

In search of new perspectives

A good word is as a good tree: its roots are firmly established and its branches are in heaven; it gives its produce every season by permission of its Lord.¹

The wise man is not he who speaks of wisdom or makes use of it, but he whom wisdom makes act, even if he is not aware of it.²

A genuinely new thought is rare – exceedingly rare – and its emergence is the hallmark of genius. It takes a rare and singular person to bring out a thought or vision that has never previously arisen, to open up the possibility of a transformation of human understanding, moving it into undreamt-of dimensions. What is normally taken as new thought is rarely little more than the realisation of a thought which has already appeared. This can be likened to the thrill and excitement we may experience on arriving in a foreign country for the first time: we are awakened to new sensations and perceptions, immediately fresh and stimulating. Yet these experiences mirror similar thoughts and perceptions of countless others before us. We, like them, are responding to the ramifications of what already exists. What is marked out as the exceptional gift of genius is to respond to what is to come, to conceive in thought the apparently inconceivable.

It has often been said that the capacity of the human brain far outweighs the use an average person makes of such potential. To begin to realise one's potential is, as Albert Einstein recognised, a remarkable achievement. At a party in the University of Princeton, he once found himself sitting next to another well-known physicist. Noticing that the man was busy writing in a notebook which he had beside him, Einstein asked him what he was doing. The man replied: "Whenever I have a good

idea I make sure I don't forget it. Perhaps you'd like to try it, it's handy." Einstein shook his head sadly and said: "I doubt it. I have had only two or three ideas in my life."

Real genius is a truly creative act of mind, entirely new and unprecedented, the result of which is an abiding universality that remains undimmed by the passage of time. Such universality is apparent in the art of Leonardo da Vinci or the writings of Shakespeare – masterpieces of creative expression that have inspired countless people down the ages, and will no doubt continue to do so. This exposing of the new is indeed revelation: revealing and making known what had been totally hidden and unknown. Until its arrival it is quite literally unthinkable. Once accepted into the mainstream of knowledge, it becomes like a beacon illuminating a vast landscape, enriching and ennobling all of humanity.

The genius of Ibn 'Arabī lies in exposing this revelation of the unknown within the arena of Unity and according to Its dictates. His insight into human experience is vast and encompassing. He describes thoughts as "visitors from heaven that cross the field of the heart", where the heart describes the most fundamental ground of our awareness. In this sense, thought does not refer simply to a process of the brain, or even something we can think about or reflect upon. It indicates that which arises at each instant within us, within our innermost consciousness. He categorises thoughts into those which are positive and beneficial and those which are negative and without benefit. All these visitors require the existence of someone to think them, someone to "carry" them, a "place" where they can manifest.

The places where these thoughts manifest can be either specific or general, depending on the kind of thought it is. For example, if the thought is expressed in the world of painting, it is specific to the eye; if in music, to the ear and so on. Each of these "worlds" is specific or partial by definition, and in that sense exclusive of the others – Leonardo da Vinci's genius operates in quite a different field to that of Einstein, Shakespeare or Bach.

In the world of human spirituality, originality depends on totality and integration, a unified field of being and knowledge which is by definition all-inclusive of the principles of all other fields. This unity represents, as it were, the very ground that the other fields operate on, like the heart from which all the faculties are derived. Occasionally, rare individuals appear in this world, bringing out the genuinely new regarding the whole human condition, and making it accessible for others. The most evident examples of this are the great prophetic figures of the West, who appear to release a new possibility in human history. These people have gone beyond the norms of what has already been revealed, and have reached a level of true humanity that is not bound by time or place. Of these

complete embodiments of the unprecedented, the medieval Arab, Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī, known as the Shaykh al-Akbar (the greatest spiritual master), is one of the most profound exponents.

Ibn ‘Arabī is a unique genius in the world of mystical teaching. Relatively unknown in the West until the twentieth century, he has been revered by Sufi mystics ever since he first burst upon the Islamic world at the turn of the thirteenth century. He wrote over 350 books and treatises, works of the highest quality that deserve to be recognised as classics of Western spirituality. They deal with every facet of spiritual learning, explaining not only all the traditional Islamic sciences of Quran and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) but also the whole prophetic tradition of the West. He portrays this tradition according to its inner significance, and presents it within a completely coherent whole. In addition, he provides a commentary on the spiritual tradition that had developed in Islam over some six centuries, putting all the various doctrines and forms of mystical realisation within the broader context of human spirituality.

