

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

## Ibn-e ‘Arabi and Kierkegaard (A Study in Method and Reasoning)<sup>1</sup>

**M**ANKIND has always been one and will remain one forever; therefore, there is no difference between the East and the West.

Science has eliminated distances, making all mankind a single community; therefore, it is meaningless to reflect upon the difference between the East and the West.

These two notions have become so popular among us these days that even those who want to keep the spirit of the East alive are, in effect, absolutely convinced of their truth. Indeed they maintain this as well as that but make no effort to understand either. If they would just let the two clash, one might at least get some pleasure from the wrangle. As far as such utterances go, even Shaikh Sa’di has said something to the effect that “*Banī ādam a’zā’e yak dīgar-and*”<sup>2</sup> (humans are body parts of one another). But what he really meant was that all human beings partake of one spirit. However, the two above quoted statements would better translate as: all humans have two hands and two feet, and everyone experiences the same hunger, therefore humanity is one.

The West has bequeathed this notion of human fraternity to us. Inasmuch as humanity is one, we need not feel embarrassed by this fact;

---

<sup>1</sup>“Ibn-e ‘Arabi aur Kirkegōr,” from the author’s collection *Vaqt kī Rāgnī* (Lahore: Qausain, 1979), 58–77. The subtitle and footnotes have been added by the translator.

<sup>2</sup>This is the first line of a three-verse composition which occurs in the tenth story of the opening chapter, “The Character of Kings,” in Sa’di’s *Gulistān*, for which see *Gulistān-e Sa’di*, ed. Ghulām Ḥusain Yūsūfī (Tehran: Shirkat-e Sihāmī, Intishārāt-e Khuvārizmī, 1989).

in- stead we should be grateful to the West for teaching us such a nice thing.

*Us mālik kō kyūn na pukārēn*  
*Jisnē pilā`n dūd<sup>b</sup> kī d<sup>h</sup>ārēn*

Why not call the Lord  
Who fed us jets of milk!<sup>3</sup>

Since the West knows such good things, maybe we should learn some other things from it as well. We're concerned with literature, let's inquire from a writer then. If we set Pound, Joyce, and Lawrence aside for the time being, the one book that has profoundly influenced the most qualitatively significant portion of Western literature in the twentieth century is beyond a doubt André Gide's *Earthly Nourishment*.<sup>4</sup> This book, which has been seminal in the intellectual upbringing of easily three or four generations of Western writers, begins with the suggestion that they should abandon their country, their views, the books they're perusing, and, in the event they lack the courage to abandon any of these, then at the very least they must go out of their room.<sup>5</sup> The West always instructs in good things, so let's follow this Western imam and see what unfolds. We have been cooped up inside the Western room rather too long, let's step out and stroll around a bit inside the Eastern parlor. This, in the parlance of the Western imams, would be considered an investigation of a "new reality," and, hence, an enterprise meriting reward.

---

<sup>3</sup>From the poem "Hāmārī Gā'ē" (Our Cow) by Ismā'il Mēraṭhī. Although [Muḥammad] Ismā'il Mēraṭhī (1844–1917) wrote ghazals in both Persian and Urdu, he is actually famous as a children's poet.

<sup>4</sup>It may well have, but, interestingly enough, Gide himself has this to say about it, "The book's complete lack of success shows how far it was at variance with the taste of the day. Not a single critic mentioned it. In the course of ten years barely five hundred copies were sold" (3–4). For publication details of this work, see Muhammad Umar Memon, "Askari's 'Ibn-e Ārabī and Kierkegaard' (Translator's Note)" elsewhere in this issue.

<sup>5</sup>"And when you have read me, throw this book away—and go out. May it then give you the desire to go out—to go out from wherever you may be, from your town, from your family, from your room, from your thoughts." (*The Fruits of the Earth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 7.

It appears, though, that some bogeyman is lurking inside the Eastern parlor, for the second we so much as peeked in, our Western imam himself backed out in panic. Around 1925, René Guénon (i.e., Shaikh ‘Abdu’l-Vāḥid Yaḥyā)<sup>6</sup> had presented the basic concepts of the East in their original form to the West and had also analyzed the Western civilization in light of those concepts. Gide had read René Guénon’s works in 1943. He wrote in his journals that had he read those works in his youth, only God knows what direction his life would have taken. Now, though, he was an old man and nothing could be done about the matter. Just as his body had stiffened so that it could not assume different yoga postures, so had his spirit, which couldn’t, therefore, accept the ancient wisdom. Rather, he would even go so far as to say that what Europe did was all right, even if it led to its own destruction. It simply couldn’t now turn away from its path. And so he would stick by his error.<sup>7</sup> At about this time Gide had also confessed to some of his devotees that if René Guénon were right, this would destroy all his life’s work; upon which a devotee had retorted, “Not just your work alone, even the mightiest—say, Montaigne—won’t escape that fate.” After a long anxious pause during which he remained absolutely speechless, Gide finally remarked, “I have not the slightest objection to everything René Guénon has written. It simply cannot be refuted. But the game has ended. I’m much too old.” And even after this admission, the same senseless repetition of the same tune: The West is in error, still the West is the best.

In the following I’ll summarize what Gide had produced in his defense of the West on those two occasions.

1. The East wants the individual to lose himself in some Absolute Being. The West, on the other hand, desires the individual to retain his individuality, even enhance it noticeably. The very

---

<sup>6</sup>René Guénon (1886–1951) had a traditional Catholic upbringing and studied philosophy and mathematics. Later, in Paris, he became a Muslim under the influence of the French painter Gustav Ageli. He left for Egypt in 1930, where he remained until his death. His books cover a wide variety of subjects from metaphysics and symbolism to critiques of the modern world and traditional sciences. *Orient and Occident* and *Crisis of the Modern World* are two of his most widely read books.

<sup>7</sup>For the original, see Appendix.

thought that he might lose his own individuality gave him the creeps.

2. Gide is not interested in this Absolute Being that couldn't even be defined. "I enjoy defining things the most," he said—in other words, his ability to exercise analytical reason. (In the same statement Gide claimed for himself the status of Bacon and Descartes. What *I* personally enjoy the most is to recall that the source of most of Gide's reflections is none other than Nietzsche and that Gide rattled sabers with Julien Benda,<sup>8</sup> who was, in fact, the greatest follower of Descartes in literature, practically every day of the week.)
3. This Absolute Being is something entirely abstract. Over this ineffable Unity Gide rather preferred multiplicity, life, the world, and mortal men (in other words, all those things that have to do with "emotion" and "sensibility"). For the sake of Unity, Gide is unwilling to sacrifice multiplicity.

Now let's condense these further:

1. Multiplicity instead of Unity;
2. Limited individuality of man instead of Absolute Being; and
3. Analytical reason, emotion, and sensibility—i.e., psyche and body—instead of spirit.

