

THE SUPREME ATMAN OF SHANKARA'S ADVAITA AND THE ABSOLUTE ESSENCE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF IBN AL-'ARABI

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1. Introduction

According to a recent book there are four major systems of Indian advaita philosophy: Advaita Vedanta, Kashmira Shaivism, Shunyavada Buddhism and Vijnanavada Buddhism.¹ In addition to these four schools, the Ibn al-Arai school of Muslim Sufi philosophy should be recognized as a unique and viable form of Indian advaita. Before coming to Muslim India, these ideas originated with the *wahdat at-wujud* (oneness of being) philosophy of the Spanish Sufi, Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240). He maintained that mystical intuition was the main source of his writings and that his advaitic book the *Fusus al-Hikam*, was dictated to him by the Prophet Muhammad in a visionary dream in 1229. An Arabic account of an Iranian translation of a Sanskrit manuscript on Tantric Yoga has been attributed to him.² After his death his ideas were soon suppressed in the Middle East, but fortunately took hold in Turkey (Anatolia), Iran and India. In Iran his writings inspired many advaitic philosophers like al-Jili (1365-1428) who visited Kushi in India, al-Jami (1414-92) and Mulla Sadra (1571-1640), whose

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¹ Sharma, Chandradhar (1996), *The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

² Rizvi, Saiyid (1983). *A History of Sufism in India* 2 Vols., Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal: 1, 104, 389-90; ii,36; al-'Arabi, Ibn (1980). *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam)*. (Hereafter the sections written by Ibn al-'Arabi are cited as *Fusus*), Austin, R.W.J. tr. New York, Paulist Press: 23,45.

teachings and commentaries on the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas of Ibn Sina (alias Avicenna) had an impact on Indian Sufism.³

Ibn al-'Arabi's philosophical system was mediated into India by the writings of the Iranian Fakhr al-Din Iraqi (1213-89). He learned of these ideas from Ibn al-'Arabi's premier disciple and adopted son al-Qunawi (1207-74) who was a good friend of the famous Iranian Sufi mystic Jmal al-Din Rumi (1206-74). His doctrines were the primary Sufi philosophy in India until the seventeenth century, when the orthodox dualist Ahmad Srihindi (1564-1624) opposed some of his doctrines.⁴ Later, the influential Shal Wali Ullah of Delhi (1703-62) synthesized the doctrines of Ibn al-'Arabi and Ahmad Sirhandi.⁵

2. The Spiritual Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi and Shankara

In order to facilitate a meaningful comparison of their ideas, Ibn al-'Arabi's and Shankara's teachings are presented for each of the following twenty-nine topics.

1. The Absolute (Brahman) transcends all human conceptions and is therefore unknowable and indescribable:

³ Rizvi (1983), i, 103-04; Lewis, B. (1971), ed. *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. 9 vols., Leiden: E.J. Brill: iii, 711. See also, Sharif, M.M. (1966). *A History of Muslim Philosophy*. 2 Vols.; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz: ii, 820-82, 904-60, 1557-79, for an excellent review of the ideas of the Iranian philosophers.

⁴ Chittick, William (1992) 'Notes on Ibn al-'Arabi's influence in the Subcontinent', *The Muslim World* 87: 218-41 discusses about thirty of the Indian Sufis who belonged to this school; Rizvi (1983), i, 104, 205, 217, 250-55, 389-90; ii, 16-17, 36-38, 76-77, 90-91, 169-70, 190-91, 209-13; Elaide, Mircea (1987), ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 Vols., New York: Macmillan: vii, 396; Lewis (1971), iii, 711.

⁵ Rizvi (1983), ii, 134-39, 255-5, 286-70, 314-15, 417-24; Ahmad, Aziz (1964). *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 191-96. According to Chittick (1992), 221-22, an untranslated edition of high quality writings of over fifty members of the Ibn al-'Arabi school going back to the fourteenth century, are in Indian libraries. Unfortunately these advaitic writings of the Indian Sufis are not in good condition. It would be a great tragedy if special effort was not taken to preserve these invaluable manuscripts.

Ibn al-'Arabi: The Absolute Essence (dhat) is unknowable because it is without substance, attributes, quantity, relations, name, form, differentiation, limitation, space or time, yet it is the source of all of these. It exists in a state of unified and unconditional transcendence beyond human understanding and is intellectually ineffable. It is not similar to anything we know and is independent of all predication and of subject-object duality. Only bare existence can be predicated of it since any attribute would limit it. Being beyond finite existence, it is experienced only by a process of negation.⁶

Shankara: Brahman is unconditioned, non-determinate, not a genus, without attributes, relations, activity, form or internal variation. It is not located in any point in space, yet it is ubiquitous since the existence of all things depend on it. Brahman is not discerned through discursive reasoning, since it is partless and precedes the subject-object distinctions of knower, known and knowing. It not comprehended by the intellect or described by words, because all finite categories of understanding fail to grasp it. It is indescribable (*acintya*) since knowledge is based on making comparison with what has already been experienced. Being the eternal subject it is intelligence itself, existing prior to all possible human experience and not an object of knowledge. The knower can never be known as an object, since it is the foundation of all logical proofs. Brahman can be realised by following the discriminative practice of "neti neti" ('not this', 'not this'), in order to negate the apparent phenomenal existence that is superimposed on it.⁷

⁶ Al-'Arabi, Ibn (191). *Futuh al-Makkiyya* (hereafter *Futuh*). 4. Vols., Cairo: i, 289, 691; ii, 57, 110, 289, 619; iii, 164; iv, 196; Chittick, William (1989). *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York: 58-59, 81, 112. The majority of references used in this article from the *Futuh al Makkiyya* are in this book; Affif, A.E. (1979). *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid din Ibnul Arabi*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf: 4-11, 21-24, 37-44; Husaini, S.A.Q. (1979). *The Pantheistic Monism of Ibn al-'Arabi*. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf: 67, 133-51; Chand, Tara (1952). 'Growth of Islamic Thought in India', in Radhakrishnana, Sarvepalli. ed. *History of Philosophy East and West*. London: George Allen & Unwin: 498-99.

