THE MUHAMMADAN INHERITANCE

One of the great merits of the writings of Michel Chodkiewicz is that he has placed the Muhammadan dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s spirituality at the center of his concerns. Too often in earlier studies of al-Shaykh al-Akbar, scholars pretended that he had appeared in Islam almost in spite of the Koranic revelation and that his chief contribution was to formulate a philosophical system that had certain advantages over Western philosophy because it focused primarily on the spiritual and esoteric dimension of things. Before the writings of Chodkiewicz, those familiar with the Shaykh al-Akbar’s own writings were always surprised at how much these writings were skewed in Western-language presentations. What was missing form these studies was the Shaykh’s own focus on the Koran, the Sunnah, and the Shariah. What was forgotten was that Ibn ‘Arabi was first and foremost an inheritor of the explicit teachings of Muhammad, not a great champion of esoteric or initiatic teachings. This is not to deny that Ibn ‘Arabi is one of the greatest expositors of mystical wisdom that the world has ever known. It is simply to say that his exposition needs to be placed squarely in the actual texts and traditions from which it grew. Michel Chodkiewicz’s work has the great merit of never letting us forget this fact.

As Professor Chodkiewicz has explained in detail in his masterly Seal of the Saints, Ibn ‘Arabi laid claim to being the “Seal of Muhammadan Sanctity” or, as I prefer to translate this expression, the “Seal of the Muhammadan Friends of God.” The terms is derived from a title that the Koran gives to Muhammad, “The Seal of the Prophets”. This is typically understood to mean that Muhammad was the last of the 124,000 prophets that God sent to the world from the time of Adam. The title is also understood to mean that Muhammad in his own person achieved all the human perfections possessed by all previous prophets, while the revelation he received — the Koran gathers together all prophetic knowledge in a - single synthetic whole, while at the same time clearly differentiating; these sciences from each other. For lbn ‘ Arabi, this explains the two primary names or the Koran, qua`an and furqan. One of the literal meanings of qur’an is “that which brings together”, while the term furqan means “that which differentiates”.

Like “seal”, the term “friend of God” is Koranic, and by the time of Ibn ‘Arabi it had become one of the standard expressions that was used to describe those Muslims who came close to embodying the model of human perfection established by Muhammad. As Chodkiewcz has illustrated, the idea of divine friendship is a major theme of Ibn ‘Arabi writings. In brief, he follows the mainstream of the Islamic tradition by asserting that god chooses as His friends

those people who embody the best qualities of the human race. God's friends are first and foremost the prophets. Then God's revelations to the prophets make it possible for others to become His friends as well. Each prophet is a source of guidance and a model of human perfection. Those who follow in the footsteps of any prophet may be given an "inheritance" from that prophet, and this inheritance has three basic dimensions: works, or activities that manifest noble character traits; states, or inner experiences of unseen realities; and knowledge, or direct perception of various modalities of reality.

Ibn 'Arabi considered that goal of religion to be the achievement of human perfection in the three modalities of works, states, and knowledge. The prophets are the models who establish the diverse paradigms of perfection. Knowledge is one dimension of perfection, and in many ways the most important and fundamental dimension. It demands discernment and putting things in their proper places. Ibn 'Arabi writes, *"As a person moves closer to perfection, God gives him discernment among affairs and verifies for him the realities" (II 525.2)*[1] "realities" are the thing of the universe as known by God Himself.

Each modality of human perfection, as established by the prophets, brings along with it knowledge of a certain configuration of the realities. The realities are infinite, so they can be known in their simultaneity by God alone. Nevertheless, it is possible for human beings to know the principles of all the manifest and nonmanifest realities. In many passages, Ibn 'Arabi connects the modes of knowing the realities with the names of God. Thus the great prophets have special insight into the manner in which the primary divine names exercise their effects in the universe. In the Bezels of Wisdom, Ibn 'Arabi associates each of twenty-seven prophets with a specific divine attribute.

Each prophet has left an inheritance, and Ibn 'Arabi tells us that in every age there must be at least 124,000 friends of God, that is, one inheritor for each prophet of history (III 208.14). The prophetic inheritances define the various modes of authentic experience and knowledge of God. In other words, to attain to true knowledge, one must know God according to a certain paradigm of human perfection defined by a specific prophet.

The question of how people can gain the knowledge bestowed upon a prophet is central to Ibn 'Arabi writings. The simplest answer is that, to the extent human initiative plays a role, people must follow a given prophet's guidance. However, the guidance of most prophets. has not come down to us. In the case of these prophets, the only way to receive an inheritance is to receive it by means of one of the later prophets. And since Muhammad's message comprises everything given to all previous prophets, the best way to receive a prophetic inheritance is to follow Muhammad. In any case, in the last analysis, it is God Himself who chooses to bestow a

particular prophetic inheritance on any given individual.

