

A Contested Concept: The Image of God in Islam

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Abstract

Muslims throughout the world might be surprised to learn that Islamic scholars have considered the “image of God,” a central term for thinking about theological anthropology. For unlike with the sacred scriptures of their Jewish and Christian neighbors, the phrase “image of God” never appears in the Holy Quran and has not played a prominent role in either of Islam’s two largest communities, Sunni and Shia. And yet, in his concept of al-Insan al-kamil, translatable as the “perfect or complete man,” the prominent Islamic mystic and Sufi scholar Ibn al-‘Arabi argues for an Arabic term that is analogous to the Christian and Jewish notions of an “image of God.” In order to support his philosophy, Ibn al-‘Arabi pulls evidence from Muslim sources – the Quran, Islamic teachings, and one of the most authoritative schools of hadith, including Hadith Bukhari 6227 which states that God created Adam “in his image” – and yet, despite the way Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works have captivated the minds of Western scholars and theologians, his studies remain controversial among Muslims. This paper examines the holy Quran’s prohibition of anthropomorphizing God and an exegetical examination of Hadith Bukhari 6227 to argue that while a certain aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” is in accordance with Islam, other aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” go against basic Islamic teachings. In the end, while the phrase “image of God” is esteemed in other monotheistic faiths, this paper concludes that it ought not be embraced in Islam. And yet, even though Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy is rightly criticized by Muslim scholars, this paper argues that it remains important to examine because it makes a person more conscious of the myriad of tensions that can arise within a religious community’s interpretation of their sacred texts, a phenomenon that manifests across different faiths.

Keywords: Islam, Image of God, Hadith

1. Introduction

Many Muslims are unaware that the “image of God,” a phrase usually associated in the Christian and Jewish faiths, has been considered by Islamic scholars as a central term for thinking about theological anthropology. It should be made clear that the phrase “image of God” never appears in the Holy Quran and has not played a prominent role in either of Islam’s two largest communities, Sunni and Shia. However, a prominent Islamic mysticism, or Sufi, scholar, Ibn al-‘Arabi, argues for the concept of al-Insan al-kamil, an Arabic term that can be translated in English as the “perfect or complete man.” This concept of the “perfect man” is intriguing because Ibn al-‘Arabi pulls evidence from the Quran, hadiths, and Islamic teachings to support his philosophy that because God created humans from His essence, humans are, in fact, in God’s image. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works have captivated the minds of Western scholars and theologians, yet his studies remain controversial and at times even resented among Muslims. Nevertheless, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s studies are compelling because he is able to draw bold conclusions and support ideas about a very sensitive topic in Islam.

For in Islam, the association of an “image” with God and even with certain prophets is widely recognized as kufr, or rejection of Islam. This concept was taught to Muslims by the Prophet Muhammad who narrated many hadith forbidding image-making to the Muslim nation, the most prominent being: “the people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Judgement will be the Image-Makers.”¹ Furthermore, the anger of Muslims is apparent when non-Muslims depict images of sacred Islamic figures. For example, in 2005, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoon images of the Prophet Muhammad, riots occurred in many Muslim majority countries such as Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Additionally, the prohibition of sacred images in Islam is displayed in Islamic holy sites. Unlike the elaborate images and paintings of Jesus Christ and saints embellishing church walls of some denominations, a person will never see an image of God or a prophet in a mosque, anywhere in the world. Overall, the concept of religious images is frowned upon in Islam, but more significantly, the association of God with an image is considered blasphemous. This is due to the fact that Muslims believe associating an image to God can distract a worshiper from understanding the wonder and caliber of God. And one cannot forget that the Quran clearly states “there is nothing that resembles God” (42:11). Thus, for Muslims, an “image of God” becomes a sin that connotes the ultimate disbelief of Allah, a sin that if pursued, can even destabilize your entire identity as “Muslim.”

But this contested concept of the “image of God” has not stopped a small minority of Muslim scholars from exploring it in Islam. While the idea of an “image of God” is indeed frowned upon in Islam, Sufi scholar, Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that it is hidden deep in Islamic teachings. Through his studies and work, Ibn al-‘Arabi introduces the concept of the “perfect man,” which in some respects is analogous to the revered concept of “the image of God” in Genesis. To put it simply, in his concept of the “perfect man,” Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that through submission, purification, and divine guidance, a person can attain the highest type of knowledge and, in this way, they emulate God. In other words, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, a person knows himself by contemplating God’s creations, and when a person gains knowledge of the world they also gain knowledge of God. Through this knowledge, a person becomes complete, as their purpose for creation is fulfilled, and they become united with their creator who made them from His essence.

