

The Land of the Olive: Between East and West

Orientations towards the Sun of Unity
in the work of Ibn 'Arabī¹

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By the Fig,

By the Olive,

By the Mount of Sinai,

By this Land secure!

We have indeed created Man in the best of modes ...²

In our modern world where all places are within easy reach, both physically through planes and in imagination through the TV set, internet and so on, where mass tourism brings similar luggage and lifestyles in its wake, we seem to be feeding the trend towards greater uniformity of place, the so-called “McDonaldization”. But for those prepared to dive deeper, it does not have to be so: if one can, as the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once expressed it, “put one’s eye, one’s head and one’s heart on the same axis”, if one can thus achieve an inner transformation that integrates all aspects of our humanity and leads to the reality of one’s being, there can be a fuller celebration of diversity within the Whole.

The ancient town of Cordoba in southern Spain is anything but a place of uniformity, retaining its remarkable character even under the impact of incessant visitors. Situated at the heart of

1. Paper first presented at “Between East and West, the spiritual journey: the significance and implications of Ibn 'Arabī’s teaching in today’s world”, Cordoba, Spain, 24–26 September 2004.

2. Q.95:1–4.

Andalusia on the banks of the Guadalquivir (*al-wādī al-kabīr* or “the great river” as the Arabs called it), it has had a long and extremely diverse history: it was already a wealthy and important commercial city after the Second Punic War, and following its capture by the Romans in 152 BC, it was colonised with Roman citizens and became the provincial capital. After being devastated by the Vandals in the early fifth century AD, it was rebuilt by Byzantines and taken over by Visigoths. But its real flowering came after the Muslim conquest when the Umayyad rulers made it the capital of a western caliphate which rivalled Baghdad in splendour. This period is uniquely preserved in the Great Mosque (“La Mezquita”), which has managed to retain its Arab character despite the establishment of a Christian cathedral in its centre. After the Christian conquest in 1236, the patron of the city became Raphael, the angel who heals the sick, after whom every Cordoban family names at least one of their children, even to this day.

The city has long had a great tradition of learning: in Imperial times it was home to the two Senecas and the poet Lucan, and later the birthplace of innumerable Arab scholars such as Ibn Ḥazm (d.456/1064), Ibn Rushd/Averroes (d.595/1198) and Moses Maimonides (d.601/1204). The city must also have had a special place in Ibn ‘Arabī’s heart, since he not only went there to make his celebrated visit to Ibn Rushd when he was young, but had several saintly friends who lived in the town. He also received two most noteworthy visions: the first at the age of eighteen in the Great Mosque in 580/1184, when he irrevocably committed himself to the spiritual life; the second six years later, when he was greeted by the prophet Hūd in the company of all the prophets and saints.³

The city has also been associated with that noblest and most ancient of fruits, the olive, ever since the Carthaginians introduced it on a commercial scale into the Iberian peninsular, and just to the south lie two of the most famous olive-growing areas

3. For details, see S. Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier* (Oxford 1999), pp. 60 and 85. See also Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Sufis of Andalusia*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (Sherborne 1988), pp. 112–14 and pp.123–4.

in the whole of Spain (Baena and Jaen). It is at Cordoba University's Department of Agronomy that the world germplasm repository for identifying the different varieties of olive is housed.

If the oil and petro-chemical industry underpins most forms of power in our modern world, it was the oil of the olive that literally lit up the ancient world and lay at the heart of the great battle between Carthage and Rome for supremacy in the Mediterranean. Unlike the modern "black gold", which has many polluting side-effects, the olive tree grows above ground and, as the ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Romans were well aware, yields incalculable benefits (light, heat, food, medicine, wood-working and perfume). The great myth of the founding of Athens under the patronage of the goddess Athena is based upon the miraculous olive.⁴ To acknowledge its practical importance in the ancient, medieval and modern world is part of understanding its powerful metaphorical significance.⁵

4. A native to Asia Minor, the olive is one of the very oldest cultivated trees in the world. It was grown long before any form of writing was invented. Beginning in 5000 BC, the olive culture seems to have spread from Crete to Palestine and Syria, then to Egypt and Turkey. Until 1500 BC, Greece was the area most heavily cultivated. Athens, for example, was named after the goddess Athena, who is reputed to have brought the gift of the olive to the Greeks: Zeus had promised to give Attica to the god or goddess who brought the most useful gift – Athena's olive was considered far superior to Poseidon's horse. The original olive tree is said to have been planted on the rocky hill we know today as the Acropolis, and to be the ancestor of the olive that grows there today. With Greek and Roman colonisation, the olive was planted throughout the Mediterranean basin. The olive was universally considered precious throughout the Middle East – it was a newly plucked olive leaf that the dove brought to Noah in her beak (Genesis 8.11), while Moses exempted from military service anyone who worked in its cultivation, and David even had guards watching over the olive groves and warehouses. Olive-leaf crowns (the victor at the Olympic Games was given one) and olive branches were ritually offered to deities and powerful figures (some were even found in Tutankhamen's tomb). The oil (called by Homer "liquid gold") was burnt in the sacred lamps of temples, and used for anointing in different religious traditions – the Prophet Muhammad also recommended it to his followers to be rubbed into the body.

