



RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE, MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE, AND THE PERSONAL MISSION OF MUHYI-D-DIN IBN 'ARABI

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Abstract: The article intends to shed light on the importance of mystical experiences encountered by the Sheik al-Akbar, the great religious theologian Ibn 'Arabi, the great spiritual leader of Sunni Islam. Following the perfect illumination by the revelation of his own personal mission in Muslim Andalusia, the Sheik al-Akbar started to preach the exoteric lessons of Islam, based on the Quran, Hadith, and Shari'a. However, he did not limit his knowledge and lessons to exoteric elements, but deeply immersed himself into the metaphysical esoteric truth of the Haqiqa and engaged into the narrow path of Tariqa, the spiritual path leading to realization of the Supreme Truth. By constantly teaching his disciples and by travelling across the Muslim realm, the Sheik al-Akbar reinvigorated and consolidated Sunna, while unravelling the ultimate mystery of divine perfection one can achieve. By the willingness to obey the revelations and to submit his personal will to the Divine injunction, he served the Muslim community and led the path of esoteric and exoteric knowledge and teaching.

Keywords: Ibn 'Arabi, Islam, Sufism, religion, mysticism.

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Introduction

Guiding the Muslim community, revealing the inner dimension of the heart, the secret knowledge of the Supreme and fortifying the true believers in the path of Muslim tradition, this is the mission endorsed by Ibn 'Arabi. This endorsement may seem unrealistic, as to both revivify faith and to guide the community under outer rules, on one hand, and to reveal more subtle dimensions of the faith, on the other hand. How one could teach an exoteric and an esoteric type of lesson, while keeping the straight line of orthodox faith? This mission impossible is not impossible for the one who is guided by the Supreme, for the one who offers all his effort with the great joy of serving the Supreme and the community. This is the mission of the chosen one, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-'Arabī, on his full name, and this is the short story of his extraordinary religious journey. By accompanying him on his journey, we discover the

profound meanings of Islam, the external articulations of the law, religion and politics, as well as the personal devotion towards the legacy of the Prophet.

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn al-'Arabī, mentioned hereby as Ibn 'Arabī in order to avoid any confusion with another (although less known) religious author named al-'Arabī, is to be known as *Sheik al-Akbar*, the greatest spiritual master of Islam. By his personal mission and his spiritual efforts, he is to be called *Muhyi-d-Din*, the one who revivified the Muslim faith through the vast synthesis of the religious disciplines based on the Quran, Muslim Law (*Shari'ca*) and Tradition (*Hadith*). Those exoteric disciplines are to be completed, in a more personal manner, by essential contributions to the revelation of the metaphysical Truth (*Haqiqa*) and the experience of a genuine mystical path of “integrating” this metaphysical Truth, which truly is an effective mystical realization (*Tariqa*). This is why Ibn 'Arabī truly is the greatest spiritual master of Islam, because he endorsed

his spiritual mission and revived the faith with no deviation at all, by keeping in line with the orthodox tradition (*Sunna*). No one could have done this with no support from the Supreme, with no divine guidance and without surrender the personal will, the ego that oppresses many believers in their spiritual journey.

The mission is by no means a personal decision, a choice made by a young man in quest for his life achievement. By contrary, his mission is an endorsement, an acceptance of a state of being that is imposed from above. Ibn 'Arabī was born in Murcia, in Arab Spain (*Al-Andalus*), in A.D. 1165 (A.H. 560), son of an army officer from the Caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf from the Almohad dynasty. His own future military carrier was swept away by the revelation that occurred in the great Mosque of Cordoba in A.D. 1184. While attending the Friday prayer in company of one of the caliph's sons, the young Ibn 'Arabī experienced the mystical abduction (*jadhba*), the vivid presence of the Divine. He then decided to quit the common life of a soldier, his comrades and all his belongings and to enter the mystical path.¹ By doing so, he turned immediately into a follower of the Path, as he was abducted (*majdhūb*) and thus willing to make an advance on his spiritual journey.

