

Leiden University

Religion and Its Counter-Tendencies:
A Reflection on the Question of Religion

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by

Omar El-Rakhawy

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1.

Religion, Philosophy, and Science

The Question of Epistemic Authority

At the root of all inquiries and approaches to religion is the question “what is religion?” and in accordance with the particular approach of choice, definitions have been suggested in response, none of which conclusive. There is in fact around six hundred definitions of religion within academia today. This paper suggests that a reflection on this fact of proliferation is a venture for philosophy, and is potentially illuminating with regards to the “question of religion” within the “human sciences”. Philosophy itself has a reflective and directly redefining relationship to its own identity, its place in the academic/scientific endeavor, and no less with regards to its subfield the “philosophy of religion”. It becomes primary that we first ask about philosophy of religion as a particular activity, and then its relation to the scientific/academic study of religion. What then is meant by the “philosophy of religion”? What does it mean that “religion” be dealt with philosophically?

1.1 Philosophy of Religion: Between “philosophy and religion” and “philosophy of religion”

As there can be no answer to this question that obtains universally, a starting point could be observed in the *difference* assumed in the conjunction between Eastern and Western appropriations. One would have to raise the question of what is philosophy itself, if it figures so differently in these overarching conceptual traditions of “East” and “West” as Winston L. King chooses to distinguish them in his introduction to Keiji Nishitani’s book *Religion and Nothingness*. King observes that,

“[a] basic difficulty that stares us in the face immediately...is the differing relation of philosophy and religion in East and West...For us in the West, religion and philosophy have been two ever since the time of the Greek philosophers. For though the Catholic theological tradition incorporated Aristotle into its theology and Platonism into its experience, philosophy never lost its independence, even in the Middle Ages. In the early modern period it asserted its independence anew under the impulse of humanism and the new empirical sciences.” (W.L. King, in Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*, viii).

An independence that is metaphorically represented by the geographical separation between Athens and Jerusalem, the focal points of these two influences of Western tradition.

An independence and a separation that is less obvious and familiar in an *Eastern* context of “philosophy and religion”, where both are seen to have the final purpose of the *salvation of man*. Through this, entering into mutual dialogue, in contrast to the *justificatory and evidentiary modes* of engagement well presented in the two concerns of philosophy of religion according to the Cambridge Dictionary”: *coherence* and *actual existence*.

The subfield of philosophy devoted to the study of religious phenomena...In the major theistic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the most important of these claims concerns the existence, nature, and activities of God. Such traditions commonly understand God to be something *like a person* who is disembodied, eternal, free, all-powerful, all-knowing, the creator and sustainer of the universe, and the proper object of human obedience and worship. One important question is whether this conception of the object of human religious activity is *coherent*; another is whether such a being *actually exists*.” (Audi, 696).

Indeed, neither Eastern nor Western philosophies of religion can be seen under monolithic overarching terms. Many Western philosophers and thinkers attempted exactly such an “explanation of Christian religious experience”. Coming to mind now are Meister Eckhart, Augustine, and Kierkegaard. On the other hand, Zen philosophy cannot be equated with Sufism for instance, but where there is a common and fruitful mutual and comparative ground is where both *begin*; the existential and “perceptual” primacy of the human individual that permeates both disciplines. The case of Keiji Nishitani is illuminating precisely because as King describes him, he is an example of an “Eastern Buddhist philosopher...coming westward to make his case, equipped with a considerable knowledge of Christian and Western thought. This,” King continues, “is something quite different from the usual Zen-Western encounter, in which there is on the one side the Eastern Sage who deliberately mystifies the Westerner with an array of Koans which must be either appropriated in the esoteric Zen manner or altogether left alone, and on the other side the Westerner who registers frustrated or devout bemusement.” (Nishitani, vii) Such encounters, and this is partially why Nishitani is relevant here, are also commonly experienced with Sufi pedagogy and language use, and in a sense, the intention of this paper is to explore the value and relevance of such “mystifying” encounters, not between “east” and “west” per se, but between the *academic role* and the *religious address* to our understanding of religion in general, and to the study of religion in particular. The final Chapter on Niffari, is particularly helpful in connecting this question of *intentional mystification* with the type of pedagogy,

epistemology, and communication that gears into the form of “religious authority” formulated in this paper as *prescription*.

