

# RETHINKING THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE IN AN ERA OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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## ABSTRACT

*If it had been the Lord's will, they would all have believed – all who are on earth!*

*Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!*

*(Qur'an, 10:99)*

After reading ayats like the one taken as the motto of this paper, it is definitely not easy to claim that the Qur'an encourages an exclusivist approach towards other religions. In our rethinking this Islamic pluralistic perspective and what it means today, we should take into consideration the very definition of religious pluralism by David Ray Griffin in the first chapter of his *Deep Religious Pluralism* ("Religious pluralists do not believe that their own religion is the only legitimate one. They believe that other religions can provide positive values and truths, even salvation – however defined – to their adherents," p. xiii). Taking this definition of religious pluralism into consideration, then, it is very important to show that Islam generally adhered to a pluralistic position from its very beginnings, i.e. the Prophet of Islam created a single community where citizenship for and cooperation with non-Muslims were essential, which is diametrically opposed to today's prevailing interpretations of Islam and the actual state of affairs. The author firmly believes that in this year of 2008 and the 70th anniversary of Shaykh Allama Muhammad Iqbal's death it is possible to reconsider this pluralistic society created in Medina, according to which an Islamic community or state should essentially be pluralistic, without allowing any kind of oppression, or without falling into so called U-turned Islam, intellectual myopia and parochialism.

This is the same dilemma expressed in S.H. Nasr's article "To Live in a World with No Center – and Many" in which, for Nasr, every religion and culture is based on a centre from which stem moral, social, intellectual, and artistic values. Moreover, the real task for us is how to live in a way that appreciates the value and importance of these various religions and cultures without falling into the dangers of debilitating relativism and nihilism. In this era of crisis of value orientation at every level, it is important to emphasize that the main reason for holding a pluralistic position lies in his consideration that a centreless world possesses the greatest danger for future generations.

Finally, still on the tracks of these two thinkers (notwithstanding the fact that Iqbal was criticized by S.H. Nasr), it is possible to reconsider significant possibilities that can lead to the reconstruction of a more plausible Islamic pluralistic position today, and with some distinctions in comparison with other contemporary and classical Muslim thinkers as well, the author believes that their views can be taken as good "flucht lienen" for reconstructing a more plausible and adequate Islamic pluralistic position vs. today's prevailing exclusivist one, which is really a great sin against God and people alike.

In recent years, philosophers in the Balkan region have begun to show a keen interest in learning the current discourse on religious pluralism. I do believe that our Bosnian translation of Iqbal's *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, as well as several books by S. H. Nasr and the work by David Ray Griffin that is referred to, would provide philosophers and theologians in this region with a secure foothold from which to embark on a study of the issue of religious pluralism in the wider field of Islamic and Western philosophy.

Key words: Ibn 'Arabī and the emergence of a more pluralistic consciousness, religious pluralism, philosophical cross-cultural dialogue in Islam, comparative philosophy.

## I

Philosophy, as Socrates demonstrated, is not something that simply gets taught – it is something one does. Philosophy that is not an instrument of social change is not philosophy. This view of philosophy, of course, is entirely compatible with today's prevailing philosophy of pragmatism – one

with which I could agree as a disciple of the *philosophia perennis et universalis* – while duly remarking that from the perspective of the perennial philosophy itself, practical benefit is not an end in itself, but the outcome of following the Truth of tradition. Clearly, if we study Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings in depth, as has been done many times through this Society’s endeavours and its annual symposia, there is a possibility we will find pluralist terms for life in the civil order onto which fate has launched us. It is not our intention here to go any deeper into the aesthetics of the cyber-world and the effects of derealization, the dubious reality-show mentality of today’s generations to which I shall make only passing reference and which is a barrier to a comprehensive understanding of the Muslim model of thought in general and that of Ibn ‘Arabi in particular, since it is still relatively unknown and has been but little studied in the western theoretical architecture of the twenty-first century, even here in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Let us then ask ourselves who, of the existing historical actors of today, would find the time, the will and the motive to reflect on the possibility of the relationship between essentially different cultural entities that are nonetheless familiar with on-going active dialogue as the conceivable future of human life on this earth? Personally, I see this kind of readiness for a genuine conceptual opening up to the experience of the truths of non-European cultural circles, primarily those of south and south-east Asia and the far East, and in particular in dialogue with the Muslim model of thought, through the existing projects of great families such as the Goethe Institut,<sup>83</sup> the Fulbright Visiting Specialist Program,<sup>84</sup> the British Council’s Open Europe Programme<sup>85</sup>, Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies (Center for Islamic Area Studies at Kyoto University – KIAS) and others of which I am a

