

Introduction

What are the Divine Names? What is meant by the so-called ‘Most Beautiful Names of God’? Why do we need each one of them in particular? How do they relate to Reality Itself? How might we ourselves be able to be characterised by their qualities?

Ibn ‘Arabī responded to these and other questions with the mastery that is so characteristic of his teachings – in which theory and practice are inseparable – by composing a detailed commentary on the Names, which is presented here in English.

The Names of God have been the subject of some excellent general studies as a whole, most notable among them being *Les noms divins en Islam* by Daniel Gimaret.¹ To complete this work, it would be desirable to be able to refer, in future, to a substantial general study of the Divine Names in Sufism. In anticipation of such a book, we would like to contribute this translation and study of two of Ibn ‘Arabī’s seminal texts on the Divine Names.

About the author

Few authorities in the Islamic world have had a relevance and impact comparable to that of the great Andalusian master Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, also known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (‘the Greatest Master’). He was born in the Spanish city of Murcia in the year 560/1165, and devoted himself to the spiritual life from a young age. He went on to become one of the world’s foremost exponents of Sufism.

After travelling extensively throughout the western and eastern parts of the Islamic world, in the course of which he disseminated his teachings widely, Ibn ‘Arabī passed away in the year 638/1240 in

¹ D. Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam: exégèse lexicographique et théologique* (Paris, 1988), henceforth *Noms*.

Damascus: he is buried in a mosque built in his honour and which, like the Şālihiyya neighbourhood where it is found, pays homage to his name.

His astonishingly prolific body of work, estimated at more than 200 titles according to his own testimony, has left a decisive and lasting impression on Islamic thought over the last seven centuries. This is demonstrated by, among other things, the importance and continuity of the literary output produced by his numerous disciples and commentators across the entire geographical sphere of Islam. In our times, Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings continue to be full of vitality, as we can see in the impact that his works have made upon the ideas and poetry of spiritual people, intellectuals and creative artists across the globe.

Since there are now magnificent biographies on the Shaykh al-Akbar, and given that he is such a well-known author, I have restricted myself to including only the necessary biographical and bibliographical references in this book that certain sections required, referring elsewhere to relevant sources.

On the meaning of the Divine Names

Why does Sufism place so much importance on knowledge of the Most Beautiful Names of God and the continuing practice of remembering them (*dhikr*)?

First of all, we may note that the conventional translation ‘the Most Beautiful Names’ (*al-asmā al-ḥusnā*) can be legitimately – and perhaps more accurately – be rendered as ‘the Most Beneficent Names of God’. This is because the Divine Names are the ways in which God bestows His beneficence and goodness upon the created world in general, and human beings in particular. This actualisation is what is indicated by the famous Quranic statement, applicable to every human being in potential, that ‘He taught Adam the Names, all of them’.² In fact, unlike those who maintain that God has no name, the Divine Names are the ways in which human beings relate to and call upon or invoke

2 Q 2:31.

God, and can ultimately participate in God's naming of Himself.³

According to one hadith frequently cited by Ibn 'Arabī, Adam was created in the image of God. According to the Sufi conception of the human being, which we might call 'anthropo-vision', the Perfect Human participates in the original Adamic nature and in the pre-existent Muḥammadian reality (or the Reality of Muḥammad). The human being is the microcosmic synthesis of creation, the mirror in which the Divine Reality contemplates Himself, and the eye-pupil through which God sees. God was a Hidden Treasure, not yet known, and He wanted or loved to be known and recognised. He created mankind so that we might know Him, and this is the principal goal of a human being: to know and recognise the All-Knowing Living God. This cognitive function is inseparable from the realisation of Divine Love. Yet we cannot, in any way, love or positively know the Creator in His transcendent, inconceivable Essence. Through revelation, God has taught the human being His Most Beautiful Names so that we may invoke and remember Him through them.

Out of His love and compassion, God (*Allāh*) – 'Hidden' in terms of His unknowable Essence – is experienced through His Self-revelation in the cosmos, in the human being and in the revealed Book, the places of His manifestation, thus making Himself known to human beings as 'the Manifest' and 'the Hidden'. His Names – which Ibn 'Arabī considers to be 'relationships' (*nisab*) – allow mankind to come to know Him in His similarity and to gain knowledge of His incomparability, reconciling immanence and transcendence in a middle path built on the reunion of opposites.

The Names are, therefore, the creative means by which God reveals Himself in an infinity of 'onomatophanies', that is, the manifestations of the properties of His Names in the cosmos. The One makes Himself known in the world of multiplicity by way of His Names, which are infinite but can be enumerated as a matter of convention as specified through revelation. All the Names designate the One and refer, therefore, to one single Essence; but at the same time each one of

3 For an excellent discussion of the naming of God in Jewish and Christian thought, see Janet Soskice, *Naming God* (Cambridge, 2023).