This analysis is absolutely flawless as far as it applies to Western civilization. However, by placing two objects, one opposite the other, Gide apparently believes that while the East holds firm to one, the West holds to the other. Now where the East is concerned, it is not a matter of "contradiction" or "opposition." It is the belief which Muslims call "Unity" (*vahdat*) and Hindus "non-duality" that runs through every fiber in the body of all Eastern civilizations. Ibn-e 'Arabī has elucidated with utmost clarity that neither the declaration of pure "incomparability"

---

<sup>8</sup>Benda (1867–1956) was a French essayist known for his polemical writings against contemporary intellectuals for their indifference to the values of reason, intellectualism, and classicism in which he himself passionately believed. The relationship between Gide and Julien Benda may not have been quite as warm and cordial as 'Askari seems to imply, but neither was it entirely devoid of respect and admiration (see, Gide, *Journals*, vol. 4, pp. 12, 37, 60, 250, 252, 267, 283–4, and 290).

(*tanzīh*<sup>9</sup>) nor of pure “similarity/sameness” (*tashbīh*) suffices. True Reality amounts to “declaring incomparability in similarity”<sup>10</sup> and the other way round (*tanzīh fī al-tashbīh aur tashbīh fī al-tanzīh*). Shankaracharya also holds the same view, and also René Guénon who has stressed it repeatedly in his books. But Gide, in spite of reading those books, kept insisting that he would stick by his error. He never did know why, precisely, the East was right, and why, precisely, the West was wrong. René Guénon had already foretold as much. Although he was writing all this, he said, it was unlikely that his books would ever be truly grasped by the West. What other consequence could be envisaged by throwing in one’s lot with Bacon and Descartes! One couldn’t even tell whether Zuleika was a woman or a man (*Zulaikhā zan būd yā mard*).

However, in the West those who do not consciously follow Descartes, or those who are opposed to the trends set in motion by him and Bacon, or those who affirm “spirituality” or “religion”—do they come at all nearer the East? Is the “spirituality” of the East and the West one and the same thing? (Here, the West stands for post-sixteenth-century Europe.) In reflecting on this issue we shall not privilege the East over the West or vice versa. Following in the tracks of Gide (“I enjoy defining things the most”) we shall adopt a similar frame of mind, indeed, we shall abide by the method elucidated by Bacon. Just as a botanist compares and contrasts by setting two plants next to one another, we shall do the same because such is the preferred method of our Western imams.

We have selected two books for our comparative study: Ibn-e ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*<sup>11</sup> from the East, not the whole book though, just three chapters<sup>12</sup> that deal with the Prophets Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Ishāq (Isaac), and Ismā‘īl (Ishmael); and from the West Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and*

---

<sup>9</sup>I.e., according to Chittick’s definition, “incomparability of God with all created reality” (*The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), xxi-ff.

<sup>10</sup>I.e., grasping or viewing Reality both as different/other/transcendent and similar/same/immanent at the same time.

<sup>11</sup>For publication details of this work, see Memon, “Askari’s ‘Ibn-e ‘Arabī and Kierkegaard.’”

<sup>12</sup>Chapters five, six, and seven.

*Trembling*.<sup>13</sup> Ibn-e ‘Arabī because he is the Shaikh-e Akbar (Master Supreme) of Muslims, and Kierkegaard because he is the Imām-e A‘am (Supreme Leader) of Western philosophy and theology today. The selection of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* is determined also by the fact that it has served as the foundation of the structure for the thought of most contemporary Western philosophers and scholastic theologians. All philosophers, whether theist or atheist, use the story of Prophet Ibrāhīm (i.e., as explicated by Kierkegaard) as a symbol. In fact Mircea Eliade,<sup>14</sup> an expert in comparative religion, even goes so far as to distinguish this story as the very soul of the Jewish and Christian religions, and indeed as their central symbol; however, behind his thinking is not the story itself but rather its exegetical gloss by Kierkegaard. No better book could be found, therefore, for understanding the finest thought and philosophy of Western civilization. On the other hand, Shaikh-e Akbar, too, has elucidated the inner significance and meaning of the story in question. So it is hoped that a comparative study of the two books will reveal the essence of East and of West in ways that are not possible through any other method.

The moment one so much as picks up the two books, the conflict between East and West rears up its head. If one only read the three chapters in question in *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, it is likely that one may not understand them at all, or end up drawing absolutely the wrong kind of conclusions. These chapters are part of a comprehensive thought, a thought grounded in the Qur’ān and Ḥadīṣ. Here, it is well nigh impossible to understand the parts without a knowledge of the whole. This is the reason why Shaikh Shihābū’d-Dīn Suhrawardī<sup>15</sup> used to instruct

---

<sup>13</sup>For publication details of this work, see Memon, “‘Askarī’s ‘Ibn-e ‘Arabī and Kierkegaard.’”

<sup>14</sup>Mircea Eliade (1907–86) was a Romanian by birth but spent much of his later life in the United States where he was professor of History of Religions at the University of Chicago. He has written many books and novels.

<sup>15</sup>Also known as Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (1155–91). He was one of the leading figures of the “illuminative” school of Islamic philosophy and author of some fifty works, among them the most well known *Ḥikmat al-Isḥrāq* (The Wisdom of Illumination) in which he attempted to reconcile philosophy and Taṣavvuf. ‘Askarī seems to imply that al-Suhrawardī’s admonition was based on his personal experience. There is no evidence to support that he and Ibn al-‘Arabī had ever met, for when the latter arrived in Baghdad in 1204, the former had been dead for thirteen years. However, a brief “silent” meeting is mentioned between Ibn al-‘Arabī

his disciples (*murīd*), “Beware, don’t ever meet Ibn-e ‘Arabī or you will turn into an atheist (*zindīq*).” So Ibn-e ‘Arabī’s explication of the deeper meaning of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm’s story is no momentary and vagrant thought, rather it is the essence of a lifetime’s reflection on the mysteries or symbolic meanings (*rumūz*) of the Qur’ān. This is confirmed and corroborated—not contradicted—by a perusal of his other books. Conversely, if one so much as stepped outside this one particular book of Kierkegaard, one would run into enormous difficulty. This is because Kierkegaard later abandoned some of his earlier views, or altered them, or assumed total silence in regard to them. In short, this book of Kierkegaard represents only a phase in his reflective life and may not conform at all to other phases. This sort of thing, namely, that one may outgrow one’s old views and adopt new ones, is viewed by the West as a sign of sincerity and loftiness, and is called intellectual growth. In the East, however, such a person is looked upon with suspicion. This is so because “truth” is not viewed in the West as having an independent existence, and that which has no independent existence, the East would simply not call it “truth.”

