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Andrey Smirnov
Institute of Philosophy, Moscow

**The Şūfī Concept of Being:
How Unlimited Universal Tolerance Could Be?
(Onto-Logical Foundation of Ultimate Religious Tolerance)**

The celebrated Şūfī thinker Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) proposed a vision of religious tolerance of which the ultimateness is hardly rivaled both in Muslim and Western thought. This theory rests on ontological ground and is found by philosophical doctrine known as ‘unity of being’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). In this paper I will argue that it is no less important to grasp the logic of reasoning that Ibn ‘Arabī follows when he develops both his ontology and his theory of tolerance. It is this logic that sets the framework within which his line of argument evolves, for it defines the meaning of the theses advanced by this author and conditions for their validity.

To prove that point, I will do the following. Firstly, I will propose a logical sketch of the concept of tolerance in contemporary Western thought. I will elaborate briefly on the connection of that concept with the notions of the ‘other’, the ‘unity’ and the ‘multiplicity’, and, especially, on the relation between the general and the particular and on importance of the logical aspect of that relation for shaping the concept of tolerance. Secondly, I will give an exposition of Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of (nominally) the same notions. Those are ‘other’ (*ghayr*), ‘partaking’ (*mushāraka*), ‘similarity’ (*mushābaha*), ‘one’ (*wāḥid*), ‘one-ness’ (*aḥadiyya*), ‘multitude’ (*kathra*), and others. Finally, I will speak about the logical relation in which those notions stand to each

other in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought and compare it to the way they shape the general framework of the discourse on tolerance in Western thinking. The common logical ground for the comparison will be constituted by the relation of negation. I assume that ‘the other’ stands in relation of negation to my ‘ego’ (or, to put it differently, the two ‘others’ stand in relation of mutual negation) and, consequently, tolerance means overcoming this negation. If the ‘others’ are viewed as particulars, then to overcome their mutual negation means to arrive at some sort of generality which bridges over the mutual ‘hostility’ of its parts. I will argue that Ibn ‘Arabī follows the same logical scheme but understands differently the procedure of negation and, consequently, of generalization. The specificity of Ibn ‘Arabī’s logic of reasoning boils down to the specificity of those procedures and founds the striking ultimateness of his thought.

I

The concept of tolerance in the West began taking shape in Roman times and was developed in course of a long history, and its elaboration is far from being over. It would be a folly to try to give any kind of account of this history here. What I would rather do is to point at those notions to which the concept of tolerance is closely related. As a result, I will sketch a logical structure of the notion of tolerance. I do not claim that this structure is reproduced in every study dedicated to the topic of tolerance. What I do claim, however, is that this structure is relevant for understanding the logic of reasoning that such studies are based upon, implicitly or explicitly. Making the final preliminary remark I would like to say that doing so I do not intend to make any extraordinary or sudden discovery. I will rather be referring to the things which I expect to be commonly accepted.

‘Tolerance’ can hardly be conceived without the notion of the ‘other’. In the last decades the ‘other’ and ‘other-ness’ became a special object of attention for philosophers and anthropologists, and they were elaborated on in numerous studies. However, long before our times ‘the other’ emerged within the horizon of the thinkers, at least those who were concerned with the theme of tolerance. In fact, from the very beginning tolerance was conceived as one of the possible attitudes towards the other.

Initially tolerance was treated first and foremost as religious tolerance, and later the concept was developed to cover non-religious spheres as well. Today when we discuss relations within the society or between different cultures, it is difficult to do without the concept of 'tolerance towards the other', be it the other human being, the other culture, the other religion, etc. It does not suffice to say that 'the other' is a notion utterly important for understanding what tolerance is. We should rather say that 'tolerance' is inconceivable without the notion of 'the other', so that to contemplate tolerance means to contemplate 'my' relation to 'the other' (or relation between the two 'others').

Why is 'the other' so indispensable to the discussion of tolerance? I think the answer is: because 'the other' stands in relation of negation to my 'ego', and tolerance is an attempt to minimize the disastrous results of that negation. It seems rather obvious, and at the same time important, that this negation cannot be overcome altogether, that is, it cannot be annihilated (at least not until 'the wolf shall dwell with the lamb'). Tolerance does not wipe out the negation but rather channels it to where it is no longer minacious for the general survival and/or well-being.

Thus we can define tolerance as a means to traverse negation, to make a transition from negation as a relation between the two opposites to their unity in which their mutual negation is sublated. This transition opens up two perspectives: the one in which the two 'others' are still incompatible and oppose each other, and the other perspective in which the two are united despite their opposition and mutual negation.

The negation between the two opposite 'others' is basically twofold as long as its source is concerned.

