

The Name and the Named

by William C. Chittick

The original disposition (fitra) of Adam is the original disposition of all the cosmos... ; it is the Self-disclosure of Allah.... So within him is the capacity (isti`dad) of every existent thing in the cosmos. Hence he worships by every religion, he glorifies God with every tongue, and he acts as a receptacle for every Self-disclosure-on condition that he fulfills his humanity and knows himself. For he does not know his Lord except through knowledge of himself. If anything of himself veils him from seeing the whole, he has committed a crime against himself, and he is not a perfect man.... By perfection is meant knowledge of self, and knowledge of self is identical with knowledge of the Lord. Adam's original disposition was his knowledge of God, so he knew the original disposition of all things. That is why God says, "He taught Adam all the Names"

Ibn al-`Arabi

The Koran encourages few practices as often as it encourages *dhikr Allah*, the "remembrance of God." The word *dhikr* means not only "remembrance" but also "mention," and the Koran clarifies that remembrance of God demands mentioning His name or names (whether verbally or mentally) in several passages where it speaks of *dhikr ism Allah*, "the mention of God's name." Observant Muslims remember and mention God's name through performing the daily prayer, reciting the Koran, and many other ritual practices.¹ Those who take seriously the Prophet's command to "act beautifully" (*ihsan*) attempt to serve and worship God "as if they see Him," and they find that the best way to keep His image present to their mental gaze is to remember Him constantly.

Muslim theologians and Sufis have written numerous commentaries on the names of God. In the process they frequently describe the effects that each name may have on the souls of those who remember it. Among these theologians, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-`Arabi (d. 1240) has long been known by the Sufis as the "greatest master" because of his unparalleled expositions of the theoretical basis for Islamic teachings. His works are full of explanations of why full humanity—which he calls the station of "perfect man" (*al-insan al-kamil*) can only be achieved by men and women who focus themselves upon the fullness of reality, which is nothing but the reality of God Himself. That reality is revealed to us only through God's names, and focusing upon it can only take place through remembrance. A brief review of Ibn al-`Arabi's teachings on human perfection can help clarify why the divine names play such a central role in Islamic teachings and practices.

According to Islamic cosmology in general and Ibn al'Arabi's teachings in particular, God created man as the last of the creatures, since He employed all the other creatures to bring him into existence. As the final link in the "great chain of being" man brings together and combines (*jam'*) in himself all previous links. Not only does he have animal, vegetal, and mineral components, he also replicates the whole invisible and visible cosmic hierarchy,

¹ On the Koranic basis for *dhikr* and the role that it plays in Sufism, see Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), chapter five.

beginning with the First Intellect and including the Universal Soul, Prime Matter, the Universal Body, the Throne of God, God's Footstool, the starless sphere, the sphere of the constellations, the seven planets, and the four elements. In some mysterious way, man contains everything in the cosmos.

Ibn al-'Arabi discusses the cosmological links between man and the various strata and creatures of the macrocosm in many contexts. In a brief overview we can do no better than to discuss the most fundamental determinant of man's existence, the fact that he was made in the divine image. According to the Prophet, "God created man in His own image," or, slightly more literally, "Allah created Adam upon His own form." It is important to note the use here of the divine name "Allah," which is called the "all-comprehensive name," since it brings together every other name of God. When one mentions Allah, one mentions implicitly all of God's names, such as All-merciful, All-forgiving, Just, Creator, Generous, Powerful, Exalter, Abaser, and so on down the list of the ninety-nine, or 1001, or infinite divine names. No name other than Allah includes in itself all the names, since each of the other names has its own specific and limiting characteristics which sets it apart from the others. Only Allah is truly a universal name.