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<sup>83</sup> For example, the periodical “Fikrun wa Fann/Art and Thought” for culture and the promotion of dialogue with the Islamic world, on [www.Goethe.De](http://www.Goethe.De), or [www.Qantara.De](http://www.Qantara.De) where one can find information on discussions on politics, culture and social issues in German, Arabic and English. Then there are *Zenith Online* and *The Ifa-Forum Dialogue*, which cover the Muslim world in 83 countries in a measured critical manner.

<sup>84</sup> Fulbright Visiting Specialists Program: Direct Access to the Muslim World on [www.Cies.Org/Visiting\\_Specialists/](http://www.Cies.Org/Visiting_Specialists/), a programme dedicated to establishing inter-religious dialogue with the Muslim world.

<sup>85</sup> A newly-launched programme, headed by Guido Jansen, Open Europe Programme British Council in Berlin, a colleague whom I recently had the opportunity to meet in Sarajevo with his team.

member, in which Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings should have a presence in a relationship with modern thinking.<sup>86</sup> I would agree, therefore, with Professor Chittick that his influence is spreading, both within the Muslim world and in the West, and that the activities of the Ibn ‘Arabi Society is one of the many signs of renewed interest in his teachings,<sup>87</sup> even if that interest is still far from sufficient.

## II

Ibn ‘Arabi should be, and without doubt already is, regarded as among the enduring contributors not merely to Islamic but to world civilization and religious understanding. Our on-going task in an era of globalization is to render this central dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought more widely acceptable, thereby countering the prevailing exclusivist approach to and interpretation of Islam with its pluralist outlook and model of thought within an Islamic pluralist position that is a powerful bulwark against the intellectual myopia and narrow-mindedness of our own times and their obtusities.

When I first crossed the threshold of the Ibn ‘Arabi Society in Oxford, almost a decade ago, and met Martin Nottcutt and his wife Caroline, followed by James Winston Morris at Hawick (Bashara School), I never imagined that I would become a member of that great family of admirers of the Shaykh al-Akbar, or that by publishing Morris’s series of public lectures in Sarajevo I would provide the kick-start for an outstanding bilingual publication,<sup>88</sup> which was reprinted later in English and translated into a number of other languages – I refer to his *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a*

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<sup>86</sup> See, e.g., Peter Coates, *Ibn ‘Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*, Anqa Publishing, 2002. This book is an appeal to reflect on some central ideas of modernity in the light of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings. For Akbarian studies and the way in which they are applied and transformed in the modern world, see the interesting study by Suha Taji-Farouki, *Beshara and Ibn ‘Arabi: A movement of sufi spirituality in the modern world*, Anqa Publishing 2007.

<sup>87</sup> See online article: Ibn al- ‘Arabi, by William C. Chittick (State University of New York).

<sup>88</sup> James Winston Morris, *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilization*, which I have translated in association with R. Hafizović and A. Silajdžić as *Orjentacije: islamska misao u svjetskoj civilizaciji*, El-Kalem, Sarajevo, 2001, pp. 193 (separate Bosnian and English versions).

*World Civilisation*.<sup>89</sup> After almost a decade of keeping steady track of the contribution this Society makes to the study of Ibn ‘Arabi world-wide, I must agree with our friend and colleague Morris, who said in Sarajevo that anyone who wants to be involved in translating and studying this leading thinker and Sufi, particularly in the dramatic development of the world of academic research into the scope of his profound influence on every aspect of the Islamic religion and the Islamic humanities, must consult past and present editions of the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* (Oxford, now in its fourth decade). Truly, as a wholehearted co-signatory to this view of Morris’s and to his assertion that if by chance Ibn ‘Arabi were alive today he would no doubt be a film director, we must say that this *Journal* has helped to create an active global network of scholars, researchers and translators whose influence is ever more visible at the numerous international conferences dedicated to the Shaykh al-akbar and his later Muslim interpreters, including some of our countrymen such as ‘Abdullah Bosnawi, who is already a classical thinker, and others, as well as modern scholars such as my colleague Rešid Hafizović of the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Sarajevo, who has gathered quite a flock of young researchers around himself.

