

REVELATION, DIVINE NAMES, AND THE  
UNIVERSALITY OF PROPHETIC  
GUIDANCE IN IBN AL-‘ARABI’S  
THOUGHT

Ibn ‘Arabi  
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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Ibn al-‘Arabi’s unique approach to understanding divine reality, prophecy, and religious universality, diverging from traditional theological methodologies. Ibn al-‘Arabi emphasizes that all created things are interconnected through their divine origins, with the universe reflecting God’s names. Human beings, uniquely created in God’s image, are endowed with the capacity to embody all of God’s names, but only through the guidance of prophets. Ibn al-‘Arabi critiques the limits of human reason and emphasizes the necessity of revelation, which balances God’s incomparability and similarity, leading to true spiritual knowledge. The article also examines Ibn al-‘Arabi’s views on the universality of revealed religions, arguing that the essential message of all prophets is the same, with particularities defining each tradition. He rejects the notion that Islam abrogates previous religions, instead likening Islam to the sun, which overshadows but does not nullify the stars (other religions). The article delves into a mythic narrative from Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, where the divine names, personified as agents of creation, come together to manifest the cosmos. This story illustrates the ontological necessity of revelation and how it establishes order and balance in the universe. Lastly, the article highlights Ibn al-‘Arabi’s appreciation for rational thinkers who follow the prophetic path, distinguishing them from those who engage in philosophical debates without true spiritual insight. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s philosophical and mystical insights offer a profound understanding of divine wisdom, the role of prophets, and the interconnectedness of all creation.

Ibn al-‘Arabi was thoroughly versed in the dry ratiocination of the contemporary doctors of theology, but he avoided their methodological approach. He was more likely to rely on images, symbols, analogies, and allegories derived primarily from “openings” and “tastings” and deeply rooted in the Koran and the sayings of Muhammad. He constantly returns to one basic theme: All things are intimately interrelated through their common roots in the Divine Reality. The universe in its indefinite multiplicity is nothing but the outward manifestation of God’s names, which are the faces that God turns toward creation. The revealed names provide keys that unlock the door to the invisible world. Everywhere we look we see the properties and traces of the names within the created things.

Unique among creatures, human beings display the properties of every name of God, because they alone were created in God’s form and given dominion over all creatures, each of which manifests only some of God’s names. But people cannot actualize the divine names unless they follow the guidance revealed through the prophets. Reason, even in the best of circumstances, provides insufficient knowledge of God. It allows people to understand that God is incomparable and forever unknowable, but it can never tell them anything about His similarity and self-disclosure in the macrocosm and microcosm. In contrast, revelation provides a balanced knowledge of God, for it combines the declaration of incomparability that is grasped by reason with the similarity that answers to imagination. Only when reason works harmoniously with imagination on the basis of the prophetic message can people reach perfection. Those who are able to combine reason and imagination in themselves and God—the People of Unveiling. “The common people stand in the station of declaring similarity proper balance are those who have truly witnessed the lifting of the veils between, the People of Unveiling declare both similarity and incomparability, and the rational thinkers declare incomparability alone. Hence, God combined the two sides in His elect” (II 116. 7).

The Koran pictures revelation as a message sent by God to human beings by means of a “prophet” (*nabi*) or “messenger” (*rasa/*). Revelation is a universal phenomenon, since *Every nation has its messenger* (10:47). It has two complementary dimensions that correspond to the two Shahadahs, the Islamic testimonies of faith:

“There is no god but God” and “Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

All prophets are given a message of *taw/lid*, which declares that experienced reality comes from the One and returns to the One: *And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, “There is no god but I, so serve Me” (21:25)*. Muslims must have faith in every messenger of God, because each confirms the truth (*tasdiq*) of the messages that went before. *And when Jesus son of Mary said, “Children of Israel, I am indeed God’s messenger to you, confirming the Torah that has gone before me” (61:6)*.

Although the basic message of all the messengers is the same, each messenger also brings unique teachings that define the particularities of his message. Thus, if “Muhammad is the messenger of God,” Jesus, for his part, is *the messenger of God and His word that He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him (4:171)*. Other divine messengers also have specific functions and teachings. *We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people (14:4)*.

