded within an overlapping set of (at least five) language worlds[26] found within premodern Islamic intellectual, religious, and literary cultures (Sells 1996a, pp. 87–124 at 88). Both literary and theoretical articulations of "union" could be found in the vast heritage of poetry and prose literature on love, which included the Arabic *nasīb* (elegy) or the Persian *ghazal* (love lyric) and its vernacular counterparts (e.g., in Turkish or Urdu). If the "union" of lover and beloved in poetry was figurative (*majāzī*) and ambiguous, it was presented more explicitly in prose works, where authors could explain that they had human–human "union" in mind, or rather the "union" between "God" and the "human being/self" (or both at once).[27] Many Muslim theorists (Sufi and non-Sufi alike) restricted

their discussions to human–human love/union, and even considered a particular kind of union between human beings to represent the highest ideal.[28]

Other Sufi theorists believed that "divine–human union" was the most real and truest form of union achievable in life, since God was after all "The Real" (al-Ḥaqq), and therefore the source of all reality and truth in the world.[29] To understand what they meant, readers (and we today) have to delve into a vast body of specialized Sufi literature, since it is there that the expressions that we translate as "God", the "human being/self", and "union" in contemporary discourses carried more precise meanings that we can begin to understand. To begin, scholarly Muslim readers knew that the word "Allāh",[30] which is the most obvious premodern equivalent to our word "God", had three basic meanings in theological (kalām) and Sufi discourses. Depending on the context, it could refer to the Essence (Dhāt), the Names and Attributes (Asmāʾ wa Ṣifāt), the Acts (Afʿāl), or all of them at once.[31]

The significance of these different "levels" or meanings of "God" will become apparent in the course of the discussion.[32] For now, it is important to observe that by the time of Ibn ʿArabī and his early followers, theoretically inclined Sufis began to equate the Essence with "Being per se" (Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa).[33] This was an important move for several reasons, the most important of which was that it fostered the development of a sophisticated language for expressing the relationship between God (Allāh) and "everything besides God" (mā siwāʾ Allāh) that wielded considerable explanatory power. God—referring now to the Essence—was "Necessary Being" (Wājib al-Wujūd), or the Being that could not not be. Everything else was "possible being" (mumkin al-wujūd), which meant it could be or could not be (Chittick 1994b, pp. 70–111 at 75; 1989, p. 116; 1994a, p. 40). The difference, expressed in another way, was that God was "Real-True Being" (al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq)—"the Real-Truth" (al-Ḥaqq)[34] being a Qurʾānic name that could denote the Essence—while everything else was "metaphorical" (majāzī) being (Chittick 1994b, p. 75; 1994a, p. 17). The further implication was that possible being was "unreal" (bāṭil) by itself, and only real through something else, that something being ultimately Real-True Being.[35]

Another important point about the language of wujūd was that it implicitly connected "Being" with "Consciousness", the latter being an expression whose modern sense is difficult to find in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and his followers. Still, wujūd presented readers with a subtle and vital connection, since the Arabic dictionaries indicated that wujūd also meant "finding". In fact, the active and passive participles of the same Arabic root, "Finder" (al-Wājid) and "Found" (al-Mawjūd), were discussed by early Muslim theologians as Names of God. What this meant for Ibn ʿArabī and his followers was that God is the Being that necessarily finds and is necessarily found (lacking nothing within It/Himself and finding all within It/Himself).[36] All other things may find and may be found at some time or another, or they may neither find nor be found at all. Some "existent things" (mawjūdāt)—inanimate objects, like stones—are found by God and may be found by human beings, while they themselves never find at all,[37] since they do not possess faculties of perception. In all cases, God (the Essence) is the Real-True Finder and the Real-True Found. Before Ibn ʿArabī, the Sufi theorist Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111), wrote "there is nothing in wujūd but God (Allāh)" (Ghazālī 2005, p. 393; 1998, p. 16). From Ibn ʿArabī's point of view, what he meant was that "there is nothing in existence but God" and that "there is nothing in finding but God"[38] or "nothing in consciousness but God".[39]

The foregoing should clarify what are perhaps the two most important objections to McGinn et al.'s theory of the mystical consciousness from an Ibn ʿArabīan perspective: (1) there can be no account of the mystical consciousness that does not begin with "Consciousness per se" (Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa).[40] "Meta-consciousness" or "consciousness-beyond" cannot find real meaning apart from Real-True Consciousness/Being. In other words, no "ascent" (ʿurūj) to the mystical consciousness would be

possible if Real-True Being/Consciousness had not first "descended" (*nuzūl*) to our ordinary/mundane level. Once again, the major weakness that besets the account of McGinn et al. is the absence of a "Real-True" foundation for the mystical consciousness[41]—a compelling explanation for the mysterious co-presence—which Ibn ʿArabī and his followers offer.

(2) McGinn's discussion of "God" by way of the mystical consciousness is also too ambiguous, shrouded as it is in the mystery of unknowing. McGinn, Roy, and Moore point out in their respective treatments that "God" is not intended primarily as an object (of conceptions or images)—i.e., the God of positive theology—which is an important clarification, but one that does not explain enough.[42] For instance, for Ibn ʿArabī and his followers, "God" cannot refer to a second "essence" (*dhāt*) dwelling within the human being/self or a shared "existence" (*wujūd*) between them. Why? For one, Ibn ʿArabī believed that "the realities do not change" (*al-ḥaqāʾiq lā tatabaddal*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 65, 75, 141, 338–39). What changes are the accidents or properties of things, which constantly undergo transformation in this world through "Self-disclosure" (*tajallī*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 61, 97, 102). In reality, God (*Dhāt*) remains forever and eternally Himself and human beings/selves (*dhawāt*) likewise remain forever themselves in their eternal realities.

If God is Being, and human beings seem to exist in this world, their existence/being is only "metaphorical" and God's is "real." So again, the actual situation (*nafs al-amr*) is that Being belongs to God. Insofar as human beings are anything at all (and not nonexistent, *maʿdūm*[43]), it is only God who is "found" (*mawjūd*) within a non-existent "locus of manifestation" (*maẓhar*),[44] where His Names/Attributes (e.g., "The Formgiver" [*al-Muṣawwir*], Q. 59:24) are displayed. For instance, God (the Essence) may disclose Himself in an "imaginal" or "conceptual" "form" (*ṣūra*) corresponding to His Reality in the "mental being" (*wujūd dhihnī*) of the mystic, who is himself a human form reflecting the Name "Formgiver".[45] But insofar as every "form" of God is different from God Himself (*Dhāt*), nothing at all is found. What is found is only Nondelimited Being delimited by the non-existent properties of the human being/self, or its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or root (*aṣl*),[46] which establish it as a possibility in Being (Chittick 1989, pp. 96–97). Being per se transcends all the delimitations It assumes, and apophasis assures us that God (the Essence) stands above and beyond Its manifestations, forever beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

The broader point needs to be stated again, but now more explicitly. For an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, what grounds any account of the encounter between God and human beings/selves is that God is the Real-Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), which means He is the source of all reality, truth, and objectivity (*ḥaqīqa*) in the world, as well as the source of the authentic subjectivity of the mystical consciousness, since He is also Real-True Consciousness (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*). For Ibn ʿArabī, the two are not separate, whereas McGinn et al. have chosen to be silent both about the God who is Real-True Being as well as the God who is a mental and imaginal object of positive theology. At the same time, they poetically and ambiguously affirm an unknowable "God" who/that is a mysterious and inexplicable presence permeating the mystic's consciousness. For an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, to ground the objectivity of the mystical consciousness in the exemplary lives of the mystics is to put the cart before the horse: to explain the Real in terms of the metaphorical, or the higher in terms of the lower. If being/consciousness is indeed primary and "matter" is secondary, as scientific research has begun to show,[47] McGinn et al. should be comfortable making more robust distinctions between real and derivative forms of consciousness, rather than accepting only a single level with some structure related to intentionality.[48]

The absence of a clear and robust explanation of the expression "God" also makes it challenging for McGinn et al. to join together the God who is a real object in theology with the God who/that is a co-presence in the mystical consciousness in a compelling and self-

consistent way. They wish to be agnostic toward the God who is an object in theology,[49] and likewise to remain silent about any truly objective foundation to the mystical consciousness. If this foundation is not the God of theology who might be abandoned by the mystic in the "authentic subjectivity", it must surely be a God beyond theology. Have they turned "meta-consciousness" or "consciousness-beyond" into a silent God?[50]

An Ibn ʿArabīan thinker has no problem wedding Real-True Being/Consciousness (the "God beyond theology") with the God of theology within a single self-consistent narrative. Since Consciousness and Being are united in *Wujūd*, whatever "authentic subjectivity" could possibly mean, and whatever objectivity might be found in a mystic's comportment in this world, derive from one and the same source. Both stem from his degree of contact with Real-True Being/Consciousness (i.e., with "union" precisely). I will present an Ibn ʿArabīan account of "authentic objectivity–subjectivity" in the next two sections. As for the God of positive theology, Ibn ʿArabī and his followers made it clear that the judgments an individual has about God as an "object of belief" are judgments about the God who can be known.[51] They refer to the God described positively by the Names and Attributes (the Divinity, *al-ulūha*), which do not grasp God Himself (the Essence).[52] They have no access to Being per se (*Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*), or the "Reality of Being" (*Ḥaqīqat al-Wujūd*). If they seek knowledge about the Essence, they can only grasp Its meaning indirectly through the Names/Attributes that describe God as inaccessible and unknowable.[53] Human beings can neither know nor become the Real as such. There are limits—epistemological and ontological—to union, as we will see below.

McGinn et al. seem to be committed to the view that "uniting" and "identity" imply the ultimate loss or falling away of every concept or image of God.[54] They wish to absolutize Meister Eckhart's profession of "atheism" (a theological and discursive dis-ontologizing of God), turning God into "no-thing". For an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, this dis-ontologizing of God in the "ascent" (ʿurūj) to Real-True Being/Consciousness is not absolute.[55] The "Gods created in beliefs" never fall away at the levels proper to them—e.g., in conceptual and imaginal being.[56] Human beings always possess concepts and images of God, which are forms of Real-True Being. Those who gain consciousness of God through God—i.e., those who move closer toward Real-True Being/Consciousness—begin to see that every knotting or coloration in the mind or imagination is a delimitation of God (the Essence). They also learn that some "Gods knotted in beliefs" are more objectively grounded than others. This entails relativization, not abandonment of the God of theology, who will be continually re-conceptualized and re-imagined (tied, untied, and re-tied) as a knot of belief in the mystic's consciousness. An Ibn ʿArabīan thinker might say that the truth/reality of particular beliefs is relative (*nisbī*), and that their value is predicated precisely on the degree to which they open toward "nondelimitation"[57] (Chittick 1994a, pp. 152–55).

4. An Ibn ʿArabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* II: The Meaning of the "Human Being/Self"

To talk about the "human being/self" in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and his school is to speak of a reality that is inseparable from God, since human beings possess a "deiform nature". To separate the two would thus be to invalidate any objective foundation for the reality of union, which remains a fundamental problem in the theory of the mystical consciousness offered by McGinn et al. As we saw earlier, Ibn ʿArabī and his followers distinguished between God (the Essence), and "all that is other than God" (*mā siwāʾ Allāh*). Thus, to understand the relationship between God and human beings, we have to first understand how God and "everything else" come to be related; a relationship that Ibn ʿArabī and his followers expressed in terms of (1) the Essence (*Dhāt*) and Its "manifestation"

(*ẓuhūr*); (2) God and His "Self-disclosure" (*tajallī*); or (3) the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) and creation (*al-khalq*); each of these being useful in different contexts and discussions.[58]

Our specific task in this paper has been to understand how ordinary human consciousness and the "mystical consciousness" (expressed now in Ibn ʿArabīan terms) are related to Real-True Being/Consciousness. To this end, we must first clarify that human beings, like everything else in cosmic existence, are among the never-repeating Self-disclosures of God,[59] or never-ending manifestations of the Essence. All creatures (not just human beings) are therefore connected to God and are inseparable from Him in their "roots". Unlike other creatures, however, human beings hold a special distinction in that they display (or are capable of displaying) Real-True Being/Consciousness "perfectly" or "completely", which is not a wider possibility across the domain of cosmic existence.[60] Although most human beings—whom Ibn ʿArabī sometimes calls "animal human beings" (*al-insān al-ḥayawān*)—do not live up to this ideal; certain human beings—those whom he calls "perfect/complete human beings" (*al-insān al-kāmil*)[61]—have come into this world as, or have made efforts to become, perfect/complete "forms of the Real-Truth" (*ṣuwar al-Ḥaqq*). What this means, to invoke another set of correlative expressions used by Ibn ʿArabīan thinkers, is that God has become the "meaning" (*maʿnā*) in the invisible world to which their "forms" (*ṣuwar*) correspond in the world of created existence.

