Chapter V

Mysticism

Embodied Letter: Sufi and Kabbalistic Hermeneutics

Elliot R. Wolfson

The complex and variegated, and at times conflictual and contentious, relationship of the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, can be profitably understood by the Heideggerian notion of *Zusammengehören*, a term that denotes the belonging-together or the drawing-near of what persists in the difference of being the same.[1] To grasp the subtlety of this point, we must attend to Heidegger's somewhat counterintuitive distinction between "the identical" (*das Gleiche*) and "the same" (*das Selbe*). In "Die Onto-Theo-Logische Verfassung der Metaphysik" (a lecture delivered on February 24, 1957, in Todtnauberg as part of a seminar on Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*), he put it this way: "But the same [*das Selbe*] is not the merely identical [*das Gleiche*]. In the merely identical, the difference disappears. In the same the difference appears, and appears all the more pressingly, the more resolutely thinking is concerned with the same matter in the same way."[2] Heidegger sometimes expressed the difference between selfsameness (*Selbigkeit*) and identicalness (*Gleichheit*) by noting that the quality of the belonging-togetherness (*Zusammengehörigkeit*) applies to the former and not to the latter.[3] From Heidegger's perspective, we can say meaningfully that things belong together only if they are not identical; sameness, on this score, is discernible through difference, not in a Hegelian sense of a dialectical resolution of antinomies, which is what Heidegger labels "identicalness," but in a more profound coincidence of opposites according to which one thing is

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similar to the other by virtue of their dissimilarity.[4] I submit that the intricate relationship of the liturgical communities of Islam and Judaism is best envisioned by a conceptual model, whereby the proximity of one thing to another is determined by the distance that separates what is juxtaposed.

Esotericism and hermeneutics

In this essay, I will limit my analysis to the hermeneutical assumptions of the esoteric currents in Judaism and Islam, referred to, respectively, as Kabbalah and Sufism. In spite of the many discrepancies between these two traditions, and indeed, the wide diversity that characterizes each in its own right, in the domain of hermeneutics there are many interesting parallels. I would go so far as to say that Kabbalists and Sufis share in what Henry Corbin designated the "central postulate of esoterism and of esoteric hermeneutics (*taʾwīl*)," the "conviction that to everything that is apparent, literal, external, exoteric (*ẓāhir*) there corresponds something hidden, spiritual, internal, esoteric (*bāṭin*)."[5] Corbin was addressing the specific phenomenon of Shiʿism, but I do not think it inappropriate to expand the scope of his words to depict the nature of esotericism more generally, especially as it is expressed in the mystical traditions of both Islam and Judaism.[6] At the core of this hermeneutic is the archaic theory of correspondence articulated, perhaps most famously, in the beginning of the *Emerald Tablet*, a series of gnomic utterances attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus:[7] "I speak not fictitious things, but that which is certain and true. What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing."[8] The ontological belief that the material world is a replica of the spiritual world of ideal archetypes resonates with the hermeneutical claim that the sacred text has an external and an internal meaning, the former related to the visible, physical world and the latter to the invisible, metaphysical realm. The point is enunciated clearly in the following passage from *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the main anthology of Kabbalistic homilies that began to circulate in the last decades of the thirteenth century but that was not redacted into a discernible textual form until the sixteenth century: "All that the blessed holy One made in the earth was in the mystery of wisdom, and everything was to manifest the supernal wisdom to human beings, so that they may learn from that action the mysteries of wisdom. And all of them are appropriate, and all of the actions are the ways of the Torah, for the ways of the Torah are the ways of the blessed holy One, and there is not even a minuscule word that does not contain several ways, paths, and mysteries of the supernal wisdom."

To view corporeal matters as a sign of that which exceeds the corporeal is one of two dominant attitudes to the physical realm that one can discern in the writings of Kabbalists in the late Middle Ages. In consonance with contemporaneous patterns of Christian and Islamic piety, but especially the former, for the Kabbalists, the body

was a site of tension, the locus of sensual and erotic pleasure, on one hand, and the earthly pattern of God's image, the representation of what lies beyond representation, the mirror that renders visible the invisible, on the other. It should come as no surprise, then, that in spite of the negative portrayal of the body and repeated demands of preachers and homilists to escape from the clasp of carnality, in great measure due to the lingering impact of Platonic psychology and metaphysics on the spiritual formation of medieval spirituality, the flesh continued to serve as the *prima materia* out of which ritual gestures, devotional symbols, and theological doctrines were fashioned. However, there is a critical difference that distinguishes Christianity from the various forms of mystical devotion that evolved historically in Judaism and Islam.