On the one hand, the two oppose each other if they do actually share something. Biologically speaking, the two individuals of the same species share common fodder supplies and therefore oppose each other. In society, human individuals share common resources and, having different abilities, oppose each other as well. In human society, unlike the natural world, this negating opposition between the two beings can be transcended by some kind of economy and coexistence. This transition from the individual to the general requires tolerance of some sort as long as it forces the mutual

negation between the two out from the centre of their relations to the margins and replaces it by common agreement.

On the other hand, the two negate each other if they do not share the common feature but they assume they inevitably should. This is a specific case of relation towards religious or scientific truth. The truth is presumably one, and if the two have different opinions, only one of those can be true (or neither), but not both. Thus the two negate each other in their relation towards truth, and if they take the situation seriously they might even translate this mutual negation into violence, which did happen many times in human history and still does. The only way to deal with the situation is to make the two believe that their opposition does not have the vital importance and therefore can be channeled to non-annihilating forms (peaceful discussions, etc.). This peaceful coexistence between the two incompatible visions of what the truth is will always be based on some sort of common agreement or consent that replaces the opposition between the two, this opposition being forced out to the marginal spheres of their relations. This last step takes us back to the first version of overcoming the negation between the two 'others'.

Let me summarize briefly. Put in a nutshell, the logical structure of 'tolerance' is a transition from negation to its sublation. It is achieved by generalizing the particulars and thus arriving at the unity of the many (the first source of negation). When this strategy is inapplicable for logical reasons (the second source of negation: either A or non-A is true, not both), the destructive negation is pushed out to the margins where it is permitted to dwell whereas the centre is occupied by the mutual consent to coexist.

I think that this very sketchy and generalized logical structure stands behind many (if not all) modern theories related to tolerance this way or the other. When we speak about multiculturalism we imply that despite all the possible diversity of 'cultural perspectives' there are certain common principles on which the diverse cultures need to agree as long as they wish to live together. Those common principles take priority over the probable deviations permitted by different cultures. Those principles might be not numerous, but they override any cultural specificity in case of conflict and thus permit no

infringement, otherwise tolerance turns into permissiveness and results in dissolution of the society. This well-known thesis is only an implication of the logical structure of the relation of one to many in which the many, being generalized, lose part of their diversity and mutually negating features. If modern theories leave much more margin for cultural diversity and non-generalized features and make us believe that the strife for religious or scientific truth does not need to lead to the suppression of the opponent, those theories still leave intact the logical structure of negation and its sublation through tolerance.

II

Now let me address the theory of tolerance proposed by Ibn ‘Arabī. My source for quotations will be his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Bezels of Wisdom), a relatively short text containing the synopsis of the Great Shaykh’s philosophical views. I will read the relevant passages and make an attempt to understand them through the proposed logical structure of ‘tolerance’. Since this structure, as described above, is extremely abstract, I can expect it to be fit for explanation of any discourse on tolerance, provided that tolerance is contemplated basically as an attitude towards the other.

Although Ibn ‘Arabī does not use the term ‘tolerance’ (which is usually rendered into Arabic as *samāḥa*) and its derivatives except on very rare occasions¹, his long and detailed discourse on other religions and beliefs (including pagans and unbelievers) can hardly be qualified in terms other than tolerance. Moreover, the notion of ‘the other’ (*ghayr*) plays the pivotal role in his reasoning on that topic, and the texts quoted below provide an ample evidence for that. As for the negation, its meaning is much more evident in the Arabic word *ghayr* than in English ‘the other’, and to say in Arabic that ‘A is *ghayr*-B’ means to say that ‘A is not-B’ or ‘A is other than B’. ‘Otherness’ (*ghayriyya*) and negation stand very close to each other.

Every thing in the world is ‘the other’ (*ghayr*) in its relation to anything else in the world. The world is made up of the ‘multitude’ (*kathra*) of such ‘others’, all of which have some sort of relation with ‘the One’. ‘Otherness’, which is the characteristic of the

¹ An example of such usage see in: *Ibn ‘Arabī. Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Revelations of Mecca). Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, vol. 4, p. 491.

world, is transgressed by virtue of that relation, since there is no otherness in the One. This transition from the many to the One sublates the mutual negation of the others.

This very short and highly simplified, though not incorrect, exposition of Ibn ‘Arabī’s views makes one believe that the logical structure of otherness and its overcoming through a sort of generalization is basically the same as discussed above. As we move to a more specific topic of religious tolerance, this conclusion seems to be reaffirmed. Ibn ‘Arabī says that the differences between various beliefs (and, in fact, between belief and unbelief) should be set aside in favor of the commonality represented by the fact that all human beings are images of God. This strategy seems to be logically the same as described above, that is, the differences in understanding what the truth is are declared irrelevant, and disagreement is replaced by the common ability of all the humankind to embody the Divinity.