A more specific set of expressions that helped Ibn ʿArabī and his followers explain the potential perfection/completeness in human beings vis à vis God and other forms of cosmic existence, were the terms "gathering" (*jamʿ*) and "dispersion" (*farq, tafrīq*). With these, readers could understand the special distinction and potential for perfection of human beings in terms of the "all-comprehensiveness/all-gatheringness" (*jamʿiyya*) of the "human-divine form".[62] "All-Gatheringness" is a description that applies first and foremost to the Essence and pertains absolutely to God alone. If perfect/complete human beings can be said to reflect the gatheringness possessed by the Essence, other creatures, by contrast, only display different degrees of dispersion, or less complete forms of gatheringness.[63]

With these ideas in mind, manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) can now be understood as a process whereby the Essence displays the perfections comprised within It—these being related in the first place to the Names and Attributes—vis à vis the infinite possibilities in Being. If the "Hidden Treasure"[64] of the Essence, utterly transcendent above Its manifestations, can be understood as an All-Gathering Oneness (*aḥadiyyat al-jamʿ*) that negates all distinctions between things (*ashyāʾ*);[65] this "Hidden Treasure" becomes dispersed in the world of cosmic existence through manifestation, Self-disclosure, and creation. At the lowest point of manifestation, which is the point where human beings typically find themselves in their ordinary/mundane condition, the perfection that corresponds to that original "all-gatheringness" (*jamʿiyya*) has become infinitely dispersed and potentially lost but for the "human–divine form"—uniquely capable of displaying[66] "here and now", the perfection that belonged/belongs to the Essence "at the beginning".[67] "Gatheringness" therefore points to the unique role played by the perfect/complete human being in this world.

There are, of course, several stages of manifestation through which Real-True Being/Consciousness travels before coming to the ordinary being/consciousness of "animal human beings", which Ibn ʿArabī and his followers explained in detail. Different types of creatures—elements, minerals, plants, animals, etc.—were related to these different stages, each possessing a relative "gatheringness" or "dispersion" proper to its level in the cosmic hierarchy. In each form of cosmic existence, moreover, the relative gatheringness or dispersion displayed by each creature has its root in God. Thus, every form of gatheringness manifests "here and now" the "One-Onliness" (*aḥadiyya*) and "All-Gatheringness" of the "Transcendent" Essence. Similarly, every form of dispersion (*farq, tafrīq*) displays "here and now" the multiplicity comprised in the "One-Allness" (*wāḥidiyya*) of the "Immanent"

Essence, with its affirmation of every distinct possibility of Being. Finally, since we know that gathering and dispersion are relative terms—animals being relatively gathered created forms vis à vis plants, and relatively dispersed vis à vis human beings—we can now understand that human beings, alone, are able to completely reverse the trajectory of dispersion and achieve an intensity of being/consciousness that might be expressed in terms of the "mystical consciousness" (reformulated in Ibn ʿArabīan terms).

Of course, becoming an "all-gathering created being" (*al-kawn al-jāmiʿ*), one that can properly be described as a form of the Real-Truth is not a simple matter, and most human beings, in the course of their lives in this world, remain all-gathering forms only *in potentia*. What the process of actualizing the human-divine form entails, from an Ibn ʿArabīan point of view, is a series of relative "gatherings"[68], each corresponding to one major stage in the reversal of the trajectory of dispersion through which Being/Consciousness underwent and continually undergoes in Its descent to our ordinary or mundane level.

"Gathering" and "dispersion" were thus discussed by theorizing Sufis not only to explain the "descent" (*nuzūl*) of Being/Consciousness to the level of ordinary being/consciousness—this being related to "manifestation"; but also to explain the "ascent" (*ʿurūj*) of being/consciousness back to its source—this being related to "witnessing the manifestation".[69] On this ascending arc of being/consciousness's return voyage, Ibn ʿArabī and his followers often spoke of three or four "journeys" (*safar*, *asfār*) or "voyages" (*sayr*)[70] to the All-Gatheringness of the One-Only Essence. Not surprisingly, they tended to describe the completeness achieved at the end of the fourth journey (achieved by exceedingly few individuals) as the realization of the "One-Onliness of Gathering" (*aḥadiyyat al-jamʿ*),[71] a station that perfectly mirrors the All-Gathering Oneness of the One-Only Essence.

The three/four journeys, of course, were complex, each comprising multiple stations that were described in detail in the technical treatises of Ibn ʿArabī and his followers. What these treatises reveal is that this particular tradition of mysticism had a sophisticated manner of explaining the numerous and differentiated "intensifications" of being/consciousness that characterize the growth of ordinary consciousness toward the "mystical consciousness". In fact, for an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, the first appearance of the "mystical consciousness" corresponds to a relatively low degree of gatheringness achieved by the voyager at the very beginning of his return voyage to the Essence, when he first begins to "witness" Self-disclosures of God in the "outward" things of this world.[72]

But what of the many paradoxes—the various moments of "loss-in-finding" or "finding-within-loss"—that the human "self" encounters on this journey of return to the One-Only Essence, which are so difficult to explain for those who have not theorized Being/Consciousness as rigorously as Ibn ʿArabī and his followers? How, for instance, can the self sometimes appear to vanish ("to unknow"[73] or "to be un/deformed" (Roy 2003, pp. 75, 77; McGinn 2008, p. 53)) in the face of a divine "fullness" that swallows it whole,[74] paradoxically rendering God a "no-thing" as well? Or what does it mean that the loss of the self at an earlier moment is often followed by a fullness (a "self-realization") that verges on "deification" at a later moment?[75] McGinn et al. have trouble explaining these paradoxes in a robust way, since they do not distinguish two levels of being/consciousness (e.g., "real" and "metaphorical").

For an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker, these paradoxes can be correlated to the defining moments in the return voyage to the One-Only Essence. To "unbecome" is to reverse the process of "becoming", or to move toward a stage of gathering that mirrors the All-Gathering Oneness of the Essence. Since the Essence comprehends the roots or the realities of all things "before" Its manifestation, thereby being determined by "no specific thing",[76] the voyager on the return journey to the Essence must also become no specific thing, escaping the domination of any particular Name/Attribute to the exclusion of others.

It should not be too difficult to understand that when an individual human being/self moves to a stage of gathering by which he has been able to overcome and harmonize the dispersion that characterizes and dominates the lower stage, his consciousness will be experienced as drastically and profoundly different from the higher vantage point.

In other words, the "self"—the answer to the question "who am I?"—with which the voyager identifies at an earlier stage of the journey will appear to undergo loss in the transition to a higher stage (this being a period of "uniting" in the terminology of McGinn et al.). What will be realized at the higher level is that the lower "dispersed self" has now become integrated into a more gathered self—an expanded identity in being/consciousness. In its higher gatheringness, the newly expanded self no longer identifies with or operates from the lower level.[77] This is why some of Ibn ʿArabī's early followers often spoke of an "ableness" or "stability" (*tamkīn*) gained by the successful voyager after a period of "coloration" or "variegation" (*talwīn*).[78] In the intervals of coloration, the self loses its grasp on things that once seemed stable, achieving a coloration related to its voyage to the Essence by way of the Names and Attributes. Each of these losses is relative since they have to do with the voyager's inability to overcome the domination of a particular Name/Attribute. When the voyager has finally achieved a foothold at a higher level, he will have overcome the domination of this Name/Attribute without giving up the coloration related specifically to It. This point must be emphasized: the coloration itself is not given up, only the misidentification of the self with the lower level that results from coloration. In fact, coloration and stability—like dispersion and gathering—are relative terms; and it is more accurate to speak of the voyager's situation in terms of "stability in coloration" (*al-tamkīn fī ʾl-talwīn*) or "coloration in stability" (*al-talwīn fī ʾl-tamkīn*).

One of the obstacles that prevents the voyager from advancing to a stage of relative gathering—which again depends on his ability to gather and properly harmonize the meanings of the Names/Attributes within his all-gathering form—is that his consciousness/being becomes dominated by a particular Name/Attribute due to his "mystical experience".[79] For instance, readers of Sufi literature will know well that the voyager sometimes faces overpowering experiences in which he is no longer able to differentiate between himself and God in the witnessing of a particular Divine Self-disclosure[80]—an experience described by theorists as "intoxication" (*sukr*). Eventually, he may gain a foothold at a higher station of ableness—described as "sobriety" (*ṣaḥw*)—in which the attributes that had prevailed over him before his intoxication have now become "subjugated" by another set of attributes that have emerged from a root (*aṣl*) pertaining to his reality (*ḥaqīqa*)[81] in the invisible world, or from the Reality of realities (*Ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqāʾiq*).

So long as the voyager is pulled toward the "experiences" of an emerging "mystical consciousness", his voyaging through different states and stations will be determined by a coloration related to the fact that the Name "Outwardly Manifest" (*al-Ẓāhir*) has not yet been stably recognized within *all* "outward" things (loci of manifestation), including his self, its powers, and organs. Due to his mystical experiences (coloration), this voyager's wayfaring will tend to become dominated by the "properties" (*aḥkām*)[82] of one of the Names/Attributes that are subordinate to the Name "Outwardly Manifest", such as "Creator" (*al-Khāliq*), or "Knower" (*al-ʿAlīm*), or one of the other Names/Attributes by which God has revealed Himself in scripture to be similar (*tashbīh*) to His creatures.[83]

At this point in his voyage, the wayfarer is still striving toward an ableness (*tamkīn*) that would allow him to complete the first of his journeys.[84] Without this foothold, he risks terminating his voyage prematurely, so he must persevere and make efforts to overcome his dispersion. Once he has achieved the sought after gatheringness, through which he now stably recognizes the "Outwardly Manifest" in all things, including his own powers/faculties, e.g., hearing, seeing, speaking, power, he will have reached a new level

of being/consciousness as well as "self-realization". Indeed, he will have taken a major step from metaphorical being/consciousness toward Real-True Being/Consciousness. Whereas before, the voyager had witnessed his hearing, seeing, speaking, and power as separate from Hearing, Seeing, Speaking, and Power, his station is now such that he is not veiled from witnessing this Divine "Withness" (*maʿiyya*)[85] in all outward loci of manifestation. The scope of his gatheringness, the intensity of his being/consciousness, and the strength of his self-realization are attested by his perfect ableness in the continual witnessing of the Divine Self-disclosures in all outward loci of manifestation (coloration).

I have been using "self" in the foregoing discussion in a way that approximates "consciousness", referring more precisely to the crystallization of an identity within being/consciousness. The Arabic word scholars typically translate as "self" is *nafs*, which is also a reflexive pronoun used in constructions like "himself" or "itself". In Sufism, the word belies the fact that the reality to which it points is at least as differentiated as the stages of the ascending voyage of being/consciousness itself. Anyone familiar with Sufi literature knows that the self can be differentiated into "spirit" (*rūḥ*), "heart" (*qalb*), and "secret core" (*sirr*) among other levels[86] in a vast spectrum of concepts pertaining to the self. Some of that complexity is intimated by the *ḥadīth*, "whoever knows himself (*nafsahu*) knows his Lord (*rabbahu*)",[87] a scriptural statement that points to the intimate connection between "selfhood" and "lordhood"[88] that characterizes the voyager's return journey. The true lord of something might be described as its "reality" *in divinis*, which is the "Hidden Treasure's" eternal knowledge of it that governs its journey in this world.