In the domain of the theological, which cannot be surgically extracted from other facets of medieval Christian societies, the dual role of body as "stigma of the fall" and "instrument of redemption" was mediated by the Eucharist, the central priestly rite that celebrated the mystery of transubstantiation instantiated in the miraculous consecration of bread and wine into body and blood, the sacrament believed to occasion liturgically the presence of Christ, a prolepsis of the Second Coming, fostering thereby the "paradoxical union of the body with the evanescence of the sacred."[9] As one might expect, Jews and Muslims provided alternative narratives to account for the commingling of the corporeal and transcendent, the visible and the invisible, the literal and the symbolic. Focusing on sources composed within rabbinic circles in places as diverse as Palestine, Provence, Catalonia, Castile, the Rhineland, Italy, northern France, and England, just to name some of the geographic spots wherein Jewish occultism can be detected in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we can identify a hermeneutic principle that explains the theomorphic representation of the human as divine and the anthropomorphic representation of the divine as human, the transfiguration of flesh into word, which I will pose alongside of—not in binary opposition to—the more readily known Christological incarnation of the word into flesh.[10] To be sure, I think it artificial to distinguish these positions too sharply, for the hypothetical tenability of the word becoming flesh rests on the assumption that flesh is, in some sense, word, but flesh can be entertained as word only if and when word, in some sense, becomes flesh. As it happens, in the history of medieval Latin Christendom, there is evidence of scribal inscriptions placed on the hearts of male and female saints—a hyperliteral reading of the figurative "book of the heart"—a gesture that effected the transformation of the written word into flesh and, conversely, the transformation of flesh into the written word.[11] Notwithstanding the compelling logic of this reversal, and the empirical evidence

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to substantiate it, the distinction should still be upheld in an effort to account for the difference in the narratological framework of the two traditions, a difference that ensues from, though at the same time giving way to, an underlying sameness, sameness in the Heideggerian sense of belonging-together, as I noted in the opening paragraph. To translate my thinking into contemporary academic discourse: pitched in the heartland of Christian faith, one encounters the logocentric belief in the incarnation of the word in the flesh of the person Jesus, whereas in the textual panorama of medieval Kabbalah and Sufism, the site of the incarnational insight is the onto-graphic inscripting of flesh into word and the consequent conversion of the carnal body into the ethereal, luminous body—the body composed of the supernal light of the Primordial Adam in the Jewish tradition or of Muhammad in the Islamic tradition—finally transposed into the literal body, the body that is the letter, hyperliterally, the name that is, respectively, the Torah or the Qur'an.[12] The dominant discursive narrative of Christians, on the one hand, and that of the Jews and Muslims, on the other, both presume a correlation of body and book, but in an inverse manner: for the former, the literal body is embodied in the book of the body; for the latter, the literal body is embodied in the body of the book.[13] Turning specifically to the landscape of medieval Kabbalistic and Sufic esotericism, we can speak of the following shared assumption: the nature of material beings is constituted by the letters that make up their names; Hebrew for the Jews and Arabic for the Muslims was viewed as the primal language, the *ursprache*, the single Adamic language that is purportedly the source to which all the other languages may be traced. Nothing, to the best of my knowledge, is comparable in medieval Western or Eastern Christianity. The legacy of the Johannine prologue regarding the word that was made flesh did not result in the logos being restricted to any one linguistic matrix, even if the original text was written in Greek.

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Ontology and the Hebrew alphabet

Let me begin with the Kabbalistic perspective: the ontic character of the natural or essential language is not to be sought in its semantic morphemes, the particular cultural configurations of Hebrew, but in the phonemic and graphemic potentiality contained in this language, the matrix whence the sentient forms envisaged within the visual fields of our reality are constituted.[14] Jacob ben Sheshet, the thirteenth-century Catalan Kabbalist, offers a succinct formulation of this basic tenet of medieval Jewish esotericism: "The matter of the letters comprises the forms of all created beings, and you will not find a form that does not have an image in the letters or in the combina-

tion of two, three, or more of them. This is a principle alluded to in the order of the alphabet, and the matters are ancient, deep waters that have no limit."[15] Consider as well the following *Zoharic* passage elucidating the assertion that Israel is distinguished among the Gentile nations (*goyim*) for only they can lay claim to possessing language that preserves a veritable written and oral form (*ketav we-lashon*). "Through each letter they can envision the image [*diyoqna*)] and form [*siyyura*] as is appropriate. In the idolatrous nations, however, this mystery is not considered for they do not have a script [*ketav*] or speech [*lashon*]."[16] Denying the two basic linguistic forms to other idolatrous nations—a cipher for Christendom—is a significant gesture of marginalization. Obviously, the anonymous Kabbalist responsible for this text does not mean to say that non-Jews are so illiterate that they cannot speak or write. The point is not literacy but ontological accessibility. To deny an ethnic group oral and written language is to deny it access to the world in its metaphysical sense since being and language are intertwined. Only the Jews, strictly speaking, are ethnoculturally endowed with the code through which the mysteries of being can be deciphered.