⁷ Shankara (1904). *The Vedanta Sutras* (Hereafter VS). Thibaut, George. tr.

2. For all people their Essential Self (*Atman*) is Perfect :

Ibn al-'Arabi: Human beings are innately perfect in two different ways. First, humans are perfect in essence, since existence is one and the inner reality of each person is identical with the Absolute Essence. It was not Gabriel who communicated the Qur'an to Muhammad, but it was his own self appearing to him in that particular form. In spiritual intuition, the mystic contemplates their true Essential Self, realising their identity with God. Secondly, humans are potentially perfect as spiritual beings since God created a Divine self in man, made in his image corresponding to his attributes and names. The human soul is an eternal and indestructible manifestations of God's knowledge in the Divine mind. A person is eternal in their Divine form, and temporal in their mundane manifestation. Being created in the image of God, all people have the potential to manifest the Divine attributes within themselves.⁸

Shankara: Perfection exists only in the Atman, which is a person's true absolute, essential and unconditioned Self. The Self is the pure subject that pervades all cognition and perception. It reveals objects, but is never known as an object. It cannot be doubted, since it is the essential nature of the person who attempts to deny it, nor can it be proved by reason alone, since it proceeds all proofs and judgements. The *Atman* is neither the individual self nor the sum of all selves in the universe.⁹

Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988) (7th ed.): Section 3-2.22-23; 4-3.14; Shankara (1897). *Bhagavad Gita Commentary of Sri Shankaracharya*, (hereafter BG). Sastri, A. Mahadeva tr. Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu, 1961 (5th ed.): Section 13-12; sing, Ram Lal (1978). *An Inquiry Concerning Reason in Kant and Samkara*. Allahabad: Chugh Publications: 173-74; 182,214-241-45; Radhakrishnan, S. (1992). *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.2. Delhi: Oxford University: 468, 484, 534-35. 604.

⁸ Fusus, 69, 107-08, 153, 191; Futuhat, ii, 67, 468;iii, 151; Chittick (1989), 366-69; Husaini (1979), 99-108; Affini (1979), 117-20; Izutsu, Toshihiko (1984). *Sufism and Taoism*. Berkeley: University of California:104, 107.

⁹ VS, 1-1.1; 1-2.7; 2-1.14; 2-3.7; Radhakrishnan, (1992), 475-85.

3. Existence can be viewed from an absolute, relative or imaginary standpoint:

Ibn al-'Arabi: From the standpoint of the Absolute Essence all existence is unified, simple and indivisible and from the viewpoint of the phenomenal world it is differentiated, plural and divided. Absolute existence is necessary, which means that it is self-caused and must always exist, while mundane existence is possible and contingent and might exist or not exist. Theoretically there is also an impossible existence (*mumtani*) which is a non-entity that is without empirical reality.¹⁰

Shankara: There are three standpoints, imaginary non-being, empirical becoming and absolute being. The imaginary standpoint (*pratibhasika*) is sublated by the empirical, when the dreamer wakes up and becomes conscious of the external world, and the empirical existence by the experience of Brahman. The standpoint of phenomenal existence (*vyavaharika*) is the practical empirical point of view, *sub specie temporis*, which exists as long as the world is regarded as real. From the absolute point of view (*paramarthika*), *sub specie aeternitatis*, only Brahman is real and the world is non-existent.¹¹

4. An unchanging substratum underlies all existence:

Ibn al-'Arabi: God perpetually inhales and exhales the momentary universe, which is annihilated and recreated at each instance without a temporal gap. A changeless unitary substance underlies all the momentary mutable forms. The world is in a perpetual flux, pervaded by an immutable substance, the substratum of all change.¹²

¹⁰ Fusus, 107; Futuhat, iii, 275; Chittick (1989), 81-82; Affifi (1979), 10-13; Chand (1952), 494-99; Husaini, Moulvi (1977). Ibn al-'Arabi. Lahore, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf: 67-68.

¹¹ Sharma, Chandradhar (1987). *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass: 279; Klostermaier, Klaus (1985). 'Moksha and Critical Theory', *Philosophy East and West* 35:66.

¹² Futuhat, ii, 639, 677; iii, 452; Chittick (1989), 97-98.

Shankara: With momentariness (*ksanika-vada*) there can be no causation, since the cause ceases to exist before the effect arises. If there is production in the beginning, the object in the middle and destruction in the end, then an object connected by three moments would not be momentary. Also, personal identity, memory and recognition require a permanent synthesising subject. To unite the instantaneous temporal events together, an eternal underlying substrate is required. Brahman is the primary indeterminate substratum (*adhara*) of the world, the support (*ashraya*) of all change and relations. The cosmos is the effect that is superimposed on Brahman the cause. It is not the efficient cause, but the constituent or inherent cause of creation. All things are rooted in Brahman while it is rooted in itself. It is the unconditioned ultimate background or support of all relations, analogous to a canvas being the support of a picture. Since Brahman is the foundation of the world, the negation of phenomenal existence leads to ultimate reality.¹³

5. The phenomenal world is an appearance:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Creation (*khalq*) is an imaginary existence without a substantial basis. There is only Absolute Essence, unity without diversity or plurality. The phenomenal world is unreal, imaginary, a shadow and a dream (*manam*) having no real existence since only Absolute Essence exists. It is an illusion to think that we are separate from the ultimate and are striving to unite with it. The individual microcosmic soul is already united with the universal macrocosmic Absolute Essence.¹⁴

Shankara: The cosmos cannot be a pantheistic transformation or fragment of Brahman, which is partless, immutable and transcends the category of causation. Brahman and the world are one and exist in a relationship of reality and appearance (*abhasa*), like a rope that is misperceived to be a snake. This is not subjectivism because Brahman is the only

¹³ VS, 1-1.1; 2-2.20-26, 31; 4-1.5. Sharma (1987), 264-66.