Since man was created "upon the form of Allah," he was also created "upon the form of" the other names. That is why the Koran says that God taught Adam "all the names" (2:30). Hence man displays an indefinite variety of divine aspects or "faces" (*wajh*). If all human attributes and activities for the whole of human history could be brought together in one place, we would begin to have an idea of what manifesting "all the names" implies. It is precisely this human all-comprehensiveness which allows for every sort of human possibility, every imaginable attribute, every conceivable act, whether good or bad, high or low, just or unjust, compassionate or cruel. If, in contrast, Adam had been created upon the form of the Gentle, the world would be free of anger and cruelty; if he had been created upon the form of the Vengeful, no one would ever forgive his enemy; if he had been created upon the form of the All-mighty and the Glorious, he would never obey God or anyone else. But since he was created upon the form of all the names, any conceivable attribute can appear from him. For, what are the divine names but the archetypes of every possibility of existence?

Again, since man comprehends *all* the names, each human individual reflects every divine attribute to some degree. But during the course of a human life the divine names manifest themselves in all sorts of combinations and interrelationships which may or may not produce a harmonious and balanced individual. In the last analysis it is the mode in which the names appear in man which determines his destiny in this world and the hereafter. From the human point of view this mode is completely unpredictable, and thus our situation stands in stark contrast to all other creatures, since they are created within known and fixed stations (*maqam ma'lum*). But man has no fixed station, and he can become anything at all. His station does not become fixed until the moment of death.

Only one creature other than man was created upon the form of the name Allah – the cosmos in its entirety. "Cosmos" or "universe" (*al-'alam*) is defined as "Everything other than Allah." God and the cosmos include everything in existence, while the one is the mirror image of the other. So, every name of God is reflected in the universe. As Ibn al-'Arabi puts it, the cosmos itself is the sum total of all the "properties" (*ahkam*) and "traces" (*athdr*) of the Divine Names. The fundamental difference between God and the total universe is that God exists by His very essence and has no need of the cosmos, while the universe has no existence in its essence and has every need for God. In the last analysis, says Ibn al-'Arabi, even to speak of the "existence" of the cosmos is a metaphor (*majaz*), not a reality. The

cosmos only exists after a fashion, much as a reflection may be said to exist in a mirror. But God cannot not exist.

Man and cosmos are similar in that each was created upon the form of God. However, the cosmos manifests the Divine Names in a differentiated mode (*tafsil*). As a result, each and every name displays its own properties and traces both separately and together with every other name and combination of names. Hence in its spatial and temporal totality, the cosmos represents an infinitely vast panorama of existential possibilities. In contrast, man displays the properties and traces of all the names in a relatively nondifferentiated mode (*ijmal*). All the properties of the Divine Names are drawn together and concentrated within him. God created the cosmos upon His own form primarily in respect of the multiplicity of His names, but He created man primarily in respect of the unity of the names, the fact that each and every name refers to a single Reality. Ibn al-'Arabi often expresses these ideas by employing the terms "small world" and "great world"-that is, microcosm and macrocosm. More commonly, he uses the expression "small man" or "micro-anthropos" for man and "great man" or "macro-anthropos" for the universe.²

Since man is a part of the cosmos, the cosmos is not a complete divine image without him. Hence, at the beginning of the *Fusus al-hikam*, Ibn al-'Arabi writes that man is the spirit of the cosmos and that the cosmos without man is like a proportioned and well-balanced body, ready and waiting for God to breathe His Spirit into it, but lifeless as long as man has not appeared. It is for this reason that Ibn al-'Arabi calls perfect man the "pillar" of the cosmos; without him the cosmos would collapse and die, which is precisely what will happen at the end of time when the last perfect man departs from this world for the hereafter. Cosmologically speaking, the corruption and decay of the natural environment is one of the outward signs of the fact that there are fewer and fewer perfect men on the face of the earth.

Though the cosmos is not complete without man, man is complete without the cosmos, since he himself is a total divine form and a total world; that is why perfect man loses nothing through death. Quite the contrary, when he dies he is released from the limitations of the spatio-temporal world and actualizes the full ontological expansion demanded by the Divine Form. He himself blossoms into a limitless world, independent of this world and dependent only upon God.