"Recognition" (*maʿrifa*, *maʿrifat*, or *ʿirfān* in contemporary Persian/Urdu) ties the self to "consciousness", since what is recognized by the self is nothing but its own reality *in divinis*. It is through "self-knowledge" or the "mystical consciousness", in other words, that the self rejoins with God. This makes *maʿrifa* perhaps the closest *single word* in Islamic(ate) languages to "mysticism" in much of its current usage. The self at the beginning of the voyage must open its "doors" (*abwāb*) and break through to its "interiors" (*abṭūn*).[89] In doing so, it achieves a deeper self-recognition (*maʿrifa*) that is simultaneously "lord-recognition", i.e., the recognition of its own reality *in divinis*, which "lords over" it for eternity. Put differently, the self's recognition of its innermost reality (its *dhāt*) represents a gatheringness in consciousness that is as close to Real-True Consciousness as human beings can achieve; corresponding to the recognition of the Real-True Being (the Essence, the "lord" corresponding to this "all-gathering self" at the end of its voyage).[90]

Through self-knowledge, the wayfarer overcomes the metaphorical consciousness that characterizes the ordinary/mundane human level and achieves the fullness of the "mystical consciousness" at the end of its long and arduous voyage. All the "found things" (*mawjūdāt*)—the various entities "out there" or "within"—seen at the beginning of the voyage as separate existences, are recognized by the one who has reached the deepest interior of the self as manifestations of the Essence, the true Lord of all.

5. An Ibn ʿArabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* III: The Meaning of "Union"

The discussion of the prior two sections should convey to readers why Sufi authors were often criticized for speaking about the "union" between "God" and "human beings/selves". If an impatient or frustrated reader had trouble understanding what was being conveyed in the discussions that explained the relationship between God and the human being/self, they could easily paint those ideas with the brush of one of the well-known heresies in Islam: "incarnationism" (*ḥulūl*) or "unificationism" (*ittiḥād*) (Chittick 1994b, pp. 85–87, 89–91). Nevertheless, if what was meant by these labels was that two "essences" from the same level—e.g., milk and water mixed together[91]—or two entities of

differing levels, became joined, one within another (e.g., water in a container[92]), Muslim theorists who discussed "union" never seemed to countenance such ideas.

As Michael Sells explains, even poetic understandings of union did not easily suggest a union of physical bodies—the sense of union conjured by poets having been related more closely to the imagery of return to a lost paradise than to sexual union (Sells 1996a, pp. 93–94). Even in prose discussions of human–human union, theorists tended to believe that physical union was less perfect than non-physical union (Giffen 1971, p. 7). If it was a question of the close-to-perfect joining together of two wills (e.g., the single-mindedness of purpose of two lovers in a lawful relationship), this was hardly the sort of "substantial" or "materialist" union suggested by the heresies (Giffen 1994, pp. 420–42 at 426).

As for the terminology used by Sufi theorists like Ibn ʿArabī, when they spoke about union, they employed a complex set of inter-related terms with overlapping meanings. These could only be appreciated in the contexts in which they were employed. For instance, "conjoining" (*ittiṣāl*) or "unification" (*ittiḥād*) were expressions that could refer to the joining of two sides of a circle. The idea of unification suggested by such an image was the completion of an otherwise incomplete/imperfect figure.[93] We have also learned that the term "gathering" (*jamʿ*) was used by Sufi theorists to discuss the intensifications of being/consciousness. Ibn ʿArabī and his early followers made it clear that what they intended by such expressions had nothing to do with two "essences" or "realities" becoming substantially mixed together or coming to share a single existence.

The eternal reality of human beings was non-existence (ʿadam), while God (the Essence) was the Necessary Being, or the Being that could not *not* be. If union meant anything it all, it could only refer to the fact that the human being/self has now rejoined its root (*aṣl*) in the eternal order—having returned to the perfect servanthood (*ʿubūdiyya*, *ʿubūda*) connected with its "lord" in the Reality of realities.[94] At this point, the "originated" (*ḥādith*) attributes that belonged to the human being/self have become "subjugated" by the "eternal" (*qadīm*)[95] attributes that have always been found in/by Real-True Being/Consciousness (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*) but not by the ordinary human consciousness.

Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d. 688/1289), a second-generation follower of Ibn ʿArabī, in his famous prosimetrical work, *Lamaʿāt* (*Flashes*), reminded his readers that no one says an image is "incarnated within" or "united with" the mirror in which the image is displayed (ʿIrāqī 1982, pp. 93–94, 145–46). The same is true of the "form of the Real" appearing in the non-existent locus of manifestation of the voyager in the return voyage to the Real-True Being. The "outer eye" may see how two things—e.g., milk and water, or water and wine—become mixed, and the mind may suppose union to be like this: a confusion of two essences or a mixing of two substances. But the change observed in these examples is only in the properties (*aḥkām*), not in the essences (*dhawāt*) (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 93; 1974, pp. 22–23). The analogy of the mirror reveals the actual situation more precisely. It is not that the mirror exists, the image exists, and two essences become joined, sharing a common existence. In fact, "the realities do not change" (Chittick 1989, pp. 65, 75, 141, 338–39). The one who understands the situation says instead, "there was no image, and then the image appeared". Or when they see colorless light taking on the various hues and tints of the glass through which it passes, they do not say the reality of light (colorless in itself) has become united with that of glass. Rather, they say, "there was no light, and now light (colorless) has appeared as different colors". This is the meaning of "union".[96]

The true situation, recognized (*maʿrifa*) by the one who has overcome his "metaphorical consciousness" and has gained entry to the mystical consciousness—"the possessor of unveiling" (*ṣāḥib-i kashf*) (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 93; 1974, p. 23)—is in fact that Real-True Being/Consciousness has always been in a state of "union" with this world. If the things of the world were imagined before to possess their own existence (or separate existences),

and then they were seen for a time to possess a metaphorical being/existence, now it is recognized that they never existed in the first place. Ibn ʿArabī explains in an instructive passage from his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*Meccan Openings*):

> The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) is perpetually (*dāʾiman*) in a state of union (*waṣl*) with creation. Through that, He is a God (*ilāh*). This is what is meant by the Qurʾānic saying, "He is with you wherever you are" (Q. 57:4), that is, in every state of non-existence (*ʿadam*) or existence, or its modalities. Such is the actual situation (*nafs al-amr*), and what takes place for the Folk of Solicitude, the Folk of God, is that God gives them vision and unveils their insights until they witness this Withness (*maʿiyya*). This—that is, the recognizer's (*ʿārif*) witnessing (*shuhūd*)—is what is called union (*waṣl*), because the recognizer has become conjoined (*ittaṣala*) with the witnessing of the actual situation (*mā huwa ʾl-amr ʿalayhi*). (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, p. II 480.12; Chittick 1989, p. 365)

From the foregoing, it can be seen that Sufi theorists had a robust explanation for what appears to be the substitution of divine faculties for the human faculties in the "mystical identity" (McGinn's *unitas indistinctionis*). McGinn has trouble explaining how the human faculties are simultaneously silenced—"emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly from within" (McGinn 2008, p. 58)—while God works as a mysterious presence permeating those very same faculties.[97] Roy seems to prefer the total abolishment of the human faculties, which then mysteriously become replaced with another kind of "seeing" and "hearing".[98] This understanding of identity faces problems that can only be resolved by invoking an ontology of consciousness with at least two levels of perception.

Ibn ʿArabī and his followers explain how the apparent loss of the self (and its faculties) is not at all incompatible with the operation of "divine consciousness" within the voyager's being/consciousness. The clearest expression of "mystical identity" in Sufi theoretical writings came around discussions of a *ḥadīth* in which God, speaking in the first person, described Himself as the seeing, hearing, and speaking of His devoted servant, as well as his hand, foot, and tongue. When the voyager reaches certain stages of stability/ableness, he comes to recognize in different ways how this was the situation all along. Through Real-True Being/Consciousness, he becomes conscious that the Real was always his tongue, his seeing, hearing, hand, and foot, though he did not know it until he possessed this witnessing.[99] And what a difference this makes! By returning to Real-True Being/Consciousness, his own being/consciousness has become united to witnessing the situation as it is, not as he falsely surmised it to be beforehand.

As Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī suggests in his poetic description of union, the gatheringness achieved at this stage of self-realization has incorporated, harmonized, and coordinated the dispersion of the lower levels. As we have seen, followers of Ibn ʿArabī often visualized the descent of Being/Consciousness and its subsequent ascent by human beings/selves as two sides of a single circle. The two sides—the divine and the human, eternal and temporal—appeared separate from the ordinary point of view, divided by a fine line. In the fullness of the mystical consciousness, it is now understood that the two were not separate at all. The eternal and the temporal have collapsed into the "eternal now". Nevertheless, included in this recognition is the awareness that the fine line of separation (*farq*) continues to leave a trace so long as the voyager is alive in this world.[100] So long as the individual being/consciousness remains, the individual self still sees and hears through ordinary vision and audition,[101] though we mortals cannot fathom what kind of seeing and hearing this really is. It is the perception of someone who witnesses not just the outer shell of things, but also their realities *in divinis*—the things as they are in themselves—which are the things as they are now, have always been, and forever will be.

6. Conclusions

In the previous three sections, I have offered the bare outlines of a fair account of the *unio mystica* as elaborated from within the theoretical frame of the Sufi/Muslim mystic Ibn ʿArabī and early members of his school of thought. I have also been calling it an account offered by an Ibn ʿArabīan thinker today. In my presentation, I have significantly reduced the complexity of the ideas found in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī's school, since to offer anything more detailed would presume a high degree of specialization and an uncommon interest—even in the committed reader—to delve deeply into the ocean of meanings beneath the language and imagery used by this particular tradition of mysticism.

The central claim of this paper is that a cross-cultural or comparative mysticism of the future should move from this foundation—the careful study of texts and ideas by specialists in each tradition to the point of close familiarity and assimilation. As I mentioned in the introduction, the deployment of the theoretical resources of each tradition must proceed from a position of independence, not through a curated process with some pre-determined theoretical agenda. The robust formulation of a "critical lexicon" of a mysticism that better represents the perspectives of different traditions is only possible through dialogue between specialists capable of translating rich complexes of imagery and ideas in ways that convey meaning to readers with no prior access to the tradition.

Scholars of mysticism once thought that the field should explicitly eschew an approach that takes the "truth claims" of mystics or traditions as a foundation for the "evaluation" of mysticism generally.[102] An implicit claim of the present study is that "theory parity"[103] in the study of mysticism requires that they do, and that doing so also promises to enrich the field and contribute to a deeper dialogue among specialists. A translation-based approach, moreover, will advance the cause of dialogue more effectively than a "comparison" that operates primarily by way of classification, since it will leverage the robustly developed vocabularies of each tradition as its foundation.[104] It will make smaller leaps across the gaps between traditions from this more "scientific" foundation than the greater leaps typically involved in the "magic" of "comparison".[105] However long it might take, "theory parity" in the study of mysticism is inevitable as the perspectives of mystics (the "dialectical other") (Cabezón 2006, pp. 21–38 at 31) become further incorporated into the theoretical frames of specialists and increasingly inform their research.

The hope offered by this paper is that the formation of new "mystical theory" from within the theoretical and conceptual horizons determined by specialists of each tradition will stimulate dialogue by provoking those conducting research in other traditions—here scholars of Christian mysticism—to revisit their sources and answer the challenges raised by each new articulation of theory. It is hoped that the scholarly representatives of each tradition would do so in good faith—through the careful deployment of the theoretical resources of each tradition—hewing as closely as possible to its own linguistic frames. I say "as much as possible" in anticipation of the objection that any project with a "presentist" orientation will suffer from the distortion of the perspectives of the past.

A certain degree of error will perhaps have to be tolerated in the name of a dialogue that will necessarily be iterative as new textual discoveries are made, and tradition-specific literatures continue to be translated and assimilated by specialists. The latter will remain the primary scholarly effort for the foreseeable future, and it is challenging enough. I will be the first to admit that the (premodern) mystic is not very much like most of us in the contemporary academy. We struggle to enter his conceptual world and assimilate his ideas. Nevertheless, he resembles some of us more than others. If scholars of religion have warned their colleagues that it can be problematic to think that we are too much like the people we study, we nevertheless continue to study their texts for what they meant to them (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 12). Sooner or later we also begin to study them for

what they mean to us. The 12th century Sufi mystic, Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) warned his own colleagues, fellow wayfarers on the Sufi voyage, to doubt that they had arrived at their destination. Though they witnessed astounding things in the "world of imagination" (Chittick 2020, p. 151)[106], they erred in thinking that this was unveiling. Which of these two warnings is more important for scholars to assimilate today?

Notes

1   These were Moshe Idel (Jewish mysticism), Michael Sells (Islamic mysticism), and McGinn himself (Christian mysticism).

