

Transcendence and Immanence in Islam and Christianity: Exploring the Influence of Ibn ‘Arabī on San Juan de la Cruz

Trascendencia e inmanencia en el Islam y el cristianismo: explorando la influencia de Ibn ‘Arabī en San Juan de la Cruz

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Abstract

The Andalusian mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) believes God is immanent in the world most perspicuously as humankind that can be the polished mirror (*mir’āt*) in which the divine traces (*āthār*) are reflected. When this potentiality is achieved, the rank of “the Perfect Man” (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*) is attained. But this is not the essence of God, the “Absolute in His Absoluteness”, which is transcendent. The Christian theologian San Juan de la Cruz (d. 1591) demonstrates remarkable familiarity with Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas. He likewise maintains that God is immanent in the world in the form of existents who manifest His “traces” (*rastros*), with humankind being the untainted mirror (*espejo*) in which God’s immanence is most clearly displayed. When the self is entirely purged, it becomes “the perfect man” (*el varón perfecto*). But like Ibn ‘Arabī he affirms that God’s essence, “the Ultimate Principle” (*el Sumo Principio*), is transcendent.

Keywords: Islam; Christianity; mysticism; God; transcendence; immanence; Ibn ‘Arabī; San Juan

Resumen

El místico andalusí Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (m. 638/1240) sostiene que Dios es inmanente en el mundo y, de manera más evidente, en la humanidad, que puede convertirse en el espejo pulido (*mir’āt*) donde se reflejan las huellas divinas (*āthār*). Cuando se alcanza esta potencialidad, se logra el rango de “Hombre Perfecto” (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*). Sin embargo, esto no se refiere a la esencia de Dios, el “Absoluto en Su Absolutidad”, que es trascendente. El teólogo cristiano San Juan de la Cruz (m. 1591) demuestra un notable conocimiento de las ideas de Ibn ‘Arabī. Sostiene así mismo que Dios es inmanente en el mundo a través de los existentes, que manifiestan Sus “huellas” (*rastros*), siendo la humanidad el espejo sin mancha en el que la inmanencia divina se muestra con mayor claridad. Cuando el yo está completamente purificado, se convierte en “el hombre perfecto”. Pero, al igual que Ibn ‘Arabī, San Juan de la Cruz afirma que la esencia de Dios, “el Principio Supremo”, es trascendente.

Palabras clave: Islam; Cristianismo; misticismo; Dios; transcendencia; inmanencia; Ibn ‘Arabī; San Juan de la Cruz

Introduction

The enormous influence of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), the Andalusian mystic who was born in Murcia and then moved to Seville,¹ on Islam generally and Islamic mysticism specifically has been detailed in many works.² The purpose of this study is not to tread familiar ground in highlighting his influence on Islamic thinkers, but to interrogate the cross-pollination of ideas between the Islamic and Christian traditions in Medieval Spain, especially as it pertains to the concepts of divine immanence and divine transcendence. To this end, the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī on the Christian theologian San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross) (d. 1591) in terms of immanence and transcendence is investigated.

San Juan is regarded by many as one of the greatest Christian mystics.³ He became a Carmelite monk and studied at the University of Salamanca.⁴ Upon completion of his studies, and now an ordained priest, he was recruited by the renowned mystic of St. Teresa of Ávila (d. 1582)⁵ to repristinate the male wing of the Discalced Carmelite order to its original doctrines of renunciation and austerity.⁶ San Juan wrote lyrical poetry about divine transcendence and immanence, and the soul’s journey to union with the divine.⁷ His ideas have left an indelible imprint on Christian mysticism to this day (Tyler 2010).⁸ This study scrutinises the influence Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas may have had on San Juan. But in order to do this, we must first look at whether Ibn ‘Arabī himself was affected by Christian mysticism, which was then possibly adopted by San Juan.

Miguel Asín Palacios argued that Sufism emerged from Christian mysticism. He believed that Muslims yearned for a spiritual dimension to the religion much like Christianity, but found that it was wanting in Islam. In order to fill this lacuna, they adopted many of the ideas and concepts from Christian mysticism and applied them to the life of Prophet Muhammad, thereby imbuing him with a Christianized mystical life.⁹ This version of mystical Islam, promulgated by Ibn ‘Arabī, had a great influence on Christianity in the Middle Ages culminating in works like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.¹⁰ Later scholarship asserts that Palacios rather overplayed his hand and made far too much of supposed influences of Christianity on Islam, especially since the mystical tradition was part and parcel of the Islamic tradition from the very beginning. Annemarie Schimmel affirms that the origins of Sufism were Prophet Muḥammad himself.¹¹ Christopher Melchert adds that, contrary to the late inception of Sufism that Palacios described, as a formal movement, ‘classical Sufism crystallized in Baghdad in the last quarter of the ninth century C.E.’,¹² with its origins being traced back much further.¹³

¹ Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*.

² Dagli, *Ibn al-‘Arabī*; Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn Arabi*; Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*.

³ Peers, *Spirit of Flame*.

⁴ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of St. John*.

⁵ Cohen, *The Life of Saint Teresa*.

⁶ Lewis, *The Life of St. John*.

⁷ Brennan, *St John*; Thompson, *St. John*.

⁸ Tyler, *St. John*.

⁹ Palacios, *El Islam cristianizado*.

¹⁰ Palacios, *La escatologia*.

¹¹ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 26.

¹² Melchert, “Early Renunciants”, p. 407.

¹³ Green, *Sufism*; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*.

Even the influence of Islam on Christianity was overemphasised by Palacios.¹⁴ Peter Tyler believes that Palacios and scholars inspired by him take a reductionistic approach and attribute too much influence to superficial similarities. He cautions against reading San Juan's works through an Islamic lens: 'I would argue that an oversimplified direct melding of one onto the other will lead to misconceptions of both John's writing and the writings of Islam'.¹⁵ E. Allison Peers, likewise, declares that the complex mystical ontology delineated by the Sufis is lacking in the works of Christian mystics like San Juan whose main source of inspiration was individual mystical experience in the context of Christian scripture.¹⁶ He follows in the footsteps of the Spanish scholar Pablo Rousselot who was even more dismissive of Islamic influence on Christian mysticism writing, 'History confirms for us that the philosophical heritage of the Arabs (*la herencia filosófica de los árabes*) passed directly into the hands of the Jews'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this would be to swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction of zero influence. As Charles Frazee judiciously observes, 'Probably the truth lies somewhere in the middle between those who deny any traces of Sūfism and those who would make it a dominant influence'.¹⁸ This is because the close cultural contact between Islam and Christianity in Medieval Spain was fecund soil for cross-pollination of ideas.

Louis Cognet writes that 'there developed in Spain some very vigorous mystical tendencies, appearing at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the movement of the *Alumbrados* or Illuminists', which could have been Christianised remnants of Muslim brotherhoods.¹⁹ But he remains suspicious that the influence of Sufi brotherhoods could have persisted for so long because while 'in the time of Ramon Lull, the thought of Islam had certainly a powerful attraction for many souls', it was unclear 'what remained of this by the dawn of the sixteenth century'.²⁰ Other scholars, nevertheless, believe that, although Palacios had overstated the case, there were still plenty of important influences that he rightly noted between the Sufis and Christian mystics, especially San Juan. San Juan thus seems like somewhat of an outlier in terms of just how many Sufi ideas he imbibed (see below). Indeed, such is the parallel between the Sufis and San Juan that Luce López-Baralt declares,

St. John shows signs of knowing much of the most complex Muslim mystical symbology (*simbología mística musulmana*) so readily that it is alarming. (In some cases, he uses spiritual metaphors (*metáforas espirituales*) that are specifically Islamic; in others, he mimics the Sufis' detailed literary articulation of universal mystical symbols (*su manera pormenorizada de articular literariamente símbolos místicos universales*)). Further, St. John seems to know the technical language of mysticism (*lenguaje técnico místico*) that the Sufis considered 'secret' and only shared with the initiated (*los iniciados*).²¹

¹⁴ Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī*.

