# From Religious Form to Spiritual Essence:
## Esoteric Perspectives on Islam and Christianity according to Ibn al-ʿArabī and Meister Eckhart

Reza Shah-Kazemi

Australian Centre of Sufism and Irfanic Studies
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My aim in this talk is to show the ways in which two great sages, Ibn al-ʿArabī in Islam and Meister Eckhart in Christianity, help us to travel from the religious form to the spiritual essence, from the outer teachings of religion to the inner mysteries from which these teachings derive all their transformative power.

In Islam this journey from the outer to the inner is referred to in terms of a movement from the *ẓāhir*, the outwardly apparent, to the *bāṭin*, the inwardly hidden. The first point to make here is that both aspects are divine, for the Qur'an declares that God is the First and the Last, the Outwardly Apparent and the Inwardly Hidden (verse 3 of chapter 57). From the point of view of Ibn al-ʿArabī, this verse is one of the keys for transforming the basic theological teaching of Islam, *tawḥīd*, into a metaphysical doctrine concerning the nature of reality.

To say that God is the beginning and end of all things, and that He is the inward and the outward of all things means that there is nothing in Being except God (*laysa fi'l-wujūd siwa'Llāh*). This is the essence of the famous doctrine associated with him: *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the oneness of Being. The principle of *Tawḥīd*, oneness, or unification, which is expressed by the formula *no god but God* (*lā ilāha illa'Llah*), acquires a dimension of unfathomable depth in this perspective: instead of being narrowly theological—a dogma pertaining to God—it becomes ontological, embracing the whole of existence.

The negation of false gods—*lā ilāha*—is transformed into a negation of all otherness; the affirmation of the one true God—*illa'Llāh*—is transformed into a metaphysical doctrine of the affirmation of a single Reality. The principle that must be understood here is that metaphysical doctrines are not superimposed by the mystic upon the theological teaching revealed by Scripture. Rather, the mystic or metaphysician simply grasps all of the subtle implications of Scripture. As Ibn al-ʿArabī says:

> When the Scriptures speak of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), they speak in a way that yields to the generality of men the immediately apparent meaning. The spiritual elite, on the other hand, understand all the meanings inherent in that utterance, in whatever terms it is expressed. (*Bezels*, 73).

This principle is clearly at work in the teachings of Meister Eckhart. The foundational principle in Christianity, the Incarnation, for example, the dogma which tells us that Jesus

Christ was the Incarnation of the Son of God, undergoes an astonishing metaphysical transformation in Eckhart's perspective. Theologically, it is understood that Jesus' birth in time is but the expression of an eternal event: the Son is perpetually being born from the Father within God conceived as the Trinity of Three Persons. But Eckhart goes beyond this theological principle and rhetorically exclaims:

> What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters (I:1).
> Why did God become man? That I might be born God Himself (I:138).

The Birth of the Divine Word in the human soul: this is what Eckhart urges us to realize. It is in this Birth that the ultimate beatitude of the soul lies, all else is radically marginalised to the periphery of existence; indeed, all else is unreal. Everything pertaining to the creature as such is, according to Eckhart, a pure 'nothing'; everything that makes me such and such a human being as opposed to human as such is excluded from this ultimate beatitude:

God took on human nature and united it with His own Person. Then human nature became God, for He put on bare human nature and not any man. Therefore, if you want to be the same Christ and God, go out of all that which the eternal Word did not assume… then you will be the same to the eternal Word as human nature is to Him. For between your human nature and His there is no difference: it is one, for it is in Christ what it is in you (II:313–314)

The implications of this metaphysical reduction to the pure humanity which God assumed in the Incarnation is expressed by Eckhart in such daring formulations as the following:

> All that God the Father gave His only-begotten Son in human nature He has given me: I exclude nothing, neither union nor holiness (I:xlviii).
>
> [God] has been ever begetting me, his only-begotten son, in the very image of His eternal Fatherhood, that I may be a father and beget Him of whom I am begotten (II:64).
>
> [Jesus] was a messenger from God to us and has brought our blessedness to us. The blessedness he brought us was our own (I:116).