2   As McGinn explains, the *unio mystica* should be understood primarily as a "term of art", "a modern creation largely popularized by students of religion", which enables it to have "a useful, if limited, function" (McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–86). Although occasionally used by patristic authors, "it was actually very rarely used for more than a millennium (c. 500–1550), despite how often mystics spoke of being united with God. The qualifier 'mystical' (*mysticus*), whose Christian usage goes back to the second century CE, kept its etymological sense of 'secret/hidden', and was used to describe the inner, invisible, aspects of Christian life and practice, especially the spiritual meaning of scripture, its *sensus mysticus*" (McGinn 2020, pp. 404–21). The term seems to have become more popular in the nineteenth century (like "mysticism" itself) (Schmidt 2003), through the academic study of mysticism more than the writings of the mystics themselves.

3   As McGinn writes, "We are under no illusion that we have settled all the issues related to the mystery of mystical union. Indeed, we hope that mystical union (if that is even the best term) will appear richer, more complex, and more mysterious to the reader after finishing these essays than at the outset" (McGinn 1996b, pp. vii–ix at viii–ix).

4   As Michael Sells explains, the meaning of "God" has been understood in radically different ways even within a single language—for instance, an Arab Christian and Muslim understanding of *Allāh*. In Islamic Studies scholarship, "God" has been keyed to a rich and diverse set of terms found in Islamic and Sufi theology—*Allāh*, *al-Ḥaqq*, *al-Raḥmān*, etc. These words, when translated as "God", lose much of the meaning intended by Sufi authors (Sells 1996b, pp. 163–73 at 164–66). A different set of meanings developed by Muslim "Neoplatonists" writing in Arabic is lost when the Qurʾānic Names "*al-Aḥad*" (the "One-Only") and "*al-Wāḥid*" (the "One-All") are not rendered effectively, nuances that have been expertly conveyed in the translations of William C. Chittick (Chittick 2023, pp. 1–19 at 8; 1992, pp. 179–209 at 179–81, 185, 187, 202).

5   As Richard King points out in his study on the "mystification" of the "Orient", "We should be aware of the sense in which the study of religion can have iatrogenic consequences for the purported object of its study…. Here I am using the term metaphorically to highlight the sense in which religious studies as a cognitive discipline may actually distort or reduce that which it is claiming to investigate and explain" (King 1999, p. 42). King's approach has been extended by Boaz Huss, who explains how the emergence of the category of "Jewish mysticism" has shaped modern perceptions of the Kabbalah (Huss 2020).

6   As Wendy Doniger writes, "In this age of multinationalism and the politics of individual ethnic and religious groups, of identity politics and minority politics, to assume that two phenomena from different cultures are 'the same' in any significant way is regarded as demeaning to the individualism of each, a reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that 'all wogs look alike'" (Doniger 2000, pp. 63–74 at 64). As Gloria Maité Hernández explains, the anxiety over post-colonial backlash has had the positive consequence of protecting traditions from "false representations and orientalist agendas" (Hernández 2021, p. 177).

7   That is, without consideration of the ability of those traditions to change the very parameters of scholarship in mysticism, nor any special concern over the manner in which they might enact and effect such a change.

8   As Doniger explains, comparison fails when analysts presume to "stand outside (presumably, above) phenomena from different cultures and to equate them" (Doniger 2000, p. 64). It also faces criticism when it fails to attend sufficiently to difference, as

Benjamin Ray and Kimberly Patton observe: "comparison in the human sciences has been problematic and unscientific and lacking in any specific rules. It contains a kind of 'magic,' [J. Z. Smith] asserts, like Frazer's idea of homeopathic magic, 'for, as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity . . .. The procedure is homeopathic . . .. The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.'. . ." (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 3–4).

9   Ann Taves and Egil Asprem have recently urged scholars of religion to shift their concern from "religions" to "worldviews", a shift that is perhaps less likely to prejudice investigations into the writings of "theologians" or "mystics". "Worldview" also highlights the coherence of the particular form of rationality presented by a given historical subject or subjectivity (Taves 2020). By seeking to understand each culturally and linguistically specific form of "rationality" (or "worldview") on its own terms, scholars reduce the risk of inadvertently misrepresenting them.

10   I mean the direct line of authors and commentators connected to Ibn ʿArabī's most influential student and disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), sometimes discussed in the secondary literature as the School of Ibn ʿArabī (Chittick 1996).

11   Moreover, there are notable differences between the three authors on specific points, as I show below.

12   Destructive when dialogue is not sincere. Marianne Moyaert has shown some of the ways Christian frameworks for inter-religious dialogue effectively instrumentalized other traditions (turning them also into "religions") to generate discussion and debate that mostly furthered the interests of those who developed the frameworks (Moyaert 2013, pp. 64–86 at 81).

13   As Edward Howells explains, if the "reality" that the mystic "experiences" may be designated by the word "God", theorists of mysticism cannot be satisfied with an account that begins and ends with "mystical experience". Since the "notion of 'God' entails a creator who is both universally present and present everywhere equally. . .experience does not easily divide into different kinds where God is more or less present" (Howells 2020, pp. 45–64 at 45). Problematizing James's "marks" of religious experience, Howell explains that "To tell one experience of God from another—to say which are 'mystical' and which are not—requires not just certain 'marks' of experience but an understanding of how God relates to the world in the first place, and further distinctions concerning the ways that God might be present in human experience" (Howells 2020, p. 45).

14   My understanding of the mystical consciousness (as a non-specialist of Christian mysticism) draws from Bernard McGinn's "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal" (2008), Sebastian Moore's "Consciousness" (1957), and Louis Roy's *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (2003). All three authors tend to write ambiguously (not systematically) on this topic. I have therefore generalized from their more systematic statements. The theory of the mystical consciousness that I attribute to "McGinn et al." throughout this paper is therefore a generalized account.

15   I borrow these expressions from Chapter 5 of Roy's *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (2003) entitled "Eckhart: When Human Consciousness Becomes Divine Consciousness". In alluding to the identity between "human" and "divine" consciousness, Roy points to Eckhart's "mystification" of an Aristotelian scientific claim pertaining to the act of vision. As Eckhart says, when his eye falls upon some wood, in the act of perception, "the wood *is* my eye". Vision/perception therefore serves as a useful image of "mystical identity" (McGinn's *unitas indistinctionis*) (Roy 2003, p. 85).

16   McGinn has discussed the mystical consciousness in connection with the writings of Eckhart, Cusa, and St. John of the Cross; Roy has incorporated the writings of Eckhart; and Moore, the most poetic of the three, cites from Eckhart and St. Augustine.

17   The mystic's consciousness continually "unites" with (and separates from) "God", its center moving between the two poles of "uniting" and "identity".

18   As Moore suggests, from the point of view of consciousness, "God" makes sense less as an "object of consciousness" as "the whole of consciousness" (S. Moore 1957, pp. 305–24 at 314; Roy 2003, p. 44). "God" is more like light: "We look at things in the light, not at the light" (S. Moore 1957, p. 308). Light adds no object to existence, but makes them all visible (Roy 2003, p. 44).

19   As Moore writes, "Consciousness has no object, but it has an end. I mean, that the process of becoming more conscious is going somewhere. Not towards an object that I shall one day discover, but towards a completeness of itself" (S. Moore 1957, p. 311). Thus, consciousness is "not something that comes to us, but something we come to. Things happen to us, but we happen on consciousness" (S. Moore 1957, p. 312).

20   Some specialists have decried the inordinate attention paid in modern and post-modern times to "apophasis". As David Albertson writes, "Apophatic mysticism promises to clear away idolatrous speech about God and often promotes an ideal of imageless contemplation. . .. But then how should we understand its contrary, cataphatic mysticism? Does the positivity of cataphasis possess its own legitimacy, or should it always be superseded? We ought not to oppose the two traditions as if they were competitors, but neither should we fail to notice when one is elevated above the other" (Albertson 2020, pp. 347–68 at 348).

21   I am forced to use this construction since "ontology" and "epistemology" have been decoupled in many of the relevant modern frameworks and discussions. "Being" and "knowing" (or "consciousness") are intimately connected in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and his followers, as I show throughout this paper (see n. 29 and n. 37 below).

22   For this tradition, "ethics" must be objectively grounded in "ontology", and more specifically in the "deiform nature" of human beings. See, for instance, William Chittick's "*Marātib al-taqwā*: Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī on the Ontology of Ethics" (Chittick 2022).

23   As McGinn explains, the "religious consciousness" begins with the gift of love and faith. Christian mystics likewise regard what McGinn calls the mystical consciousness as a gift of God's love or grace (McGinn 2008, pp. 49–53, 61 n. 29, 62 n. 33).

24   Roy wishes to explain statements pertaining to mystical identity in two sections of his chapter on Eckhart—"Is the soul equated with God?" and "The soul's breakthrough to the Godhead?" (Roy 2003, pp. 85–93). Likewise, McGinn wishes to explain the statements of St. John of the Cross and Eckhart who believe "that the inner faculties must be emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly from within" (McGinn 2008, p. 58).

25   In what follows, I discuss ideas presented by Ibn ʿArabī; his chief student, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī; Qūnawī's students Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. 699/1300) and Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d. 688/1289); the second-generation student of Qūnawī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730-736/1329-1335); and the student of Kāshānī, Dāwūd Qayṣarī (d. 748/1347). All were highly influential teachers and masters of this tradition, who developed its perspectives in different directions.

26   These are (1) the language of love poetry, (2) Qurʾānic and scholastic theological language, (3) Qurʾānic and Sufi theoretical language relating to the ascent through the heavenly spheres, (4) Sufi dialogues of union (between speaker and listener), and (5) Sufi and philosophical language related to the perfect/complete human being.

27   Joseph Bell and Lois Giffen (Giffen 1971; Bell 1979) have collected medieval Arabic treatments of human–human love. The more recent studies of Binyamin Abrahamov and William Chittick have emphasized writings on "mystical love" (Chittick 2013; Abrahamov 2003). For an updated discussion of both kinds of literature in a later historical period, see Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (El-Rouayheb 2005).

28   Muslim litterateurs (*udabāʾ*) and religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) discussed several types of union. This included physical/sensory union—the furtive glance, embrace, light kissing, the sucking of tongues, and sexual intercourse—as well as non-physical union. Like the Ḥanbalī scholar Abū ʾl-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) many held that the sensory pleasure pertaining to physical union was secondary to (less valuable than) its spiritual meaning (Bell 1979, pp. 11–45 at 32–34, 43). As for non-physical union, a common position was the one taken by the philosopher and *ḥadīth* transmitter, Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī (d. 286/899), who held that the strongest union between human beings was the uniting of wills (Giffen 1971, pp. 5–8).

29   "The Real" (*al-Ḥaqq*) is one of the Qurʾānic Names of God. It is often paired with "creation" (*al-khalq*). Depending on the context, it may be translated "The Truth" or "The Real-Truth". This word reveals the close connection between "ontology" and "epistemology" ("Being" and "Consciousness") in the minds of many Muslim theologians and Sufi-philosophers.

30   As Sachiko Murata and William Chittick explain, "the workaday concept of God cannot do justice to a religion that uses its own idea of God as the absolute center from which everything else is judged" (Murata 1994, p. 58). The word *Allāh* in Arabic was sometimes described by theologians as a proper name, in which case it actually has no equivalent in English—just as the proper name "London" cannot be translated with the help of other descriptive words into another language.

31   The terms were not restricted to God. According to this scheme, human beings also possess an essence, attributes, and acts. The essence refers to the thing in itself (e.g., God in Himself), the attributes explain what sort of thing it is (the Quran and *ḥadīth* typically describe God through His Names/Attributes), and the acts explain what the thing does. "*Dhāt*" is originally a pronoun meaning "possessor of". Thus, if theologians and Sufi thinkers understood God as *al-Dhāt* (the Essence), what they meant was that He is "possessor of" the Attributes and Acts. The Essence is simply what is named by *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* (the "Most Beautiful Names"), Itself beyond the meanings intended by each of them separately (Murata 1994, pp. 58–78).

32   For Muslim scholastics, the Names and Attributes provide a rich source of meditation on the nature of God (Murata 1994, pp. 58–78; Chittick 1989, p. 66).

33   *al-Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa* (Being per se) and Nondelimited Real-True Being (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq al-Muṭlaq*) were expressions for "God" used by ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī and Dāwūd Qayṣarī (d. 748/1347) (Qayṣarī 2020, pp. 25–26; Kāshānī 1385, p. 97).