¹⁵ Tyler, *St. John*, p. 138.

¹⁶ Peers, *Spirit*.

¹⁷ Rousselot, *Los Místicos Españoles*, p. 47. All translations from Spanish and Arabic to English are my own unless otherwise stated.

¹⁸ Frazee, "Ibn al-'Arabī", p. 240.

¹⁹ Cognet, *Post-Reformation*, p. 27; Frazee, "Ibn al-'Arabī", p. 236.

²⁰ Cognet, *Post-Reformation*, p. 27; Frazee, "Ibn al-'Arabī", p. 236.

²¹ López-Baralt, *San Juan*, p. 12.

It is the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s concepts of divine immanence (*tashbīh*) and transcendence (*tanzīh*) on San Juan that this article explores. We begin with divine immanence.

Divine immanence

López-Baralt correctly observes that San Juan demonstrates remarkable familiarity with Sufi themes and imagery.²² Of these, there are many that are particular to Ibn ‘Arabī, such as the idea of humankind being a polished mirror for the divine. Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the reason God created the universe was that He did not want to be unknown. He begins his most popular work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Ringstones of Wisdom*) by elaborating on this,

When God, be He praised, desired to see the essences (*a’yān*) of His most beautiful Names (*Al-Asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), which cannot be tallied, or you could say, if you wanted, that He wanted to see His essence, in a comprehensive creation (*kawn jāmi’*) that captured the whole matter because it was a creation that was imbued with existence (*wujūd*), and through it His secret would be manifested to Him. This is because seeing something in itself is not like seeing it in something else that becomes like a mirror for it. ... God, be He praised, brought forth the whole universe as an indistinct creation ... so it was like a mirror (*mir’āt*) without polish. ... Therefore, Ādam was the very polish of that mirror.²³

The reason God created the universe is that He wanted to see all His ‘most beautiful Names’ (ninety-nine of which are recorded in the Qur’an, but which Ibn ‘Arabī tells us are actually countless) in something else that existed.²⁴ This would be the way in which He could be ‘known’ and not be a ‘hidden treasure’ anymore. Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to say that the entire universe is a ‘mirror’ for the divine Names because it reflects them back to God,²⁵ but it is ‘a mirror without polish’ because the Names are manifested in a fragmented way throughout the creation.²⁶ This is because all the divine Names are manifested disparately throughout the universe since each existent is only a locus of manifestation of a single Name.²⁷ The reflection is therefore indistinct and requires a polish to bring it all together and reflect a focussed image of the divine Names. Humankind generally, and Ādam specifically,²⁸ is that polish because they reflect all the divine Names in a single locus thereby reflecting a focussed image of the divine; God cannot be ‘known’ without this focussed image.²⁹ Among the most popular commentators of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work, Nūr al-Dīn al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492),³⁰ explains that Ādam is the polished mirror for the divine Names because in his essence the essences of all the divine Names are manifested.³¹ Adam’s soul, thus, becomes a polished mirror for the divine, and the souls of humankind also have the potential to be polished mirrors.

San Juan makes use of the metaphor of the mirror in his works. He writes that ‘a tainted mirror (*el espejo que está tomado de baho*) cannot represent an image clearly’.³² This is the

²² López-Baralt, *San Juan*, p. 12.

²³ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, pp. 48-49.

²⁴ Harris, “On Majesty”; Murata, *The Tao of Islam*.

²⁵ Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Polished Mirror”.

²⁶ Mahā’imī, *Khuṣūṣ*, pp. 70-71.

²⁷ Qāshānī, *Sharḥ*, pp. 8-9.

²⁸ Jandī, *Sharḥ*, p. 116.

²⁹ Qūnawī, *Al-Fukūk*, p. 12.

³⁰ Chittick, “Notes”.

³¹ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 71.

³² San Juan, *Obras de San Juan*, p. 40.

same point Ibn ‘Arabī makes when he places so much emphasis on the mirror being polished, and not tainted. Michael Sells astutely elucidates that what is seen in a tainted mirror is entirely different from what is seen in a polished mirror:

While looking at a smudged mirror what the viewer sees is the mirror. If in the act of looking the mirror is simultaneously polished, a perspective shift occurs. The mirror is no longer noticed at all, only the image of the viewer reflected in it. Vision (the viewing by a subject of an outside object) has become self-vision.³³

It is for the purpose of seeing His immanent aspect, which are the divine Names, that God created the universe. The human soul is not only the pinnacle of creation, but in being the only entity according to Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan in which divine self-vision can occur, it is the fulfilment of the purpose of creation.

San Juan agrees with the commentators of Ibn ‘Arabī who state that by committing sins humankind tarnishes the mirror in which the divine is reflected and fails to fulfil its potentiality.³⁴ He writes,

In the same way as soot (*tizne*) contaminates a beautiful and perfect face, unchecked desires (*los apetitos desordenados*) contaminate and pollute the soul that indulges in them, which in itself is the most beautiful and perfect image of God (*una hermosísima y acabada imagen de Dios*).³⁵

San Juan, much like Ibn ‘Arabī, avers that the soul of humankind has the capacity to manifest the divine; this is its ultimate potentiality, but it is a potentiality that is curtailed by sins, which tarnish the mirror of the soul in which the divine is seen.

The one who fulfils their ultimate potentiality is called the Perfect Man (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*) by Ibn ‘Arabī. He explains,

The Perfect Man (*Al-Insān al-kāmil*) ... is the heart in the body of the universe ... which encompasses God. God says, as reported in a prophetic report, ‘Neither the earth nor the heaven encompass Me, but the heart of a believing servant encompasses me’. The rank of the Perfect Man is thus that of a heart between God and the universe.³⁶

Since it is only humankind that has the capacity to be a locus of manifestation of all the divine Names, it is the heart of a human being, or the soul as San Juan says, which has the potentiality to reflect the perfect image of God. This is the meaning of the divine declaration that only the heart of a believer can encompass God, according to Ibn ‘Arabī. Even though this tradition is deemed to be weak by most traditionists (‘Ajlūnī 2012, 2:129; Munāwī 1939, 2:496),³⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī relies on it to delineate the nature of the Perfect Man, which is a central tenet of his metaphysics (Jīlī 1997; Morrissey 2020; Takeshita 1987).³⁸

Similarly, San Juan employs the metaphor of ‘the perfect man’ (*el varón perfecto*),³⁹ and the ‘perfect building’ (*edificio perfecto*) to describe ‘human disposition’ (*la disposición humana*) when it joins in perfect union with the divine.⁴⁰ This is when the potential of the soul

³³ Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s”, p. 121.

³⁴ Bālīzādeh, *Sharḥ*, p. 23.

³⁵ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 44.

³⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 6, p. 4.

³⁷ ‘Ajlūnī, *Kashf*, vol. 2, p. 129; Munāwī, *Fayḍ*, vol. 2, p. 496.

³⁸ Jīlī, *Al-Insān al-kāmil*; Morrissey, *Sufism*; Takeshita, *Ibn ‘Arabī’s Theory*.

³⁹ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 149.