THE GOAL OF CREATION

That the universe without man is incomplete should be enough to alert us to the fact that the cosmos has no purpose in and by itself; its only purpose is to bring man into existence. For perfect man is the "Sought-after Goal" (*al-'ayn al-magsuda*), God's reason for creating the universe. Ibn al'Arabi writes,

The whole cosmos is the differentiation of Adam, while Adam is the all-comprehensive book. In relation to the cosmos, he is like the spirit in relation to the body. So man is the spirit of the cosmos, and the cosmos is the body. Through bringing together all of this the cosmos is the "great man" as long as man is within it. But if you look at the cosmos alone, without man, you will find it like a proportioned body without a spirit. The perfection of the cosmos

² On occasion Ibn al-'Arabi employs the term "great man" for perfect man, e.g., *Al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, Beirut, n.d., vol. !I, p. 120.23; vol. IV, p. 45.28.

through man is like the perfection of the body through the spirit. Man is "breathed into" the body of the cosmos, so he is the goal of the cosmos.³

Man is also the goal of the cosmos since no other creature can truly know God. In the famous hadith of the Hidden Treasure, God says, "I was a Hidden Treasure and I wanted to be known; so I created the creation that I might be known." Every creature knows God after its own fashion, but only perfect man knows Him under the guise of Allah, the all-comprehensive name. Ibn al-'Arabi constantly quotes the Koranic verses that tell us, "Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies God" (57:1, 59:1, etc.). This glorification, he says, is grounded in a knowledge of God possessed by each and every created thing. The creatures glorify God inasmuch as they know Him. Flowers glorify Him as the Lord of the sun, the earth, and the rain, and bees glorify Him as the Lord of flowers. Men glorify Him as the Lord of their goals and desires, whatever these may be. It is God who is Provider, Sustainer, Life-Giver, Merciful, and so on, and all people glorify Him by such names by making use of His bounties, whether or not they verbalize their glorification. Only perfect man glorifies God by the name Allah, a glorification which comprehends the glorifications of all things.

Perfect man is the only creature complete in itself. Not even the cosmos is complete unless man exists within it. All other creatures within the cosmos are partial images of God and possess an incomplete knowledge of Him.

Everything in the cosmos is ignorant of the whole and knows a part, except only perfect man, for God taught him all the Names and gave him the all-comprehensive words.⁴ So his form was perfected, since he combined the form of God and the form of the cosmos. ... God sees His own form in the mirror of man. . . , since all the divine names are ascribed to him.⁵

To summarize: Man, or more precisely perfect man, is the microcosm, since he was created upon the form of every divine name and thereby contains within himself the realities which brought the whole cosmos into existence. The universe as a whole is the macrocosm, so long as perfect man exists within it, since without him it is but a body without a spirit.

As for the reality of perfect man, the "Muhammadan Reality," that is the Form of God in God Himself, or the Divine Face turned toward the creation of both macrocosm and microcosm. In other words, microcosm and macrocosm are two Forms of God *manifest (zahir)* within the created order; but the reality of perfect man is the Form of God as *nonmanifest (batin)*, or in other words, that which is designated by the name "Allah." Ibn al-'Arabi writes,

Perfect man is sought after for his own sake, since he is the manifest of the Form of Allah. But God Himself is both the Manifest and the Nonmanifest.⁶

THE PATH TO PERFECTION

Because perfect man contains all the realities of both God and the cosmos, he recognizes God in all things. He sees with a vision whereby all veils are lifted. For him the words of the

³ *Futuhat, II, 67.28*

⁴ Here Ibn al-'Arabi alludes to Koran 2:30, "He taught Adam all the names," and to a well-known saying of the Prophet, "I was taught the all-comprehensive words," which, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, refers to an even higher stage of perfection than that possessed by Adam.