Having all this in mind, I will read the passages of Ibn ‘Arabī’s texts directly related to the discussed topic. I will start with his ontology and move further to religious tolerance. What I intend to do is to test the applicability of the general logical structure of the notion of ‘tolerance’ for understanding Ibn ‘Arabī’s discourse on the topic. The preliminary sketch of Ibn ‘Arabī’s views seemed to verify this applicability. What we need to do now is to take a closer look at the texts of the Great Shaykh. I certainly will have to confine myself to a few of his passages leaving many others aside for the sake of place. I tried to be careful in choosing those passages that mark the important stages in Ibn ‘Arabī’s line of argument and are at the same time representative for the whole of his texts.

Let me start with the quotation that takes us directly to the core of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theories. Speaking about how the relation between the world and the God can be contemplated, the Great Shaykh says:

Speak about the universe (*kawn*) as you wish. If you like, say ‘it is the Creation (*al-khalq*)’; if you like, say ‘it is the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*)’; or say ‘it is the-Truth-the-Creation (*al-ḥaqq al-khalq*)’ if you wish so; or say ‘it is neither the Truth in every respect nor the Creation in every respect’ if you wish so; or speak about bewilderment

(*ḥayra*) in it, because what you strive [to understand] has become clear (*bānat al-maṭālib*) by appointing the grades (*marātib*)².

This thesis is very far from being a statement of relativism, skepticism, or agnosticism. It is not by chance that Ibn ‘Arabī says that what we ‘strive for’ (*maṭālib*) has become clear, which leaves no ground for doubt or uncertainty as they are usually understood. However, this clearness (which means epistemological certainty) is equalized by Ibn ‘Arabī with bewilderment. To understand why, we need to introduce two other notions, namely, *ẓāhir* (outward) and *bāṭin* (inward).

The notions of ‘outward’ (*ẓāhir*) and ‘inward’ (*bāṭin*) are by no means an invention of Ibn ‘Arabī. They were used in theoretical discourse in the Muslim world from the very early stages of its development in various branches of knowledge, philology, *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and philosophy included. *Ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* turned into a sort of meta-categories used to organize the line of argument in very different fields of thought. In Ṣūfism those two categories were applied to rationalize the relation between the God and the world, the One and the many. It was a significant novelty proposed by the Ṣūfī thinkers (among their predecessors the author of *Kitāb al-Fuṣūṣ* (The Book of Bezels) ascribed to al-Fārābī should be mentioned), and, of course, Ibn ‘Arabī contributed substantially to that line.

The relation between ‘outward’ (*ẓāhir*) and ‘inward’ (*bāṭin*) is not a relation between phenomenal and essential, as the nominal likeness of these words would perhaps suggest. Such parallel is highly misleading. *Ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* are not subordinated in a sort of hierarchy, as the essence and the phenomenon are. Rather, they are placed, so to say, on the same level, and normally a sort of harmonic relation between the two is expected to exist, that is, *ẓāhir* is to be translated into *bāṭin* and *bāṭin* into *ẓāhir*.

At least three important corollaries need to be mentioned. Firstly, to understand what the thing is, its *bāṭin* is no more important than its *ẓāhir* (as we would expect the essence of the thing to be more significant than the multitude of its phenomenal appearances). What is important is the relation between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*: we understand what the thing is when we understand how its *ẓāhir* leads us to its *bāṭin*, and

² *Ibn ‘Arabī. Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam. 2nd ed. Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī, 1980, p.112.*

vice versa. Secondly, *bāṭin* is no more inalterable than *ẓāhir* (whereas we expect the essence to persist in spite of the endless changes of its phenomenal appearances). Since one of the two is the ‘translation’ of the other, the change in *ẓāhir* alters *bāṭin*, and vice versa. Thirdly, the thing persists as long as the same ‘translational transition’ between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* takes place, not as long as its *bāṭin* stays unchanged (as we would expect the thing not to change unless its essence changes).

The last but not the least in that logical layout is the notion of ‘the thing’ of which the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* aspects we discuss. The thing is constituted not just by those two aspects but rather by the relation of ‘translational transition’ between them. The thing is, so to say, the possibility to turn its *ẓāhir* into *bāṭin* or *bāṭin* into *ẓāhir*. Of course, ‘turning’ one into the other is not a sort of alchemical craft but rather an epistemological procedure to which certain ontological realities correspond.