34   Ibn ʿArabī often uses "The Real" in a way that is close to the current sense of "Ultimate Reality" (Chittick 1989, p. 49).

35   The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) wrote that the Necessary Being is "Real by Itself (*ḥaqq bi-nafsihi*) constantly (*dāʾiman*)", while the possible being is "real through something else" (*ḥaqq bi-ghayrihi*), which means everything besides the Necessary Being is "unreal by itself" (*bāṭil bi-nafsihi*) (Chittick 2022, p. 139 n. 1; Avicenna 2005, pp. 38–39).

36   *al-Wājid* (the "Finder") and *al-Mawjūd* (the "Found") are active and passive participles of *Wujūd*. What they indicated was that God is perfectly "finding" and "found" in Himself, lacking nothing, and comprehending everything. Everything is perfectly present to Him, and He cannot "lose" nor "be lost" in the way human beings can (the name "loser" [*fāqid*] being the opposite of "finder") (Gimaret 1988, pp. 133–36 (*mawjūd*), 224–26 (*wājid*); Ghazālī 2007, p. 130). Thus, to use the expression popularized by Ibn Sīnā, His "being a finder and found" is "necessary" (*wājib*) (Chittick 1989, p. 212).

37   In addition to "finding" and "being", the word *wujūd* can be translated as "existence". "Finding" and "being" suggest perfection and completeness more than "existence", which suggests rather a bare or naked fact without qualities. In the nuances of this Arabic root, we observe again how "ontology" and "epistemology" are united in Ibn ʿArabī's perspective.

38   As Chittick writes, "In each unique thing, the Real Being discloses a unique face of its infinite reality while remaining One and Unique in itself. We, on the other hand, remain forever ourselves in our own realities, forever other than the Real Being, while we simultaneously remain conjoined with the Real Being inasmuch as we find and are found" (Chittick 2004, pp. 27–28 n. 5).

39 As Chittick writes, "God's Self-disclosure appears in two modes—ontological and cognitive, or as existence and as knowledge. . . . We need to keep in mind that *wujūd* or Being/existence means also 'finding'. It is a subjective experience as much as an objective occurrence. God's 'Being' is identical with His knowledge, that is, His self-consciousness" (Chittick 1989, p. 212).

40 Roy seems prepared to ground his theory of the mystical consciousness in an understanding of God as "Pure Being" (*esse*)—McGinn sometimes does as well—but both fall short of making this connection clear. Roy admits that Eckhart sometimes takes God as *esse* "on a restricted sense" and "sometimes an unrestricted sense", which allows him to affirm the apparently contradictory propositions that "God exists" (i.e., He is a "thing") and "God does not exist" (i.e., He is "no-thing") (Roy 2003, pp. 72–74, 79–80, 86–87; McGinn 2008, p. 54). Nevertheless, both seem reluctant to consider Eckhart's understanding of God (as Being, *esse*) as the ground (*grunde*) of the "divinized" soul's awareness, or something like "Real-True Consciousness" (McGinn 2008, pp. 51, 53–55, 59; Roy 2003, p. 75). Moore, for his part, wishes to take seriously Eckhart's position that "all things pass from their existence into their being" (S. Moore 1957, p. 318), but he does not connect "being" to "consciousness".

41 McGinn admits that the mystic is somehow able to make "true judgments about the world" (McGinn 2008, p. 47), presumably about God as well. This means it is possible to inquire about the mystic's objectivity and seek an explanation for it.

42 As McGinn observes, Roy was uninterested in the God of theology and was rather intent on removing from his theory of mystical consciousness any sense of an "object-like content" (McGinn 2008, p. 53). Roy states (apparently with Eckhart) that all understandings of God that take him as "the origin of creatures" are "provisional" or "limited viewpoints" and must be left behind. Rather, God must be apprehended as "no-thing" (*niht*), "neither this nor that that one can speak of" (Roy 2003, pp. 80, 89, 124–25). This position seems to invalidate the "relative truth" of every conception or imagining of God found in the writings of mystics, including Eckhart himself. For Ibn ʿArabī, there must be an objective ground to positive thinking about God (i.e., the "God of theology"). Real-True Being/Consciousness (*al-Wujūd* al-Ḥaqq) (i.e., the "God beyond theology") is that ground.

43 To explain what he means that the things of the world are non-existent (*maʿdūm*), Ibn ʿArabī sometimes resorts to the symbolism of light. God is named "Light" (*Nūr*) (Q. 24:35) because light is "luminous in itself", and "illuminates other things". If Real-True Being/Consciousness is Light, everything in the world is "light" (being) and "not-light" (non-existence). It is "light" (being) because it is a ray radiated from Light. It is "not light" (non-existence) because it is not *the* Light (Chittick 1989, pp. 6–8). Thus, the things of the world (in themselves, or their eternal "realties") reside in the darkness of non-existence.

44 Ibn ʿArabī claims to have coined this expression. If he did, his inspiration was at least partly Qurʾānic, since the Qurʾān often refers to God as "Outwardly Manifest" (*al-Ẓāhir*) and "Non-Manifest" (*al-Bāṭin*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 89–91).

45 What it means for a Name or Attribute to be displayed through a "property" (*ḥukm*) or "trace" (*athar*) is a subtle issue. The Names and Attributes summarize what can be known about God (e.g., that He is "Living", or "Knowing"). The Names also establish a bridge between God and the world. This means that the names used by human beings to describe things in the world (e.g., that they are "alive" or "knowing") have their roots in the divine order (Chittick 1989, p. 33). Since the Qurʾān affirms that God taught human beings "all of the names" (Q. 2:30), human beings display traces of the Names and Attributes as well. This is why, for instance, the virtuous traits of character (*makārim al-akhlāq*) discussed by Sufi teachers are expressed as *divine* character traits in the expression "become characterized by the character traits of God" (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 21–22). Human beings can be called "forms" of God because they display His Name "Formgiver" (*al-Muṣawwir*) and the Qurʾān relates that God formed them and made their forms beautiful (Q. 40:64).

46 The "reality" (*ḥaqīqa*) and "root" (*aṣl*) are part of Ibn ʿArabī's basic terminology. Everything in this world has a "root" in the non-manifest order (Chittick 1989, pp. 37–38). A "reality" is related to the Essence since God is the "Real" (*al-Ḥaqq*) and the "Reality of realities" (*Ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqāʾiq*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 134–39). The Reality of realities thus denotes the Essence insofar as it assumes relationships with the things of the world before their creation. The created thing's non-manifest root is its reality, which is also the "lord" that rules over it in this world. The thing that becomes manifest in this world is then the "servant" or "vassal" of its non-manifest "lord". Ibn ʿArabī often says that "the realities never change", which means that the existence of things in the world veils the true situation. Existence undergoes transformation, transmutation, and corruption.

47 Jeffrey Kripal foretells what he believes will be a revolutionary re-orientation in how human beings study the world and the human self founded on the realization ("the flip") that consciousness is prior, primary, and irreducible. All human activity (including every achievement of human beings) has been accomplished *within* consciousness. The history of human activity is in fact nothing but the *history of consciousness*. This is opposed to the currently dominant view that matter is primary and human beings are little islands of consciousness in a sea of matter, which neuroscientific research will eventually be able to reduce to matter as well. Kripal writes, "That new coordination, I suggest, will come as contemporary neuroscience continues to fail, spectacularly, to explain consciousness through any materialistic model or causal mechanism and a new philosophy of mind begins to appear that understands consciousness (which is not to say ego, personality, or social self) as prior and primary and so irreducible to brain function or any other material mechanism. With this irreducibility of mind will come the new ascent of the humanities, which, after all, have always been about engaging and interpreting both the most banal and the most fantastic ways that consciousness is reflected and refracted through the cultural codes of human civilization—that is, through history, social practice, language, art, religion, literature, institution, law, thought, and, I dare add, science" (Kripal 2019, pp. 13–14). The story

Kripal tells resonates with the thesis developed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his 2003-4 Dudleian Lecture entitled "In the Beginning was Consciousness". Nasr writes, "In traditional cosmologies Pure Consciousness, that is also Pure Being, descends, while remaining Itself transcendent vis à vis Its manifestations, through various levels of the cosmic hierarchy to reach the physical world whereas in the modern reductionist view things ascend from the primordial cosmic soup. Even if certain individual scientists believe that a conscious and intelligent Being brought about the Big Bang and originated the cosmos, consciousness plays no role in the so-called evolution of the cosmos from the early aggregate of molecules to the appearance of human beings on the planet. In the traditional world view, human beings have descended from a higher realm of being and consciousness, whereas according to the modernist perspective so prevalent in present day society, they have ascended from below. These are two diametrically opposed points of view, one based on the primacy of consciousness and the other on the primacy of unconscious and blind material agents, forces, and processes" (Nasr 2006, pp. 199–206 at 201).

[48]	McGinn and Roy identify at least four levels of "intentional consciousness", although they do not clarify whether the mystical consciousness is part of this scheme or "above" it (and/or "within" it) (McGinn 2008, pp. 47–49; Roy 2003, pp. 39, 124–25). These levels point to the ways human beings "reach beyond ourselves" (Roy 2003, p. 125). Toward the end of his book, Roy tacitly admits that the consciousness that enables mystics to comport themselves correctly in this world is one "finite" determination of an "infinite consciousness" (Roy 2003, p. 128). In this, he perhaps gestures toward an ontological foundation to the mystical consciousness. For his part, Moore affirms that human beings experience more or less "intense" forms of consciousness. He writes, "One may, it seems, be more or less conscious. If we cannot look at consciousness itself, we can perhaps look at the more and less and so get an indirect line on what there is more and less of. You are more conscious now than you were in the small hours of this morning. The world has come back, as it comes back every morning. In this case, the return of consciousness is the return of the world: but there is another kind of increase in consciousness which is not a return of something that was here yesterday, of the all too familiar, but has something new about it" (S. Moore 1957, pp. 305–24 at 309). For their part, Ibn ʿArabī and his followers tended to speak of five "objective–subjective" "worlds" of being/consciousness: (1) sensory, (2) imaginal, (3) spiritual, and (4) divine, from the most metaphorical (*majāzī*) to the most real (*ḥaqīqī*). Human beings/selves occupy all four in such a way that the "human-divine form" (5) can be said to comprise a fifth ("all-gathering", *jāmiʿ*) world (Chittick 1982b). I discuss "gathering" in Section 4 of this paper.

[49]	Sebastian Moore shows some awareness of the problem faced by theorists of the mystical consciousness. He writes, "The keyword. . . is consciousness. That word, as it is often used today, stands for an idea that I find quite fascinating—and this leads me to say what I want to do in this paper. It might have been expected that, having stated the artist's problems, I should propose the theological solution of those problems. I'm afraid I shall not. I have a huge problem of my own as a theologian, which I suspect is analogous to the problems of the Christian artist. My problem is to wed successfully my theological knowledge and the idea of consciousness" (S. Moore 1957, p. 308).

[50]	As discussed above (n. 42), Roy was intent on removing from his account any sense of an "object-like content" (McGinn 2008, p. 53). For him, Eckhart's breakthrough (*durchbruch*) to the Godhead was a movement toward an ineffable "God". "Let us pray to God that we may be free of God" pointed to Eckhart's desire to be liberated from the God of theology in his ascent to the ineffable "God" of "transcendent consciousness" (Roy 2003, pp. 89–90). Drawing from Robert Forman's research on mysticism and consciousness, Roy affirms the existence of a "transcendent" self, who is no longer "conscious of" objects, but is only "conscious in" (Roy 2003, pp. xviii, xx, 32, 127–28). As the "self" begins to vanish, consciousness returns to its mysterious ground where "knowledge-by-identity" or "knowledge by acquaintance" reigns, and "knowledge about" is minimized or even abolished, including the ordinary distinctions between selves (self and other) (Forman 1999, pp. 131–32; Roy 2003, pp. 38–39). Nevertheless, Roy is forced to affirm that conventional distinctions will somehow persist. This suggests for him (see n. 48 above) that the transcendent level is one "finite" determination of "infinite consciousness" (Roy 2003, p. 128). In this—i.e., the desire to ontologize consciousness—Roy moves closer to the position laid out more self-consistently by Ibn ʿArabī and his followers.