⁴⁰ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 80.

is realised and there is ‘perfect transformation’ (*perfecta transformación*) of the soul due to its ‘perfect purity’ (*perfecta pureza*),⁴¹ which results in ‘perfect union’ (*unión perfecta*) with the divine (see below).⁴² San Juan mentions that it is due to this perfect purity and perfect love for the divine that God ‘will manifest Myself to him’ (*manifestaré a mí mismo a él*), which he explains is when God manifests Himself to the soul that truly loves Him.⁴³ This divine manifestation causes a perfect transformation in which the soul manifests the divine. The perfect manifestation of the divine Names is the rank of the Perfect Man according to Ibn ‘Arabī.

Yet because the self is the most focussed manifestation of the divine Names, it is only through the self that God can be known, claims Ibn ‘Arabī. One of his favourite prophetic traditions is: ‘Whoever knows himself knows his Lord’, which he cites five times in the *Ringstones* and around eighty times in the *Meccan Revelations*. But this tradition, too, is regarded as weak by traditionists.⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī declares that this tradition is reliable and it means that, because the soul of humankind is ‘the essence of God’ (*huwiyyat al-Haqq*), it is only by knowing the self that the immanent aspect of God—the divine Names—can be known.⁴⁵ ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), whose works are a favourite among the Mawlawi Sufi order,⁴⁶ writes in his exegesis that this is what is meant by the Qur’anic declaration that God taught Ādam all the Names.⁴⁷ It is not merely teaching the Names, but teaching him the reality of his essence.⁴⁸ San Juan mentions this perfection of humankind that is imbued by God upon the aspirant who acquires divinely bestowed perfections of their outer self and inner self until they are ready to unite with the divine (see below).⁴⁹

The immanent aspect of God, therefore, is a conspicuous part of both Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan’s ontology. David Perrin writes that San Juan views divine immanence and transcendence as being two sides of the same coin.⁵⁰ The same is true for Ibn ‘Arabī. But others argue that San Juan essentially explores the incomprehensibility of divine immanence in the same way as he does for divine transcendence. Both transcendence and immanence are beyond human comprehension, and it is this apophasis that primarily differentiates the divine from the human.⁵¹ Ibn ‘Arabī also underscores that the loci of manifestation of the divine Names and are not the Names themselves, and the Names themselves are not the divine essence.⁵² This means that, not only is the immanence of God not like His transcendence, but that the immanence of God is not what is comprehended from the physical instantiations of the divine Names in the universe.

Despite this, the immanent facet of God is certainly more accessible to human comprehension, according to Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan, if in a limited way, through the loci of

⁴¹ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 84.

⁴² San Juan, *Obras*, p. 246.

⁴³ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Haytamī, *Al-Fatāwā*, p. 290.

⁴⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 122.

⁴⁶ Sukkar, “‘Abd al-Ghanī”.

⁴⁷ Qur’an, 2:31.

⁴⁸ Nābulusī, *Sharḥ*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ San Juan, *Obras*, pp. 146–47.

⁵⁰ Perrin, “John”.

⁵¹ Pollock, “Saint John”.

⁵² Lala, *Knowing God*.

divine manifestation. Scholars note that San Juan, much like Ibn ‘Arabī, highlights the way in which the aspirant perceives God as immanent in the world.⁵³ The most perspicuous emblem of God’s immanence for both mystics is humankind. Yet even the limited cognisance of divine immanence must inevitably give way to divine transcendence of the absolute divine essence since God lies fundamentally and unequivocally beyond the ken of human comprehension.

Divine transcendence

There are few things about which Ibn ‘Arabī is as unequivocal as his proclamation that God in His absolute essence is beyond all understanding. He affirms at the beginning of the *Ringstones*,

Even if we describe ourselves as God describes Himself in every way, there will always be a distinction: that we need him for our existence, and that our existence is predicated on Him in order for us to be possible. And that He is not dependent on us like we are on Him (*ghināh ‘an mithl mā iftaqarnā ilayh*).⁵⁴

There is a fundamental dichotomy between God as He is in His absoluteness, which is how Toshihiko Izutsu refers to Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of God’s pure essence,⁵⁵ and God as He is immanent in the universe through His divine Names. This difference is of the modality of existence. Whereas the manifestation of the divine is contingent, inasmuch as it is dependent on the essence for its existence, the pure essence has absolute existence that is not in need of anything. However, that is not the only way in which God is completely transcendent. Ibn ‘Arabī uses the Qur’anic part-verse ‘*There is nothing like Him*’ (*laysa ka mithlih shay*)⁵⁶ to elaborate that God is also ultimately apophatic. He explains that there are two prepositions of similarity in this verse (*ka mithl*), which means that it cannot be translated as there being nothing like God because that would mean that one of the prepositions serves no purpose. Instead, he claims that the verse actually means there is nothing like something like God, or that there is nothing like God’s likeness, because ‘whoever is free of delimitation is still delimited (*maḥdūd*) by not being that thing that is delimited’. Thus, ‘saying that “*There is nothing like Him*” is a delimitation’.⁵⁷

Ibn ‘Arabī points out that in striking a direct comparison between God and everything else that is delimited, God Himself becomes delimited in opposition. Sells notes that ‘the ultimate, absolute unity [is] beyond the dualistic structures of language and thought, and beyond all relation’.⁵⁸ God is entirely apophatic, which means that He is beyond the scope of human understanding, and *a fortiori*, articulation through language. The impulse to assert God’s transcendence falls into the same trap as assertions of His immanence. It is in this sense that immanence and transcendence are two sides of the same coin as Perrin observed in the works of San Juan.⁵⁹ Indeed, ‘the attempt to find a meaningful formulation of transcendence leads ineluctably to the discovery of radical immanence’.⁶⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

⁵³ Fordham, *Explorations*, p. 193; Peasgood, “The Relevance”, p. 166.

⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Izutsu, *Sufism*.

⁵⁶ Qur’an, 42:11.

⁵⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 111.

⁵⁸ Sells, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Polished Mirror”, p. 128.

⁵⁹ Perrin, “John”.

⁶⁰ Sells, *Mystical Languages*, p. 22.

Do you not see them [ignorant people] saying that ‘praised’, ‘exalted’, ‘self-sufficient’, ‘powerful’ are all attributes of transcendence. In their opinion, then, God is above being contrary to this. Yet the issue is not as they claim in the opinion of the spiritual elite. ... All that is in the heavens and the earth is a locus of divine manifestation and that is Him being ‘praised’, so He is not praised except through the universe. And He is too lofty for everything to be anything besides Him.⁶¹

Divine transcendence is expressed through the immanence of God in the universe because all aspects of divine transcendence are expressed through manifestations of divinity in the universe. It is in this sense that God is truly transcendent because all things are loci of His divinity and there is simply nothing else that exists. Ibn ‘Arabī drives this point home in the *Ringstones* when he says,

If you believe that God is transcendent from the universe, then He is far too lofty to have this quality in this way. However, if God is the essence of the universe, then all determinations are not manifested except from Him and in Him.⁶²

San Juan uses the same phrase to express the essential apophysis of God. He states that David remarked, ‘There is nothing like Him’ (*No hay nada como él*).⁶³ The reason for this, explains San Juan, is that the knowledge of God’s transcendence relates to the very essence of ‘some of God’s attributes’ (*algún atributos de Dios*), which include ‘His omnipotence’ (*su omnipotencia*), ‘His might’ (*su fortaleza*), ‘His goodness and gentleness’ (*su bondad y dulzura*), among many others.⁶⁴ The essential knowledge of these divine attributes, continues San Juan, is not something that can be articulated. ‘The soul sees clearly that there is no way to say anything about it, except to employ some general terms’ (*ve claro el alma que no hay cómo poder decir algo de ello, si no fuese decir algunos términos generales*).⁶⁵ San Juan agrees with Ibn ‘Arabī that the attributes of God are a way in which He can be known in the world, but the true essence of these attributes cannot be articulated.⁶⁶ The Christian saint gives the examples of David and Moses who both had experience of God and found that language fell short of communicating what they had experienced. He states that when God ‘gave Moses rarefied knowledge of Himself’ (*una altísima noticia que Dios*), ‘he could only say what can be said using common terms’ (*sólo dijo lo que se puede decir por los dichos términos comunes*).⁶⁷ Ordinary words had to suffice to describe an extraordinary experience because the utmost boundary of language had been reached.