5. Moderate politicians in Italy even named their centre-left coalition L'Ulivo (The Olive Tree, though better translated as The Olive Branch), in

This paper will attempt to investigate two key concepts, East and West, the way in which Ibn ‘Arabī views these polarities and how they may be reconciled through the image depicted in the Quran of that “blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would shine even if no fire touched it”.⁶

MAPS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD

Five years prior to Ibn ‘Arabī’s birth, the famous al-Idrīsī map was made at the behest of the King of Sicily in 1155. With Mecca as the centre, it was to depict the known world of the time, and it does so with remarkable accuracy: although of course there is no continent of America, the seas and coast-lines of the Mediterranean, Africa and Asia are particularly well-drawn, showing detailed knowledge. But one thing for a modern audience is quite peculiar: the orientation of the map is typical of the world-view of the time. That is to say, to us it appears inverted, so that north is at the bottom of the map and south is at the top. How shocking this reversal is to a modern audience – we are so used to things being a certain way up, and we cling to that view without considering it as only one way of seeing things. This is crucial when we are considering spiritual topography or geography as symbolic, in the manner that Ibn ‘Arabī does. Thus, to understand his perspective, the south should be seen at the top of our mind’s map, with east on the left and west on the right. His earthly journey from Andalusia to Anatolia and Syria should properly be imagined as one from right to left across the Islamic world (like a line of Arabic writing).

The second major difference between the modern and medieval world-view resides in the popular associations of East and West. Many of our modern conceptions of the West have been formed out of Europe’s “western” vision, from the Spanish colonial experience to the great American Dream, of conquering

an allusion to the fundamental importance of land and agriculture, and as a symbol of peace.

6. Q.24.35, part of the famous Light verse.

The Land of the Olive: Between East and West

a pristine land where mankind were living in a semi-barbarous state and bringing a new kind of order (democracy, freedom, human rights). If western Europe has seen itself as in the vanguard of modern culture in contrast to the older centres of the Middle East, then the American continent stood for its future. To the west lay a virgin land where a new society could come into being, unfettered by the past. Perhaps the Arabs also partook of this perception when they annexed Andalusia, bringing all the expertise of the “advanced” Orient to enrich an uncultured land which they called the Maghrib (west). Even *within* the USA, this glorification of the West took hold. As one nineteenth-century US author put it:

Out where the handclasp’s a little stronger
Out where the smile dwells a little longer
That’s where the West begins ...

If in westerners’ imagination the “final frontier” or New World, with all its overtones of brotherhood and democracy, appears in the West, then the East is the older world of riches, an exotic tropical paradise full of spices and heady scents (still alluring to travellers but seen as severely tarnished by fundamentalism, repressive government and the orientalist critique). We find this division of the world deep within Europe’s artistic and poetic structures of the past few hundred years, and it is still very much present as a feature of most people’s world-view today. Indeed it might be argued that the more we have come to know of the world (and hence the greater the diversity we are faced with), the further apart we have pulled these notions of East and West, creating a huge gap between ourselves and others.

We can also observe that the East–West axis of the continent of Eurasia has had a much greater impact on human development than the North–South axes of either Africa or the Americas. The North–South divide is given far less prominence in modern debates than the East–West antithesis. As one modern scientist has remarked,

axis orientations affected the spread of crops and livestock, and possibly also of writing, wheels and other inventions. That basic

feature of geography thereby contributed heavily to the very different experiences of Native Americans, Africans and Eurasians in the last 500 years.⁷

Such a division can also be seen in traditional religious and spiritual expositions of “the marriage of East and West”, where the West is associated with ideas of rationalism, technological discovery and religious orthodoxy, as opposed to the East where a more intuitive consciousness is said to have developed, giving rise to more tolerant expressions of religion. As the Benedictine Dom Bede Griffiths expressed this in the 1980s,

in the West today the masculine aspect, the rational, active, aggressive power of the mind is dominant, while in the East the feminine aspect, the intuitive, passive, sympathetic power of the mind is dominant. The future of the world depends on the “marriage” of these two minds, the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the intuitive, the active and the passive.⁸

While we would no doubt agree with the notion of the marriage of the two minds, this dichotomous characterisation of places, which was so popular in the late 60s and 70s, is being rendered out-of-date by events of the last twenty-five years. The idea of a dualism between an Eastern world connected with its spiritual roots and a Western world hell-bent upon materialism and secularisation bears little relation to actual realities. There is much evidence to suggest that we are entering a new era, in which the older, and perhaps more familiar, forms of East and West are unsustainable under the impact of a globalisation that is felt both

7. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (London 1997), chapter 10, p. 176. This is a most revealing look at the impact of geography and biogeography on human development.

8. Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (London 1982), p. 9. It is, incidentally, quite extraordinary that Dom Bede Griffiths should have discussed the spiritual teachings of the West and the East without ever mentioning the importance of Islam except in passing. For an overview of modern Muslim perceptions of the West, see Jacques Waardenburg, “Reflections on the West”, in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer Nafi (New York 2004).

in the interior and the exterior: for example, societies in Europe can no longer be characterised as a single entity, with a Christian, rationalist, humanist mono-cultural tradition, in which other perspectives are viewed with suspicion and sometimes outright antagonism. Mass tourism and huge social, economic and demographic upheavals have seen to that. We are increasingly living with new multiple identities jostling side-by-side within older national frameworks, and striving for a self-identity that can embrace all these profound differences without reducing them to a crass homogenisation.

One brief example will suffice: profound differences of view have been thrown up in the wake of the EU's tentative first steps towards holding accession talks with Turkey, the new member country that doesn't fit the stereotype of Europe. Now a majority Muslim population is knocking on the door of "the Christian club", claiming to be a bridge between the Christian West and Islamic East. Yet Turkey has an ancient Christian heritage, and Anatolia was once known simply as Rūm (Rome). It was through Anatolia that Christianity arrived in Europe, and Istanbul was once Constantinople, the Second Rome and guardian of the Byzantine Church. The greatest architect of the Ottoman Empire, Mimar Sinan, was a converted Christian, and his most famous mosque at Edirne, when damaged by an earthquake, was repaired by Italian architects. There have been centuries of constructive east-west relations, and the modern spectacle of a veiled woman walking alongside a girl in tight jeans in modern Istanbul is testimony to a pluralistic society in action.

The point that needs stressing in relation to ideas of West and East is that there appears to be a confusion between *place* and *orientation*: east and west are not actual physical places, except in our minds and therefore by common convention. They are simply orientations determined by the rising and setting of the sun, directions which each of us face in whatever place we may be. We can never reach the "place" of sunrise or sunset – these "places" always elude us. But they are what determine our flight-paths, our inward and outward journeying (their practical importance as navigational aids is demonstrated in how birds set their internal compass according to the place where the sun sets). If we

forget the orientation to the sun, and externalise this orientation into a “place out there”, we fall into a polarisation of the place where we are, in contrast to that “other”. This naturally leads to questions of superiority/inferiority and potential conflict, both personally and socially. West and East become then metonyms for our own divided perceptions of self and world.

SIGNS OF THE ONE AND INFINITE

These preliminary remarks are necessary in order to appreciate some of the penetrating insights of Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī, a veritable “sun rising in the west”.⁹ When discussing east and west or any other terms that are used to describe the outer world, he always points to the deepest meaning in the interior, in terms of inner consciousness. For, as he writes,

My purpose in everything of this type that I write is never the gnosis of what appears in phenomenal existence (*al-kawn*), but rather the purpose is ever [the gnosis] of that which is found in this human essence and Adamite substance ... for [the Prophet], may God bless him and keep him, has declared, addressing all of his community: “Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock.” Thus he established the imamate for every human being in himself, making him one who is to be rightly sought, both in the world of his transcendent [being] (*ghayb*) and of his sensual (*hiss*).¹⁰

... The Way which I follow and the Station I seek – single-minded [in my devotion] to it – is the Station of the Singularity of the One and the negation of multiplicity and number.¹¹

9. This phrase, apart from being one of the signs of the coming of the Mahdi, might, as Gerald Elmore has suggested, justifiably be applied to the appearance of Ibn ‘Arabī himself, bursting out of the Maghrib upon the central and eastern lands of Islam with a new vision. See *Islamic Sainthood in the fullness of Time*, Ibn ‘Arabī’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon (‘*Anqā’ Mughrib*), trans. Gerald T. Elmore (Leiden 1999), pp. 190 ff.

10. *Islamic Sainthood*, p. 241.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

The Land of the Olive: Between East and West

The basis for Ibn 'Arabī's teaching is the realisation of the fundamental Unity of Being. God is not simply One but also Infinite. He is One *ad infinitum*, as it were. Everything in limited existence is a place of revelation of that selfsame Unity, which at once transcends all limitation and expresses Itself through it. The world, therefore, becomes in each and every aspect the outer "shell" (*qishr*) of a Meaning that is revealed within the inner "core" (*lubb*) of the human. As above, so below; as within, so without; on earth as it is in heaven – the principle of all true spiritual teaching, implying that no aspect of the world (or of man) can be devoid of showing Truth Itself. As the Quran states so clearly,

to Him belongs the east (or place of rising, *mashriq*) and the west (or place of setting, *maghrib*). Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God. Indeed God is Infinitely Vast, All-Knowing.¹²