Upon hearing this last statement—that Jesus was a messenger from God, bringing to us a blessedness we already possess, by virtue of the primordial essence of our humanity—Muslims will be struck by how Islamic this sounds. The resonance continues at a deeper metaphysical register when we hear Eckhart's description of what happens when the Divine Word is born in the soul. He says that the Word has three aspects: immeasurable power, infinite wisdom, and infinite sweetness (I:60-61). Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to the essence of Being, *wujūd*, in almost identical terms, doing so in a formulation which plays on the three letters of which the word *wujūd* is composed: *al-wujūd wijdān al-Ḥaqq fi'l-wajd*: Being is consciousness of the Real in bliss (*Path*, 212; II:244.7 in Persian PDF ed).

Ibn al-ʿArabī comes to this understanding of the nature of Being through a process of mystical ascent which disrobes him of all otherness; finally, God removes from him his very contingency, that which makes for his specific possibility, his *imkān*. Once his

contingency is lifted from him, he comes to see all the divine Names of God returning to one object, the Named, *musammā*, and one Essence:
'that object Named', he writes, 'was what I witnessed, and that Essence was my Being. For my voyage was only in myself and pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure servant without a trace of lordship in me at all (*Illuminations* (Morris), 380).'

Just as Eckhart says that he becomes a father and begets Him of whom he is begotten, so Ibn al-ʿArabī makes a similarly startling assertion:

> He made His Throne to be a couch for me, the kingdom a servant for me, and the King to be a prince to me (*Ascension*, 75).

The point to be understood here is that in both cases there is no longer any question of specific individuality: Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabī are describing states of consciousness in which the ego has been annihilated; in Sufi terms, the ego undergoes *fanāʾ*, and that which subsists, in a condition of *baqāʾ*, can only be God:

> When that is extinguished which never was—and which is perishing—and there remains that which has never ceased to be—and which is permanent—then there rises the Sun of the decisive proof for the vision through the Self. Thus comes about the absolute sublimation (*Extinction*, 27–28).

After undergoing this annihilation that results from vision, and this vision that results from annihilation, both mystics return to themselves; but the return is to a self illumined, transformed and sustained by a taste of that which infinitely transcends the self. They now see that the return to the Essence of God is in fact never not taking place; being with God in God as God is the ever-realized reality (what Shankara calls: *nitya-siddha*), and anything else is an illusion:

> When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, none will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one missed me (II:82).

Similarly, Ibn al-ʿArabī says:

> Naught save the Reality remains…. There is no arriving and no being afar (*Bezels*, 108).

Eckhart refers to the Godhead or Ground or Essence as that which goes beyond God; there is a subtle correspondence between the realization of the nothingness of the ego and the realization of the relativity of God. For God, conceived as the Personal Lord, the Creator, the Revealer, the Judge, and so on, presupposes the existence of creatures; affirming the nothingness of the creature as such is then tantamount to affirming that there must be something infinitely more real than the Creator:

> God, inasmuch as He is 'God,' is not the supreme goal of creatures…. [I]f a fly had intellect and could intellectually plumb the eternal abysm of God's being out of which it [the fly] came, we would have to say that God, with all that makes Him 'God' would be unable to fulfill and satisfy that fly! (II: 271)

Ibn al-ʿArabī makes a similar point: here the key distinction on this metaphysical plane is between God as Essence (*dhāt*), and God as divinity (*ilāh*). As *ilāh*, God's being presupposes creatures, that is, beings over which God exercises His divinity. The creature is thus referred to by Ibn al-ʿArabī as *maʾlūh*, literally: 'godded over'.

The Essence, by contrast, has no relationship whatsoever with creatures or with anything other than Itself. He makes this key point in many places in his writings. One startling expression of this principle is given in his exegesis of the following words of verse 110 of chapter 18 (*Surat al-kahf*): *Let him not associate (any) one with his Lord's worship* (18:110).

The literal meaning of this verse relates to the prohibition of *shirk* or associating false gods with the true Divinity: in your worship, do not associate any false god with the true Lord. But Ibn al-ʿArabī makes the 'one', *aḥad*, refer to the Essence, and thus says:

> He is not worshipped in respect of His Unity, since Unity contradicts the existence of the worshipper. It is as if He is saying, 'What is worshipped is only the Lord in respect of His Lordship, since the Lord brought you into existence. So connect yourself to Him and make yourself lowly before Him, and do not associate Unity with Lordship in worship…. For Unity does not know you and will not accept you' (*Path*, 244).