Kieran Kavanaugh observes that San Juan underscores that divine transcendence allows a process of ‘divinization’ of spiritual aspirants, in which the ‘nothingness’ of creation is contrasted with God.⁶⁸ God is ontologically transcendent, adds Kavanaugh, but according to San Juan ‘the human person can become like Him through love’.⁶⁹ This does not mean that He is not numinous as Ibn ‘Arabī avers, for San Juan insists that the process of divinization requires

⁶¹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 6, p. 352.

⁶² Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 172.

⁶³ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 206.

⁶⁴ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 206.

⁶⁵ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 206.

⁶⁶ Otto, *The Idea*, pp. 62-64; James, *The Varieties*.

⁶⁷ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 207.

⁶⁸ Kavanaugh, *John*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Kavanaugh, *John*, p. 65, ft. 11.

‘a union with God beyond all knowing’ (see below)⁷⁰ and this is a path that is ‘beyond the range of the imagination and discursive reflection’.⁷¹ God is entirely numinous, but in the process of union, the self becomes transcendentalised (see below). Thomas Keating believes that this is the transformation of deification that Suan Juan advocates.⁷² In order to achieve this, San Juan prescribes strict asceticism and contemplation that transcendentalises the self so that it may unite with the divine (see below).⁷³

The symmetry of immanence and transcendence is reflected in Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of symmetrical language to explicate this duality of the divine.⁷⁴ The dilemma of immanence and transcendence is best summed up by Meena Sharify-Funk and William Rory-Dickson:

Attempts to declare God transcendent beyond any sensible form delimit God and even liken him (*tashbih*) to nonsensible, spiritual forms. Attempts to declare God free of any limitation whatsoever, in fact, limit him by this very declaration, by nonlimitation. This difficulty cannot be evaded by moving away from *tanzih* just as declarations of transcendence limit God, so, too, do affirmations of immanence.⁷⁵

The problem is that God’s essential numinosity cannot be comprehended or articulated through transcendence as Ibn ‘Arabī mentioned,⁷⁶ nor can it be articulated through immanence. What an emphasis on God’s dissimilarity tries to achieve through transcendence (*tanzīh*), an emphasis on God’s comparability (*tashbīh*) seeks through similarity. Both fail. Yet there is a difference between the two.

Arguably the most widely read of Ibn ‘Arabī’s commentators who manages to present his arcane thought in an accessible manner, Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350),⁷⁷ explains that it is the task of a messenger to call his people to God, the Absolute, who does not have any of the deficiencies of contingency, and he denies that anything else has divinity, even though he knows that they also are only a locus of divine manifestation.⁷⁸

So despite both transcendence and comparability failing to portray the true unrestrictedness of God, the messengers always chose to emphasise God’s transcendence because while both ultimately seek to convey God’s apophysis, transcendence does it through underscoring the dissimilarity of God which is somehow closer to the mark than comparability that does it through similarity.

Jāmī clarifies the matter in the following way:

Just as the one who asserts God’s transcendence through intellectual transcendence (*al-tanzīh al-‘aqlī*) is deficient in gnosis (*ma‘rifā*) because they restrict Him with absoluteness (*iṭlāq*) and delimit Him with no delimitation, likewise is the one who asserts God’s comparability incorrect without emphasising His transcendence. This is

⁷⁰ Kavanaugh, *John*, p. 113.

⁷¹ Kavanaugh, *John*, p. 185.

⁷² Keating, *The Human Condition*, p. 22.

⁷³ Welch, *The Carmelite Way*, 96.

⁷⁴ Kars, “Two modes”.

⁷⁵ Sharify-Funk and Rory-Dickson, “Traces”, 152.

⁷⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 6, p. 352.

⁷⁷ Rustom, “Dāwūd”.

⁷⁸ Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ*, p. 497.

because comparability is also a restriction (*taqyīd*) and delimitation (*taḥdīd*) for God, the One who has no limit that restricts or constrains Him.⁷⁹

Jāmī starts off with the premise that both transcendence and comparability are forms of delimitation for God who is entirely beyond all limitations and restrictions. He continues by saying that ‘this is because the one who compares God to corporeal things (*jismāmiyyāt*) constrains Him thereby’.⁸⁰ This is the basic way of restricting God where He is compared to physical beings when God is beyond all physical and spatial delimitations. ‘The who asserts His transcendence, frees Him of that’, says Jāmī.⁸¹ This means that the one who affirms transcendence does not fall into the rudimentary trap of direct delimitation. They ‘free God’ from this, but that does not mean that they do not still delimit Him, ‘each of them limits Him with their understanding and delimits Him with their knowledge’.⁸² But the error of the person who relies on comparability alone, intimates Jāmī, is more egregious than the one who relies on transcendence alone because they have not even freed God from direct delimitation. It is for this reason that messengers stress divine transcendence more than comparability, for it gets their nations closer to the true unrestrictedness of God, even if it does not get them all the way there.⁸³

San Juan, likewise, despite accentuating the comparability of God as the foregoing has demonstrated, places greater emphasis on divine transcendence because transcendence gets closer to divine numinosity than comparability. He writes,

This divine information that is about God (*Estas noticias divinas que son acerca de Dios*) is never about particular things (*cosas particulares*) because it is about the Ultimate Principle (*el Sumo Principio*), which is why it cannot be said in the particular unless it was in some way some truth that was of some thing less than God (*alguna verdad de cosa menos que Dios*).⁸⁴

We can only speak about God in a general way, says San Juan. We cannot delve into the essence of God because He is beyond our understanding. These particulars of God are ineffable because God is fundamentally apophatic. All we can do is speak ‘in some way some truth that was something less than God’. What is striking is that not only does San Juan divulge that what we speak about is not the divine essence, the Absolute in His Absoluteness as scholars of Ibn ‘Arabī state,⁸⁵ or ‘the Ultimate Principle’ (*el Sumo Principio*) as San Juan articulates it, but he adds so many layers of generality: it is knowing in some way, some truth, of some thing less than God. There are three layers of generality that are added to underscore just how numinous God is.

Peers best categorises San Juan’s prioritisation of divine transcendence over divine immanence in the following way:

This saint restores, to a world which had nearly lost it, a sense of the transcendence of Almighty God. This is not to say that he loses sight for a moment of the divine immanence, a subject which no mystical work treats with more delicacy and insight

⁷⁹ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 90.

⁸⁰ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 90.

⁸¹ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 90.

⁸² Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 90.

⁸³ Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ*, p. 497.

⁸⁴ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 207.