Before reading *Fear and Trembling* one must further bear in mind that it was written during a harrowing emotional crisis, and largely in an effort to bring it under control. Kierkegaard felt that God didn’t want him to marry the woman he loved so he broke off their engagement, and yet kept hoping silently in his heart for her return.<sup>16</sup> He perceived a reflection of his own struggle in the story of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm. Whatever the book’s value may be as philosophy, the fact remains that Kierkegaard’s novel interpretation of the narrative was the product of his own emotional crisis. The thoughts he ascribed to Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm were the creation of his own confusion and perplexity indeed some sentences in the book more or less fly straight out of his journals. In other words, he attempts to understand Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm by recourse to his own personality. Of course I’m not implying that it’s just for that reason alone that his views

---

and the famous theologian, philosopher, and *mutasavvif* Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar Suhrawardī (1145–1234) (the chief organizer of the *futuwwa* (“chivalry”) brotherhoods, a kind of spiritual guild, and the author of a manual for spiritual teachers called *‘Avārif al-Ma‘ārif*) in Baghdad in 1211, but he reportedly described Ibn al-‘Arabī as “an ocean of divine truths” (cf. Austin, *Bezels*, 10).

<sup>16</sup>This woman was Regine Olsen.

become invalid or false. All I'm trying to do here is merely "define" things in the Gidean manner.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, whatever Ibn-e 'Arabī has written has nothing whatever to do with emotional conflicts or confusions. They are entirely non-individual and impersonal things—even though just for the heck of it a French Professor Sahib, Henri Corbin, has dug up a Beatrice even for Ibn-e 'Arabī.<sup>17</sup> Assuming it were true, it hardly bears on the subject matter of his books. A book like *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* can only be composed after one has risen far above the sphere of the psyche and its myriad conundrums. Kierkegaard constructs theories to unravel the tangled skeins of his own emotional problems. On the other hand, Ibn-e 'Arabī has already arrived at the stage of *ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (the *ḥaqq* of certainty). Then again, contrary to what Corbin thinks, the matter has nothing to do with "creative imagination." Ibn-e 'Arabī is writing by means of an ability which the East identifies as "intellect" (*'aql*) and René Guénon, for the convenience of the West, has described as "intellectual intuition/vision" (*'aqlī vijdān*).

A second thing to bear in mind is that if there is any testimony to substantiate Kierkegaard's claims at all, it is he himself. On the other hand, Ibn-e 'Arabī, notwithstanding his tremendous spiritual rank, simply couldn't dare to write even a word that didn't accord with the Qur'ān and Ḥadīṣ. Even though he is credited with some five hundred works, his wont was to leave a book in the city he had written it in and move on. He practiced such exemplary care regarding his beliefs that he unreservedly advises the readers of his book *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>She was Ni ām, daughter of Abū Shujā' Zāhir b. Rustam of Mecca. It is said that Ibn-e 'Arabī, much inspired by her exceptional beauty and intelligence, composed an entire volume of mystical poetry *Tarjumān al-Ashvāq* (Interpreter of Desires). "One suspects," writes Austin, "that the relationship between Ibn al-'Arabī and this young woman had something of the quality of that between Dante and Beatrice, and it serves to illustrate a strong appreciation of the feminine in him, at least in its spiritual aspect" (*Bezels*, 7). I'm sure that 'Askarī would have bristled at this remark, however well intentioned. For an account of Ibn al-'Arabī's meeting with Ni ām, see Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999), 148–50.

<sup>18</sup>Cairo, 1911. Reprint. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d. For translated passages from this work, see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God. Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*, considered the author's magnum opus, was begun in Mecca in 1202 and completed in its first



(Meccan Openings) to make those beliefs manifest to others. The “trust” (*amānat*) of Shaikh-e Akbar is nothing other than that Allāh is One and Muḥammad is His messenger.

Let’s now open both books together. René Guénon says that since Eastern views deal with a Reality which is entirely ineffable, their basic method of expressing it is of necessity symbolic. By the same token, because Western philosophies are the product of analytical reason, they simply cannot be expressed in symbolic language. You will therefore observe that the division of chapters in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* as well as the book’s narrative style are highly symbolic and rich in allusion, and its manner is so highly concentrated that if one were to accept Pound’s definition of poetry as writing that packs maximum meaning into a minimum of words, this book would easily qualify as poetry, although it is neither poetry nor purely creative prose.

Kierkegaard has of course tried to make the narrative of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm into a symbol, but in fact three separate styles are observed in his book. One is the cut-and-dried analytical style of philosophical discourse, the other is suited to analysis of emotions and states of the psyche. The East considers it reprehensible to describe such lofty persons as prophets as merely actors in a *dāstān* (romance; story); however, Kierkegaard, as he reflects upon the significance of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, slips time and time again into the domain of the novel. The most interesting aspect of the narrative to him, by his own admission, is the opportunity it provides him to speculate on the thoughts of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm as he led his son to be sacrificed. On the other hand, Ibn-e ‘Arabī wouldn’t even reflect for a moment about the world of the psyche (*nafs*). From his perspective, the incredibly more interesting thing was to reflect on the significance of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm himself. Kierkegaard considered the novel to be the most suitable expressive medium for philosophy. But the sphere of the novel does not extend at all beyond the body and psyche. As such, this expressive mode can never be truly symbolic, at least not in the sense in which the East understands symbolic.

The third style in *Fear and Trembling* is blandly oratorical and sermonesque. Here Kierkegaard’s effort is to stretch and expand rather than to achieve concentration in the expression of emotion, betraying at times a febrile effort to stir some emotion within himself, and to affect the emo-

---

version of twenty manuscript volumes in 1231. A second version in thirty-seven volumes was completed in 1236.

tions of his reader. The question of affecting anyone doesn't even arise for Ibn-e 'Arabī. He is, rather, engrossed in how to translate his knowledge as precisely and accurately into words as he possibly can, a knowledge altogether different in its nature at that. Such knowledge cannot be characterized as either purely informational, or as knowledge that can be derived through the labor of discursive reason, rather it is the kind of knowledge in which the knower and the object of knowledge fuse together. Ibn-e 'Arabī, therefore, is not a poet in that sense, and certainly not in the special sense Kierkegaard has given it. Yet Kierkegaard couldn't see a rank greater than a poet's for himself. A poet, to him, was he who, though unable to become a hero in his own right, could nonetheless understand the achievements of a hero and sing of those achievements. The faculties such a man could marshal are simply these: sensibility, emotion, discursive reason, and imagination. Opposite to this, a cognition such as Ibn al-'Arabī's is possible through pure intellect alone, and is true spirituality. According to René Guénon, this metaphysical knowledge is neither something "mental" nor "human," but something entirely above and beyond them. Perhaps we won't accept this view, but one thing we must always keep before us throughout this comparative study is that this is precisely the operative belief which is at the back of *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and is entirely absent from Kierkegaard's conception.

Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm is the focal point of Kierkegaard's thought in *Fear and Trembling*, but simply as an ordinary human. No doubt he did perform an outstanding feat, but his psyche is hardly different from that of a common man's; in other words, Kierkegaard lays greater emphasis on Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's humanity and ascribes all manner of emotional reactions to him. Ibn-e 'Arabī, on the other hand, doesn't even think about Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's human aspect. Instead, what is important for him is his status as a prophet. His aim, preeminently, is to somehow discover the secret of his prophecy. As Kierkegaard would have it, just about any human can achieve Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's station, provided he has the aspiration (*himmat*) to do so, though Kierkegaard finds it lacking in himself. Conversely, in Ibn-e 'Arabī's opinion, yes, an ordinary man can adopt Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's method, given the strength he can perhaps even reach his status as a *valī* (friend [of God]; saint), but never his station as a *nabī* (prophet).

All right, let's accept for a moment that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was just like any ordinary human, still Kierkegaard's concept of man is also very limited. At least this is precisely what he says in this book, viz., the constituent elements of man are two: body and mind (or *nafs* [psyche] in our terminology). However, according to Ibn-e 'Arabī, the most fundamental

(*aşl al-uşūl*) thing in man is the spirit (*rūḥ*)—the mainstay of both body and psyche. It is because of this difference that Kierkegaard becomes bogged down in the world of the psyche, and cannot go beyond it, while Ibn-e ‘Arabī, as he pondered the significance of the spirit, didn’t consider the states of the psyche worth even a moment’s attention.

Now let’s have a look at the problems Kierkegaard extracted from the story of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm. His main interest lies in the mental states of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, and the issues he has pulled out, they too, in fact, flow directly out of those states. He believes that unless a man grapples with those issues he will always fall short of achieving greatness. Well then, let’s first make an inventory of those issues.

1. God commanded Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm to sacrifice his son. This command goes against human emotions and ethics. As such he must have gone through terrible anguish. Is there a point at which ethical principles are suspended?
2. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, in violation of human ethics, fulfilled God’s command. Why don’t we call him a criminal and murderer? Could God impose an “absolute” duty?
3. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm never revealed the true situation to anyone. Could this silence have any justification?
4. Kierkegaard has created yet another issue on which Sartre places much greater stress later on. The real question before Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was whether the command had come to him from God or was it a deception which Satan had thrown at him. And since God talks only to prophets, Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm therefore had to ask himself: am I a prophet? In other words, he had to ask: who am I? According to Sartre, this question truly created the deepest anguish in Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm.

As you will have observed, these questions are related to the psyche and to ethics, or, at most, to philosophy, and not at all to metaphysics. These matters pertain to the realm of the psyche, not that of the spirit. Further, an emotional tension runs through all these questions. Now let’s look at the subjects Ibn-e ‘Arabī has chosen to discuss in the three chapters of his book.

1. Why is Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm called *Khalīl Allāh* (Friend of God) and what is his spiritual station?
2. Who is an *insān-e kāmīl* (Perfect Man)?
3. How does one attain *ma’rifat-e Ḥaqq* (gnosis of God)?
4. What is meant by *mashīyat aur amr-e Ilāhī* (Divine Will and Divine Command)?

5. What is *uhūr* (self-manifestation) and *ta'ayyun* (determination)? What is the relationship between God and man?
6. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm sacrificed a ram in place of his son—what *ramz* (symbolic meaning) lies behind this choice?
7. What is the difference between *ahādīyat* (Transcendent Unity) and *vāhidīyat* (Distinctive Uniqueness)? What is the distinction between *rabb* (lord) and *'abd* (vassal)?

By enumerating just these seven subjects I'm actually showing great audacity toward Shaikh-e A' am, for the amount he has packed into these twenty pages simply cannot even be computed. The entire essence of Taṣavvuf has been concentrated here. I do not claim to have comprehended their meanings fully or even half, but I do want to make it clear that these subjects are as remote as one can get from psychology, ethics, or philosophy, being entirely metaphysical in their character.

This is the fundamental difference between Ibn-e 'Arabī and Kierkegaard. It can be seen prominently even in the smallest of details. For instance, while both of them maintain that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was being put through a test, Kierkegaard assumes that he was being tried for his faith (*imān*), and “faith” to Kierkegaard was a “passion.” However he does clarify that it was not a “transient state” but a “new [kind of] inwardness” (*andarūniyat*). Maybe it was. But the matter still does not move farther than the realm of the psyche. Kierkegaard couldn't conceive of anything greater than that. Inwardness, he reiterates time and time again, is the ultimate thing. Since “inwardness” has to do purely with the “psyche,” Réne Guénon has therefore called it the arch deception. At any rate, the secret of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's greatness, for Kierkegaard, lies in the profound and true inwardness of the former. Ibn-e 'Arabī, on the other hand, maintains instead that God was testing Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm for his “knowledge” (*'ilm*). He saw in the dream that he was sacrificing his son. The question now was whether to interpret the dream or act on it literally. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm opted for the latter in order to please God. The phrase “seeking [God's] pleasure” (*raẓā-jō'ī*) too does not have the usual emotional connotations. (I'll attend to its metaphysical elaboration a bit further down.) So Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's greatness lay in transforming the dream into reality. In Ibn-e 'Arabī's view Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm didn't have an emotional or ethical problem before him, instead the matter had to do entirely with the gnosis of God (*ma'rifat-e Ḥaqq*).

Kierkegaard explicates Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's ordeal repeatedly and with much exhilaration. He stresses the point rather forcefully that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm had gone beyond the ethical point of view. Let's first determine

the concept of ethics Kierkegaard has in mind. He opens his discussion with the assertion that “ethics” and “universalism” (“*āfāqīyat*”) are one and the same thing. The colossal mix-up here is that Kierkegaard, like most other Western thinkers, does not perceive any difference between “*umūmīyat*” (in English, “general”) and “*āfāqīyat*” (in English, “universal”). The universal transcends all particularity and individuality; conversely, the general in fact is the reiteration and extension of particularity and individuality. Had Kierkegaard apprehended this difference and only then claimed that “universal” and “general” are one and the same thing, he would not have found any contradiction between Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm’s action and ethics—in quite the same way that the question never even arose for Ibn-e ‘Arabī. Actually, the latter is looking at the whole event from the metaphysical perspective and Kierkegaard, from the purely human and social. From this perspective, the foundation of ethics can only be the “general.” The moment we accept this, contradiction immediately appears in Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm’s action and ethics. This is how Kierkegaard explains it: Ethics demands that the individual eliminate his individuality and particularity and merge into the general, which demands that a father should love his son. But Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm proceeds with the sacrifice of his son. Consequently he must be considered a criminal, a murderer according to the general and according to ethics. On the other hand, had he proceeded to sacrifice his son for the good of his people, quite like the hero of a tragedy, ethics would have looked upon him with an admiring nod. Instead, he was performing this act for his own sake and for the sake of God; hence he is neither the hero of a tragedy nor can ethics accept his act and validate his sacrifice. In spite of all this he is considered a prophet.

