



THE MUHAMMADAN INHERITANCE

Ibn ‘Arabi’s followers often called him “the Seal of Muhammadan Sanctity” or, a bit more literally, “the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship.” It seems rather clear that he laid claim to such a rank, at least in some of his poetry. But what exactly would the expression have meant to him and to the tradition that he represents?

The expression is derived from a title that the Qur’an gives to Muhammad, “the Seal of the Prophets.” This is typically understood to mean two things: first, that Muhammad was the last of the 124,000 prophets sent by God to the human race; and second, that the Qur’an, the revelation received by Muhammad, brings together and synthesizes all the knowledge given by God to all previous prophets.

“Friendship” derives from the Quranic term “friend” (*wali*). This Arabic word has a range of meanings, any or all of which may be meant when it is used: friend, someone close, someone given authority, benefactor, protector. The Qur’an makes it one of God’s names, and it also speaks of God’s friends and the friends of Satan. The friends of God are those whom he has brought near to himself, those whom he protects, and those to whom, on the basis of their special closeness, he has given a certain authority and rulership, if only over their own egocentric tendencies.

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By the time of Ibn 'Arabi, "friend" was a standard epithet for those Muslims of the past who had come close to embodying the model of human perfection established by Muhammad. Western scholars have commonly translated *wali* as "saint," but this word should be used with caution, since it has specifically Christian connotations that do not necessarily apply in the Islamic context.

The idea of friendship with God is a major theme in Ibn 'Arabi's writings. In brief, he follows the mainstream of the Islamic tradition by asserting that God chooses as his friends those who embody the best qualities of the human race. God's friends are first and foremost the prophets. His revelations to the prophets then make it possible for others to become his friends as well. Each prophet is a source of guidance and a model of human goodness and perfection.

Those who achieve the status of friendship with God by following a prophet may then be given an "inheritance" from that prophet. The inheritance has three basic dimensions: works, or proper and appropriate activities; states, or inner experiences that manifest noble character traits; and stations of knowledge, or firm rootedness in the true understanding of reality in its diverse modalities.

INHERITANCE

Ibn 'Arabi considered the goal of religion to be the achievement of human perfection in the three modalities of works, states, and knowledge. He commonly calls those who achieve the goal "Perfect Man" (*al-insan al-kamil*), one of his best known technical terms. The word *insan* has no gender connotation, so in this context the English word "man" must be understood in the same way. The main scriptural source for the notion of human perfection mentions both men (*rijal*) and women (*nisa'*): Muhammad said,

“Among men, many have reached perfection, and among women, Mary and Asiyah [the wife of Pharaoh].”

The primary examples of those who achieved perfection are the prophets, beginning with Adam. They can be defined as those perfect human beings whom God created as paradigms for the human race.

In many ways the most important and fundamental dimension of perfection is knowledge, which entails discernment and putting things in their proper places. Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “As a man moves closer to perfection, God gives him discernment among affairs and brings him to realization through the realities” (F. II 525.2).

“Realization” is the full actualization of human status, and “the realities” are things as they truly are, that is, as they are known by God. To be given realization through the realities means to understand the realities for what they are and to respond to them in the appropriate manner. Realization, in other words, demands both knowledge and works. A good deal will be said about this dual sense of the word in coming chapters.

Approaching perfection by following a prophetic paradigm brings along with it knowledge of a certain configuration of realities. The realities are infinite, so God alone can know them in their simultaneity. Nonetheless, human beings may come to know the principles of all realities. In many passages, Ibn ‘Arabi connects the modes of knowing the realities with the names of God that are so frequently mentioned in the Qur’an. The prophets have special insight into the manner in which specific divine names manifest their traces and display their properties in the universe.

Each prophet has left an inheritance. A purported hadith often cited by Ibn ‘Arabi says, “The ulama” – that is, the scholars, those who have knowledge of God and the prophetic teachings – “are the heirs to the prophets.” In his view, every age

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must have at least 124,000 friends of God, one heir for each prophet (F. III 208.14). The prophetic inheritances delineate the possible modes of authentic experience and correct knowledge of God, the universe, and the human soul. In other words, to attain true knowledge, one must know and act in accordance with a paradigm of human perfection embodied in a prophet. No one comes to know things as they are without these divinely appointed intermediaries.