Returning to the theme of east and west, it is important to note, before looking at Ibn 'Arabī's own view, the conventional "eastern Sufi" wisdom: that the East, being the place where the sun rises and brings light, is a metaphor for the spiritual and divine realm, while the West represents the place of darkness, where the sun metaphorically dies, and hence is material and dense.¹³

We find a similar motif appearing in the writings of one of Ibn 'Arabī's followers, 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī:

The west is the place of bodies, the place where the divine light has set and has become concealed by dark veils. The east is the world of spirits, which is the place of the rising of the light and its appearance from luminous veils.¹⁴

12. Q.2.115.

13. This pro-Eastern viewpoint is given even more dramatic prominence by the Sufi philosopher 'Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī (d.525/1131), who writes: "Do you know what this sun is? It is the Muhammadan light that comes out of the beginningless East. And do you know what this moon is? It is the black light of Iblīs that comes out of the endless West." Thus the east is the source, and the west is the exhaustion of manifestation.

14. Quoted from Kāshānī's *Ta'wīlāt in The Tao of Islam*, Sachiko Murata,

This emphasis upon the symbolic superiority of east over west (notably by people in the Islamic East!) tends to relegate the material world to a state of “ungodliness”, a darkness that is akin to the corrupt state of mankind which the angels foresaw.¹⁵ The ungodly and corrupt West then becomes a place to be avoided at all costs.¹⁶

For Ibn ‘Arabī the situation is quite different with regard to metaphors drawn from the material world, especially in giving a marked prominence to the west (and I do not think that this is simply attributable to the fact that he was born in Murcia and is therefore a thoroughgoing westerner!): the whole world comprises Signs (*āyāt*) pointing to God.¹⁷

The four directions are considered as psychological orientations: for example, when discussing the five Pillars of Islam (the testimony of faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting and pilgrimage), he views each of these human actions geometrically, with the attestation “There is no god but God” at the centre, and the other four ranged in front (south), behind (north), to the right (west) and to the left (east). He praises those who base themselves upon these articulations of faith:

May God place us among those who have built up their house upon these foundations! Their house is Faith (*īmān*), and its boundaries

(Albany 1992), p. 300. This shows very clearly, I believe, that Kāshānī viewed Ibn ‘Arabī through a Suhrawardian Persianate perspective, and some of the subtleties of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine are obscured in the process.

15. The angels’ response to Adam being made God’s representative on earth was to question the Divine Wisdom by complaining: “What, will you place there [on earth] one who will sow corruption therein and shed blood?” (Q.2:30) As Ibn ‘Arabī remarks, their critique of Adam was in fact evidence of their own “corruption” in not acknowledging their own limitation or that they had no knowledge of the Adamic all-inclusiveness. We may add that the critique of the West as the place of darkness is of a similar nature.

16. A similar polarity leading to feelings of superiority exists at a racial level amongst people who favour light skin over dark or black – a conceit that has, for example, afflicted many Indians even to the present day.

17. “We shall show them Our Signs unto the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that it/He is God.” (Q.41.53)

The Land of the Olive: Between East and West

are: the prayer (*salāt*) to the south, the fast (*sawm*) to the north, alms-giving in secret (*sadaqat al-sirr*) to the west, the pilgrimage (*hājj*) to the east. The one who dwells there is blessed.¹⁸

What is of particular interest here is the association of the secret individual action (alms-giving) with the west, and the overt collective action (pilgrimage) with the east. The east-west axis for Ibn 'Arabī is primarily one of outer action, either hidden (the individual giving alms) or manifest (the community going on pilgrimage), whereas north-south represents an inner act, either hidden and individual (fasting) or manifest and collective (prayer).

Elsewhere, explaining the Quranic verse "Lord of the east and the west, there is no god but He, so take Him as your trustee" (Q.73.9), he writes:

Here there is an allusion to [God's] free disposal (*tasarruf*) within the directions, of which He mentioned only *the east (mashriq)*, which is the exterior/manifest domain, and *the west (maghrib)*, which is the interior/hidden domain. The One Essence/Source (*'ayn*), which is the sun, when it rises, brings about the name East, and when it sets, it brings about the name West. Man (*insān*) has an exterior and an interior. "There is no god but He, so take Him as your trustee" in your exterior and in your interior, for He is "Lord of the east and the west".¹⁹

The identification of east with the manifest world and west with the invisible realm appears time and again throughout Ibn

18. *Fut.*I.327–8. He states that this is the arrangement of faith on the Day of Resurrection. According to a prophetic tradition, Islam has the testimony in the centre, prayer on the right, alms-giving on the left, fasting in Ramadan in front and pilgrimage behind. Ibn 'Arabī says the order may vary, explaining that the action of prayer is like a light that lies in front, while fasting is an illumination, a cutting-away from all the ties that lie behind.

19. *Fut.*III.287, quoted in William Chittick's *Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany, NY 1998), p. 77. This extract from Chapter 360, "On the true knowledge of the abode of the darkneses which are praised and the lights which are witnessed", corresponds to the 24th Quranic Sura, al-Nūr (Light) and clearly echoes the notions of east and west found in the 53rd verse of Light.