An important piece of evidence that supports Ibn al-‘Arabi’s claims is a hadith spoken by Prophet Muhammad which states, “he who knows himself knows his Lord.” Furthermore, Ibn al-‘Arabi believes that humans are a microcosmic gesture of God; they are a bridge which link the Divine Presence to the world and in doing this they “mediate the return of that Presence and its power” to its original source, God.² In all, Ibn al-‘Arabi advocates for a concept which recognizes humans as a microcosm created by a macrocosm, God. This micro/macrocosmic idea displays an interconnected relationship between human and God. Thus, when a human learns about the cosmos, they are fulfilling their potential; they come to know God and are able to build a closer relationship with him, and through this, humans mirror God and become complete, or in the words of Ibn al-‘Arabi: they become the perfect man.

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s presents us with a philosophy that is interesting and compelling, especially in the context of the Islamic religion. In this paper, I will argue that while a certain aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” is valid and in accordance with Islam, other aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” are invalid, too far-fetched, and even go against basic Islamic teachings. I will first argue why aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy of a “perfect man” are invalid. This will be achieved by pointing out that the hadith he uses as a major piece of evidence for his philosophy is controversial. The hadith is controversial because Ibn al-‘Arabi makes a stretch in its interpretation that ultimately causes him to contradict core verses in the Quran, a doctrine which can never be controversial in the Islamic religion because it is believed to be sent to Muslims directly from God through the Prophet Muhammad. Secondly, I will also present another aspect of his “perfect man” philosophy, specifically Creator/creation mutuality, which I will argue is inaccurate and misinterpreted according to Islamic teachings found in the Quran and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. I will then articulate why a certain aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy, specifically the aspect of knowledge, is accurate by validating his arguments with specific Quranic verses. My arguments against Ibn al-‘Arabi will parallel many Muslim scholars critical of his teachings; however, unlike some Muslim scholars I will examine the aspect of knowledge in his “perfect man” philosophy which may make a positive contribution within the Islamic religion.

2. Analyzing And Refuting Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Interpretation Of Hadith Bukhari 6227

One of the most controversial hadith in the Muslim world, Hadith Bukhari 6227, Mohammad al-Bukhari narrates the Prophet Muhammad saying “Allah created Adam in his image.”³ And it is this hadith that Ibn al-‘Arabi uses as grounds to justify his “perfect man” philosophy.⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabi is not at all absurd for using this hadith as the foundation of his philosophy. And in order to understand why we must first analyze what the definition and status of “hadith” is to the Islamic faith.

In Islam, a hadith is a saying of the Prophet Mohammad which serves as a major source of guidance to Muslims apart from the Quran. Prophet Mohammad was illiterate so his companions and other Muslim followers would write down and distribute his teachings. But a person just hearing this may think this practice is questionable. One may think: if other people are writing down what the prophet is saying, can they not simply make up whatever they want, and distribute it as a “hadith”? How can one be completely sure that the Prophet Mohammad himself stated this teaching? For this reason, Muslims have established a system for identifying the credibility of a hadith.

In this system which was established in 750 during the Abbasid Caliphate, Muslim scholars break up hadith into four categories based on strength: the strongest category is sahih which translates to English as sound, after sahih comes hasan which translates to good, the third category is da’if which translates to weak, and lastly, maud’u, which translates to fabricated. A hadith is considered to be sahih or sound when there were many witnesses hearing the Prophet Mohammad as he relayed a specific teaching to the Muslim nation; thus, this allows it to be regarded as very strong and credible. Only two scholars are esteemed in the Muslim world for their practice of collecting only sahih hadith, and one of these scholars is Bukhari: the man who narrated the hadith stating that Allah created Adam in his image. Thus, one can see why Hadith Bukhari 6227 proves so controversial in Islam. On the other hand, if the author of this hadith regarding the image of God was in the weak category, Muslims can simply throw it out, disregard it, and move on. But because Bukhari, a scholar who has narrated only sahih hadith in the Muslim world, says the Prophet Mohammad made this statement, Muslims have to acknowledge it as true in some regard. In all, it is because of Hadith Bukhari 6227’s strength that Ibn al-‘Arabi uses it as grounds for his philosophy.⁵