⁸⁵ Izutsu, *Sufism*.

than the *Spiritual Canticle*. But the overpowering impression produced by the terms in which he speaks of God is one of awe.⁸⁶

San Juan deals with the complex relation between divine immanence in which humans manifest the divine attributes of God, as Ibn ‘Arabī maintains,⁸⁷ and divine transcendence in which God remains beyond all manifestation, when he says,

Among all the superior and inferior creatures, there is none that comes close to God (*ninguna hay que próximamente junte con Dios*), nor has any likeness to His being (*ni tenga semejanza con su ser*). For although it is true that all of them have, as theologians say, a certain relationship to God and bear a trace of God (*cierta relación a Dios y rastro de Dios*), some more, others less, according to the greater or lesser perfection of their being, there is no relation or essential likeness (*semejanza esencial*) between God and them. Indeed, the distance between His divine being and their being is infinite.⁸⁸

San Juan concedes that there is a certain relationship between God and His creatures, and that they bear ‘a trace of God’. This is His immanent aspect. The language he employs is remarkably similar to that of Ibn ‘Arabī who writes,

The universe is manifested in the breath of the Compassionate (*nafas al-Rahmān*) by which God relieved the divine Names from what they were suffering due to not manifesting their traces (*āthār*).⁸⁹

The creation of God, therefore, according to Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan, has a relation to God in that it bears His ‘traces’. It is the way in which He is immanent in the universe, as Nābulusī makes clear when he declares that the manifestations of God (*tajalliyāt*) are His traces in the universe.⁹⁰ All things manifest this trace of God, says San Juan, ‘according to the greater or lesser perfection of their being’. Again, the language he uses is redolent of Ibn ‘Arabī who speaks of how the manifestation of the divine Names by created beings is commensurate with their innate ‘preparedness’ (*isti‘dād*).⁹¹ Jāmī explains in his commentary that ‘the manifestation of the divine essence can only be in the form of the locus of manifestation, and that is the servant, and according to their preparedness’.⁹²

Both Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan, then, assert that the traces of the divine are manifested in the world in the form of the creation according to their levels of preparedness or perfection. Yet both also agree that this does not violate divine transcendence, which must take precedence over divine immanence. Indeed, Michael Fordham argues that ‘the transcendent reality of God’ is one of the ‘central features’ of San Juan’s mystical outlook.⁹³ San Juan proclaims that there is no ‘essential likeness’ between God’s being and that of His creation much like his forebear. For this reason, God is fundamentally beyond comprehension because

⁸⁶ Peers, *Spirit*, p. 199.

⁸⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 48-50.

⁸⁸ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 97.

⁸⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 145.

⁹⁰ Nābulusī, *Sharḥ*, p. 164.

⁹¹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 64-65.

⁹² Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 85.

⁹³ Fordham, *Explorations*, p. 185.

it is impossible for comprehension (*entendimiento*) to grasp God through heavenly (*celestiales*) or earthly (*terrenas*) creatures as there is no proportion of likeness (*no hay proporción de semejanza*) between them.⁹⁴

In the final analysis, then, divine immanence gives way to divine transcendence because God is entirely apophatic.

If God cannot be known, says San Juan, then in order to journey to the divine and ultimately unite with Him, there must be an intellectual process of unknowing,

Neither through comprehension with the intellect can anything similar to God be understood, nor with volition (*voluntad*) can the delight (*deleite*) and gentleness like that of God be perceived, nor again, can memory create knowledge or images that represent Him (*noticias e imágenes que le representen*) in the imagination. It is clear, therefore, that comprehension cannot immediately be led to God by any of this knowledge, and that to get to God, it must not understand in order to seek to understand (*no entendiendo que queriendo entender*). Indeed, by blinding itself (*cegándose*), and putting itself in darkness (*poniéndose en tiniebla*), rather than opening its eyes can it reach the divine rays (*el divino rayo*) [of light].⁹⁵

The divine is beyond all comprehension, and beyond all will and imagination. There is no way to attain the divine through comprehension since God lies firmly beyond the ken of human understanding. The only way, then, to reach the divine, says San Juan, is to forsake knowing, to accept the darkness of unknowing, to paradoxically close the eyes of comprehension so that the rays of divine enlightenment can be perceived. Ibn ‘Arabī makes the same point in the *Ringstones*: only when the aspirant is immersed in ‘perplexity’ (*ḥayra*) on the path to God can they attain knowledge of God.⁹⁶

The path to God

Both Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan agree that the path to God involves an unknowing, or metaphysical perplexity *vis-à-vis* God which, paradoxically, imbues knowledge of God.⁹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī writes that because ‘God has a locus of manifestation in every existent, so He is manifested in every intelligible thing (*mafhūm*), while He is concealed from all comprehension’ (*fahm*),⁹⁸ this leads to a metaphysical aporia in which the gnostics are ‘drowned in the seas of the knowledge of God, and this is perplexity’ (*ḥayra*).⁹⁹ Put otherwise, since God is both immanent and transcendent, and cannot be comprehended, the only way to know anything of God is through a metaphysical perplexity that acknowledges this fundamentally contradictory reality because ‘a delineation of God (*ḥadd al-Ḥaqq*) is impossible’.¹⁰⁰ William Chittick explains this in his profound study of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works,

To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*ḥayra*), not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one’s way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not finding and not-knowing Him at the same time. Every existent thing other than God dwells in a never-never land of affirmation and negation, finding and losing, knowing

⁹⁴ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 97.

⁹⁵ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 73.

⁹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 73; San Juan, *Obras*, p. 100.

⁹⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 68.

⁹⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, 68.

and not-knowing. The difference between the Finders and the rest of us is that they are fully aware of their own ambiguous situation. They know the significance of the saying of the first caliph Abū Bakr: ‘Incapacity to attain comprehension is itself comprehension’.¹⁰¹

In her masterful lexicon of Ibn ‘Arabī’s nomenclature, Su‘ād al-Ḥakīm explains that Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes between knowledge and perplexity for ‘while a scholar (*‘ālim*) encompasses knowledge, we find that perplexity encompasses the perplexed, so the perplexed is drowning (*ghāriq*) in the sea of knowledge’ (*baḥr al-‘ilm*).¹⁰² The distinction between knowledge and perplexity, then, is that the scholar possesses knowledge, while the gnostic who is perplexed is possessed *by* their perplexity; they are entirely immersed in a metaphysical perplexity.

Jāmī writes that there are three levels of perplexity in his commentary of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work. For ‘the people at the beginning’ (*ahl al-bidayāt*) of their spiritual journey, perplexity is what galvanises them to seek the divine from among ‘the masses of people’ (*jumhūr al-nās*).¹⁰³ The first level of perplexity is therefore an awareness of one’s aporia regarding God, and the desire to attain a deeper level of understanding of God. It distinguishes these aspirants at the start of their journey from the rest of the masses who believe they have a firm understanding of what God is, either in terms of His transcendence or in terms of His immanence. Jāmī elaborates that the cause of ‘the primary general perplexity’ (*al-hayra al-ūlā al-‘amma*) is that a person is ‘in need of (*faqīr*) and seeks the [divine] essence’ (*dhāt*).¹⁰⁴ Since this very desire to seek out the divine essence is the start of the journey to the divine, it is connected to the perfection of that journey says Jāmī. But if the person does not find a school of thought or belief that allows them to formulate a conception of the divine, they remain in a state of perplexity and do not emerge from it.¹⁰⁵ Jāmī explains that the level of primary general perplexity incorporates those who gain a basic knowledge of the divine and are content with that, and those who realise that their primary conception of God is not as He truly is, and they therefore seek a deeper awareness of God, which is why this latter group progress to the second level.¹⁰⁶

The discontent among the primary level progress to the secondary level that has the same bifurcation as the primary level: there are those who are content with the level that they are at and do not seek more, but there are others who see that people have divided into groups regarding their conception of God ‘and each of them believes they, and those who agree with them, are correct in their conception of God, and everyone else is misguided’. This latter group sees that there are ostensibly contradictory conceptions of God due to His multiplicity and immanence that have been transmitted and this becomes a source of perplexity for them.¹⁰⁷ It is this secondary perplexity of multiplicity and immanence that allows them to progress to the third and final stage and become ‘the people of spiritual unveiling’ (*aṣḥāb al-kashf*).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Chittick, *The Sufi*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰² Ḥakīm, *Al-Mu‘jam*, p. 359.