⁵ *Futuhat, III, 398.15.*

⁶ *Ibid., III, 109.13.*

Koran are concretely realized: "Wherever you look, there is the face of God" (2.115). For perfect man, everything is a divine Self-disclosure (*tajalli*). Ibn al-'Arabi writes,

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Achieving perfection depends upon knowing oneself, and to know oneself is to know Allah. In Ibn al-'Arabi's vocabulary, those who do not achieve perfection are known as "animal man" (*al-insan al-hayawan*). Though Adam was created perfect, imperfection and animality have gradually come to be the dominating characteristics of his children. But we should not take man's present animal state as normative. Hence it is incorrect to define man as a "rational animal," since, as Ibn al-'Arabi puts it, "Man is defined specifically by the Divine Form."⁸ He writes,

A person who does not reach perfection in this world is a rational animal, a part of the Divine Form, nothing else. He does not reach the degree of man. On the contrary, he is related to man as a corpse is related to a human being, since a corpse is a man in shape, but not in reality; the corpse lacks all powers, just like him who does not reach perfection.⁹

Ibn al-'Arabi refers to the process whereby human beings come to possess the divine names in fact and not just virtually as "assuming the traits of the Names of Allah" (*al-takhalluq bi asma' Allah*), or "assuming God's character traits" (*al-takhalluq bi akhlak Allah*). He identifies this assumption of divine traits with the spiritual path.¹⁰ It is clear that a man must assume the divine traits because he does not possess them in his present situation, and it would be a terrible error to imagine that man is perfect simply by virtue of being human. How then does one become perfect?

To summarize Ibn al-'Arabi's answer: one must follow the "Universal Balance" (*al-mizan al-kulli*), that is, the divine guidance which God has revealed through the prophets. Only in this way can man bring his beliefs, his thoughts, and his activities into conformity with the Divine Form upon which he was created. Ibn al-'Arabi often refers to the Universal Balance as the Balance of the Law (*al-mazdn al-shar'i*), i.e., the Law or "Shari'a" revealed by God and exemplified in its highest form through the Koran and the example of Muhammad. Only the external, formal, particular pronouncements of God can protect man from his own egocentric ignorance and the whims and desires of others. Only a norm revealed by God Himself can allow man to assume God's character traits and names. The most dangerous

⁷ Ibid., II, 69.25

⁸ Ibid., III, 154.19

⁹ Ibid., II, 441.4.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, II, 42.3, 267.11. A term used synonymously is "Gaining similarity to God" (*al-tashabbuh bi Allah*), II, 93.30, 126.9, 385.13.

course a person can follow is to fall back upon his own interpretation of the nature of things or upon an interpretation that is not firmly rooted in the Universal Balance. Many passages from Ibn al-'Arabi's works could be quoted to illustrate these themes. One example will have to suffice:

Beware of throwing the Balance of the Law from your hand! ... If you understand from the Law something different from what the people understand, such that your understanding prevents you from performing the apparent and exoteric statute of the Law, do not rely upon your own understanding! For it is the ego's deception taking a divine form but coming from a direction of which you are unaware.

We have met sincere people ... who were confused in this station. They preferred their own unveiling (*kashf*) and their own understanding to the established statute of the Law, thereby nullifying the statute. They depended upon this in their own case, and then they let other people observe the statute exoterically. But in our view this unveiling is nothing.... Anyone who relies upon it has suffered a dreadful confusion and has left the framework of the path of the People of God, thereby joining those who are the "greatest losers," those about whom the Koran says, "Their striving has gone astray in the present life, while they think they are working good deeds" (18:104).¹¹

The Universal Balance provides the only means whereby one can hope to assume the character traits of God, yet, paradoxically, following it does not mean that one actively strives "to assume God's character traits". In other words, one does not try to imitate God's generosity, His justice, His forgiveness, and so on. A little reflection upon the diversity and multiplicity of God's names should be enough to show that this sort of task is totally beyond the reaches of our forgetful human nature and that the very attempt to imitate God would involve a tremendous arrogance. The goal of striving on the path is not to acquire God's attributes for ourselves, but to negate our own attributes. Man does not gradually grow in stature until he becomes a kind of demigod rivaling God Himself. On the contrary, man is gradually reduced in stature until there is nothing left of him. But since nothing belongs to man in the first place, once he eliminates his own attributes and effaces his own self, there remains only that which truly is: the face of God turned toward creating him, the Divine Form, the Reality of Muhammad.