A close parallel to Jacob ben Sheshet's passage is found in the following remark of Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth-century exponent of the ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah, which has been set in sharp contrast to the trend of theosophic Kabbalah. Commenting on the statement in *Sefer Yesirah*, a treatise that first became influential in the ninth and tenth centuries, though some maintain that parts of it are much older in provenance,[17] that by means of the letters the Creator "forms the soul of every creature and of the soul of everything that will be formed,"[18] Abulafia writes: "Indeed, each and every body is a letter [*ot*] … and every letter is a sign [*ot*], signal [*siman*], and verification [*mofet*] to instruct about the divine overflow [*shefa ha-shem*] that causes the word [*ha-dibbur*] to emanate through its mediation. Thus, all of the world, all the years, and all the souls are replete with letters."[19] The influx that bestows vitality upon all beings of the world—classified by Abulafia in terms of the threefold division expounded in *Sefer Yesirah*, *olam*, *shanah*, and *nefesh*, literally "world," "year," and "soul," but denoting more broadly the temporal, spatial, and human planes of existence, each of which is constituted by the Hebrew letters—is here identified as the word (*dibbur*). For Abulafia, the older cosmological speculation is reinscripted within the standard medieval worldview, yielding the belief that the intellectual efflux, which informs the cosmos, is made up of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, and these collectively are the word of God, which is also identified as the tetragrammaton, and this, in turn, with the Torah in its mystical valence.[20] Viewing the body as a letter, and the letter as a sign that points to the intellectual overflow permeating reality, provides a theoretical ground to undergird an alternate conception of the flesh, or what may be called *linguistic embodiment*, a transposed materiality that is rooted in the belief that the body, at its most elemental, is constituted by semiotic inscription.[21] As Abulafia put it in *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, "The letters are the force of the root of all wisdom and knowledge without doubt, and they themselves are the matter

Graphic composition of amuletic type mixing divine names of biblical origin, divine names of Kabbalistic origin (in which the divine name is comprised of forty-two letters), and alphabetic combinations based on verses, all framed by the names of angels; late nineteenth century. Paris, Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations.

of prophecy [*ḥomer ha-nevu'ah*], and they appear in the mirror of prophecy as if they were dense bodies that speak to a man mouth to mouth in accord with the abundance of the rational form that is contemplated in the heart that converses with them, and they appear as if they are pure, living angels that move them."[22] In *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, a relatively short treatise that proffers a Kabbalistic exposition of the Maimonidean ideal of *'ishq*, we are told that the mind (*maḥashavah*) of the adept at the peak of the ecstatic conjunction to the object of his yearning "imagines an image of the letters [*ṣiyyur ha-otiyyot*] that are imagined, contemplated, and thought, rational thoughts replete with letters, which are the true forms, imagined in the image and likeness of the ministering angels, for each letter is a vision from the prophetic visions, and each of them is pure splendor."[23]

We can elicit from the Kabbalistic sources—and with respect to this matter I do not detect a fundamental difference between the theosophic and the prophetic Kabbalah—a cosmic semiotics predicated on the confluence of the verbal and the visual: it is not only that the letters are the acoustic instruments of divine creativity, but it is through them that the image and form of all that exists is apprehended ocularly. The widely held belief on the part of Kabbalists that the name (*shem*) of an entity is its essence (*guf*)—when cast in the terminology of Western epistemology, the realist as opposed to the nominalist orientation—presupposes an intrinsic connection between language and being, which rests, in turn, on the assumed correlation of letter and matter, a correlation likely springing from the mythopoeic sensibility expressed in detail in the second part of *Sefer Yesirah*.

Saying the unsayable

What exists in the world, examined subphenomenally, are the manifold permutations of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, themselves enfolded in the four-letter name

YHWH, the name through the nameless—demarcated by the middle of the thirteenth century as Ein Sof—declaimed. On this score, there is no tension in the Kabbalistic teaching between the views that ultimate reality is ineffable and that reality is constituted by language, or specifically Hebrew. The apophatic tendency to submerge all forms of sentient imaging in the One beyond all form cannot be completely severed from the kataphatic insistence on the possibility of apprehending the forms by which the divine can be known and experienced. The juxtaposition of the kataphatic and apophatic in the history of Kabbalistic speculation has fostered the awareness on the part of the ones initiated in the secret gnosis that the mystical utterance is an unsaying, which is not the same as the silence of not-speaking, a speaking of the unspoken, a knowing of the unknown, a seeing of the unseen.[24] Language, accordingly, serves as the index of its own inability to be indexed, the computation of indeterminacy. If truth is truly beyond language, then silence alone is appropriate to truth, but this silence, as I have already said, is realized not in not-speaking but in unsaying, which is a saying nonetheless. If not-speaking were the only way to articulate truth, then nothing would be spoken, but if nothing would be spoken, then nothing would be unspoken. It is not only that every act of unsaying presupposes a previous saying or that any saying demands a corrective unsaying, but, more paradoxically, *every saying is an unsaying*, for what is said can never be what is spoken insofar as what is spoken can never be what is said. To express the point more prosaically, images of negation are not the same as the negation of images, for if the latter were faithfully heeded, the former would truly not be, as there would be nothing of which to (un)speak and hence there would be no data for either study, critical or devotional. Mystical claims of ineffability—to utter unutterable truths—utilize images that are negative but no less imagistic than the affirmative images they negate.[25]