1.2 What is meant by philosophy of religion?

The word “religion”, being such an ambiguous and mystifying term demands from us that we start as is already implied, not from where we believe religion is represented or located (in God, in believer, in culture, in society, etc.), but where we think we are standing in *relation* to it. When I say “we”, I do not mean any particular person or collective, but there are two main ways in which I can interpret this “we” in view of religion. There is the collective “we” of life, of humanity, the social body, family, religious affiliation, nation, *umma*, Church or scientific community. The operation and search for “religion” therein, is therefore conceived within a social/collective/public/demonstrable framework; religion as a social phenomenon, or the conception of “religion” as the spirit of the collective and visible in its social structures and cultural “evidence”. In this sense, the study of “religion” is objective, it searches for organizational structures, relations to authority, secularization processes, religious movements, coherent typologies and cultural forms, all of them sharing in common a certain *independence* from the “religious” as an *address*, and fulfilling a central requirement of objectivity; *empirically verifiable* “religious phenomenon”. Since religion is a shared reality, a value-sharing system, objective inquiry into the world surrounding the *phenomena of religion* is a responsibility with regards to the *public*, to *history*, to *politics*, and in general to safeguard religion itself from *monopoly*, and retrieve a portion of objective responsibility from the grip of ideological and “subjective” responses.

There is on the other hand the “we” which is actually an “I”, the divided self of any human subjectivity in the face of the *religious address*, therefore, the search for and operation of religion therein, is conceived within the boundaries of the “Single Individual” as Kierkegaard has it, or a conception of religion that addresses the *inwardness* of *subjective* human existence, in its non-societal, non-communal dimension, even if that address calls *for community*. Reflecting on Kierkegaard’s text (Kierkegaard, 21, 1843) , Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*,

For common sense, just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely spread belief is that responsibility is tied to the public and the nonsecret, to the possibility and even necessity of accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them. Here on the contrary it appears, just as necessarily, that *absolute responsibility* of my actions, to the extent that such a

responsibility remains mine, singularly so, something no one else can perform in my place, instead implies secrecy. (Derrida, p. 60, 1996)

Can we similarly make a conceptual difference between a “general religion” and an “absolute religion”, in which the latter is conceived within the bounds of the “single individual”, and which then allows for a *renewable* relationship with the religious text by virtue of the individual being “higher than the universal”? This touches upon another question. Who is the proto or archetypical “believer” from whom so-called *empirical* religious data is collected?

It has become established that the area where *definitions* in the strictest academic sense become more and more impossible, multiple, and contextual, has been the social and human sciences, the study of religion being its peak representation. (Massimo, 49-67) I interpret this to mean, not definitively, that the closer to *the self* the phenomenon under consideration or observation is, the less the consensus on “what it is” or “where it is” is attained with any certainty, exactness, or comprehensiveness¹ (Pals, p. 3, 2006). The question of this paper then, is not about religion directly, but about the “question of religion”, that is, the process by which religion is studied.

1.3 Nishitani’s Existential Reversal of the Question

According to Nishitani, there is a utilitarian concern that underlies the very question of religion, in its most object-oriented form of “What is religion?” and which can be re-stated to be “what is the purpose of religion for us?” He goes further in his remark to say,

“[o]ne can ask about the utility of things like eating for the natural life, or of things like learning and the arts for culture. In fact, in such matters the question of utility should be of constant concern. Our *ordinary mode* of being is restricted to these levels of natural or cultural life. But it is in *breaking through* that ordinary mode of being and overturning it from the ground up, in pressing us back to the elemental source of life where life itself is seen as useless, that religion becomes something we need—a must for human life.” (Nishitani, 2, 1982)

Nishitani notes two premises, firstly, that “religion is at all times the individual affair of each individual...Accordingly, we cannot understand what religion is from the outside. The religious quest alone is the key to understanding it; there is no other way,” and secondly, that

¹ The founder of the “science of religion”, Friedrich Max Müller, defines it terms of “comprehensiveness” and “exactness”.

“from the standpoint of the essence of religion [in the religious quest], it is a mistake to ask ‘what is the purpose of religion for us?’ and one that clearly betrays an attitude of trying to understand religion apart from the religious quest.” The important point in what Nishitani is saying, is to argue that the very question “what is religion?” has existential and subjective prerequisites or conditions to approaching it, and the way in which these prerequisites are sought, or at least hinted to, is in another “counter-question” as he calls it: “The counterquestion which achieves this breakthrough is one that asks, ‘For what purpose do I myself exist?’” (Nishitani, p. 2, 1982).

Whereas the question of religion, as “what is religion?” is underlined by the assumption that our self-identity as questioner is intact, Nishitani’s claim, is that “...religion upsets the posture from which we think of ourselves as telos and center for all things.” (Nishitani, p. 3, 1982) In a sense, one can say that religion seeks to make us less *subjective* (as telos), yet does so *addressing the subject and the subjective*. In so assuming, there becomes another premise which is, that only a certain posture allows the question of religion to become a relevant question to life itself.

