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**Ibn 'Arabi**  
**in the Later Islamic Tradition**

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**The Making of a Polemical Image**  
**in Medieval Islam**

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**Alexander D. Knysh**

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*To My Wife Anna*

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## PREFACE

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> , The University of London.
<i>EI</i>	<i>The Encyclopedia of Islam</i> , 1st ed.: 4 vols., Leiden and Leipzig, E. J. Brill, 1913–1934.
<i>EI<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>The Encyclopedia of Islam</i> , new edition: vols. 1–9, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1954–.
<i>IES</i>	<i>Islam: Entsiklopedicheskii sovar’ (Islam: An Encyclopedic Lexicon)</i> : Ed. by S. M. Prozorov, Moscow, Nauka, 1991.
<i>REMMM</i>	<i>Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée</i> : Éditions ÉDISUD, Aix-en-Provence.
<i>MRM</i>	Ibn Taymiyya, <i>Majmū‘at al-rasā’il wa ’l-masā’il</i> : 4 vols., ed. by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, Cairo, Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1922–1930. Reprint: Cairo, Lajnat al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 5 vols., 1976.
<i>RWW</i>	Al-Taftāzānī, <i>Risāla fī waḥdat al-wujūd</i> . In <i>Majmū‘at al-rasā’il</i> : Istanbul, no publisher, 1294 A.H.

## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND DATES

In this book I follow a simplified version of the transliteration of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)* for Arabic and Persian words. Although I retain the *‘ayns* (‘) and the *hamzas* (’) in the main text, I omit dots under certain letters, which, in academic literature, represent velarized, or “emphatic,” Arab consonants. Nor do I use macroned letters to convey long Arabic vowels. These omissions are made in order to facilitate the production of a lengthy text such as this one, and by no means reflect my negative attitude toward any transliteration system current in my field of specialization. A full transliteration of the Arabic and Persian names and titles is provided in the bibliography.

All dates are given according to the Muslim lunar calendar (*hijra*), which are followed by a backslash and the Common Era equivalent.

## INTRODUCTION

Few personages of Islamic intellectual history enjoy the fame of Muhyi ‘l-din Muhammad Ibn ‘Ali Ibn al-‘Arabi, or simply Ibn ‘Arabi (560-638 A.H./1165-1240 C.E.), as he was known in the Muslim East. Fewer still are as controversial as this outstanding exponent of Islamic mysticism. Already in his lifetime and especially after his death, Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical ideas became a stumbling block for Muslim scholars who have tried to find a key to the “Ibn ‘Arabi enigma” ever since. In the process, they have often clashed over the meaning of Ibn ‘Arabi’s breathtaking insights into the mysteries of the cosmos, the Islamic Scripture, and religious faith. Today, as before, Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy continues to bewilder his readers, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Although his vast work has been analyzed in dozens of academic monographs and in hundreds of articles, Ibn ‘Arabi still poses a major intellectual challenge to his investigators. More significantly, an aura of mystery and controversy that has enveloped his name over the last seven centuries has attracted to him not only academics but also a broad nonspecialist audience in the Muslim countries and in the West.<sup>1</sup> In the Muslim world, Ibn ‘Arabi’s abiding importance is attested by a vast body of polemical literature around his name. It is not surprising: from the 7th A.H./13th C.E. centuries onward practically every Muslim thinker of note took it upon himself to define his position vis-à-vis the controversial Sufi master.

The present book, however, is not a study of Ibn ‘Arabi per se. His doctrines have been analyzed in scores of scholarly dissertations, some of which will be surveyed further on.<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention to augment or to correct the conclusions reached by my predecessors, who have furnished an accurate, if not always impartial, summary of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas. My purpose here is to examine the perception



of Ibn ‘Arabi’s personality and teaching by Muslim scholars throughout the four centuries following his death. This, therefore, is a study of image-making and polemics in premodern Islam. With this goal in mind I will inquire into the methods and motivations of Muslim scholars, since, as we shall see, Ibn ‘Arabi’s posthumous image was molded largely against the backdrop of the theological controversy over his intellectual legacy.

Another issue to be addressed in this work is the Islamic notion of “heresy” as opposed to “true belief.” It will be treated in the context of the fierce intellectual confrontations between the upholders of communal, nomocentric Islam and those who espoused a more subjective, imaginative, and personal approach to the meaning and implications of Islamic faith. It is in this context that I will discuss the perennial conflict between the exoteric and esoteric interpretations of religion that we find in all monotheistic traditions.