Signs of Allah

A precise analogue to the perspective I have outlined is found in Islamic mysticism; indeed, with respect to this matter, the notional proximity between Islam and Judaism is far more conspicuous than between either of them and Christianity. As with so much of Islamic occultism, or, one might say, Islamic spiritualism more generally, the starting point is an expression in the Qur'an in a section that delineates various signs (*āyāt*) of the divine in the world, which serve as part of the liturgical glorification of Allah in evening and morning (30:17–27).[26] The signs consist of the creation of man from dust and the creation of his spouse, the helpmate, with whom man can settle down and live harmoniously (20–22), the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of ethnic and racial identities (22), the creation of patterns of human behavior and natural phenomena (23–24), and, finally, the fact that all things in the heavens and earth arise by the command, or will, of Allah

(25). Everything that is in the cosmos, therefore, may be viewed as a sign marking the way to the One that is both within and outside the cosmos. These signs, we learn from another sura, should not be worshipped, for prayer is to be directed exclusively to Allah, the all-hearing and all-knowing (41:37–38). At the end of the sura, after a sustained chastisement of the "unbelievers," "Allah's enemies" (26–28), which, unquestionably, refers in this context to the Jews who rejected the claims of the prophet and the authority of the Qurʾan, the new book of revelation, there appears the following remark, "We shall show them our signs in the distant regions and in their own souls, until it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth" (53). The Jews will be shown the signs in the "horizons," that is, the created universe, and in "human souls," until they finally discern the truth. The word "sign," *āya*, denotes the presence of the deity concealed in the manifestations of natural and psychological phenomena, *signa naturalia* and *signa data*, in Augustinian terms.[27] When read esoterically, the significance of the sign is that it points beyond itself to the reality for which there is no sign; the plurality of signs reveal the transcendent one by veiling it in the multiplicity of forms by which it is revealed. In a manner similar to the Kabbalistic approach to the Torah, for the Sufi, each letter of the Qurʾan is a sign—at once aurally and visually manifest—that comprises an infinity of meaning, inasmuch as the scriptural text is the incarnation of the divine form; hermeneutically, this infinity is manifest in the potentially endless explications of the text elicited by countless readers, links in the cumulative chain of interpreters that stretches across the divide of time. Here it would be opportune to recall the contemporary notion of "infinite semiosis," as expressed in Robert Corrington's summation of Umberto Eco: "All semiosis is prospectively infinite, because any given sign will have its own plentitude of dimensions and its own movement outward into uncountable radii of involvement."[28] From the standpoint of medieval Sufis and Kabbalists, the innumerable transmutations of meaning stem from the fact that each

Calligraphic names of Muhammad and of ʿAli, Mohammad Fatʾhiyab, Iran, early nineteenth century, National Museum of Natural History, Paris.

sign/letter is a component of the textual corpus that constitutes the name of the nameless, the veil that renders the invisible visible, and the visible invisible.
Moreover, the occult wisdom in both traditions proffered a view of the cosmos in similar terms: Everything is a sign, a discrete indivisible, that guides one to the in/significant beyond the universe, devoid of all forms and images, the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) present in all things by virtue of being absent from all things. The world, accordingly, may be viewed as the book in which one discerns (de)scripted forms that lead from the visible to the invisible or, better, from the visible invisibility to invisible visibility, from faces manifestly hidden to faces hiddenly manifest.[29]

The phenomenon of the sacred text

The full implication of the Islamic notion of nature as the book in which the divine will is exposed, and the paradoxes that pertain to the presumption that the natural and psychological phenomena are signs by which one discerns the unseen, are drawn by the esoteric interpreters of the Qurʾan, the inscripted text of revelation, the "rolled-out parchment," whose words are considered to be signs of divine intention, linked especially to the eschatological day of judgment, comparable to entities in nature, such as the mountain and the sea (Q 512:1–8). The esoteric reading elevates the book itself to a supreme position, embellishing the tradition that assigned the Qurʾanic expression *umm al-kitāb*, literally, "mother of the book" (Q 3:7, 13:39, 43:4), to the Qurʾan itself, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*, the "well-preserved tablet" (Q 85:21–22), the *Urschrift*, fore/script, that comprises the forms of all that exists. Read esoterically, the Arabic letters—the bones, tissue, and sinews of the Qurʾanic body—are signs that point to the unseen and thereby reveal the light by concealing it. The attitude of Sufis articulated by Annemarie Schimmel presents a perfect analogue to the perspective affirmed by Kabbalists with respect to Hebrew: "Learning the Arabic letters is incumbent upon everybody who embraces Islam, for they are the vessels of revelation; the divine names and attributes can be expressed only by means of these letters—and yet, the letters constitute something different from God; they are a veil of otherness that the mystic must penetrate."[30] The metaphor of the veil is instructive, as the function of the veil is to disclose but at the same time to hide; indeed it discloses by hiding and hides by disclosing. In a similar vein, the letters of the matrix text—Torah for Kabbalist, Qurʾan for Sufi—reveal and conceal the divine essence, the *face* beyond all veils, the pre/face devoid of form, the pre/text devoid of letter. Just as Kabbalists were wont to speak of the Torah as the divine body (*guf elohi*), or as identical with the name YHWH, so a tradition reported in the name of the Prophet portrays the Qurʾan as proceeding from and returning to Allah. Kabbalist and Sufi would agree that if one remains bound to the letters of the scriptural text, then one is fettered by an idolatry of the book, mistaking the image for the