The general function of the prophets is to guide people to felicity. God sent them to remind people that they were created to be His servants and vicegerents and to warn them of the consequences of shirking their responsibilities. The Koran makes clear that ignoring guidance will lead to wretchedness and prevent felicity. Quoting as it were from the primordial revelation given to human beings, the Koran says that when God sent Adam down from paradise, He said to him, *When there comes to you from Me guidance, then whosoever follows My guidance shall not go astray, neither shall he be wretched; but whosoever turns away from My remembrance, his life shall be a life of narrowness, and on the day of resurrection, We shall raise him blind (20:123-24)*.

In short, the Koran declares that the essential message of every prophet is the same, while the details of each message are unique. Hence the universality of religious truth is an article of Islamic faith. It is true that many Muslims believe that the universality of guidance pertains only to pre-Koranic times, but others disagree; there is no “orthodox” interpretation *here* that Muslims must accept.

One would expect to find among Sufis a clear exposition of the universality of revealed truth without the reservations expressed by most other Muslims. But the Sufis had to take into account the beliefs of their contemporaries. Even Ibn al-‘Arabi, who was not

afraid to attack the limitations of the juridical and theological mentalities, often defends a literal reading of the Koranic criticisms of the People of the Book, without suggesting that by “Christians” or “Jews” the Koran means anyone other than the contemporary practitioners of those religions.

The Koran never criticizes the prophetic messages as such, but it often condemns misunderstandings or distortions by those who follow the prophets. The Shaykh sometimes criticizes specific distortions or misunderstandings in the Koranic vein, but he does not draw the conclusion that many Muslims have drawn—that the coming of Islam abrogated (*naskh*) previous revealed religions. Rather, he says, Islam is like the sun and other religions like the stars. Just as the stars remain when the sun rises, so also the other religions remain valid when Islam appears. One can add a point that perhaps Ibn al-‘Arabi would also accept: What appears as a sun from one point of view may be seen as a star from another point of view. Concerning abrogation, the Shaykh writes,

All the revealed religions [*shara’i*] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad’s revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [*hawl*] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant. (III 153. 12)

If the Shaykh’s pronouncements on other religions sometimes fail to recognize their validity in his own time, one reason may be that, like most other Muslims living in the western Islamic lands, he had little real contact with the Christians or Jews in his environment, not to speak of followers of religions farther afield. He had probably never met a saintly representative of either of these traditions, and he almost certainly had never read anything about these two religions except what was written in Islamic sources. Hence there is no reason that he should have accepted the validity of these religions except *in principle*. But this is an important qualification. To maintain the particular excellence of the Koran and the superiority of Muhammad over all other prophets is not to deny the universal validity of revelation nor the necessity of revelation’s appearing in particularized expressions. Since all revealed religions are true in

principle, the particular circumstances that lead one to suspect that they have been corrupted may change. This is what happened when Sufis like Dara Shikoh in India met Hindu saints. '

### **The Divine Names and the Origins of Religion**

In Chapter 66 of the *Futuhidit*, the Shaykh provides a highly original account of God's creating the universe and sending the prophets. He focuses on the divine roots of revelation, which is to say that he sets out to explain what it is in *wujud* that results in the appearance of prophets in the cosmos. Instead of answering in the usual fashion that prophecy is rooted in mercy and guidance, he looks deeper into the Divine Reality. In the process he shows that man-made law—and here he uses the Arabic word *ndmus*, which is derived from Greek *nomos*—manifests the same divine motivations that establish revealed religions.

Ibn al-'Arabi frequently discusses divine roots by explaining the implications of the divine names in the rational mode of the theologians. But in Chapter 66, he provides an imaginal, even mythic, account of how the divine names exercise their effects in the world. In the process, he personifies the names in a manner that is probably unprecedented in Islamic sources, not least because, if the names of the names were changed, we would have a polytheistic myth. He is completely aware of what he is doing, of course, and he warns the reader at the beginning not to imagine "manyness or an ontological gathering." He gives the narrative an imaginal slant so that people will be able to grasp in concrete terms the principles that function within the divine things (*ilahiyat*). Otherwise, they would be forced to fall back on the abstract theorizing of the theologians.

What the Shaykh explains in his account should by now be more or less familiar. He states, in brief, that the immutable entities are known by God, but in order to become existent entities, they need both God's desire to give them existence and His power to do so. Thus he is explaining in mythic fashion the hierarchy of attributes that are found in *wujud*. Creation of the universe depends upon God's power; His power comes into play on the basis of His desire; His desire depends upon His knowledge of the possible things; and His knowledge depends upon His *wujud*, which the Shaykh sometimes identifies with the divine life. Thus we have the four basic names that are embraced by the name God: Living, Knowing, Desiring, and Powerful. Their order is not haphazard, but depends upon the intrinsic characteristics of *wujud*.