All that can be worshipped is God as Lord, *Rabb*, or *ilāh*, and even then, all that one is worshipping is a god created in the form of your belief (*al-ilāh al-makhlūq fi'l-iʿtiqād*). However, since this created form of God in one's belief is the subjective reflection of an objectively real self-disclosure of the One, and since this created form is moreover essentially defined by the Revelation of God, and only accidentally defined by the contours of one's individual belief, worship of God is really worship of God and nothing else, for the Lord is the form assumed by the Essence for the sake of being conceived and worshipped, loved and known.

Another way in which Ibn al-ʿArabī distinguishes between the Essence and the Lord brings us close to Eckhart's conception of the Trinity. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the plurality of the Names and Qualities of God are registered as a differentiated plurality only at the degree of Being proper to the Lord; at this degree of Being, we speak of 'the unity of the many'. At the level of the divine Self, or Essence, we speak of 'the unity of the One':

> In respect of His Self (i.e. His Essence), God possesses the Unity of the One, but in respect of His Names, He possesses the Unity of the many (Path, 337).

Here, we should take note of a statement which makes one think of the dizzying heights to which the Hindu idea of Maya extends; it also helps Muslims to appreciate the meaning of the Buddhist notion of *anatta*, no self, no Atman, whether on the individual or universal level:

> All existence is an imagination within an imagination, the only Reality being God, as Self and Essence, not in respect of His Names (*Bezels*, 124–125).

In other words, even the Names of God—and therefore the degree of Being to which these Names pertain as distinct Names—are 'imagination', not ultimate Reality. The sole

Reality is God as Self and Essence, because it is only the Oneness of the One that is ultimately Real; by contrast, to quote Ibn al-ʿArabī again, 'The Names in their multiplicity are but relations which are of a non-existent nature' (Sufism, 161).

And again:

> The Names have two connotations; the first connotation is God Himself Who is what is named, the second that by which one Name is distinguished from another…. As being essentially the other, the Name is the Reality, while as being not the other, it is the imagined Reality (*Bezels*, 125).

At this point, however, we have to pay careful attention to the way in which the imagined Reality of the Names in their plurality is reintegrated by Ibn al-ʿArabī into the pure Reality of the One: in essence, the oneness of the many is simply the other side of the same coin of the oneness of the One. The oneness of the many is but the face of the One turned towards the many. Ibn al-ʿArabī makes this point beautifully in his own comment on a line of poetry in his *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, Interpreter of Desires, and it is here that one remarks upon the extraordinary similarity with Eckhart's conception of the Trinity:

> My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the Persons are made one Person in essence. [The interpretation given by Ibn al-ʿArabī]: 'Number does not beget multiplicity in the Divine Substance, as the Christians declare that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One God, and as the Qur'ān declares: 'Call upon God or call on the Merciful; however ye invoke Him, it is well, for to Him belong the most beautiful Names' (17:110).' (*Tarjuman*, p. 70)

Ibn al-ʿArabī identifies the three Persons of the Trinity as three aspects or 'names' of the one Essence, thus resolving multiplicity within unity in a manner which is analogous to that by means of which the ninety-nine 'names' of Allāh refer to a single Essence in Islam. For, to repeat his crucial statement, 'number does not beget multiplicity in the divine Substance'. This statement is almost identical to what Eckhart says about the Trinity. And here we should note the remarkable fact that Eckhart, in speaking about the Trinity, refers to the number 100: an oblique reference, perhaps, to Allāh and His 99 Names?:

> For anyone who could grasp distinctions without number and quantity, a hundred would be as one. Even if there were a hundred Persons in the Godhead, a man who could distinguish without number and quantity would perceive them only as one God…. [He] knows that three Persons are one God (I:217)

Both Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabī situate differentiated plurality on a plane, within the divine nature, which is below that of the Essence; a plane which pertains to the relationship between the Creator and the created. This plurality pertaining to relativity, however, can only emerge as a result of the infinitude of the Essence. This infinitude implies that an innumerable plurality is comprised, in absolutely undifferentiated mode, within the Essence. In other words, what is infinite within the Essence is transcribed as so many modes of differentiable plurality—three Persons or ninety-nine Names—on the

plane of the divinity. The oneness of the One is not therefore numerical, it is metaphysical; it is a oneness of all-inclusive totality, a unitive infinitude which transcends the altogether created category of number; it is an infinitude which transcends the plane upon which oneness can be contrasted with multiplicity. It is on the plane of the divinity that oneness can be contrasted with many-ness. The oneness of the many pertains to the relationships that the One assumes in relation to the many. To speak of 'relationship' is ineluctably to speak of relativity, and it is on this plane of relativity—still within the divine nature itself, but relativity nonetheless—that one can ascribe numerical plurality to God.