For as Morris would say, „This world-wide collective effort to rediscover the profound influences of Ibn Ibn ‘Arabi and his teachings on central dimensions of Islamic culture from W. Africa to China and Indonesia is not just an academic project of historical 'archaeology': those involved, in each country and region concerned, are well aware of the contemporary and future significance of Ibn ‘Arabi's understanding of the roots of Islamic spirituality and tradition for any lasting effort of renewal and revivification within Islam and the emerging global civilisation“<sup>90</sup>. At this very point, with the reference to the enduring existential reflection on the central issues and perspectives of all Ibn ‘Arabi’s available writings, with views and emphases that are radically different and yet ultimately astonishingly complementary, I should like to

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<sup>89</sup> *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation*. London, Archetype Press, 2004. (Arabic, Urdu and French translations in preparation or already in print).

*Yonelimler: Bir Dünya Medeniyetinde İslam Düşüncesi*. Istanbul, İnsan yayınları [Humanities Press], 2006. (Turkish translation by Prof. Mahmud Erol Kiliç.)

*Sufi-Sufi Merajut Peradaban*. Jakarta, Forum Sebangsa, 2003. (Indonesian translation by B. Harun.)

<sup>90</sup> See his „Orientations“, Archetype, Cambridge, 2004, p. 125.

address some questions of Selfhood in the context of the Islamic perspective in this age of religious and philosophical pluralism.

The purpose of this short paper, then, is to draw the attention of this valued audience once again to the universal elements of classical Islamic thought and spirituality, which are explicitly based on the universal dimensions of human experience. I am of the firm belief that these elements will supply the badly-needed foundations for the creation of genuine communication and a real community– the foundations for enduring cultural creativity, individual realization and collection transformation in the evolving global civilization. However, it is our misfortune that we are unable to perceive that they have already once prompted this far-reaching form of creativity, leadership, and political and spiritual insights, which gave rise to the great multi-cultural and multi-confessional civilizations of ‘Abbasid Baghdad (al-Farabi), Andalusia (Ibn Tufayl, Averroes and Ibn ‘Arabi) and the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid empires.

This raises the question of what the Islamic position actually is—one of exclusivism, of inclusivism, or even of religious and philosophical pluralism and what shape it is given by its advocates.

### III

We in Bosnia and Herzegovina are in the process of constructing and raising the profile of our European, plural identity, with all the familiar difficulties and obstacles we necessarily encounter on the way. In this often chaotic context, the religious perspective, when it degenerates into a clash between different fundamentalisms instead of opposing the dominance of technology, operates as the veritable twin to competitive, conflictual logic, which it actually enhances. It is vital that we understand that diversity is a corrective factor for globalization and that diversity of cultural models is the only guarantee of respect for the human race.<sup>91</sup> In fact, we rediscover the secret of European success in which the whole idea of the EU is based on the notion that you may be German and French, or Swedish and European,

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<sup>91</sup> Julia Kristeva, „My motto is diversity“ in: *Diversity and Culture*, Collection Penser l’Europe, p. 20.

or British and German, at the same time, which was achieved through inter-religious contacts in Bosnia as long ago as the mid tenth century. The very notion of cultural homogeneity is a denial of reality, and the real standards of Europeanness lie in the answer to the question: What will make Europe more European? The answer, of course, is a more cosmopolitan Europe, where national identity becomes less and less exclusive and more and more inclusive on the way to creating a genuinely plural society. Things are exclusive from the very outset in the blinkered nature of the ethnic model of thinking, and I maintain that it is perfectly possible to be a Muslim and a democrat, just as it is possible, for instance, to be a socialist and a small businessman. We in Bosnia are learning this territorial ontology of identity with considerable difficulty on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration, endeavouring to embrace both sides of the Atlantic in our reflections, since we never lose sight either of the United States, as the current “third Rome” of the globalized world.<sup>92</sup>

Bosnia, like Europe and the USA, is equally synonymous with the differences that the insanity of ethnicity and intellectual myopia have made immense efforts over the past fifteen years to abolish, and this paper is an attempt to imagine the future of its cultural diversity and polyphony in the context of an Islamic perspective in this age of religious and philosophical pluralism, basing itself on the traditional thinkers who follow Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings in their way of thinking.<sup>93</sup> Personally, I am very close to the

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<sup>92</sup> See, in particular: Brighouse H. & Brock G., *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Burawoy M et al., *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; Delanty G. & Rumford C., *Rethinking Europe. Social Theory and the Implications of Europeanization*. London/New York, Routledge, 2005; Huntington S.P., *Who are we? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. New York. Simeon & Schuster, 2004.