Ibn ‘Arabi often says that human effort can take seekers only as far as the door. Having reached the door, they can knock as often as they like. But God must decide when and if He will open the door. Only after the door has been opened does full inheritance take place. This explains the meaning of the title of Ibn ‘Arabi’s magnum opus, al-Futuhat al-makkiyya, “The Meccan Openings”. The sciences contained in this work were not gained by study or discursive reasoning. They were simply given to Ibn ‘ Arabi when God opened the door to him.

In a typical passage, Ibn ‘Arabi describes the process whereby one attains to opening as follows:

When the aspiring traveler clings to retreat and invocation of God’s name, when he empties his heart of reflective thoughts, sitting in poverty, having nothing, at the door of his Lord, then God will bestow upon him and give him something of knowledge of Hann, of the divine mysteries, and of the lordly sciences.... That is why Abu Yazid has said, “You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but I take my knowledge from the living One who does not die.” (I 31.4)

When the door was opened to 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 inherit all these sciences. Hence Ibn ‘Arabi saw himself as the Seal of Muhammadan Friendship, that is, the last person to actualize fully the specific mode of friendship that results from embodying the paradigm established by Muhammad.

Clearly, Ibn ‘Arabi’s claim to be the Seal of God’s Muhammadan Friends does not imply that there will be no friends of God after him. Rather, it means that no one after him, except Jesus, will inherit the totality of the prophetic works, states, and sciences, a totality realized by Muhammad alone among the prophets. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi maintained that friends of God would continue to inherit from Muhammad, but from his time onward they would inherit works, states, and sciences connected to specific prophets of previous eras. For example, he writes:

Just as God sealed the prophecy of the revealed religions through Muhammad, so also God sealed, through the Muhammadan .Seal, the friendship that is acquired through the Muhammadan inheritance, but not that which is acquired through the other prophets. For among God’s friends are those ‘who inherit from Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. These will continue to he found after this Muhammadan Seal. But after him, no friend will be found “upon the heart of Muhammad” (II 49.24).

If the Muhammadan friends of God alone inherit all the sciences (of Muhammad which are equivalent to the science of all the prophets the seal of these friends will be the person in his own time with the most knowledge of God. Thus Ibn ‘Arabi writes about the Seal, *“There is no*

one who has more knowledge of God.... He ,Ind the Koran are siblings" (111 329.27). In other words, like the Koran, the Muhammad Seal embraces the sciences of all previous revelations.

With these brief remarks about Ibn 'Arabi understanding of the significance of the knowledge contained in his own works, I turn to an even briefer account of the contents of these works. I want to suggest one or two of the answers that he would give to two closely related questions: "What can we know about God?" And, "Who are we to ask?"

IBN ' ARABI'S CONCEPT OF GOD

Ibn ' Arabi basic givens about God are provided by the Koran, God's linguistic self-expression. When he attempts to summarize the contents of the Koran, he sometimes says that it address two primary modes of human understanding reason (or intelligence) and imagination. In order to understand the Koran in its totality, both of these faculties must be employed. Each Koranic verse yields up an appropriate meaning according to the mode in which the reader addresses it. Ibn 'Arabi often brings this home by discussing certain verses as expressions of a rational truth, and then offering a different interpretation of the same verse on the basis of an imaginal understanding.

This is not to say that Ibn 'Arabi thinks each Koranic verse has two meanings one rational and the other imaginal. In his view, each word and each letter of the Koran not to speak of its chapters and verses has an indefinite number of meanings, each of which is intended by God. If someone recites a Koranic verse and finds there the same meaning that he has found in a previous recitation, this simply shows his ignorance. As Ibn 'Arabi writes, *"When meaning repeats itself for someone who is reciting the Koran, he has not recited it as it should be recited. This is proof of his ignorance. But when someone's knowledge is increased through his recitation, and when he acquires a new judgement with each reading, he is the reciter who, in his own existence, follows God"* (IV 367.3).

One of the constant themes of Ibn 'Arabi works is the prophetic saying that reaffirms an important Judeo-Christian principle: "God created the human being in His own image". One of the corollaries of this principle is that human conceptualization of God is rooted in the very image of God that people embody. It is true that in one respect, God is infinitely beyond the human image, and the image has no means whatsoever of relating to God. But the only response to God from this point of view is silence, since nothing can express the utterly inexpressible. Hence we turn to a second point of view.

In a second respect, god discloses Himself to human beings through the divine images that are their own selves, and He does this in two basic modes. First, He discloses His indisclosability.

