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DEFINING THE APPROACH

Ibn ‘Arabi has no reason to complain about biographers ignoring him in their works; this is not usually the case in Muslim prosopographical literature.¹ The accounts of his life and work by his younger contemporaries resurface in the subsequent centuries, “enriched” with details not found in the original sources. Such later elaborations indicate the abiding importance of Ibn ‘Arabi for later generations of Muslim writers. As understandable as these elaborations are in view of the subsequent theological disputations surrounding Ibn ‘Arabi’s name, they considerably complicate the task of reconstructing an objective portrait of the Greatest Master.²

At the same time, for a researcher looking into the process of image-making in medieval Islamic society the numerous biographical notices on Ibn ‘Arabi are a treasure chest of information that reveals the critical aspects of his personality and intellectual heritage as viewed by medieval observers. Following Chamberlain’s incisive suggestion,³ the impersonal and formulaic character of medieval biographies widely bemoaned by Western Islamicists is precisely the one that helps to get valuable insight into the self-image and intellectual universe of the ‘*ulama*’. Rather than ascertaining the accuracy of single anecdotes that constitute biographical entries, I shall try to bring out their uses in medieval biographies of the Greatest Master and their intended effect on the readers.

In Chapter 2, I shall review the testimonies of Ibn ‘Arabi’s biographers from the 6th/13th centuries onward with special reference to the anecdotal material contained therein. This review will help to determine how Ibn ‘Arabi’s personality was reimagined and reproduced in the collective memory of the Muslim community over time. This approach seeks to render justice to the concerns and order of priorities of the society of which Ibn ‘Arabi was an outstanding, if

somewhat atypical, representative. Before turning to these issues, it is necessary to situate this study within the vast corpus of academic literature on Ibn 'Arabi and on his work.

To a large extent, this study was motivated by the dramatic disparity in the way in which Ibn 'Arabi is portrayed by Western and Muslim scholars. Even a cursory glance at the studies of the Sufi master by such Western or Western-trained researchers as Nyberg, Asin Palacios, Nicholson, Afifi, Corbin, Burckhardt, Landau, Nasr, Izutsu, and more recently Austin, Chittick, Chodkiewicz, and Addas reveals that, despite the diversity of their personal backgrounds and methodologies, they tend to present Ibn 'Arabi as a great genius of Islamic mystical thought who stood head and shoulders above both his Muslim contemporaries and later his critics. In a similar way, these Western investigators see Ibn 'Arabi as a individual who was grossly misjudged by his narrow-minded coreligionists.

With this notion of Ibn 'Arabi as their starting point, the Western scholars mentioned above set about conveying to the uninitiated the unfathomable greatness and subtlety of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. In so doing, they diligently dissected Ibn 'Arabi's principal works with Western analytical tools, leaving out the native Muslim opinions of Ibn 'Arabi and his work that are scattered across innumerable biographies, theological treatises, and polemical tracts.

Western Islamicists' disregard for the Islamic material on the Greatest Master was dictated in part by their belief that Muslim views of his legacy are inherently biased, simplistic, and therefore irrelevant to the task of reconstructing his sophisticated doctrines. One result of this disregard was that the assessments of Ibn 'Arabi by Muslim authors were effectively banished from the pages of Western monographs, which relegated the authority to interpret Ibn 'Arabi to a handful of his Muslim followers who were handpicked by Western investigators. The testimonies and commentaries of Ibn 'Arabi's followers have since dominated Western discussions of Sufi philosophy, which rely on them for the elucidation of obscure passages and terminology found in Ibn 'Arabi's works. Consequently, the Western audience has been presented with a thoroughly sanitized (and generally sympathetic) portrait of the Sufi thinker and his teaching.