His Names manifests different effects in creation – a creation which is constantly being renewed at every moment, since theophanies never repeat themselves. As Ibn ‘Arabī succinctly puts it in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*:

‘each Name indicates both the Essence (*dhāt*) and the meaning which it conveys and requires. Insofar as it indicates the Essence, all the Names belong to it; and insofar as it indicates the [particular] meaning which belongs to it alone, it is distinguished from all others – for example, Lord (*rabb*), Creator (*khāliq*), Shaper (Image-maker, *musawwir*) and so on. The Name is the Named in terms of the Essence, and is other than the Named by virtue of this particular meaning which it conveys.’⁴

While each of the Names conveys a particular meaning that distinguishes it from all other Names, such that ‘Lord’ is not the same as ‘Creator’ or ‘Image-maker’, the Name simultaneously points to the One Named or the Essence, apart from which nothing has being. All the Names are therefore in this respect merely designations of the all-embracing Name *Allāh*, which includes all the Names and is the specific Name of the One Divine Being. In calling upon the Lord, for example, one is calling upon the One Being in His aspect of Lordship; when a drowning man asks God to save him, he is calling upon the One Being in His aspect of Rescuer. It is an essential part of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching that a human being relates directly to God only through a particular Name according to the needs of their state or predisposition. In the light of the particular needs a person may have – expressed in the ‘dependence’ sections of the *Kashf al-ma‘nā* – the spiritual aspirant has recourse, whether through explicit verbal remembrance, inwardly or outwardly, or by means of the implicit language of their state, to the specific Name that procures the satisfaction of those needs.

At the same time, the meanings of the Names may be regarded as being susceptible to successive degrees of realisation. They are not

4 *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, chapter of Idrīs, ed. Mahmud Kılıç, p. 59. We may note that the three Names Ibn ‘Arabī uses as examples are interrelated in a descending order: ‘Lord’ alludes to the universal pre-creation relationship of God with all beings (see Q 7:172), ‘Creator’ to the creating relationship itself, and ‘Shaper’ to the forming of the created being.

only descriptions of the personal relationship of need and dependence (*ta'alluq*) between a human being and their God, as a servant in need of the one he serves. At a deeper level they also characterise the nature of Reality Itself, how God 'relates' the Name to Himself in Himself, or in other words, what the Name signifies from a Divine point of view – the human realisation (*tahaqquq*) of this level might be characterised as 'transpersonal' or 'supra-personal', in the sense that it can only be realised by the passing-away of any sense of individual separation or 'otherness'. At the third and deepest level, the theomorphic human being is also capable, according to their predisposition and receptivity, of adopting or being characterised by the qualities of the various Names of what Ibn 'Arabī calls 'the One-who-is-Many' (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*)⁵, expressing them – by way of their powers of concentration, spiritual aspiration and comprehension of the heart – within the essential Unity. It is crucial to understand that 'adopting', 'assuming' or 'being characterised by' (*takhalluq*) the qualities of the Names does not imply any kind of appropriation. The human being is a receptacle, the 'place' where the effects of the Names are manifested: he (or she) is a participant in the Divine Qualities with which, by the grace of Divine Providence, he is attired or invested as a devoted servant of God. Only by contemplating the Lordly quality of the Names and being truly conscious of all that comes from Him and all that returns to Him, can one properly speak of being invested with or characterised by the Names. When the servant attributes the manifestation of a particular quality to their own self, this is not characterisation, but rather, an illusory and vain pretension. Ibn 'Arabī refers to this very succinctly when he says in connection with the Name *al-Ghafūr*: 'realisation is the [full] knowledge of the Name, while characterisation is the activation of its effect'.⁶

Ultimately, when the mystery of the Unity of Being – by virtue of which God is Love, Lover and Beloved – is realised, the knower experiences and perceives all of manifestation as a theophany, in such a way that God is seen in all things, without negating servanthood, or erasing the multiplicity of grades of existence.

5 See, for example, *Fut.* II.303 and IV.232.

6 *Kashf* 35-3.

The Names can, therefore, be understood as what shapes the contours of potential human development and governs the myriad aspects and models of spiritual perfection. In this sense, the different psychological types and the multiple modalities of knowledge and realisation reflect the diverse possible relationships that can be established with the Names. In accordance with their own predisposition, a human being may be particularly receptive to the influence of one or more Names. The effects of the Lordly Name that is most intimately linked to the inner secret of the servant, and that determines their particular spiritual modality, will be that which manifests predominantly in them.

As Ibn ‘Arabī says, ‘Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) means adhering to [spiritual courtesy, i.e.] the good manners prescribed in revelation, both externally and internally. These are the Divine character (*al-khuluq al-ilāhiyya*). The term can also be applied to the cultivation of noble qualities and to the abandonment of base ones.’⁷

The ideal model of development would consist of a growing receptivity to all the Names at once, actualising God’s noble qualities in a harmonious way, and bringing them together in one’s essential being. This would be equivalent to realising one’s potential as ‘Abd Allāh, Servant of *Allāh* – the Name that integrates and encompasses all the others – the one in whom all the Names can express themselves in their fullness and completion and in accordance with the real requirements of each moment.

In the texts presented here, we can clearly see Ibn ‘Arabī’s care in differentiating the subtle features of each Name’s characteristics. While from the perspective of essential Unity, all the divine Names designate a single ‘Named’, from the perspective of diversity there are no identical synonyms. The varying definitions of a Name require various translations into English. We have tried to keep these translations primarily to the explanations given by Ibn ‘Arabī as well as those suggested by the verbal root, so as to broaden the understanding of a Name’s meaning and field of reference.

7 See Ibn ‘Arabī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt*, pp. 74–5; *Rasā’il Ibn al-‘Arabī*, 3/82.