¹⁴ *Futuhat* i, 279; Husaini (1979), 186-88; Affifi, (1979), 54, 62; Austin, (1980), 40; Izutsu (1984), 7-11, 32-33.

reality, and the mental world is as much an appearance as external existence. The world is phenomenally real since it provides the foundation for liberation and potential consciousness of Brahman, but is not ultimately real. From another standpoint, Brahman appears to be the creator of all phenomena through modification of forms, yet Brahman is immutable beyond phenomenal distinction. We have never been nor will we ever be, a doer or enjoyer of action.¹⁵

6. Ultimate reality is veiled by the perpetual and conceptual limitations of the human mind:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The mundane veil (*hijab*) of darkness conceals the higher reality while the spiritual veil of light reveals it. Spiritual experience is an unveiling (*kashf*) process. The phenomenal universe is the external aspect of the Absolute Essence experienced through the mind. Absolute Essence is veiled perpetually by space and time and conceptually by names, predication (*akham*), the primary qualities of size and form and by the five secondary qualities.¹⁶

Shankara: Misunderstanding (*avidya/maya*) is the cause of bondage and its removal brings liberation. *Avidya/maya* has two functions, in its tamasic aspect the mind veils and conceals (*avarana*) the real nature of Brahman. As rajas the mind actively misrepresents true reality, exercising its power to project (*viksepa*) an apparent existence. Right understanding (*vidya*) enables one to unite with the higher reality. Phenomenal existence is a world of names (*nama*) and forms (*rupa*), bound by the relation of space, time and causation. The name is the

¹⁵ VS 2-1.14, 24-26; Radhakrishnan (1982), 456,566-71. According to Gaudapada the first systematic exponent of the Advaitic Philosophy, there is neither creation nor destruction, persons in bondage or a spiritual aspirant, seekers after liberation or the liberated (*ajati-vada*). The waking state is as unreal as the dream state. The phenomenal world is absolutely unreal, like an illusory elephant. Bhattacharyya, Krishnachandra, 'The Philosophy of Shankara', in Bhattacharyya, Haridas (1937), ed. *Cultural Heritage of India*. Vol.3. Calcutta: Radhakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1953 (2nd ed.): 240-41.

¹⁶ Izutsu (1984), 32-33.

internal aspect of the form and form is the external aspect of the name. Material substance is external, but the form continually changes, just as clay can be moulded into many forms with different names, yet remains as clay.¹⁷

7. The phenomenal world is neither existent nor non-existent:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The world is neither existent (*wujud*) nor non-existent (*adam*), analogous to an image reflected in a mirror, which is authentic yet it is not the real object. "There is no God but God," implies that only God exists, yet the cosmos expresses some reality or we could not experience it. The world is 'unreal in itself, but real in the sense that Absolute Essence manifests itself through it. The reality is identical not with the phenomenal object, but with the bare existence of a thing. There is only Absolute Essence, and the universe exists to the degree that it manifests that reality according to the provisional view.¹⁸

Shankara: *Maya* like Brahman is indescribable and indefinable being neither real nor unreal. It is not real since only Brahman exists and the *maya* vanishes with higher knowledge. Neither is it unreal like the son of a barren woman, since it is responsible for the appearance of a world. The world is self-contradictory and of an incomprehensible nature, yet it is real from the practical standpoint. Brahman is veiled by the projective power of name and form.¹⁹

¹⁷ VS, 1-3.41; 1-4; 2-1.14; Shankara (1947). *Crest Jewel of Discrimination (Viveka-Chudamani)* (Hereafter VC). Prabhavananda, Swami and Christopher Ishwerwood ed. Hollywood: Vedanta Press: 59; Radhakrishnan (1992), 571; Prabhavananda, Swami (1964). *The Spiritual Heritage of India*. Garden City: Doubleday:342.

¹⁸ Fusus, 65; Futuhah, i, 304; iy, 151, 408, 434; Affifi (1979), 10-12, 41-42, 54, 62; Chittick, William (1994). *Imaginal Worlds*. Albany: State University of New York:L 18, 25-28; Chittick, William (1988). 'Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn-al-'Arabi's Eschatology'. *The Muslim World*,78, 53-58.

¹⁹ VS, 1-4.3. VC, 58-59; Sharma (1987), 274-75, 279.

8. The Absolute (Brahman) is reflected onto the phenomena world:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The image of the Absolute Essence is reflected onto the screen of the phenomenal world. According to another conception, the intelligible ideas (*al-ayan al-thabita*) in the mind of God objectify as attributes and names that are reflected onto different and diverse mirrors, which are the objects of the phenomenal world. Each person and object reflects the Divine names according to their nature and capacity as a recipient. Still, another idea is that the mirror is the Absolute Essence on which the worldly objects are reflected. We are the mirror in which God contemplates His attributes and names, and He is the mirror in which we see our true self. The images of God are projected onto the mirror of the phenomenal world so that the Divine can know and perceive Himself as an object.²⁰

Shankara: Brahman-Atman is the prototype (*bimba*) which shines on the surface of *avidya maya* or the intellect (*buddhi*), producing the reflected (*pratibimba*) individual self (*jiva*) and the world. The reflected image is mistaken for the prototype. Alterations in the reflection do not affect the immutable Brahman. When *avidya maya* disappears the reflection ceases to exist and only Brahman-Atman remains.²¹

9. The Absolute Reality (Brahman) has two aspects, the unmanifested and the manifested:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The one reality has two different aspects. It is the unmanifested transcendent Absolute Essence in respect to

²⁰ Izutsu (1984), 34-35; Affiofi (1979), 16.

