

RETHINKING Ibn 'Arabi



GREGORY A. LIPTON

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For Manzar

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Prologue

In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map.

JORGE LUIS BORGES, "On Exactitude in Science."¹

WHILE MY OSTENSIVE concern in this book is to analyze how particular ideas of the medieval Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi have been translated within a contemporary field of interpretation, the meta-subject that frames this analysis is the larger issue of religious universalism. And while my approach is necessarily critical, I am not overly concerned to weigh in on the ongoing debate regarding the ontology of religion itself—that is, whether or not religion *is* "of its own kind" (*sui generis*).² Yet, it seems fairly clear to me that the related, and likewise ongoing, scholarly struggle to find a universal definition of religion is well-nigh impossible. This is so, as Talal Asad has persuasively argued, "not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."³ For the methodological purposes of this study, I thus profess a type of philosophical quietism where my general aim, in Wittgensteinian fashion, is to take account of "language-games, describe them, *and sometimes wonder at them*."⁴ In the following chapters, I therefore attempt to remain at the level of discourse by asking *how* those ideas and ideals we privilege *as* religious are conceived, received, and ultimately naturalized. More specifically, I seek to show how the speculative metaphysical ideas of Ibn 'Arabi have been read, appropriated, and universalized within the discursive

context of Traditionalism or the Perennial Philosophy (*philosophia perennis*)⁵ with a primary focus on the interpretive field of Perennialism associated with the *sui generis*, or “nonreductive,” tradition of religious universalism connected to Frithjof Schuon.⁶

Thus, even though this book takes seriously claims of religious *terra firma*—that is, religion “as such”—its analytical concern revolves around the discursive “maps” that chart such claims. Of course, the metaphor of mapmaking in the field of religious studies is well worn, made famous many years ago by J. Z. Smith’s seminal essay “Map Is Not Territory.”⁷ Smith’s essay ends with his oft-quoted rejoinder to the mathematician Alfred Korzybski’s famous dictum, “‘Map is not territory’—*but maps are all we possess*.”⁸ Yet, Smith’s cartographic metaphor is equally applicable to the religious practitioner in the so-called real world as it is for the scholar of religion in the academy. In performing what he calls a “deep”—and indeed “transgressive”⁹—reading of Smith’s essay, Peter Wright has recently emphasized this essential point:

The student of religions . . . is not all that different from the practitioner of a religion. The practices of reading and writing, interpretation and criticism—i.e., the practices that . . . constitute for Smith the study of religions as a humanistic adventure among texts—belong to the same family of activities that constitute ordinary religious practice. The scholar of religions and the adherent of a particular religious tradition are both engaged in a quest romance that produces a species of “cartography.”¹⁰

Thus, while there may be what scholars like to think of as a “critical distance” between the academic discipline of religious studies and the object of their study—the religious themselves—it nevertheless appears to be a difference of degree rather than of kind.¹¹

One of the ways that the differences among such maps have been categorized is by orders of abstraction away from the original “insider map of believers.”¹² Yet, when dealing with contemporary scholars of religion who consider their own scholarship a vehicle for spiritual gnosis, as was famously the case with the comparatist Mircea Eliade, then any supposed distance between the academic study of religion and asserting religious truth rapidly vanishes into the thin air of theory itself.¹³ As Steven Wasserstrom observes, “Eliade’s *Historian of Religions* himself somehow recapitulated the paradigmatic experience of the traditional believer; only thus could he *see* the real forms, and therefore only in this way could then *show* them to the reader.”¹⁴ Similarly, in his introduction to *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, religious studies scholar and Perennialist Seyyed Hossein Nasr claims that “ideally speaking, *only saintly men and women* possessing wisdom

should and can engage in a serious manner in that enterprise which has come to be known as comparative religion.”¹⁵

To be sure, the art of mapmaking is an elitist enterprise. As cosmographical projections, maps assert particular correspondences to reality, able to be read and followed by anyone with skill enough to do so. As such, all maps inevitably claim, to one degree or another, *the universal* through their ability to offer privileged access to truth. In its most unassuming form, such universalism is based on the assertion that territory can be abstracted outside of time and culture—a particular locality can be reified and placed within a less complicated dimension, represented by semiotic simplifications. The usefulness of cartography in the history of humanity is of course beyond question. The notion, however, that maps are reliable representations of reality is more complicated. Indeed, the full quote of Korzybski’s popular maxim referred to above reads: “A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness.”¹⁶ One of the best ways of articulating the problematics underlying Korzybski’s deceptively simple insight has been dubbed Bonini’s paradox by William Starbuck: “As a model grows more realistic it also becomes just as difficult to understand as the real-world processes it represents.”¹⁷ This paradox has numerous ramifications in many fields, but for my purposes here it is useful to consider what it brings to bear on the concept of the universal. The closer we approach any notion of “reality,” the more complex such ideas are, and increasingly less useful. The idea of the universal, like a map, is only of use when it simplifies reality; yet, when reality is simplified, there is always a choice involved—something *must always* be left out. Thus, the paradox of religious universalism is that all such discourse simultaneously reveals and conceals: the more it shines light upon a claimed universal perspective, the more it occludes others. As Milton Sernett observes:

Perhaps psychohistorians will someday explain for us why the archives of the past overflow with examples of how religion has, on the one hand, served as a cross-cultural unifying principle while, on the other hand, it has been a means by which insiders define themselves over against outsiders.¹⁸