In discussing the “orthodoxy” versus “heterodoxy” dichotomy in medieval Islam I will touch upon a number of related dichotomies: Sunni legalism versus Sufi vision, conformism and orthodoxy versus innovation and freethinking, communalism versus individualism, cold rationalism versus mystical raving, and so forth. I will also tackle such issues as the objectivity of the Muslim biographical literature, the role of anecdotes in prosopographical and theological texts, the literalization and fictionalization of polemical discourse, and the dynamic tension and dialogue between various interpretations of the Muslim dogma. In the end, more questions will be raised than answered. Nevertheless, my hope is to achieve the following objectives:

1. to highlight the principal stages of the scholarly debate over Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy and the evolution of polemical arguments employed by the participants;
2. to describe the reasons for a striking, almost inconceivable, tenacity of his mystical teaching;
3. to unravel the motives of the parties to the controversy over Ibn ‘Arabi and his ideas.

Finally, I would like to assess the impact of the Ibn ‘Arabi issue on medieval Islamic thought and to try and understand how his life and ideas were used by various theological and political factions vying for ascendancy.

In the genre, the present book is yet another exercise in the noble science of “ulamalogy,”<sup>3</sup> being focused as it is primarily on the Muslim scholars, whose interests, it is to be recalled, are by no means identical with those of the other strata of the medieval Islamic society, namely the military, the merchants, the craftsmen, and the peasants. The focus on the ‘*ulama*’ inevitably takes a toll on the other critical participants in “the venture of Islam” whose conspicuous absence from the pages of scholarly monographs has been justly bemoaned in recent Western scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Yet, in my mind, the sheer bulk and complexity of the ‘*ulama*’ literary output and the important roles they played in medieval Muslim societies prevent us from proclaiming closed the study of their *weltanschauung*. Whereas their social status and reproduction, their relation to property, and their access to power have been treated in some detail by the Western scholars mentioned in note 3 of this section, their intellectual concerns, doctrinal disagreements and factional differences merit further examination. The need for such an examination is pointed out even by the critics of “ulamalogy,” who acknowledged that here also much remains to be done.<sup>5</sup> And this is precisely my goal in the present book.

This study does not claim to be linguistically, chronologically, and geographically comprehensive. Despite its wide scope—from 7th/13th-centuries Ayyubid Egypt and Syria to their Mamluk successors in the 8th/14th–10th/16th centuries, from 8th/14th Timurid Central Asia to contemporary al-Andalus, North Africa, and Rasulid Yemen—it still fails to give full justice to the tumultuous and eventful history of Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy. By all standards, the corpus of literature devoted to Ibn ‘Arabi is enormous: it features dozens of book-length apologies and refutations, not to mention hundreds of biographical notes and passing references to his teachings in medieval Muslim literature. Many, if not most, of these writings are still in manuscript form or have appeared in obscure, often inaccurate, editions.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I limit my inquiry to Arabophone works, ignoring numberless pertinent treatises in Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Tatar, Uzbek, Malay, and in the other languages of Islam. However, one can argue that the Arabic material is generally representative of the view of Ibn ‘Arabi found in non-Arabic literatures. First, most Arabic tracts in defense or refutation of the Greatest Master, as he was known among his admirers, were written by Persians, Hindus, and Anatolian and Central Asian Turks. Second, the seminal theological and polemical works on Ibn ‘Arabi and his school were written in Arabic—the language

par excellence of Islamic scholasticism.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that there have been no important discussions of the Ibn ‘Arabi issue in the other languages of Islam. Such discussions, however, are by and large commentaries on, or popularizations of, Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings rather than original contributions to the polemic. In any case, when non-Arab authors defended or refuted the teaching of the Greatest Master in their native tongues, they relied heavily on their Arabophone predecessors for arguments.

Originally, I intended to trace the history of the controversy over Ibn ‘Arabi and his teaching from its inception up to the present day. However, halfway through the project, I realized that such a task cannot be accomplished in one book. With every new century the volume of literature on Ibn ‘Arabi and his followers grew exponentially, making an exhaustive survey impossible. More importantly, much of the material from the later period remains unpublished and may take many more years to accumulate and classify. Therefore, instead of giving a sketchy account of the entire corpus of writings on Ibn ‘Arabi over the last seven centuries, I decided to concentrate on those writers who shaped the polemic over the Ibn ‘Arabi issue.