The question of how people can gain a prophetic inheritance is central to Ibn 'Arabi's writings. The simplest answer is that, to the extent human initiative plays a role, people must follow a prophet's guidance. However, the guidance of most prophets has not come down to us. The only way to receive an inheritance from those prophets is to take it through the intermediary of Muhammad, whose message comprises everything given to all previous prophets. In the last analysis, however, it is God himself who chooses to bestow an inheritance on any given individual.

OPENING

Ibn 'Arabi tells us that effort can take seekers only as far as the door. Having reached the door, they can knock as often as they like. It is God who will decide when and if he will open the door. Only at the opening of the door can complete inheritance occur. This explains the sense of the word "opening" in the title of Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futuh al-makkiyya*, "The Meccan Openings."

The title announces that the knowledge and understanding contained in the book were not gained by study or discursive reasoning. They were simply given to the author when God opened the door to him. The whole *Futuh*, in other words, represents a massive series of unveilings and witnessings, or "mystical visions" if you prefer.

It is important to keep in mind that Ibn 'Arabi does not confuse unveiling, witnessing, and opening with "revelation," which applies properly to prophetic knowledge. It is precisely the special nature of revelation that makes it necessary for God's friends to follow the prophets. As Ibn 'Arabi often tells us, the basic distinction between a prophet and a friend is that the friend is a "follower" (*tabi'*) and the prophet is the one "followed" (*matbu'*).

If one wants to achieve opening, the way to do so is to engage in the practices set down by one's prophet and to follow the instructions of a shaykh or spiritual master, who, in the ideal case, will be a full heir to that prophet. Among the practices that a shaykh will prescribe are retreat (*khalwa*), which is seclusion from others in order to devote oneself fully to meditation and prayer, and remembrance (*dhikr*), which is the constant invocation of a Qur'anic divine name or formula.

When the aspiring traveler clings to retreat and the remembrance of God's name, when he empties his heart of reflective thoughts, and when he sits in poverty at the door of his Lord with nothing, then God will bestow upon him and give him something of knowledge of Him, the divine mysteries, and the lordly sciences. (F. I 31.4)

Notice that it is the "heart" (*qalb*) that needs to be emptied of thought. In the usage of the Qur'an and Islamic sources in general, the heart designates not the emotive and affective side of human nature, but the center of consciousness, awareness, and intelligence. The heart is the human faculty that can embrace God in the fullness of his manifestation. In Ibn 'Arabi's terms, the heart alone can know God and the realities in a synthetic manner embracing both rational understanding and supra-rational unveiling.

THE MUHAMMADAN SEAL

When God opened the door for him, Ibn 'Arabi found that he had inherited all the sciences of Muhammad. Among these sciences was the knowledge that no one after him – except Jesus at the end of time – would be Muhammad's plenary inheritor. It was this unveiling that allowed him to see himself as the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship, that is, the last person to actualize the specific mode of friendship that results from embodying the fullness of the paradigm established by Muhammad.

By no means does Ibn 'Arabi's claim to be the Muhammadan Seal imply that he was the last friend of God. Rather, it means that no one after him, with the exception of Jesus, would inherit the totality of prophetic works, states, and knowledge – a totality that had been realized only by Muhammad among all the prophets.

One should not be surprised that Ibn 'Arabi privileges Muhammad here. This is the Islamic tradition, after all, and every tradition privileges its own founder. For those who prefer a more universal language, we can say that for Muslims, Muhammad is the full embodiment of the Logos, which is the Divine Word that gives rise to all creation and all revelation. Ibn 'Arabi calls this Logos by several names, including "the Muhammadan Reality."

Ibn 'Arabi maintains that there are friends of God in every age and that they will continue to inherit from Muhammad, but they will no longer have access to the entirety of Muhammad's works, states, and sciences. The modalities of the inheritance will be defined by their connection to specific prophets embraced by Muhammad's all-comprehensive prophethood. After the Muhammadan Seal, "No friend will be found 'upon the heart of Muhammad'" (F. II 49.26).

Ibn 'Arabi's claim to be the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends has appeared pretentious and even outrageous to many people

over the centuries. Hostile and critical scholars have dismissed it out of hand. The fact remains, however, that no author writing after him has come close to matching the profundity, freshness, and detail of his interpretation of the sources of the Islamic tradition. Whether or not one would like to call him the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends, it is difficult to deny him the title “Greatest Master.”