The most evident feature of these writings is their universality and breadth, coupled with an astonishing penetration into the central issues of human experience. Few people can claim to have read more than a portion of these works, and even fewer would be bold enough to claim to have understood them. They represent an unparalleled resource for all genuine seekers of Truth, and often openly state, or prefigure, insights more commonly attributed to later figures. For example, the concept of human evolutionary development appears in one of his poems, several centuries before it was taken up in the West.

It is equally clear that his works have a remarkable power to transform the state and mentality of his readers. Ibn ‘Arabī has always aroused fierce passions, and his writings have never been considered “easy”. The model of sainthood and true spiritual realisation to some, he has also been seen by others as a controversial figure bordering on heresy. All this seems more to reflect or give expression to the prejudices and beliefs in the minds and hearts of his readers, rather than giving a clear picture of his teaching. Like all great geniuses, the real man’s identity and principles have often been obscured by ideological controversies or popular misconceptions.

In historical terms, Ibn ‘Arabī is a watershed: unifying the previously oral traditions into a written synthesis, he represents the culmination of five and a half centuries of Islamic spirituality. Eighteen years after his death, the Mongol invasions of the Fertile Crescent shattered much of Islamic civilisation in the East, changing the face of the Middle East for good. When Islamic culture rebuilt itself in the aftermath of this apparent

disaster, it was Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings that permeated the Islamic world, especially Turkey and Iran.³ His terminology became the basis of later Sufi teaching, and his works have been the underlying reference point for all the major orders (for example Qādiriyya, Mevlevi and Naqshabandiyya) ever since. Nobody else can claim to have had such influence as a spiritual teacher throughout the Islamic world. Inscribed over the doorway to his tomb in Damascus is a famous couplet which he himself penned. Although some might think it a vain boast, it shows a remarkable awareness of his own stature as a spiritual master:

In every age there is one after whom it is named;
for the remaining ages I am that one!⁴

Fundamental to Islamic teaching is the doctrine of *tawhīd* (affirming the Unity of God), and it is the realisation of *tawhīd* that lies at the heart of



“In every age...”, the poem over the entrance to Ibn ‘Arabī’s tomb in Damascus.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s person and teaching. While to later generations he has appeared as a great author, he was also recognised during his own lifetime as an extraordinary mystic, as someone with the most profound insight into and understanding of human nature, who was able to teach by deed and word. He was one of those who realise their true nature through experience and state rather than through intellectual thinking, and yet at the same time he was able to express his vision in words, in the most comprehensive manner. His own life must rank as one of the most remarkable lived by any human being. All those who come after can only be grateful for the profusion of insights which he wrote down, concerning his own experience and that of his contemporaries. The fact that we know so much about both his own inner and outer life is almost entirely due to what he himself

described. As one of his contemporaries, who met him in the last period of his life in Damascus, wrote:

He is one of the greatest of those who are knowledgeable of the Way [of God], uniting all the sciences bestowed by God. His reputation is enormous and his writings are many. The realisation of the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) has completely predominated over him in terms of knowledge, behaviour and state, and he pays no heed to the ups and downs of existence. As disciples he has men of knowledge, who are masters of spiritual perception and authors in their own right.⁵

It is essential to realise that spirituality does not simply denote a part of the human reality, but rather the whole of what is meant by human being. This integral wholeness is the foundation-stone of self-consciousness, and cannot but include all the particular aspects. It becomes visible in what we know and understand, in how we behave and in how we think and feel. In short, we are spiritual beings, and the whole of what is called the material world is spiritualised. We should beware of thinking of spirituality as being concerned with only one faculty or as being purely beyond this world, with no application in the day-to-day. We should also beware of falling into the all-too-easy intellectual trap of separating reason from intuition, head from heart. This is far from the reality that Ibn 'Arabī explains. For him, any reality that the world, or an aspect of it, has can only be properly understood through its spiritual origin. He connects every worldly reality to its divine principle, thereby giving every thing its rightful place. A simple story in his own words demonstrates how a unified vision may have very practical effect.