This plurality, though, does not 'beget' or imply any kind of numerical multiplicity within the divine Substance or Essence, because this Essence is simple, non-compound: that is, absolutely indivisible. It comprises all possible aspects, but also transcends them. As Schuon has said, the Absolute is Absolute not because It comprises aspects but because It transcends the aspects it comprises. The Essence is 'one' not in any numerical sense of unity which can be distinguished, on the same plane of number, from plurality; for then we would still be on the plane of relativity, asserting one 'unit' or thing as opposed to other similarly located units or things. Rather, the Essence is one, as we said just now, in a properly *metaphysical* sense, a sense which goes beyond *physis* or nature, understanding by nature all that which pertains to the created order, and number evidently pertains to this order.

Number, then, as applied to God must be applied in a consciously metaphysical manner: if one is to speak of God in terms of the contingent category of number, then one should assert that God is indeed 'one', for, on the plane of number, 'one' is the most adequate symbol by which the Absolute can be described, as Frithjof Schuon has cogently argued in his remarkable critique (which is also a defence) of the doctrine of the Trinity (see 'Evidence and Mystery' in *Logic and Transcendence*).

Returning to Eckhart, let us note the ways in which he manifests what Muslims would unhesitatingly call *tawḥīd.* His doctrine of oneness is ultimately derived from his experience of absolute unity within himself. In the following passage, he describes this unity as a 'citadel':

> So truly one and simple is this citadel, so mode and power transcending is this solitary One, that neither power nor mode can gaze into it, nor even God Himself!… God never looks in there for one instant, in so far as He exists in modes and in the properties of His Persons… this One alone lacks all mode and property… for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside… But only in so far as He is one and indivisible (can He do this): in this sense He is neither Father, Son nor Holy Ghost and yet is a something which is neither this nor that. (I:76)

Before proceeding any further along this metaphysical trajectory, it is important to note that both mystics lay down strict conditions for receiving their teachings. Eckhart says in one sermon that his words are meant only for the 'good and perfected people' in whom dwell

> … the worthy life and lofty teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. *They* must know that the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within (I:6, emphasis added).

> For what I say here is to be understood of the good and perfected man who has walked and is still walking in the ways of God; not of the natural, undisciplined man, for he is entirely remote from and totally ignorant of this birth (I:1).

Good character, together with the assimilation of the basic teachings of Scripture, constitute the qualification for starting the journey along the path towards union, even if the next stage of this path calls for an unknowing and a radical forgetting. This forgetting is necessary for Eckhart, not in order to transcend Scripture, but to leave behind one's own inescapably limited understanding of Scripture; for the transcendent aim is to be one with the essential content and source of revelation itself, the Word of God. Union with the source of revelation thus presupposes an emptiness of all conceptions, even those derived from the data of revelation itself.

In Ibn al-ʿArabī we find an almost identical stress on the pre-requisite of virtue and of the correct observance of the outward forms of Islam. For example, in one treatise on the central method of spiritual realisation, the spiritual retreat, *khalwa*, he says that before entering the retreat, the following three conditions must be observed: Firstly, proper intention: God alone—and not self-glorification, or phenomenal powers and states—must be the object of the aspirant's quest. Secondly, the aspirant must strictly observe the external rules of the religion. Thirdly, his imagination must be mastered and this in turn presupposes the appropriate 'spiritual training' (*riyāḍa*) which means among other things, the perfection of character (*Journey*, 30); and for Ibn al-ʿArabī, as for all the mystics of Islam, there can be no perfection of character apart from the emulation of what the Qur'an calls the *uswa ḥasana*, or *khuluq ʿaẓīm*: the beautiful model, the tremendous nature, constituted by the Prophet Muḥammad.