Although the present study covers the period between the 7th A.H./13th C.E. and the 10th A.H./16th C.E. centuries, one should not assume that subsequently the debates around Ibn ‘Arabi suddenly subsided. On the contrary, with the rise of the Ottoman state, whose rulers came to view Ibn ‘Arabi as a patron saint of their dynasty,<sup>8</sup> the controversy gained fresh momentum. As under the Mamluks, the leading scholars and government officials of the greatest Islamic empire continued to debate Ibn ‘Arabi’s “orthodoxy.” An official ban on public defamation of Ibn ‘Arabi throughout the Ottoman realm issued by the noted Ottoman scholar and statesman Kemal Pasha-zade (d. 940/1534) is just one example.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Sultan Selim I commissioned the Meccan theologian Abu ‘l-Fath Muhammad Ibn Muzaffar, known as Shaykh Makki to compose an official apology for the Greatest Master.<sup>10</sup> Many Ottoman ‘*ulama*’ followed suit, producing a substantial body of pro-Ibn ‘Arabi literature.<sup>11</sup> Finally, perhaps the most influential apology for, and popularization of, Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching was written by the great scholar and Sufi of Ottoman Egypt, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani (d. 973/1565).<sup>12</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy, which occupied scholars throughout the Ottoman age, made a remarkable comeback in the 14th/19th-20th centuries, when the problem of Ibn ‘Arabi was once again propelled

to the forefront by political and ideological developments.<sup>13</sup> The other areas of the Muslim world—the Maghrib, Iran, India, and, to a lesser extent, Central Asia—did not remain immune to the Ibn ‘Arabi controversy. In India, for instance, debates over Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy took on the form of a bitter antagonism between the followers of the doctrine of the unity of being (pro-Ibn ‘Arabi) and those who supported the unity of witnessing (anti-Ibn ‘Arabi), first formulated by ‘Ala al-dawla Simnani (d. 736/1336) and later refined by the great Indo-Muslim reformer Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624).<sup>14</sup>

Why was Ibn ‘Arabi so important to the Muslims of such varied backgrounds in such diverse societies and historical epochs? This study will try to give an answer to this question.

The first two chapters of this book examine the beginnings of the anti-Ibn ‘Arabi debate in the late 7th/13th–early 8th/14th centuries. This was a seminal period for Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy—a time when his metaphysical, theological, and exegetical tenets were closely scrutinized and evaluated by the educated classes of the Muslim *umma*. In coming to grips with his open-ended, often contradictory statements, the scholars forged the first polemical arguments (both pro and contra), laying the groundwork for one of Islam’s most enduring doctrinal controversies. Since then, these arguments, substantially augmented and refined, became the stock-in-trade of the later writers on this topic.

In reviewing the development of the argumentative strategies deployed by the polemicists I shall occasionally depart from a strict chronological order. Such departures are especially numerous in Chapter 2, where the discourse oscillates freely between the historical present and the historical future. This technique allows us to observe how the original narrative motifs were restated by later writers, highlighting the use of his statements and the facts of his biography for polemical purposes.

Throughout my study, I am trying to demonstrate that the scholarly discourse around Ibn ‘Arabi’s teaching hinged on a set of thematic axes that remained unchanged in different historical and theological contexts. In line with this approach, comparisons will be drawn between the first occurrence of a given motif or fact of Ibn ‘Arabi’s life and its subsequent “creative” evolutions, and occasionally outright abuses, by later disputants. This diachronic method is less prominent in the later chapters, where it is supplanted by a more consistently synchronic perspective. In each case,

the shifts in chronological framework are dictated by the nature of material under discussion.

### Ibn 'Arabi's Life and Work

Although this is not a study of Ibn 'Arabi himself, at least some general idea of his life and work is essential to make sense of the polemic over his legacy. Without this background knowledge, the argumentation adduced by both sides engaged in the disputation may be lost on the reader.

Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Muhammad Ibn al-'Arabi, as he styled himself in his writings, or Muhyi al-din Ibn 'Arabi, as he was known among eastern Muslims, was born in 560/1165 in the Andalusian town of Murcia.<sup>15</sup> When he was still a child, the Almoravid kingdom that had ruled the Maghrib and al-Andalus for almost two centuries was overthrown by another Berber dynasty, the Almohads. At the time of this momentous transition from one dynastic rule to the other, Ibn 'Arabi's father, an Arab of noble pedigree, held an important office at the court of the sovereign of Murcia named Ibn Mardanish.<sup>16</sup> Following the death of this ruler, Ibn 'Arabi's father and his family moved to Seville where he was taken into government service by an Almohad ruler. Under the Almohads Seville experienced an unprecedented cultural florescence, replacing the old capital, Cordoba, as the main center of Muslim culture and learning in al-Andalus.<sup>17</sup> The young Ibn 'Arabi made good use of this cultural ambience. He studied the traditional Muslim sciences under the guidance of the best Andalusian '*ulama*' of the epoch and soon excelled in all fields of intellectual endeavor, especially in the Arabic belles-lettres.