imageless, the figurative for the prefigurative, but both would also insist that the way beyond the letters (scripted and/or voiced) is by way of the letters, visual-auditory signs, semiotic ciphers at once visible and audible—seen as heard, heard as seen—signs that communicate the incommunicable, not through an equational model of symbolic logic, but through an implicational model of poetic allusion. The affinity to the Kabbalistic orientation becomes even more pronounced when we consider the embellishment of these motifs in the theosophic gnosis of the Spanish Sufi Muhyiddin Ibn al-ʿArabi. Just as the Qurʾan is the book that manifests the invisible through verbal images, so the cosmos is a book that unveils the divine presence through veils of phenomenal existence. In Ibn ʿArabi's own words, "God dictates to the hearts through inspiration everything that the cosmos inscribes in *wujūd*, for the cosmos is a divine book inscribed."[31] Two Qurʾanic motifs are combined here, the identification of cosmic phenomena as signs pointing to the unicity of all being and the idea of the heavenly book, the primordial scripture, inscribed by the divine pen, *qalam* (Q 68:1). In another passage, the hypostatic dimension is foregrounded as Ibn ʿArabi offers the Muslim corrective to the Christological Trinity: "The Christians supposed that the Father was the Spirit (*al-Rúh*), the Mother Mary, and the Son Jesus; then they said 'God is the Third of Three,' not knowing that 'the Father' signifies the name Allah, and that 'the Mother' signifies the *Ummu ʾl-Kitáb*, i.e., the ground of the Essence, and that 'the Son' signifies the Book, which is Absolute Being because it is a derivative and product of the aforesaid ground."[32] The common thread that ties together the triad of potencies is the belief in the ontological reality of the Arabic letters; the first manifestation, envisioned as the father, is the most sacred of names, Allah, the second manifestation, envisioned as the mother, corresponds to *umm al-kitāb*, the primordial text or the ground of the Essence, and, finally, the third manifestation, envisioned as the son, is the book, the absolute being that derives from the ground. There is much more to say about Ibn ʿArabi and the different layers of the Islamic esoteric tradition, but what is most critical for our purposes is to underscore the hypostatic personification of the Qurʾanic text as the tablet that contains all cosmic forms that serve as the veils through which God is manifest and the concomitant figural representation of the cosmos as the book that comprises all semiotic signs that point to the truth that cannot be signified.

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See article by Michael Barry, pp. 869–890.

Beyond the veil

As is well known, basic to Sufism is the belief that the objective for one who walks the path is to rend the veil, to behold truth in its naked form. However, and this

is a point that I do not think is often appreciated by scholars, inasmuch as rending the veil reveals that which has no image, the unknowable essence that cannot be essentialized, the inaccessible presence that cannot be represented, it must be said that the veil conceals the face it reveals by revealing the face it conceals. Language is decidedly inadequate to mark the middle ground wherein concealing and revealing are identical in virtue of being different and different in virtue of being identical. Epistemologically, the matter may be expressed in the following terms utilized by Ibn ʿArabi: the veil conveys both the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of the face and the image seen through the veil, for the image that is seen is an image and not the face, and the similarity (*tashbīh*) of the face and the image, for in the absence of an image the face could not be perceived.[33] In *Fusus al-hikam*, Ibn ʿArabi notes that to become an imam and a master of spiritual sciences, one must maintain both the incomparability and similarity of the ultimate reality in relation to all other existents in the chain of being, for to insist exclusively on either transcendence or immanence is to restrict that reality inappropriately.[34] The mandate to lift the veils, therefore, does not result in discarding all possible veils; indeed, there can be no "final" veil to lift, as there must always be another veil through which the nonmanifest will be made manifest. In this respect, the Sufi sensibility remained faithful to the Qurʾanic declaration that it is not fitting for God to speak to a human "except by inspiration, from behind a veil, or by the sending of a messenger" (42:51); that is, by way of an intermediary that renders the unseen (*ghayb*) visible. What is unveiled in the unveiling, therefore, is not the face behind the veil, but the veil before the face; that is, unveiling is the metaphorical depiction of removing the shells of ignorance that blind one from seeing the truth of the veil in the veil of truth: God and world are identical in their difference.[35] The transcendence of God, the unity of the indiscriminate one (*aḥadiyyat al-aḥad*), renders all theological discourse at best analogical, since there is no way to speak directly about that which transcends all being, yet the divine is immanent in all things—indeed, mystically conceived, there is nothing but the single true reality that is all things, the unity of multiplicity (*aḥadiyyat al-kathra*).[36]