[51]	Dāwūd Qayṣarī offered a useful distinction between the "concept" (*mafhūm*) of being (*wujūd*) and its "reality" (*ḥaqīqa*). All concepts of God are related to the "mental being" (*wujūd dhihnī*) of the individual, which is a manifestation in the intellect (*ʿaql*) of the situation as it actually is (*nafs al-amr*). Mental being, however, is still only a shadow of Being per se (*al-Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*) (Qayṣarī 2020, pp. 26, 29, 37, 51), hence the need to distinguish between "concept" and "reality".

[52]	According to Ibn ʿArabī, God may be considered in respect to "Himself" (*Dhāt*) or in respect to "His Level". Either He is "the Essence" or He is "the Divinity" (*al-ulūha, al-ulūhiyya*). The name *Allāh* applies to both, although the meanings differ. When *Allāh* refers to the Essence, it indicates that nothing positive can be said about God, who is "no specific thing". When it refers to the Divinity, it indicates that all Names/Attributes are ascribed separately to Him (Chittick 1989, pp. 47, 49, 59–62, 66).

[53]	If the Essence is unknowable, our knowledge of God belongs to the level of the Names/Attributes (the Divinity). In fact, we only learn about the unknowability of the Essence through Names that "negate" or "strip away" (*salb*). For instance, the "One-Only" (*Aḥad*) indicates that God is One in a way that negates the relationships He assumes with creatures (He is "transcendent"). (Chittick 2023, pp. 4, 8; 1989, pp. 9, 58, 109). By contrast, Names like "Knower", "Seeing", "Hearing", and "Speaking" affirm (*ithbāt*) those relationships (He is "immanent") (Chittick 2023, pp. 4, 10; 1989, p. 58).

54   McGinn avers that mystics make "true judgments about the nature of reality" (see n. 41 above), which should include judgments about the God of theology. Unfortunately, he seems to understand this "true" judgment only as an "inverse insight" (a knowledge gained by loss). The mystical doctrine of "learned ignorance" (*docta ignorantia*) accounts for the mystic's true judgment that God is in fact "no-thing". The "uniting" mystic simply comes to learn the limits of his knowledge about God (McGinn 2008, pp. 53, 56). But how does McGinn explain the correctness of this judgment (its objective foundation)? He only states that it is the consequence of "the special gift of God's love" (McGinn 2008, pp. 49–50), which is no explanation at all.

55   As Michael Sells explains, when Eckhart prays to "now" be "free of God", he does not intend to introduce a "scholastic" distinction between "God Himself" and "God in creatures", thereby negating the "God in creatures". In fact, he asserts that God is in creatures as well as beyond creatures. If "before", the discussion was of the "God in creatures", "now" it is of "God Himself". The "God in creatures" is affirmed at one level, and negated at another level. Since the "God in creatures" rejoins "God Himself" in the negative movement, both are valid, each in its place (Sells 2011, pp. 1, 10, 188–89, 190–92).

56   According to Ibn ʿArabī, every concept and/or image of God held and professed by an individual represents a specific "knotting" or "coloration" within Being/Consciousness (Chittick 1994a, pp. 138–41; 1989, pp. 335–41). The relative truth of each "knot of belief" has its foundation in Real-True Being/Consciousness. The judgments a person has about God (his "God of beliefs") become truer the more he advances toward Real-True Being/Consciousness. So long as consciousness remains an "individual, in-this-world, human consciousness", even while accessing "imaginal", "spiritual", and "divine" consciousness, it will continue to form concepts and images about God. For a thorough treatment of this topic, see chapter 9 ("Diversity of Belief", esp. pp. 138–41 and 152–55) in William Chittick's *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Chittick 1994a, pp. 137–60). If Ibn ʿArabī identifies God (the Essence) as the Real-Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), the God of theology would include what he calls "the Real through whom Creation takes place" (*al-Ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 125, 132–34), or "the Real created in beliefs" (*al-Ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī ʾl-iʿtiqādāt*) (Chittick 1994a, p. 150; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, p. IV 386.17).

57   The two expressions—"relative" (*nisbī*) and "real/true" (*ḥaqīqī*)—were useful to Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (Chittick 1999, pp. 203–17 at 208–12). If the "heart" (*qalb, fuʾād*) is understood as the place where God discloses Himself to believers, then a heart for which the description of "oneness" (*waḥdā*) has overcome that of "manyness" (*kathra*) will be receptive to a "truer" knotting of belief (see n. 68 below) (Murata 1992, pp. 311–13); for its oneness has become "true/real" (*ḥaqīqī*) and its manyness "relative" (*nisbī*). As for "nondelimitation in beliefs", Ibn ʿArabī writes, "If God were to take people to account for error, He would take every possessor of belief to account. Every believer has delimited his lord with his intellect (*ʿaql*) and consideration (*naẓar*) and has thereby restricted Him (*qayyadahu wa ḥaṣarahu*). But nothing is worthy for God except Nondelimitation (*wa lā yanbaghī li-Llāh illā ʾl-iṭlāq*)" (Chittick 1994a, p. 153; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, p. III 309.30).

58   On these correlative terms, see Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Chittick 1989, pp. 16, 19, 43, 49, 61, 89, 91, 96, 132–33, 164, 173, 196, 214, 216).

59   Ibn ʿArabī frequently reminds his readers that "the Self-disclosures are never repeated" (*lā takrār fī ʾl-tajallī*). He identifies the Essence as the ultimate source of transformation, transmutation, and corruption in this world. As the Qurʾān declares, "Every day He is upon some task (*shaʾn*)" (Q. 55:29). Here, "He" refers to the Essence, and "Day" refers to the present moment, the ever-recurring temporal locus of a new Self-disclosure (Chittick 1989, pp. 18, 96, 103).

60   This is related to the comprehensive and multi-dimensional way in which human beings display the Names/Attributes.

61   On the distinction between "animal human beings" and "perfect human beings", see Chittick and Murata (Chittick 1994a, pp. 23, 36, 38, 155; Murata 1992, p. 305). Ibn ʿArabī makes the point, *pace* the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā, that the human being is not defined by his rationality (the Aristotleian "rational animal", *ḥayawān nāṭiq* in Arabic), but rather "by the divine form" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, p. III 154.19). Qūnawī also explains that "animal men (*al-unāsī al-ḥayawāniyyūn*) are the forms of. . .that human-divine reality in respect of outward manifestation" (Chittick 1992, p. 189). Perfect human beings, on the other hand, actualize the human–divine reality at all levels (outward and inward, visible and hidden).

62   Ibn ʿArabī discusses this complex topic in his remarks on the meaning of "Adam". This name refers both to the first prophet/first perfect human being and to the inner reality of every human being (its potential to actualize the human-divine form). Ibn ʿArabī describes Adam as an "all-gathering created entity" (*al-kawn al-jāmiʿ*). This means that he possesses a "form" (*ṣūra*) in this lower world whose "meaning" (*maʿnā*) is *Allāh* in the higher world. Since *Allāh* is the all-gathering name (*al-ism al-jāmiʿ*), "Adam and his children" are the only loci of manifestation in this world that comprehensively display (potentially or actually) the meanings of all the Names/Attributes in a proper balance (Chittick 1982a, pp. 30–93 at 37–38, 45; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1966, p. 48; 1980, p. 50).

63   Kāshānī writes, "The Reality of realities is the One-Only Essence (*al-dhāt al-aḥadiyya*) that gathers together all realities. It is called the Presence of Gathering (*ḥaḍrat al-jamʿ*) and the Presence of Being (*ḥaḍrat al-wujūd*)" (Chittick 2023, p. 5 n. 7).

64   The "Hidden Treasure" is an allusion to the infinite relationships or "regards" that the Essence assumes with the possible things. These relationships are summarized by the Names and Attributes. "Hidden Treasure" comes from a saying that Sufis attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad. According this Prophetic *ḥadīth* in which God speaks in the first person, "I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known." (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 10; Chittick 1989, p. 391 n. 14).

65 "One-Onliness" (*aḥadiyya*) points to the "transcendence" of the Essence, since it negates all "regards" or possible relationships with things, whereas "One-Allness" (*wāḥidiyya*) points to the "immanence" of the Essence, and affirms every possible relationship with things (Chittick 2023, pp. 8, 11–12; ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 10). The word "thing" (*shayʾ*, *ashyāʾ*) in Islamic/Arabic philosophical discourses—one of the "indefinites" (*min ankar al-nakīrāt*)—is applicable to anything but God (Chittick 1989, pp. 12, 88).

66 For Ibn ʿArabī, cosmic existence as a whole represents a differentiated (*mufaṣṣal*) locus of manifestation of all of the Names and Attributes, while human beings, living within cosmic existence, each represents a summated (*mujmal*) locus of manifestation of all the Names and Attributes (Chittick 1982a, pp. 37–38).

67 As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, "In the beginning" refers both to the distant past as well as the present moment, which is an "eternal now" (Nasr 2006, p. 199). In a similar way, Sebastian Moore writes, "In the beginning was the Word, the word wholly meaningful, wholly within silence. This is true now. It means 'this is not the starting point'. How much of our lives is based on the opposite assumption, that 'in the beginning was the [mundane] situation'" (S. Moore 1957, p. 319).

68 In general, "gathering" signifies a coordination of manyness through the achievement of an overpowering oneness. Dispersion, by contrast, signifies the domination of oneness by a differentiating manyness. In gathering, the description of oneness becomes true/real (*ḥaqīqī*), dominating over the description of manyness, which thus becomes relative (*nisbī*) (see n. 57 above).

69 Sufi theorists explained in their teachings that human beings can only aspire to a "mystical consciousness" because Being/Consciousness had first descended and "condescended to" the human being/consciousness.

70 The words "voyage" (*sayr*) and "journey" (*safar*) were near synonyms in discussions about "wayfaring" (*sulūk*). Ibn ʿArabī seems to have limited the journeys to three (Aboueleze 2007, pp. 185–95 at 187). His early followers added a fourth. See William Chittick's "Farghānī and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Four Journeys" (Chittick Forthcoming).

71 A number of Sufi theorists located "gathering" (*jamʿ*) among the final stations of being/consciousness's voyage of ascent. ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), in his description of the one hundred stations of the voyagers, placed "gathering" at the 99th station, while calling it "the furthest station of the wayfarers" (*ghāyat maqāmāt al-sālikīn*). (Anṣārī al-Harawī 1966, p. 46). Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī and other followers of Ibn ʿArabī named the stations achieved at the end of the third and fourth journeys the "gathering of gathering" (*jamʿ al-jamʿ*) and "one-onliness of gathering" (*aḥadiyyat al-jamʿ*). For an extensive discussion of "gathering", see Chittick's "Farghānī and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Four Journeys" (Chittick Forthcoming). For a summary, see his commentary on "Flash VI" of the *Divine Flashes* (*Lamaʿāt*) of ʿIrāqī (ʿIrāqī 1982, pp. 137–38).

72 According to Farghānī, the wayfarer begins to witness Divine Self-disclosures at the beginning of the first journey, which is partly what defines it as a journey in the first place. At this early stage, the mystical consciousness has begun to emerge, as Farghānī explains in his commentary on the first line of the *Poem of the Wayfaring* (*Naẓm al-sulūk*) by Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1234): "My eye's hand poured me the strong wine of love, my cup her/Her face, majestic beyond beauty". According to Farghānī, this line describes the wayfarer's witnessing of the Divine Self-disclosure in the locus of manifestation of a beautiful human face, which is classified as a Self-disclosure pertaining to the Divine Act (*fiʿl*) (Farghānī 2007, pp. 147, 149–50).

73 This is the *docta ignorantia*, or the learned ignorance described by Eckhart (McGinn 2008, pp. 53, 56–57; Roy 2003, pp. 75–79).

74 Among the three theorists, Louis Roy was most preoccupied with self-negation. He insists that God must be found as "no-thing" within the nothingness of the empty self, "whenever the operations of its faculties are interrupted" (Roy 2003, p. 80). It was perhaps Roy's interest in dialogue with Zen Buddhism that caused him to be so preoccupied with "emptiness". McGinn and Moore are less concerned with the "emptiness" of unbecoming, though they too acknowledge the self-negation involved in apophasis. McGinn affirms the teachings of at least two mystics—John of the Cross and Eckhart—whereby the "inner faculties must be emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly within them" (McGinn 2008, p. 58). Moore follows Aldous Huxley in claiming that "education should be addressed primarily to 'the not self': when harmony has been established with this massive silent partner, the powers of the self are quickened in an amazing way" (S. Moore 1957, p. 306). He writes further, "In realizing 'not-this', I have stepped back from being thus filled with things, from 'this'" (S. Moore 1957, p. 319).