The mythic form of the Shaykh's account suggests one of several resources that Muslims have for bridging the gaps between Semitic monotheism and various forms of polytheism. Are the gods properly to be understood as independent beings, or as personifications of what Muslims know as "divine names"? Certainly Ibn al-'Arabi would choose the latter alternative—there can be no "ontological gathering." He would maintain that any attempt to consider the gods as independent entities represents a human opinion or a distortion of an original prophetic message.

After explaining how the divine names meet together and decide among themselves to bring the cosmos into existence, the Shaykh imagines that God gives them free rein to exercise their effects. The result verges on chaos, for the entities that manifest the effects of the Exalter disagree with those who manifest the Abaser, those who display the Forgiver argue with those who reflect the Avenger, and those who represent the Withholder dispute with those who act on behalf of the Bestower. Hence the creatures have recourse to the names, asking them to establish norms of order. The names in turn refer back to the divine Essence, who appoints the name Lord (*rabb*) to give order to their conflicting properties.

Elsewhere Ibn al-'Arabi explains that the primary divine attribute designated by the name Lord is *islah*, which means to make whole, wholesome, and sound; to put in order; to ameliorate; to remedy; to conciliate and to establish peace. Hence the cosmos has need of the Lord so that it may reach its *maslaha* (a word from the same root), which can be translated as "(means to) wholesomeness." "The cosmos needs the Lord more than any other name, because it is a name for every means to wholesomeness" (II 442. 20). The opposite of *islah* is *if sad*, to corrupt. The fact that the basic attribute designated by Lord is "making wholesome" explains why the angels objected to God's plan to create Adam as vicegerent in the earth and why they said to Him, *What, wilt Thou place therein one who will work corruption and shed blood?* (2:30).

The angels glorify only the praise of their Lord. The Lord is He who makes wholesome. Making wholesome applies only to corruption. God never mentioned that the angels glorify any name other than Lord. . . . Hence the angels knew that it was the name Lord that turned its attentiveness toward the cosmos, because that which dominates over the earth is the authority of caprice, and it is caprice that gives rise to the cor-



ruption of which the angels . . . spoke.' The angels knew what would happen because of their knowledge of the realities. And it did indeed happen as they had said. Their mistake was only that they hurried to pronounce these words without knowing God's wisdom in His act. (II 251. 24)

In the chapter of the *Futubhat* devoted to the name Lord, the Shaykh explains in more detail how God in respect of being the Lord undertakes to establish the wholesomeness and best interest of the things in the cosmos. He looks at the fundamental purpose of each thing's existence, and He gives it the exact situation appropriate for its own nature in order to assure its own specific felicity. In each case, the thing exists for the purpose of praising and glorifying God, or to make manifest the divine names and attributes in the most fitting and appropriate way.

If you look at the possible things in respect of their own essences, there is nothing that would determine the preferability of one of the two sides [that is, existence or nonexistence] over the other. The Lord looks upon the preferability of their existence and nonexistence, their coming into existence at an earlier time or a later time, their place and position, and then He establishes relationships between them and their times, their places, and their situations. He undertakes what is most wholesome for each possible thing and makes it appear within that. For He only makes it appear in order to glorify Him and to know Him with the knowledge that is appropriate for it in keeping with what its capacity can accept. There is nothing more.' This is why you will see some possible things coming at an earlier time than other possible things and some coming later, some being high and some being low. They undergo variations in diverse states and levels, such as rulership and dismissal, craftsmanship and trade, movement and rest, joining and separation, and other such things. Thus the possible things undergo change and fluctuation in the midst of other possible things, not in anything else. (IV 199. 15)