This situation is not an easy one, since the neophyte has no guidance. As mentioned by Addas,² one can be spiritually abducted and retired from the common and banal life as he is desired by God (*murād*), yet he has to have the profound desire (*murīd*) to follow the difficult path he only contemplated from above when abducted by the Supreme. This is why Ibn 'Arabī searched for guidance in the religious lessons of many Sufis and saints, before beginning his own teaching carrier.³ After the years of learning from various sources, the announcement was made in a state of dream (*mubashshira*), asking him to teach and to guide the Muslim believers (*insah 'ibādī*). The call arrived in Fez, in Maghreb, in A.D. 1199 (A.H. 594), and the mission begun.⁴ However important the mission of guiding the community ascribed to him was, he never stopped learning from the wisdom of Sufis, in an impressive effort to renew the Islamic faith and to spread out the teachings of many of his predecessors.⁵

The years of mystical accumulation and personal perfecting are imbued with the research of the perfect guidance. On the one hand, as mentioned before, Ibn 'Arabī spared no effort in looking for guidance from saints and other Sufis from Andalusia. Their portraits are gathered in a vivid description of the religious teachings and practices of his time.⁶ Those Sufis were scattered on the territory he knew at that moment, meaning in Moorish Spain and the Maghreb. He will portray them later in his *Rūh al-quds* as heroes (*fityān*) of the Path (*tarik*), as saints of the Faith, praising them for their exoteric knowledge as the *Hadith*.⁷ They are not the most educated, since many of them are ordinary craftsmen or shopkeepers, yet they are privileged interlocutors of

God, pure and luminous saints.⁸ They teach him merely not from book texts, but by their personal daily practice of simplicity and devotion. Uryanī, one of his masters from Andalusia, although an illiterate peasant, teaches him the essential lesson of servitude (*ubūdiyya*). With no inner emptiness, with no adequate attitude of refraining ego, no lesson is possible. If others are more educated, they are far from being great theorists of Sufism. Mīrtulī is more educated, yet the lesson he teaches is the lesson of compassion. And that goes for other saints, who have realized a high degree of perfection by refraining themselves, constantly focusing on the only reality, on God.⁹

Following the mystical call from A.H. 594 / A.D. 1197, he is persuaded to move from the periphery of the Muslim world to its very center. But before arriving at Mecca, he takes a long farewell voyage and visits his masters across Andalusia (A.H. 595 / A.D. 1198), then crossing the Gibraltar strait and going to Salé (A.H. 597 / A.D. 1200), to Marrakech, to Bougie, finally to Tunis. It is there that he pays to last visit to the Sheik Abd al-Azīz Mahdawī, whom he knew already since A.H. 590 / A.D. 1194.¹⁰ After spending nine months in Tunis, he does not return to his homeland, as he did before. Heading East, Ibn 'Arabī arrives at Cairo, then to Hebron, Jerusalem, Medina and Mecca, ready for the A.H. 598 / A.D. 1202 pilgrimage (*Hajj*) celebrations.¹¹ He will stay here until A.H. 600 / A.D. 1204. From this perspective, this is a no-return journey,¹² a journey he was undertaking at the end of an age, a *fin-de-siecle* Almohad world.¹³ This was indeed the end of the Almohad successful rule, and more generally the end of a fabulous era for Muslims in Spain. His mission was therefore to skip the perils of the uncertain state of political affairs and move towards the center of the Muslim world.

Staying in the Almohad caliphate would have endangered his mission. The religious intransigence of the rulers had already an important cost for those who decided to stay. The most famous case was that of Abū l-Walid Muhammad bin Ahmad Ibn Rushd (as known as Averroes in Europe), the great master of logic and philosophical thinking. In order to avoid suspicion from the guardians of the strict orthodox faith, he had to imagine a very subtle defensive discourse, namely the *Decisive Discourse* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*), assessing the full compatibility between philosophy (*falsafa*) and the Revelation, as carried out by the Muslim dogma (*sunnat Allāh*). Although the demonstration made by Averroes helps supporting the compatibility between the gift of rational understanding of the divine creation and the submission to the Law, he barely escaped more radical action against him, as his life has been spared in exchange of his disgrace and exile to Marrakech, when he eventually died in A.H. 595 / A.D. 1198.¹⁴



The “Seal of Muhammadan sainthood”

