

The Capable Heart
Rev. Jennifer Brooks¹
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“My heart has become capable of every form.” —Ibn Arabi

Ibn Arabi was a Sunni Muslim born in 1165, just a few years after England’s King Richard the Lion Heart. He lived the first half of his life in Spain.

When he was 35 he went on pilgrimage to Mecca and stayed for a few years. Most of the second half of his life he lived in “Anatolia,” a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic region that today is Turkey. His last years were in Damascus, then an independent city in the area that now is part of Syria.

He was a poet and philosopher; a Sufi mystic and a careful, logical thinker. He wrote thousands of pages of closely reasoned analysis of the nature of the cosmos, asking and answering questions about the nature of reality and the existence of God.

When he wrote the few lines of poetry beginning with “My heart has become capable of every form,” he had already achieved greatness as a thinker and teacher. During his lifetime—a lifetime marked by six crusades—he was so well-regarded in the West that he was called “Doctor Maximus.”

Today he is considered the pre-eminent Muslim philosopher of all time, and his works continue to have relevance for post-modern thinkers.

“My heart...is a pasture for gazelles.” This line is a tribute to naturalism, a world-view that finds connection and meaning in the natural world. It’s a view familiar to many people today, especially in American Unitarian Universalism, because our 19th century forebears were the transcendentalists—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau. These American Unitarian thinkers were naturalists and they laid the groundwork for the spirituality that today we call naturalism.

“My heart [is]...a cloister for Christian monks.” This line expresses acceptance of Christian traditions—not surprising, really. The Islamic tradition accepts and incorporates many aspects of Christianity and Judaism. There are Sufi Muslim poems and prayers to Jesus and to Mary his mother. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all trace their origins to Abraham, father of Isaac and Ishmael. They are the three great “Abrahamic” religions, the three traditions that assert belief in “one God” rather than many.

All the same: the heart as “cloister” for monks of a non-Islamic religion? This line is, perhaps, a bit edgy.

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But Ibn Arabi's poem goes from edgy to challenging in the next line: "My heart is ... a temple for idols and a Ka'aba of the pilgrims." These two ideas side-by-side are an amazing statement for a devout Muslim.

Ka'aba means "cube" in Arabic. The word refers to a black granite cube, 15 meters high, at the center of Mecca. In pre-Islamic times, the Ka'aba was the center of a 20-mile zone of non-violence, allowing tribes in Mecca and the surrounding areas to trade peacefully.

Muhammad lived from 570-632 CE. His tribe was keeper of the Ka'aba, which had become the center of a sacred area and was surrounded by 360 idols to Arabian tribal gods. Central to Muhammad's religious philosophy was that there is no God but Allah—the "one God." When Muhammad said that the Ka'aba should be a shrine only for the "one God" alone, his views irritated the other tribes and as a consequence the leaders of Muhammad's tribe became angry with him. In 622 he escaped to Medina; he returned 8 years later and *conquered* Mecca. When he had established control, Muhammad destroyed the 360 tribal idols surrounding the Ka'aba.²

Consider: Ibn Arabi dares to juxtapose a mention of the holy Ka'aba, central destination of Muslim pilgrims, and the phrase "temple of idols." It's more than a mere juxtaposition; he says his heart *is* a temple of idols and his heart *is* the Ka'aba. This from a devout Muslim, a man who is a follower of Muhammad—Muhammad who tore down the idols from around the Ka'aba.

It's almost anti-climatic when Arabi goes on, in the next lines, to call his heart "the tablets of the Torah, and the book of the Koran."

In the space of a few lines he tells the Muslim world that his heart is a temple for idols, the holiest structure of Islam, the central sacred writings of Judaism, and the words of Muhammad, Islam's sacred book the Koran.

It's easy to understand that in his time Ibn Arabi was somewhat...*controversial*.

Why would this philosopher, who toiled over thousands of pages of closely reasoned analysis, encapsulate in just a few lines the idea of multivalence? Of pluralism, multi-culturalism? Of religious tolerance?

What was he saying? And—why does it matter to us?

In Ibn Arabi's philosophy, God is infinite and everything else is limited. He said, "The movement which is the existence of the universe is the movement of love."

The debate of the time, a debate that continues today, was whether a human being could possibly understand the nature of reality, the nature of the cosmos.

² According to the Koran, Abraham and his son Ishmael built the Ka'aba on the foundations of an original built by Adam. *Koran, 2:127*.

Does God exist? If so, what is God? Is God co-extensive with the universe, or outside the universe, shaping it? Can limited human beings grasp what God is, what God requires?

Ibn Arabi did believe in the possibility of actual knowledge of the existence as a whole, not by use reason and logic, but by the heart.

This idea allowed him to escape the problem of pluralism, the problem of wide acceptance and tolerance of all perspectives and beliefs. The era of “modernism,” in which all of us were immersed at birth, taught us that reason is foundational. For the past 500 years modern thinkers have used reason to examine religious beliefs and cultural practices.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, our religious forebears brought reason to the interpretation of scripture. Our denomination’s acceptance of diversity in theology is in part a response to the differences that result when people reason from different perspectives.

It’s like the old story about people wearing blindfolds who touch different parts of an elephant. The one who touches the tail says, “The object before me is a rope.” The one who touches the trunk says, “The object before me is a snake.” The one who touches the leg says, “The object before me is a tree.” No one can see the whole elephant and recognize it as an elephant. Each has a limited perspective.

Pluralism accepts that a human’s limited perspective, combined with differences in culture and experience, cause people to understand the universe differently. Reason, however exact, cannot enable the blindfolded observer to deduce the elephant by touching its tail.