It is from the Divine Name the Creator (*al-Bārī*) ... that there derives the inspiration to painters in bringing beauty and proper harmony to their pictures. In this connection I witnessed an amazing thing in Konya in the land of the Greeks [modern Turkey]. There was a certain painter whom we proved and assisted in his art in respect of a proper artistic imagination, which he lacked. One day he painted a picture of a partridge and concealed in it an almost imperceptible fault. He then brought it to me to test my artistic acumen regarding its harmony. He had painted it on a large plate, so that its size was true to life. There was in the house a falcon which, when it saw the painting, attacked it, thinking it to be a real partridge with its plumage in full colour. Indeed all present were amazed at the beauty of the picture. The painter, having taken the others into his confidence, asked for my opinion on his work. I told him I thought the picture was perfect, but for one small defect. When he asked what it was, I told him that the length of its legs was out of proportion very slightly. Then he came and kissed my head.⁶

To try to comprehend a writer and thinker such as Ibn ‘Arabī is to confront two immediate conundrums: firstly, inhabiting a seemingly very different world, we may find our assumptions and world-view challenged by someone who expressed himself within a medieval context. It requires, then, a suspension of certain modern preconceptions, or at least a willingness to go beyond immediately “modern” concerns. Much of what passes for Islam in our times is but a pale reflection of the great spiritual tradition that lies at its heart. In reading Ibn ‘Arabī and drawing on such an invaluable source of inspiration, it may be that we are able to see more clearly what is meant by Islam and spirituality. This applies to muslims and non-muslims alike.

Secondly, we need to understand Ibn ‘Arabī on a more intimate and personal level, since his writings concern the deepest meaning of our existence. To understand or love another human being inevitably involves self-understanding and love. The “other” is as a mirror in which we can see ourselves. Much modern psychological practice is founded on this principle, the articulation of which dates back at least to the Delphic oracle’s inscription, “Know Thyself”. When the mirror into which we are looking is a man who can speak to us on all levels of our being, both those which are known to us and those that remain unknown, it is inevitable that we will be confronting our hidden, more personal preconceptions as well. It has been remarked that reading Ibn ‘Arabī is far more difficult than reading the Quran, and that only the saint and mystic can truly understand the meaning of his writings. While it may indeed be true, ultimately that is precisely what makes the reading of his work so rewarding.

How can we surmount these apparent obstacles? One way to begin is with a general overview of medieval Islamic Spain and how Western history has emphasised and developed a single strand of that culture. This background may allow us both to understand some of our own modern perspectives and prejudices better, and to appreciate the world in which Ibn ‘Arabī appeared and wrote. However, I shall not attempt a detailed description of the historical events leading up to the twelfth century, or even of the times of Ibn ‘Arabī. For one thing, this has been done in other books. For another, it is enough here simply to situate him within the conditions of his time, whose prevailing attitudes were so different from our own, in order to get closer to the context of the historical person and the meaning of his writing. Here we are tracing a very broad picture of medieval Spain and its development through the time of Empire, as a portrait of the genesis of many of our modern attitudes. At the same time, we must remember that a genius of the stature of Ibn ‘Arabī is a genius precisely because he transcends the conditions of his time and place, and that his constant preoccupation is with the essential unity of all conditions.

The Spain into which Ibn 'Arabī was born in 1165 (AH560) was a culture somewhat limited in physical terms, but undoubtedly one of the most advanced of its day. It was known as al-Andalus to the Arabs, referring to that area of the Iberian Peninsula which was under their dominion for almost eight centuries (AD711–1492). Its frontiers shifted back and forth over this time, and at its height the Arabs held control over most of what is modern Spain and Portugal, ignoring only the north-western corner of Spain by the Bay of Biscay. During Ibn 'Arabī's day, the border stretched across the centre of Spain and Portugal, roughly bisecting the peninsula, with its centre in the geographical area we know today as Andalusia.

The Arabs had inherited an ancient kingdom, established by the Romans and continued by the Visigoths. The period of Arab rule is often called Moorish culture, though strictly speaking the term Moorish derives from the Spanish *moros*, meaning "Mauritanian" or North African. The



The remarkable world-map which the Maghribian geographer, Muḥammad al-Idrīsī, completed in 1155 at the Sicilian court. The high point of medieval geographical research and cartography, it represents the earth as circular, with Arabia at the centre. Originally, south was put at the top of the map.

whole area that extends from Spain to Tunisia was seen as one homogeneous cultural entity, the Maghrib or western part of the Islamic world. Of those who settled in Spain, the ruling élite was drawn from Arab peoples who had emigrated during the early years of Muslim rule from the heartlands of Arab culture, such as Syria, Arabia and Yemen. The later settlers tended to be mainly Berber, from North Africa, and were often illiterate. As a whole, Islamic Spain might be described as a Muslim enclave on European soil, except for the fact that this would be a view that benefits from hindsight – Europe was not a concept then as it is now. Neither Spain nor France were political or social entities, nor were the boundaries and shape of Islamic culture by any means fixed. Indeed no-one at that time could be certain that Islam would not become the dominant religion in the whole of Europe.