Ibn ‘Arabī applies this general layout to solve the philosophically shaped question: how the Universe made up of the unity and the multiplicity is constituted? To denote this Universal Whole, Ibn ‘Arabī uses *al-kawn* (as in the above quotation), or, alternatively, *al-’amr* and *al-sha’n* (both those words translate in ordinary language as ‘the case’ or ‘the thing’). The ‘outward’ (*ẓāhir*) of this Whole is the world often called ‘the Creation’ (*al-khalq*), while the ‘inward’ (*bāṭin*) is the God generally referred to by Ibn ‘Arabī as ‘the Truth’ (*al-ḥaqq*). The direct correspondence of the described nature exists between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, or the world and the God, on two levels. Firstly, the world as a whole corresponds to the God. Secondly, any given thing in the world corresponds to itself-in-the-God.

Now, what is this ‘correspondence’ that ties the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin* together and that I propose to call ‘correspondence through translation’? Figuratively Ibn ‘Arabī describes it as an unceasing process of the Divine breath. The breathing-in ‘pulls’ the world into the God, while the breathing-out ‘ejects’ the world outside the God. Those ‘pulling in’ and ‘ejecting out’ are one of the ways to contemplate the translation of the outward (*ẓāhir*) into inward (*bāṭin*) and vice versa. Those images are rationalized in the theory of ‘new creation’ (*khalq jadīd*) according to which each atom of time (*zamān fard*)

is constituted by annihilation of the world in the God and its creation anew. I hardly can dwell upon this extremely interesting theory here. Instead, I will mention another quotation from Ibn ‘Arabī to clarify more the relation between *zāhir* (the world) and *bātin* (the God).

There is no doubt that the originated (*muḥdath*) [being] was originated and that it stands in need of an originator that has given it its origin because it was possible by itself (*li-inkāni-hi li-nafsi-hi*)³.

Here Ibn ‘Arabī uses the notion of ‘possible’ (*mumkin*) which was introduced by Mu‘tazila and developed in Ibn Sīnā’s ontology. The possible is generally understood as the thing for which existence and non-existence are equally probable and which therefore stands in need of something external (called *murajjiḥ* ‘the giver of preponderance’) to turn the balance one way or the other and make the thing either existent or non-existent, in which case it becomes ‘necessary-through-the-other’ (*wājib bi-ghayri-hi*) or ‘impossible-through-the-other’ (*mumtani‘ bi-ghayri-hi*). This theory is directly related to our discussion of other and otherness. It is not difficult to notice that existence and non-existence, on the one hand, and otherness, on the other, always come together, and if there is one of them, the other is inevitably there as well; alternatively, if there is no otherness, we can speak only about the possible-as-such (as Ibn ‘Arabī does in the above quotation), but not about the existent-through-the-other or the non-existent-through-the-other.

There are philosophical doctrines that hold that the world is made up of existent things and that we can speak about some of the things as non-existent in certain sense. Such division of the Universe into existence and non-existence leaves no place for possible-as-such. It is about the adherents of such theories that Ibn ‘Arabī says:

Some theoreticians with weak minds... are inclined to deny the possibility (*inkān*) and establish [only] the necessity through the self and through the other. As for the one who grasped the truth (*muḥaqqiq*), he establishes the possibility and knows its realm of presence (*ḥadra*), and [establishes] the possible (*mumkin*), [knows] what that possible is and why it is possible if that very [possible] (*huwa bi-‘ayni-hi*) is necessary-

³ Fuṣūṣ, p.53.

through-the-other, and why the name ‘other’ through which the necessity was acquired is given to it by right⁴.

The notion of the ‘possible’ elaborated by Ibn Sīnā supposes that we can speak about the possible as about ‘the thing’, or as about ‘it-self’, prior to its existence (or non-existence). It means that the thing possesses its ‘self’ (*dhāt*) regardless of its existence. What is crucial for the line of argument that I am trying to reconstruct here is the fact that this ‘self’ stays the same both outside the realm of existence and non-existence and inside it. To put it differently, to add existence to the thing or withdraw it means to change the thing in no way except the attribute (*ṣifa*) of existence.

This is why the ‘possible’ (*mumkin*) can be equalized neither with Aristotelian ‘potentiality’ or ‘form’ nor with Platonic ‘idea’. This is fairly clear when we speak about the ‘possible’ of Ibn Sīnā. But it somehow becomes less obvious when it comes to Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophical views. Only a few of his scholars refrained from characterizing them as Neo-Platonic (this has become almost commonplace) or from saying that, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the God contemplates in Himself the ‘ideas’ of all existent things. It is true that all the ‘possibles’ (*mumkināt*) constitute the Divine Self (*dhāt*), but each of them, Ibn ‘Arabī holds, is *exactly* the same as the existent being corresponding to it but for the attribute of existence, — and this claim would have been impossible in case of an idea and its material replicas.