If the Muhammadan friends of God inherit all the sciences of Muhammad, this means that they have been opened up to all the knowledge and understanding given to all the prophets. This is the knowledge that was given scriptural form in the Qur’an. Thus the Seal of the Muhammadan Friends will somehow embody the whole Quranic message. This is why Ibn ‘Arabi can write concerning the Seal, “There is no one who has more knowledge of God ... He and the Qur’an are siblings” (F. III 329.27).

READING THE QUR’AN

Ibn ‘Arabi presents all of his writings as explications of the Qur’an, which the tradition considers to be God’s Speech or Word, his linguistic self-expression. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, the Qur’an presents all prophetic knowledge in a synthetic manner while addressing the two primary modes of human understanding, “reason” (*‘aql*) and “imagination” (*khayal*). If people want to understand the Qur’an in its totality, they need to employ both of these faculties.

Each Quranic verse yields up an appropriate meaning according to the mode in which the interpreter understands it. Ibn ‘Arabi often brings this home by discussing certain verses as expressions of a rational truth, and then offering other interpretations of the same verse on the basis of an imaginal understanding (or what we might call a “symbolic truth”).

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Such dual interpretations do not mean that Ibn 'Arabi thinks each Quranic verse has only two meanings – one rational and the other imaginal. In his view, each word of the Qur'an – not to mention its verses and chapters – has an indefinite number of meanings, all of which are intended by God. Proper recitation of the Qur'an opens up the reader to new meanings at every reading. "When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Qur'an, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance" (F. IV 367.3).

UNDERSTANDING GOD

One of the major themes of Ibn 'Arabi's writings is the time-honored principle of the Judeo-Christian tradition that God created man in his own image. Muhammad's version of this saying reads, "God created Adam in His own form."

I translate the Arabic word *sura* as "form" rather than "image" to retain its technical meaning. It is used in Islamic philosophy in the Aristotelian sense, in contradistinction to matter (the doctrine of hylomorphism, "matter-form-ism"). In Sufism, the same word is used to designate the appearance of things, in contrast to their "meaning" (*ma'na*), which is their invisible reality, the spiritual substance that gives rise to their appearance in the outer world. Ibn 'Arabi uses the word in both senses, though usually in the latter.

As for the word "image," it can serve well as a second translation for the word *khayal*, which we have already met as "imagination." *Khayal* denotes not only our subjective power of imagining things, but also the objective reality of images in the world, such as reflections in a mirror.

In one respect, God is infinitely beyond understanding, and the only proper response to him is silence. In another respect, he discloses himself to his human forms, and he does so in two

basic ways: first, he discloses his undisclosability, and thereby we come to know that we cannot know him. This is the route of negative theology, and Ibn 'Arabi frequently takes it. Second, God discloses himself to human beings through scripture, the universe, and their own souls. To the degree that he does so, people can and do come to know him.

Ibn 'Arabi calls the modality of awareness that discerns God's undisclosability "reason," and he calls the modality of understanding that grasps his self-disclosure "imagination." "Unveiling" is then fully actualized and realized imagination, which recognizes the divine reality in its images. Rational thought pushes God far away, but imaginal thought brings him close. Reason discerns God as absent, but unveiling sees him present.

When reason grasps God's inaccessibility, it "asserts his incomparability" (*tanzih*). When imagination finds him present, it "asserts his similarity" (*tashbih*). Long before Ibn 'Arabi, asserting God's incomparability (or transcendence) had been normative for most versions of Islamic theology, and asserting his similarity (or immanence) was often found in Sufi expressions of Islamic teachings, especially poetry. Ibn 'Arabi's contribution was to stress the need to maintain a proper balance between the two ways of understanding God.

People are able to maintain the balance between incomparability and similarity by seeing with "both eyes," that is, both reason and imagination. If we do not see God, the world, and ourselves with the full vision of both eyes, we will not be able to see things as they are. The locus of such a vision is the heart, whose beating symbolizes the constant shift from one eye to the other, made necessary by the divine unity, which precludes a simultaneously dual vision.

To be human, then, is to be a divine form. To be a divine form is to be a divine self-expression within which every name of God—every real quality found in the cosmos, every attribute of

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the absolutely Real (*al-haqq*) – can become manifest and known. The human form is both different from God (incomparable) and identical with him (similar). Correct understanding of the situation demands seeing with both eyes.