¹⁰³ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁵ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁶ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 180.

¹⁰⁷ Jāmī, *Naqd*, pp. 180-81.

¹⁰⁸ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 181.

In this third stage, the aspirant realises that God only speaks to humans *from behind a veil* (*min warā' hijāb*),¹⁰⁹ which means that there is an omnipresent veil between God and the creation, and that nothing that is manifested is in 'its original state of purity' (*tahāra aṣliyya*).¹¹⁰ The veil itself, explains Jāmī, is what determines the conception of God that is viewed by His creation. The divine unity of transcendence is presented as multiplicity because of the veil, but only those who are able to peer behind the veil can see the true divine unity of transcendence that is the source of the veiled-induced divine multiplicity and immanence.¹¹¹ When the aspirant reaches this level, they 'transcend the rank of the Names and Attributes', which is the veiled level of multiplicity and immanence, 'so that God, be He praised, is no longer determined for them in an immaterial or a physical way'.¹¹² In His absolute essence, God is not the immaterial divine Names, nor is He is the immanent physical manifestation of those Names in the sensible world. This liberates the aspirant from immanentising God and they are 'no longer restricted to all these things nor to any one of them'.¹¹³

Metaphysical perplexity, thus, is the impetus behind spiritual progression on the path to God. It is perplexity that sets the neophyte on the road to God. Those who do not experience perplexity never go beyond the exoteric notions of God. The aspirant is not content with this, and seeks the inner aspect of God in the first stage. It is the aspect of God that betrays that His true nature is more than just transcendence. Those who are content, again, do not progress any further. They remain in the first stage. Those who are not content and still perplexed by the inner aspect of God, progress to the level of divine multiplicity, which is the way in which God is immanent in the world. Again, there are those who are content with this and do not progress further. Those who remain perplexed by divine multiplicity and immanence, progress to the final stage where they become the people of spiritual unveiling. They see the divine unity behind the immanent multiplicity, and become cognisant of God's ultimate transcendence and apophasis.¹¹⁴ Ian Almond explains Ibn 'Arabī's notion of perplexity and bewilderment in similar terms,

Bewilderment becomes the best way the believer has of escaping the metaphysical trap of his own perspectiveness ... by presenting and confusing the believer with a multiplicity of different Gods, some orthodox, some heretical, some intimately immanent, others aloof and transcendental. In the alarming, disconcerting contiguity of this myriad of different images, one can truly begin to understand how 'the actual situation of the Divinity does not become delimited or restricted and remains unknown'.¹¹⁵

San Juan, too, believes that perplexity is the only path to God. He explains that in order to unite with God, one must forsake their knowing of this world and embrace unknowing:

Every soul that depends on its own knowledge and ability to unite with the wisdom of God is extremely ignorant before God and will be very far from it (*sumamente es ignorante delante de Dios y quedará muy lejos de ella*). ... Those who consider

¹⁰⁹ Qur'an, 42:51.

¹¹⁰ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 181.

¹¹¹ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 181.

¹¹² Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 181.

¹¹³ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 181.

¹¹⁴ Jāmī, *Naqd*, pp. 180-81.

¹¹⁵ Almond, "The Honesty", p. 525.

themselves to be wise are extremely ignorant before God. ... And only those who lay down their wisdom like ignorant children and walk with love in God's service have wisdom from God (*Y solos aquéllos van teniendo sabiduría de Dios, que como niños ignorantes, deponiendo su saber, andan con amor en su servicio*).¹¹⁶

The path to God—since it involves the ostensibly contradictory conceptions of divine immanence and divine transcendence, which betray the ultimate numinosity of God—requires the aspirant to relinquish their knowing of God; it is only in unknowing, in deliberate ignorance and perplexity, that God can be attained. Denys Turner explains that San Juan operates in a tradition that goes back to St. Augustine (d. 430) in which there is union with God that is 'beyond description and beyond experience', and which is reflective of 'an apophaticism of language about God'.¹¹⁷ This is because for 'the Medieval mystical traditions, the Christian soul meets God in a "cloud of unknowing", a divine darkness of ignorance. This meeting with God is beyond all knowing and beyond all experiencing'.¹¹⁸ Turner elaborates that, just as San Juan describes the active process of laying down one's wisdom, ignorance here is not to be understood as a passive unknowing; rather it is an active process:

It is the conception of theology not as a naïve *pre-critical* ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing.¹¹⁹

In much the same way as Ibn 'Arabī, who highlights that the first phase on the path to God is a conscious unknowing of God, San Juan depicts the first phase as an acquired ignorance. He declares that 'those who see become blind' (*los que ven, se hagan ciegos*).¹²⁰ It is this active process of making oneself blind, of relinquishing knowledge about God, that constitutes the first phase on the path to God for the aspirant. Just as the path to the divine occurs in three phases for Ibn 'Arabī, it occurs in three phases for San Juan: 'All the three phases in the mystical experience are initiated by the action of God on the soul. Throughout the whole process, God is the prime mover'.¹²¹ Ibn 'Arabī, too, argues that the impetus to seek God and acquire cognisance of His essence is imparted by God.¹²² The extent to which one can do this, he calls, the 'preparedness' (*isti'dād*) of the person. He states that, 'Preparedness is not something that is earned; rather, it is a bestowal, from God, which is why no one knows it but God'.¹²³

Preparedness determines the level that one will reach in their path to God, which means it determines whether they seek the inner aspect of God, or whether they simply adhere to exoteric conceptions of Him. Further, it governs whether they will progress to divine multiplicity and immanence and, finally, to divine unity and transcendence. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 736/1335?), largely responsible for the formalisation of Ibn 'Arabī's doctrines,¹²⁴ elucidates that preparedness controls the way in which God is comprehended by people: 'They

¹¹⁶ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Turner, *The Darkness*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Turner, *The Darkness*, p. i.

¹¹⁹ Turner, *The Darkness*, p. 19.

¹²⁰ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 78.

¹²¹ Fordham, *Explorations*, p. 190.

¹²² Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, p. 130.

¹²³ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt*, vol. 6, p. 359.

¹²⁴ Lala, *Knowing God*.

see God in the form of their preparedness, and that is what a cohort of Sufis mean when they say, “God manifests Himself according to the preparedness of the servant”.¹²⁵ The preparedness is therefore the status into which different people are divinely divided, or as Jāmī puts it, ‘the spiritual and natural ranks’ (*marātib rūhāniyya wa ṭabī‘iyya*) of human beings.¹²⁶ San Juan also asserts that people on the path to perfection are divided into ranks, and that this preparedness is bestowed by God without being earned.¹²⁷ He affirms that gnostics who have been earmarked by God for perfection receive ‘knowledge of things both seen and unseen’ (*noticia de las cosas presentes o ausentes*).¹²⁸ However, in order to underscore that this is a divine gift, he remarks that ‘these spirits sometimes know other things, but not always when they want’ (*estos espíritus conocen a veces en las demás cosas, aunque no siempre que ellos quieren*)¹²⁹ because it is God who is the bestower of this preparedness and not something they have earned, as Fordham makes clear.¹³⁰

If they are given the preparedness by God, Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan both believe that in the first phase of the beginners, the aspirant will seek the inner aspect of God, as mentioned. But unlike San Juan, who ‘is always most solicitous for those who by comparison with himself are beginners’,¹³¹ Ibn ‘Arabī does not focus too heavily on the beginners, targeting most of his works for the spiritual adepts.¹³² The second stage is the first dark night (*noche oscura*) of the senses. San Juan describes this as ‘depriving yourself of all the objects of the senses’ (*que es privarse de todos los objetos de los sentidos*).¹³³ They are the sensual desires that must be abandoned because

If the soul always clings to these and never gets rid of them (*si el alma se quisiese siempre asir a ellas y no desarrimarse de ellas*), it will never stop being a child (*nunca dejaría de ser pequeñuelo niño*), and always talk about God like a child, and know God like a child, and think about God like a child (*y siempre hablaría de Dios como pequeñuelo, y sabría de Dios como pequeñuelo, y pensaría de Dios como pequeñuelo*) because holding on to the rind of the senses (*porque asiéndose a la corteza del sentido*), which is childish (*que es el pequeñuelo*), it will never reach the substance of the spirit, which is the perfect man (*nunca vendría a la sustancia del espíritu, que es el varón perfecto*).¹³⁴

Richard Lovelace clarifies that the night of the senses demands complete obedience to God.¹³⁵ All the sensual pleasures must be renounced so that one is no longer a child that only has rudimentary exoteric knowledge of God. After the first stage, ‘the imperfections of the newly awakened soul’ are purged in the night of the senses so that it can receive ‘an inflowing of God into the soul’ in the night of the spirit.¹³⁶

¹²⁵ Qāshānī, *Sharh*, p. 217.