²¹ Shankara (1950). *Bhasya on the Brhadaranyaka Upanishads*. (Hereafter BU). Almora: Advaita Ashrama: 2-4.12; Radhakrishnan (1992), 607. In contrast to Ibn al-'Arabi's double reflection concept. Vijnanabhikshu developed a theory (*anonyma-pratibimba*) where individualized pure consciousness (*purusha*) shines on the insentient intellect (*buddhi*) and the reflection is an intellegized mental wave (*vriti*) and the egoistic notion of the self identifying with the intellect. The mental wave is reflected back on to individualized pure consciousness, which reveals the objects of the intellect as a knower and experiencing person. If there is only one reflection, then the intellect is both the revealer and the revealed. Gupta, Anima Sen (1969), *Classical Samkhya*. Lucknow: United Press: 14., 113-14.

itself and the manifested self-revealing Divinity in relation to the creative names of God. Its attributes and names are many, but its Essence is one. To view the reality from only one of these two standpoints is one-sided and incomplete.²²

Shankra: There are two aspects of the Godhead, the inactive attributeless (*nirguna*) Brahman and active *Ishvara* (*Saguna Brahman*) with attributes.²³

10. Immanent Divinity is the indwelling witness of consciousness:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Omniscient God observes and cognizes all things as the immanent witness. He is the inner reality of consciousness and the cognitive faculty of man. The spirit of Muhammad is the indwelling Holy Spirit, the revealer of Divine knowledge and the creative activity of God. It is the Divine link between the Absolute Essence and the phenomenal world.²⁴

Shankara: God is the immanent indwelling spirit (*antaryamin*), the soul of all. As the inner controller, God rules the individual soul (*jiva*) from within. The witness self (*saksin*) is an eternal and immutable consciousness, a passive observer, the substratum of the world that illumines the intellect like a light. Everything is known directly without the mediation of a thought wave, by the self-luminous witness of consciousness.²⁵

3. Creation of the Cosmos

11. The Absolute (Brahman) is universal pure consciousness:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Divinity objectifies as universal consciousness, in the initial self-revelation (*tajalli*) of the

²² Fusus, 153; Futuhat iii, 316; Chittick (1989), 41,49; Izutsu (1984), 48-55; Affifi (1979), 10-13; Chand (1952), 498-99; Husaini (1977), 67.

²³ BU, 1-4.10.

²⁴ Fusus, 215; Affifi (1979), 10-13, 20. 66-89; Izutsu (1984), 143-44, 236-43,263-67; Chand (1952), 498-99; Husaini (1977), 67-68.

²⁵ VS, 1-2.28; Radhakrishnan (1992), 546, 601-03; Chatterjee, A.K. (1992). 'The Concept of Saksi in Advaita Vedanta'. *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 10:45-64.

Absolute Essence within itself. It is the first creative phase of existence, the self-realization of the Divine becoming conscious of itself and experiencing its own internal being. Divine attributes and names are undifferentiated, and there is an identity of knower, knowledge and known at this stage.²⁶

Shankara: Brahman as pure consciousness (*chit*) is not an attribute or action or a combination of material elements. Absolute consciousness is the permanent, uncaused, immutable, indeterminate, ontological principle of unity. It is pure knowledge (*jnana*), eternally self-luminous, the omnipotent witness. Brahman as pure consciousness is both the transcendent and the immanent ground of reality.²⁷

12. The Absolute (Brahman) manifests as Personal God who is the creator of the universe:

Ibn al-'Arabi: In the second self-actualization of the Absolute Essence, the Divinity contemplates its internal nature as an infinity of intelligible ideas and potential determinate forms. These immutable but intelligible ideas are eternally comprehended by God, as the essential nature of possible objects or as quiddities (*mahiyya*) that make thing what it is. They exist in a state of potentiality before objectifying as the phenomenal world. The intelligible ideas are archetypes of empirical existence that objectify as individual concrete entities and are not universal forms that generate multiple entities. They are the source of a person's pre-existent latent nature determining their individual character.²⁸

Shankara: *Ishvara*, the personal God, is the highest manifestation of Brahman in the relative world. It is reflected in or conditioned by *vidya* and totally free of *avidya*. Divine being is the eternally begotten, relative and changing Brahman with

²⁶ Izutsu (1984), 40-45; 152-58; Affifi (1979), 47-53.

²⁷ Indich, William (1980). "Can the Advaita Vedantin Provide a Meaningful Definition of Absolute Consciousness?", *Philosophy East and West* 30: 481-93.

²⁸ Fusus, 53-54, 64; Uzutsu (1984), 28, 40-45, 152-58; Affifi (1979), 47-53.

attributes (*Saguna Brahman*) and is a distinct personality. The supreme omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent spirit is both transcendent and immanent, controlling the universe from within. *Ishvara* creates, sustains and destroys the universe and is the source and end of all existence. In the eternal cognition of God the universe is trans-temporal and as a concrete actualized externalized form is temporal. It was created by the supreme intelligence that controls the universe, just as clay requires a conceptual pattern in the mind of a potter to become a pot. The regulatory, symmetry and harmony of the world indicate a conscious director. *Ishvara* is the uncaused first material and the efficient cause of an orderly world. Worship of *Ishvara* leads to lordship in the Divine world and eventually to Brahman.²⁹

13. God has primary attributes

Ibn al-'Arabi: The Divine (*ilahi*) attributes (*sifat*) do not subsist separate from the Absolute Essence. Divine names are eternal but limited manifestations of the Absolute Essence, with each name exemplifying one of God's infinite attributes. All phenomenal objects are attributes of God (*ilah*) in that they are nothing apart from Him. The seven primary names that are God's attributes are life, knowledge (omniscience), will, power (omnipotence), speech, omni-benevolence and justice. Existence is the only common characteristic shared by God and His creatures.³⁰

Shankara: Existence, consciousness and bliss (*satchitananda*) are *Ishvara's* essential attributes (*svarupa-laksanas*), while creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world are only accidental (*tatashatalaksanas*) characteristics. As the controlling power of the universe and *maya*, *Ishvara* is omniscient and omnipotent. *Ishvara* and the objects of the world have the common characteristics of existence or being (*sat, satta*).³¹

²⁹ Vs, 1-1.2-6, 18-20; 2-1.14.22; Radhakrishnan (1992), 542-61.