The Muhammadan inheritors and the great friends of God differ from ordinary human beings in the clarity of their vision and the appropriateness of their activity. They have realized the form in which they were created, so they grasp the realities in proper proportion and respond to every situation as God himself would respond, were he to take upon human form.

KNOWING SELF

All expressions of knowledge go back to our own understanding and experience. Seeing with both eyes, or what might be called “gnosis” (*ma'rifa*), is no exception. The human self or soul (*nafs*) is “an ocean without shore,” to use the expression that Michel Chodkiewicz has chosen as the title of his outstanding study of Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics. To the extent that we do come to know ourselves correctly as the divine form, we also come to know the infinite God in both his incomparability and his similarity.

It is axiomatic for Ibn 'Arabi (and for most of Islamic theology as well), that God never repeats himself in his creative activity, because he is absolutely One. At each moment the One discloses itself to each individual in the universe, and each disclosure of the One is one and unique. Every creature undergoes constant change and flux as the moments of self-disclosure follow one upon another. We are no different from any other creature in this respect, so we are endlessly changing and forever new. Each moment of self-knowledge represents a new perception of God's manifestation in the soul and the world.

For Ibn 'Arabi, the achievement of self-understanding means to live in a constantly overflowing fountain of divine

self-expression, a neverending outpouring of knowledge and awareness. At each instant God's knower experiences a renewed divine self-disclosure and comes to a fresh understanding of what it means to be created in God's form.

God is infinite, but his form is limited, because it appears in the realm of disclosure and manifestation. Each moment of self-disclosure specifies the form and makes it uniquely itself. The Real itself cannot fit into form, so the divine forms can only appear as successive self-disclosures, extending ad infinitum. This explains among other things why people in paradise will never be sated or bored; they experience constant renewal and refreshment. So also, the gnostic, who sees with both eyes, witnesses each moment as a totally new creation, fresh and exhilarating.

In discussing the nature of self-knowledge, Ibn 'Arabi frequently cites the famous maxim attributed to the Prophet, "He who knows himself (or, "his soul") knows his Lord." The saying can perhaps more accurately be translated, "He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord." The saying does not employ the usual word for knowledge, *ilm*, which often carries the connotation of learning or erudition without true understanding. Rather, it uses the verbal form of the noun *ma'rifa*, which is often translated as "gnosis." This word implies direct experience of the thing and recognition of its true nature and actual situation. The "gnostics" are those who achieve this sort of knowledge – direct, unmediated knowledge of self and God. Thus "gnosis," if this is the right translation, means simultaneous self-recognition and God-recognition.

In his frequent explanations of the meaning of this maxim, Ibn 'Arabi sometimes takes one or the other of the two basic routes of understanding God – asserting his incomparability or declaring his similarity. The more we use our rational insight to analyze the knowing self, the better we come to recognize that we are not God and we cannot hope to know him. But the

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more we are given the gift of imaginal vision, the better we recognize ourselves and the world as forms of the divine self-disclosure.

Ibn 'Arabi refers to the perception of self and world achieved by the gnostics – those who recognize things for what they are – as the direct vision of “He/not He,” or “God/not God.” With one eye they see that God is incomparable, transcendent, and infinitely beyond their perception and understanding. With the other eye they see that all things display God’s similarity, immanence, and sameness. Each thing in the universe, not least the human self, is simultaneously God and not God. Each breath, each beat of the heart, offers a new instance of God’s absence and presence.

Although knowledge of God’s Essence is inaccessible to any but God himself, knowledge of God as he discloses himself to the soul is the ready cash of everyone. There is in fact no other knowledge. All of us know God in ourselves and the world, but most of us do not recognize what we know. “There are none but knowers of God, but some of the knowers know that they know God, and some do not know that they know God. The latter know what they witness and examine, but they do not know that it is the Real” (F. III 510.32).

GOD’S WIDE EARTH

At the highest stage of self-knowledge, the gnostics recognize their own nature as the infinite and neverending self-disclosures of God. In their constant vision of the forms of self-disclosure, they live along with Ibn 'Arabi in “God’s wide earth.” In the Qur’an, God says, “O My servants, ... truly My earth is wide, so worship Me” (29: 56). To be God’s “servant” (*'abd*) is to recognize one’s created status vis-à-vis the Creator, and to “worship” him is to act appropriately to one’s status.

Appropriate “worship” or “service,” *‘ibada*, is precisely proper “servanthood,” *‘ubudiyya*, a word derived from the same root.