The ‘realm of presence’ (*ḥaḍra*) of the possibles that Ibn ‘Arabī refers to in the above passage is the Divine Self. This Divine Self is, of course, existent, and its existence is ‘necessary-through-its-self’. However, the possibles that constitute this Divine Self are not existent, and Ibn ‘Arabī refers to them as ‘fixed’ (*thābit*). The ontological concept of ‘fixedness’ (*thubūt*) was introduced into Islamic thinking as early as the epoch of Mu‘tazila and was understood by different philosophers either as distinct from both existence and non-existence or as equivalent to existence. As for Ibn ‘Arabī, he treats it as an independent concept (thus siding with the first point of view) although in some passages he seems to equalize the ‘fixed’ and ‘non-existent’ (thus proposing his own view

⁴ Fuṣūṣ, p. 67.

on the ‘possible’ and its relation to fixedness, existence and non-existence). For example, he says that

the possibles are rooted in non-existence⁵

or claims that

the embodiments (*a’yān*) which are [qualified by] non-existence are fixed in Him⁶.

Whatever Ibn ‘Arabī’s innovation in understanding the possible in its relation to non-existence, it does not affect the nature of relationship between the possible thing and the existent thing that I am discussing. In the last quoted passage Ibn ‘Arabī speaks about *a’yān*. This Arabic term is the plural of ‘*ayn*’ which means ‘the thing as such’, in flesh and blood, and therefore is rendered in my translation as ‘embodiment’. The possible things that are ‘fixed’ in the God and are at the same time non-existent (for they do not have the attribute of existence through which they would have become ‘necessary’ and cease to be ‘possible’), are called by Ibn ‘Arabī ‘embodiments’, things as such, because they are *exactly* those things that ‘appear’ in the realm of existence, in time-and-space, in our world. This ‘appearance’ (*zuhūr*) is, ontologically speaking, the process in which each of the ‘possible embodiments’ (*a’yān mumkina*) dwelling in the Divine Self acquires the attribute of existence and thus enters the realm of ‘otherness’, where it becomes strictly differentiated from all the other beings of the world.

Summarizing, we can say the following. No thing is differentiated from any other thing, moreover, from the God Himself (except for the attribute of ‘necessity-of-existence-through-its-self’, Ibn ‘Arabī points out⁷) when that thing is possible and devoid of existence. The same thing is differentiated from any other thing in the world and, of course, from the God, when it has the attribute of existence and is called ‘necessarily-existent-through-the-other’. The relation between the two ‘states’ (*ḥāl*) of the thing is the relation between its *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* aspects. From that point of view, transition from *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin* is accomplished by withdrawal of existence, while transition from *bāṭin* to *ẓāhir* is performed through donation of existence. Those two transitions (*ẓāhir* \Rightarrow *bāṭin* and

⁵ Fuṣūṣ, p. 96.

⁶ Fuṣūṣ, p. 76.

⁷ See Fuṣūṣ, p.53.

bāṭin ⇒ *ẓāhir*) occur in each atom of time, and thus *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* translate into each other though staying distinct (*tamayyuz*) from one another.

Those ‘who know the truth’, Ibn ‘Arabī claims, understand that the possibles themselves are called ‘necessary-through-the-other’ and know why the name ‘otherness’ is given to that ‘other’. Two answers, I think, different though not contradictory, can be proposed to the question what is meant by that ‘other’. On the one hand, it is the Necessary-through-Its-Self because it gives every *mumkin* (possible) its existence turning it into *wājib* (necessary); thus all the existent things in the world are existent through the Divine Self. On the other hand, if we consider the world as such paying no attention to its relation with the Divine Self, we might say that ‘the other’ through which the thing in question exists is some other thing which is usually called in philosophy its cause (*‘illa* or *sabab*). This second answer is the answer of those who cannot, Ibn ‘Arabī claims, see the truth of the Universe, that is, the fact that it is constituted by the *ẓāhir-bāṭin* relation between the Divine Self and the world, while the first answer is given by those who are able to witness that truth.