Even though universal perspectives are useful as models of unification, they are also necessarily divisive as discourses through which specific communities operating within particular times and places stake out their claims. In this sense, as Ernesto Laclau put it, “the universal is no more than a particular that has become dominant.”¹⁹ Yet, from a metaphysical perspective, the fact that universals are derived from so-called particulars does not necessarily diminish their universal status. In the case of universalizing religions such as Christianity or Islam, historical

particulars constitute much of revelation itself. But to argue that such particulars can become universally applicable *is not necessarily* to argue that they transcend their particularity. Rather, part of the paradox of universalism is an inherent confusion between the universal and the particular, as Laclau observes: “Is it universal or particular? If the latter, universality can only be a particularity that defines itself in terms of a limitless exclusion; if the former, the particular itself becomes part of the universal, and the dividing line is again blurred.”²⁰

The concern that fuels the theoretical impetus behind this book thus focuses on universalist mapping practices that tend to lose sight of—or simply disregard—the inherent, dialectical tension between the universal and the particular as conceived within all religious discourse. As a pertinent example of this, and one that I revisit in chapter 4, the Perennialist scholar James Cutsinger recently asserted that to be objective, scholars of religious studies “must entertain the possibility” that Frithjof Schuon was able to directly access “the Truth—with that capital ‘T’” in ways that are not explicable through “*sheerly natural causes or purely human phenomena*.”²¹ Cutsinger goes on to make the even bolder claim (coming as it does from a professor in a religious studies department at a public research university) that such a gnostic “power of immediate or intuitive discernment [is] unobstructed by the boundaries of physical objects and *unaffected by the limitations of historical circumstance*.”²² Taking Cutsinger’s definition of gnostic power at face value,²³ it stands to reason that if “limitations of historical circumstance” could indeed be shown as constitutive for any given transcendent claim to universal knowledge, then such a claim would necessarily be called into question. Thus, setting aside the thorny question of ontology, and in response to Cutsinger, the contention that threads together the various arguments throughout this book is simply this: all universal claims *inevitably* carry the burden of their own socio-historical genealogies. That is to say, every map bears the situated perspective of its cartographer.

In regards to my personal cartographic perspective, one final note is in order. In terms of the field of Ibn ‘Arabi studies, the insights contained in this book are critically indebted to two of the most formidable, contemporary scholars who write on Ibn ‘Arabi in European languages: Michel Chodkiewicz and William Chittick. In the last several decades, their immeasurable contribution has enriched and transformed how Ibn ‘Arabi is read and understood. Both scholars are at pains to articulate the importance of sacred law for Ibn ‘Arabi—a point I revisit from different perspectives throughout this work. No doubt, they would also agree that Ibn ‘Arabi’s discourse would qualify as universalist in some fashion. Yet in terms of critically inspiring my particular theoretical interposition, Chodkiewicz has importantly, *albeit discretely*, brought to light the absolutist and exclusivist nature of Ibn ‘Arabi’s particular brand of universalism in opposition to

Chittick's more inclusivist interpretive framework. In the first half of this book, I spend significant time fleshing out this particular aspect of Chodkiewicz's wide-ranging insight, while critiquing the aspect of Chittick's work that has seemingly attempted to attenuate what I refer to as Ibn 'Arabi's political metaphysics and its embedded supersessionism. Yet, any critique of Chittick I proffer here must be understood as situated within a larger indebtedness owed to his prolific and careful expositions of the Andalusian Sufi's corpus. Without having encountered and benefited from Chittick's extraordinary erudition, I could never have begun my ongoing journey of understanding and appreciation of Ibn 'Arabi's work and thought. I thus offer the interventions of this book not in the spirit of opposition, but as additional vantage points to a necessary and ongoing conversation.

Introduction

IBN ʿARABI AND THE CARTOGRAPHY OF UNIVERSALISM

What we normally call universalism is a particularism thinking itself as universalism, and it is worthwhile doubting whether universalism could ever exist otherwise.

NAOKI SAKAI, “Modernity and Its Critique:
The Problem of Universalism and Particularism.”¹

REVERED BY COUNTLESS followers and admirers spanning over seven centuries and nearly as many continents, the Andalusian Sufi Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), or more popularly Ibn ʿArabi, is commonly referred to as “the Greatest Master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*)—or as Bulent Rauf, one of his most seminal New Age commentators, once called him: “the universal Doctor Maximus.”² In the chapters that follow, I will show how Ibn ʿArabi imperially mapped the religious Other, while simultaneously exploring the ways in which his ideas have been mapped and universalized within the interpretative field of the prolific Swiss-German esotericist Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998). This book is thus an attempt to theorize Ibn ʿArabi’s own conception of universalist metaphysics in juxtaposition to his contemporary universalist reception—a reception that I argue projects European concepts of religion upon the Andalusian Sufi’s discourse in the guise of transhistorical and transcultural continuity. I hold such a theoretical lens essential in the study of Ibn ʿArabi, and Sufism more broadly, for without it scholars run the risk of unwittingly perpetuating and further naturalizing long-standing European orders of religious authenticity.³ As such, I approach my subject first and foremost from the framework of religious studies, in the sense that I am preoccupied with how various discursive communities employ the protean and situated category of “religion.”⁴

In this introduction, I broadly chart the theoretical and discursive waters through which this book attempts to navigate. Beginning with an overview of my analytical trajectory, I problematize the notion of the universal in both the

discourse of Ibn 'Arabi and the interpretive field of contemporary Perennialism. In addition to establishing a framework for how Ibn 'Arabi's socio-political life-world can be read within an absolutist cosmology of a so-called perennial religion or *religio perennis*, I introduce the racio-spiritual grammar of Schuonian Perennialism and the orders of exclusion it harbors. I conclude with a chapter overview.