According to Ibn ‘Arabi, when one achieves true servanthood of God, as he did in the year 1195, one worships God in God’s own “wide earth, ... which has permanent subsistence – it is not the earth that accepts change ... The servant remains a servant forever, so he remains in this earth forever. It is a supraformal, intelligible earth, not a sensory earth” (F. III 224.10).

From the vantage point of God’s wide earth, the faith of those who know God is the reverse of the faith of the common people. The faithful, in the Quranic formula, are those who have “faith in the Unseen.” The Unseen is typically identified as God, the angels, and the Last Day. The gnostics also have faith in the Unseen, but for them the Unseen is the universe. “They witness nothing but God in the realm of being. They do not know what the world is, because they do not witness it as a world ... They have faith in it, but they do not see it, just as the people have faith in God, but they do not see Him” (F. IV 74.16).

THE INHERITOR

One might say that Ibn ‘Arabi’s project in the *Futuhāt* is to map out the works, states, and knowledge that he received as a denizen of the Wide Earth of God and as an heir to Muhammad and the other prophets. The stress that he places on the necessity of following in Muhammad’s footsteps to gain this knowledge and to achieve perfection cannot be overestimated. He tells us, for example, that the highest vision of God that anyone can hope to attain is found in the vision of the form of Muhammad, the perfect human embodiment of the total divine self-disclosure.

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The most excellent, balanced, and correct of mirrors is Muhammad's mirror, so God's self-disclosure within it is more perfect than any other self-disclosure that there may be.

You should struggle to gaze on the Self-disclosing Real in the mirror of Muhammad so that he may be imprinted in your mirror. Then you will see the Real in a Muhammadan form with a Muhammadan vision. You will not see Him in your own form. (F. IV 433.10)

The Quranic prototype for traversing the path to God is the Prophet's *mi'raj* or "ladder," also called his "night journey" (*isra'*). According to the traditional accounts, Gabriel came to Muhammad one night and took him to Jerusalem. From there they ascended together to the Lote Tree of the Far Boundary, the outermost limit of paradise. Then Muhammad ascended alone to the presence of God.

According to a well-known saying of the Prophet, "The daily prayer is the 'ladder' of the believer." In keeping with this saying, many Sufis have taken the accounts of the Night Journey as symbolic depictions of the fruit of spiritual practice. Followers of the Prophet can reap this fruit here and now through prayer and the remembrance of God. Quite a few Sufis, however, recounted how they themselves had traveled in the Prophet's footsteps all the way up the ladder to God. Ibn 'Arabi was one of these, and he provides several accounts of his journey.

In one of his accounts, Ibn 'Arabi describes his meetings with the prophets and angels who inhabit each of the heavens. When he finally attained to the divine presence, God sent down upon him a single verse of the Qur'an, one that highlights his role of speaking for all prophetic wisdom: "Say: 'We have faith in God, and in what has been sent down upon us, and sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and the prophets, of their Lord. We do not distinguish among them, and to Him we submit'" (3: 84).

Ibn 'Arabi tells us that when he was given this verse, God made it the key to every knowledge. He came to understand that he was a "Muhammadan," that is "one of the inheritors of Muhammad's all-comprehensiveness." In other words, he recognized that in his own being he embraced all the knowledge revealed to all the prophets. He saw that he had been given the knowledge and understanding of all the names that had been taught to Adam (Q. 2:31). Or rather, he recognized that, as a form of God, he contained all knowledge in himself.

In this night journey I gained the meanings of all the divine names. I saw that they all go back to a single Named Object and a Single Entity. That Named Object was what I was witnessing, and that Entity was my own existence. So, my journey had been only in myself. I provided no indications of any but myself. It was from here that I came to know that I am a sheer servant and that there is nothing whatsoever of lordship within me. (F. III 350.30)

At the highest levels of self-realization, knowledge of self yields the recognition that there is nothing in existence but the self, because nothing can be found in the entire universe but God's self-disclosure. At its most comprehensive and unified, that divine self-disclosure is simply the form in which human beings were created. One who realizes this station recognizes his absolute subservience to the Real and acts as God's servant in all that he does. Achieving this station can only come through "gnosis," that is, through self-recognition. Ibn 'Arabi advises the seeker, "Do not hope to recognize yourself through other than yourself, for there is no other" (F. III 319.23).