³⁰ Fusus, 68; Husaini (1977), 75; Husaini (1979), 156.

³¹ VS, 1-1.2; 2-1.6; Radhakrishnan (1992), 539; Chatterjee, Satischandra and

14. The universe is an objectification of the Divine names-words:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Divine names are limited objectification of the Absolute Essence, each name expressing one of the infinite Divine attributes. The words we employ to express them are only names of the names. God objectifies Himself in creation through his names, which actualize as phenomenal objects and temporal historical events. Divine names are universal categories of the possible modes of phenomenal existence, and their particularities are fixed in God's knowledge. Creation (*amr*) is the sum of the names expressed through the breath of God. God spoke the name "kun" (i.e. be) and the cosmos comes into existence. All phenomenal entities are created by the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, which are segments of the names. Each person and object participates in the Divine self-disclosure actualizing the properties of the Divine names in an endless variety of roles.³²

Shankara: The Vedas are the breath of God and express the ideas in the mind of *Ishvara*. They are uncreated, authorless, infallible and of transcendental origin. At the beginning of each cosmic cycle, the Vedic words (*shabda*) are the archetypical ideas used to create the names and forms of the genus of all things. For example, the word "bhuh" occurred in the mind of God, he uttered it and its corresponding object the earth was created. There is an eternal connection between words and the meaning they signify. The primary meaning of a word is universal and a species and only indirectly a particular individual. Sanskrit letters are eternal since the world was created out of the beginningless Vedic words.³³

Dhirendramohan Datta (1984). *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta: 389.

³² Fusus, 148, 181; Futuhat, i, 322; ii, 236; iii, 195; Chittick (1989), 5, 19-20, 30-39; 52-54; 84-89, 302; Affifi (1979), 41-47.

³³ VS, 1-1.3; 1-3.28-30; Radhakrishnan (1992), 495-96; Herman, A.L. (1962-63). 'Sphota', *Journal of the Ganganatha Jha Research Institute*, 19: 10, 17-18.

15. Humans are microcosmic modes of the universal soul-mind-body:

Ibn al-'Arabi: In the third self-objectification, the Absolute Essence creates the cosmos using the intelligible ideas which as Divine names externalize as the universal mind-soul. The creation is not *ex nihilo*, but a manifestation of the intelligible ideas in the mind of God. The Divine being is conscious of Himself as a unity and of the individual souls that are His modes. Humans are a microcosmic spirit (*ruh*), mind-soul (*nafs*) and physical body (*jism*) that are particular modes not parts of the macrocosmic universal spirit (*al-ruh al-kull*), universal mind-soul (*al-nafs al-kull*) and universal body (*al-jism al-kull*). The phenomenon of creation unfolds as a logical and not a temporal sequence.³⁴

Shankara: All people are fragments of the universal cosmic causal body-spirit (*Ishvara*), subtle body-mind (*Hiranyagarba*) and physical body (*Virat*). *Ishvara* as the Universal Spirit is the unity of all causal bodies. *Hiranyagarbha* the cosmic mind is the totality of all subtle bodies of the mental world. *Virat* is the aggregate of all physical bodies and material existence.³⁵

16. The phenomenal world is a unity in diversity:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The universe is an organic whole with each microcosm being significant only in relation to the macrocosm, analogous to the sea and its waves and the sun and its rays. Absolute Essence manifests as a multifarious universe in manifold forms as a unity in diversity. The unity of multiplicity (*ahadiyyat al-kathra*) is not the same thing as the unity of the Absolute Essence (*ahadiyyat al-ahad*).³⁶

³⁴ Husaini (1979), 57-66, 94; Izutsu (1984), 102, 176-78, 198-201; Affifi (1979), 24-28; Chittick (1989), 16-17; Austin (1980), 33-34.

³⁵ VS, 2-3.15, 49; Radhakrishnan (1992), 552.

³⁶ Futuhat, ii, 431-32; ii, 420; iv, 150; Chittick (1989), 25, 139-43; Husaini, (1979), 57-66, 93-94; Chittick (1994), 28-29.

Shankara: The individual soul and the Lord are related as part and whole, like the waves and the sea, in a state of diversity and unity. Diverse phenomenal limitations are terminated analogous to a river merging into the ocean.³⁷

17. The eternal universe is created out of prime matter:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The fourth objectification is the Universal Body composed of possible prime matter and nature. Matter is that which receives form, creating first earth, then water, air and fire in sequence. God's commands (*amr*) and words (*kalim*) act upon nature, which is receptive to Divine activity and the mother of the cosmos. The eternal and infinite cosmos undergoes a continuous process of creation, transformation and annihilation.³⁸

Shankara: The eternal beginningless creative order of the universe issues from *Ishvara* the first cause, externalizing as *akasha* which is both space and the subtle infinite ubiquitous all-pervasive matter that has the quality of sound. In sequence, *akasha* produces the grosser element of air which is associated with touch, then fire (gas, light, heat), with sight, water (liquid) with taste and finally earth (solid) with smell. These five elements combine to form gross matter. In the dissolution of the cosmos grosser elements dissolve into the subtle and the process is reversed.³⁹

18. Creation is the spontaneous self-expression of God's creative potential:

Ibn al-'Arabi: God produced the cosmos in order to become conscious of Himself as an object, to express the fullness of His being and to actualize His infinite creative potential. God contemplated His Essence in joy and love and then desired to

³⁷ VS, 1-4.21; 2-1.13; 3-2.6; Potter, Karl (1981). *Advaita Vedanta Up to Samkara and His Pupils*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass: 84, 234.