This takes us to another concept important for our discussion of otherness and its nature. It is the concept of cause and causality. Ibn ‘Arabī’s views on that topic are not very common when viewed against the mainstream of preceding and contemporary Arabic philosophy. But since they are the direct implication of the already discussed *ẓāhir-bāṭin* relation between the Divinity and the world, it will not be too difficult to get to their core.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s conception of causality is best expressed by his own formula:

The cause is caused by what it is the cause for (*al-‘illa ma‘lūla li-man hiya ‘illa la-hu*),⁸

that is, the cause is the effect of its own effect. This looks like a paradox. Ibn ‘Arabī is well aware of it; moreover, it is the seeming absurdity of this (and suchlike) conclusions that leads to the ‘bewilderment’ (*ḥayra*) which expresses the authentic knowledge of the truth of the Universe, as he claims in the first of the above quoted passages. The absurdity

⁸ Fuṣūṣ, p. 185.

is only apparent, I argue, because this thesis is absolutely consistent in the light of the nature of the *zāhir-bātin* relation as conceived by Ibn ‘Arabī. The thing-*zāhir* is nothing but the thing-*bātin* plus existence, while the thing-*bātin* is nothing more than the thing-*zāhir* minus existence. The thing, or, as Ibn ‘Arabī prefers to say, the ‘self’ (*dhāt*), or the ‘embodiment’ (*‘ayn*) stays the same for *zāhir* and *bātin* aspects regardless of addition or withdrawal of existence. It means that there is no logical priority for any of the two aspects, outward or inward, since they are mutually translated into each other. You may choose arbitrarily one of them, let us say, the *bātin*, to start with and call it ‘cause’. Then you will proceed to *zāhir* and call it the effect. But if you then ask yourself: ‘Why did the cause cause the effect exactly as it did, and not differently?’ the answer will be: ‘Because the effect was as it was, and it made the cause cause it exactly as it did’. Making a turnaround, you will thus get back to what was the initial step and see that the cause is nothing more than an effect of its own effect. This endless back-and-forth movement between *zāhir* and *bātin* is the very exemplification of *ḥayra*, the word which (in addition to ‘bewilderment’) means ‘whirlpool’ and thus denotes the constant circular movement. This movement in which you can never stop at *the* definite point and which always takes you to the one side as soon as you reach the other, will make you repeat after Ibn ‘Arabī that the Universe is either the God, or the Creation, or the-God-the-Creation, or neither-the-God-nor-the-Creation; or, as he puts it in another passage,

*al-‘amr al-khāliq al-makhlūq wa al-‘amr al-makhlūq al-khāliq*⁹,

that is, ‘the Universe is the-Creator-the-Created, and the Universe is the-Created-the-Creator’, or, in an alternative translation, ‘the Universe is the Created Creator, and the Universe is the Creating Creature’.

Elaborating on the consequences of that theory, Ibn ‘Arabī says:

Nothing returns from the True to the possibles except what is given by their selves in their states (*aḥwāl*). So, the manifestation (*al-tajallī*) differs because of the differences of the state (*ḥāl*), and the impact (*‘athar*) is left on the slave according to what he is. This is why the good (*khayr*) is given to him by no one but himself; and the

⁹ Fuṣūṣ, p. 78.

opposite of the good is not given to him by other than him. He blesses his self and tortures it, so let him blame only his own soul and praise only himself.¹⁰

It is difficult to be more down-the-line than that in drawing ethical conclusions from the proposed theory of causality. This passage brings to our attention once again the concept of ‘other’ and reminds of the main topic of our discussion. In our perspective we may rephrase Ibn ‘Arabī’s views in the following way. The change that occurs due to the transition from *bātin* (*al-Ḥaqq*, the Divine Self) to *zāhir* (the world) is the appearance of otherness (*ghayriyya*). Otherness is there in the world because each thing acquires existence and is therefore actually differentiated from all other things. In the backward movement (from *zāhir* to *bātin*) the existence is withdrawn from all the things, and along with it the otherness disappears, and all the things, though retaining their selves and staying exactly the same except for their existence, are no longer ‘others’ in their mutual relation.

Ibn ‘Arabī stresses this last point very clearly when he speaks about the problem of ‘excellence’ (*tafāḍul*) and ‘superiority’ (*‘uluww*). On the one hand, he says, we see that the existing things excel each other by virtue of their attributes, so some of them are superior to others. On the other hand, Ibn ‘Arabī claims,

what appears in the Creation has the capabilities (*‘ahliyya*) of everything that excels it. So, every part of the world is the whole (*majmū‘*) world, that is, it accepts (*qābil*) the truths of the separated individuals (*mutafarriqāt*) of the whole world.¹¹

This is so because every thing dwelling in the Divine Self is undifferentiated from any other thing and therefore is capable of accepting its ‘truth’ (*ḥaqīqa*), that is, becoming it. From that point of view no predominance (*tafāḍul*) is possible. In the same way, there is no relative highness, or relative superiority (*‘uluww idāfa*) in the Supreme (*al-‘aliyy*) God, Ibn ‘Arabī says, although the ‘fixed embodiments’ (*a’yān thābita*) dwell in Him,¹² but as for the world of existent things, the superiority of one over the other is there. This superiority is produced by otherness that, Ibn ‘Arabī argues, expresses the God’s jealousy, for He

¹⁰ Fuṣūṣ, p. 96.