To be both a criminal and a prophet at the same time is non sequitur. To find his way out of the quagmire, Kierkegaard dug up this solution: A point is reached which necessitates the suspension of the general and the ethical perspective, and a great man goes beyond ethics. What might some of the other conditions for this be; we shall have occasion to look for them later. For the moment, however, the following conclusion can be drawn: Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm attained this lofty station only after transcending ethics. So, in order to achieve such greatness, it is imperative to transgress ethics.

First of all, Ibn-e ‘Arabī, preoccupied as he is with metaphysics, does not look at all at Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm from an ethical perspective. This is because ethics is related to action and emotion, both of which, at the end of the day, belong in the domain of the psyche. But even if we were to re-

flect on this narrative from an ethical point of view, this would not lead to contradiction because ethics for Ibn-e ‘Arabī isn’t exactly what Kierkegaard, and the rest of the West along with him, assume it to be. According to Kierkegaard, God’s command to Ḥaḏrat Ibrāhīm was tyrannical, but he was entirely free to carry it out or not to carry it out. The matter was just this: Had he chosen not to, he would never have attained prophethood. He violated ethics and accepted to fulfill God’s command—all in order to attain prophethood. From Ibn-e ‘Arabī’s perspective, the whole issue of compulsion (*jabr*) and free will (*ikhṭiyār*) is a colossal deception. Compulsion obtains only when one is forced to act against his own will, but God commands man to do only what is innate in man’s primordial nature. In other words, whatever command is directed to an individual comes from his own nature; hence, there is here neither “compulsion” nor “free will.” Whatever one does is simply a making manifest of one’s nature. If the reader wants to pursue the details, he must be prepared to endure the uninspiring dryness of a few terms. Objects of creation are existentiated when Divine Names (*asmā’-e Ilāhī*) irradiate (*tajallī*) over Fixed Entities (*a’yān-e ṣābita*) and Cosmic Realities (*ḥaqā’iq kaunīya*), and those Fixed Entities receive the kind of Divine irradiation that is required by their primordial natures. The self-manifestation particular to an existent (*maujūd*) is called that existent’s own special Lord/Master (*rabb*), and the existent its “vassal” (*marbūb yā ‘abd*). Every lord gives only that command to his vassal which is consistent with that vassal’s nature. Therefore, one never receives a command which is against one’s Fixed Entity, only that which is applicable. Every vassal is pleasing and favored of his master, provided he acts according to his nature. “Good,” from the perspective of metaphysical ethics, lies in making the effort to know one’s Fixed Entity and its special desiderata. Likewise, “evil/bad” is that one remains oblivious of his Fixed Entity. Knowledge of one’s Fixed Entity is, in essence, self-knowledge, and it is in fact the “soul at peace” (*naḥs muṭma’inna*), and this is what is implied in fulfilling the Divine purpose. Ibn-e ‘Arabī writes,

This is how it is with every “soul-at-peace”: it fulfills God’s purpose, becomes “accepting and accepted,” loving and loved, and thus more excellent than everyone. It is to him that the command “Come back to your Lord” (*“irji’ī ilā rabbiki”*) is given. Who is asking it to return? Of course the same Lord who had called out to it: “O soul-at-peace, come back to your Lord accepting and accepted. Enter the ranks of My élite servitors and enter

My paradise” (*“yā aiyatuhā’n-nafsu’l-muṭma’innatu irjī’i ilā rabbiki rāziya’m-marziya fa’dkhulī fi’ibādi va’dkhulī jannati”*<sup>19</sup>). The soul-at-peace recognized its lord among lords, accepted it and was accepted by it.<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard’s was the ethics of the West—confined to man and especially to society. No wonder he had made it into such an insurmountable problem. By contrast, Eastern ethics is bound neither by man nor by his society; it is metaphysical from one end to the other, or, rather, an offshoot of metaphysics. Here no tension exists between spiritual greatness and ethics. If ethics were not at the same time a spiritual matter, the East would not consider it more than child’s play. To gauge the difference between these respective concepts of ethics, consider the tremendous ease and equanimity with which Ibn-e ‘Arabī goes even so far as to claim that whatever is happening in the world is good. However many clamors Nietzsche has raised regarding going beyond the limits of good and evil, they are by comparison mere kite-flying (*ṣirf patañg-bāzī haiñ*).

One might also tacitly understand here that what Kierkegaard calls “submission and acceptance” means no more than equating any external calamity that may befall man with the will of God and then accepting it with submission and without protest. Even calling it “absolute submission and acceptance” would not make one bit of difference. The matter hardly advances at all. Ibn-e ‘Arabī, on the other hand, maintains that no calamity is ever visited upon man from the outside, that this too is a requirement of his own Fixed Entity. Even the inhabitants of Hell enjoy a special pleasure all their own because their chastisement conforms entirely to the requirements of their primordial natures. In short, every calamity is the mirror-image of one’s innate nature. But how men react to calamity will certainly differ. Those who are either unaware of their Fixed Entity or do not understand the essence of calamity will protest it and blame God for it. A second type among those considering it from God would say nothing. The third type, people who have come to know their Fixed Entity, will consider the calamity suitable for themselves—God’s heaven for them. This is what seeking God’s acceptance and true submission means. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was blessed with this station, and so was his son (regardless of whether it was Ḥaẓrat Ismā’īl according to

<sup>19</sup>Qur’ān, 89:27–30.

<sup>20</sup>From the Urdu translation it is impossible to locate this quote in *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, but a similar passage could be found in Austin, *Bezels*, 107.

Muslim tradition or Ḥaẓrat Ishāq according to the Jewish tradition and to Ibn-e ‘Arabī).

Besides, submission and acceptance have another aspect. The closer a particular created thing is to God the greater is its goodness, and its evil will increase correspondingly with its distance from God. Consequently atoms occupy the highest station, followed, in order of descending rank, by inorganic matter (solids), vegetation, animals, and, last of all, humans. This circle is described as the descending arc (*qaus-e nuzūlī*) of existence. When man adopts the spiritual path (*rāh-e sulūk*) and his spiritual development commences, he rises to the level of animals, next he ascends to the level of vegetation, then of solids, and, finally, reaches God. This then is the ascending arc (*qaus-e su‘ūdī*). The distinguishing quality of the animal state is that here man does not let his mind or opinion get in the way of fulfilling God’s command. Rather he makes God’s command his own choice. Ḥaẓrat Ismā‘īl was treading on that path. Hence, the ram points to his station of *valāyat*.<sup>21</sup> To Ibn-e ‘Arabī the secret behind the sacrifice of a ram was precisely this. Not even a whiff of this metaphysical meaningfulness comes anywhere near Kierkegaard who otherwise does mention “submission and acceptance,” but these are states of the psyche to him and no more.