During these 800 years of Muslim rule in Spain, a radical change took place, affecting the culture, language and intellectual perspective, and transforming it from a Christian to a primarily Islamic country. This did not entail coming under the domination of eastern Islam, but rather becoming a separate beacon of light at the western fringe of the Mediterranean. It was a new fusion at the edge of the Muslim world, incorporating elements of the old Roman Empire, the Christian kingdom of the Visigoths and immigrants of varying backgrounds who were drawn to Spain by the excitement of a dynamic culture. It took many years for Muslims to form the majority of the population, and as minority rulers they were bound to tolerate and accept peoples of different backgrounds, ways and faiths.

The Arab rulers who conquered Spain in AD711 began as governors appointed by the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs, who ruled the Islamic world from Damascus. When the Umayyads were themselves overthrown by the Abbasids in 750 and the centre of power moved eastwards to Baghdad, al-Andalus found itself even further removed from the centre. The escape to Spain of one of the Umayyad princes, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and the establishment of an Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba, allowed Andalusian Arabs to see themselves as preservers of a more ancient line than the new order in the east. They would not take orders from Baghdad, nor would they tolerate the rise of other versions of Islam: in 929 Cordoba declared itself an independent caliphate, almost certainly in response to the growth of the Fatimid state in North Africa, which promoted the rival doctrine of Shi’ism.⁷ But political independence did not mean isolation. Interdependence with the Muslim lands of the east was consciously striven for by successive rulers, who encouraged cross-cultural contacts, bringing eastern teachers to Spain and sending students to study in the east. The élite of al-Andalus was as intensely Arabised as Syria or Egypt,

and by the eleventh century the region had become one of the major intellectual centres in the Muslim world.

By all accounts the most cultured country in Europe, al-Andalus possessed and cultivated all the sciences known at the time. There was a natural tendency for the Muslims of Spain to aspire to be rigorously “pure” – they were far from the centre of the Islamic world and therefore vulnerable. At the same time, however, the cultural diversity of the Iberian Peninsula, with its different traditions, provided an opportunity for greater experimentation. We can still sense some of its grandeur from the artistic and architectural achievements that have remained, for example the Great Mosque at Cordoba or the Alhambra in Granada. Essentially it was a land where religion and science worked together, and many visitors were drawn by the extraordinary achievements in agriculture, irrigation and scientific research. The Moors transformed the Iberian Peninsula into one of the most successful economies of the time. Cordoba and Toledo became the western arm of a great cultural explosion: scientific knowledge which had originated in India, China and the Hellenistic world was sought out by Arab scholars and translated, refined and augmented in various centres of learning, starting at the Persian city of Jund-i-Shapur, where several scholars from Plato’s Academy went after the school was closed down in AD529, and moving on to Baghdad, Cairo and then Cordoba and Toledo, from where this knowledge was disseminated into Western Europe.

Al-Andalus’ geographical position enabled it to act as a bridge between East and West, making available texts from ancient Greece and Rome, and Mediterranean culture in general, and involving many different nations in the process of translation. Jews, who were proficient in Arabic, Hebrew and Latin, figured prominently. Perhaps the Arabs’ most evident gift to the world, in the long run, was the translation of scientific and philosophical works into Latin, works that had been lost to the Christian lands when the Roman Empire collapsed. One historian has remarked that “the process by which the learning of the Islamic



The Courtyard of the Myrtles at the Alhambra in Granada, with the Hall of the Ambassadors at the end of the pool. Built in the 14th century, the Alhambra represents the artistic distillation of the sophistication of al-Andalus.