³⁸ Futuhāt, ii, 431-32; ii, 420; iv, 150; Chittick (1989), 98, 139-43; Husaini (1979), 64-66, 93-94; Izutsu (1984), 202-05; Affifi (1979), 29.

³⁹ VS, 1-1.22; 2-1.35-36; 2-3.8-13; Radhakrishnan (1992), 591-93.

externally objectify Himself. Creation is God's spontaneous, yet necessary self-expression and self-realization.⁴⁰

Shankara: Creation is a self-expression of God's free and joyous internal nature. The world is created as sport (*lila*) proceeding from the Divine nature without any external purpose. It is a spontaneous overflow of God's perfection and not due to an unfulfilled need. It is analogous to a child playing a game for its own sake.⁴¹

19. One all-inclusive name-sound encompasses the entire universe:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Allah is the most all-inclusive of all the names of God (*al-ism al-jami*) and includes the qualities of all the Divine attributes. It is the universal name of God, denoting the Divine reality in the broadest possible sense, rather than designating a limited aspect of His nature. Allah is both the Absolute Essence and God as Divinity.⁴²

Shankara: The symbol Om is present in all names, speech and conceptual constructions. Om encompasses Brahman, Atman and Ishvara and is the totality of the waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep states.⁴³

⁴⁰ Futuhat, iii, 151; Chittick (1989), 368; Chittick (1994), 29; Austin (1980), 33-34.

⁴¹ VS, 2-1.33; Radhakrishnan (1992), 550-51; Herman, A.L. (1971). 'Indian Theodicy: Samkara and Ramanuja on Brahma Sutra II. 1.32-36', *Philosophy East and West* 21:266-69.

⁴² Fusus, 183; Futuhat, i.322; ii, 236; iii, 195; Chittick(1989), 5, 19-20, 52-54, 66-67, 239, 302.

⁴³ VS, 1-3.13; Potter (1981) 356. Dara Shikuh (1615-59) identified Allah with Om, since both are considered to be the most universal of all Divine names. He also discovered Sufi terms that correspond to Sanskrit concepts such as *advaita akasha*, *antaryamin*, *avatar*, *avyakta*, *dhyana*, *mahabhuta*, *maya*, *nirgauna*, *turiya* and *timurti*. He was a close friend of Shaikh Muhibbullah, a skilled commentator of Ibn al-'Arabi texts and was initiated by a mystic of that school. Rizvi (1983), ii, 134-39, 255-56, 268-70, 3134-15, 417-24; ahmad (1964)m 191-96; Hasrat, Bikrama (1982). *Dara Shikuh: Life and Works*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal: 11-12, 31, 228-32.

4. Religion and Mysticism

20. A pre-existent Divine being incarnates as a world saviour:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The most exalted self-revelation of God is the perfect man (*al-insan al-kamil*), the spirit of Muhammad, the logos, the theophany of the Divine attributes, names and the Word of God. In the perfect man the spiritual perfection of the Divine is realized, and God becomes conscious of Himself and His perfection. This active principle of Divine knowledge is exemplified in all of the prophets (*nabi*), who are mediators between God and the world. It was perfectly represented in the prophet Muhammad, who realized the Divine unity and expressed all of God's attributes and names. Before his human birth Muhammad pre-existed, from all eternity as a cosmic being. He is a perfect reflection of God, but not God Himself or a member of the Trinity. While the prophet Muhammad is the totality and perfect embodiment of the logos, other prophets and saints of the various religions of the world are aspects of the spirit of Muhammad and partial expressions of the logos.⁴⁴

Shankara: *Ishvara* manifests as a Divine incarnation (*avatar*) in order to liberate people. Part of *Ishvara* incarnates in a human body to restore righteousness in the world and for the benefit of his worshippers. God controls the world and out of compassion for humanity becomes an embodied soul. While living on earth, the avatar is always conscious of his own spiritual identity. Yet, the earthly avatar is a double illusion. First, the entire empirical world is an appearance and secondly, God only seems to incarnate. Through his *maya* he appears to be embodied and benefiting the world, though in reality he is unborn and indestructible. Apparently, active in the establishment and maintenance of righteousness, he is beyond all action.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Affifi (1979), 20, 66-89; Izutsu (1984), 236-43, 263-67.

⁴⁵ BG 4.4-6, 9; Murty, K. Satchidananda (1959). *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta*. New York: Columbia University: 7-9, 278-80.

21. Great prophets manifest holiness and establish a new world religion:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The most distinguished prophets like Moses, Jesus and Muhammad received a supernatural revelation to establish a new religion by Divine authority and express a sublime level of holiness. Next are the lesser prophets and the apostles who transmit the message of the great prophets to the people. Then there are the saints who experience mystic visions and exemplify the prophets' teachings. Lastly, are the theologians and philosophers who relate to the Divine through discursive reason (*aql*).⁴⁶

Shankara: When religion predominates, the Lord incarnates in human form to re-establish the ancient religion and to reinvigorate spiritual life. The *avatar* is greater than the pious sages (*rishis*) who reveal the Vedic scriptures at the beginning of each cosmic cycle. Holiness is superior to intellectualism since erudition, sophisticated speech, a refined vocabulary and dexterity in expanding the scriptures do not bring liberation. A logician employing rational arguments establishes one thing to be true, which a more ingenious person can prove to be false.⁴⁷

22. Some or all soul's reincarnate:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Enoch (*Idris*) was a prophet before Noah who was elevated by God to the sphere of the sun. Later he was sent to earth becoming the apostle Elias (*Ilyas*).⁴⁸

Shankara: All un-liberated souls journey to another world after they die. Eventually, they reincarnate into this world in a specific body determined by their *karmas*.⁴⁹

23. Divinely revealed scripture is the highest religious authority:

Ibn al-'Arabi: The scriptural revelation of the various prophets did not differ on vital matters concerning the

⁴⁶ Izutsu (1984), 263-74; Affifi (1979), 72-75.