Naturally, Western exponents of Ibn 'Arabi have focused on the more sensational aspects of his thought. Such an approach has tended to reduce Ibn 'Arabi's complex legacy to a few "congenial" topics, which fascinated Western writers but which were not necessarily representative of how Ibn 'Arabi was assessed in his own

environment. Through addressing such favored topics, several principal approaches to Ibn 'Arabi have crystallized in Western scholarship. Western humanist scholars with a solid background in the history of classical and European philosophy were attracted primarily to Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical speculations and cosmology. Consequently, they usually occupied themselves with gauging the extent to which Ibn 'Arabi was influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy or its Christian interpreters.⁴

A different view of Ibn 'Arabi was taken by European clergymen who were concerned with detecting the underlying affinities between Christian and Islamic theology with a view to advancing an Islamo-Christian dialogue. Such Christian scholars treated Ibn 'Arabi, if not exactly as a crypto-Christian, then at least as a freethinker open to other religious confessions, especially Christianity.⁵ However, a scrutiny of Ibn 'Arabi's attitude toward other confessions, reveals little direct indebtedness to, or sympathy for, Christian doctrines. As in the case of the philosophically oriented students of Ibn 'Arabi, the ideological agenda that motivated the Christian scholars rendered them oblivious to his assessment by his own community.

The pioneering studies of the Greatest Master by Corbin and Izutsu in the 1950s and 1960s provided a more objective glimpse into how Ibn 'Arabi was perceived by his fellow Muslims. Both scholars brought into sharp focus the heretofore neglected aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought, consciously abandoning the Eurocentric perspective that shaped the work of their predecessors. While Corbin justly questioned the long-established tradition of treating Ibn 'Arabi as a neo-Platonic thinker par excellence and underscored the Islamic origins of his doctrine, Izutsu carried out an excellent analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's philosophical views as interpreted by his Persian follower, al-Qashani. Chittick's illuminating analysis of the strengths and weakness of their methodological assumptions⁶ absolves me from the need to detail them here. Suffice it to say that their views of Ibn 'Arabi were too personal, colored as they were by the scholars' spiritual and intellectual commitments, to serve as a foundation for a balanced academic examination of his weltanschauung.

More recently, new trends in the study of Islam's greatest mystical thinker have asserted themselves. They are determined by the realization that, while the recondite text of the *Fusus* has been studied backward and forward, the rest of Ibn 'Arabi's vast oeuvre has been overlooked by investigators. This realization caused some scholars to redirect their attention to his neglected writings, which, as

they soon discovered, were much more lucid than the *Fusus* and, additionally, more in concert with mainstream Sunni theology. Blazing the path for future investigators, Yahia compiled a massive catalog of Ibn 'Arabi's works that has become an excellent introduction to the transmission and reception of Ibn 'Arabi's written legacy in the centuries following his death.⁷ More importantly for our purpose, the Egyptian scholar was the first to draw the attention of the researchers to the polemical and interpretative literature around the *Fusus* and, to a lesser extent, the *Futuhat*. Finally, he furnished a helpful list of Ibn 'Arabi's advocates and critics.⁸

Yahia's next project—a critical edition of “The Meccan Revelations”⁹—invigorated academic interest in this unique monument of Sufi literature. Exploiting its riches Chodkiewicz provided a brilliant analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's theory of sainthood, which was based almost entirely on a close reading of his magnum opus.¹⁰ Later, Chodkiewicz supervised an ambitious Franco-American project that led to an annotated translation of several chapters from the *Futuhat* by the leading Western experts on Ibn 'Arabi's thought.¹¹ In his latest book, *An Ocean Without Shore*, the French scholar continues to make extensive use of the *Futuhat* in an effort to prove that Ibn 'Arabi was a perfectly orthodox scholar, who was misinterpreted by his obscurantist critics.¹²

Efforts to shake off the deeply ingrained obsession with the *Fusus* and to work out an understanding of Ibn 'Arabi grounded on a broader textual basis culminated in Chittick's recent study of the *Futuhat*.¹³ His “Sufi Path of Knowledge” introduces the Western audience to the original complexity of Ibn 'Arabi's thought, making no concessions to the expectations and tastes of the Western reader.¹⁴ At the risk of snubbing the feelings of those who consider Ibn 'Arabi to be a bearer of some universal, supraconfessional spirituality Chittick boldly reclaims him for Islam. As with Chodkiewicz, he calls in doubt the view that Ibn 'Arabi was a thoroughgoing freethinker bent on undermining the foundations of Sunni Islam. Chittick's study depicts Ibn 'Arabi as a mainstream Sunni thinker of the highest integrity who was maligned by a few stick-in-the-mud Muslim divines led by Ibn Taymiyya.¹⁵ For Chittick, Ibn 'Arabi's message was to impart to his coreligionists a new, deeper understanding of the Qur'an and Sunna, without, however, departing from the letter of the Muslim revelation.¹⁶