The self-manifestation of God, therefore, must be through the multitude of veils that make up the cosmos. The paradoxical nature of the veil to disclose what is occluded by way of occluding what is disclosed is evident in the tradition concerning the response of the archangel Gabriel to Mohammed's query whether he had ever seen the Lord, "As it is, between me and Him there are seventy veils of light. If I ever came close to the one nearest to me I would get burnt."[37] If the highest of angels cannot approach the lowest of the veils separating him from the divine, how much more so must it apply to beings of the natural world? All that we consider real is veritably a veil; truth comes forth as unveiling the unveiling of the veil so that the unveiled is seen in the veil of the unveiled; disposing the veil would result, by contrast, in veiling the veil and the consequent effacing the face.

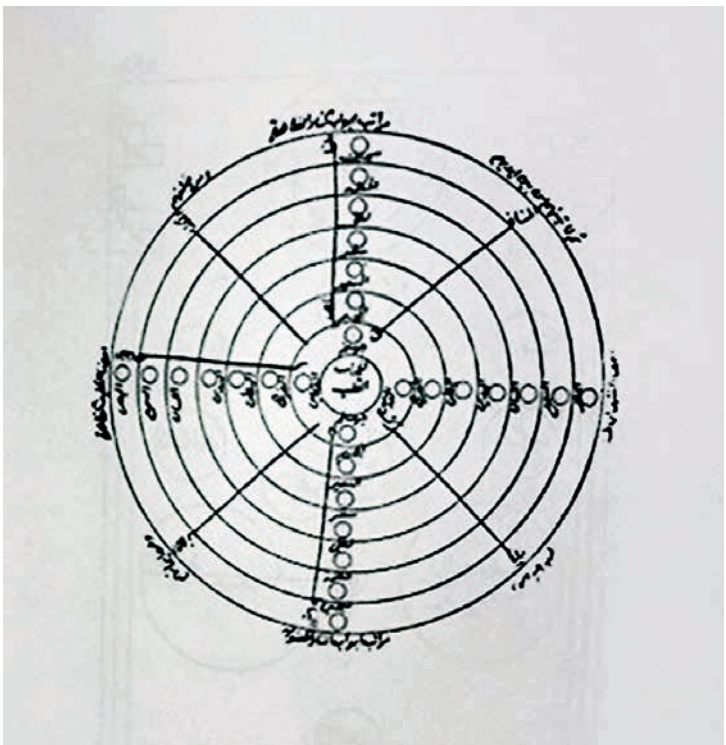

Diagram from *Futuhat al Makkiyya* or *The Meccan Revelations* of Ibn Arabi.

Ibn ʿArabi elaborated the paradoxical mystery of the veil and its unveiling in a somewhat more technical philosophic tone commensurate with his speculative gnosis. "There is nothing in existence but veils hung down. Acts of perception attach themselves only to veils, which leave traces in the owner of the eye that perceives them."[38] Ephemeral contingencies are but veils hiding the eternal being, the necessary of existence, but it is through the concealment of these veils that the invisible is rendered visible. "Thus the Real becomes manifest by being veiled, so He is the Manifest, the Veiled. He is the Nonmanifest because of the veil, not because of you, and He is the Manifest because of you and the veil."[39]

In another passage, Ibn ʿArabi expresses the matter as a commentary on the aforementioned hadith that God possesses seventy veils of light and darkness: "The dark and luminous veils through which the Real is veiled from the cosmos are only the light and the darkness by which the possible thing becomes qualified in its reality because it is a middle. . . . Were the veils to be lifted from the possible thing, possibility would be lifted, and the Necessary and the impossible would be lifted through the lifting of possibility. So the veils will remain forever hung down and nothing else is possible. . . . The veils will not be lifted when there is vision of God. Hence vision is through the veil, and inescapably so."[40]

The veil thus signifies the hermeneutic of secrecy basic to the esoteric gnosis of Sufism, envisioning the hidden secret revealed in the concealment of its revelation and concealed in the revelation of its concealment. Accordingly, the task is to discard the veils to reveal the truth, but if the veils were all discarded, there truly would be truth to see. This is the import of the statement that the "veils will not be lifted when there is vision of God." If the unseen, the hidden reality that is the face, is to be seen, the vision manifestly must be "through the veil."[41] The Sufi ideal of seeing without a veil is coming to see that there is nothing ultimately to see but the veil

that there can be a seeing without any veil. This is an exact parallel, both philologically and conceptually, to the *Zoharic* passage in which it is emphasized that God places the secret, which is the light, in the words of the Torah, and the sage, who is full of eyes, sees it "through the garment" (*mi-go levusha*)[42]—the secret is beheld through the garment, and not by removing it. The polysemous and dissimulating nature of truth is such that when one removes the garment one does not uncover truth disrobed but yet another garment through which the invisible is arrayed.