Mapping the Double Bind of Universality

In his groundbreaking work on European imperialism, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Walter Mignolo asserts that “maps *are* and *are not* territory.”⁵ Here, Mignolo alludes to Alfred Korzybski's famous claim, which I have already referred to in the prologue—that is, “a map *is not* the territory it represents.”⁶ Yet, Mignolo goes on to argue that nevertheless, maps *are* territory “because, once they are accepted, they become a powerful tool for controlling territories, colonizing the mind and imposing themselves on the members of the community using the map as the real territory.”⁷ Here, Mignolo echoes Jean Baudrillard's assertion that today it is the map “that engenders the territory.”⁸ It is through careful attention to this dual sense of cartography, and the controlling power of its universal pretensions, that I approach the subject matter of this book.

Within the contemporary study of religion, the term “universalism” presents a double bind, since it is used to represent both exclusivist and inclusivist perspectives. Premodern proselytizing religious traditions—what the nineteenth-century French scholar of religion Léon Marillier aptly dubbed “universalizing religions”⁹—were framed within supersessionist doctrines of *universal* validity. Based on the original Latin *universus*, “all together, all taken collectively, whole, entire,”¹⁰ the term “universalism” as applied to such religions refers to how their truth claims are interpreted from within as valid for all people and all times.¹¹ Yet the term “universalism” is also commonly employed to articulate a meaning that focuses on the essential unity of various religions as a *plurality* rather than on the universal nature of one particular tradition. This usage denotes various types of inclusivist and pluralist perspectives that recognize broader sets of valid doctrines or religious formations, typically understood as united within an underlying or transcendent universal truth or *ur-religion*—what Schuon has defined as “the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or what may be called the *religio perennis*; this is the religion to which the sages adhere, one which is always and necessarily founded upon formal elements of divine institution.”¹²

Yet, a closer look at such apparently tolerant, pluralistic modalities of universalism in comparison with the seemingly coercive triumphalism of their

proselytizing cousins reveals a disturbing paradox. Because maps purport intelligibility no matter who reads them or from what perspective, every map inherently claims an inclusive, universal validity. But like all ontological truth claims, maps can only offer a simplified perspective—a perspective that is, in keeping with the traditional metaphor, only two-dimensional. This two-dimensionality is thus an imposition upon the reader that reduces him or her to its flattened horizon. Such a coercive flattening can be likened to the anxiety articulated by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the face of the horrors of the Shoah as “the tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal,” where the “irreducible singularity” of the individual is threatened by theorizations of ontic totality.¹³ Here, Levinas pushes back against the political ramifications of Western metaphysics as traditionally plotted at the cost of the Other subsumed within an egoistic whole—what Levinas similarly refers to as the “imperialism of the same.”¹⁴ In such an endeavor, ontology can be likened to an enchanted looking glass of great power within which situated ideals of the self are perceived at the level of a transcendence that claims to encompass the Other.¹⁵ In other words, every recourse to universalism, whether inclusive or exclusive, is an imposition of a particular homogenous perspective—a sameness ultimately based on exclusion. As the sociologist Ulrich Beck observes:

In any form of universalism, all forms of human life are located within a single order of civilization, with the result that cultural differences are either transcended or excluded. In this sense, the project is hegemonic: the other’s voice is permitted entry only as the voice of sameness, as a confirmation of oneself, contemplation of oneself, dialogue with oneself.¹⁶

While premodern forms of universal religious discourse—such as the medieval supersessionism of Christianity and Islam—are seemingly self-aware of their own hegemonic exclusivism, it is only in modernity where discourses of religious universalism claim to variously include all worldviews equally. Yet, just below the surface of modern universalist schemes of religious inclusivism lie orders of exclusivism that are seldom acknowledged, since any such acknowledgment would throw into question their entire *raison d’être*. From this perspective, cosmological maps should be understood as hegemonic projections of absolute knowledge. Indeed, the core argument of this book is that all modalities of universalism—both premodern, overtly imperial forms and modern, ostensibly tolerant forms—are particular instantiations of power. Thus, “the moment you embrace universality and the idea of truth *you are entangled in a struggle* with the partisans of particularity and of alternative versions of universal truth.”¹⁷

While I read the cosmological maps of Ibn 'Arabi as naturally inscribed by medieval Islamic imperialism, I locate Schuonian Perennialism as similarly inscribed by European imperialism and its attendant colonization of knowledge under the auspices of a civilizing mission. In the conceptual spaces constructed within both of these mapping strategies, in the words of Mignolo, “a universal knowing subject is presupposed.”¹⁸ Moreover, there is a correspondence between universal knowledge and an assumed (in Ibn 'Arabi's case) or unspoken (in Schuon's) cache of power. How cosmic space is mapped in each of these two discursive regimes has a direct bearing on how religion itself is imagined. Yet with all of their obvious differences, their maps yield surprisingly similar enunciations of universal validity founded on premises of specific localities.