Little is known about that "profane" period of his life, which he later viewed as an insignificant prelude to his subsequent conversion to mysticism.<sup>18</sup> There are some indications that he was employed as a secretary to the governor of Seville, although the exact circumstances of his early career remain obscure. In Ibn 'Arabi's own words, at that time he led a life typical of a wealthy young man of noble Arab stock and vaguely alluded to the profligate carousels and merry pastimes in which he indulged together with his aristocratic boon companions.<sup>19</sup>

Then, unexpectedly, came a conversion to the Sufi path that was precipitated by an unearthly voice commanding Ibn 'Arabi to abandon his ungodly ways and to devote himself to what he was created for—the service of God.<sup>20</sup> Deeply shaken by this miraculous episode,

Ibn 'Arabi parted company with the people of his class, and started to attend the gatherings of ragtag ascetics whom the snobbish Muslim scholars and king's courtiers dismissed as illiterate bumpkins, tricksters, and worthless beggars.<sup>21</sup>

Unheeding of the repeated admonitions and even ridicule by his former friends and relatives, Ibn 'Arabi stubbornly refused to relinquish his new brethren in God. The sincerity and finality of his conversion is attested to by the rest of his life. Following the example of his Sufi friends, Ibn 'Arabi engaged in the ascetic exercises associated with the initial stages of the mystical path. We see him practicing the constant invocation of God, vigils, fasting, vows, retreat, and meditation. Parallel to the practical training, he vigorously pursued the study of the classics of Sufi literature under the renowned mystical masters of Seville. Judging by Ibn 'Arabi's own accounts (which, it should be noted, are often self-serving and chronologically inconsistent), he soon learned all he could from the Sufis of Seville and started to crisscross the Iberian Peninsula in search of a more advanced spiritual direction. His quest for mystical knowledge took him to the Maghrib, where he benefited from many outstanding representatives of Western Sufism, who pursued the mystical path established by the great North African saint Abu Madyan (d. 594/1197).<sup>22</sup> According to Ibn 'Arabi's own testimony, he soon outstripped his Maghribi teachers in the degree of spiritual attainment as well as in the mastery of the Sufi tradition. Still a young man, he reportedly achieved the status of an accomplished Sufi *shaykh* surrounded by a reverential retinue of disciples.<sup>23</sup>

At the age of thirty-five, Ibn 'Arabi left al-Andalus on a pilgrimage to Mecca never to return to his native land that was shrinking in the face of the Christian Reconquista. In the East, Ibn 'Arabi journeyed extensively and studied under the most prominent religious teachers of his time. He spent several years in the Hijaz, whereupon he visited Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Anatolia. Wherever he wandered, he was accompanied by a small group of devoted disciples, some of whom became major exponents of his teachings.<sup>24</sup> In addition to studying *hadith*—a preoccupation he pursued until his last days—Ibn 'Arabi taught his own works to the Sufis of the Hijaz, Aleppo, Konya, Siwas, Baghdad, and Damascus. His expertise in esoteric and exoteric sciences won him many followers including a few Muslim sovereigns who lavishly supported him and his disciples. In Syria, Ibn 'Arabi enjoyed the patronage of the Ayyubid princes who granted him generous allowances in money and property. In Anatolia also, he made friends with the local Saljuq sultans and their

courtiers, including the father of his foremost disciple, Sadr al-din al-Qunawi (d. 673/1274).<sup>25</sup> His decade-long sojourn in the Saljuqid kingdom left a deep imprint on the intellectual life of Muslim Anatolia (Rum), which became an important center of the transmission and dissemination of his mystical ideas. While there, he wrote many Sufi works and trained numerous disciples. Simultaneously he counseled the sultan of Rum on religious and political issues and composed for him a letter of practical advice.<sup>26</sup> Unlike many of his learned contemporaries who craved royal favors, Ibn 'Arabi seems to have firmly adhered to the Sufi principle of staying away from secular authorities. Although he did occasionally accept royal patronage, he neither amassed a fortune nor entered the official service of any ruler.