¹¹ Fuṣūṣ, p.153.

¹² See Fuṣūṣ, p.76.

prohibited the knowledge of the truth of what we have mentioned, namely, that He is the embodiment of the things, and veiled it by jealousy (*ghayra*), that is, by you derived from ‘the other’ (*ghayr*).¹³

In Arabic ‘jealousy’ is derived from the same root as ‘other’ and is written and sounds like it except for one letter. Ibn ‘Arabī uses this wordplay to underpin the fact that otherness of the things apparent in the world conceals their unity as dwelling in God.

Hence a very interesting and important thesis that Ibn ‘Arabī puts forward. If you have the full knowledge of how the Universe is constituted, you will not regard anything or anyone as an adversary to be opposed by your action and force. This is not a moral maxim. What Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory implies is perhaps the most strong form of what I would call ‘incapability of hostility’, for, according to the Ṣūfī master, you *are not able* to regard your opponent an object for purposefully directed influence on your side. This is so because there cannot be just *your* side if you realize what the universal order is: *your* side is undifferentiated from *his* (your opponent’s) side as long as the *bātin* of the things is concerned. Ibn ‘Arabī develops these thoughts speaking about the ‘energy’ (*himma*) that the mystic acquires by realizing the truth of the universal order inside himself: the more he realizes this order, the more energy he possesses that puts all the world at his ‘disposal’ (*taṣarruf*), and the less he actually uses this energy:

The higher his knowledge, the less his disposal through the energy. There are two rationales for that. The first is his true realization (*taḥaqquq*) of the maqam of slavery where he sees the root of his natural creation. The other is the oneness (*aḥadiyya*) of the disposing [person] and the one at [his] disposal: he does not see against whom he could direct his energy, and this keeps him from [doing so].¹⁴

The two reasons for non-disposal are formulated in the two perspectives, *ẓāhir* and *bātin* (worldly and Divine), of the universal order. Being a ‘true slave’, as Ibn ‘Arabī puts it, means being in the world only, realizing in one’s self the *ẓāhir* side only, and thus being only the object of disposal, not its subject. On the other hand, if we realize the *bātin*

¹³ Fuṣūṣ, p.110.

¹⁴ Fuṣūṣ, p. 128.

side we see that there is no otherness and hence no differentiation in it, for they are reduced to strict one-ness (*aḥadiyya*).

At this point (*mashhad*) he sees that his adversary (*munāzi*) did not deviate from his truth (*ḥaqīqa*) according to which he [was] in the state of fixedness of his embodiment and the state of his non-being. Thus nothing has appeared in existence except what he had in the state of non-existence in fixedness. So, he did not step away from his truth and did not ruin his path. This is why the name ‘conflict’ (*nizā*) is an accident brought forth by the veil on peoples’ eyes.¹⁵

Let me add one more important consideration concerning the notion of ‘other’. Otherness that differentiates every existent thing from the rest of them is, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, absolute. He is quite definite on that point. Calling the things of the world ‘veils’ (*ḥijāb*) of the God, Ibn ‘Arabī points that

one of them is not the embodiment of the other, because two similar [things] (*shabīhān*) are others (*ghayrān*) for the one who knows that they are similar.¹⁶

Speaking about *mushāraka* (‘participation’, ‘association’, ‘partaking’), he concludes that in reality there is no associate (*sharīk*), for each one has its own share (*ḥaẓẓ*) of what was said they are participating (*mushāraka*) in.¹⁷

Let us note what this position implies for the procedure of generalization. The things of the world share nothing, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, but this does not prevent them from making up an absolute unity. This unity is constituted not by the common feature they all possess, and to make a transition from the state of differentiation, multiplicity, and absolute otherness to the state of unification they do not need to loose any of the features that make them diverse; on the contrary, they keep them all. This is an absolutely sparing procedure of unification since every different trait is respected and none of them needs to be sacrificed for the sake of unification.

¹⁵ Fuṣūṣ, p. 128.

¹⁶ Fuṣūṣ, p. 124.

¹⁷ Fuṣūṣ, p. 191.

Proceeding from this ontological ground, Ibn ‘Arabī elaborates on the topic of religious tolerance. The ontological link to that theory and at the same time the ground for it is provided by the following remark of the Great Shaykh:

No thing in the Universe, existent and existing, is other (*ghayr*) in regard to the he-ness (*huwiyya*) of the True; rather, it is the embodiment of this he-ness.¹⁸

Otherness exists between the things of the world, where it is absolute, as we have seen. But as for any thing of the world and the God, they are not separated by otherness, Ibn ‘Arabī claims. The *ẓāhir-bāṭin* relation of translation (mutual and constant transition) between the God and the world rules out any otherness between them. At the same time they are not identical, of course, but distinct (*tamayyuz*) from one another.