Charting the Discursive Trajectory

Echoing self-critical discussions in the field of religious studies that began over fifty years ago,¹⁹ Tomoko Masuzawa observes that “the idea of the fundamental unity of religions—or what may be reasonably termed liberal universalism—has been in evidence in much of the comparative enterprise since the nineteenth century.”²⁰ Yet, Masuzawa submits that “many of today's scholars would likely contest, rather than accept, this presumption that the unity of ‘religious experience’ should be the basis of religion as an academic discipline.”²¹ While such a position may be less common in religious studies today, it still plays a critical role in the academic study of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, with scholars who are sympathetic to the particular philosophical and theological orientation of Perennialism.²² Indeed, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has described Schuon as a “master of the discipline of comparative religion,” asserting that “from the point of view of sheer scholarly knowledge combined with metaphysical penetrations, *it is hardly possible to find a contemporary corpus of writings with the same all-embracing and comprehensive nature combined with incredible depth.*”²³ Although Schuon's large corpus of over thirty works remains relatively obscure, his philosophical framework commands one of the most dominant knowledge regimes in the contemporary “Western”²⁴ reception of Ibn 'Arabi. Indeed, James Morris, a leading expert on Ibn 'Arabi, has acknowledged Schuon's ubiquitous influence in interpreting and transmitting Ibn 'Arabi's thought to “academic specialists in the spiritual dimensions of religious studies.”²⁵

Ibn 'Arabi's monistic-leaning mysticism has a long-standing and popular correlation with the Islamic metaphysical axiom known as “the Unity of Being” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Although this particular terminology was never explicitly used by Ibn 'Arabi himself, it has indeed come to emblematically represent his unitive metaphysics that professes God as the ontological reality of all things.²⁶

Through his correlation with the doctrine of the Unity of Being, Ibn ‘Arabi is often associated in the West with Schuon’s thought and his ostensibly similar concept of “the Transcendent Unity of Religions”—the title of his first major work.²⁷ In the second half of the twentieth century, Schuon not only served as the leader of the first organized traditionalist European Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*)²⁸ but also, upon the death of the French Traditionalist René Guénon in 1951, became the foremost proponent of the Perennial Philosophy.²⁹ *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (*De l’Unité transcendante des Religions*, 1948) argues that a transhistorical religious essence unifies all religious traditions beyond the limits of exoteric absolutism, thus embracing all normative religious traditions as universally valid means to the divine. According to Perennialist thought, such religious universalism forms the basis of the most ancient wisdom and is the sacred inheritance of all great mystics from every religious tradition.

Indeed, Ibn ‘Arabi himself is often alleged to have been a proto-Perennialist. For example, the Perennialist author and Schuonian William Stoddart has remarked that Ibn ‘Arabi should be acknowledged as one of the main “forerunners of the perennial philosophy in the East” since he “explained with particular cogency how an ‘essence’ of necessity had many ‘forms.’”³⁰ Stoddart’s statement appears to be an allusion to Ibn ‘Arabi’s famous verses from his collection of poems, *The Interpreter of Desires* (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq*)—which I discuss in detail in chapter 1—that claim a heart “capable of every form” and profess “the religion of Love.” Indeed, Schuon himself repeatedly mentions in his own writings these same lines of Ibn ‘Arabi to help exposit the *religio perennis* as the underlying truth of all religions. In one such passage, he states:

The *religio perennis* is fundamentally this: the Real entered into the illusory so that the illusory might be able to return into the Real. It is this mystery, together with the metaphysical discernment and contemplative concentration that are its complement, which alone is important in an absolute sense from the point of view of *gnosis*; for the gnostic—in the etymological and rightful sense of that word—there is in the last analysis no other “religion.” It is what Ibn Arabi called the “religion of Love.”³¹

As I will discuss momentarily, although Ibn ‘Arabi’s *ultimate* soteriological vision is famously informed by a radical hermeneutic of mercy acknowledging that even those in eternal damnation will eventually find contentment and bliss, throughout this book I demonstrate how close readings of his positions on the religious Other reveal a traditionally derived supersessionism based on the exclusive superiority of Islam and its abrogation of all previous religious dispensations. In direct opposition to prominent universalist and Perennialist readings, I throw

into relief how Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the religious Other is founded on a political metaphysics in which the Prophet Muhammad, and thus the religion of Islam, not only triumphs over but also *ultimately subsumes* all previous religions and their laws. While it is certainly true that Ibn 'Arabi's "theomonism"³² is submersed within a unitive mysticism of love—a mysticism often taken in the West to be opposed to religious exclusivism—I argue that intertwined with this unitive love is a universal political metaphysics that discursively absorbs all religio-political competition.