Ibn al-‘Arabi uses this hadith to justify his philosophy by assuming the pronoun “his,” in the hadith, refers to God. And for Ibn al-‘Arabi this interpretation is only logical, considering Allah’s divine names and attributes. This is due to the fact that in Islam, Allah is also referred to by his ninety-nine names. These names help Muslims comprehend the capacity and glory of Allah; they include: the Hearing (As-Sami), the Seeing (Al-Basir), the Knowing (Al-Alim), the Mighty (al-Jalil), the Wise (al-Hakim), and the Generous (Al-Karim). Ibn al-‘Arabi points out that because humans possess and are capable of all the following qualities, humankind is in God’s image.⁶ And in this way, his interpretation of Hadith Bukhari 6227 is justified.

Most importantly, Ibn al-Arabi’s interpretation of Hadith Bukhari 6227 provides him with grounds to establish his philosophy regarding the “perfect man.” This concept is eloquently stated in an essay by Yahya Michot. He states, “In the hadith of Adam’s creation, Ibn al-‘Arabi did not see a danger of anthropomorphic reduction of God but, rather, grounds for a theomorphic exaltation of the Perfect Man.”⁷ In other words, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, associating humankind with God, in such a close relation, does not in any way reduce or downgrade God’s glory, capacity, and power. But rather, by associating man with his Creator, man is able to transcend, achieve, and perfect the divine attributes which describe God. And by doing this, man becomes like God; he becomes complete and he is then the “perfect man;” and, in his book the *Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that the Islamic prophets chosen by Allah to relay His message are regarded as “perfect men.”⁸

Not surprisingly, Ibn al-Arabi’s interpretation of Hadith Bukhari 6227 has been refuted by many Muslim imams and scholars. I will argue that they are correct because of the strong theological evidence they provide. These scholars and religious leaders against Ibn al-‘Arabi use the holy Quran as the source of their refutations. And for these Muslims scholars and generally all Muslims, the Quran functions as a noncontroversial doctrine, as it is believed that this holy text was verbally revealed to the Prophet Mohammad by the angel Gabriel from God. In the Quran, Muslim scholars point out that there are numerous commands and verses which deny any type of association or likeness to God. They include: “there is nothing like God” (42:11), “Allah does not forgive anything that should be associated with him” (4:48), and “O believers, you shall worship God alone, and you shall not associate anything with Him therein” (4:36). These declarations in the Quran are clear in stating that there is nothing in Allah’s image, but then one may ask: what of this hadith describing Adam’s creation? How could Prophet Mohammad, a man chosen by God to relay God’s holy message, narrate a hadith contradicting such prominent and directly phrased verses of the Quran?

This contradiction between Hadith Bukhari 6227 and Quranic verses has created a vast range of explanations and discussion between people of the Muslim world. However, it should be indicated that this dilemma is not foreign to people of other monotheistic faiths. In Christianity, for example, a controversial verse such as Psalm 137, “happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks,” appears in a holy text and Christians cannot simply make it nonexistent. But rather, they must try to interpret it within the specific boundaries of their religion. And this is exactly what Muslim scholars are doing with regards to Hadith Bukhari 6227. Nevertheless, to answer the questions of how Prophet Mohammad could possibly narrate a hadith contradicting core verses of the Quran, Muslim scholars respond by looking at the Arabic text of this controversial hadith, as it was spoken by Prophet Mohammad himself.

One set of questions includes the reference of the pronoun “his” in Hadith Bukhari 6227. In the Arabic text, the Prophet Mohammad does indeed state that “Allah created Adam in his Image,” but the text does not specify if the pronoun, “his,” refers directly to God. Yahya Michot, a Muslim Islamic studies professor, discusses two various