Chittick emphasizes that Ibn 'Arabi's respect for the revealed Law, which is evident from the *Futuhat*, was his genuine concern, not just “a window dressing,” as some Western writers suggested.¹⁷ Sup-

ported by Chittick's brilliant translations and vast Islamological erudition, his vision of the Greatest Master seems very compelling indeed. Yet, like his predecessors, Chittick focuses almost exclusively on Ibn 'Arabi's self-image, making short shrift of how Ibn 'Arabi was judged by the majority of Muslim 'ulama'. His attempt to cast Ibn 'Arabi as a mainstream thinker rests for the most part on the internal evidence thoroughly culled from the Shaykh's own works.¹⁸ But then again one can hardly expect Ibn 'Arabi to present himself as someone other than a faithful adherent of the *shari'a*. As the fierce polemic around his name abundantly shows, Ibn 'Arabi's protestations of his orthodoxy failed to lull his learned critics into taking this self-portrait for granted. They judged him on the basis of his theological and metaphysical propositions and of their implications (perhaps unintended) for the Muslim community at large. It is here that the cleavage between Ibn 'Arabi's self-perception and his assessment by others is at its widest.

Who, then, was the "real" Ibn 'Arabi and what determines his continuing relevance for the Muslim community? The present study is an attempt to answer this question. Anticipating the discussion to follow, I would tentatively describe him as a gifted religious reformer—not unlike al-Ghazali—with a unique spiritual message to convey to his community. The essence of this message seems to have consisted in curing the Muslim community of the perceived spiritual malaise which, in Ibn 'Arabi's mind, afflicted it as a punishment for a barren, literal interpretation of the Islamic revelation by his cor-religionists. In line with this grand scheme, Ibn 'Arabi offered the Islamic community an esoteric panacea, for the most part unsuccessfully.¹⁹ This overriding reformist concern provides a helpful clue to Ibn 'Arabi's personality and thought.

In tracing the fate of his legacy through the centuries,²⁰ this study gives his opponents and skeptics an opportunity to plead their case. Until their voices have been heard, one can hardly give the "Ibn-'Arabi problem" the justice it deserves.

Ibn 'Arabi in Recent Western Scholarship

One feature that contemporary Western Islamicists share with their 19th-century forbearers is a genuine admiration for the great intellectual and cultural achievements of Islamic civilization. From this perspective, the great complexity and sophistication of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching makes an especially rewarding subject of scholarly

inquiry. Not surprisingly today, as before, Islamicists continue to focus on the works of the so-called Ibn 'Arabi school of thought whose major representatives have been discussed by Morris and Chittick.²¹ To these U.S. scholars goes the credit of providing an illuminating account of the ideas, problematics, and terminology of Ibn 'Arabi's later commentators, many of whom were original and important thinkers in their own right. While Morris and Chittick concentrate primarily on the Muslim East, Chodkiewicz has given a useful overview of the "traces" of Ibn 'Arabi's ideas and terminology in the popular religious lore of the Maghrib and Africa, namely religious poetry, Sufi litanies, and *tariqa* manuals. Chodkiewicz has shown that Ibn 'Arabi's influence—often indirect and anonymous—on many important Sufi leaders of the Muslim West was profound and often critical.²²

Ibn 'Arabi's reception by later Muslim scholars was addressed by Addas who analyzed several accounts of Ibn 'Arabi's life and work in Muslim biographical dictionaries. Since Addas's goal was to reconstruct an "historical" portrait of the Greatest Master, she carefully cleansed it from the legendary and fictitious layers that had adhered to it over the centuries. In light of this objective, Addas gave preference to Ibn 'Arabi's autobiographical narratives over his image in later biographies, which she dismissed as biased and inaccurate.²³ Apart from Addas's work, the evidence from the later biographical and polemical literature is examined in Chodkiewicz's *Ocean Without Shore*, which evinces an obvious apologetic agenda in presenting Ibn 'Arabi as an orthodox Muslim.²⁴