From 620/1226 until his death in 638/1240 Ibn 'Arabi lived in Damascus where he enjoyed the protection of the local Ayyubids. He made friends with some influential religious officials of Damascus, who proudly counted themselves among his disciples. Thanks to these connections Ibn 'Arabi was free to promulgate his esoteric teachings in spite of occasional protests of some concerned local 'ulama' such as 'Izz al-din Ibn 'Abd al-Salam.<sup>27</sup> His teaching sessions, however, were confined to a narrow circle of close followers and admirers who alone were able to make sense out of his difficult discourses. Only after his death did his esoteric writings acquire a wider readership. Some conservative 'ulama' were scandalized by his bold insights and hastened to condemn them as outright "heresy," setting in motion the torrid controversy that is the subject of this study.

In Damascus, Ibn 'Arabi wrote his controversial masterpiece titled "The Bezels of Wisdom" (*Fusus al-hikam*)—a brilliant, if extremely opaque essay on prophethood, mystical metaphysics, exegesis, and the nature of religious faith. In this comparatively short essay Ibn 'Arabi addressed many critical issues of Muslim theology and laid down his metaphysical views that evince strong monistic tendencies.<sup>28</sup> To make matters worse, he did this in a way that baffled and antagonized many of his traditionally minded readers, exposing him to harsh criticism.

Parallel to the *Fusus* Ibn 'Arabi completed a final recension of his magnum opus, the "Meccan Openings" or "Meccan Revelations" (*Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*)—a multivolume project he started during his stay in Mecca and continued to revise until his last years. The end result was a colossal (no hyperbole in this case) book that combines the characteristics of a spiritual diary and an encyclopedia of the traditional Islamic sciences seen from an esoteric perspective. With the two major works of his life successfully accomplished Ibn 'Arabi

passed away peacefully in 638/1240, surrounded by his disciples and relatives. Today, his domed shrine in one of the suburbs of Damascus attracts numerous admirers of his genius who come to visit him from far and wide.

Ibn 'Arabi is justly regarded as among the most prolific Muslim writers ever: his legacy consists of an estimated 300 to 400 works. Their length vary from slim two-page pamphlets to medium-size tracts to such monuments as his unfinished Qur'anic commentary and the *Futuhat*. The subjects of Ibn 'Arabi's writings are extremely diverse.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he approached the traditional Islamic subjects from a peculiar angle that was dictated by his deeply personal vision of God and of the world. To wit, he seems to have been interested not in the subject as such as in its relevance to a set of moral, theological, and cosmic insights that he wanted to illuminate. At the same time, neither in the *Fusus* nor in the *Futuhat*, nor in any other work, does he provide a succinct and unequivocal account of his teaching. On the contrary, his discourse is deliberately crafted so as to obfuscate its essence.

In line with this discursive strategy, Ibn 'Arabi couches his favorite motifs and ideas in the lexicon and imagery of traditional Muslim disciplines, especially *kalam* and *fiqh*. Additionally, he availed himself of the terminology and topoi of Arabic poetry, literary criticism, mythology, and occult sciences. In an effort to convey to the reader his elusive mystical insights and fleeting experiences, Ibn 'Arabi often resorted to "symbolic images that evoke emergent associations rather than fixed propositions."<sup>30</sup> Although he occasionally did use syllogistic reasoning, he considered it to be incapable of expressing the dizzying fluidity and dynamic that characterize his vision of reality. To compensate for the perceived inadequacy of syllogistic arguments Ibn 'Arabi deliberately loaded his discourses with shocking antinomies and involved allegories that defy any rational explanation. Little wonder that his works often strike his reader as a mishmash of themes and topoi operating on several parallel discursive levels ranging from poetry and mythology to jurisprudence and speculative theology. These are, in a nutshell, the major features of Ibn 'Arabi's narrative method that account for the difficulties one encounters in trying to elucidate or summarize his ideas.

Recent studies of his work have expressed doubt over the stereotyped view that portrays him as a thoroughgoing esotericist who was completely oblivious to the external aspects of Islamic religion.<sup>31</sup> Supporters of this approach argue that Western scholarship has been insensitive to the more exoteric aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's work,

namely his unflinching preoccupation with the *hadith*, *fiqh*, and the minutia of the Muslim ritual. In rejecting this one-sided view of the Greatest Master, the revisionist scholars point out that the topics of many of Ibn 'Arabi's "esoteric" treatises are in fact quite traditional. Consequently, so the argument goes, the more conventional aspect of his legacy has been underestimated by both Ibn 'Arabi's followers and his antagonists who tended to focus on the more controversial aspects of his work.

A closer examination of Ibn 'Arabi's purportedly "exoteric" writings reveals that his treatment of such traditional issues as speculative theology and *fiqh* betrays the same underlying commitment to his favorite mystical ideas and esoteric *topoi*.<sup>32</sup> However, one cannot but agree with the revisionist scholars in that the exoteric or traditional facet of Ibn 'Arabi's legacy has not yet received the attention it deserves. For all intents and purposes, the stark reality is that students of the Greatest Master in the East and in the West continue to concentrate on the sensational esoteric ideas of the *Fusus* at the expense of the more conventional elements of his oeuvre.