<sup>93</sup> On inter-religious Akbarian studies see, in particular: *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-‘Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Suny Series in Islam) by William C. Chittick; J.W. Morris, *Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives*, 226 pp. There is a free downloadable version of this in .pdf format at: [www.Ibnarabisociety.Org/Ibnarabi](http://www.Ibnarabisociety.Org/Ibnarabi); idem, *Understanding Religion and Inter-Religious Understanding: Four Classical Muslim Thinkers*. Monograph: Kuala Lumpur, Center for Civilisational Dialogue, 2003; idem, *Rhetoric and*

mindset, or the proposition, that sees Islam as genuinely offering a model for universal citizenship, despite all the distortions of this idea and the stereotypes that have been established through an entire nexus of different interests and groups on various grounds, and I would be delighted if, somewhere along the way, we could manage to shed all our apprehensions over the awkward position of the Islam world in regard to this question, even if only momentarily.

In the view of many thinkers, Muhyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) is the most influential thinker of the latter half of Islamic history and philosophy, whether in the Muslim or the classical meaning of the word, and philosophy constitutes the framework for his world view. Philosophy in this sense is, of course, identical with the wisdom of which the Qur’an speaks (2:269), that same wisdom which features in a narrative in the very middle of the Qur’an (18:65). I am not referring, of course, to the secular understanding of the term, of philosophies that are constructed and then deconstructed by new ones, with each one merely the expression of the fragility of human insights and cognition, of the contingency and temporality of the human being. It is important to emphasize this at a time of trendy insanity and philosophies that preach the separation of man from connection with anything Higher, and hence the entirely reasonable concern over just how sensitive we really are to Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings on the perception of God in the concepts of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, where we discern the alterity (*ghayriyyah*) of all things through the affirmation of that which is first, and in affirming alterity we recognize the Divine testimony (*ma‘īyyah*, [57:4]). In fact, this true cognition depends on seeing everything “with the eye of the imagination and the eye of the intellect,” where this type of intuitive cognition, far from denoting the sub-rational, is actually cognition of a supra-rational character, and where rational cognition is merely a solid preparation on the way to scaling the “cliffs of the Spirit” or the “Himalayas of the soul,” like those ladders of Wittgenstein that, once climbed, we no longer need.

Sadly, the harmony we need to establish between reason and the capacities of the imagination has been demolished for all time by profane



philosophies and professional philosophers (philosophers *von beruf*), by doctrines that take for granted the mental knowledge of concepts and juggle with them without any particular commitment to their being given preferential treatment in our lives. What is more, the place of the imaginal has been occupied by the imaginary world of the virtual, artificial intelligence of computer games, while as for Ibn ‘Arabī’s Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), the world of the imaginal (*‘alam al-khayāl*) and the perfect man as the ideal and paragon (*al-insān al-kāmil*) the central tenet of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings nowadays, instead of these numerous degrees of perfection leading to the ability to see God with both kinds of eye and perception, we are becoming increasingly familiar with violent, monodimensional man in his frenetic schizophrenia. Well might we ask, therefore, whether today’s generations are in a position once again to lend an ear to the teachings of this great Teacher and to attune their understanding to his most characteristic theoretical framework, the specific path of “verification” (*taḥqīq*), so as to become “verifiers” (*al-muḥqqiqūn*), to take on the “cloak of investiture” known to later generations as the *ḵbirkat al-akbariyyah*, which they should indeed introduce into the educational curriculum of the third millennium. As is well known, here we finally come to the certainty we seek through our philosophical and theological training, knowing that among those who turned their hand to this was our own ‘Abdullah Bosnawī (d. 1644), who made a valuable contribution to the philosophical exposition of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas.<sup>94</sup> However, this position

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<sup>94</sup> Islam came to the Balkans in the 15th century, and is now an integral part of the culture and identity of a number of countries in south-eastern Europe, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania. For more see:

Abulafia, David, *Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean 1100-1400*, London, Variorum Reprints, 1987.

Ibid., *Frederick II. A Medieval Emperor*, London, The Penguin Press, 1988.

Ahmad, Aziz, *A History of Islamic Sicily*, Edinburgh, University Press, 1975.

Amari, Michele, *Storia dei Musulmani de Sicilia*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2002.