75 McGinn and Moore give greater credence to the "self-realization" of the "divinized soul". For McGinn, every intentional act of the mystic is somehow intertwined with the divine presence (the "God-self" of Teresa, Eckhart, and Ignatius) (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 50–51, 53). Moore writes, "Consciousness... has no object, it is simply the delight and strength of self-hood.... I mean, that the process of becoming more conscious is going somewhere... towards a completeness of itself" (S. Moore 1957, p. 311).

76 If "*Allāh*" names the Essence, it is because (like every proper noun) it does not specify an attribute. In this way, it is like (for instance) the name "Boston", which does not point to a meaning that would identify every town named "Boston". *Dhāt* is a "pronoun of allusion", which means the Essence is just that which is alluded to by every Name/Attribute or Act.

77 As Qūnawī explains, when Being/Consciousness descended the levels, it gradually left the world of luminosity (*nūrāniyya*) and simpleness (*basāṭa*), entering into darkness (*ẓulmāniyya*) and compositeness (*tarkīb*). The return voyage of being/consciousness must, therefore, be an ascent of "unbecoming" or "decomposition" (*miʿrāj al-taḥlīl*). The wayfarer on this voyage obeys the Command to "deliver the trusts back to their owners" (Q. 4:58). He "discards" (for instance) the "elemental" part he acquired on the descent back to the world of elements. Nevertheless, the return voyage must also comprise an aspect of composition (*tarkīb*), since the wayfarer continues to have an "elemental existence" while he lives (Chittick 1992, pp. 194–95).

⁷⁸ These complementary terms were often discussed by Sufi theorists. Stability/ableness tended to be seen as a higher station, although Ibn ʿArabī reverses the hierarchy, noting that coloration/variegation corresponds to the actual situation. God, in His Self-disclosure, constantly transforms Himself in/through the forms of the world (Chittick 1989, p. 108).

⁷⁹ As Sufi theorists often insist, any perception, tasting (*dhawq*), or witnessing (*shuhūd*) of a Divine Self-disclosure, however magnificent or sublime, is not an encounter with the Real-Truth Itself. The early Sufi of Baghdad Junayd (d. 298/910) said, "the water takes on the color of the cup." This means the witnessing of the wayfarer is only in accordance with his preparedness (*istiʿdād*) (Chittick 2020, pp. 134–56 at 141–42). Understanding this point will help to prevent the voyager from placing too much value in experiences. The writings of Sufi theorists are in general agreement with the current consensus that "it is fundamentally misconceived to think of the mystical life as based upon the cultivation and interpretation of special episodes or states of consciousness, whether or not different in kind from other types of experience" (P. Moore 2005, p. 6356).

⁸⁰ Unlike the Essence and the Names/Attributes, the Acts/acts are synonymous with the ambiguous domain of existent things. They represent the "creatures" of this world, which are Self-disclosures of God or manifestations of the Essence. In themselves, the creatures are non-existent (see n. 43 above) (Chittick 1989, pp. 11–12), but in the cosmos, their situation is ambiguous.

⁸¹ See n. 46 above.

⁸² The terms "property" and "trace" help to explain how a Name or Attribute is displayed in cosmic existence. The word "property" (*ḥukm*) stresses the authority that the Name/Attribute has in exercising influence over the states of a given locus of manifestation. The "trace" or "property" really belongs to—is "proper to"—the Name or Attribute from which it became established in cosmic existence (Chittick 1989, pp. 39–41). For instance, the "creature" displays the ruling authority of "Creator".

⁸³ Incomparability (*tanzīh*) and Similarity (*tashbīh*) name the two ways of gaining knowledge of God. Attributes that affirm God's similarity to creatures (*tashbīh*)—e.g., "speech", "sight", "knowledge"—suggest that traces of those Attributes are displayed in cosmic existence and thus give news that God is "Outwardly Manifest" (*Ẓāhir*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 68–70). See also n. 53 above.

⁸⁴ Qūnawī explained these stages of gathering in more explicitly Neoplatonic terms. As he describes, when the voyager's being/consciousness becomes dominated by of one of the Names/Attributes, it moves away from "centrality" or "middleness" (*wasaṭiyya, markaziyya*). This voyager's wayfaring will then be characterized by dispersion over gathering, by coloration over ableness, and by disequilibrium (*inḥirāf*) over equilibrium (*iʿtidāl*). By achieving "middleness"—the center point of the circle—the voyager gains the desired equilibrium (*iʿtidāl*) and stability/ableness (Chittick 1992, pp. 189–90).

⁸⁵ As the Qurʾān affirms, "He is with you (*maʿakum*) wheresoever you are" (Q. 57:4). In connection with this verse, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (d. 555/1111) describes four levels of "those who affirm oneness (*tawḥīd*)". Only the fourth and highest group of "unifiers" witnesses that "there is no more than one actor" (Chittick 2020, pp. 139–40). So long as he sees two in his own acts—God and himself—the unifier lacks perfect togetherness. He remains fixed in dispersion.

⁸⁶ Farghānī discusses seven interiors in his explanation of the four journeys. His vision is based on traditional reports describing seven interiors of the Qurʾān or seven universal Names/Attributes of God. These correspond to the seven "root attributes" of the wayfarer (i.e., life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, seeing). Moreover, the differentiated structure of the self suggests that attributes like life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, etc., possess multiple interiors beyond the "ordinary" life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, etc., that most human beings know (Chittick Forthcoming).

⁸⁷ This is a famous *ḥadīth* which Ibn ʿArabī cites and discusses from many points of view (Chittick 1989, pp. 344–46).

⁸⁸ For Ibn ʿArabī, the Name Lord (*rabb*) denotes the relationship the Essence assumes with creatures (n. 46 above). It alludes to the "root" of every created thing, which is the reality that lords over it in this world (Chittick 2023, p. 14). Most human beings do not open the doors to this reality, and thereby fail to recognize the Essence as their lord (Chittick 1989, pp. 310–12).

⁸⁹ It is only possible to speak of "interiors" of the human being/self because human beings are "outer forms" (*ṣuwar*) whose "inner meaning" (*maʿnā*) is named by *Allāh* (the Essence). See n. 45 above.

⁹⁰ Farghānī explains that the self's recognition of itself on the ascending arc of the voyage is a recognition of its essence (*dhāt*) gained *from* its essence, its innermost reality, or highest level. This innermost interior of the self is identified with the One-Only Essence (*Dhāt*), which is this "all-gathering" self's Lord (Chittick Forthcoming). See also n. 46, n. 71, and n. 89 above.

⁹¹ The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) cites the mixture of water (*māʾ*) and milk (*laban*) as a suitable comparison for the kind of "divine–human" unification (*ittiḥād*) he observed in the doctrines of certain heretical groups (Muslim and non-Muslim) (e.g., Jacobite Christians). In this union, two realities appear to share the same existence (*wujūd*) (in this case, through the mixing of two substances), or their essences become confused (e.g., water becomes wine or milk). The heretical view Ibn Taymiyya attributes to Ibn ʿArabī and some of his followers is that God and human beings (two things of differing reality) are joined together by a single existence (*wujūd*) (Ibn Taymiyya 1974, p. 24; Knysh 1999, pp. 98, 100–105).

⁹² Ibn Taymiyya distinguished between those who professed "unification" (*ittiḥād*) or "incarnation" (*ḥulūl*) in one specific created being (e.g., the Prophet Jesus), and those who professed it more generally. He saw the establishment of water (*māʾ*) in a container (*ināʾ*) as a suitable comparison for the doctrine held by Nestorian Christians (Ibn Taymiyya 1974, p. 24).

⁹³ The completion of the circle is often associated by members of the School of Ibn ʿArabī with the station of the Prophet Muḥammad. Farghānī refers to the station achieved by Muḥammad as "most-perfectness" (*akmaliyya*), whereas the limit of other extraordinary

human beings is only perfection/completeness (*kamāl*) (Chittick 2023, p. 11). ʿIrāqī describes the station of most perfect human beings by the expression "two arcs' lengths", while that of Muḥammad is "or nearer". These names come from the Qurʾānic description of the Prophet Muḥammad's nocturnal ascent (*miʿrāj*) related in Q. 53:8-9 ("then drew near and suspended hung, two arcs' length away, or nearer") (ʿIrāqī 1982, pp. 98, 137–38, 141–42, 147–48, 154, 160).

[94] See n. 46, n. 71, n. 89, n. 91 above on servant (*ʿabd*) and lord (*rabb*). To be the perfect servant (*ʿabd kāmil*) is to be the servant of the Essence. It is to achieve the gatheringness of the Prophet Muḥammad whose Lord is the Essence (Chittick 2023, pp. 11–18). For Sufi theorists, this is only a theoretical possibility, since only Muḥammad has achieved this station.

[95] These two terms—*ḥādith* and *qadīm*—were used by Muslim philosophers and theologians in discussions about the temporal origination or eternity of the world. Here, they are better translated as "recently arrived" and "timeless".

[96] ʿIrāqī explains poetically how "union" was the case all along: "a sun shining through a thousand bits of glass; a ray of color through each one, beaming to plain sight. All of it one light, but a thousandfold in colors, so that difference appears between this one and that one." This difference, however, is imagined (*mutawahham*). (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 94; 1974, p. 23).

[97] See n. 24 and n. 75 above. On the one hand, McGinn wishes to explain the teaching that the "inner faculties" must be silenced for God to work within (McGinn 2008, p. 58). He also wishes to accommodate the view of St. John of the Cross that those very same faculties are transformed by grace (McGinn 2008, pp. 57–59), and to affirm the "God-self" of Teresa, Eckhart, and Ignatius (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 50–51, 53). I do not see how McGinn can self-consistently explain this situation without an "ontology of consciousness"—i.e., a theory explaining how the ordinary consciousness becomes integrated within (coordinated and harmonized by) the mystical consciousness, the expanded "self" now identifying with the higher level without this abolishing the lower. An ontology of consciousness explains how the two are united so long as the mystic is alive.

[98] See n. 24, n. 75, and n. 76 above. Roy wishes to explain Eckhart's teaching that "the faculties no longer operate". He takes this to mean that the faculties are drawn "in to a unity", sinking "into an oblivion", with some, like memory and the senses, even becoming "inactive" (Roy 2003, pp. 75–77, 80). For Roy, the self must pass into "unawareness" for another set of operations to become active in the ground (*grunde*). I do not see how Roy can explain this situation without positing a more gathered consciousness into which the dispersed consciousness becomes integrated, the self now operating from the gathered level.

[99] An Ibn ʿArabīan theory of the "mystical consciousness" will distinguish between "metaphorical" and "Real-True" consciousness. This distinction helps to explain the various "colorations" and "stabilities" achieved by the voyager in his ascent (*miʿrāj*). When the attributes of the metaphorical self/consciousness are annihilated (*fānī*), they are not lost in subsistence (*baqāʾ*). Rather, they are seen for what they are—loci of manifestation in which the Names and Attributes display themselves. The consciousness of the dispersed self has been integrated into and coordinated by the expanded consciousness of the more gathered self. At this higher level, the "timeless" Names/Attributes of Real-True Being/Consciousness have "subjugated" the "newly arrived" attributes belonging to the individual human being/consciousness.

[100] See n. 94 above. ʿIrāqī's point confirms the views of Nasr and Moore cited above (see n. 67). Followers of Ibn ʿArabī described all of Being/Consciousness as "a single circle divided by a line into two bow-shaped arcs" (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 98; Chittick 1992, pp. 185–88). As ʿIrāqī explains, the line appears to exist (*mī namāyad kih hast*) from the vantage point of ordinary human consciousness, situated at the lower quadrant of the "rising" or "returning" arc (*qaws-i ṣuʿūdī/ʿurūjī*). There, it is like the line dividing light and shadow (*nūr wa ẓulm*). At the moment of "meeting", this fine line vanishes, and the knower suddenly understands that the "timeless" and the "newly arrived" have never been separate. The line was only imagined (*mutawahham*) to exist (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 98; 1974, p. 27). Still, though the "eternal" and the "temporal" have now collapsed into the "eternal moment", and the wayfarer has overcome his metaphorical consciousness, he has not abandoned consciousness at the lower level. He only sees this level for what it is. Hence, Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī remarks, "But wait! Even if the line is erased, the circle will still not appear as it did at first. The line's effect (*athar*) will remain" (ʿIrāqī 1982, p. 98; 1974, p. 27).