Unsurprisingly, to the general Muslim and Western reader, Ibn 'Arabi remains first and foremost the author of the *Fusus al-hikam*, "The Bezels of Wisdom"—an abstruse and elliptic work that recapitulates the cardinal themes of Ibn 'Arabi's theosophical discourse. Although the much more detailed *Futuhat* is also viewed as a hallmark of Ibn 'Arabi's *weltanschauung*, it is too lengthy, technical, unstructured, and repetitious to attract anyone but the most devout investigator. Apart from these two writings, the Muslim reader is also likely to be aware of Ibn 'Arabi's poetry that purports (misleadingly) to represent the gist of his complex doctrine. Disparate poetic fragments from Ibn 'Arabi's *diwan* are often quoted by his antagonists as proof of his radical departure from the "true Islam."<sup>33</sup>

As regards Ibn 'Arabi's other writings, they are known only to a narrow circle of specialists.<sup>34</sup> Some of them are little more than essays and rough drafts that were later polished and incorporated into the monumental *Futuhat*. Ibn 'Arabi's minor tracts from the Andalusian period contain elaborately veiled predictions about the imminent advent of a divinely inspired messiah (*mahdi*) from the "house of the Prophet." They reflect a preoccupation with messianic eschatology that Ibn 'Arabi shared with the mystical masters of the Maghrib and al-Andalus whose ideas he developed in his later writings.<sup>35</sup>

In short, all of these writings, including the voluminous collection of Ibn 'Arabi's poetry, have been overshadowed by the controversial *Fusus*. No wonder that this work has elicited most of the

polemical responses that are discussed in the chapters that follow. As we shall see, in the polemic over Ibn 'Arabi's legacy, his other writings were rarely, if ever invoked.

What is, then, the essence of his doctrine in the *Fusus*? The question is not as innocent as it might appear at first sight. The text of the *Fusus* stubbornly eludes any summarization through abstract terms to the extent that some scholars have doubted whether Ibn 'Arabi had any meaningful philosophical doctrine at all.<sup>36</sup> In the words of a Western investigator, Ibn 'Arabi "integrally combined the contrasting approaches of earlier Islamic intellectual traditions that had focused respectively on spiritual disciplines and contemplation, intellectual and scientific inquiry, and the elaboration of scriptural and prophetic teachings" in a way that "was never really repeated or adequately imitated by any subsequent Islamic author."<sup>37</sup> In the *Fusus*, Ibn 'Arabi's discourse is particularly (perhaps deliberately) arcane, presenting the reader with a tangle of disparate theological and metaphysical propositions cast in mythopoeic parables and recondite terminology.<sup>38</sup> Throughout the *Fusus*, Ibn 'Arabi couches his intensely personal experience of God and the universe in a variety of discursive garbs from scriptural exegesis to speculative theology to *fiqh* and romantic poetry. Paradoxically, these discursive show windows are not easily interchangeable: they color the very visions and experiences that Ibn 'Arabi endeavors to convey, making it difficult to neatly separate the content from the form. True, an experienced reader may identify a few recurring motifs that permeate Ibn 'Arabi's entire narrative. Yet, one can never be sure whether in reformulating these motifs their original meaning is preserved intact. On the contrary, it often seems that the new verbal shells transform the very meaning of these motifs. Nor can one be sure whether a given formulation is final or just another rephrasing of the same recurrent theme. The goal of this deliberately elusive discourse is to "carry the reader outside the work itself into the life and cosmos which it is attempting to interpret."<sup>39</sup> This effect is achieved through breaking the shackles of habitual human perception by a kaleidoscopic change of perspective—a method that a Western scholar aptly described as "mystical dialectic."<sup>40</sup>

Further adding to the specificity of the *Fusus* is the way in which its elliptic narrative compels the reader to engage in the constant process of decoding in order to unravel its underlying import. Faced with the absence of an unequivocal referential framework or a conventional syllogistic argumentation, the reader has to make use of his personal resources, such as educational background,

world-outlook, and intuition. As Morris put it, Ibn 'Arabi's esoteric texts "are meant to function as a sort of spiritual mirror, reflecting and revealing the inner intentions, assumptions and predilections of each reader . . . with profound clarity."<sup>41</sup> It is, therefore, hardly surprising that each Islamic generation offered its own understanding of the *Fusus*, though, as we shall see, in the end several authoritative trends within the interpretive tradition triumphed over creativity. Given Ibn 'Arabi's discursive strategy, one can see why these numerous interpretations have failed to exhaust the potential of his polyvalent and multilayered text. A recent rediscovery of Ibn 'Arabi's "contribution to mankind" by some Western intellectuals is the best testimony to this remarkable feature of his oeuvre.<sup>42</sup>