⁴⁷ BG, Introduction, 4.7-8; VC, 49; VS, 2-1.11.

⁴⁸ Fusus, 229-30; Izutsu (1984), 15.

⁴⁹ VS, 3-1.8.

comprehension of the Divine nature. This is because knowledge was disclosed to them through God's self-revelation and not from limited and fallible intellectual deliberation. The Qur'an is the most comprehensive and infallible word of God, yet it is only a partial revelation of the Divine realm. Sublime religious truths received by the prophets are disclosed to a lesser degree to some mystics through religious experience.⁵⁰

Shankara: The Vedic scriptural testimony is the ultimate authority concerning supra-sensible reality, which lies beyond the scope of perception and inference. At the beginning of each cosmic cycle, the Vedas that existed prior to creation, are revealed to the sages who see them in an exalted vision. The Vedic scriptures have been validated over the centuries by the great mystics in the super-conscious state (*samadhi*) of consciousness.⁵¹

24. A devotee should follow a spiritual teacher who is a member of a religious tradition:

Ibn al-'Arabi: One must have a spiritual guide to avoid the dangers and pitfalls that lie along the religious path. The authentic teacher is an heir to the prophet and belongs to the spiritual chain of transmission of the Sufi order.⁵²

Shankara: A true spiritual teacher (guru) understands the scripture and is a knower of Brahman. They are an ocean of love, who, by their very nature, without any selfish motives, guide the disciple in the way of truth. Approach the master with reverence, humility, love and service. Listen to their instructions and then reason and meditate on them, to dispel doubt and generate conviction. The guru is the living embodiment of a

⁵⁰ Futuhat, i, 305; ii, 134, 291, 588, 644; iii, 142, 160; Chittick (1989), 235-41, 255-56; Affifi (1979), 96-98.

⁵¹ VS, 1-3, 28-30; 2-1.11, 27; Radhakrishnan (1992) 514-18.

⁵² Futuhat, I, 91; ii, 88, 316, 364, 528-29; iii, 19, 147; Chittick (1992), 147-53; 159, 270-74; 309-12, 317-23.

spiritual tradition (*sampradaya*), who traces his lineage back to the founder of the order.⁵³

25. Transcendental consciousness and illumination are attainable through spiritual experience:

Ibn I-'Arabi: Intuitive understanding (*ma'rifa*) is derived from the Divine effulgence that illumines the mind of a spiritual aspirant and yields a direct insight into the truth. It lies latent in the innermost recesses of the human heart and is realized in religious experience. In the immediate vision, one becomes absorbed in God who becomes the sight and hearing of the gnostic (*arif*). Knowledge burst forth in the tranquil and pure soul, bringing an illumined oneness of consciousness with God. The veil is lifted and the light of wisdom reveals all things as they really are. Divine virtues replace human qualities, and one realizes that God is the doer and that all things belong to Him. All phenomenal forms disappear, removing the veil of what is other than God. The inward eye of the soul penetrates behind discursive knowledge and God reveals Himself in the heart of the mystic. The knower of God, while subsisting on the earth, lives in the hereafter, already resurrected from the dead. Theologians (*mutakallim*) follow the rational approach stressing God's inaccessibility, otherness, majesty, justice and wrath, while the mystic experience God's accessibility, nearness, humility, mercy and compassion. In the unveiling process the Sufi perceives God's presence in all things. Miraculous powers involve concentrating the mind and will on an object, in order to gain control over external entities. There is, however, a danger of egotistic preoccupation with them leading to their misuse.⁵⁴

Shankara: *Anubhava* is direct immediate revelation of reality and self-knowledge, free of words or discursive reasoning. It is

⁵³ VC, 44-46. Shankara was a disciple of Govindapada, whose guru was Gaudapada the first systematic exponent of the advaitic philosophy. Shankara established ten monastic orders, each with their own unbroken historical line of gurus.

⁵⁴ Fusus, 148-51; Izutsu (1984) 253, 265-66; 275; Affifi (1979), 106-09; Chand (1952), 500-01.

opened to all, but attained only by a few. Spiritual intuition carries the highest degree of certitude, and only this supra-sensuous consciousness destroys *avidya* and the conception of multiplicity. An illumined soul passes into the ultimate state of awareness when the immanent *Atman* as pure bliss and consciousness is realized. It is the transcendental consciousness that verifies the infallible statements of the scriptures. Purification of the heart is necessary for spiritual attainment, since the inner guide and intellect (*buddhi*) dwell there. A knower of Brahman is liberated while living (*jivanmukti*), enjoying the constant bliss of the God. Like the potter's wheel that continues to revolve after the vessel has been completed, so human life for the sage continues after liberation. Death occurs only after the *prarabdha karmas* are exhausted, and then ultimate perfection is attained. The practice of Yoga can also lead to the attainment of psychic powers.⁵⁵

26. Reason is necessary to comprehend the scriptures.

Ibn al-'Arabi: Reason is necessary for acquiring a true understanding of things allowing a person to judge between right and wrong, and is helpful for controlling one's passions.⁵⁶

Shankara: Use of reason, particularly the principle of non contradiction, is a valuable tool for defending the scriptures and explaining what they are communicating. Reason, which is an auxiliary of revelation, is used to support religious ideas.⁵⁷

27. God is attained through religious devotion:

Ibn al-'Arabi: Love is the most uplifting form of religious worship, since spiritual devotion binds things together in a unity of existence. God dwells in the heart of the devotee and is nearer to them than their jugular vein. Sufis seek union with God by

⁵⁵ VS, 401.15; Vc, 141-43; Radhakrishnan (1992) 492, 510-14, 616-17, 620-625, 645; Chatterjee and Dataa (1984), 407-08.