This explains why Ibn al-'Arabi often describes the station of perfect man in negative terms, since positive terms can only refer to the Self-disclosure of God Himself. On the metaphysical level, Ibn al-'Arabi explains that perfect man returns to his own immutable archetype, which is nonexistent in relation to the cosmos. Ibn al-'Arabi tells us repeatedly that all existence belongs exclusively to God. Our *existence* as separate creatures is illusory, since existence is not our essential attribute. However, our *reality* as separate creatures derives from the Eternal Divine Knowledge, so our reality is eternal and immutable. When perfect man negates his own existence as a separate creature, he returns to his nonexistence, which is his true nature; but by the same token he dwells in eternity, at ease in the Being and bliss of God.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., II, 234.6.

¹² Ibn al-'Arabi calls this station "the ease of eternity" (*rahat alabad*). He writes, the greatest of the men of God "are protected from attributing acts to themselves when the acts become manifest from them. They say, 'The acts belong to His names which become manifest within His loci of manifestation. So how should we claim them? We are a no-thing (*la shay'*) in the state of being loci of manifestation for God and in every other state.' This station is called 'the ease of eternity'" (*Futuhat, II, 96.33; cf. III, 48.21*).

Humanly speaking, the station of perfection is described by the term "servanthood" (*ʿubudiyya*). As Ibn al-'Arabi often remarks, it is impossible to gain nearness (*qurb*) to God without being His servant." ¹³Perfect man is the utter and absolute servant of God. He does nothing on his own, since his separate existence has been negated. Whatever he does is done by God through him. In many passages Ibn al-'Arabi speaks of servanthood as the highest human station, achieved primarily by Muhammad, the most perfect of the perfect men, who is known to all Muslims as "God's servant and His messenger" (*ʿabduhu wa rasuluh*). First Muhammad is God's servant, then only is he worthy to be His messenger. It goes without saying that in order to reach this extremely exalted station of servanthood, one must first follow the commands of one's Master to the last detail. In other words, servanthood cannot possibly be actualized outside the framework of the Universal Balance – the revealed Law.

One more point needs to be brought out. By now it should be clear that according to Ibn al-'Arabi, being a perfect man is not only the *highest* possible human aspiration, it is also, properly speaking, the *only* human aspiration. If man does not actualize the Divine Form upon which he was created, he remains less than human, no matter what sort of great deeds he may have accomplished in this world. The station of perfection is the mark of being human, and it has only been achieved by a relatively small number of those whom we normally refer to as "human beings." By reaching perfection man becomes the absolute servant of God, totally effaced as an independent individual but fully affirmed as a Divine Form. Perfect man lives in every situation exactly as that situation demands according to the Wisdom of God, not according to any human norms. Perfect man is fully and completely merciful, compassionate, forgiving, loving, generous, just, and so on, exactly as demanded by the divine Reality Itself.

One could go on listing the attributes of perfect man indefinitely. I merely want to point out that the station of perfection as described by Ibn al-'Arabi is beyond our wildest fantasies of what it means to be human. If this is so, would it not be better for all of us to give up the idea of being perfect? Certainly not, says Ibn al-'Arabi, since in any case we have to live up to the Truth which is incarnate within ourselves; in any case we owe to God to follow the Universal Balance, which He revealed to guide our activity; and in any case He has guaranteed happiness in the hereafter to those who follow the Law to the extent of their capacities, whether or not they reach perfection. But as human beings, we must always strive to attain to our true archetype, the Muhammadan Reality itself. I close with one further quotation from the "Greatest Master":

You should think about the degree of animal man in relation to perfect man, and then you should try to understand which kind of man you are yourself. For you have the capacity to receive perfection, if you understand. That is why you have been admonished and notified by the whole world. If you did not have the capacity to receive perfection, it would be incorrect to admonish you, and letting you know about perfection would be vain and useless. So blame only yourself¹⁴ if you do not reach that to which you have been called!¹⁵

¹³ E.g., !bid., IV, 231.2.

¹⁴ Allusion to the words of Satan to his followers when they enter the chastisement of hell: "So do not blame me, but blame yourselves" (Koran 14:22).

¹⁵ *Futuhāt*, III, 266.21.