Having discussed in his myth of origins how God chose the name Lord to put the cosmos in order, the Shaykh turns to the human situation in order to explain the ontological necessity of revelation, which brings about the wholesomeness of human beings and allows them to choose their own best interest. The idea of establishing wholesomeness keeps on recurring throughout the passage, reminding us that the basic point of the narrative is to illustrate how God keeps balance in creation in function of the name Lord, whether this takes place on the level of creation as a whole or on the level of the human situation within the cosmos. The Shaykh points out that wise thinkers, left to their own devices, are able to grasp the divine origin of the cosmos. Here his narrative is slightly reminiscent of *Hayy ibn Yagzan*, the famous philosophical tale written by his

contemporary Andalusian Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185).<sup>4</sup> In the manner of many Muslim philosophers, Ibn Tufayl thought that the rational perception of philosophers could achieve the same level of knowledge as the revelation given to the prophets. Ibn al-‘Arabi disagrees vehemently, as he makes clear throughout his works. In this particular passage, he says that true philosophers will acknowledge the superiority of the prophets and follow them, for they will recognize that the rational knowledge achieved by philosophy pertains only to God’s incomparability. Knowledge of His similarity and of how this functions to bring about salvation and nearness to God is inaccessible to the unaided human reason. However, a sound rational faculty will recognize the truth of the prophetic message and accept it. Toward the end of the passage, Ibn al-‘Arabi turns to criticizing the philosophers and theologians of his own time.

Interestingly, at the very end of the chapter, the Shaykh excludes from criticism the great philosopher Averroes (d. 1198). As mentioned in the introduction, Ibn al-‘Arabi had met Averroes when he was perhaps fifteen, at which time Averroes would have been fifty-five; the present passage makes clear that Ibn al-‘Arabi had a good opinion of him. In the West, Averroes was more influential than any other Muslim thinker except perhaps Avicenna. But the Shaykh portrays Averroes not as a skeptic who questioned the validity of revealed religion—as he has sometimes been described in Western sources—but rather as a great master of rational discourse who defended revelation. Already in the Shaykh’s time Averroes was remembered more as a doctor of the Shariah than as a philosopher. In any case his philosophical works remained largely unstudied in the civilization that nurtured him, while Ibn al-‘Arabi’s teachings spread to every corner of the Islamic world.

In what follows, I translate Shariah (*shari’a*) as “revealed religion.” This term has long since entered the English language to mean the revealed law of Islam, or the individual, social, and ritual regulations of the religion. In this sense, the term is often contrasted with *lariga*, or the spiritual path, the body of teachings that is concerned with transformation of the soul and is codified in many forms of Sufism. Literally, the word *Shariah* means “road (leading to water),” and Ibn al-‘Arabi frequently employs it in a broad sense to refer to all the teachings brought by a divine messenger, not simply the social and ritual regulations. He also employs it in the plural to refer to the religions brought by the prophets, or the divinely instituted paths for reaching the water of life. This then is the chapter:

*Chapter 66: On the True Knowledge of the Mystery of Revealed Religion, Outwardly and Inwardly, and On the Divine Name That Brought It into Existence*

God says, *Had there been in the earth angels walking at peace, We would have sent down upon them out of heaven an angel as messenger* [17:95]. He also says, *We never chastise, until We send forth a messenger* [17:15].

Know that *divine names* is an expression of a state given by the realities. So pay attention to what you will hear, and do not imagine manyness or an ontological gathering! What we will discuss in this chapter is only a hierarchy of intelligible realities that are many in respect of relationships, but not in respect of entified *wujud*, for the Essence of the Real is one in respect of being the Essence.

We know in respect of our *wujud*, our poverty, and our possibility, that there must be a Preponderator by whom we are supported. We also know that our *wujud* must demand from that Support diverse relationships. The Lawgiver alludes to these relationships as the “most beautiful names.” In respect of being the Speaker He named Himself by them at the level of the necessity of His divine *wujud*, which cannot be shared by anyone, for He is One God, and there is no other God.

After this introduction concerning the origin of this matter and the production of effects and the giving of preponderance within the possible cosmos, I say:

The names gathered together in the presence of the Named. They gazed upon their own realities and meanings and sought the manifestation of their own properties in order that their entities might become distinct through their effects. For Creator—who is Ordainer—Knower, Governor, Differentiator, Originator, Form-giver, Provider, Life-giver, Slayer, Inheritor, Grateful, and all the rest of the divine names gazed upon their own essences. But they found nothing created, governed, differentiated, or nourished. They said, “What can be done so that the entities within which our own properties become manifest may become manifest that thereby our authority may become manifest?”

Hence the divine names—which are demanded by some of the realities of the cosmos after the manifestation of the entity of the cosmos—had recourse to the name Originator. They said to him, “Perhaps you can give existence to these entities so that our properties may become manifest and our authority established, for the presence within which we now dwell does not receive our effects.”