We now turn to the issue which is much talked about in Western literature, philosophy, and theology these days, or, rather, an issue which the West considers the biggest sign of spiritual greatness—anguish/angst. Kierkegaard thinks that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm had to go through intense anguish because, on the one hand, he was acting entirely against his own emotions and ethical values, and on the other, he could not even justify his action to the people. He was therefore feeling terribly lonely. Even so, this anguish was necessary for him because it was, in fact, his *raison d’être*, that which made him a prophet. The Existentialists have also appropriated this concept of anguish; indeed it has been much drummed about. Among them some go so far as to call it “spiritual angst” or even “metaphysical angst.” Since this angst is priced very high, maybe we should first listen to what René Guénon has to say about it. Disquietude, agitation, or angst—all such states result from the fear of something known or unknown. But what fear can possibly afflict him who has already grasped the spirit of or acquired knowledge of

---

<sup>21</sup>The status of being a “friend (*valī*) of God.” In Taṣāvvuf the term denotes “sanctity” and “saintliness.”



metaphysics! So “spiritual” or “metaphysical” angst is an entirely absurd phrase. These two can simply never inhere in one place. Then again, these people allege that angst is born from loneliness. But one who is in fear of something cannot be alone. He cannot be alone because there is this other thing beside him, granted it may be something unknown.

The long and short of angst’s preeminence is that the West has all along considered “pain” something extremely valuable in itself, and with such incredible exaggeration that Gide refused to permit the translation of one of his books into Arabic only because Eastern people were unfamiliar with agony. In exactly the same way Shibli<sup>22</sup> had once remarked: These Muslims—they are so cultured that, according to the Arab custom, a menu precedes the dishes at a banquet. Likewise, Ṭāhā Ḥusain,<sup>23</sup> in his zeal to refute Gide’s claim, went to feverish extremes to prove that there was much expression of agony in Arabic literature. Well, maybe there was. But this is not the point. The point is rather that “pain” in itself has no importance in the East, though it may be treated as a means. As far as the pain goes, one can see any number of Hindu yogis inflicting on themselves all kinds of torture (*tapas*), but even among Hindus it is merely considered a method for the “purification of the self/psyche” and hardly a *sine qua non* at all. The question of pain or angst as something inherently important does not even arise in the East. Then again this *tapas* is practiced in strict conformity to a regulative method; moreover, it seeks, above all else, how to sacrifice the psyche and ego and how to remove the heart from the shoot and turn it toward what is the root.

If Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm experienced any anguish at all, it had to be something along these lines. The true meaning of sacrifice among us is precisely this sacrifice of the ego. If Kierkegaard has discovered anguish in Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm it is because he treats him as an ordinary mortal. This is also the reason he thinks that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was assailed by such doubts as whether the command was from God at all, whether God could talk to him at all, and who he himself was. Such doubts are perfectly legitimate in the case of an ordinary man, but Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was a prophet, and Ḥaẓrat Ismā’il had achieved the status of *valāyat*, that is, he had gone past

---

<sup>22</sup>Shibli Nu‘mānī (1857–1914), Indian religious scholar and critic of poetry, is chiefly remembered for his five-volume study of Persian poetry *She‘ru’l-‘Ajam*.

<sup>23</sup>Ṭāhā Ḥusain (1889–1973) was an outstanding figure of the modernist movement in Egyptian literature.

the realm of the psyche. To ascribe such doubts to them is entirely senseless. Anguish is the fate of one who is ignorant of his Fixed Entity. Once he has achieved awareness of it, all doubts simply vanish for him.

However, if one is so enamored of anguish and so hell bent on observing such a state in Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, the matter can also be explained metaphysically in accordance with Eastern views, though one must remember that, here, it is no longer a matter of the psyche, but rather one of reflecting on the domain of the spirit. Fear, anguish and the like are all states of the psyche, not of the spirit, so the use of such words in the present context will be entirely figurative and anthropomorphic. Let's have a look at the reality of anguish in its figurative meaning. I have already described the arcs of ascent and descent above. Starting from his status as a spiritual aspirant (*sālik*), man goes through a series of stages before he finally reaches God. The Supreme Reality itself has three stages: self-manifestation, concealment, and, thirdly, the stage where there is neither. Only after acquiring knowledge of the third stage does one achieve the status of *valāyat* in the true meaning of the word. However, the status of prophethood (*nubuwwat*) is even higher than *valāyat*. Once there, the gnostic (*ʿarif*) must turn back and, crossing once again the gamut of stages, return to the plain of humanity, which is called "descent" (*nuzūl*). As far as the stages of ascent and descent go, a spiritual wayfarer must travel through them at some point or other, but here we are talking especially about Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's status of *valāyat* and of prophecy. Any mature Muslim knows that the status of prophethood is not achieved through labor, and no other prophet will appear after Muḥammad, the Prophet and Messenger of God, whether sanctioned by the *Sharī'a*, (*tashrī'i*), not sanctioned by it (*ghair-tashrī'i*), or merely a "shadow messenger" (*illī*).

Among Muslims the completion of the upward journey is figuratively described as the "Night of Ascension" (*shab-e mi'rāj*) and the downward journey as the "Night of Destiny" (*shab-e qadr*). For Ibn-e 'Arabī one of the meanings of the latter is the Prophet's noble body, because the Reality of Muḥammad (*ḥaqīqat-e Muḥammadi*) had manifested itself here. Therefore, the status of prophethood is greater than the status of *valāyat*. Likewise, the status of descent is higher than that of ascent. However this may be, a *valī* experiences such exhilaration in the final stage of the ascent that he feels disinclined to come down. He does not want to return to the stage of humanity. Kierkegaard says that one of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's temptations was that he may find some moral justification for his action. Among us there can be only one temptation

for a *valī*, viz., he may want to remain in the last stage of ascent and feel no inclination to return to the earth. The true test of a *valī* is that God calls upon him to descend and to manifest himself. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was being tested for just this. There can be no greater sacrifice for an ordinary man than to relinquish his psyche or ego. The equivalent for a *valī* would amount to abandoning the highest stage of ascent and choosing descent and manifestation. The sacrifice of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, and Ḥaẓrat Ismā'īl was “God’s sacrifice” (*ẓabīḥ Allāh*) precisely in this sense. Without this sacrifice these distinguished personalities could never have attained the rank of prophethood. The greatest responsibility imposed on a prophet is to make the Creator and Creation manifest at the same time. This is indeed an extremely difficult thing to accomplish. For this reason René Guénon calls this state “hesitation,” Ḥājī Imdād Allāh<sup>24</sup> “anxiety,” and Rumi “*bim-o-tars*” and “*mahābat*.” Maulānā-e Rūm [i.e., Rumi] writes that the Reality of Muḥammad (*ḥaqī- qat-e Muḥammadi*) is such a thing that had Jibrīl (Gabriel) seen it, he would have remained unconscious until eternity. When *vahy* (Divine Inspiration) descended upon Muḥammad, he couldn’t bear his own Reality:

*Az mahābat gasht be-hush Muṣṭafā*  
The Chosen [i.e., Muḥammad] fell unconscious  
from reverential dread

Actually traversing the stage of descent aside, according to Coomaraswamy,<sup>25</sup> a man as distinguished as Shankaracharya literally shuddered even at the mention of it. In sum, Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was simply impervious to the anguish and doubts that assail ordinary men. The most that might happen is hesitation at accepting the status of prophethood and disquietude at becoming manifest.