On the other hand, his inner guidance was operated by the great prophets. Having no spiritual master at hand, immediately after his first “illumination” from A.H. 594 / A.D. 1197, Jesus became his master, alongside Moses and the Prophet Muhammad. They will teach him numerous lessons, since he is now prepared to abandon himself and to advance on the Path. In order to fortify him, the following couple of years, the Supreme sends him the message of his selection, promoting him to the upper stage of sainthood, which is called the “station of the Nearness” (*maqām al-qurba*). Moreover, in another mystical vision from A.H. 596 / A.D. 1199, he is the “Seal of the Muhammadian sainthood,” meaning by this that sainthood is still possible, but not directly from the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵ The saints (*malāmiyya*) have all attained the perfection given by the “station of the Nearness,” which is the last “station” before the state of legislative prophecy. This “station” of legislative prophecy has already been sealed by the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, sainthood could only come by the intermediary of other prophet.¹⁶ As through the prophet Muhammad the legislative prophecy was sealed, and the universal sainthood was sealed through Jesus, the sainthood deriving from the Prophet Muhammad was also sealed. And it was indeed sealed through himself.

The experience of the “station” of Muhammadian sainthood appears to have unfolded gradually, beginning as an intimation of love, then knowledge, and finally manifesting it in the rapturous breakthrough of Divine-prophetic Light.¹⁷ In this illumination state, he fully understood that he has been chosen as the “Sun of the West” (*shams al-maghrib*), the Seal of the saints, born in his time. Ibn 'Arabī will make this claim later on more explicitly in his poems from the *Dīwān*, emphasizing that he is the “Seal of the Imāmate” (*khātam al-imāmah*), the particular Muhammadan Seal of sainthood, not the universal one, which belongs to Jesus.¹⁸

This revelation renews with the initial revelation he had in Fez in A.H. 594 / A.D. 1197. And this is the special relationship that Ibn 'Arabī holds with Jesus as his first inner master. Following this revelation, Ibn 'Arabī separated from friends and family, choosing to stay in a long a harsh retreat for fourteen months, during which he obtained numerous illuminations, the “secrets” he would write about.¹⁹ This was a rapturous breakthrough, as well as an exit from deep ignorance, a kind of *jāhiliyya*, of paganism, when compared with the mystical and theological further developments. And the first Master was Jesus. It was in his hands that he converted. Jesus oversees him and does not neglect him not even for an instant, this is the confession made by Ibn 'Arabī in the book of “Illuminations” (*Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*). Jesus requested him to practice ascetism and renunciation,

and guided him in the early phase of his perilous mystical Path, full of pitfalls and detours.²⁰

For Elmore, it is obvious that Ibn 'Arabī made openly the claim concerning the “Seal of the Imāmate” after his move from the less doctrinally permissive Maghrib to the East.²¹ In his homeland Andalusia, it has been difficult to openly assess his doctrine of sainthood (*walāyah*) as embodied in the notion of the seal of the saints (*khatm al-awliyā*) he ascribes to himself. In a more permissive environment, in Mecca, where he began writing the great book of “Illuminations,” Ibn 'Arabī makes the confession that he understood who is to be the Seal of the saints, as someone whom he once met and recognized, only to rephrase it in the same book and to acknowledge that he understood from the very beginning that he is the Seal of Muhammadan sainthood.²² However, it was much easier for Ibn 'Arabī to assess his sainthood and the mission the Divine asserted to him in the verses of his poems than in other metaphysical or exoterically written books. Using poetry for veiling the evidence of his assessment was a solution to escape the suspicion of the hard-liners, who were very eager in unravelling religious misconducts of association between God and some of its creation. Before him, another mystical poet, Huseyn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj, has been executed in A.H. 309 / A.D. 922 in Baghdad for daring assimilating himself to the Divine.²³