Hence people come to know that they do not and cannot know God. This type of divine self--disclosure is discussed by those who take the route of negative theology, as Ibn ‘Arabi often does. But God also discloses Himself to human beings to let them know that they can and do know Him inasmuch as and to the extent that He discloses Himself. This is the route of positive theology.

In terms of the human receptacle, the mode of understanding that reaches the conclusion that God cannot be known is called “reason”, whereas the modes of understanding that knows for certain that God does indeed show Himself is called “imagination”. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s view, rational thought pushes God far away, while imaginal thought brings Him close. Reason sees god as absent, while imagination finds Him present.

In the technical terminology of Islamic theology, the understanding that God is inaccessible to human thought is called tanzih, or the “assertion of God’s incomparability”. This perspective is normative for all schools of rational theology in Islam. In contrast, the understanding that God is accessible to human understanding that God is accessible to human understanding is called tashbih, “the assertion of God’s similarity”, and it is normative for many Sufi expressions of Islamic teachings, especially those found in poetry, by far the most popular form of literature in Islamic civilization. For Ibn ‘Arabi, reason, which sees God as incomparable, and imagination, which sees Him as similar, are the “two eyes” that human beings must employ in order to see the nature of things.

To be human, then, is to be a divine image, and to be a divine image is to be a self-expression of God within which every divine attributethat is to say, every real attribute found in the cosmos can be known. Understanding the divine image, which is both different from God and identical with Him, demands that all God’s attributes be seen as both incomparable and similar, both inaccessible and present. One of the basic differences between ordinary human beings and the friends of God is that ordinary human beings have not succeeded in actualizing the full possibilities of their own selves. As a result, they fail to see with both eyes, or their two eyes do not focus correctly and in harmony. By contrast, perfect human beings have actualized the image in which they were created, which is to say that they see the realities in proper proportion and respond to every situation as God Himself would respond were He to take human form. They are, in effect the human forms of God, each of them unique and endless.

KNOWING SELF AND GOD

All expressions of knowledge go back to the experience of the human self, which is to use a common Sufi expression that Professor Chodkiewicz has chosen as the title of his recent

study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s hermeneutics “an ocean without shore”. To the extent that the human self comes to be known, God’s incomparability and similarity come to be known. But for Ibn ‘Arabi, it is an axiom that God’s self-disclosure never repeats itself, because God is unique and infinite. At each moment God shows Himself in a unique manner to each individual in the universe. Hence the gnostic’s knowledge of self is endlessly changing and forever new, since each moment of self-knowledge represents a new moment of knowing the divine self-disclosure.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, the goal of the seeker’s quest is to live in a constantly overflowing fountain of divine self-expression, a never-ending outpour of knowledge and bliss. At each instant the gnostic — the .one who knows things as they truly are experiences a renewed self-disclosure of God and hence comes to a new understanding of what it means to be God’s image. God is infinite and His image is also infinite. However, as Ibn ‘Arabi often remarks, the infinite cannot fit into existence, because existence would negate its infinity. Hence the infinite divine image can only be experienced by successive self-disclosures, and these extend ad infinitum. This explains the bliss of the people of paradise. They are never bored, because they experience constant renewal. So also, the life of the gnostic never becomes stale, because he sees each moment as a new creation. In discussing the nature of self-knowledge and its connection to God-knowledge, Ibn ‘Arabi typically cites the famous saying of the Prophet, “He who knows himself knows his Lord”. In explaining the meaning of this saying, he takes the two basic routes of asserting God’s incomparability and declaring His similarity. Through rational analysis of ourselves, we come to know that we are not God. But through perceiving the images of the divine slef-disclosures within ourselves, we come to understand that we are indeed God. Ibn ‘Arabi sometimes refers to the mystic vision of self as the direct experience of “He/not He”, or “God/not God”. This is the reality of the divine image, a reality that demands never-ending transformation and joy.[2]

Knowledge, of course, demands escape from ignorance. The Prophet said, “The search for knowledge is incumbent upon every Muslim”. One Koranic meaning of the term muslim is simply a thing that is submitted to its Creator. In this sense, everything in the universe is a Muslim. It follows that the search for knowledge is incumbent upon everything in the universe, and this incumbency pertains to its very mode of existence. All things search for knowledge, whether they know it or not. As Ibn ‘Arabi remarks.

In reality, the teacher is God, and the whole universe is a learner, a seeker, poor, and in need. This in fact is the perfection of each thing, Anyone who does not have these qualities is ignorant of himself, and he who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of his Lord. He who is

ignorant of something has not given it its rightful due, and he who does not give something its rightful due has wronged that thing through his own properties and has stripped himself of the clothing of knowledge. Thus it has been made clear to you that all nobility lies in knowledge alone, and that the knowers of God are ranked in keeping with their knowledge (III 399.12).