explanations of Muslim theologians regarding the “his” pronoun in Hadith Bukhari 6227. The first explanation is that God created Adam in the form of adult man, which Adam would later carry on as he inhabited earth; God did not create Adam as an embryo or a child, but rather Adam was formed by God in the same image he would possess when he left paradise. The second explanation is that Prophet Mohammad was referring to somebody specific in his audience. For in Prophet Mohammad’s time, Muslims would sit around the prophet in a circle at a mosque or in his home, as the prophet preached to them about Islamic teachings. In these religious spheres held by the prophet, Muslims would openly ask the Prophet Mohammad questions regarding the Islamic faith, verses in the Holy Quran, etc. Thus, when Prophet Mohammad said “Allah created Adam in his image” he could have been referring to the form of that particular person to whom he was speaking. He could have also gestured to a man sitting by him to provide an example that God created Adam just as he created the form of any other man: with a head, feet, and arms. Muslim scholars have responded with explanations regarding Ibn al-‘Arabi’s interpretation of Hadith Bukhari 6227, specifically the use of the pronoun in the hadith. Muslims have also responded to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s reasoning behind his interpretation of this hadith, specifically the concept that because humans are capable of certain attributes of God, such as hearing and seeing, they are consequently in his image. These refutations against this concept of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy are similarly plausible based on their explanations and the theological evidence they provide. In response to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s reasoning about these divine attributes in relation to humans, Muslim scholars have stated that while God is in fact given names such as the Hearing (Al-Sami) and the Seeing (Al-Bashir) it is important to recognize that when described by these names Allah is the All-Hearing and the All-Seeing. In other words, unlike humans, Allah is able to hear all the sounds in the earth and cosmos, such as the chirp of every bird and the whisper of every human. This is also true when discussing sight, as Allah is capable of seeing every fish in the every ocean and every raindrop as it falls, all at once. Overall, the hearing, seeing, speaking, and knowledge of humans is never like Allah and can never be compared. For Allah is infinite and perfect, with no shortcomings. While the attributes of humans are finite and imperfect.

Most importantly, Muslim scholars point out that while humans are in fact capable of knowledge, only Allah is the All-knowing. For the holy Quran states, “Allah knows your secrets and what you make public. And Allah knows all the good and evil that you are earning” (6:3) and “mankind have not been given of knowledge except a little” (17:85). Thus, Allah’s holy names and attributes should not be compared to the mere sight or hearing of human. For no matter how hard a person tried, they could never fulfill these attributes in the same capacity as God, nor could they comprehensively define all the power these attributes entail. The Quran states that this is beyond a person’s capacity. And even if man is, in fact, able to see and hear, Muslim scholars argue that it is not meant to be held in the same regard as Allah. In fact, in the Quran the two holy attributes of Allah, the hearing and the seeing, are in the same verse which states that Allah does not share a likeness to anything. The Quranic verse is: “There is nothing that is anything like Allah, for he is the All-Hearing and the All-Seeing” (42:11). The coincidence of these two holy attributes being in the same verse which denies Allah any association with anything supports Muslim scholars’ explanation that Allah’s divine attributes are not capable of being shared or associated with the attributes of His human creation. This explanation can be extended to all of Allah’s holy names. And it is because of these descriptions of Allah which are highlighted so explicitly in the holy Quran that makes Ibn al-‘Arabi’s comparison of humans to Allah in Hadith Bukhari 6227 weak and too far-fetched. The second controversial aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy that I will be analyzing and refuting is Creator/creation mutuality.

3. Analyzing And Refuting Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Concept Of Creator/Creation Mutuality

The second controversial aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy is his idea of Creator/creation mutuality. In order to understand this complex aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy we will begin by analyzing his popular metaphor of the mirror which depicts the “perfect man” and God’s relationship. In his works, Ibn al-‘Arabi compares the “perfect man” to a mirror of God. Ralph Austin, a scholar specializing in Arabic and Islamic mysticism, summarizes this relationship by stating that through the perfect man “God’s desire to be known is recognized and in the Perfect Man, God knows himself perfectly.”⁹ This quote shows that for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the “perfect man” becomes the link between humankind and God in which both man and God become united. In other words, the “perfect man” becomes a reflection or manifestation of God.

This concept of humans being a manifestation of God is perplexing, especially in the context of Islam. Austin further explains and describes the importance of this manifestation within Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy. Austin states, “[the perfect man] is the manifestation of God to Himself by which [God] becomes able to perceive Himself and able to experience Himself as His own Presence.”¹⁰ This quote implies that God needs “the perfect man” in order to

“experience” and recognize Himself. In this way, Ibn al-‘Arabi believes the “perfect man” and God are linked. Like looking at one’s reflection in a mirror, a person cannot truly see himself without perfecting their attributes. And once these attributes are perfected, God, in return, perceives Himself through “the perfect man.” This concept is clearly articulated in Ibn-al-‘Arabi’s *The Bezels of Wisdom* when he writes: “God worships me and I worship Him.”¹¹ Thus, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, a person with perfect attributes, the “perfect man” worships God and in return God knows Himself and recognizes His Essence.