The poems from the *Dīwān (al-kabīr)* are peculiar to Ibn 'Arabī's tendency to poetically illustrate what is difficult to express in other ways. The poetic language is the most appropriate material for putting into words what generally cannot be fully contained by words. The mystical states are still expressed in a deficient language, yet there is no other way. As in the case of the Quran, the language falls apart and the words breach from the inner pressure, when the divine reality of the Truth comes to be engulfed in worldly phrases made of common words. Despite this partial lack of efficiency, poetry is the best way for Ibn 'Arabī to unravel the beauty, the serenity, the permanence of the Divine. Although many of his poems are lost and few of them have been saved in the form of two collections (*Dīwān al-kabīr* and *Dīwān al-ma'arif al-ilāhiyya*), there are hundreds of them dispersed through the great body of religious writings, especially in the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*. In the poems from the *Book of Illuminations* and those from the *Dīwān*,²⁴ the claim for the Seal of Muhammadan sainthood is made in more open fashion, at the cover of the poetical expression. It is there that Ibn 'Arabī is able to address the subtle paradox of the union between the Creator and his creation, that is the unity of all creation with his Source. In the *Dīwān*,²⁵ Ibn 'Arabī finds the freedom to express in the poem “Eminent is the Glory of God” (*Tā'ālā jaddu rabbī*) the pure transcendence of God and its immanence visible in the heart of true believers, at this point that it is possible to say: “He is me” (*fa-qultu anā*). This is very close to what Huseyn al-Hallāj has claimed (*Anā l-Haqq*).

The Profession of Faith

The perfection of his mission is in line with the strength and purity of his profession of faith.²⁶ Through his inheritance of the spiritual “station” (*maqām*) of sainthood, he becomes aware about his mission, which explicitly states the guidance of the Muslim community. Inheriting from the divine knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad, being his successor (*wārith*), he begins a solid and comprehensive synthesis of the Muhammadan legacy, which consisted in numerous commentaries to the *Qur'an*, the *Hadīth* and the *Shari‘a*, with its particular school of thought. Thus he received the inspiration to put together the pieces of the religious legacy not by personal will, but by divine guidance. Because the Supreme can send his divine knowledge through inspiration (*ilhām*), direct projection (*ilqā’*) or through the descent of the Holy Spirit of Knowledge (*al-Rūh al-amīn*). Therefore, through divine grace, none of the words he wrote were exempt of subtle and non-personal knowledge. This is by no way a claim for divine prophecy, which has been sealed by the arrival of the Prophet, but a direct participation to the Muhammadan legacy (*mīrāth*). Saints may receive such mission, that is to return to the believers community and to guide them. This is part of the perfection ascribed to them, which is both “ascending” and “descending.” This is his mission, to return to the community and make accessible to everyone the aims of the Law, to explicit the rules that the Prophet prone and which are certain, with no personal authority to remove a given rule or to introduce a new one. His mission is more of an equilibrium and moderation, a balance between individuality and universality, in order to give birth to a synthesis which preserves totality,²⁷ as much as Islam itself did with the elements of the previous monotheist faiths, when it was revealed as the last comprehensive religion.

The *Profession of Faith* intends to make a comment on the acts of faith of those who compose the community pertaining to the Tradition of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-jamā‘a*) and especially of those learned and skilled in the interpretation of his legacy. Because they are the guides of Islam, the Profession of Faith (*Tadhkirat al-Khawāṣṣ wa-Aqīdat Ahl al-Ikhtīcāṣ*) comes as a confirmation of their particular doctrinal orientation. This is true for the leaders of the different Law schools (al-Shāfi‘ī and Ibn Hanbal, for example), as for those who supplementary assess their faith on the mystical experience of great Sufi masters (‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlī, more especially). Therefore, this profession of faith is by no means a personal one. It is both a confession and a profession of faith, as well as a solemn oath (*‘aqīda*) made by a whole community, namely the community who believes in the *Hadīth* (of Salvation). It is said by a *hadīth* that the Muslim community will split into no less than 73 different branches or groups, and that only

one such a group would be delivered at the end of time. This profession of faith (*‘aqīda*) really means giving up to one’s personal ideas, in order to fully manifest the Truth of the community or that of the Muslim spiritual family.²⁸ This is also the case with the more general and canonical double Profession of faith (*shahādah*), where the true believer gets rid of all personal identity and interest in order to submit his human will to the Supreme, becoming both faithful and servant.²⁹ In the peculiar case of Ibn ‘Arabī, his personality does not pass through when enouncing the fundamental Islamic truth, but manifests through his ability to put the religious truth enunciations (*haqā’iq*) into the most appropriate form for a given audience. This is a gift received from the Supreme, as inheriting from the Prophet Muhammad, to be able to express that can barely be expressed, the “Words that can express everything” (*jawāmi‘ al-kalim*).