‘Arabī’s writing.²⁰ This contemplation has an alphabetical underpinning in the Arabic language: the word in Arabic for east is *sharq*, whose first letter, *shīn*, is also the first letter of the word for the world of witnessing or manifestation, *shuhūd* or *shahāda*; and the word for west, *gharb*, begins with the letter *ghayn* which gives *ghayb*, meaning the non-manifest or invisible world. When discussing letters and their numerical values, Ibn ‘Arabī points out that the Eastern version of counting is used by the people of lights (*ahl al-anwār*) and the Western by the people of secrets (*ahl al-asrār*).²¹

In addition, by pointing out the rather obvious fact that east and west derive all their meaning from the single source of the sun, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasises that it is the One Essence that should be our focus, both interiorly and exteriorly. This is clearly expressed in one of the poems in his “Interpreter of Desires”:

He saw the lightning in the east and he longed for
the east; but if it had flashed in the west, he
would have longed for the west.

My desire is for the lightning and its gleam, not for
the places and the earth.²²

20. See for example *Islamic Sainthood*, p. 324, where Ibn ‘Arabī describes the Light of the Muhammadian Reality as “the orient of the lights and well-spring of the rivers, from which proceed the Throne and the intermediate world and the earth, as well as all things inanimate and animate, being the origin of all entities.”

21. The *abjad* alpha-numerical system of letter-number correspondences have two versions: an Eastern (where the last letter is *ghayn*, therefore *gharbi* or western) and a Western (where the last letter is *shīn*, therefore *sharqi* or eastern). See Ibn ‘Arabī’s *The Seven Days of the Heart* (Oxford 2000), trans. P. Beneito and S. Hirtenstein, Appendix C, pp. 161–2 (and *Fut.1.67*). In Arabic the associations of the root *gh-r-b* include departing, being a stranger, being odd, strange or obscure. Perhaps it is no wonder that the West (*gharb*) or becoming westernised can be viewed by Arabic-speakers as something alien or outlandish (*gharīb*)?

22. *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, p. 74. See also poem XLVI, v.13.

In his commentary on these lines, Ibn 'Arabī explains that the lightning in the East signifies God manifesting Himself in visible form, i.e. through the Divine Names and Qualities, while the flash in the West would be the purer manifestation of the Divine Essence to the mystic's heart. It is the direct engagement with the One True Beloved who is manifest, that is his sole concern, overriding all considerations of how or where or when. To that extent, at least, east and west are equal, though not the same.

WEST IS BEST?

Elsewhere, Ibn 'Arabī gives a most interesting gloss on the importance of this east–west polarity by drawing the conclusion that the west must be prior to the east, since the hidden world has priority over the manifest. This is paralleled in temporal terms in the priority of the night over the daytime.²³ In what would appear to be an early western work, *R. al-Intisār*, written in answer to certain questions from a Shaykh from Baghdad, he describes himself as “the lowliest Sufi of the Maghrib, the least of them in terms of following [the Way], the most incomplete in terms of spiritual opening, the most covered in terms of veils”. Then, in praise of his own masters in the Maghrib, he writes:

By God, were you to behold those among us who have arrived at the very Essence of Reality, you would completely pass away at the very first flash of being annihilated in the Real. For the spiritual opening (*fath*) of the west is unrivalled by any other opening, since its allotted place in temporal existence (*al-wujūd al-zamānī*) is the night – and the night precedes the daytime in the Glorious Scripture in every passage. At night is the night-journey of the prophets and the attainment of real benefit. At night comes the revelation of the Real to His servants, for it is a time of stillness beneath the coursing of measured things (*aqdār*) – it is pure grace (*'ināya*) ... So then praise be to God who has made the opening of the people of the occident (*ahli'l-maghrib*) an opening of secrets and

23. The night is hidden while the day is manifest. See *Seven Days*, pp. 16 and 149 for a discussion of this precedence.

other openings. For the virginal secrets are only “deflowered” with us. Thereafter they emerge before you in your East as “divorcees” who have completed (*faraghna*) their period of waiting. Then you marry them at the horizon of the orient. Now we share equally in the pleasure of marriage, but we [in the west] win the pleasure of deflowering!²⁴

Now is Ibn ‘Arabī here indulging in a kind of one-upmanship over his Eastern brethren (just as they had been doing)? Is he not conflating the east/west orientation with physical places? If so, that might point to a somewhat naïve and youthful enthusiasm, and indicate that this was an early work (and that Ibn ‘Arabī had this insight into east/west polarity from the beginning).