A 12th-century door-knocker on the gate of what used to be Seville's Great Mosque, now the Cathedral.

world was discovered, appropriated, colonised by Western scholars, and made widely accessible by means of translation into Latin, the international language of scholarship ... was one of the turning-points in the intellectual evolution of mankind."⁸ This process began at the turn of the millennium and gathered pace through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the Christian kingdoms of the north grew in power.

Whatever the negative and narrow attitudes shown by some, and whatever the vicissitudes of war and internal power politics that engulfed al-Andalus from time to time, there was an extraordinary cultural interaction between Muslim, Christian and Jew, and many of the ideas that appeared later in Europe as the Renaissance were formed and transformed in this crucible. It is somewhat ironic that Western science owes its triumph to Arab experimentation in Spain. It was these scientific and philosophical ideas which were to break the mould of the medieval world-view,

where all is given by means of revelation, where the revealed books of the Bible or the Quran form the sole basis of learning.

In 1142 Peter the Venerable, head of the influential Cluny Benedictines in France, commissioned an Englishman, Robert Kelton, who was working on scientific works in Spain, to translate the Quran and Hadith from Arabic into Latin. Such international co-operation, however, was not done in the interests of inter-faith dialogue, but as ammunition to devise polemics against the Arabs. Another prominent example was Gherardo of Cremona (c.1114–87), who arrived in Toledo after it had been recaptured by the Christians, in search of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, an astronomical work of prime importance. He was apparently so impressed by all the intellectual activity that he stayed there for twenty years, copying or translating some eighty or more manuscripts of Arab science and Greek classics. By the end of the thirteenth century most works on mathematics, astronomy, medicine and philosophy had been made available in Latin – the extent of European interest can be gauged by the fact that these works were studied

and widely quoted by men such as Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon.

The change from Moorish culture to Spanish Empire was slow but dramatic. It reveals not simply the historical process by which the strands that had been united under Islamic rule, albeit tenuously, unravelled. It also gives us a picture, in political terms, of what has formed the substance of the "Western" intellectual view ever since. The Islamic view of Judaism and Christianity, as revealed religions and therefore worthy of respect, clearly left its mark upon many: even Alfonso VI, the Christian king of Castile who conquered Toledo in 1085, called himself "king of the two religions". This view of co-existence could not and would not predominate. Christians have never really reconciled themselves to accepting Islam as legitimate and its founder as a prophet. At best, Islam is seen as a heresy and its founder "a sower of scandal and schism", according to no less a writer than Dante. The "schism" which is attributed to the other is nothing less than the schismatic belief which the person making the accusation holds. The Spanish reconquest, achieved with the help of French knights and reforming popes, was primarily a holy war, ushering in a religious heroic age (according to the propaganda), in effect a world-view based upon exclusion and racial purity. Spain was to be a nation of Christians, and to possess an Empire of peoples under one religion and one King, wherein all others would be ruthlessly excluded. This kind of fanaticism, of course, has parallels throughout history, not least among so-called fundamentalists in the modern world, and always displays that peculiar intolerance which demands physical exclusion of "others".

By 1492 the unravelling of the Moorish strands was complete in the Iberian Peninsula, and Europe had defined its future destiny. Within three months any possible co-existence of the three religions in Spain was shattered. On 2 January 1492 Boabdil, the last Muslim ruler, rode out from Granada to Santa Fe, and surrendered the keys of the city to Ferdinand and Isabella. He believed the King's assurances that Muslim life would continue unhampered under Christian rule. Four days later, on 6 January, the Pope's crucifix was placed alongside the standard of the Spanish King and Queen upon the highest tower of the Alhambra. On 28 March the royal contract was signed, authorising Christopher Columbus to travel across the Atlantic in the name of Christendom and Spain. On 31 March an edict expelling the Jews from Spanish soil was issued. As a recent historian has remarked, "with the voyage of Columbus Spain gained a continent; with the expulsion of the Jews it lost a limb."⁹ One might add, "two limbs", since the remaining Muslim population was also dispersed by King Ferdinand: first, he bribed the ruling class to go to North Africa, and then, like the Jews, the rest were ordered to accept baptism or depart. This

was not the end of the Andalusian ideal, whereby the three Abrahamic religions could co-exist in harmony and tolerance: it became influential in other parts of the Mediterranean, such as the Moroccan Kingdom and the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the medieval world had been ruptured, and a new era had begun.

