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CHAPTER II

The Reality of the One and Dialogue with the Other



At first sight, nothing could be simpler than the Qur'ānic message of *tawḥīd*. There is but one true or real God: *lā ilāha illa'Llāh*. All false gods are negated by this simple formula and by the mentality that it fosters. For the Sufis, however, the content of this simple message has no boundaries, for *tawḥīd* is not restricted to the plane of theology; it comes to embrace all that is. Consequently, the whole of Sufism—its speculative metaphysics, its transformative spirituality, its soul-searching psychology, its mystical practices and its ethical imperatives—can be seen as so much 'commentary' or elaboration upon this Qur'ānic message of *tawḥīd*. The most important shift effected by the Sufi assimilation of the message is that from theology to ontology, from the nature of God to the nature of Being.[1] As Kāshānī says, summing up this ontological perspective: 'There is no He but Him, and no existent apart from Him.'[2] Nothing exists apart from God or in addition to Him: we have here not only an affirmation of the oneness of God to the exclusion of

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[1] This is the distinction which Āmulī makes, between *al-tawḥīd al-ulūhī*, and *al-tawḥīd al-wujūdī*, as will be further discussed below.

[2] Kāshānī, *Taṭsīr*, vol. II, p. 17. The *tafsīr* in question was for centuries attributed to Ibn ʿArabī, on account of the evident fact that the essential approach, principles and even many of the specific interpretations found in this commentary are derived from the perspective of Ibn ʿArabī.

other gods, but also, and more fundamentally, the affirmation of a unique reality, which is exclusive of all otherness, or rather: in relation to which all otherness is, ultimately, unreal.

In relation to dialogue, one can then pose these questions: if nothing but God is real, and there is no 'otherness', in reality, what is the meaning of dialogue with the other? How can dialogue take place, and what can its purpose be, in a context defined by metaphysical oneness? What status can be attributed to the two agents of dialogue, the self, and the other, if nothing is real but God? Is dialogue in our actual world enhanced or undermined by such metaphysical perspectives? These are the questions that form the background against which the esoteric exegesis of the Qur'ānic concept of oneness will be presented in this chapter.

The starting point for these reflections will be a fairly lengthy exploration of the commentary given by Kāshānī on the chapter called *al-Ikhlāṣ* ('Sincerity'/'Purity'), also called *al-Tawḥīd*, a fundamental credal affirmation and one of the most oft-recited of all the chapters of the Qur'ān. The key theme here will be the relationship between unity and multiplicity, or between oneness in diversity and diversity within oneness. It will be seen that the oneness of reality, far from excluding multiplicity, implies it, embraces it and integrates it—the 'many' belong to the One, are projected by It into relativity, and return to It, this process manifesting to the One its own infinite richness: this, in essence, is the 'dialogue' constituted by existence itself, and which might be regarded as the ultimate 'prototype' or enlivening sap of all dialogues at the human level. Thus, the positive reason for diversity on the human plane, as indicated in the following words of verse XLIX: 13, can be situated within a universal context of divine Self-manifestation, whereby the One expresses and thus 'makes known' Its own inner infinitude: *O mankind, truly We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another.* (XLIX: 13)

The insights of other representatives of the Sufi tradition will also be considered, in order to explore and illustrate some

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of the concomitants of this metaphysical conception of *tawḥīd*, and its implications for dialogue. In relation to this divine Self-disclosure, the ontological status and cognitive function of the self, the human agent engaged in dialogue, is defined more clearly: on the one hand the human self will be seen to be integral to the divine Self-disclosure, being the most faithful reflection, within relative existence, of the unconditional being and manifold qualities of the divine nature; and on the other hand, the self-effacement required for the Sufi assimilation of *tawḥīd* will be seen to have potentially far-reaching consequences for effective dialogue with the other. Finally, the other will be examined in the light of the preceding discussion: as there is nothing in existence but the divine, and as multiplicity is affirmed as integral to the oneness of God, that divine Reality cannot but be present in the other, and it cannot but teach us something about that divine Reality, if we be sensitive to the divine 'Face' that is in the other, that is also in oneself, and, indeed, that is there, wherever we look: *And unto God belong the East and the West; and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God*. (II: 115)