In light of the foregoing, one can see why Ibn 'Arabi's narrative method continues to puzzle the students of his thought. This, however, is not to say that his principal ideas cannot be expressed in a language of abstract philosophical categories. Shorn of its deliberate obfuscation and confusing digressions, Ibn 'Arabi's discourse in the *Fusus* boils down to a limited number of cut-and-dried philosophical propositions that very often appear to be in conflict with the exoteric Muslim dogma. This impression is further enhanced by Ibn 'Arabi's exegetical paradoxes that he employed to awaken his readers to the hidden dimensions of the revealed texts. By actualizing the conceptual and spiritual potentialities of the Qur'an and the Sunna, Ibn 'Arabi creates what amounts to a new, esoteric prophesy.<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, his daring interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith* did not go unheeded. Like his metaphysical and theological propositions they aroused the ire of exoterically minded scholars. As we shall see, his "allegorical" exegesis was continually denounced by his critics not only as farfetched and arbitrary but also as one that cast doubt on the finality of the revelation.

At the same time, it is obvious that Ibn 'Arabi's discursive methods and esoteric exegesis are uniquely well suited to his ultimate goal—to convey to the reader an intuitive perception of the intense polarity within the originally unique and indivisible Divine Absolute that unfolds its properties in an astounding multiplicity of the empirical universe. It is this spontaneous self-polarization within the unique Divine Godhead that Ibn 'Arabi found particularly fascinating. Anxious to express the evasive interplay of the primordial, immutable oneness, and the multiplicity and change inherent in its empirical manifestation, he experimented with nonconventional discursive methods. Since he applied his experimentation to the sacred texts of Islam, he inevitably laid himself open to accusations of

heresy and unbelief. What we call "the problem of Ibn 'Arabi" can be explained, in part, by the fact that his theological opponents were neither willing nor able to accept his rules of the game. Briefly put, whereas Ibn 'Arabi's paradoxes and antinomianism were deliberately geared to disrupting the conventionalities of scholastic reasoning, his opponents continued to test his statements by the very conventions he sought to dispel. Hence, the inevitable collision of world-orientational philosophies in which the opponents were simply unable to see eye to eye.

Should we for a moment ignore the peculiarities of Ibn 'Arabi's discursive method and present his abstruse narratives in conventional terms we would wind up with an assortment of trite philosophical propositions that evince neo-Platonic inspiration. Like many religious thinkers before and after him, Ibn 'Arabi was captivated by the idea of the universe as a temporal and spatial unwinding of divine perfections that he equated with the manifestation of divine attributes or names. In his scheme, these attributes/names are primordial exemplars, the matrix upon which God shaped the empirical universe into being. This concept of creation is akin to the medieval Christian doctrines that also emphasized the exemplary structure of the universe. One immediately thinks, for example, of medieval Christian "realism" positing an intimate correspondence between the *modus intelligendi* and *modus essendi* as the key to understanding the world around us.<sup>44</sup> In a like vein, Ibn 'Arabi viewed his immutable entities (*a'yan thabita*) as paradigmatic creative possibilities, which are eternally fixed in God's knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

According to Ibn 'Arabi, the unfolding of the divine perfections in space and time was occasioned by God's primeval desire to contemplate himself in the mirror of the cosmos—a notion that is intimately linked to the pervasive medieval analogy of the micro- and macrocosm. This analogy, in turn, evokes the *homo imago Dei* motif of ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>46</sup> Each divine attribute or perfection, in Ibn 'Arabi's view, is manifested in the universe in accord with each individual creature's primordial predisposition to receive it. This predisposition, or readiness, is itself predicated on the creature's primordial essence that is part of God's knowledge of himself and the world prior to creation. Hence, in line with the neo-Platonic doctrines, which were embraced by medieval European theologians as well as by their Muslim colleagues, the world can be seen as a theophany, or manifestation of God's potentialities and perfections.<sup>47</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics describes the world as a product of the divine self-reflection that prompts God to manifest himself in the