In one sense the history of the West in the last 500 years is the story of the triumph of the Columbine spirit, the spirit of exploration, conquest and exploitation. In retrospect it might appear to have truncated itself at birth by alienating itself from the Jewish and Muslim communities. Like an adolescent breaking free from the family home and striking out on their own, this spirit has celebrated its exclusive rights. Columbus can be seen as a symbol of the human desire to explore the unknown, to “capture” it and exploit it for our own ends, with scant regard for any other perspective. The failure to respect what one finds in this search is a tragic reflection of the original alienation, in this case the vandalism of the Andalusian ideal. Columbus himself never found what he was looking for: he crossed the Atlantic in search of the fabulous wealth of the East, only to return with a few Indians, a handful of trinkets and the scourge of syphilis. While Columbus was to be personally broken by the apparent failure of his mission, this did not hold back the spirit of conquest. The



The monument to Christopher Columbus in the Cathedral of Seville. His coffin is held aloft by four figures representing the Spanish kingdoms. This may or may not be the navigator's actual tomb, as controversy surrounds the whereabouts of his remains.

Spanish Empire was built on American gold. It is no coincidence that the rise of Western capitalism took place in the wake of the great explorations of men like Columbus, da Gama and Vespucci.

On the other side of the ocean, some of those American Indian peoples who witnessed the arrival of the European invaders had cause to reflect in sadness, even before the first shots were fired. The Christian cross, so proudly carried across the Atlantic by the Spanish, was a sure sign to the Indian mind that something was missing – the four parts of the cross were no longer bounded by an enclosing circle. These outlandish strangers had forgotten the essential circle of unity binding all things and transcending all divisions. Polarisation, in the form of the divisions of the cross, had become the new world-view, the dominant force.

There is no doubting the practical success of this Western spirit of enterprise. It has brought about a huge change in ways of living, irrespective of geographical or political boundaries. Standards of living have improved beyond all expectation. The physical world is now no longer divided into known and unknown. We have charted the seas and mapped the lands, and made the information available to millions. Travelling to other countries has become commonplace, and the impact of tourism can be felt in every corner of the globe. We have viewed the whole planet from outer space, and we use satellites to chart our weather systems and predict future disasters. The times in which we are now living are unprecedented: what used to be available only to a select few within each society is now becoming widely accessible to many societies, if not all.

The world-view is no longer automatically God-centred, king-centred, male-centred; we no longer see ourselves bound by a single culture or in an earth-centred universe. The vistas opened up through modern science and technology in every area of life are forcing a rapid re-evaluation of beliefs and ways of living. At the same time, there is the development of an awareness that what has brought us this far is not adequate to the task of the future: we can no longer afford to behave in ways that exclude others or damage the environment. Polarisation, in whatever form, is an incomplete mode of thought. Many therefore now search for a new synthesis, a new perspective of reality, which incorporates and gives credence to all the divergent possibilities of humankind and the natural world, a new integration of reason and revelation. Such a search is not new, but its articulation in the present age will be different.

One thousand years ago, at the start of the millennium, the intellectual treasures of al-Andalus began to provide Europeans with the revolutionary ideas of Aristotelian philosophy and scientific inquiry, laying the foundations of the modern world. I believe that it is now time, at the start of another millennium, to look again at this Andalusian heritage in its

other aspect, the spiritual teachings expressed by its greatest genius, Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. True cultural advance is not related to progress in technology or social organisation, but to an increase in self-knowledge and the freedom to contemplate and celebrate the Divine Beneficence in all its forms. The explorations of the physical world by Columbus and his like were based on limited vision and aspiration. They cannot truly be compared with the explorations of the human spirit by such as Ibn ‘Arabī, which begin and end in the limitless expanse of the Unknown. We shall no longer be looking for the New World in three dimensions: the ocean that separated Columbus from America is finite and can now be crossed in a matter of hours. The world we shall attempt to explore in the following pages begins and ends in the infinite ocean of Divine Unity, from which we are never separated, and in which new, fresh meanings are constantly arising. As Ibn ‘Arabī mentions in the following lines of poetry, such a journey of discovery is one of glorious wonderment:

I marvelled at an Ocean without shore
and a Shore without ocean,
At a morning Light with no darkness
and a Night with no dawn,
At a Sphere without any location
known to pagans or priests,
At an azure Dome, raised high, revolving,
All-Compelling Power its centre,
And at a rich Earth without dome or location,
the Mystery concealed.¹⁰