However, there is a much more serious point being made: the association of the primal revelation of divine secrets with the notion of the west. The west becomes a metaphor for closeness to the Real and for concealment of the secrets from all but those whom God selects. If the east opens into daytime when the sun’s light dawns upon everyone, the west opens into night when there is privacy, intimacy and seclusion with the beloved. The remarkable image of the “deflowering of virgins” is also found as a metaphor for the deepest spiritual realisation, in which new meanings are revealed.²⁵ As Michel Chodkiewicz has pointed out, there is also an east–west polarity in his perspective on the prophets: “they are oriental in terms of *nubuwwa* [prophethood] and occidental in terms of *walāya* [sainthood]”.²⁶ In other words, the

24. *R. al-Intisār*, p. 338 of *Rasā’il Ibn ‘Arabī* (Beirut 1997). I have corrected the text in places according to the superior manuscript, Ayasofya 2063. I have mostly followed the excellent translation of Gerald Elmore, to whom I am indebted for drawing my attention to this revealing passage in his *Islamic Sainthood*, pp. 174–5.

25. See *Unlimited Mercifier*, p. 82. For further details, see *Islamic Sainthood*, pp. 176 ff. There is an evident allusion to the condition of Mary, and Elmore also observes a fascinating parallel in the story of Jesus’ birth, where the three wise men travelled from the east following the star of esoteric knowledge in search of the rising of the new sun of salvation in the west (p. 190, n. 158).

26. See M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints* (Cambridge 1993), p. 119.

prophetic function of a prophet, which is exterior, is therefore “eastern”, and his saintly side being interior is “western”. Thus the “sun of reality”, unlike its physical counterpart, rises in the “west”.

PLURALITY AND POLARITY

Fidelity to the Quranic revelation leads Ibn ‘Arabī to also open up dimensions on other passages where East and West are mentioned:²⁷ for example, he quotes a Divine oath which runs as follows: “No! I swear by the Lord of the easts and the wests, surely We are able to substitute a better than they; We shall not be outstripped” (Q.70:40–1). In his comment on this Quranic verse (in a short treatise written in Mosul, Iraq), Ibn ‘Arabī observes that God swears by His Essential Lordship in terms of east and west as they are immutable and fixed directions, rather than something transient such as the action of rising or setting. He begins by explaining why the One Essence should give rise to multiple polarities:

He swore using the plural since easts and wests are many: His visibility and His invisibility, His manifesting and His hiding, in the world of bodies and in the world of spirits, in this world and in the hereafter, in paradise and in hell, in veils and in revelations, in union and in separation, in effacement and in establishment, in annihilation and in subsistence, in intoxication and in sobriety, in waking and in sleep, and in absolutely every state of being.²⁸

The spiritual side of the prophets is referred to as the “sunsets of wisdom” (*mawāqi’ al-hikam*).

27. See for example *Fusūs al-hikam*, Arabic text, ed. ‘Afifi (Beirut 1946), pp.207 ff., where he discusses the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh regarding the “Lord of the East and the West and all that is between them.” And also *Fut.*IV.360, where he describes the “Lord of the two Easts and the two Wests” (Q.55.17) in terms of the exterior of the two emergences (this world and the next?) and the interior of the two forms (the divine and the worldly).

28. *K. al-Qasam al-ilahi, Rasā’il*, p. 134. I am indebted to Matt Warren for

At the end of the treatise, he gives a brief description of four different levels of these polarities within the human viewer (five if we include the physical starting-point), in an astonishing series of rhyming pairs:

Within the easts and wests are obtained all the [different] points of view (*madhāhib*). The east of the physical eye is the rising of the lights (*anwār*), while the west of the eye is the finding of the moon's last night (*sarār*).²⁹ The dawning of the intellect is the east of tradition (*manqūl*), while the west of the intellect is the mystery that is indicated (*madlūl*). The east of the soul is the rising of assimilation (*tajnīs*);³⁰ the west of the soul is the presence of purest sanctity (*taqādis*). The east of the spirit is the dawning of clarification (*īdāh*); the west of the spirit is the evening-breaths of tranquillity (*riyāh*). The east of the secret consciousness is the rising of being rooted in the heart (*istizhār*);³¹ the west of the secret consciousness is the contemplation of a trackless land (*zahār*).³² Substituting [one for the other] is a pointer to beautifying (*tajmīl*). The power of [individual] ability does not predominate because created beings are [all] directly connected to the Real.³³

These inner polarities are clearly degrees of realisation of meaning, framed upon the simple perception of light and dark in the

drawing my attention to this passage. The text has been corrected against the manuscript, Veliyuddin 51 (Beyazit library, Istanbul), which was copied from the author's original, written in Mosul in the year 601/1205.

29. In other words, when the moon is invisible to the human eye, and darkness overwhelms the heaven.

30. In the sense of finding resemblances between oneself and others and becoming assimilated as part of a group or class (*jins*).

31. Ibn 'Arabī uses this expression in connection with Abū Yazīd having the Quran rooted in his heart, and he calls it "experiencing the pleasure of [God's] bringing down from the Unseen (*ghayb*) upon the hearts" (*Fut.* III.314). See also *Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 394, n.4.