¹²⁶ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 85.

¹²⁷ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 212.

¹²⁸ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 212.

¹²⁹ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 212.

¹³⁰ Fordham, *Explorations*, p. 190.

¹³¹ Peers, *Spirit*, p. 67.

¹³² ‘Afifi, “Ibn ‘Arabī”; De Cillis, *Free Will*, p. 168.

¹³³ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 16.

¹³⁴ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 149.

¹³⁵ Lovelace, *Dynamics*.

¹³⁶ Peers, *Spirit*, p. 126.

In language reminiscent of Ibn ‘Arabī, San Juan describes those who adhere to exoteric conceptions of God alone as children who hold on to ‘the rind of the senses’ (*la corteza del sentido*). Ibn ‘Arabī describes those who adhere to the apparent (*ẓāhir*) façade of the religion and not acknowledging its inner (*bāṭin*) aspect¹³⁷ as ‘the veiled ones’ (*maḥjūbīn*).¹³⁸ What is ‘the rind of the senses’ for San Juan is depicted as the ‘the veil (*ḥijāb*) of the self’ by Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers.¹³⁹ John Welch speaks extensively about San Juan’s assault on the egocentric life, which forms a barrier to the divine.¹⁴⁰ In the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī, likewise, the ego, which is dubbed ‘I-ness’ (*anāniyya*), is a barrier to annihilation in the divine (see next section) as it maintains a sense of the self that is apart from God.¹⁴¹ When this ‘I-ness’ is forsaken for the divine, the rank of the Perfect Man (*Al-Insān al-kāmil/ el varón perfecto*) is attained according to Ibn ‘Arabī and San Juan respectively.¹⁴²

San Juan clarifies that it is only through mortification of the senses and forsaking the desires of the concupiscent self that the divine is reached. He explains,

The reason it is necessary for the soul to pass through the dark night of mortification of appetites and the denial of pleasure in all things (*noche oscura de mortificación de apetitos y negación de los gustos en todas las cosas*) is so the soul can attain divine union with God (*para llegar a la divina unión de Dios*) because all the pleasures that it has in creatures are darkness before God (*todas las afecciones que tiene en las criaturas son delante de Dios puras tinieblas*).¹⁴³

The dark night of the senses therefore advocates for stringent self-denial and asceticism. Ibn ‘Arabī had previously promulgated the same approach in the path to the divine, and he himself lived an extremely austere life.¹⁴⁴ His asceticism was also reflected in his punctilious religious observance of, and his hyperliteralistic approach to, Islamic law.¹⁴⁵

San Juan seems to adopt the same definition of asceticism as Ibn ‘Arabī, for he writes that this ‘denudation’ (*desnudez*) of the senses is called a ‘night for the soul’ (*noche para el alma*) because

We are not dealing with the lack of things (*no tratamos aquí del carecer de las cosas*), since that does not ‘denude’ the soul if it still has a desire and appetite for them (*porque eso no desnuda al alma si tiene apetito de ellas*); rather [we are dealing with] the ‘denudation’ of pleasure in and appetite for them (*sino de la desnudez del gusto y apetito de ellas*), which is what leaves the soul free and empty of them, even if it has them (*que es lo que deja el alma libre y vacía de ellas, aunque las tenga*).¹⁴⁶

It is not the absence or presence of things, then, that San Juan identifies as the principal determinant of asceticism or lack thereof, but whether there is any desire for worldly things, irrespective of whether one possesses them or not.

¹³⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 94-95.

¹³⁸ Qāshānī, *Latā’if*, vol. 2, pp. 580-81.

¹³⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tafsīr Ibn ‘Arabī*, vol. 1, p. 259. This work is erroneously attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī even though it has been proven that Qāshānī was the author (See Lala, *Knowing God*).

¹⁴⁰ Welch, *The Carmelite Way*.

¹⁴¹ Tahānawī, *Kashshāf*, vol. 1, p. 98.

¹⁴² Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Fuṭūḥāt*, vol. 6, p. 4; San Juan, *Obras*, p. 149.

¹⁴³ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁴ Addas, *Quest*.

¹⁴⁵ Chittick, *Faith and Practice*; Ghurāb, *Al-Fiqh*; Lala, “Asceticism”; Mayer, “Theology”.

¹⁴⁶ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 19.

Ibn ‘Arabī makes the same point when he says that ‘asceticism’ (*zuhd*) can only be applied to property (*milk*) and the pursuit (*ṭalab*) for it, so refraining from pursuing [it] is asceticism because our companions [i.e., the Sufis] differ about the pauper (*faqīr*) who does not have any property: is it proper for the term ‘ascetic’ to be applied to them, or do they have no part (*lā qadam lah*) in this rank [of asceticism]? Our position is that a pauper is in a position to have the desire for worldly things and can take great pains (*ta‘ammala*) to attain it, even if they do not succeed. Thus, to forsake this endeavour and pursuit, and to not desire it, that is without doubt asceticism.¹⁴⁷

Ibn ‘Arabī declares unequivocally that only forsaking the desire to possess things can be defined as asceticism (*zuhd*) in the same way as San Juan after him. This is the dark night of the senses which precedes the dark night of the spirit.

The dark night of the spirit is necessary, says San Juan, because the mortification of the senses is not enough to attain union with the divine. If divine union is to be attained, the soul must enter the second night of the spirit (*la segunda noche del espíritu*) where [spiritual communications], perfectly denuding the sense and spirit of these apprehensions and pleasures (*desnudando el sentido y espíritu perfectamente de todas estas aprehensiones y sabores*), allows it to walk in dark and pure faith, which is the proper and adequate means by which the soul is united with God (*caminar en oscura y pura fe, que es propio y adecuado medio por donde el alma se une con Dios*).¹⁴⁸

The second night, therefore, perfectly purifies the sense and spirit of all their imperfections in order that the soul may attain union with the divine. Colin Thompson correctly identifies the denudation of the senses and the spirit not as ‘entities’ or ‘locations’ but as ‘modalities of inner life’.¹⁴⁹ There is a modality shift between the first and second nights in the same way as there is in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī where the preliminary stage of multiplicity and divine immanence gives way to the final stage of divine unity and transcendence. The modality of multiplicity and immanence must be traversed so that the modality of unity and transcendence can be perceived, just as the night of the senses must be navigated so that the night of the spirit can be reached. The ultimate purpose of this, of course, is union with the divine.