This emphasis on submission to the religious tradition stemming from Revelation help us to understand the cardinal importance—indeed the centrality—of humility in the perspectives of Eckhart and Ibn al-ʿArabī. This humility is expressed in Sufism by the term *faqr*, poverty or neediness. The Qur'an addresses us all as the poor, *al-fuqarāʾ*:

> O mankind, ye are the poor in relation to God, and God, He is the Rich, the Praised. (35:15)

One of Eckhart's most famous sermons is on poverty. This sermon can be read as a commentary on this Qur'anic verse, as well as on the Biblical verse—one of the beatitudes given by Jesus—with which Eckhart begins the sermon: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'. Eckhart defines a poor man as 'one who wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing.' (II:269–270)

He criticizes those people, attached to 'penances and outward practices', who claim that the poor man who wills nothing is one who 'never does his own will in anything, but should strive to do the dearest will of God'. Eckhart then evaluates this position thus:

> It is well with these people because their intention is right, and we commend them for it. May God in His Mercy grant them the Kingdom of Heaven! But by God's wisdom I declare that these folk are not poor men or similar to poor men… I say they are asses with no understanding of God's truth. Perhaps they will gain heaven for their good intentions, but of the poverty we shall now speak of they have no idea. (II:270)

> As long as a man is so disposed that it is his will with which he would do the most beloved will of God, that man has not the poverty we are speaking about: for that man has a will to serve God's will—and that is not true poverty! (II:272)
>
> For when that man stood in the eternal being of God, nothing else lived in him: what lived there was himself. Therefore we declare that a man should be as free from his own knowledge as he was when he was not. That man should let God work as he will, and himself stand idle. (II:272)

Eckhart's notion of poverty, then, is rooted in an awareness of our essential nothingness. This is almost identical to what we find in Ibn al-ʿArabī's perspective on poverty, which is linked to the idea of a servitude which is likewise rooted in nonexistence. One of the ways in which he conveys this notion of the poverty of the true servant is his turning upside down the conventional Sufi interpretation of the following divine saying, in which God describes two types of servant:

> My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him; and my servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works until that I love him. When I love him I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot upon which he walks.
> (*Forty Hadith Qudsi*, no. 25, modified)

It is normal in Sufism to read this saying as an allusion to the grace of sanctity (*walāya*) that is granted to the servant whose total dedication to God is expressed through those devotions which are supererogatory, that is, over and above the obligatory prayers.

But Ibn al-ʿArabī says the exact opposite:

> Supererogatory works and ***clinging*** fast to them give the servant the properties of the attributes of the Real, while obligatory works [note: no ***clinging***] give him the fact of being nothing but light. Then he [the servant] looks through His [God's] Essence, not through His [God's] attributes, for His Essence is identical to His hearing and His seeing. That is the Real's Being, not the servant's existence. (*Path*, 330–331 (modified))

What is intended here is made clearer by Ibn al-ʿArabī's distinction between servitude (*ʿubūdah*) and servanthood (*ʿubūdiyyah*), the first referring to the quality as such, shorn of all personal appropriation, the second connoting a personal substance to which the quality is appended.

> Servitude is the ascription of the servant to Allah, not to himself; if he is ascribed to himself, this is servanthood (*ʿubūdiyyah*) not servitude. So servitude is more complete. (*Illuminations* (Chittick) 555, n. 16)

In other words, insofar as servanthood requires the affirmation of the individual, it relates to the affirmation of relative existence before it is subordinated to Being; whilst

servitude, as a quality which subsumes the individual, is itself sublimated within Being; the individual ceases to be a barrier between the quality of servitude and the reality of Being. The saint who is thus assimilated to the attribute of servitude gazes upon the way in the which 'God turns him this way and that.' (*Illuminations* (Chittick) 555, n. 16).

This reminds us of Eckhart's statement: 'That man should let God work as he will, and himself stand idle.'

Ironically, it is this apparent idleness that qualifies one who has inwardly attained complete freedom: this is a freedom from oneself, and freedom from God, for it is uncreated freedom in and as the Essence of God:

> While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God. . . I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, then I had a God. For before there were creatures, God was not 'God': He was That which He was. But when creatures came into existence and received their created being, then God was not 'God' in Himself—He was 'God' in creatures (II:271).

Eckhart was 'free of God' only when he had no God, that is, before the duality between God and creatures was established. Now this 'before' must be understood not chronologically but ontologically, that is, not as a moment in time but as a degree within Being. Eckhart realizes this degree of being, as he attests in the following statement, part of which we cited earlier:

> When I return to God, if I do not remain there, my breakthrough will be far nobler than my outflowing…. When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, none will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one missed me, for there God unbecomes (II:82).

Where God unbecomes, and the Godhead alone subsists, *there* Eckhart is 'free of God'; but we cannot any longer speak of Eckhart as a specific individual. He has, by definition, undergone *fanāʾ*, annihilation; this annihilation being the sole means of access to ultimate freedom. Being completely 'free' is being 'free of God', and this state is strictly predicated upon being liberated from one's own ego.