In the accomplishment of his mission to call upon believers and to answer to their questions regarding his faith, his views on God, his principia, he let himself be guided by the Light of the Almighty. Therefore, he simply asked God to send him the good advice. He put his faith in Him, praying for help, asked for His blessing and was ready to obey His commandment and to answer to His will. Ibn ‘Arabī put his hope in the way God will make believers who follow the Path understand the meaning of His will. For those who enter the Path, he asked God for helping them harmonize their spiritual state, in order for them to advance in Faith and Virtue by guidance (*al-Imām wa-l-Ihsān*). And the *Profession of Faith* is a both a synthesis and a remembrance of the elements specific to the faith of the community pertaining to the Tradition of the Prophet. It is a renewed consciousness about the unity and unicity of the Supreme. As it is laid down written in the *Qur'an*, as it is reported by numerous *hadīth*, God is unique, with no equal, with no companion. Master of the whole creation, existing only by Himself, every existing thing depends on Him. The universe exists through Him, while He exists by Himself, with no beginning and with no end, eternal and self-sufficient. He created time and space, He generates and resorbs all particular being, while he is transcendent from all being, too elevated and too holy for that any created being could be associated to Him.³⁰

The synthesis made by Ibn ‘Arabī in the *Tadhkira* rests upon the consensus made by all theologians and philosophers of Islam, as it is the case with the manifestation of all creation within God’s consciousness. All that exists could not be without His knowledge and will. All that exists first appeared in His consciousness, then the peculiar beings entered the manifestation in the exact way He knew them, while He never stopped knowing them in absolute totality and detail.³¹ Starting with this principle of the Divine consciousness in all manifestation (*al-wujūd*), the synthesis made through this *Tadhkira* is based on the acknowledgement of a



series of essential elements in Islam, which are shared by all Muslims. Those essential elements are the unicity of the Supreme (*waḥhada*); the principal reality of the Prophet Muhammad, as the first reality that overpassed the curtain of the non-manifestation (*khidr al-ghayb*), the first to be born yet the last one to be sent to the world as prophet (*al-Rasūl*); the essential of the Faith (*al-Imān*); the first four successors (*imāma*) of the Prophet, namely Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī. This synthesis is made, under the form of a profession of faith, in order to serv as a reminder to the members of the community (*Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-jamā'a*) and to find the proper medium position between passionate and subjective standpoints. This is clearly expressed in the poem from the *Diwān* called "In Saba," that the central point of equilibrium (*wasat*) is the best thing in terms of faith, offering wisdom beyond any kind of excess.³² Here, Ibn 'Arabī refers to the very middle point of the second Surat of the Quran, which describes the Muslim community as a community of a mid-distance, making thus appeal to virtues as moderation and equity, so specific to Islam.

Heading towards the heart of the Islamic realm: *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*

Accomplishing the order he has received, to guide the faithful members of the community, would have been impossible from the eccentric position Ibn 'Arabī had in the margins of the Islamic world. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the doctrinal freedom in his homeland Andalusia was shrinking under the grip of the religious hard-liners from the Almohad dynasty. Sharing the destiny of Averroes or even worse would not have been of any help. That is why Ibn 'Arabī decided to head towards the center of the Muslim world, arriving at Mecca in A.H. 598 / A.D. 1201, after a long journey from Fez to Cairo, Hebron and Jerusalem.³³ The voyage from Jerusalem to Mecca, passing by Medina, is made by foot, as a pilgrimage. He will stay in Mecca until A.H. 600 / A.D. 1204. As soon he arrives at Mecca, he begins to write the marvelous *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*Illuminations from Mecca* or *The Meccan Openings*).