Perennialism, Ibn 'Arabi, and the Universal

The idea of the universal has been directly associated with Perennialism since its early formation. While Guénon never used the term "perennial philosophy" (*philosophia perennis*) itself, preferring instead "the primordial tradition,"³³ the eminent historian and seminal Perennialist author Ananda K. Coomaraswamy did use it but with the additional term "universal"—that is, "*Philosophia Perennis et Universalis*"—noting that along with the idea of a perennial philosophy, "*Universalis* must be understood, for this 'philosophy' has been the common inheritance of all mankind without exception."³⁴ Moreover, in its direct connection with Perennialism, the idea of the universal is often imbricated with the thought of Ibn 'Arabi. For example, in his 1972 essay, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," Nasr connects Ibn 'Arabi's aforementioned verses from *The Interpreter of Desires* with Schuonian Perennialism and the notion of the transcendent unity of religions. Not only is the Sufi "one who seeks to transcend the world of forms, to journey from multiplicity to Unity, from the particular to the Universal," but also Sufism itself "is *the most universal affirmation of that perennial wisdom* which stands at the heart of Islam and in fact of all religion as such."³⁵ Nasr goes on to state that "it is this supreme doctrine of Unity . . . to which Ibn 'Arabî refers in his well-known verses in the *Tarjumân al-ashwâq*. . . . It is a transcendent knowledge that reveals the inner unity of religions."³⁶ In his work *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'ân and Interfaith Dialogue*, the Perennialist scholar Reza Shah-Kazemi similarly identifies his approach as both Schuonian³⁷ and "universalist,"³⁸ directly connecting it with Ibn 'Arabi and his doctrine of the "universal capacity of the heart," thus also referring to Ibn 'Arabi's famous lines from *The Interpreter*.³⁹

Yet, here it is important to contextualize the often confusing, and confused, idea of the universal in relation to Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics. In *Islam and the Fate of Others*, Mohammad Khalil categorizes Islamic universalism in a soteriological sense in relation to its supposed binary opposite of "damnationism." Here, these terms are used in the specific context of discourses having to do with the duration

of Hell: universalists hold that all people will be granted eternal Paradise, while damnationists maintain that some will have to endure the Fire eternally. To complicate things even more, the category of universalism, for Khalil, includes the subgroups quasi- and ultimate universalism.⁴⁰ Somewhat ironically, Khalil is forced to classify Ibn ‘Arabi as only a “quasi-universalist” since, according to Ibn ‘Arabi’s rather unique mixture of literalism and a hermeneutics of mercy, there will be people who will remain in Hell forever even though their punishment will cease and it will become blissful for them. As Khalil notes, the entire concept of “chastisement” for Ibn ‘Arabi is “therapeutic”—that is, “it rectifies” because it is issued from God through the ruling property of divine mercy.⁴¹ Thus, in one of his more well-known hermeneutical inversions, Ibn ‘Arabi takes the rectification of divine chastisement to its logical conclusion where he claims that the punishment (*‘adhāb*) of Hell ultimately transforms into a blissful “sweetness” (*‘udhūba*) for its denizens.⁴²

In addition to his binary universalism/damnationism, Khalil still further divides Muslim theological discourses into the now-standard threefold typology of inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism.⁴³ However, in Khalil’s treatment he includes the additional subgroups of limited and liberal inclusivism.⁴⁴ Indeed, Khalil’s proliferation of categories and final classification of Ibn ‘Arabi as a “liberal inclusivist” over that of a pluralist—in addition to a quasi-universalist—quickly reaches a point of diminishing returns where such categories grouped together seem too complex to be overly useful.⁴⁵

Yet, more important for the present discussion, Khalil jettisons the usual inclusion of truth claims within the standard threefold model mentioned above and situates his classifications from within a strictly soteriological basis.⁴⁶ As such, Khalil asserts that Ibn ‘Arabi

affirms the salvation of “sincere” non-Muslims, because of his belief that every single path we take is not only created by but leads to God—a God of mercy (*rahma*) and nobility (*karam*)—he maintains that *all* of humanity, including even the most wicked, will ultimately arrive at bliss.⁴⁷

Because his ultimate soteriology is informed by such a radical hermeneutic of mercy, Ibn ‘Arabi holds that even those in eternal damnation will eventually experience eternal bliss. Yet, because Khalil does not address Ibn ‘Arabi’s views on the epistemological validity of other scriptural truth claims, the implications regarding a severe punishment for those in Hell during the interim period remain unarticulated.

Indeed, it is a popular contention, commonly encountered in Perennialist discourse, that Ibn ‘Arabi’s oft-mentioned notion of “the divinity of beliefs”

(*al-ilāh fi al-i'tiqādāt*)⁴⁸ is simply a doctrine on the universal divinity of religions or Schuon's transcendent unity of religions.⁴⁹ Yet, as I set forth in chapter 1, such assertions evince a reading of Ibn 'Arabi at once colored by contemporary universalist axioms and anachronistically embedded within the ubiquitous modern understanding of religions as "systems of belief." Even though Ibn 'Arabi held that every human being is engaged in worship—since the very essence of creation is precisely that—he asserted that "the one who associates partners with God" (*al-mushrik*) is "wretched" (*shaqī*) since he or she has discourteously gone against revelation.⁵⁰ And as I point out throughout the coming chapters of this book, there are multiple places where Ibn 'Arabi castigates the Jews and the Christians for their supposed blasphemy and unbelief.⁵¹

Khalil himself concedes that for Ibn 'Arabi, "although all will eventually attain felicity as they proceed toward God, the righteous will be spared the 'deserts, perils, vicious predators, and harmful serpents' found along the way."⁵² Here Khalil quotes a larger discussion from Chittick (who, as I discuss in chapter 3, also writes within the Schuonian interpretative field) recounting Ibn 'Arabi's concept that all paths lead back to God. Chittick relates that for Ibn 'Arabi, perfect saints understand with the "eye of the heart" that all things, good and evil, exist through God's will and His "creative command" (*al-amr al-takwīnī*). However, Chittick immediately qualifies this statement by asserting the dialectical necessity of God's "prescriptive command" (*al-amr al-taklīfī*) in Ibn 'Arabi's thought, which is the origin of revealed law. Here, Chittick notes:

In no way does their acceptance of all beliefs negate their acknowledgement that everyone is called to follow the prescriptive command, which sets down the immediate path to felicity. This is why Ibn al-'Arabī writes, "It is incumbent upon you to practice the worship of God brought by the Shariah and tradition [*al-sam*]." He explains that the person who sees things as they truly are "travels on the path of felicity that is not preceded by any wretchedness, for this path is easy, bright, exemplary, pure, unstained, and without any crookedness or deviation. As for the other path, its final outcome is felicity, but along the way are found deserts, perils, vicious predators, and harmful serpents. *Hence no created thing reaches the end of this second path without suffering those terrors.*"⁵³

Because Ibn 'Arabi holds "wrath" as an eternal divine attribute, its consequence of "chastisement" is *also* considered by him to be an eternal attribute.⁵⁴ It is therefore important to note that while Ibn 'Arabi held that "every single path we take is not only created by but leads to God," as Khalil does above, he *also* believed that the

interim between any path and its destination of felicity is filled with either divine reward or chastisement. And as Chittick himself stresses in the passage above, the criteria that Ibn ‘Arabi used for distinguishing between them was based on revealed law—that is, the sharia.

All of this is to say that even careful treatments of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought can fail to distinguish between his clear notion of ultimate, universal salvation and the interim implications of his supersessionism.⁵⁵ As I argue in chapter 2 against the majority of Perennialist interpretations, including that of Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabi is a staunch supersessionist, claiming that “the abrogation (*naskh*) of all of the (previously) revealed laws (*jami’ al-sharā’i’*) by Muhammad’s revealed law (*sharī’a*)” is divinely decreed.⁵⁶ Although the sharia of Muhammad does permit the People of the Book to continue to follow their revealed laws, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, it does so only if their adherents submit to the Qur’anic injunction of verse 9:29 and pay the “indemnity tax” (*jizya*) “in a state of humiliation.”⁵⁷ As I further show in chapter 3, Ibn ‘Arabi clearly holds that the People of the Book are also guilty of “corruption of the text” (*taḥrīf al-naṣṣ*), having changed the actual words of their once-pure revelation. Thus, in sharp contrast to the Perennialist notion of the “universal validity” of religions, here the spiritual efficacy of Judaism and Christianity appears to be determined by *obedience* to the revelation of Muhammad rather than any particular validity that Ibn ‘Arabi grants to the Torah or Gospel. While it may be initially comforting to hear that according to Ibn ‘Arabi all Christians or Jews will ultimately be “saved,” the implied potential for an untold number to suffer a prolonged period of “therapeutic” purification in Hell for following corrupted scriptures or abrogated dispensations without the salvific remuneration of an indemnity tax would seem to warrant pause for those who claim, like Sayafaatun Almirzanah, that Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysical approach “is very essential in enhancing interfaith dialogue and acceptance of different religious perspectives.”⁵⁸

Although exclusivist notions of religious supersessionism and socio-political authority in Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought remain largely unacknowledged or regularly relegated as accidental to his core metaphysics, his metaphysical cosmography was clearly formed within the medieval crucible of religious rivalry and absolutism. Thus, following Hugh Nicholson’s recent disavowal of “a nonrelational and nonpolitical core of religious experience,”⁵⁹ I argue that the wider religio-political absolutism of Ibn ‘Arabi’s socio-historical location cannot be dissociated from his own metaphysical anthropology, cosmology, and cosmography. Ibn ‘Arabi’s monistic discourse purposefully blurs the dialectical boundaries between the human and the divine, thus marking modern attempts to decisively separate his mystical truth from his socio-political context as more reflective of longstanding

Euro-American discourses on religious authenticity than Ibn 'Arabi's own historically situated political metaphysics.

Mapping Ibn 'Arabi and the Political

Details of Ibn 'Arabi's life are strewn throughout the core texts of his vast corpus (currently estimated to comprise over 300 works of greatly differing lengths⁶⁰). Gathered together, these details can be read as adumbrating something of an autohagiography.⁶¹ Rather than rehash all of its contours, here I will briefly rehearse some of its more essential features and then discuss how they have been variously configured in contemporary universalist retellings.

Born in Murcia, Spain, in 1165 CE, Ibn 'Arabi's father most likely served its independent emir, Ibn Mardaniš (r. 1147–1172), in some soldierly capacity. When Murcia fell in 1172 to the Almohads, Ibn 'Arabi's father moved his family to Seville, the provincial capital of the Almohad caliphate, where he pledged his allegiance and military service to the caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184). Coming from a military family, Ibn 'Arabi was himself trained as a soldier and was a member of the caliphal army.⁶² When he was around fourteen or fifteen years old, he apparently experienced a formative spiritual awakening that would set the stage for a life filled with recurrent visions and claims of attaining the highest station of sainthood.⁶³ Soon after, he took up learning the traditional religious disciplines and devoted himself especially to the study of the Qur'an and hadith.⁶⁴ When he was nineteen years old, he definitively left the army, his wealth, and his intimate friends, dedicating his life to the mystical path.⁶⁵ It was during this time that he sat with and befriended mystics throughout Andalusia and Northwest Africa, whose stories he recorded in various places, but most famously in his hagiographical work *The Spirit of Holiness in the Counseling of the Soul* (*Rūḥ al-quds fī munāsaḥat al-naḥs*).

