

## On the Diversity of Divine Self-disclosures

Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir

*I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me. [Qur’an, 51:56]*

That is, that they might know Him, according to the opinion of the majority of the spiritual masters. This interpretation is corroborated by the following words which are part of a Holy Tradition: “I was a Hidden Treasure. I was not known, and I loved to be known. Thus I created the beings and became known to them, and it is through Me that they have known Me.” There is also the verse in which God—exalted is He—says: *Thy Lord hath decreed, that ye worship none save Him* [Qur’an, 17:23]. “Decreed” means decided in an irrevocable manner. Having been created only for this purpose the jinn and humankind are bound to know Him in conformity with this primordial nature (*fitra*) in which God has created them, and in this respect no one can not know God. But He has also decreed that they worship none but Him, so that they never worship other than Him, for His decisions are executory, irreversible, and cannot be contradicted. If men differ in their knowledge [of the divine Reality], this is due to the diversity of their intelligences which depends on the diversity of their aptitudes (*isti‘dād*); the latter, however, have no cause, being pure primordial potentialities (*li’annahā qadīma, ghayr maj‘ūla*) that constitute a holy, essential effusion which is not affected by any attribute. It is because the manifestations of He who is worshiped are multiple that one sees multiple religions and traditions. The *raison d’être* of any worship is to magnify [the Worshiped], and thus the worshiper meditates and humbles himself before He who can harm or benefit, give or retain, accord [or withhold] subsistence, elevate or abase... Yet, all these Attributes belong in reality to One Being which is none other than God—exalted is He—the Non-manifest Absolute (*al-Ghayb al-muṭlaq*). Whoever worships any form—the sun or the stars, the fire, light, or darkness, nature, an idol, an imaginary form or a jinn—says about the form which he worships: “This is how He who constitutes the object of my worship presents Himself.”... And he ascribes attributes of the Divine to it, making it a source of harm or benefit, which would be justified from a certain aspect, were it not for the fact that in so doing he assigns a limit [to God] and claims to submit Him to conditions.

Ultimately, the worshiper does not seek, through the form which he worships, but the Reality which deserves to be worshiped and which is none other than God—exalted is He. For this is what God has decided and decreed from pre-eternity. But it is His Absolute Manifestation, exempt from all limitation and free from all condition that this worshiper does not grasp, because he has not realized it effectively (*‘alā al-tahqīq*), despite having a global knowledge thereof (*fi al-jumla*) which is none other than this primordial knowledge. Thus any worshiper who is not among this blessed group (*al-ṭā’ifa al-marḥūma*) which constitutes the elite of the gnostics only worships [the absolute Reality] as conditioned, limited, and finally in conformity to his judgment (*maḥkūman ‘alayhi*), for this is how he knows Him.

Even dogmatic theologians do not fall outside of this rule, in their judgment that God must be endowed with such and such Attribute, but that it does not befit Him to possess such and such other Attribute. They have made their reason the instrument of [knowing] God; yet reason cannot but pronounce itself in favour of Absolute Transcendence, whereas the knowledge of His Unity (*tawhīd*) as taught to us by the Scriptures and the prophets – blessings and peace be upon them all—comprises a double aspect of transcendence (*tanzīh*) and of immanence (*tashbīh*). There is no doubt that theologians, be they Sunnis or Mu'tazilites, have pronounced themselves on the question of God by ascribing Him a particular attribute and denying Him another only after having formed a rational and imaginal conception of God, for their judgment is necessarily a development of this conception; and if one of them objected that in his mind God assumed absolutely no form, it is either because he ignores all the modalities of conception or because he is an insolent liar. This is the reason why you will see them, after having passed all kinds of judgments (*ḥukm*) about God, recognising in the end that, “Whatever conclusion that comes to your mind, know that God is different from it!” With these words they wish to disavow everything they have concocted before; yet, this disavowal constitutes itself a (rational) conclusion which as such would deserve to be rejected.