⁵⁶ Futuhat, ii, 190, iii, 333; chittick (1989), 159-62.

⁵⁷ Mukherjee, Satindra (1930). 'Sankara on the Relation Between the Vedas and Reason', *Indian Historical Quarterly* 6: 108-13.

remembering Him and becoming His intimate companion and his servant. It is hazardous to ascribe God's majestic attributes to oneself; therefore, one should remain firmly fixed in servanthood when manifesting the divine presence. Gnostics attain intuitive understanding through the knowledge of the heart, which leads to salvation and happiness. One should always adhere to the prescriptive commands that God wants us to follow.⁵⁸

Shankara: Theistic religious ritual, ceremonies and image worship, if properly performed, is a gradual path to the highest liberation of identity with Brahman. Religious devotion is directing the current of the mind to flow constantly to God. Thinking, feeling and willing are each absorbed in Divine consciousness, like the attraction of iron-filings to the magnet or a river to the ocean. A meditator should practice religious ritual, maintain high moral standards and follow scriptural injunctions. An ethics of discrimination between the eternal and temporal, renunciation, self-control, compassion, forgiveness, non-violence, tranquillity, truthfulness, patience, deep concentration, self-surrender, faith and the desire for liberation should be practised.⁵⁹

28. All people will eventually be liberated-

Ibn al-'Arabi: Everyone will eventually be saved and liberated and encounter the light of paradise, and will, in varying degrees experience eternal joy. Since each religion is a limited expression of the one universal religion, adherents of all faiths will eventually be saved. Evil is non-being and not a positive reality. Just as darkness is the absence of light and ignorance is lack of knowledge, so also evil is the privation of the good. Only the good embodies authentic existence and procures its being from God.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Fusus, 63, 209-10; Futhat, ii, 88, 528-29; iii, 147; Chittick (1989) 309-12; 317-24. Indian religion also emphasizes worshipping the Lord as a companion (*skhya*) or servant (*dasya*) and the practice of self-surrender (*prapatti*).

⁵⁹ VC, 53, 6-61; Masih, Y. (1987). *Shankara's Universal Philosophy of Religion*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal: 111-14.

⁶⁰ Fusus, 210; Futuhah, iii, 373, 528; iv, 142; Chittick (1989), 290-91, 336-37, 347; Affifi (1979), 166-67; Izutsu (1984), 82-85.

Shankara: Devotees, who properly worship *Ishvara*, go to the Kingdom of Heaven (*Brahmaloka*) at death, and will attain gradual liberation. They will see God face to face and experience his bliss, but there will always be a sense of separateness. All the qualities of *Ishvara*, except the power of creating, ruling or destroying the universe will be theirs. After living with *Ishvara* until the end of the cosmic cycle, they will merge with Brahman. Since the Atman is a person's essential nature, all people will eventually realize their own true self (*sarvamukti*).⁶¹

29. God reveals Himself through all religions-

Ibn al-'Arabi: Absolute Essence is formless in itself, but objectifies in innumerable ways according to the nature and particularities of the recipient. The Supreme Being is not confined to any Divine form, since He transcends all limitations. God could not be recognized if He did not limit and restrict his self-disclosures. Since the name God is worshiped through these different names and forms, all religions lead to the same goal. Religions have been revealed to various communities at particular times and places, according to their beliefs and temperament. Divine self-disclosure is always coloured by the receptacle that receives it, since "The colour of water is the colour of the vessel containing it." In reality, only God truly understands God. Each religion provides a unique way of experiencing the Divine and the world. A gnostic belongs to a universal mystical religion and realizes the Divine in many forms and symbols, since in each deity there is a special aspect of the Supreme Being. Unintelligent people are blasphemous, acting improperly to God, by showing disrespect to His expressions and forms in other religions. The Supreme Being is too large and great to be confined to a particular religion and excluded from all others.⁶²

⁶¹ VS. 4-3.8-10; 4-4.17; Radhakrishnana (1992), 643-48.

⁶² Fusus, 137, 210, 247-48; Futuhat, i, 266; iii, 207, 373, 377, 528; iv, 142; Chittick (1989), 28-29, 229, 290-91, 336-37; 347, 352-358; Izutsu, (1984) 60-61, 82-85 253; Husaini (1977), 54, 62, 70-73; Affifi (1979), 166-67.

Shankara: The worship of Brahman cannot be subsumed under a particular religion. Brahman is revered in different manners according to the diversities and degrees of comprehension of the human mind. The one reality is called by different names like Brahma, Vishnu or Maheshvar (Shiva) by members of different religious faiths. Self-realization is a result of spiritual practice and religious experience and not of utilizing subtle arguments to expound the theological ideas of a specific religion. Theistic dualists who worship Ishvara will eventually reach the ultimate goal at the end of the cosmic cycle.⁶³

In summary, it is evident that by working within the context of Islamic and Qur'anic beliefs and terminology, Ibn al-'Arabi offers a unique and stimulating perspective on advaitic philosophy that differs from Shankara's teachings in numerous details. He made a valuable contribution to a universal advaitic philosophy and established himself as one of the eminent thinkers in the area.⁶⁴

⁶³ Radhakrishnan (1992), 652-55; Halbfass, Wilhelm (1990). *India and Europe*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass: 412-14.

⁶⁴ For more information on Ibn al-'Arabi contact the: Muhiyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, P.O Box 892, Oxford OX2 7XL, United Kingdom; Muhiyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, P.O. Box 425988, San Francisco, CA 941142-5988, U.S.A. or the Association Muhiyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, Apdo. de Corres 10.574, 28004, Madrid, Spain.