

Light from Light: A Christian Approach to Ibn 'Arabi

By Stratford Caldecott

“Now the world is totally transfigured into God; its totality rests within the inner realm of God’s totality, its unity encounters the primordial unity. The radiance of God’s glory streams over it, as the splendor of the sun overpowers the light of the stars”

*St Maximus*¹

The quotation is from a book about one of the greatest Christian saints and teachers of the monastic tradition, Maximus the Confessor or Maximus the Theologian (580-662). The book is by one of the greatest modern Christian theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose work did a great deal to bring Maximus back to the attention of Christian theologians in the twentieth century. It gives us a taste of orthodox Christian mysticism, to which we will return at the end.

Unity of Being

But I want to talk first about Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), known to many Sufis as “the Greatest Shaykh.” In an introduction to his life and thought,² Stephen Hirtenstein writes about the mystical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition of which Ibn 'Arabi was perhaps the supreme exponent: “In this tradition, God is not understood to be a Being, or even the Supreme Being above and beyond the universe, for both conceptions imply that there are other beings outside Him. What is meant by God is simply Being as such. This cannot ever become an

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, (Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 353.

² <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/treasureofcompassion.html>.

object of knowledge or contemplation or thought; it can only be known as unknowable, but simultaneously it presents itself as both knower and known, contemplator and contemplated, lover and beloved.”

This seems to go to the heart of things: Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of “*Wahdat al-Wujūd*,” or the Unity of Being. It appears at times to resemble a kind of pantheism, but it is no more pantheistic than the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, or so I wish to demonstrate. I am no student of Arabic, let alone of Ibn ‘Arabi, but the Ibn ‘Arabi Society has an archive of excellent scholarly articles on its website, and so I am able to quote Souad Hakim’s paper on the topic of the “Unity of Being”, where she writes as follows:

“The expression ‘He is He’ (*Huwa Huwa*) is widely used to denote the Unity of Being. It means that God and the creatures have a single essence, and such an expression is not in agreement with the Unity of Being in Ibn ‘Arabi. It is for that reason that we have coined a new expression ‘He Within Himself’ (*Huwa fi Huwa*). This expression respects the Lord-Servant duality, and translates the manifestation of God in every instant (*manjud*), not in Himself but through His Most Beautiful Names. We may here quote a text of Ibn ‘Arabi which describes the manifestation of God in created things, in accordance with the expression ‘He Within Himself’ (*Huwa fi Huwa*), ‘God is too Exalted and High to be known as He is In Himself (*fi nafsihi*). Yet He is known in created things [...] Some see God in things while others see things and God in them.’”³

Yet, as she also says, “There is no Being other than God’s, and the whole universe is the effect of the manifestation of His Names. If the perpetual theophany were to stop for the blinking of an eye, the whole universe would fall into non-being.” Is this really compatible with Christianity? Well, it is certainly compatible with a certain reading of St Thomas Aquinas, the most respected Christian philosopher and theologian of all time, born when Ibn ‘Arabi was about 60 years old. For Aquinas, there is no question but that the world exists, and it is not God. At the same time, only God has Being, and all else has something merely analogous to being—a kind of reflective participation, if you like. Compared to God’s being, ours is non-existence.⁴

³ <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/unityofbeing.html>.

⁴ There is no space here to explore the thought of John Duns Scotus, of whom it is often said that the being of God is indeed of the same kind as that of creatures, but raised to an infinite degree. In fact, Scotus says only that the *concept* of being is univocal. This univocal concept reduces *ens* to a kind of lowest common conceptual denominator, i.e., a lack of self-contradiction. This, however, indirectly reflects the infinite self-affirmation of the IAM (which for Scotus is Trinitarian), without anticipating the substantial content of that act in its infinite self-determination.

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