Bausani, Alessandro, *Notes on the History of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Italy during the Middle Ages*, Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi, III, 1995, pp. 174-185.

Bresc, H. – Bresc-Bautier, G., *Palermo 1070-1492*, Paris, Autrement, 1993.

*Del nuovo sulla Sicilia musulmana*, Roma, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1995.

Lewis, Bernard, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London, Phoenix Press, 1982.

Mack, Smith, *A History of Sicily. Medieval Sicily 800-1715*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1968.

of Ibn ‘Arabi’s, denoted as *madhhab al-tahqiq* (“the school of verification”) is all the harder in that it signifies realizing these concepts in our lives, literally tasting (*dhawq*), instead of merely knowing them mentally; hence this paper, our “editorial.”

#### IV

The idea that Islam offers a model for universal citizenship is present in particular in the thinking of two Muslim pluralist thinkers: Muhammad Iqbal, in the first half, and S. H. Nasr in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, God willing, on into the 21<sup>st</sup>. This year is the seventieth anniversary of Iqbal’s death,<sup>95</sup> and this month we have celebrated Nasr’s seventy-fifth birthday. Despite the differences between them, both dedicated themselves to the study of Sufism and are profoundly steeped in it.

Professor Nasr explains in one of his works<sup>96</sup> that pluralism is widely regarded as the only alternative to this world view of a world without a centre. One of the principal reasons why pluralism was so important, particularly in recent times, is that, given the way the world is today, we cannot isolate ourselves from exposure to other religious, cultural and ethnic differences. His exposition helps us to understand and evaluate the true nature and value of the Other. On the other hand, in Iqbal’s mind, Islam was not a monopoly on the basis of which some people who regard themselves as virtuous should sit in judgment on the spirituality of others. “God is the birthright of every human being<sup>97</sup>,” he said in one of his works. There still

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Mehren, M.A.F., *Correspondance du philosophe soufi Ibn Sab’in Abdoul-Haqq avec l’Empereur Frederick II de Hohenstaufen*, Paris, 1879.

Montgomery Watt W., *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh, University Press, 1972.

Salierno, Vito, *The Muslims in Italy*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2007.

Id., *Biblioteca Arabo-Sicula*, Leipzig, 1857.

Udovitch, Abraham L., *New Materials for the History of Islamic Sicily*, Roma, 1995.

<sup>95</sup> The “Iqbal in Europe” conference is due to be held in London on 17 June this year.

<sup>96</sup> See S.H. Nasr, “To Live in a World with No Center – and Many”.

<sup>97</sup> Khurram Ali Shafique, *Iqbal: An Illustrated Biography*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 2007, p. 77.

remains the question of how we are to live in the midst of this kind of multiplicity and diversity without falling into mere debilitating relativism.<sup>98</sup>

This anticipation of the events of our times is very typical of Iqbal, and I should therefore like to quote another passage: “All nations accuse us of fanaticism. I admit the charge – I go further and say that we are justified in our fanaticism. Translated in the language of biology fanaticism is nothing but the priciple of individualisation working in the case of group. In this sense all forms of life are more or less fanatical and ouguht to be so if they care for their collective life. And as a matter of fact all nations are fanatical. Criticise an English-man’s religion, he is immovable; but criticise his civilisation, his country or the behaviour of his nation in any sphere of activity and you will bring out his innate fanaticism. The reason is that his nationality does not depen on religion; it has a geographical basis – his country. His fanaticism then is justly roused when you criticise his country. Our position, however, is fundamentally different. With us nationality is a pure idea; it has no material basis. Our only rallying points is a sort of mental agreement in a certain view of the world. If then our fanaticism is roused when our religion is criticised, I think we are as much justified in our fanaticism as an Englishman is when his civilisation is denounced. The feeling in both cases is the same though associated with different objects. Fanaticism is patriotism for religion; patriotism, fanaticism for country”<sup>99</sup>

It follows from what Iqbal says about Islam and patriotism that Muslim solidarity as a community is based on our perseverance in maintaining the religious principle, and that at present this is regarded as loosened and that we are nowhere, as if we shall probably suffer the same fate as the Jews, since we do not understand the difference between Islamism, which constructs

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<sup>98</sup> Iqbal’s position on Sufism long caused a problem for the study of his thinking, which began with his *Asrar-i Khudi (Secrets of the Self)* in which *wahdat al-wujud* was wrongly interpreted and translated as pantheism, since Iqbal had no direct access to Ibn ‘Arabī’s works – a stance that was later altered by his profound respect for Ibn ‘Arabī, and Iqbal’s works on Sufism from this period should be approached with extreme caution, since his position was defined in later works. Finally, this was the reason for S. H. Nasr’s criticism of Iqbal: even though Iqbal had great respect for tradition, he was an almost fanatical adherent of the principle of human development and progress.