By contrast, the present study avoids any presuppositions regarding Ibn 'Arabi's "orthodoxy"/"heresy" and focuses on the polemical discourse generated by both his admirers and antagonists. Accordingly, it relegates to the background the Greatest Master's understanding of himself and brings out those elements of his work and personality that his Muslim critics found particularly disconcerting or puzzling. For this purpose, the deliberate polemical distortions and fanciful anecdotes that surround his name are particularly useful. The blatant prejudices and unbridled biases of the later sources reveal how stereotypes, images, and symbols were formed and sustained in the Muslim scholarly milieu and how they were integrated into the dialogues and theological debates within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

In a sense, the present work follows in the footsteps of Massignon's painstaking inquiry into the vicissitudes of the controversial legacy of al-Hallaj, the famous mystic of Baghdad executed in 309/922.²⁵ To anyone familiar with Massignon's magisterial study

this parallel will soon become obvious. There are, however, substantial differences between my approach to Ibn ‘Arabi and Massignon’s treatment of “the first mystical martyr of Islam.” Massignon took an intense personal interest in al-Hallaj, whom he considered to be a model Muslim mystic. His study, therefore, is overtly sympathetic with his protagonist and presents the latter’s teaching and career as the culmination of Islam’s spirituality.²⁶ In other words, Massignon took for granted the validity of al-Hallaj’s understanding of Islam as well as the authenticity of his religious message to the community of Islam. As one Western scholar put it, Massignon’s “goal was not to establish a chronology of al-Hallaj’s actions, but somehow to penetrate the core of his spiritual personality, and to see it as a vital response to the totality of his milieu.”²⁷ Faithful to this hermeneutical methodology, Massignon dismissed or chastised those Muslims who dared to question the authenticity of his hero’s vocation as well as his compliance with the *shari‘a*. In contrast to Massignon, this book gives a careful consideration to the voices coming from both sides of the debate over Ibn ‘Arabi’s contribution to the Muslim tradition.

This nonaligned approach is likely to bar me from appreciating fully the psychological and experiential motives that determined the actions of the characters depicted in my study. Yet, in my estimation, this lack of “empathetic” understanding is more than compensated by the sympathetic portraits of Ibn ‘Arabi created by Yahia, Addas, Chodkiewicz, Deladrière, and Gilis—portraits that often verge on partisanship. In consciously avoiding any ready-made suppositions regarding Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching, I will try to look at him from different perspectives. As for the *sympathesis* and *compassion*, which were so vigorously promoted by Corbin as the surest way to better understand the Greatest Master,²⁸ they are not entirely absent from my study. However, I try to spread them more evenly among the parties to the debate.

Another feature of my approach to Ibn ‘Arabi is determined by the nature of the sources at my disposal. Trite as this statement may sound, one need not be misled by the ostensibly “neutral” genres of historical, chronological, and biographical narratives that form the textual basis for this study. Very often it is impossible to distinguish between a purportedly “objective” historical and biographical document and a “subjective” polemical tract written by a Muslim scholar in defense or refutation of a theological cause.²⁹ This is not surprising, since both texts were often produced by the same people—that is, the professional ‘*ulama*’ whose intellectual preferences and factional commitments left an imprint on all of their writings

regardless of the genre. In other words, a work that we would normally class according to its outward features as either "history" or "biography" is often little more than a platform for making one's polemical point or for settling scores with one's learned rivals. Upon closer scrutiny, many of the historical and biographical works from the epoch under discussion turn out to be thinly camouflaged polemical treatises with clear-cut religio-political, and occasionally personal, agendas. Wittingly or not, their learned authors intruded their personal predilections quite bluntly and without much regard to impartiality. Another methodological problem arises from the thoroughly selective way in which medieval writers organized their prosopographical narratives. This process is often comparable to literary portraiture, so loaded it is with the author's personal biases and commitments. My study of numerous accounts of Ibn 'Arabi and his work has compelled me to believe that many of the sources in question should be treated as bona fide literary discourses.