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The One in the Many, the Many in the One

Before turning to Kāshānī's commentary on *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, it would be useful to bear the following point in mind. As was noted in the previous chapter, Sufi exegesis is characterised by its allusive (*ishārī*) character: the verses of the revealed text are seen to allude to realities and principles glimpsed, tasted, or fully realized by the Sufis in spiritual contemplation. In considering the commentaries below, some of which may appear to fly far from the evident or literal meaning of the words being commented upon, it would be wrong to infer that the vision of oneness presented by the Sufis is predicated solely on their own private, arbitrary inspirations and not on the text itself.

It is undeniable that the majority of the verses dealing with the oneness of God in the Qur'ān express this oneness in

a manner which rigorously stresses the divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), incomparability and remoteness: *There is nothing like Him* (XLII: 11); *Glorified be thy Lord, the Lord of Glory, above what they describe* (XXXVII: 180). Such verses, however, give only one side of the picture, for there are others in which the immanence, similarity (*tashbīh*)[3] and proximity of God are stressed. These verses indicate that the divine Reality is not just exclusive but also inclusive, not just above and beyond all things, but also containing and thus penetrating all things. They reveal that the divine Presence, being infinite, is thereby inalienable—there is no space or time, where God is not present, even though He transcends all space and time. Such verses, albeit few in number, must be given an importance out of proportion to the frequency of their occurrence in the text, not only because they are so often invoked by the Sufis in their treatises; and not only because they resonate so profoundly with the experiential openings effected by the spiritual practices that are an inseparable part of Sufism understood as a living tradition;[4] but also because these verses define fundamental, metaphysical principles pertaining to the mystery of divine oneness. When Sufis therefore relate all sorts of verses—dealing with diverse subjects—to the all-pervading, immanent divine Presence, it is not a question of 'speculating in the void'. It is instead the expression of a vision of an all-embracing oneness evoked by particular verses, a vision which is experientially intuited, mystically anticipated or concretely realized. Verses such as the following, then, should be borne in

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[3] It should be noted that *tashbīh*, though often translated as 'immanence' in contrast to *tanzīh*, 'transcendence', in fact means 'similarity', or 'making similar'. But similarity is not immanence, strictly speaking: divine immanence means the actual presence of God, not the presence of something similar; it is thus a mode of pure identity, and identity is not similarity. However, as will be seen below, the symbol of the mirror helps to show how it is that *tashbīh* can legitimately be used to refer to immanence, as well as to similarity.

[4] See the discussion in the previous chapter on the 'remembrance/invocation of God' (*dhikru'Llāh*).

mind, and meditated upon, as the background for the exegesis that will be presented in this and the following chapter:

Everything is perishing save His Face (XXVIII: 88)
Everything that is thereon is passing away; and there subsisteth but the Face of thy Lord, possessor of Glory and Bounty (LV: 26–27)
And unto God belong the East and the West; and wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God (II: 115)
He is with you wherever ye may be (LVII: 4)
We are nearer to him [man] *than the jugular vein* (L: 16)
And thou didst not throw when thou threwest, but God threw (VIII: 17)
We are nearer to him than ye are, but ye perceive not (LVI: 85)
God cometh in between a man and his own heart (VIII: 24)
Is He not encompassing all things? (XLI: 54)
He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward (LVII: 3)
God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star. [The lamp is] *kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would almost glow forth though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guideth to His light whom He will. And God striketh similitudes for mankind. And God knoweth all things* (XXIV: 35).

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Turning now to Kāshānī's exegesis of *Surat al-Ikhlāṣ*, let us first cite the chapter itself:

Say: He is God,[5] *One;*
God, the eternally besought.

[5] I translate the word 'Allah' as 'God' here and in all translations of verses from the Qur'ān; retaining the Arabic can have, for some, the implication that what is in question is something other than the 'God' recognised in the Jewish and Christian traditions, whereas what is in question is the self-same deity. According to the Qur'ān: *And do not hold discourse with the People of the Book except in that which is finest, save with those who do wrong. And say: We*