Nevertheless, this aspect of Creator/creation mutuality in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy is extremely resented by Muslim scholars and they have strong warrants for their concerns based on Quranic evidence and the teachings of Islam. Muslims begin to challenge this aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy by pointing towards the Quranic verse which states “Allah has no partner in His dominion, and has no weakness, and therefore [Allah has] no need of any aid” (17:111). It is through this verse that Muslim theologians question Ibn al-‘Arabi’s reasoning and ask: if Allah, an all-powerful entity, does not require any aid then why would he need the help of a mere human to experience Himself and recognize his glory? Many Muslims respond by stating Allah does not, and it is quite a stretch in the Islamic faith to imply that Allah needs His creation.

For in the Islamic religion, the relationship humans have with Allah is like that of a servant to their master: completely subjugated and at the mercy of Allah’s will, power, and decision. Allah is the All-Powerful, the All-Loving, and the One. He forbids evil, desires good, and sends humanity with prophets for guidance. In his essay, Mischot eloquently discusses Muslims’ relationship with their Lord. In short, Mischot describes this relationship as one where Allah invites humankind to be His faithful servants, to serve and worship Him by following the teachings he has bestowed upon people through the holy Quran and the teachings of His prophets. As His servants, Muslims are to fear, obey, and trust only Him.¹² This relationship is also described several times in the Quran, a prominent verse being: “all praise is for God alone, whose deliverance is sure and whose profound peace is upon His servants” (27:59). In all, this is the relationship advocated and taught to Muslims through the holy Quran and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. So it can only seem far-fetched for one to claim that humans can transcend that humbling role they have as servants to Allah in their relationship with Him.

Furthermore, Muslim theologians argue that the phrase in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *Bezels of Wisdom*, “He worships me and I worship Him” as well as his entire concept of the perfect man being the “manifested consciousness” of God comes extremely close to the ultimate Islamic sin, shirk, which means establishing partners with Allah; and these Muslims are correct based on Islamic history and values. For one must recognize that in Islam the concept of shirk goes completely against Prophet Mohammad’s entire mission.

Prophet Mohammad’s mission was to spread the message of Islam and it is simply this: nothing must be worshipped apart from the one and only Allah. This central value of Islam is the first pillar of Islam in which Muslims must make a testimony or the Shahadah which declares “there is no god but god and Mohammad is the messenger of God.” In Islam, anyone who makes and believes this testimony is a Muslim and anyone who denies it, is not.¹³ And the Quran warns numerous times against associating a partner with Him. The Quran states: “God will not forgive associating any God with Him” (4:48) and “no partner is there for Allah” (6:163). Thus, through this understanding, a person can see how crucial the oneness of God is in Islam. And one can also see why Ibn al-‘Arabi’s concept of Creator/creation mutuality comes very close or even implies that man has god-like qualities – an extremely un-Islamic notion.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that when Prophet Mohammad first began to preach the message of Islam in Mecca, it was to an audience of idol-worshippers, a nation of polytheistic believers. Thus, this Creator/creation aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy is worrisome and resented by Muslim theologians because it portrays a contradiction with the basic teachings of Prophet Mohammad’s time and all that he was tirelessly preaching against.

Overall, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s concept of Creator/creation mutuality must be rejected according to Quranic verses and Islamic teachings. The fact that Allah “needs” a human to experience and perceive Himself is extreme in the context of Islam. In the Quran, it clearly states that Allah has no partner and does not need the aid of anyone. Furthermore, this aspect of Creator/creation mutuality bestows man with a type of godliness which strongly implies the Islamic sin of shirk and threatens the idea of the oneness of God, a concept central to the Islamic faith. And lastly, this aspect of Creator/creation mutuality is contradictory to the humbling and god-serving relationship which is advocated to Muslims by Islamic teachings and the Quran. Next, I will be analyzing a certain aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy that should be embraced.

4. Embracing The Aspect Of Knowledge In Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “Perfect Man” Philosophy

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s idea of Creator/creation as well as his reasoning and interpretation of Hadith Bukhari 6227 causes many Muslim scholars to rightly go against his teachings, as they are too far-fetched in Islam. Nevertheless, while some aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy are indeed extreme in the context of the Islamic religion, a certain aspect of his “perfect man” philosophy should be embraced by Muslims. This aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy has two parts that go hand in hand. The first part states that Muslims must attain knowledge by remembering Allah; the second part is that this knowledge helps Muslims maintain a stronger bond with their Lord and allows a person to fulfill their potential as “Muslim.”