Anthropomorphism reversed

We may conclude, therefore, that for Kabbalist and Sufi alike, the letter is the body, the verbal image by which the imageless is disclosed in the concealment of its disclosure. Such a perspective reverses the allegorical approach to scriptural anthropomorphisms promoted by medieval philosophic exegetes in the two traditions; that is, instead of explaining anthropomorphic characterizations of God as a figurative way to accommodate human understanding, the attribution of corporeal images to an incorporeal God indicates that the real body, the body in its most abstract tangibility, is the letter, a premise that I have called the principle of poetic incarnation. When examined from the esoteric perspective, anthropomorphism indicates that human and divine corporeality are entwined in a mesh of double imaging through the mirror of the text, which renders the divine body human and the human body divine. Phenomenologically speaking, the life-world of Kabbalists and Sufis revolves about the axis of the embodied text of textual embodiment.

Beyond providing a radically different hermeneutical key to interpret scripture, the understanding of textual embodiment had practical implications in the mystical approach to ritual. A hallmark of Kabbalism and Sufism was to view sacramental behavior as an instrument through which the physical body is conjoined to and transformed in light of the imaginal body of God manifest in the inscripted body of the text. The experience of being assimilated into the light as a consequence of fulfilling the ritual is predicated on the assumption that the action below stimulates the light above; since the commandments are part of the scriptural text, and the latter is identical with or comes from God, ritualized gestures serve as the means by which the soul separates from the body and ascends to the light, augmenting the overflow of the divine efflux. In this matter, too, the mystical current in medieval Islam and Judaism is to be distinguished from Christianity: ritual performance is the means by which the corporeal body is textualized and the textual body corporealized. Compliance with ceremonial practice facilitates the transformation of the carnal body into the textual body, a state of psychosomatic equilibrium wherein the body becomes the

"The life-world of Kabbalists and Sufis revolves about the axis of the embodied text of textual embodiment."

perfect vehicle to execute the will of the soul, and the soul the perfect guide in directing the will of the body. The soul thus mirrors the embodiment of God's glory in the Torah or in the Qurʾan by donning the name that is envisioned in the form of an *anthropos*. As the incorporeal assumes the bodily contours of the scriptural text, the body of one who observes the law is transformed into a ritualized body composed of the very same letters. Just as the way beyond language is through language, so the way beyond body is through body. This holds a key to understanding the role of asceticism in the formation of the mystical pietism affirmed in Kabbalistic and Sufi teaching: separation from sensual matters is not seen as a way to obliterate the body—commitment to *shariʿa* or to *halakha* respectively precluded such an unmitigated renunciation of the natural world, even under the weight of a Neoplatonized Aristotelian metaphysics that looked derisively at the material body—but as a means for the metamorphosis of the mortal body into an angelic or astral body, a body whose limbs are constituted by the letters of the name, the anthropomorphic configuration of the scriptural corpus. Adorned in the apparel of this luminous body, the soul is conjoined to and incorporated within the divine name.

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1. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. and intro. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 29; German text, 92.

2. Ibid., 45; German text, 111.

3. Martin Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 25; German text, Martin Heidegger, *Feldweg-Gespräche* (*GA*, 77) (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 39.

4. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 29; German text, 92.

5. Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 78.

6. See Paul B. Fenton, "Henry Corbin et la mystique juive," in *Henry Corbin: Philosophies et sagesses des religions du livre; Actes du Colloque "Henry Corbin," Sorbonne, les 6-8 Novembre 2003*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Christian Jambet, and Pierre Lory (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 153.

7. Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, trans. William Stoddart (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1967), 196–97; Allison Coudert, *Alchemy: The Philosopher's Stone* (London: Wildwood House, 1980), 27–28; Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy: Alchemical Idea and Images in Manuscripts and Books from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 68–70.

8. John Read, *Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy, Its Literature and Relationships* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 54.

9. Françoise Jaouën and Benjamin Semple, "Editors' Preface: The Body into Text," *Yale French Studies* 86 (1994): 1–4. On the Eucharist, the glorified flesh of Christ, and the indwelling of the divine presence in the saintly body, see Henri De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum, L'Eucharistie et l'église au moyen age*, 2nd rev. ed. (Paris: Aubier, 1949); Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193–272; Rowan Williams, "Troubled Breasts: The Holy Body in Hagiography," in *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient*, ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 63–78, esp. 67–72.