Post-modernism is the era we live in now, the era of reaction to modernism. In post-modernism, acceptance of pluralism results from an understanding that differences in belief and outlook are inevitable, and that reason isn’t enough to identify the whole truth about existence. Post-modernists say that it’s not possible to know the “ultimate ground of existence”—just as it is not possible for the blindfolded observers to know the whole elephant.

For Ibn Arabi, pluralism and the acceptance of all beliefs as valid does not arise from the idea that we *lack* an “ultimate ground”; Arabi’s idea is that the nature of reality itself creates a multitude of perspectives, and yet we can know the ultimate ground.

This is a paradox. If the nature of reality creates multiple perspectives, how can we know the ultimate truth about reality?

One of the great rational thinkers of the modern age was Kant, who thought that through reason it would be possible to arrive at all the fundamental principles of religion. Ibn Ara would agree with Kant about the power of reason to give us information about the universe.

But Kant also believed that “what we cannot know through human reason, we cannot know,” and here Ibn Arabi would disagree.

He thought there was another way of knowing—the way of the heart—in Sufi Muslim terms, the way of love.

In my own thinking about pluralism, I've been frustrated by the fact that acceptance of differences appears to have no limits. Reason does not give us a way to set limits for pluralism, to identify what beliefs we should not tolerate, because reason cannot reach the ultimate ground"; but post-modernism does not offer guidance either. Post-modernism simply says we have to accept every point of view.

But Ibn Arabi, writing centuries ago, offers our post-modern era a way to resolve the paradox of pluralism.

His view of the cosmos means tolerance of differing perspectives. It means striving to understand others. It means radical acceptance of other people and other ways. But it also sets a limit. That limit is bounded by love.

When we ask ourselves what beliefs and behaviors we must tolerate because we accept the idea of pluralism, we can use love to identify beliefs and behaviors we need not tolerate.

Love does not torture. Love does not oppress. Love does not make distinctions among human beings because of the color of their skin. Love answers the question of boundaries to tolerance, to the acceptance of pluralism.

In many ways Ibn Arabi's spiritual philosophy is like that of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. The seven principles, those values that we share—that draw us together—they join us in a unity of love, not a unity of theology.

Our denomination has chosen to welcome the diversity in theology that results from different cultural perspectives and experiences. But our principles serve as a boundary of love: if we respect the inherent worth of every person, if we commit ourselves to justice, to compassion, to protection of the planet, to democracy—then we are not a denomination that "accepts anything"—it's not true, as people sometimes say, that "if you are a Unitarian it doesn't matter what you believe."

It does matter. Tolerance is essential; but the boundary of tolerance is love. It's not easy to explain or codify, but it's something we nonetheless can understand. Ours is a tradition that respects the power of the mind but also celebrates the truth of the heart. In Emerson's words, "the heart knoweth."

So I say with Ibn Arabi:

"I follow the religion of Love:

Whatever path Love's camel takes,

That is my religion and my faith."

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

This sermon is based on a poetic excerpt from Ibn Arabi (1165-1240). He was a Sunni Sufi Muslim mystic and philosopher who was born in the Muslim-controlled Iberian Peninsula and lived in Spain from the ages of 8-35, when he made a pilgrimage to Mecca. The poem is in Arabi's book *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* or "Interpreter of All Desires." The poem:

My heart has become capable of every form:
It is a pasture for gazelles,
And a monastery for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols,
And a Ka'aba of the pilgrims,
And the tablets of the Torah,
And the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love:
Whatever path Love's camel takes,
That is my religion and my faith.

A useful website on the philosophy of Ibn Arabi <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/> is maintained by the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, founded in 1977. A more basic description of Ibn Arabi's work is available through Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Arabi.

In a review of a book by Peter Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought: The History of Taking Metaphysics Seriously* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2002), Atif Khalil writes that for Peter Coates, "This relativistic epistemology is one of the most controversial features of Ibn Arabi's thought, one that set it apart not only from Muslim "orthodoxy" but also the mainstream sufi tradition. It was this particular understanding of God and the nature of human belief that led [Arabi], in the *Bezels of Wisdom*, to caution the spiritual aspirant against becoming bound to a particular belief thereby denying the legitimacy of others, 'lest great good escape you.' It also led him to boldly declare [the words of the poem] in *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, *The Interpreter of Desires* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 2003, 43)." Atif Khalil, *Journal of Religion and Society*, vol. 7 (2005), available online at <http://moses.creighton.edu/jrs/2005/2005-r9.html>.

As reported by Atif Khalil, Peter Coates thinks:

"Ibn Arabi did believe in the possibility of actual knowledge of the whole of existence as a whole—the proper domain of metaphysics—not, however, through ratiocination but the organ of the Heart. This allowed him, paradoxically, to argue for both a relativism that accepted all beliefs, and for the existence of an accessible ultimate epistemological and ontological ground upon which all such beliefs are based. For the Muslim mystic, all beliefs have validity not because, as post-modernists might contend, they lack an ultimate ground, but because the nature of that ground creates a plethora of perspectives. Coates suggests we take this view seriously because it offers a way out of the deadlock created by a nihilistic, groundless relativism. Many modern thinkers would frown upon the suggestion we take mystical perception seriously, and certainly, for Ibn Arabi this ultimate ground is only "mystically" accessible, however Coates recommends considering this alternative because of the all-too-obvious limitations of rationality that the history of philosophy bears witness to beginning particularly with Kant. Ibn Arabi, observes Coates, would wholeheartedly agree with the German philosopher, and against his own medieval philosophical contemporaries, among them Averroes, in that there are boundaries beyond which reason cannot transgress. But he would also advocate - and Coates is again in full agreement - the need to rise beyond the intellectually self-defeating and somewhat hubris-laden Kantian view according to which "what we cannot know through human reason, we cannot know" (44)."

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