Since any thing in the world is the embodiment of the Divine he-ness, then nothing at all is untrue, and no belief about God can be called false. The only way to fall into mistake is to deny the true character of any of the beliefs and to claim to be the sole possessor of the truth thus excluding all other beliefs. This very radical claim is only a logical consequence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, and the Great Shaykh does not hesitate to draw all the conclusions from his theory no matter how uncommon they sound.

He says, for example:

It has become clear to you that the Supreme God is in every direction (*fī ‘ayniyyat kull wijha*) and that there is nothing but beliefs (*i ‘tiqādāt*).¹⁹

Those two clauses are to be taken as logical cause and effect. Since God is everywhere, there cannot exist *the* belief, only *beliefs* are possible, none of which, strictly speaking, is ‘better’ than the other. There is no doubt whatsoever that Ibn ‘Arabī was a decent Muslim not inclined to religious indifference or to acknowledging the ‘equality’ of religions. Not at all. Still he holds that of all the contradicting, or at least incompatible, beliefs none is exclusively true, and every one is true provided it does not claim the exclusive truth.

Beware of tying yourself up with a definite belief (*‘aqd makhsūs*) and denying the truth of all the others. In that case much benefit (*khayr kathīr*) will evade you; moreover, the knowledge of the [universal] Order (*al-‘amr*) as it is will evade you. So

¹⁸ Fuṣūṣ, p. 122.

¹⁹ Fuṣūṣ, p. 114.

be in your soul a prime matter for forms of beliefs with no exception, because the Supreme God is too wide and too great to be encompassed by any of the beliefs and not by the others.²⁰

III

I suggested that the general logical structure of the notion of tolerance outlined in the first part of the article would make it possible to reconstruct Ibn ‘Arabī’s message on that topic. What I did in the second part was to read his texts and make explicit the line of argument that he follows and that verifies, according to the Great Shaykh, his views. I think this proved to be successful. In a very abstract and generalized form, Ibn ‘Arabī’s views fit into the logic of tolerance as a way to overcome the mutual negation of the opposites by arriving at some sort of unity and universality. However, what this general logical scheme does not account for is the evident ultimateness of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theories. Moreover, his radicalism seems to contradict the very foundation of the notion of ‘tolerance for the sake of something’, since the Great Shaykh justifies the most extreme forms of behavior by the same logic he follows to provide ground for diversity of doctrinal beliefs.²¹ This ultimateness is not accounted for by the logical structure of the notion of tolerance. Where does it come from?

I argue that it is neither the result of a choice the thinker arbitrarily makes when he/she tries to express personal experience or personal impressions in a form intelligible for others. What appears to us as the ultimate character of Ibn ‘Arabī’s conclusions is the direct and inevitable result of his understanding of the procedure of generalization by which a transition is made from the multiplicity to the unity and by which the mutual negation of the multiple opposites is overcome.

In Western thought tolerance as allowance of otherness is never absolute. Historically speaking, it started with a certain sphere of relations in society which then began to expand gradually and is still far from reaching the absolute limits. Logically speaking, tolerance ceases to be ‘tolerance’ and turns into ‘permissiveness’ and ‘indifference’ if it becomes absolute and allows any deviation of whatever sort. This is so

²⁰ Fuṣūṣ, p. 113.

²¹ See, for example, Fuṣūṣ, p. 157, 200-201, 211.

because tolerance is always tolerance ‘for the sake of something’, and this ‘something’ is considered a feature necessarily common for all. It is this common feature that permits generalization and keeps diversity from turning into destructive opposition.

Ibn ‘Arabī follows a different procedure of generalization. For him the mutual negation of the opposites is overcome not by virtue of a common feature which they all possess as some general property and which they resort to trying to solve possible contradictions that result out of mutual negation. Due to the *zāhir-bāṭin* translational transition the absolute diversity with *no* common features is possible and does not stand in the way of harmonious unification for the sake of which *none* of the different and mutually negating features needs to be sacrificed.

This suggests the following answer to the question posed as the title of this article. Religious tolerance can be absolute, i.e., unlimited, as Ibn ‘Arabī’s case demonstrates, without being reduced to indifference or permissiveness. The crucial condition for it, though, is the adoption of a rather specific understanding of negation and its sublation through generalization, the procedure that produces perfect unity without suppressing any of the mutually opposing and negating traits of the unified particulars. This is the logical key to Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology that constitutes the ground for his theory of tolerance.