Union with the divine

Ibn ‘Arabī does not believe true union with the divine can occur as Henry Corbin affirms,

What a man attains at the summit of his mystic experience is not, and cannot be, the Divine Essence in its undifferentiated unity. And that is why Ibn ‘Arabī rejected the pretension of certain mystics who claimed ‘to become one with God’.¹⁵⁰

The height of the mystical experience could never entail absolute union with the essence of God. However, this does not mean that annihilation (*fanā’*) in God could not occur, just that this annihilation did not signify a non-existence of the self. Jāmī corroborates that according to Ibn ‘Arabī

¹⁴⁷ Lala, “Asceticism”.

¹⁴⁸ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 418.

¹⁴⁹ Peasgood, “The Relevance”, p. 156.

¹⁵⁰ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, p. 273.

In the station of annihilation (*maqām al-fanā*) in God, *the real existence of the servant must be acknowledged, ... since ‘annihilation’ (fanā) here does not mean the absolute non-existence (in ‘idām) of the essence of the servant; instead, it means annihilation of the human side (jihāt al-bashariyya) in the lordly side (jihāt al-rabbāniyya).*¹⁵¹

The self never ceases to exist when it is ‘annihilated’ or unites with the divine according to Ibn ‘Arabī; it is only human attributes that become divine attributes. It is for this reason that Ibn ‘Arabī avers that at the height of mystical experience the states of annihilation and subsistence (*baqā*) occur concurrently.

Ḥakīm elaborates on the inextricable relation between annihilation and subsistence in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī by clarifying that

annihilation and subsistence are spiritual conditions that are linked and one entails the other; they occur in an individual at one time (*zaman wāḥid*), but have distinct relations. Annihilation is the relation of an individual to what is created, and subsistence is their relation to God. Subsistence is a relation does not cease to exist because it is a divine characteristic (*na‘t ilahī*), as opposed to annihilation.¹⁵²

Both annihilation and subsistence, then, describe the same spiritual state but refer to different aspects of it. Annihilation refers to the creational attributes that no longer exist because they are annihilated in the divine attributes which now subsist in the person. Yet the person themselves are not annihilated in the divine.

Ibn ‘Arabī believes that this is the true meaning of the prophetic tradition in which God announces,

I declare war against whoever treats a close associate of mine (*walī*) as an enemy. My servant does not draw near to me with anything more beloved to me than the rulings I have made mandatory upon them. And my servant continues to draw closer to me with supererogatory acts to the point that I love them. And when I love them, I am their hearing through which they hear, their sight through which they see, their hand with which they grasp, and their feet with which they walk.¹⁵³

A mystic at the height of their spiritual experience is so close to God that their actions are completely concordant with the divine will. It is in this sense that God is immanent in the world as His will is being perfectly enacted by His servant. In this sense alone is the servant annihilated in and unites with God, says Ibn ‘Arabī, and thus, godly characteristics that are now being carried out by the servant subsist.¹⁵⁴ This also demonstrates that for Ibn ‘Arabī divine transcendence and immanence occur and persist simultaneously. God is immanent as the servant who achieves the rank of the Perfect Man because their actions are perfect manifestations of the divine will, yet they can never be subsumed in the divine essence because God is transcendent. It is this concurrent immanence and transcendence that makes God ultimately apophatic.

San Juan, likewise, affirms that perfect and lasting union with the divine does not occur in this world. Instead, much like Ibn ‘Arabī, he explains that union with the divine in this world

¹⁵¹ Jāmī, *Naqd*, p. 99.

¹⁵² Ḥakīm, *Al-Mu‘jam*, p. 203.

¹⁵³ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 8, p. 105.

¹⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ*, pp. 80-84.

is an ephemeral state in which the will of God and that of the soul coincide.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, he begins his *Prologue* with the disclaimer:

In order to fully explain and elucidate what the dark night (*noche oscura*) is, thorough which the soul passes to attain divine light of the perfect union with God's love (*por la cual pasa el alma para llegar a la divina luz de la unión perfecta del amor de Dios*), **so far as it is possible in this life** (*cual se puede en esta vida*), requires more illuminated wisdom and experience than I have.¹⁵⁶

San Juan explicitly states that there is a limited manner in which union with the divine can occur in this world. Kavanaugh asserts that in the opinion of San Juan perfect and enduring union with the divine is impossible as long as the soul is bound to a corporeal form. Only after the mortal coil is shaken off can there be perfect union, which means it can only happen in heaven.¹⁵⁷

This transitive worldly union with the divine is achieved through faith, says San Juan, because God is ultimately apophatic, which means that the intellectual faculty of the soul cannot be occupied by the love of God through its normal function. Only through faith 'which is something that does not fall within what makes sense' (*que es cosa que no cae en sentido*),¹⁵⁸ can this love and union be attained. Therefore, because God is beyond the ken of human comprehension, it is only by adopting the means that itself falls outside the purview of rationality can the divine be attained.

Just as Ibn 'Arabī intimates that the third stage and final stage is where the divine unity and transcendence behind creational multiplicity and immanence is perceived, San Juan believes that 'ordinary consciousness is always diffuse, always engaging in multiplicity',¹⁵⁹ but this must give way to faith which unifies the soul such that the unity of the soul is 'exclusively directed to the one, singular object in God'.¹⁶⁰ This requires a 'transdentalisation' of human faculties, explains Keating, so that they are in perfect accord with the divine will, which is only possible through faith.¹⁶¹ Both mystics, then, argue for a preliminary stage of multiplicity and immanence after which the final stage of unity and transcendence can be attained, and the simultaneous affirmation of both modalities means that God's essence remains resolutely apophatic.

Conclusion

Ibn 'Arabī wrote extensively on divine immanence and transcendence in the overarching domain of his mystical *Weltanschauung*. San Juan demonstrates remarkable familiarity with the concepts and imagery employed by Ibn 'Arabī and develops them in the sphere of his own conception of divine immanence and transcendence. Both mystics assert that God is immanent in the world because each form of creation is a locus of divine manifestation or a 'trace' (*athar / rastro*) of God according to their preparedness. Of these traces humankind is the most perspicuous locus of divine immanence because it is the polished 'mirror' (*mir'āt/ espejo*) in which all the divine 'attributes' (*ṣifāt/ atributos*) are clearly reflected. When a person

¹⁵⁵ Peasgood, "The Relevance", p. 191.

¹⁵⁶ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *The Collected Works*.

¹⁵⁸ San Juan, *Obras*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁹ Mondello, *The Metaphysics*, p. 101.

¹⁶⁰ Mondello, *The Metaphysics*, p. 171.

¹⁶¹ Keating, *The Human Condition*.

achieves their potentiality to manifest all the divine attributes, they become ‘the Perfect Man’ (*Al-Insān al-kāmil/ el varón perfecto*). Despite this, however, both mystics place a greater emphasis of divine transcendence because the manifestations of the attributes are not the divine attributes themselves, and the divine attributes are not God’s essence, which is ‘the Absolute in His Absoluteness’, or ‘the Ultimate Principle’ (*el Sumo Principio*) that is completely incomparable to anything else. It is for this reason that both affirm ‘there is nothing like Him’ (*laysa ka mithlih shay’/ no hay nada como él*). Ultimately, God is beyond the ken of human comprehension and both divine immanence and transcendence advert to this. It is for this reason that on the path of the aspirant to the divine, both mystics advocate a three-stage process in the form of a ‘conscious unknowing’ or ‘perplexity’ (*ḥayra*), which progresses through the multiplicity of divine immanence, to the final stage of divine unity of transcendence in the dark night of the spirit. At the summit of the divine experience for the spiritual elite, ‘annihilation’ (*fanā’*) or ‘perfect union’ (*unión perfecta*) occurs, but both maintain that in this world, at least, this union cannot ever be complete and abiding.

Word count: 12428

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