This is precisely what Ibn al-ʿArabī asserts in the following passage, after stating that only the divine Essence possesses the station or *maqām* of Freedom. Here, it is important to stress the distinction between a state, *ḥāl*, which is always temporary; and a station, *maqām*, which is permanent:

> When the servant desires the realization of this station… [he knows] that this can only come about through the disappearance of the poverty that accompanies him because of his possibility, and he also sees that the Divine Jealousy demands that none be qualified by existence except God… he knows through these considerations that the ascription of existence to the possible thing is impossible…. Hence he looks at his own entity and sees that it is nonexistent… and that nonexistence is its intrinsic attribute. So no thought of existence occurs to him, poverty disappears, and he remains free in the

> *state* of possessing nonexistence, like the freedom of the Essence in Its Being (*Illuminations* (Chittick), 257–258).

Just as the Essence is free of the limitations binding the Creator to creation, so the servant is free of the limitations binding him to the Creator only insofar as he, the servant, realizes completely his own nonexistence: to exist is to be imprisoned within the poverty, *faqr*, which is forever in need of the riches—the Being—of the Lord. The servant remains always the servant. When the servant becomes ontologically and not just notionally aware of his nonexistence, only then can there arise the momentary *state* of complete freedom, a taste of, or participation in, the eternal freedom of the Essence. What this all implies and induces is the purest or most radical sense of humility:

> Since the *wujūd* of the servant is not his own entity, and since the *wujūd* of the Lord is identical with Himself, the servant should stand in a station from which no whiffs of lordship are smelt from him (*Path*, 324).
>
> For my voyage was only in myself and pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure servant without a trace of lordship in me at all (*Illuminations* (Morris), 380).
>
> The final end and ultimate return of the gnostics… is that the Real is identical with them, while they do not exist. (*Path*, 375).

We call this humility 'radical' because it goes to the very root of our existence, or rather, it uncovers the fundamental ambiguity of our existence: that we are at once pure nothingness and pure Being. The gnostics, the true knowers, are aware that their true identity is the Real, in the very measure that they are aware that they—as individuals—do not exist.

They recognize themselves in the Light which they discover in the depths of their hearts, the Light of which their specific existence is a shadow. Ibn al-ʿArabī writes:

> The object of vision, which is the Real, is light, while that through which the perceiver perceives Him is light. Hence light becomes included within light. It is as if it returns to the root from which it became manifest. So nothing sees Him but He. You, in respect of your entity are identical with shadow, not light (*Path*, 215).

It is as if Eckhart were commenting on the idea of light returning to its root when he says:

> In the inmost part, where none is at home, ***there*** that light finds satisfaction, and ***there*** it is more one than it is itself.' (II:105)

The light within Eckhart's intellect—which is 'uncreated and uncreatable'—is more truly one that it is itself. To the extent that he identifies with this light, he is truer to himself in that which transcends him than he is in and as himself. In other words, one finds one's self more in the One than in oneself. Let us not forget that Eckhart is not speculating in the void: he is speaking as one who has leapt into that void (cite

Schuon: *Logic and Transcendence*), and tells us that he knows himself only in the negation of his own particularity, in the disappearance of his own egoic nucleus. One of the most powerfully evocative images Eckhart gives us to convey a hint of what this self-abnegation means is this:

> When the soul has got so far it loses its name [cf *nama-rupa* transcended] and is drawn into God, so that in itself it becomes nothing, just as the sun draws the dawn into itself and annihilates it.
> (III: 126)

This is a perfect image of the mystery expressed by the Sufi formula: *al-baqā' ba'd al-fanā'*, subsistence after annihilation. The annihilation of the lesser light of the soul—the extinction of its fragmentary consciousness—is infinitely compensated by the rising of the sun—the awakening to supreme consciousness. The negation of limitation—whether this limitation take the form of the Trinity/Divine Names in the face of the Godhead or of the soul before God—this negation of limitation transforms death into life: self-negation, motivated by supreme aspiration and consummated by divine grace, grants one a taste of the beatitude of infinite being. We return to what Eckhart describes as the content of the Word that is born in the soul: immeasurable power, infinite wisdom, and infinite sweetness; and to what Ibn al-ʿArabī describes as the essence of Being: *al-wujūd wijdān al-Ḥaqq fi'l-wajd*: Being is consciousness of the Real in bliss.

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