Originator said, “That goes back to the name Powerful, for I am under his scope.”

The root of this is as follows: In their state of nonexistence the possible things asked the divine names—an asking through their state of abasement and poverty—as follows: “Nonexistence has blinded us, so we are not able to perceive one another or to know what the Real requires you to do with us. If you were to make manifest our entities and clothe them in the robe of *wujud*, you would be giving us blessings and we would undertake the appropriate veneration and reverence. Moreover, your ruling authority becomes genuine through our becoming manifest in actuality. Today you possess ruling authority over us only potentially and virtually. What we seek from you is what you should be seeking to an even greater degree from us.”

The names replied, “What the possible things have said is true!” So they fell to seeking the same thing.

When the names had recourse to the name Powerful, he said, “I am under the scope of the name Desiring, so I cannot bring a single one of your entities into existence without his specification. The possible thing itself does not give me the ability to do that. First the command of Commander must come from his Lord. When he commands the thing to enter into engendered existence, saying to it ‘Be!’ then he gives me the ability from himself, and I undertake to bring it into existence and immediately give it engendered existence. So have recourse to the name Desiring. Perhaps he will give preponderance to and specify the side of *wujud* over the side of nonexistence. Then I, Commander, and Speaker will join together and give you existence.”

So the names had recourse to the name Desiring. They said to him, “We asked the name Powerful to bring our entities into existence, but he deferred the command to you. What do you decree?” Desiring said, “Powerful spoke the truth! But I have no news about the property of the name Knowing in respect to you. Does he or does he not have precedent knowledge that you will be given existence, so that we can specify it for you? I am under the scope of the name Knowing. Go to him and mention your situation to him.”

So they went to the name Knowing and mentioned what the name Desiring had said. Knowing said, “Desiring spoke the truth! And I have precedent knowledge that you will be given existence.

But courtesy must be observed. For we have a presence that watches over us, and that is the name God. So we must make ourselves present before Him, for he is the Presence of All-comprehensiveness. ”

All the names gathered together in the presence of God. He said, “What is on your mind?” They told him the story. He said, “I am the name that comprehends your realities and I denote the Named, who is an All-holy Essence described by perfection and incomparability. Stay here while I enter in upon the Object of my denotation. ” So he entered in upon the Object of his denotation and told It what the possible things had said and what the names were discussing. The Essence said, “Go out, and tell each one of the names to become connected to what its reality requires among the possible things. . . . ”

So the name God went out, next to him the name Speaker, acting as his spokesman to the possible things and to the names. He mentioned to them what the Named had said. Knowing, Desiring, Speaking, and Powerful established their connections, and the first possible thing became outwardly manifest through the specification of Desiring and the property of Knowing.

Once the entities and the effects had become manifest in the engendered universe, some of them exercised authority and dominated over others in keeping with the names by which they were supported. This led to quarrel and dispute. Then the possible things said, “We fear lest our order be corrupted and we return to the nonexistence where we used to dwell. ” So they called upon the names through that which was cast to them by the names Knowing and Governing. They said, “O names! If your properties were to follow a known scale, a designated boundary, and a leader to which you all go back, that would preserve our *wujud* for us as well as your effectivity within us for you. That would be more wholesome for both us and you. So have recourse to God! Perhaps He will present to you someone who will set a boundary at which you can stop. If not, we will be destroyed, and you will no longer have any effects!”

The names replied, “This is the right means of wholesomeness and the best opinion!” Hence they did what they were asked. They said, “The name Governor will communicate your situation. ” They informed Governor, and he said, “I will do so. ”

The name Governor entered, and then he emerged with the Real’s command to the name “Lord. ” He said to him, “Do what

wholesomeness demands so that the entities of the possible things may subsist. ” The name Lord took two viziers to help him in what he was commanded to do. One vizier was the name Governor, and the other was the name Differentiator. God says, *He governs the affair, He differentiates the signs; haply you will have certitude concerning the encounter with your Lord* [13:2], who is the “leader. ” So consider how exact is the Word of God, since it employs expressions that fit the state that is demanded by the actual situation!