---

<sup>24</sup>Ḥājī Imdād Allāh al-Muhājir al-Makkī (1815–99) was the spiritual guide of many Deobandi ulema, including Muḥammad Qāsim Nānavtavī, the founder of the *Dār al-Ulūm* at Deoband. Following the Indian “Mutiny” of 1857, in which he fought against the British, he escaped to Mecca in 1860 and settled permanently there. Author of several books on spiritual and theological issues, he was also a Persian and Urdu poet.

<sup>25</sup>Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) was a pioneer historian of Indian art and a major interpreter of Indian culture to the West.

Kierkegaard further says that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm quietly endured his anguish and suffered in isolation. Kierkegaard feels that it is man's moral duty to come out in the open, accept ordinariness, and reveal himself, so self-disclosure is absolutely required of man from a moral perspective. But it is through inwardness and introversion that one truly attains greatness. Greatness requires silence and concealment because one's personal relationship with God is always inward and private and cannot, therefore, be revealed to others. As I'll show shortly, Kierkegaard didn't grasp even the status of *valāyat* properly. Anyway, this reflection of his can be considered valid for the stage of *valāyat*, but only after much stretching and straining, and absolutely cannot be valid for the status of prophethood. In his exaggerated love of inwardness, Kierkegaard even lost sight of such an obvious fact as Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm being so outstanding a man that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike claim descent from the Abrahamic religion. A prophet's duty is not silence and concealment. In fact, his foremost responsibility is to make himself manifest. Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm didn't remain silent at all. His very action was nothing less than a proclamation in itself. It was through this action that he revealed his true reality. This was not "concealment" but "making manifest." What the West calls a veil out of its love for inwardness, is pure "making apparent" from the perspective of Eastern metaphysics.

God's command went against human emotions and ethics, nonetheless Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm carried it out. From this Kierkegaard concludes that God imposes an absolute duty on man. This occurs when man as an individual establishes an absolute relationship with the Absolute Being. Kierkegaard defines this personal relationship as love of God and faith. Even though Kierkegaard has defined faith variously, on the whole he thinks of it as a passion, a great madness, and a personal relationship with God. Sometimes he dashes off sentences that seem very close to Eastern concepts; however, since the difference between spirit and psyche was never entirely clear in his thinking, we must interpret them from the perspective of the psyche. This is why I said that on the whole he understands faith as a passion. Mircea Eliade too has offered the same explanation; rather, he thinks that the most basic distinction between Jewish and Christian civilization is precisely this concept of faith. If this makes them happy—well, good for them. As it happens Eastern civilizations are not exactly strangers to this conception of faith either. The faith of the shepherd in the famous parable in the *Maṣnavī* of Maulānā Rūm is

also exactly of the same variety.<sup>26</sup> The East is totally familiar with this concept of faith, even gives it a place in life, but does not consider it the highest form of faith. True gnosis (*ma'rifat*) is not a personal relationship. A true gnostic goes even farther beyond the sphere of humanity, let alone the personality of the individual. This is not something that Europeans have the wherewithal to accomplish. Likewise, Kierkegaard holds that faith begins from the point where reflection ceases, and the highest form of faith is that of passion and madness. Among us, there is just one grade of faith, though it reaches fruition only after it has passed through a series of stages, for instance that of *'ilm al-yaqīn* (knowledge of certainty) then of *'ain al-yaqīn* (eye of certainty) and finally of *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*.<sup>27</sup> In the second of these man only sees a reflection of Reality, but he becomes the Reality itself in the final stage. Westerners lack the ability to conceptualize any stage beyond that of *'ain al-yaqīn*. Then again, as they would have it, one must abandon intellect in order to attain faith, and this because they consider the analytical and partial intellect as the whole intellect. Contrarily, the whole intellect—which René Guénon describes as intuitive/visionary intellect (*viḍānī 'aql*) for the convenience of the West—is the only way for the East to arrive at the stage of *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*. Regarding emotion (passion), the East does not reject this either. But, here, special care is taken to find a method for *sulūk* (gnosis) that is particularly suited to the nature of a given individual. It will be much easier to understand if we take recourse in the terminology of the Hindus. There are three methods of *sulūk* (spiritual way) among them: *gyanyog* for one in whom whole intellect predominates; *bhaktiyog* for one in whom the psyche holds sway; and *karmyog* for one in whom the body is sovereign. Therefore the faith Kierkegaard talks about belongs in the category of *bhaktiyog* or *ma'rifat-e*

---

<sup>26</sup>For the Persian original of the parable, see *Maṣnavī-e Ma'navī*, vol. 1, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1935), 340–6, lines 1720–1815; for an English prose translation, A.J. Arberry, tr. *Tales from the Masnavi* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 132–4.

<sup>27</sup>I couldn't render this term concisely in English. In Taṣavvuf it would seem to denote the type of non-empirical but absolute knowledge that results when the individual viewing consciousness itself merges into the object of cognition (i.e. Reality). Chittick has explained this “hierarchy of spiritual attainments” as: “Often these three stages are compared to knowledge of fire, seeing fire, and being consumed by fire” — *Self-Disclosure of God*, 404, fn. 5.

*‘ishqī* (passion-propelled knowledge). And even here there are two major differences. Among us paths may differ but only at the starting point, farther down they merge into one. Secondly, each method has special conditions and customs which absolutely must be observed. In the West, there is passion and only passion, with absolutely no system for its training and guidance. This means that Kierkegaard’s “faith” isn’t even properly *bhaktiyog*, but rather, as per D. H. Lawrence’s statement, a passion of the senses that invents a mental image for itself and keeps deriving pleasure from it.