As underlined by Chodkiewicz in the preface to *The Meccan Openings*, the entire voyage Ibn 'Arabī undertook from his native Andalusia to Mecca was full of "illuminations," of mystical "openings," breaches of the Divine through the worldly manifestation.³⁴ This is in line with previous revelations, so the *Futūḥāt* will follow the same path of intense divine inspiration, where Ibn 'Arabī writes down what is sent to him. Although the final pages of the *Futūḥāt* are to be written in A.H. 629 / A.D. 1231, a large part of text was already finished in A.H. 599 / A.D. 1202. The process was frequently interrupted by other works and by numerous voyages, including his definitive settlement at Damascus in A.H. 620 / A.D. 1221. Following a thorough revision of the entire text, which

began in A.H. 632 / A.D. 1234, the final version was ready in A.H. 636 / A.D. 1238, comprising no less than thirty-seven autographed volumes. Dedicated to his disciple Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, the volumes have been turned by this disciple into a pious legacy (*waqf*) in Konya and have been legated until they entered into the possession of the Turkish state and moved to Istanbul at the beginning of the 20th century, as mentioned by Chodkiewicz in the preface to the French edition of the *Illuminations*.³⁵

What is remarkable here is the constant submission of the author to divine inspiration. One would have expected to find in such a work a personal confession and a very personalistic point of view, much as other writers generally do. It is worth comparing this complete submission to the divine will to another famous confession of faith, that made by Rousseau at the heart of *Emile*, his pedagogical treatise.³⁶ Whereas for Rousseau the profession of faith is to be used as the basis for an expanded and modern liberal Christian faith, a type of idealistic, social, humanitarian, and moral religiosity, Ibn 'Arabī is completely decided to abandon his personal dimension in the full submission to the Divine. As it confesses in the *Futūḥāt*, he has not written a single word other than by obeying a pure and divine dictation (*imlā' ilāhī*), a spiritual insufflation (*nafath ruhānī*), directed towards his heart.³⁷ Therefore, he says nothing from his own, he makes no judgment other than produced by the insufflation of the Divine spirit into his heart. He is no more than a heart prostrated in front of the gate of the Divine presence. All that he done was to transcribe, with no rough draft, what comes from this Presence.

The relationship with the heart of the Islamic realm is explicit. The "illuminations" that took place in Mecca during the religious procession around the Ka'ba or during his stay inside the holy enceinte turned into *Illuminations* (*Futūḥāt*). In a way, there is new light shed on previous mystical experiences and theological matters, yet this is more than a simple recapitulation.³⁸ Even the rapturous breakthrough of divine Light, the nocturnal ascension (*mi'rāj*) that he already confessed in an earlier writing (*Kitāb al-Isrā'*) is now tinted with a different, less poetical color.³⁹ The great synthesis Ibn 'Arabī accomplishes in the *Futūḥāt* demands now a less personal and poetical orientation, despite the numerous poems that are scattered inside the great treatise's body. The great work of the *Illuminations* puts together, clarifies and connects theological and mystical notions that have been attained more briefly or less systematically, such as the theological knowledge, the requested religious behavior, the spiritual stations (*ahwāl*) and the spiritual locations (*manāzil*) to be reached, and the "poles" (*aqtāb*) of different periods in time, namely those from the Muslim saints who detained the highest spiritual position within the community at a given moment. Finally, the treatise ends with the most profitable practical advices for both those who aspire

and those who accomplished the spiritual inner journey.

Watching continuously over the community

Ibn 'Arabī's stay in Mecca from A.H. 598 / A.D. 1201 until A.H. 600 / A.D. 1204 is an essential period, marking his full attachment to the Muslim community in the very heart of Islam, the "navel of the World." This is the moment of his full endorsement of the mission he has received, namely guiding the Muslim community. The synthesis of the mostly oral elements of faith is now essential, since the "sacred deposit" of the religious knowledge is in danger. Politically speaking, the context is not favorable for the *Dār al-Islām*, the Muslim world. In the West, there is the Christian progress of the Reconquista, endangering the existence of Islam in Andalusia. In the Middle East, there are the French knits to combat, and the Turks surge over Iran, while the Mongol hordes will soon wipe out the Caliphate in Baghdad (in A.D. 1258).