To better understand this first aspect of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy one must recognize what Sufi Muslims meant by a person attaining knowledge. In contrast to Western philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato, who believed reason and effort to be the highest type of knowledge, Sufi scholars such as Ibn al-‘Arabi believed the highest type of knowledge did not come from reason but rather it came “by revelation from God.”¹⁴ In her essay, “Fulfilling Our Potential: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s understanding of man in a contemporary context,” Jane Clark summarizes this concept when she states “[for the Sufis] man has a faculty which is superior to reason, which [Sufis] refer to as the ‘heart’ (qalb); this is a receptive place in which God reveals Himself to man.”¹⁵ In this quote, Clark demonstrates that a person attains knowledge when God “reveals” Himself in a person’s heart. However, it should be noted that when Allah reveals Himself to his servant he is only revealing that he is existent. Allah does not reveal what he looks like nor does He actually show what He is to his follower. Instead, Allah’s “revelation” to a person only serves as a confirmation that Allah is anchoring them and near them. The more a person surrenders to God the stronger a person’s confirmation and faith in Allah becomes. Clark goes on to state that only “through submission [to God], purification, and Divine Guidance” can a person attain this type of knowledge.¹⁶ This quote means that a person must surrender to Allah and use His guidance in order to have Allah reveal His Presence to His believer. Overall, for Ibn al-‘Arabi the heart is the place and the foundation for knowledge. Jane Clark summarizes this entire concept when she states:

When the heart is oriented invariably towards God, and its potential fully realized, then, for Ibn al-‘Arabi every one of man’s faculties can become a means and a channel for the knowledge of God – so it flows through the imagination and the senses as well as through intellect and intuition, because all the faculties are, in reality, instruments of the heart.¹⁷

Here again we see how Ibn al-‘Arabi believes that attaining knowledge is achieved in the heart, as a person’s heart is meant to be surrendered to Allah. And once man seeks knowledge, he fulfills his God-given potential as human.

And for Ibn al-‘Arabi this knowledge is attained by the Islamic practice of dhikr or remembrance of Allah, and he is correct based on Islamic teachings. In Islam, dhikr is a practice in which Muslims continuously remember and praise God. It can be done directly and indirectly. The direct practice of dhikr can be done by uttering phrases such as “subhanallah” (glory to be Allah), “alhamdulillah” (praise be to Allah) or “la ilaha illallah” (there is no God but Allah) or by reciting the Holy Quran. This practice allows Muslims to remember, thank, and be aware of Allah throughout the day and life. Dhikr can also be practiced indirectly, as for something to be recognized as dhikr it must simply be felt by the heart and influence good deeds. Forms of indirect dhikr can be done in a conversation or action that remembers or is in accordance with Allah’s will. In Islam, Muslims should strive to remember Allah when they are reading, working, learning, or spending time with friends. In short, when Muslims practice dhikr they are acting in accordance with Allah’s will; they are performing all of their actions with the goal of obeying and pleasing Him for the ultimate reward of joining Allah in Paradise. Furthermore, the concept of dhikr is central within the Quran. The Quran states: “most assuredly, it is by the remembrance of God that hearts grow calm. These are the ones who truly believe and do righteous deeds. For them, there is sheer blessedness in this life and a most excellent resort waiting in the Hereafter” (13:28-29) and “But whoever turns away from my remembrance, for him, indeed, there shall be a stringent life” (20:124). These verses show how vital the remembrance of Allah is in Islam and they also show how Ibn al-‘Arabi is correct because by remembering Allah a person taking the first step to fulfilling his role as a Muslim.