32. According to Kazirminski, *zahār* means the edge of a rocky land, while Lane calls it the exterior and elevated part of a stony tract. The manuscripts I have consulted are unvowelled, and I am unclear whether this is the right reading here. The rhyme ends as it begins, in *-ār*.

33. *Qasam*, p. 136. The last two lines here refer to the Quranic words

phenomenal world. What one can see (by virtue of the lights of the sun and moon) in the outer world and cannot see (by virtue of the full darkness of night) is thus refracted at four different levels: what the intellect sees is what can be handed down as tradition, those apparent meanings which can be transferred from one to another, while it does not grasp the deepest meaning which can only be indicated by phenomena. Like the dark night which only appears once a month, the awareness of not-seeing directly is far rarer than our daily perceptions and cognitions. At the level of the soul, we see what we think we are by comparison with others, while we cannot see the purity of what we (or others) really are. While spiritual realisation brings clarity, its furthest limit lies in the awareness of being utterly in repose under Divine instruction, at peace with whatever He bestows. At the innermost level, the constant prostration of the heart is experienced, in the same way that Sahl al-Tustarī knew it, and there only the trackless desert of contemplation exists.

NEITHER EAST NOR WEST

The fact that created beings are all directly connected to God brings us to what can only be described as “neither of the east nor the west”. Ibn ‘Arabī is explicit that the Essence of God, and by extension the reality of Perfect Man, is beyond all polarity: just as the movement of the sun, a single body, produces the opposition of east and west, so does the viewer who sees and marks the two horizons. In fact we can see how the two horizon-events occur through an interaction of viewer and Sun, in a kind of mutual vision and non-vision.

The dancing interplay between God and Man in terms of polar opposites such as east and west, manifest and hidden, light and dark, day and night, are beautifully evoked in the following poem:

quoted before: “We are able to substitute a better than they; We shall not be outstripped” (Q.70:41).

When it is the eye ('*ayn*) of the servant, then the servant
is hidden

When it is the hearing of the Real, then God is
the one who hears

The whole matter is only between obligation and
supererogation

You and God's Self ('*ayn*) bring all together

Truth (*haqq*) and creation (*khalq*), they will never cease –
Bestowing existence on the essence one moment,
the next withholding it

When it is the essence/eye of the servant, then night is
your state

When it is the essence/eye of the Real, then light
shines forth

You are only between an east and a west

Your sun in a west, and your full moon rising.³⁴

THE WHITE LIGHT

The west as symbol of the fundamental unknowability of God is also alluded to in a remarkable visionary meeting between Ibn 'Arabī and Abū Bakr al-Siddīq, the first caliph and the Prophet's closest companion. In what he calls the theophany of white light, which takes place "at the back of the pavilion of the Unseen", Ibn 'Arabī finds the figure of Abū Bakr at the highest rung of this revelation,

gazing westwards, and wearing a robe of the most splendid gold, whose radiance arrests the eye. The light embraced him, streaming down from his beard to his place of sitting. Still he was, immobile and speechless, like one amazed.³⁵

34. *Fut.*IV.313, from the Presence of Light (*nūr*) in Chapter 558. I have followed, with amendments, Chittick's translation (*Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 161).

35. *Al-Tajalliyāt al-ilāhīya*, Ibn 'Arabī, ed. Osman Yahia (Beirut 2002), chapter 71, p. 174. The setting for this chapter is in the mid-point between

Each element here has a precise significance. According to Ibn Sawdakīn, whose commentary is a record of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own explanations, the white light signifies that which includes all other colours, and therefore the state of complete perfection (*kamāl*) – in relation to the other colours, it is like the supreme Divine Majesty within the Names or the Essence with its qualities. The place where this light shines is entirely beyond the world of intellect or sense perception. “As for facing westwards, the west is the very source of secrets ... and his face was set to the west because the sun going down is the same as the secrets disappearing.” To be turned towards the source of secrets is to be in complete facing to the Reality of Man, and remain motionless in total conformity to the model of the Prophet.

THE TREE

While the white light signifies perfection, the receptor of this light, the mystic or knower of God (*‘ārif*), may be depicted as a tree.³⁶ The image of the tree, in particular the olive with its light-giving oil, recalls the famous light-verse of the Quran:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth: the likeness of His Light is as a niche, wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive tree that is neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would shine even if no fire touched it, Light upon Light; God guides to His Light

the Theophany of Red Light where ‘Alī resides and the Theophany of Green Light where ‘Umar resides. The supremacy of white over the colours is thus respected, not by being put first, but by virtue of occupying the intermediate position (*barzakh*).