In the face of the steady progress made by Christian armies in the Iberian Peninsula and believing he had learned all he could from his teachers in the Islamic West, Ibn 'Arabi left Andalusia for good around the year 1200. This began a period of not only extensive traveling but also a prolific outpouring of writing, including his multivolume opus *The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*), which he began in 1202—after encountering a theophanic youth (*fatā*) on the Hajj—and did not complete until 1238.⁶⁶ Besides Mecca, his eastward travels led him to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Anatolia, where he spent various amounts of time and established several important relationships with powerful rulers. The most famous of these relationships, as I discuss in chapter 2, was his friendship with the Seljuk Sultan of Anatolia, 'Izz al-Dīn Kaykā'us I (r. 1211–1220), whom he advised to impose discriminatory regulations upon his

“protected” (*dhimmi*) Christian subjects. In 1223, Ibn ‘Arabi permanently settled in Damascus with the support and protection of the Banū Zakī, a prominent Damascene family of *ulama*.⁶⁷ There he spent the remaining seventeen years of his life transmitting his teachings to a small circle of intimate disciples and finishing his by now immense written corpus, including *The Ring Stones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*),⁶⁸ his *summa metaphysica*.⁶⁹

Although the ostensible purpose for historical narratives, and especially biographies, is to accurately reproduce events they report, they too are maps. Such narratives offer, as Hayden White observes, “a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an *icon* of the structure of those events in our literary tradition.”⁷⁰ Indeed, in Euro-American accounts, Ibn ‘Arabi’s life story has taken on the classical and Romantic mythos of an epic quest for illumination, more specifically, the journey “from the Occident to the Orient.”⁷¹ In his discussion of Ibn Sīnā’s (d. 1037) famous “visionary recitals,” Nasr notes that

the Orient, being the place of the rising Sun, symbolizes the domain of pure forms, which is the domain of light, while the Occident, where the Sun sets, corresponds to the darkness of matter. . . . The gnostic’s journey takes him from matter to pure form, from the Occident of darkness to the Orient of light.⁷²

In a parallel construction, the distinguished Sorbonne Orientalist and esotericist Henry Corbin (d. 1978) imagined Ibn ‘Arabi as a “pilgrim to the Orient,” claiming that his turn eastward was an enlightened departure from a moribund Western legalism to an Oriental realm of spiritual enchantment. In Corbin’s mapping of Ibn ‘Arabi’s heroic journey, the Andalusian Sufi leaves behind his “earthly homeland” in the Arab Occident and emerges in the Persian Orient as the spiritual equal of the celebrated Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273).⁷³ In so doing, according to Corbin, Ibn ‘Arabi “attained to the esoteric Truth” and passed “*through and beyond the darkness of the Law and of the exoteric religion*.”⁷⁴ Like Orientalist conceits about Rumi, Corbin held that Ibn ‘Arabi eventually liberated himself from the restrictive and dogmatic shackles of exoteric Islam. Such assertions, similar to Schuon’s own discursive practices, echo nineteenth-century European ideals of religious authenticity marked by a long-standing anti-Judaic tradition deprecating “legalism.”⁷⁵

While framing Ibn ‘Arabi’s life story as an epic quest for illumination in the Orient is perhaps the most common topos in his contemporary Euro-American reception, it is not the only one. For example, in *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony*, Stephen Schwartz takes an analogously Eurocentric, yet almost opposite approach. Here, Schwartz claims that it was Ibn ‘Arabi’s

so-called Spanish Sufism itself that “inaugurated a truly European Islam, providing a model for moderate Muslims living in Christian Europe in the twenty-first century.”⁷⁶ As such, Schwartz uncritically adopts a position that understands Sufism as an Islamic appropriation of Christian mystical and monastic traditions of a supposed European West.⁷⁷ Indeed, he refers to this “view of the historical relations between Islam and the West” as “a secret history of the interreligious linkage of Europe and Asia in the past thousand years.”⁷⁸ The fruits of such a hidden past, according to Schwartz, have given rise to Sufism as an “alternative” to “the stagnation imposed in Islam today by radical ideology”—an alternative that reveals “tendencies toward an exalted spirituality, love of Jesus, and resistance to *Shari'ah*-centered literalism.”⁷⁹

Even though more nuanced than the two extremes of Corbin and Schwartz, Claude Addas—Ibn 'Arabi's most erudite contemporary biographer—also configures the topos of a journey to the Orient in a narrative that attempts to dissociate Ibn 'Arabi's original metaphysical purity from his own locality and later political engagement. Here, Addas claims that Ibn 'Arabi's Western abode afforded him a sanctified space “*resolutely aloof from political life*,” while his Meccan investiture as “the Seal of the Saints” (*khātām al-awliyā'*), which I discuss more below, required that he enter the political sphere in “the role of ‘advisor to princes’ . . . among the Ayyūbids and the Seljuks.”⁸⁰ Even so, Addas insists that Ibn 'Arabi still managed to ultimately distance himself from the politics of his day since such “circumstantial issues” had really nothing to do with his spiritual mission.⁸¹