After these clarifications, let’s return to the idea that God imposes an absolute duty. Kierkegaard holds that by establishing a personal and absolute link with the Absolute Being, man frees himself of ethics and the general, indeed he rises above them; or rather he attains his very individuality by this method. Now ethics becomes something merely relative for him. To carry out his absolute duty he acts unethically. However, his relation with God is not affected by this transgression. This is because his action is for the sake of God and for himself. There is no need for much further comment. We have already seen that in the Eastern outlook true ethics lies in recognizing one’s own special Fixed Entity and acting in accordance with it. Here, no contradiction arises between religion and faith or ethics. The very meaning of *swadharm* among the Hindus is that man should strike an accord between his actions and his nature. Kierkegaard equates faith with “inwardness” and ethics with “outwardness,” assigning the former superiority over the latter. This too is pure Western mentality. If ethics means recognition of one’s Fixed Entity, then ethics simply cannot be something external. Among us the *Shari‘at* is as indispensable as *Tariqat*. René Guénon has even gone to the extent of saying that people who reject *Shari‘at* in their fervor for inwardness in fact consider the body as impure and do not wish to include it in spiritual experiences.

Kierkegaard has faltered yet again in the matter of faith. He holds that faith is both the greatest sacrifice and the greatest self-love. This is a direct consequence of muddling the psyche and spirit. *Haqq al-yaqīn* is born precisely when the psyche is extinguished. One who calls faith “love of oneself” indeed does not know the first thing about faith.

At any rate, Kierkegaard is incapable of thinking anything further than that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm first showed submission and acceptance, and then established a personal relationship with God, hence he is called the *Khalīl Allāh* (Friend of God). On the opposite end of the scale, Ibn-e ‘Arabī puts this gloss on the phrase “*Khalīl Allāh*”: that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm

had permeated the balance of Divine Attributes. Kierkegaard has become so hopelessly drowned in the realm of the psyche that he repeatedly forgets Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's prophethood and his mission, which was to convey God's message to the people. In perfect innocence he blurts out that somebody as saturated with faith as Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm was, simply could not be a guide or spiritual master (*bādi yā murshid*); rather he stands alone in his place. Ibn-e 'Arabī makes a point of telling us that because of his status as the Friend of God Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm introduced the custom of hospitality and feast giving, and that he is a likeness of Mikā'il (Michael).

Have a look at another of Kierkegaard's central concepts. He believes that the greatness of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm's faith is that he accepted something absurd, and, secondly, by establishing his relationship with the Infinite, he also regained the finite world (i.e., his son). In other words, Kierkegaard thinks that the concepts of "faith" and the "absurd" are one and the same thing. René Guénon argues that "absurd" is that which is beset by internal contradiction, and the existence of such a thing is impossible. Hence this concept, the whole of it, is entirely erroneous. However, it is possible that we may see something as absurd because we're not looking at it from the right point of view. In that case, the fault lies with the beholder. If we reflect from the human perspective or from the vantage of the psyche (which is, in fact, the method of people in the West), the whole story of Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm would look totally absurd. Conversely, we will find everything necessarily in its place if we look at the event from the spiritual and metaphysical perspective, as we have already seen above.

Now as regards regaining the world through absolute faith in God, it is improper to attribute such things to a prophet or *valī* because the human psyche becomes altogether extinct at the stage of *valāyat*. However, if the phrase is meant to refer to the "descent" it may be all right, but Kierkegaard certainly didn't have this meaning in mind. He was equating the retrieval of the finite world with the kind of reward that one might get after passing one's school exams. According to the Eastern outlook, the real test for a *valī* comes when God bestows the finite world upon him. When the spiritual preceptor of Ni āmu'd-Dīn Auliya'<sup>28</sup> told

---

<sup>28</sup>Ni āmu'd-Dīn Auliya' (1242–1325) was a major figure in the history of the Islamic mystical movement in India. *Favā'id al-Fu'ād*, a book of his conversations put together by his pupil Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, is available in English translation by Bruce B. Lawrence—*Morals for the Heart* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).

him, “Go now, you have been granted both faith (*dīn*) and the world (*dunyā*),” the latter broke into tears.

We have seen above that Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm, having recognized his Fixed Entity, was acting in accordance with it, he was not showing obedience to some tyrannical ruler. Kierkegaard says that in his struggle with God, Ḥaẓrat Ibrāhīm subdued Him by the strength of his faith and love, and especially by his weakness. This is kite-flying—pure and simple, hardly requiring any comment.

As I have stated in the earlier part of this essay, my purpose in this comparative study of Ibn-e ‘Arabī and Kierkegaard is to make plain the difference between East and West, and, following in the tracks of Gide, to fix some definition of the two. It is not that the two had remained undefined for Gide, but he was surely unable to face certain truths, if only because he had become old. But I’m writing this essay in the hope that it will not be read by those who have become old.

Finally, I must confess to one of my own failings. If I have made some error in presenting Kierkegaard’s views, I’m not embarrassed about it. This is because every book of his is beset by internal contradictions, and certain statements of his are so fuzzy they are amenable to any interpretation under the sun. However where Ibn-e ‘Arabī is concerned, I’m truly frightened. Here, there is absolutely no room for misunderstanding or personal opinion. Nor is this kind of knowledge accessible through books. At any rate, I have taken every precaution on my part and have also sought guidance from the works of Shaikh ‘Abdu’l-Vāḥid Yaḥyā. So if I have made an error, consider it mine, and whatever I have presented correctly, it is by the grace of Shaikh ‘Abdu’l-Vāḥid Yaḥyā. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

## Appendix

*Fez, October [1943]*

Si Abdallah, converted to Islam and a Sanscrit scholar, gets me to read the books of René Guénon. What would have become of me if I had met them in the time of my youth, when I was plunged into the *Méthode pour arriver à la vie bienheureuse* [Method for Achieving Blessed Life] and was listening to the lessons of Fichte in the most submissive way possible? But at that time Guénon’s books were not yet written. Now it is too late; the die is cast. My sclerosed mind has as much



difficulty conforming to the precepts of that ancestral wisdom as my body has to the so-called “comfortable” position recommended by the Yogis, the only one that seems to them suitable to perfect meditation. To tell the truth, I cannot even manage really to desire that resorption of the individual into the eternal Being that they seek and achieve. I cling desperately to my limits and feel a repugnance for the disappearance of those contours that my whole education made a point of defining. Consequently the most obvious result of my reading is a sharper and more definite feeling of my Occidentality; in what way, why, and by what means I am in opposition. I am and remain on the side of Descartes and of Bacon. None the less, those books of Guénon are remarkable and have taught me much, even though by reaction. I am willing to recognize the evils of Occidental unrest, of which war itself is a by-product; but the perilous adventure upon which we thoughtlessly embarked was worth the suffering it now costs us, was worth being risked. Now, moreover, it is too late to withdraw; we must carry it further, carry it to the end. And that “end,” that extremity, I try to convince myself that it is *good*, even were it achieved by our ruin. I should probably need the “comfortable” position in order to bring my thought to maturity. Meanwhile I am persevering in my error; and I cannot envy a wisdom that consists in withdrawing from the game. I want to be “in it” even at my own expense.

[André Gide, *The Journals of André Gide*, vol. 4: 1939–1949). Translated by Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 226]

Published in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 19 (2004)  
<mumemon@charter.net>