10. For earlier roots to the Kabbalistic conception, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 239–54.

11. Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

12. The identification of the name and the Torah has been explored by a number of scholars of whom I will here mention a few representative examples. See Gershom Scholem, "Der Sinn der Tora in der jüdischen Mystik," in *Zur*

Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), 55–64 (French translation in *Le Nom et les symboles de Dieu*, 105–11); Moshe Idel, "The Concept of Torah in Hekhalot Literature and Its Metamorphosis in Kabbalah," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 23–84, esp. 49–58 (Hebrew); Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1079–82.

13. For a similar account in a different cultural context, see John Lagerwey, "Écriture et corps divin en Chine," in *Corps des dieux*, ed. Charles Malamoud and Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986), 383–98. It is of interest to note that the author begins his essay with an epigram from Jeremiah 7:23–24.

14. Still instructive on this topic is the much-commented-upon essay by Gershom Scholem, "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 39 (1970): 243–99, reprinted in Gershom Scholem, *Judaica 3: Studien zur jüdischen Mystik* (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1973), 7–70. The French version of this essay appears in Gershom Scholem, *Le Nom et les symboles de Dieu dans la mystique juive*, trans. Maurice R. Hayoun and Georges Vajda (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 55–99.

15. Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhohim*, ed. Georges Vajda, intro. Georges Vajda and Efraim Gottlieb (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1968), 154, and *Sefer Ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Hayyim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), 2:392–93: "There is no letter in the *alef-beit* that does not allude to the holy One, blessed be he."

16. *Zohar* 3:204a.

17. For a scholarly review on the origin and dating of this composition, see Klaus Herrmann, *Sefer Jezira: Buch der Schöpfung* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2008), 184–204.

18. *Sefer Yesirah* (Jerusalem, 1990), 2:2. According to the textual reconstruction of A. Peter Hayman, *Sefer Yesirah: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 53, 100–102 (§19), these words are a later interpolation.

19. Abraham Abulafia, *Osar Eden Ganuz* (Jerusalem, 2000), 66. The role of language in Abulafia's Kabbalah has been noted by various scholars and especially by Idel, who has discussed this theme in many studies. For a representative list of the relevant sources, see Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 12–14, 16–27, 143–45n55, 146n71; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia—Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 58–59, 62–64.

20. Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, 29–38, 46–55, 79–81, 101–9, 163n33, 171n88, 193–94n78; and *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 319–51.

21. For a more elaborate analysis of this theme, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body: Abraham Abulafia's Polemic with Christianity," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, ed. D. Engel and L. H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 189–226.

22. Abraham Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba* (Jerusalem, 1999), 159.

23. Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Hesheq* (Jerusalem, 2002), 10.

24. I am here reiterating the argument in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 215.

25. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35; Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3–41; and "Utterance and Ineffability in Jewish Neoplatonism," in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 279–98; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Negative Theology and Positive Assertion in the Early Kabbalah," *Da'at* 32–33 (1994): v–xxii.

26. *Le Coran, L'Appel*, trans. and ed. André Chouraqui (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990).

27. Giovanni Manetti, *Theories of the Sign on Classical Antiquity*, trans. Christine Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 166–67.

28. Robert S. Corrington, *Ecstatic Naturalism: Signs of the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 67.

29. Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), xii–xiii. On the nexus of body and writing in Islamic sources, see also Malek Chebel, *Le Corps en Islam* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 175–90.

30. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 411. For the introduction of gender, and specifically the feminine character, to depict the nature of the sign and the spirit, see *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, intro. and trans. Michael Sells (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), 201–4.

31. Cited in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 5.

32. Cited in Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 140n1.

33. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, xxi–xxii; *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 68–76; and *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 23–29. See also Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 140; Ronald L. Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qurʾanic Prophets: Ibn ʿArabi's Thought and Method in "Fusus al-Hikam"* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 7–11, 18–22, 80–88, 116–22.
34. Ibn al-ʿArabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. and intro. Ralph W. J. Austin, preface by Titus Burckhardt (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 74–75.
35. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 268. On the narrowing of the ontic gap between God, world, and soul in Sufi mysticism, see the wealth of material translated and analyzed by Helmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din ʿAttar*, trans. John O'Kane with editorial assistance of Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 615–36.
36. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 364. For a more detailed discussion of this theme, see the elaborate treatment of Fritz Meier, "The Problem of Nature in the Esoteric Monism of Islam," in *Spirit and Nature: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 149–203.
37. Anton M. Heinen, *Islamic Cosmology: A Study of as-Suyuti's Al-Hayʾa as-Saniya Fi L-Hayʾa as-Sunniya, with Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982), 133.
38. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 110; and "The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), 74.
39. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 129; and "Paradox of the Veil," 81–82.
40. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 156; and "Paradox of the Veil," 74–75.
41. Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 105, 107–8, 113, 115, 156.
42. *Zohar* 2:98b. For a fuller discussion of this passage, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 73–74.