Although all of the above narrative configurations are marked by different ways of interpreting Ibn 'Arabi's midlife sojourn eastward, they are at base universalist maps that attempt to show, in one way or another, the purity of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics as distinct from the corruptive particularism of time and place. In this book, I argue that such maps form part of a larger metaphysical tradition of cartography transmitted through a specific European intellectual and religious history. Indeed, since the theoretical intervention of the controversial German philosopher Carl Schmitt, the “depoliticization” of religious discourse in the modern West has become increasingly acknowledged and thus theorized in the field of religious studies. In his 1927 work, *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt situates the modern privatization of religion as originating in the European reaction to the religious disputes of the sixteenth century when “theology, the former central domain, was abandoned because it was controversial, in favor of another—neutral—domain.”⁸² Schmitt therefore laments that “concepts elaborated over many centuries of theological reflection now became uninteresting and merely private matters.”⁸³ Thus, as Grace Jantzen more recently observes, the Enlightenment impetus to quarantine religion (and its attendant threat of

violence) to individual belief has played a central role in the modern Western concept of authentic religious experience

as essentially a private, inner state, having nothing to do with outer, public realities. It was, instead, a strictly personal matter. It could, however, be cultivated; and could produce states of calm and tranquility which would enable return to those public realities with less anxiety and inner turmoil. Understood in these terms, *mysticism becomes domesticated, is rendered unthreatening to the public political realm.*⁸⁴

Thus, the metaphysical category of mysticism as the universal core of exoteric religion emerges in secular modernity as a discursive site carrying with it an aura of authentic religiosity that is often called upon as a refuge from politics and the discord of religious rivalry and absolutism. Indeed, it is precisely the anachronistic imposition of the modern notion of “universality” upon Ibn ‘Arabi that *depoliticizes* his discourse, thereby subtly associating his inward mystical quest with the transcendence of outward religious difference. For example, in a 1963 essay, the distinguished Islamicist and comparativist Wilfred Cantwell Smith situates Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics (i.e., *waḥdat al-wujūd*) within a “universalist Ṣūfī interpretation of the Islamic order” in decided opposition to the “closed-system” of communal and “formalist” Islam.⁸⁵ Here, Smith depoliticizes Ibn ‘Arabi’s “metaphysical monism” by universalizing it, stating that “to believe in the ultimate unity of the world and the universe is to believe also in the unity of humankind.”⁸⁶ Thus, according to Smith, any type of metaphysics that acknowledges a divine unity must also acknowledge the unity of all religions. In this book, I wish to unsettle such attempts to dissociate Ibn ‘Arabi’s unitive mysticism from what might be called his “political theology”⁸⁷—a theology, I argue, that is constituted more by religious difference than by unity and forms an essential part of his own universalist tradition of metaphysical mapping.

The Perennial Religion in the Hierarchical Universe of Ibn ‘Arabi

In the thirteenth-century Muslim world of cartography, the geographic system of Ptolemy was used to help place the Arabs within a universal context. In such maps, “the center of space and memory is the Arabic world.”⁸⁸ Like their Christian counterparts in Europe who did not even acknowledge the Islamic world in their ethnocentric maps, Muslim cartographers like Muḥammad al-Idrīsī (d. 1166) similarly ignored the existence of Europe.⁸⁹ Just as medieval Muslim geography “took

as its basic unit the Islamic Empire, the *Dar al-Islam*,"⁹⁰ so too did Muslim theocosmology. "The original Muslim universalizing impulse," as Amira Bennison notes, "rested on the idea, shared with Christianity, that the faith would ideally become the sole religion of mankind."⁹¹

Muslim universalism thus went hand in hand with the classical idea of the caliph, who "presided over a religion which was presented as the consummation of all previous divine revelation."⁹² Indeed, as Peter Fibiger Bang observes, "At the heart of the notion of universal empire is a hierarchical conception of rulers and statehood."⁹³ And while Sufism is often imagined in the contemporary West as based on a type of inward "spirituality" that transcends all social and political divisions, medieval Sufism was in fact suffused with this type of imperial hierarchy. As Margaret Malamud notes:

The [Sufi] model of dominance and submission that structured relations between masters and disciples replicated the way in which power was constructed and dispersed in medieval Islamic societies: namely, through multiple dyadic and hierarchical relationships of authority and dependence that were continuously dissolved and reformed. This pervasive pattern was operative in the spiritual, the political, and the familial realms.⁹⁴

Malamud thus asserts that medieval Sufi discourse and practice affirmed and consecrated "hierarchy and inequality in the mundane world by connecting them to the divine will and order."⁹⁵ Yet, such hierarchical models within Sufism also played a critical role in the social cohesion of medieval Muslim societies, which "came to rely on authoritarian relationships grounded in esoteric doctrines to discipline and control the desires of its subjects."⁹⁶

Though Ibn 'Arabi's thought was thoroughly inscribed by an Islamic imperial cosmology, his metaphysical vision did not simply promote the restoration of the original caliphal hierarchy. More radically, he envisioned himself as standing in for it altogether. As Marshall Hodgson perspicaciously observed, Ibn 'Arabi's own conception of spiritual hierarchy and the idea of a cosmic axial saint filled the political gap left by the disintegration of caliphal power beginning in the tenth century: "There might no longer be a caliph with power in the ordinary political sense. But there remained a true spiritual caliph, the immediate representative of God, who bore a far more basic sway than any outward caliph."⁹⁷

Indeed, after claiming to attain to the Muhammadan Station and thereby inheriting "the comprehensiveness of Muhammad (*jam'at muhammad*),"⁹⁸ Ibn 'Arabi located his cosmic function at the very apex of the earthly hierarchy of saints: the Seal of the Saints, or more specifically, the Seal of Muhammadan