<sup>99</sup> Idem, op. cit., quote from his *Stray Reflection* on page 61.

nationality from a purely abstract idea— religion— and the “westernism” of the existential moving force of which the concept is nationality based on a specific thing— a country. Regardless of whether one agrees with this postulate of his or not, this interpretation of Islamic philosophy as a living religious tradition, not as the mere knowledge of concepts— the need, that is, for the living spiritual testimony of Islam and the system of Islamic philosophy and the meaning of the teachings of Sufism in practice and in Islamic thought— is invariably inseparable from the inner experience of the spirit of Islam. Fortunately, as Iqbal himself put it,<sup>100</sup> “the burning simoon of Ibn Taymiyya’s invective could not touch the freshness of the Persian rose”— his metaphor for the living Sufi teachings. We must thus be personally committed to the practice of Sufi teachings, and not merely to our own contemplative or speculative testimony to the Supreme Truth, though post-modern man is unusually ready to seek short-cuts in matters of spirituality, as though it could be achieved with a double-click on the keyboard. The state of Akbarian studies, or to put it better their ostracism, is now the best indicator of the distortion of the Islamic model of thought in the world’s intellectual myopia and tunnel vision which, sad to say, prevail today in what we now call the Muslim world.

Furthermore, new insights into comparative and world philosophy should encourage western philosophers and analysts of Islam to cultivate their interest in Islamic philosophy as an aid to setting priorities for their own deeper studies and creative philosophical work, or a framework conducive to understanding and a programme of complexity and diversity, especially Ibn ‘Arabi’s thinking – that thinker, poet and, above all, Sufi, who has brought us all together today around his spiritual spread or symposium.

By this I mean to advocate an articulation of religious and philosophical pluralism through the study of the Muslim model of thinking in general and

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<sup>100</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy*. The work has been translated and published in Bosnia as a bilingual edition with the Bosnian title *Razvoj metafizike u Perziji: prilog historiji muslimanske filozofije*, trans. N. Kahteran, Connectum, Sarajevo, 2005, p. 71: “but the burning simoon of Ibn Taymiyya’s invective could not touch the freshness of the Persian rose. The one was completely swept away by the flood of barbarian invasions; the other, unaffected by the Tartar revolution, still holds its own.”

Akbarian studies in particular, for this is the reason why it is so important, even from the practical standpoint that I referred to in my foreword, that we do not oppose Sufism, but rather defend it, and seek to remove the obstacles that are currently erected against it and the spread of its ideas.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, what stands in the way of such efforts is the “ulema of evil”, which has been best defined by one of the finest religious leaders of the Bosnian Muslims (Čaušević).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See: S.H. Nasr, *Sufism and the Integration of the Inner and Outer Life of Man*, The Singhvi Interfaith Lecture for the Year 1999, The Temenos Academy, 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Džemaludin Čaušević was installed as Reisu-l-ulema on 26 March 1914 on receipt from Istanbul of a *manshur* or decree of appointment, and continued to hold the post until 1930 when he retired at his own request. He was honoured and appreciated by all the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina and by many other friends. As translator of the Qur’an, he came under attack from the periodical “El-Hidaja”; rejecting these attacks, he made reference to Shakib Arslan (*Hadir al-’alam al-islami*, vol. IV, p. 44), who wrote:

“The class known as the ‘ulama’ bears the greatest responsibility before God and the people for the decline and degeneration of Islam. With few exceptions, they have used religion as a means of acquiring earthly goods, and have made it a rule to make overtures and pay court to the rulers to facilitate all their dealings, to which end they make use of a range of Shari’a arguments and fatwas (legal decisions). Whenever someone intended to commit an act of violence against some absolutist ruler or statesmen, they would issue fatwas, seeking to determine the meaning of the verses of the Holy Qur’an by resorting to weak arguments, in order to win favours and rewards from the power-holders. They persisted in this fallacy as long as Muslims remained unaware of the games they were playing, and even began to use such means to make overtures to non-Muslim authorities in various matters that have led to the decline and fall of Islam. Whenever a Muslim country fell into the hands of a foreign country, or a Muslim nation rose up to defend itself from foreign aggressors and usurpers, the foreign government would find its most loyal servants among the ulama, who would serve its ends and issue fatwas at its bidding. Suffice it to cite just one instance among many, that of the Syrian ulama, who issued a fatwa during the war to the effect that the Sharif of Mecca, Hussain, was to be pronounced an apostate, simply in order to curry favour with Jamal Pasha, Syria’s military commander. After the Allies won the war and occupied Syria, this same ulama later pledged its loyal allegiance to the very same Sharif Hussain whom they had so recently regarded as an apostate Caliph. When the French entered Damascus, they repudiated Hussain for the second time, issued a fatwa at the bidding of the French, and declared Hussain an alien. The majority of the ulama change their views to suit changing circumstances, and if reproached on that account, they reply: ‘It is a precaution, intended to save ourselves from violence.’ In fact, this excuse is unacceptable, and their conduct is contrary to the Shari’a and in contradiction with the Qur’an and Sunnah.

I am, of course, fully aware that we are increasingly not part of a traditional culture, but of a scientific one, or a civilization of the image, where instead of the image remaining at its proper level in the world and retaining its symbolic role it simply tends to be reduced to the level of sensory perception, thereby ultimately being devalued.<sup>103</sup> In Henry Corbin's opus in particular, whose reference to the "trahison des clercs" in Sunni Islam I call as witness, the image of a world emerges that manages to avoid the trials and temptations of socialization and historical materialization,<sup>104</sup> those dangerous traps of historicism. What is more, his oeuvre is another moving testimony to the consequences of— to use his own words once again— the "socialization of the spiritual" in the lands of Sunni Islam, the creation of a false boundary between the sacred and the profane or secular. Corbin's allusions here vividly demonstrate that this phenomenon of the "socialization of the spiritual" conceals the sense of traditional cultures of being targeted by the emergence of what he calls the "trahison des clercs." Corbin was a resolute and eminent

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Their claim that they were anxious to dispel violence is false, a cloak for their hidden agenda. One wanted to be a qadi, another a mufti, and some aspired to be Reisu-l-ulema. Some among them wanted to make good money from their signature. We do not know how long Syria (only Syria, we ask ourselves? *si*) will tolerate these turbaned ignoramuses, and will look at people with strong will, not at the ahmediyya turban."

As this quotation from Shakib Arslan shows, one of the chief culprits for the degeneration of Islam is "ulama-su" ("the ulama of evil"), as the great scholar Zamakhshari called them no less than nine centuries ago.

(Quoted from E. Karić, *Tefsir: uvod u tefsirske znanosti* (Tafsir: an introduction to the science of Qur'anic commentary), Knjiga bosanska, Sarajevo, 1995, pp. 276-7).

<sup>103</sup> In his own day Henry Corbin, that eminent French philosopher, Islamist and one of the greatest names in western European oriental studies, as well as the leading interpreter of illuminationist philosophy in the West and of the esoteric approach to it, to say nothing of Akbarian studies, focused on the religious heritage of the Persian and Arabic world to rediscover the forgotten tradition that we find in his studies on Sufism, Shi'ism and the pre-Islamic religions of Persia. He reveals to us the vast area that exists between the three-dimensional world of our everyday experience, which has yet never belonged to the "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace, as William Gibson, who coined the phrase, calls it. Corbin gives it various names in his works, depending on the specific features of the culture or philosophical personality under consideration: *'alam al-mithal*, *mundus imaginis*, *barzakb*, *the inner world*, the land of *Hurqalya*, the imaginal world or the creative imagination. However, whatever term we use to describe it, it features in Corbin's works as a categorically *real* space.

<sup>104</sup> See, in particular, Pierre Lory, "Henry Corbin: his work and influence" in: *History of Islamic Philosophy*, vol. II (Routledge History of World Philosophies), ed. By S.H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 1149-1155.

scholar who strove so earnestly to restore to the light of day reflections on this imaginal dimension, a dimension that is so often sidelined these days in academic circles.