The name Lord set down for them limits and established for them customs by which the wholesomeness of the kingdom might be established, and *to test them, which one of them is more beautiful in works* [11:7]. God made these limits and customs of two kinds: One kind is called “wise regulation. ” He cast it into the original dispositions of the souls of the great human beings. Hence they set down limits and established laws through a power that they found in their own souls. They did so in every city, place, and clime, in accordance with what was demanded by the constitution and nature of those areas, since they knew what wisdom demanded. Through that they preserved the possessions, lives, families, relatives, and kinship relationships of the people. They named it the “laws, ” a word that means “cause of good, ” since *ndmus* in technical usage is the one through whom good comes, while *jdsus* is employed for evil.

So these were the wise laws established by the rational thinkers as the result of an inspiration from God of which they were unaware for the sake of the wholesomeness, order, and arrangement of everyone in the world where there was no divinely revealed religion. The founders of these laws did not know that these affairs would bring about nearness to God, nor that they would yield a Garden or a Fire, nor [did they know] anything connected with the next world. They did not know that there is a next world and a sensory resurrection within natural bodies after death, or an abode within which there is food, drink, clothing, marriage, and joy, and another abode within which there is chastisement and pain. For the existence of all this is possible, its nonexistence is possible, and they had no proof of the preponderance of one of the possibilities over the other.

*And monasticism they invented* [57:27]. So their laws and their means to wholesomeness were built upon bringing about the subsistence of wholesomeness in this abode. Then individually, in

their own souls, they came to know the divine sciences, such as *tawhid*, the glorification and veneration worthy of God's majesty, the attributes of incomparability, the lack of any likeness or similarity. Those who knew and understood this called it to the attention of those who did not. They urged people to accept the correct view. At the same time they let the people know that rational faculties are limited in respect of their reflective powers and cannot pass beyond certain bounds; that God effuses His knowledge into the hearts of certain of His servants, thereby teaching them *a knowledge from Him* [18:65], and that this did not seem unlikely in their eyes; and that God has deposited within the celestial world certain commands concerning which some knowledge can be gained by drawing conclusions from the existence of their effects in this elemental world. This is indicated by God's words, *He revealed to each heaven its command* [41:12].

They investigated the realities of their own souls. They saw that when the bodily form dies, nothing is lacking from any of its members. Hence they came to know that the body perceives and moves by means of something added to it. They investigated this added thing and they recognized their own souls. Then they saw that the soul gains knowledge after having been ignorant, so they understood that even though the soul is nobler than the body, it is accompanied by poverty and need. They ascended through rational consideration from one thing to another. Each time they reached something, they saw that it was in need of something else. Finally rational consideration took them to something that was in need of nothing, which had no likeness, which was similar to nothing, and to which nothing was similar. They stopped there and said: This is the First. It must be One in itself in respect of itself, and its Firstness and Unity must not accept a second, since there is nothing like it and nothing comparable to it. So they declared the unity of its *wujud*. When they saw that the possible things in themselves had no reason to come into existence, they knew that this One had given them *wujud*. Hence the possible things have need of the One and venerate it by negating from it everything by which their own essences are described. This is the furthest limit of the rational faculty.

While these rational thinkers were busy with their own affairs, there arose among them a person of their own kind whom they looked upon as having no position in knowledge. They did not believe that he was the possessor of sound reflection or correct rational consideration. He said to them, "I am God's messenger to you. "

They said, “Let us be fair. Look at his claim itself. Does he claim what is possible, or what is impossible? Logical proofs have established for us that God possesses a divine effusion that He may give to whomsoever He wills, just as He has effused it upon the spirits of these celestial spheres and the intellects. All things share in possibility, so no possible thing is more worthy than others in respect of possibility. Hence we must consider the truthfulness or falsity of this claimant. We should not proceed to make either of these judgments without a proof, for that would be discourtesy, given our knowledge.”

They said, “Do you have a proof for the truthfulness of what you claim?” So he brought them proofs and they considered his manner of proving and his proofs. They considered that this person had no reports that reflective thoughts could have reached by drawing conclusions, nor was any such thing known from him. So they came to know that He who *revealed to each heaven its command* [41:12] had revealed to each heaven the existence of this person and of what he brought. Hence they hurried to declare their faith in him and acknowledge his truthfulness. They came to know that God had given him knowledge of the sciences which He had deposited in the celestial world and which could not be reached by their reflective powers, and that He had given him a knowledge of Himself which they did not have.