Each group of worshipers therefore seeks to confine the absolute Reality in its own doctrine by negating that God can disclose or manifest Himself in any other way except according to their conception thereof. This is the reason why there are many of those who shall not recognise Him on the Day of Judgement, and who will thereby ask Him to protect them from Himself, as testified by the following authenticated tradition which I quote in meaning (*bi al-ma'nā*): “[On the Day of Judgment] God will order all the communities to follow that which they worshiped. Only this [Islamic] community will remain in place with all its hypocrites in it. Then God will present Himself before them in a form in which they do not recognise Him, saying unto them: ‘I am your Lord.’ They will exclaim: ‘We seek God’s protection from you! We shall stay in place until the coming of our Lord, and when He comes, we shall recognise Him.’ Then He will show Himself to them in the form which is familiar [to them], and they will testify, ‘Thou, indeed art our Lord!’”

Yet, the form [that God will assume in that occasion] and the transformation at issue are but His self-disclosures in conformity with the manner in which God wishes to manifest Himself, and which is desired by Him—exalted is He. In reality they are pure nothingness without the least reality, were it not for the sight of their beholder. God—exalted is He—will remain as He was in Himself before manifesting Himself in this particular self-disclosure, without being affected in His Immutability by the slightest change, as is the case with any divine epiphany, in this world or in the next. The people [mentioned in this *ḥadīth*] will therefore be in the truth when they contest Him in the first Self-disclosure, since He cannot be enclosed in any form whatsoever, and also in the truth when they recognise Him in the second one, for He who is thus manifested is always the Same through His different Self-disclosures. The point is simply that, the first time, God manifested Himself in a form which was unfamiliar to them in this world, and which they could not imagine insofar as it did not conform to their beliefs. However, each of these deniers only recognised Him as limited and conditioned by the form in which they imagined Him in this world, by concluding (*ḥakama*) that He had to be endowed with such and such Attributes and deprived of such and such other ones... No one among them recognised Him [as He is in reality]—escaping all contours of a particular doctrine, and sovereign with respect to a form which would necessarily determine His Self-disclosures. [On the Day of Judgment] they will not recognise Him for the Sovereign when He shall manifest Himself to them in the form familiar to them in this world, whereas it is the Same who manifests Himself to them in each Self-disclosure. Not a single of these deniers who

shall ask for His protection for having not recognised Him will be able to recognise Him in His absoluteness [that is, free from any condition or constraint]; he shall recognise Him only in the conditioned form which traces out the contours of his particular belief, a form which is fashioned only by his reason and in which they persist in worshipping Him. Were it not for the permission of the legislator [the Prophet] to “imagine” the Worshipped in our worship of Him, we would not fear affirming that there is no difference between he who fashions an idol by his own hand, thus giving Him a sensory form, and he who gives Him a rational form. Yet, in a famous tradition the Prophet—whose trustworthiness is complete and unquestionable—has authorised imaginal representations [of the Divinity] and has forbidden sensory representations: “Excellence consists in worshipping God as if you see Him”—that is, to imagine Him as being in front of you when, for example, you turn towards the *qibla*, in order to meet all the appropriate conditions of worship while standing before Him, so that He may be present in your heart throughout your worship. This order has been given to us in such a form because just like—in an external plane—our body is maintained by orientation in the direction of the *qibla*, thereby being unable to neither turn away nor make a movement [that is not part of the prayers], so does our heart focus in our inside [on the object of its worship], which makes it avoid dispersion and abandonment [to self-propagating thoughts].

But the Prophet did not order this to the one who imagines (*mutakhayyil*) God thus to “condition” Him for his account while denying it to others, nor to confine Him in a ritual orientation while refusing to admit that a third could assign Him another, nor to ascribe Him an “imaginal form” to the exclusion of any others. For, within these very imaginal representations, He remains—exalted is He—the Absolute who is unconditioned and unaffected by form. Being the Essence of opposites, both of the Absolute and the conditioned, He is at once one and the other.

As for the knowers—may God be pleased with all of them—when they will be faced with this Self-disclosure and this change of form in the Ultimate Abode, they will remain in total silence without trying to make Him known to anyone. Such is their attitude already in the here below, for they know Him as the true unconditioned Absolute and also as beyond Absoluteness itself which constitutes already a definition [and thereby a condition]. They know that He is the Manifest who is disclosed through all forms—sensory, rational, subtle, or imaginary—and that *He is the Manifest and the Inward, the First and the Last* [Qur’an, 57:3]. They have not been ignorant of Him in this world, and they shall not be ignorant of Him in the next either, in whatever form He shall manifest Himself. Which explains the following sentence attributed to certain gnostics: “The gnostics shall be tomorrow, God willing, as they are today.”

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Translated by Edin Lohja for  
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