[101] As Qūnawī explains, although being/consciousness left the world of luminosity (*nūrāniyya*) and noncompositeness (*basaṭiyya*) and entered into darkness (*ẓulmāniyya*) and composition (*tarkīb*) in its descent, the voyager's return to simpleness, or his ascent of decomposition (*miʿrāj al-taḥlīl*), also represents, in another sense, a voyage of "supra-formal composition" (*tarkīb maʿnawī*), since he never leaves the lower level, even as he returns the parts he acquired "back to their owners" (Chittick 1992, p. 195).

[102] Peter Moore makes this one of the four requirements for any modern treatment of mysticism. He writes, "Any modern treatment of mysticism must satisfy two negative and two positive criteria. First, it must avoid reifying mysticism into some kind of uniform system or tradition standing outside the historical traditions of religion. Second, it must avoid making the forms or truths of the mysticism of any one tradition a touchstone for the evaluation of mysticism more generally. Third, it must take into account the global diversity of mysticism; it must embrace Nagarjuna as well as Teresa of Ávila, Isaac Luria as well as Shankara, Mirabai as well as Plotinus. Finally, it must take into account what may be called the four "dimensions" of mysticism: the experiential, the theoretical, the practical, and the social" (P. Moore 2005, p. 6356).

[103] I borrow this expression from José Cabezón who explains how the academic study of religion has advanced by incorporating the perspectives of the subjects it first studies as objects. He writes, "...we are a long way from achieving theory parity. For example, it is hard for us even to conceive of the day when a "Theories of Religion" course might be taught with a substantial selection of

readings from nonwestern sources, to take an example of something that some of us consider a sign of maturity in this regard. Still, there does seem to be movement in the direction of theory-pluralism, even if the limited experiments that we have engaged in are still dominated by a predominantly western agenda" (Cabezón 2006, pp. 21–38 at 31).

104   The construction of typologies (e.g., a mysticism of "uniting" and one of "identity") is useful, as this paper has shown, but it risks becoming superficial and overly rigid. The 1996 study of McGinn, Idel, and colleagues revealed that the classifications of an earlier generation of scholars were, in fact, too rigid. McGinn writes, "Rather than being easily classifiable by opposed types, most mystical texts feature an oscillation and interaction between two poles that need not be seen as expressing opposition" (McGinn 2005, p. 6335). A dialogical approach to mysticism is likely to challenge the rigidity of other classifications suggested by the following distinctions—e.g., dualist/non-dualist, theistic/non-theistic, and voluntaristic/gnostic forms of mysticism.

105   What I mean here, to leverage the insights of the comparative study of religion, is that scholarship operating principally from within the linguistic frame of a particular tradition and engaging in scholarly dialogue with others through "translation", is less likely to fall prey to the charge of misrepresentation or distortion than an approach that makes comparison its primary *modus operandi*. This is because comparison proceeds by "magical" leaps involving "the 'manipulation of differences' across large gaps. . ." in order to observe and document similarities (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 3–4). The potential ill-effects of such an approach to cross-cultural dialogue have now been well-documented (Patton and Ray 2000a).

106   As Chittick explains, a good deal of Sufi literature explains how to discern between the sorts of ambiguous experiences—trances, visions, premonitions—connected only to the "imaginal" world from the more significant perceptions connected to the higher worlds. The disciplines of the Sufi path help wayfarers attune their understanding so that they can discern true from false (Chittick 2020, pp. 150–52). The study of "mystical practices", including "contemplative discernment", will surely enrich the hoped for dialogue between traditions. This topic has tended to receive less attention in academic studies of mysticism than the more exciting discussions about "experience", or the more specialized discussions of "doctrines" (P. Moore 2005, p. 6357).

References

Aboueleze, Balkis. 2007. Le voyage dans *Kitâb al-isfâr 'an natâ'ij al-asfâr* d'Ibn 'Arabî: Entre finitude et absolu. *Cahiers D'études Hispaniques Médiévales* 30: 185–95. [CrossRef]

Abrahamov, Binyamin. 2003. *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazâlî and al-Dabbâgh*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon. [CrossRef]

Albertson, David. 2020. Chapter 18: Cataphasis, Visualization, and Mystical Space. In *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*. Edited by Edward Howells and Mark Allen McIntosh. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 347–68. [CrossRef]

Anṣārī al-Harawī, 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad. 1966. *Manāzil al-sāyirīn*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Bābī al-Qāhira.

Avicenna. 2005. *The Metaphysics of the Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text (al-Ilahīyāt min al-Shifāʾ)*. Translated by Michael E. Marmura. Provo: Brigham Young University Press.

Bell, Joseph Norment. 1979. *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Cabezón, José Ignacio. 2006. The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74: 21–38. [CrossRef]

Chittick, William C. 1982a. Ibn 'Arabī's Own Summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*: 'The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom'. *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 1: 30–93.

Chittick, William C. 1982b. The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qūnawī to al-Qayṣarī. *The Muslim World* 72: 107–28. [CrossRef]

Chittick, William C. 1989. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Chittick, William C. 1992. The Circle of Spiritual Ascent According to al-Qūnawī. In *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*. Edited by Parviz Morewedge. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 179–209.

Chittick, William C. 1994a. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Chittick, William C. 1994b. Rūmī and waḥdat al-wujūd. In *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*. Edited by Amin Banani, Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 70–111.

Chittick, William C. 1996. The School of Ibn 'Arabī. In *History of Islamic Philosophy*. Edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman. London: Routledge, pp. 510–23. [CrossRef]

Chittick, William C. 1999. Spectrums of Islamic Thought: Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī on the Implications of Oneness and Manyness. In *The Heritage of Sufism: Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*. Edited by Leonard Lewisohn. New York: Oneworld, pp. 203–17.

Chittick, William C. 2004. The Central Point: Qūnawī's Role in the School of Ibn 'Arabī. *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 35: 25–45.

Chittick, William C. 2013. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Chittick, William C. 2020. Religious Experience in Traditional Islam. In *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience*. Edited by Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 134–56. [CrossRef]

Chittick, William C. 2022. Marātib al-Taqwā: Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī on the Ontology of Ethics. In *Mysticism and Ethics in Islam*. Edited by Bilāl Orfali, Atif Khalil and Mohammed Rustom. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, pp. 139–61.

Chittick, William C. 2023. Farghānī on the Muhammadan Reality. *Horizonte* 21: 1–19. [CrossRef]

Chittick, William C. Forthcoming. Farghānī and *Waḥdat Al-Wujūd* and the Four Journeys. *Journal of Sufi Studies*.

Doniger, Wendy. 2000. Post-Modern and Post-Structural Comparisons. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 63–74.

Dupré, Louis. 1996. Unio Mystica: The State and the Experience. In *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn. New York: Continuum, pp. 3–23.

El-Rouayheb, Khaled. 2005. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. [CrossRef]

Farghānī, Saʿīd al-Dīn ibn Aḥmad. 2007. *Muntahā ʾl-madārik fī sharḥ Tāʾiyyat Ibn al-Fāriḍ*. Edited by ʿĀṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī al-Ḥusaynī al-Shādhilī al-Darqāwī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, vol. 1.

Forman, Robert K. C. 1999. *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press. [CrossRef]

Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad. 1998. *The Niche of Lights (Mishkāt al-anwār)*. Translated by David Buchman. Provo: Brigham Young University Press.

Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad. 2005. *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm.

Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad. 2007. *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī Sharḥ Asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā)*. Translated by David B. Burrell, and Nazih Daher. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.

Giffen, Lois Anita. 1971. *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre*. New York: New York University Press.

Giffen, Lois Anita. 1994. Ibn Ḥazm and the Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma. In *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*. Edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Manuela Marín. Leiden and New York: Brill, pp. 420–42. [CrossRef]

Gimaret, Daniel. 1988. *Les noms DIVINS en islam: Exégèse Lexicographique et Théologique*. Paris: Editions du Cerf.

Hallaq, Wael. 2018. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hernández, Gloria Maité. 2021. *Savoring God: Comparative Theopoetics*. New York: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Howells, Edward. 2020. Chapter 3: Mystical Theology and Human Experience. In *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*. Edited by Edward Howells and Mark Allen McIntosh. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 45–64. [CrossRef]

Huss, Boaz. 2020. *Mystifying Kabbalah: Academic Scholarship, National Theology, & New Age Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press. [CrossRef]

Ibn al-ʿArabī. 1911. *Kitāb al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*. Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā.

Ibn al-ʿArabī. 1966. *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī.

Ibn al-ʿArabī. 1980. *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Translated by Ralph W. J. Austin. New York: Paulist Press.

Ibn Taymiyya, Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm. 1974. *Majmūʿat al-Rasāʾil wa ʾl-Masāʾil*. Edited by Rashīd Riḍā. Cairo: Lajnat al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, vol. 4.

Idel, Moshe, and Bernard McGinn, eds. 1996. *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. New York: Continuum.

ʿIrāqī, Fakhr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm. 1974. *Risāla-yi Lamaʿāt wa Risāla-yi iṣṭilāḥāt*. Edited by Javād Nūrbakhsh. Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khānqāh-i Niʿmat Allāhī.

ʿIrāqī, Fakhr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm. 1982. *Divine Flashes*. Translated by William C. Chittick, and Peter Lamborn Wilson. New York: Paulist Press.

Kāshānī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq. 1385. *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sāʾirīn*. Qum: Intishārāt-i Bīdār.

King, Richard. 1999. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"*. London: Routledge. [CrossRef]

Knysh, Alexander D. 1999. *Ibn ʿArabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2019. *The Flip: Epiphanies of Mind and the Future of Knowledge*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press.

Lumbard, Joseph E. B. 2024. Islam and the Challenge of Epistemic Sovereignty. *Religions* 15: 406. [CrossRef]

McGinn, Bernard. 1996a. Comments: Bernard McGinn. In *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn. New York: Continuum, pp. 185–93.

McGinn, Bernard. 1996b. Preface. In *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn. New York: Continuum, pp. vii–ix.

McGinn, Bernard. 2005. Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Lindsay Jones. Detroit: Thomson Gale, pp. 6334–41.

McGinn, Bernard. 2008. Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal. *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8: 44–63. [CrossRef]

McGinn, Bernard. 2020. Chapter 21: Mystical Union. In *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*. Edited by Edward Howells and Mark Allen McIntosh. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 404–21. [CrossRef]

Moore, Peter. 2005. Mysticism [Further Considerations]. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Edited by Lindsay Jones. Detroit: Thomson Gale, pp. 6355–59.

Moore, Sebastian. 1957. Consciousness. *The Downside Review* 75: 305–24. [CrossRef]

Moyaert, Marianne. 2013. Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Edited by Catherine Cornille. Chichester and West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 64–86. [CrossRef]

Murata, Sachiko. 1992. *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*. Albany: State University of New York Press. [CrossRef]

Murata, Sachiko. 1994. *The Vision of Islam*. St. Paul: Paragon House.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2006. In the Beginning was Consciousness. In *The Essential Sophia*. Edited by Katherine O'Brien. Bloomington: World Wisdom, pp. 199–206.

Patton, Kimberley C., and Benjamin C. Ray, eds. 2000a. *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Patton, Kimberley C., and Benjamin C. Ray. 2000b. Introduction. In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*. Edited by Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–19.

Qayṣarī, Dāwūd ibn Maḥmūd. 2020. *The Horizons of Being: The Metaphysics of Ibn al-ʿArabī in the Muqaddimat al-Qayṣarī*. Translated by Mukhtar H. Ali. Leiden; Boston: Brill. [CrossRef]

Roy, Louis. 2003. *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers*. Albany: State University of New York Press. [CrossRef]

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. 2003. The Making of Modern Mysticism. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71: 273–302. [CrossRef]

Sells, Michael. 1996a. Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam. In *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn. New York: Continuum, pp. 87–124.

Sells, Michael. 1996b. Comments: Michael Sells. In *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*. Edited by Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn. New York: Continuum, pp. 163–73.

Sells, Michael. 2011. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Taves, Ann. 2020. From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies. *Religion* 50: 137–47. [CrossRef]