They saw that this person descended in his knowledge of God to the level of the weak-minded common people, bestowing upon them what would make their rational faculties wholesome; and also to people of great rational faculty and sound consideration, giving them also that which would make their rational faculties wholesome. Hence they knew that this man possessed, through the divine effusion, something from beyond the stage of reason and that God had given him a knowledge of that effusion and a power over it that He had not given to them. They acknowledged his superiority over themselves, had faith in him, declared his truthfulness, and followed him. So he designated for them the acts that bring about nearness to God. He taught them about possible things created by God and hidden from them and about what would come to be among them from Him in the future. He told them about the resurrection, the gathering, the mustering, the Garden, and the Fire.

In this way messengers were sent according to the diversity of the times and the variety of the situations. Each of them confirmed the truth of the others. None of them differed whatsoever in the



roots by which they were supported and of which they spoke, even if rulings differed. Revealed religions were sent down, and rulings came. The governing property belonged to the time and the situation, just as God has declared: *To every one of you We have appointed a right way and a revealed law [5:48]*. So the roots coincided, without disagreeing on anything.

The people distinguished between the prophetic regulations promulgated by God as revealed religion and the wise regulations established by the sages in accordance with their rational consideration. They understood that the [prophetic] command was more complete and that it came from God, without doubt. They accepted what they were told about the unseen things and had faith in the messengers. None of them resisted except him who did not counsel his own soul concerning his knowledge, but followed his caprice and sought leadership over his fellows. He was ignorant of his own soul and its measure and he was ignorant of his Lord.

Hence the root and the cause of the establishment of revealed religions in the cosmos was the search for the wholesomeness of the cosmos and for the knowledge of God of which reason is ignorant, because it does not receive it through its own reflection. In other words, reason cannot discover this knowledge independently in respect of its own consideration. Hence the revealed books came down with this knowledge, and the tongues of the messengers and prophets spoke about it. Then the rational thinkers came to know that there were certain things concerning the knowledge of God in which they were deficient and which the messengers completed for them.

I do not mean by “rational thinkers” those who nowadays speak about philosophy. I mean only those who followed the path of the prophets. In other words, they busied themselves with their own souls and with ascetic discipline, inner struggle, retreats, and preparing themselves for that which enters in upon the heart from the celestial world when the heart is purified, that which has been revealed to the high heavens. These are the ones I mean by “rational thinkers.” As for those who busy themselves with chatter, talk [*kalam*], and debate, employing their reflective powers to analyze the component words that have issued from the first philosophers while remaining oblivious of the affair undertaken by those great men, the likes of these—who are among us today—have no worth in the eyes of any person of intelligence.’ For they mock at religion, show contempt for God’s servants, and have reverence only for those among themselves who stand in the same place. Their hearts

have been overcome by love for this world and the search for position and leadership. So God has abased them, just as they have abased knowledge. He has scorned them and derided them, letting them have recourse to the doors of the ignorant—the kings and the rulers. So the kings and the rulers abase them.

The words of people like this are of no account. God has *sealed their hearts* [2:7] and *made them deaf and blinded their eyes* [47:23], despite the fact that among themselves they claim extravagantly to be the best of the world's inhabitants. Even the jurist—he who gives legal pronouncements in God's religion—is better than they in every respect, in spite of the paucity of his abstinence. After all, people who have faith, even though they acquire it only through following the authority of others, are better than those who consider themselves "rational thinkers." God forbid that any intelligent person have the attributes of such as these!

We have met few people who are true rational thinkers. These are they who have the greatest knowledge of God's messengers. They are among those who follow most carefully the examples [*sunan*] of the Messenger and are most concerned with preserving his examples. They know the veneration demanded by God's majesty, and they are aware of the knowledge of Himself that God singles out for His servants—the prophets and the friends of God who follow them—in respect of a special divine effusion. This effusion is out-side the ordinary learning that is acquired through study and effort and cannot be reached by reason in respect of its own reflective power.

I have listened to the words of one of the great ones among them [i. e., Averroes]. He had seen the knowledge that God had opened up to me without rational consideration or reading, but through a retreat in which I had been alone with God, even though I had not been seeking. He said, "Praise belongs to God, that I should have lived in a time in which I saw *one whom God has given mercy from Him, and has taught him knowledge proceeding from Him* [18:65]. " *God singles out for his mercy whom He will, and God is of bounty abounding* [2:105]. (I 322-25)