36. See *Fut.*II.646, where Ibn ‘Arabī is discussing the station of no-station (*maqām lā maqām*) in the context of Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī saying “I have no morning and no evening – morning and evening belong to one who is bound by quality, but I, I have no quality”. Ibn ‘Arabī comments: “the gnostic in this station is like the blessed olive, which is neither of the east nor the west, so he does not determine over this station with any quality nor is he limited by it.”

whoever He wishes, and God strikes similitudes for men, and God knows all things.³⁷

The four elements of this image of shining light, the niche, the glass, the lamp and the oil, are taken by Ibn 'Arabī to signify different aspects of the complete human being, which are: being protected from the passions, having clarity and serenity of heart, the radiant light of the heart and finally the sheer luminosity of absolute closeness of identity between Man and God.³⁸ This sheer luminosity that appears in the mystic's secret heart is "kindled from the blessed tree" of the Reality of Man, who stands always in perfect equilibrium³⁹ between God and His creation, "neither of the east nor the west", who does not incline more to the exterior or to the interior, a complete mirror in which God can manifest Himself to Himself, the eye-pupil through whom the whole world is showered with mercy and bathed in light.

Regarding this tree, Ibn 'Arabī says, "its root is its west and its branches are its east, and it itself is neither of the east nor the west. So observe! Do you [ever] see a tree that is without these

37. Q.24.35. For a fuller exposition of Ibn 'Arabī's treatment of this verse, see Denis Gril's article, "Le commentaire du verset de la lumière d'après Ibn 'Arabī", *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, XXIX (1977), pp. 179–87, Damascus.

38. See *Fut. I.434*. According to the teaching of the great Ottoman follower of Ibn 'Arabī and first instructor in the way of the Jelveti, Muhyiddin Mehmet Üftade (1490–1580), there are correspondences between four subtle centres in man (corporeal nature, soul, spirit and secret consciousness), four aspects of man (animal, human, angelic and supreme), four steps (law, way, knowledge, reality) and four successors to Muhammad (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī). The basis for all these is the Quranic verse (Q.57.3): "He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden." For further details, see *The Nightingale in the Garden of Love: The Poems of Üftade*, trans. Paul Ballanfat (French) and Angela Culme-Seymour (English), (Oxford 2005).

39. The association of the olive tree with equilibrium is also implied in Q.95.1–4, where it is mentioned (like a *barzakh*) between the fig-tree (associated with Jesus) and the mountain (associated with Moses). The olive, with all its associations of peace and kingliness, becomes thus the prime tree-symbol of Muhammad, bringer of the final revealed Law which includes all others.

two principles? You will never find such a thing unless it is God, exalted be He!"⁴⁰ What does he mean by "its root is its west"? This alludes to the fact that there is nothing outside this tree to which it could be oriented – there is no outer west or east, it is its own orientation: its hidden aspect and its outward manifestation is itself. This tree symbolises the Divine Ipseity (Itselfness, *huwīya*), the Reality of the Self, grounded in identification with the Divine Essence in the interior, and branching out in its full expression and manifestation. It is equally a metaphor for the Reality of Man, whose secret interior is identical to the Essence and whose exterior is the place of God's manifestation.

In the tree's extension from root to branch, it is "neither of the east nor the west", as it does not become part of a polarity, and the light which shines forth from it is itself. Is this perhaps the real inner significance of offering an olive branch as an act of peace and reconciliation? For it reminds us that our reality is not of the world of polarity, and that nothing has ever left the Presence of the One and Only. Like the olive yielding its precious oil, this Divine Itselfness extends into the heart of Perfect Man, self-luminous, illuminating all through Its own sheer luminosity. Unlike earthly lights, It has no need for any other to light It ("its oil would shine even if no fire touched it").

During a vision of this Tree, Ibn 'Arabī sees the hearts of people of true faith (*al-mu'minūn*) brought before him and is told: "Ignite them with light, for the darkness of covering-up [the truth] has enveloped [them] and nothing but this light can dispel it." The rapture which Ibn 'Arabī says he experienced during this vision is an indication of the extreme Divine desire to be known⁴¹ and

40. *Tajalliyāt*, p. 187, from the oral teachings recorded by Ibn Sawdakīn on the Theophany of the Tree (*tajallī* 73). The whole theophanic vision is as follows in Ibn 'Arabī's text: "I raised the ladder of ascension and mounted it. I was given possession of the extended light, and the hearts of the people of faith were brought before me. I was told: 'Ignite them with light, for the darkness of covering-up [the truth] has enveloped [them] and nothing but this light can dispel it.' I was overcome by rapture during the ascension."

41. As in the Divine Saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*) "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known – so I created the world that I might be known (or: that they might know Me)."

His pleasure at the restoration of a lost soul to true knowledge (like the parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep). For this tree of Light is also a beacon for others to find their own reality. In other words, the only purpose and aim of the perfected human, returned to creation in full consciousness of his Divine root and acting as God's representative on earth (*khalīfa*), neither of the east nor the west, is to serve as a guide to others, igniting their hearts with a light of guidance and knowledge which will bring them directly to the Source of all.

In the words of the Psalm,

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God:

I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever.⁴²

42. Psalm 52:17–18.