things and phenomena of the empirical universe. This idea shocked his opponents who (mis)took it for a veiled acknowledgment of the substantial identity between God and the world that effectively disposed with divine transcendency and self-sufficiency. In such a theory, God was no longer the absolutely otherworldly and impregnable entity of mainstream Muslim theologians. He rather becomes part and parcel of, and immanent to, His creation. Hence, the widespread association of Ibn 'Arabi with the doctrine of the oneness of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) which is generally understood as an Islamic prototype of Spinozian pantheism.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the immutable entities (the primordial concepts of future creation that had eternally existed in the divine consciousness) was construed by many Muslim scholars as springing from the "heretical" doctrine that posited the eternity of the world (*al-dahriyya*).<sup>49</sup> By recognizing that God had created the cosmos in accordance with a preestablished pattern determined by these immutable entities (considered somehow independent from God), Ibn 'Arabi, in the opinion of his critics, effectively did away with divine omnipotence. The Sufi, however, never plainly stated this: rather we see that he constantly focuses on the ever-changing manifestations of the immutable entities without, however, specifying the nature of their relationship with the Godhead.

In addition to the critical concepts of existential oneness (*wahda*) and the immutable entities, the *Fusus* outlines a few other theological propositions that raised the hackles of his learned readers. Among such irritative propositions is Ibn 'Arabi's notion of two conflicting modes of divine volition: one pertaining to the creative command, the other—to the obligating command. The former stresses the role of God as the creator of the universe, while the latter is concerned primarily with the moral and normative imperatives of the divine dispensation.<sup>50</sup> From the perspective of the creative command, all human actions are a product of the Divine Will and, therefore, are equally "pleasing" to God. The obligating command, on the other hand, conditions human actions by declaring them either "good" or "evil." In other words, it urges humans to comply with legal rulings and moral precepts promulgated in the *shari'a*, threatening punishment to those who disobey. Many theologians rejected this dichotomy of the Divine Will as a gateway to antinomianism and moral irresponsibility.<sup>51</sup> The other objectionable ideas in the *Fusus* are, for the most part, corollary of the seminal theological and metaphysical propositions that were just outlined.

Our description of Ibn 'Arabi's principal themes would be incomplete without referring to his famous concept of the perfect man (*in-*

*san kamil*) which is explicated in several chapters of the *Fusus*. In Ibn 'Arabi's view, the perfect human being forms the critical link between the two diametrically opposed aspects of the unique divine reality. Neither an animal nor an angel, man hovers between the world of corruption and the world of immutability by combining in himself the characteristics of both realms. By virtue of his intermediary position, man becomes a microcosmic reality in which God contemplates himself in the most adequate form. As Austin, put it: "the Perfect Man is that human individual who has perfectly realized the full spiritual potential of the human state, who has realized in himself and his experience the Oneness of Being that underlies all the apparent multiplicity of existence."<sup>52</sup> For Ibn 'Arabi, the perfect mystical man constitutes the very cause, and the ultimate goal of creation.

In Ibn 'Arabi's writings, the perfect man presents himself not only as a purely metaphysical abstraction, but also as a quite real supreme saint (*wali*), or the spiritual "pole" (*qutb*), of the epoch, who was entrusted by God with leading humanity to salvation. In some of Ibn 'Arabi's texts, this perfect individual is placed in the context of the historical experience of the Muslim community and identified with the awaited world-restorer, the eschatological *mahdi* who appears at the end of time to revivify religion and to prepare the ground for the final arrival of the Qur'anic Jesus, the harbinger of the final hour.<sup>53</sup> In several poetic passages, Ibn 'Arabi identified himself with this supreme saint of the epoch, although it is not clear whether this was his genuine conviction or just a figure of speech. Nevertheless, the very fact that he toyed with this idea incensed the Muslim scholars who were anxious to protect the Muslim community from sedition by self-proclaimed saviors.

Whatever messianic pretensions he had, Ibn 'Arabi entertained them in private. At least, he never disclosed them publicly. His discretion helps explain why his espousal of such potentially disruptive ideas did not get him into trouble during his lifetime. Ibn 'Arabi's cautious religio-political stance and preoccupation with inner experiences and visions explains why, in an age that witnessed the formation of the major Sufi brotherhoods, he founded neither an organized *tariqa* nor a popular school of Sufism.<sup>54</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi's failure to attract a large popular following is due in part to the obscurity and elusiveness of his teaching. Unlike the founders of popular Sufi orders (e.g., 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jili, al-Suhrawardi, Najm al-din Kubra, and al-Shadhili), the Greatest Master offered no clear-cut practical guidelines that could be readily translated into popular patterns of social behavior. Although he occasionally does give some practical recommendations for beginning