Furthermore, in the Quran, Allah asks Muslims to attain knowledge which is in accordance with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s idea that humans must seek knowledge in order to better understand the capacity of Allah and fulfill the potential Allah bestowed upon them. For example, a prominent verse in the Quran states: “But say only: My Lord! Enrich me in knowledge” (20:114). In this verse, Allah directly commands Muslims to attain knowledge. Many Muslim imams argue this verse refers to religious knowledge. However, a second verse in the Quran states, “But the one who has come with the truth – and all who confirm it – such as these are the dutiful” (39:33). Many Muslim scholars believe this verse urges Muslims to attain scientific knowledge. They argue that Allah wants his followers to acknowledge the miracles of the world as well as gain knowledge of it. Examples of these miracles of the world include the biology of the immune system or the way the earth revolves around the sun; through these miracles a person is able to see and truly appreciate the power of God and in doing this, they become closer to Allah and stronger in their faith. The Quran

supports this idea in the verse: “We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves” (41:53). In other words, by understanding the miracles of God’s creation, a Muslim is able to better understand God’s caliber and Allah desires this of his servants so that they have a strong confirmation in him. Nevertheless, in contrast to Ibn al-Arabi’s views, it should be clarified that when Muslims attain knowledge of Allah’s creations, this does not reveal any insight on to what Allah is or constitutes. For example, a painter can create a masterpiece, but the viewer of the masterpiece will never be able to bring to mind what the painter looks like or what his other attributes are. The viewer can only appreciate the talent and craftsmanship of the painter; and this is exactly what Muslims are doing when they appreciate the beauty of the world. They are praising God who created the beauty of the universe. But humankind will never know if this beauty is a part of God or in God’s image. It was simply made by Allah so that humankind can see Allah’s miracles and have confirmation of His existence. This idea was relayed by both Prophet Mohammad and Prophet Ibrahim when their audience of idol-worshippers would ask them to prove God existed.

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s argument that humankind fulfills its potential when it maintains a strong bond with Allah is also relayed in the Quranic verse: “For We are nearer to each [person] than even the jugular vein” (50:16). In this Quranic verse, humans are meant to strive to attain the strongest bond with their Lord, to surrender and worship Him and attain knowledge of His capacity. For in Islam complete devotion, love, and attachment to Allah is essential. As the article “A Common Word Between Us and You” states, a Muslim must be devoted to Allah with “all one’s heart, all one’s soul, all one’s mind, all one’s will or strength, and all one’s sentiment.”¹⁸ In other words, in Islam, love and attachment to Allah is commanded on the deepest level of a Muslim’s heart in which a Muslim must devote himself to Allah with their whole being. This devotion helps us develop an understanding of God’s magnitude and wonder but it never allows Muslims to completely understand what Allah is.

In all, Ibn al-‘Arabi believes that a human’s potential is to build the strongest, most fervent bond with their Lord; this is the purpose of the Muslim. And it is this part of Ibn al-Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy that should be embraced and examined by the Muslim nation because it helps them better recognize their role in their faith.

5. Conclusion

Overall, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy remains an area of controversy in Islam. In this paper, I have argued that in a religion which resents images of religious figures and images of God, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s concept of the “perfect man” is too much of a stretch. This is firstly due to the fact that his use of Hadith Bukhari 6227 as the foundation of his philosophy is a weak base when considering the controversial discussion surrounding this hadith. Secondly, the Creator/creation mutuality aspect of his “perfect man” philosophy proposes that human and God are united which is contradictory to Islamic teachings. This aspect of his philosophy grants man a type of godliness which strongly implies the Islamic sin of shirk, or associating partners with Allah. Despite these controversial aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy, I have argued that Ibn al-‘Arabi is in accordance with Islamic teachings when he asserts that humans must attain knowledge in order to understand God’s capacity; this knowledge occurs when a Muslim remembers Allah and this remembrance, or dhikr, ultimately brings a person closer to Allah, allowing him to fulfill his purpose and potential as a “Muslim.” This specific aspect of knowledge is useful to examine in Islam because it helps a Muslim better comprehend their role in their faith; but ultimately, when looking at Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophy as a whole, his ideal of the “perfect man” does not hold in the Islamic religion.

Yet after careful examination of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy, it is fascinating to think that in a religion that resents the use of religious images, Ibn al-‘Arabi was able to produce a philosophy with thorough evidence and reasoning. While his philosophy may be criticized by Muslim scholars, it is important to examine because it makes a person more conscious of the myriad of tensions that can arise within a religious community’s interpretation of their sacred texts, a phenomenon that manifests across different faiths. In all, this paper has examined the phrase “image of God,” in the context of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s “perfect man” philosophy, and the tension it brings to the Islamic religion. While this phrase is esteemed in other monotheistic faiths, such as Christianity and Judaism, this paper has concluded that due to verses of the holy Quran and Islamic teachings, the phrase, “image of God,” ought not be embraced in Islam.

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