In one respect, knowledge of the shoreless ocean of the self is impossible, and coming to know the impossibility of knowing oneself provides the basis for knowing God in terms of incomparability. In one of his many explanations of this principle, Ibn 'Arabi writes, *"The Prophet said, "Ha who knows himself knows his Lord ". In the same way, he who sees himself sees his Lord, or, he who sees his Lord sees himself In the view of the gnostics, with this statement the Shariah has locked the door to knowledge of God. For .... no one can reach the door to knowledge of God. For... no one.can reach knowledge of himself, since the self cannot be known disengaged from its connection to a body that it governs, whether this body be luminous or dark.... In that same way, God cannot be known except as a god [that is, He cannot be known in His inaccessible Essence]. Other than a God cannot be known, because it is not possible in knowing Him to disengage Him from the cosmos that is His vassa*l (IV 423.16).

Although knowledge of God's.Essence is inaccessible to any but God Himself, knowledge of God as He discloses Himself to the soul is available to every seeker. In fact, there is no other knowledge. Everyone knows God in themselves, but most people do not know that He is what they know.

There are none but knowers of God. However, some of the knowers know that they know God, and some of them do not know that they know God. The latter have knowledge of what they witness and examine, but they do not know that it is God. (II 510.32).

At the supreme level of spiritual experience, knowledge of self yields the understanding that there is nothing else in existence but the self, since nothing can be found but God's image, His self disclosure. In a long account that Ibn ' Arabi provides of how he ascended to God in the footsteps of Muhammad, he summarizes his experience as follows:

Through this ascent I actualized the meanings of all the divine names. I saw how they all go back to a single Named Object and a single Entity. That Named Object was the object of my witnessing, and that Entity was my own existence. So my journey had been only in myself (III 350.30).

This is why Ibn 'Arabi advises the seeker, *"*Do not hope to know yourself through other than yourself, for there is no other" (III 319.23.).

At the highest stage of self-knowledge, the gnostics actualize their own self-hoods as infinite and never-ending self-disclosures of God. Ibn 'Arabi writes, *"He who is not accompanied by*

the vision of God constantly, with every breath, is not one of these men" (III 227.26). Or again: *The gnostics witness God in the forms of the possible things, those things whose existence has originated in time. Those who are veiled the exoteric scholars deny Him. Hence God is called the Manifest in respect of the gnostics, but He is called the Nonmanifest in respect of those who are veiled. But He is none other than He. The Folk of God, those who are worthy of Him, never cease to dwell, in this world and the next, in constant visual witnessing. Though the forms [of self-disclosure] are diverse, this does not detract from their witnessing* (III 541.9).

The true gnostics witness the self-disclosures of God, who is the Real. They see nothing other than God, for every "other" is unreal. They dwell, along with Ibn 'Arabi, in what he sometimes calls the "wide earth of God". He tells us that he entered this earth in he' year 590/1195, when he was thirty years old, and he never left it. It is the station of true and utter servanthood of God.

When someone comes to dwell in the wide earth of God, he fully realizes the worship of God, and God ascribes that person to Himself God says, "0 My servants,... truly My earth is wide, so worship Me" [Koran 29:56], that is, "Worship Me in that earth ". I have worshipped God in that earth since the year 590, and today I am in the year 635 [1237-38].

This earth has permanent subsistence. It is not the earth that accepts change. That is why God made it the dwelling place of His servant and the locus of His worship. The servant remains forever a servant, so he remains in this earth forever. It is a supra-sensory, intelligible earth, not a sensory earth (III 224. 7).

The full Muhammadan inheritance demands the actualization of the Koranic vision through the concrete experience of life. Those who live with Muhammad dwell in God's wide earth, never departing from witnessing. His face in everything that appears to them. Like Muhammad, they have faith in the "Unseen "— which, in the Koran, is typically identified with God, the angels, and the Last Day. But also like Muhammad, they witness these unseen realities interwoven with their daily experience. Muhammad lived in the presence of God, the angels, and the Last Day, for these were the determining realities of his existence. So also the Muhammadan inheritors live in the witnessing of these realities, so much so that the "unseen " for them is in fact the present world. They accept on faith that there is a world and that the people who dwell within it do not see God, but their own situation is different.

They witness nothing but God in the engendered universe. They do not know what the world is, since they do not witness it as a world. They witness God with the eye, and they witness the world through faith, for God has reported to them that there is a world. Hence they have faith in it, but they do not see it. (IV 74.13).

NOTES

[1] All quotations are from Ibn Arabi`s, al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya, Cairo, 1911.

[2] For a detailed explanation of the concept of He/not He (huwa/la huwa), see W. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi 's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany : State University of .(New York Press, 1989