The "sacred deposit" of wisdom and faith has to be secured by writing it down. Yet his mission is more than that. He is working for vivifying the "sacred deposit."⁴⁰ Therefore he is to be called "Muhyi-d-Din," the vivifier. He is not only the *Doctor Maximus*, he is also the consciousness of the community, absorbing religious knowledge from various masters and dispersing the profound understanding of Islam as it is unraveled to him through relentless revelation. It is at Mecca that he makes the account of his *Rūh al-Quds*, portraying the simplicity and sainthood of his former religious masters from Andalusia and the Maghreb.⁴¹ With the supreme function of the "Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood," he is now placed in a position where he has to serve as councilor for the Ayyubid Caliphs and the Seleucid Sultans. Yet this is not enough for securing the "sacred deposit." The deposit has to begin his voyage towards the "two horizons," as it has been revealed to him. That is why the *Sheik al-Akbar* heads towards the Eastern horizon, stepping into *Bilād al-Rūm*, into Anatolia, arriving at Konya in A.H. 601 / A.D. 1205. After long journeys across Egypt, Iraq, and the Hijāz, the Great Master settles in Anatolia in A.H. 612 / A.D. 1216 and resides there for several years.⁴² It will be in Syria, *Bilād al-Shām*, that Ibn 'Arabī would finally choose as permanent residence, beginning with A.H. 620 / A.D. 1223, following the injunction of the Prophet: "Head towards Syria."

It is in Damascus, the "Sanctuary of Prophets," that Ibn 'Arabī puts an end to his earthly voyages and where he consolidates his teaching, prepares his disciples and writes his poetic masterpiece *Diwān al-ma'arīf al-ilāhiyya*. "Benefit of my presence," he said to his companions in Damascus.⁴³ However, the most important mystical works are not to be toughed openly, due to profound esoteric knowledge which could be easily misunderstood. This is the case of the great treaty on the "Wisdom of Prophets," the famous *Fusūs al-Hikam*.⁴⁴ This

is one of the many gifts of wisdom (*mawāhib al-hikam*) that he received through numerous revelations, and which he is now ready to share in an intelligible manner for his disciples. The marvelous and precious "jewel of wisdom" was received in a beatific dream (*mubashshira*) in A.H. 627 / A.D. 1229, when the Prophet Muhammad himself handed the entire volume of the *Fusūs*, already written, and ordered Ibn 'Arabī to share it with his disciples. This is the closing of the circle of revelations that began in Fez in A.H. 594 / A.D. 1197, with the first rapturous breakthrough of Divine-prophetic Light. In a way, this is the conclusion of his mission he received to guide and to support the community (*insah 'ibādī*).

Fusūs al-Hikam is to be seen as the spiritual legacy of the *Sheik al-Akbar*, since he delivers here the most essential mystical wisdom in relation with qur'anic knowledge, as compared with the jewel inserted into the ring.⁴⁵ Whereas the "ring" is always the divine wisdom, the "jewel" is the proper spiritual form each prophet assumes when it comes into manifestation. As pointed out by Jean Herbert in the preface of the *Fusūs*, the incorruptible ring stone equals the eternal nature of the divine wisdom, with only the color and shining of the jewel changing with the combined human and divine presence of the prophets. The wisdom expressed by the prophets, beginning with Adam and ending with the last to have been sent to the world, yet the first to be born at the beginning of all time, the Prophet Muhammad, is equally praised by all Muslim believers and the followers of other religions as jewels are generally praised by all men. This universal message is the true legacy of the Great Master, who conducted his mission of both strengthening the orthodox Muslim Law and turning Islam into a universal wisdom to be shared by all.

Conclusion

By his mission, inspired by beatific dreams, the Great Master unites the peculiar elements of Islam and the universal wisdom, as he underlines the great unity of the Law revealed to Muslims and the eternal truth he inspires.⁴⁶ Following the original fall from the Garden of Eden, the man has no way to recover his divine stature but by submitting to the ontological servitude, by abiding to the eternal Law which has been revealed. He is to recover his original dignity only by obeying the divine commandments, since the Law revealed equals the essential Reality.⁴⁷ The mission he accomplished was to guide the community by the great synthesis of the Islamic elements, to fortify Islam when confronted with political external perils and to secure the "sacred deposit." He did so by writing the essential religious treaties and spreading the knowledge he received through inner mystical states, getting sure that the teaching reaches the "two horizons." The strict observation of the Law for everybody was to be accompanied by even more strict



rigor for himself and for his followers, those very few who were engaging into the difficult Sufi path and who received the most esoteric of his teaching.