I believe we are now in a better position to understand the task of comparative philosophy and of renewed reflections on the Islamic position in a age of religious and philosophical pluralism. The task of comparison is on a solid footing, since the subjects before it have common roots in the mystical theosophism with which the sages of the three great communities of the Abrahamic tradition have been engaged, as have all the religious traditions of the world. I should like to say that the great responsibility for the effort to understand and eliminate this dangerous situation into which we have sunk falls in large part upon comparative philosophy, while the thinkers I have referred to, Iqbal and Nasr, whatever their differences, are pluralist thinkers, and I cannot take pleasure in the way they are represented in M. Ruzgar's contribution to an otherwise fine study, *Deep Religious Pluralism*, edited by David Ray Griffin,<sup>105</sup> which I have recently translated in the conviction that it could help us to promote religious and philosophical pluralism here in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I must say that Griffin has done an excellent job as editor in presenting and organizing this series of essays, which presents for our consideration every world religious tradition and focuses on the potential of "deep religious pluralism" based on Whitehead's philosophy, which is just one attempt of the kind. Add to this the fact that philosophers and theologians in the Balkans have shown keen interest in recent years in the theological and philosophical grounds for a comprehensive pluralization of all aspects of society, and it is clear that such writings are more than welcome.

Finally, where Ibn 'Arabi himself is concerned, the modern vocabulary to which our younger scholars in particular are accustomed, in the work by Peter Coates already referred to, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously*, and Suha Taji-Farouki's *Beshara and Ibn 'Arabi: A movement of sufi spirituality in the modern world*, as well as the works of today's leading scholars of Ibn 'Arabī's thinking and writings, William Chittick and

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<sup>105</sup> David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville-Kentucky, 2005.

James Morris, so well-known to all of us and so dedicated (both of whom have visited Bosnia and Herzegovina), has found its way to our philosophical and theological seminars.

## V

In conclusion, I should like to say that comparative philosophy is the ambitious but historically necessary project of establishing a critical discourse between different philosophical systems and the thinkers belonging to those diverse cultures and traditions, with the aim of broadening philosophical horizons and the possibility of understanding among our students involved in the study of comparative philosophy. Another of its specific tasks is to establish international peace and deeper understanding in a specific, practical and yet intellectual venture within multicultural societies. As a result, comparative philosophy— or what one might more appropriately these days call “cross-cultural,” “transcultural” or simply “global” philosophy— has manifested a wealth of different aims, methods and styles throughout its history and evolution. One of the enduring aims of comparative or cross-cultural philosophy was to bring to light the foundations of the cognitive and evaluative postulates of traditions that are different from our own, in the expectation of greater clarity and a better understanding of the postulates that inform us in a given tradition. We thereby begin to know ourselves better, it is thought, within and through the recognition of other alternative conceptual frameworks, values and modes of organizing and finding meaning in human experience. The principal Eastern traditions are being studied, as are now many other non-Western ones, discovering how they reveal different “modes of thought,” and how they could be contrasted with one another and with various western forms. This would be comparative philosophy in its broadest cultural modality (E. Deutsch), and could be regarded as part of a greater comparative undertaking that one might call a problem-based approach. Whether it is in ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, or any other philosophical discipline, the idea is that we can identify philosophical problems running through various traditions, and that we could use the resources of those traditions to help us deepen and broaden our own philosophical understanding and impact. In fact, scholars should be able to study Eastern philosophy in order to enrich their own philosophical background, which in turn would help them to wrestle more effectively with



the philosophical problems that interest them. What is more, we have begun to understand that the very idea of *philosophy* may denote quite different things in different cultures, and that we have much to learn from these other concepts— which leads us directly to comparative philosophy as creative philosophy. The assumption is that this enquiry could lead us to open up to new and better forms of philosophical understanding.

Finally, in this age of globalization this type of study is now a mega-trend in philosophy, and the aim of the XXII world congress of philosophers being held this year in Seoul is to redefine philosophy and to call attention to the need to introduce inter-traditional, cross-cultural, cross-systematic, more integrative and more global studies. Hence our hope that the insanity in the prevailing cult of ethnicity, of the nation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will not impede us in such efforts. To move in the opposite direction would be to maintain the continuity of ostensible alterity, of mutual ignorance, between Muslims and non-Muslims, with its distrust, isolation and extremism on both sides. Even now, Ibn ‘Arabi helps us in the European community to become aware of ourselves and others and to build modern national and cultural identities and new cross-cultural leadership and skills, as well as answers to the question of how to be a Muslim in today’s European, USA and global world of knowledge. *Wa mā tanfiqī illā bi’Llāh!*