The profound connection of the Great Master with strict orthodoxy (*Sunna*) has been praised by Syrian ulama and the rulers of the Ayyubid Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire alike. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first action taken by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I when entering Damascus as a conqueror in February A.D. 1516 is to pay a pious visit to the tomb of the Great Master. One year later, he is back from the victorious campaign against the Mamelukes in Egypt and eager to build a mosque and a mausoleum in order to replace the neglected tomb of his Great Master, covert with wild grass. In less than one year, the mosque is proudly standing and the Sultan in person takes part to the Friday

prayer in February A.D. 1518.⁴⁸ After long centuries, the somehow discrete and less frequented mosque one could notice in one street in Damascus covers, beneath the ground floor, a magnificent subterranean mosque, when those initiated could pray and meditate near the tomb of the *Sheik al-Akbar* in an atmosphere of devotion and silence. This is the experience made by Jean Herbert and narrated in the preface of the *Fusus al-Hikam*.⁴⁹ Symbolically, this is in line with the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the entire religious teaching and spiritual heritage of the Great Master, the “Vivifier of Faith” (*Muhyi-d-Din*), the “Seal of the Muhammadan Sainthood.” By strictly obeying his personal mission, the “sacred deposit” of Islam was secured, multiplied and finally spread into the “two horizons.”

Notes:

1. Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. Ibn 'Arabī, *Les soufis d'Andalousie*, transl. Roger Deladrière (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995).
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. Binyamin Abrahamov, “Ibn al-'Arabī and Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī,” *Al-Qantara* 32 (2011): 369-385.
6. Ibn 'Arabī, *Les soufis d'Andalousie*, transl. R.W.J. Austin (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995).
7. Ibn 'Arabī, *L'Esprit de Sainteté dans le Conseil de l'Ame*, transl. Sakhr Benhassine (Paris: Geuthner, 2018).
8. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 38.
9. *Ibid.*, 43.
10. Ibn 'Arabī, *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, transl. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).
11. *Ibid.*, 16.
12. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*.
13. Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time. Ibn 'Arabī's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 53.
14. Dominique Urvoy, *Averroès. Les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).
15. Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints. Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabī* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).
16. Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 49.
17. Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, 54.
18. Ibn 'Arabī, *Le grand Diwān*, trad. Omari Hammami, Patricia Mons (Paris: Albin Michel, 2016).
19. Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 21.
20. *Ibid.*, 29.
21. Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, 56.
22. *Ibid.*, 58.
23. Louis Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
24. Ibn 'Arabī, *Le grand Diwān*.
25. *Ibid.*, 70.
26. Ibn 'Arabī, *La Profession de Foi*, transl. Roger Deladrière (Arles: Actes Sud, 1985).
27. *Ibid.*, 17.
28. *Ibid.*, 28.
29. Frithjof Schuon, *Comprendre l'Islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1976).
30. Ibn 'Arabī, *La Profession de Foi*, 83.
31. *Ibid.*, 84.
32. Ibn 'Arabī, *Le grand Diwān*, 98.
33. Ibn 'Arabī, *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, 16.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 18.

36. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).
37. Ibn 'Arabī, *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, 19.
38. Ibid., 20.
39. James W. Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabi and the Mi'rāj," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 629-652.
40. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 81.
41. Ibn 'Arabī, *L'Esprit de Sainteté dans le Conseil de l'Ame*.
42. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 111.
43. Ibid., 120.
44. Ibn 'Arabī, *La Sagesse des Prophètes*, transl. Titus Burckhardt (Paris: Albin-Michel, 2008).
45. Ismail Lala, "Quranic Knowledge and Akbarian Wisdom: Ibn 'Arabi's Daring Hermeneutics in *Fusūs al-Hikam*," *Cumhuriyet Theology Journal* 25 (2021): 479-493.
46. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabī et le voyage sans retour*, 123.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 7.
49. Ibn 'Arabī, *La Sagesse des Prophètes*, 7.

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