This fundamental conversion in life is occasioned by the opening up of the horizon of nihility at the ground of life. It is nothing less than a conversion from the self-centered (or man-centered) mode of being, which always asks what use things have for us (or for man), to an attitude that asks for what purpose we ourselves (or man) exist. Only when we stand at this turning point does the question ‘what is religion?’ really become our own
(Nishitani, 4-5, 1982)

In a sense then, the subject of religion, is the “subject” of one’s self-world relation. This localization of the essence of religion, is not a final attempt at exposing any essences. It is a localization which is itself, a *dissemination* and *diffusion* of “locality” and “finality”. The subject-world relation is actually nowhere to be found, except in *time* and *becoming*.

For Nishitani, “the question that asks about reality must itself become something that belongs to reality” and accordingly Nishitani attempts to “answer to the question of the essence of religion by tracing the process of the real pursuit of true reality.” (Nishitani, p. 6, 1982) But does Nishitani not put too much emphasis on the relation between religion and so called, “true reality”? Despite the Cambridge definition which mentioned the concern of the philosophy of religion with “actual existence”, Nishitani deals with reality, expectedly, in a very different sense. A sense that will be later joined and further elaborated in the next chapter. And as we have reached a point in which the concept of “reality” will play an

important part, it will become more obvious why tracing the advent of science and its unique form of epistemic authority with regards to “true reality” is extremely relevant here.

1.4 Science and Shifting Epistemic Authority:

Beginning a discussion of the study of religion with the epistemic parameters set by the scientific paradigm is among my initial concerns. The philosopher of science, Daniel C. Dennet, contends that “there is no such thing as a philosophy-free science; there is only a science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination.” (Dennet, p. 21, 1995).

It is significant to remind that prior to the study of religion as “phenomenon”, there was no concrete overarching conception of “religion” as such, instead, religion, this or that religion, provided a framework from which the world was viewed and other questions asked. Today, in at least the academic discourses, religion provides no framework at all, the framework is already provided from elsewhere and as such, “religion” is turned from framework (in which God/Sacredness/Divinity is an inseparable pole *in terms of which* religion is religion) to object of knowledge, or a “human phenomenon” (which is therefore hypothetically understandable with *natural laws* without recourse to “divinity,” and which posits divinity itself as a *hypothesis*).

It is very interesting then to ask this question, how does scientific subjective requirements and conditions, reconfigure our relationship, not to an unidentified “religion” in itself, (secularization), but to the “religious address”—which was (authoritatively) divine, and now is hypothetical? How does the hypothetical nature of religion, in an objective framework, override the language *play* of the *religious address*?

It is clear that the advent of science has effected a revolution in epistemic authority in relation to “reality”. This conversion, often underlined as the foundational impulse and framework of *modernity*, with its unique methodological input, can be seen best in the framework of its epistemic and communicative paradigms. Science, I believe, operates on and affords some level of certainty (or pragmatic certainty) within a public and *language* based frame of reference, that is, anything that is knowable in or by scientific methods and endeavors is hypothetically expressible and knowable by anyone and everyone, and therefore, potentially *falsifiable*. This is quite unlike traditional religious (epistemic) authority, in which a hierarchy ensues based on the (embedded) spiritual *differences* and *relations* between *others*, in relation to a passed down past, and in relation to a present and given state of affairs.

So what about dimensions of “human” existence which are not public, and not even speakable, representable? Where does the event of privacy or *secrecy* occur, and has religion anything to do with this private event which the methodological publicity of the scientific method is perhaps incapable of discerning as part and parcel of “what religion is”? How does one then reach *certainty* or *establishment* in the most non-public, non-exposable, non-demonstrable, and non-communicative self-relational realm of subjective existence?

As religion constitutes an intersubjective reality, it is therefore governed by communicative forms of authority and meaning, and just as much, the intersubjective reality that science constitutes must also have its unique forms of communication and authority. Assuming that somehow these two types of authorities are in some sort of correlation (whether negative or positive), then *the tackling of one should be illuminating for the other*. If the authority envisioned in the epistemology of science can be subsumed under a single banner of the Western metaphysical tradition, one could, with much hesitancy involved, focus on the notion of “objectivity” and its related communicative/epistemological criteria, presuppositions, and methodologies. Even if it is already established that objectivity is not the whole of the scientific endeavor, or that science represents a certain degree or definition of objectivity that does not exhaust its other more subject-oriented synonyms and requirements, (such as “honesty”, “truthfulness”, “pragmatism”), nevertheless it still constitutes its philosophical foundation, “what is the object?”

As the focus is on the epistemic/communicative paradigm that is initiated by the scientific approach, the question which arises along this paradigm, is the question of epistemic authority, where is “truth” to be located, in which method, in which paradigm, and by whom, and how does “language” stand in this relation? The iconic meeting of the Church and Galileo, or any of the scientists/mystic figures that could care less about the Church’s scriptural/natural deductions, is exemplary in that it is a moment in which a truth controversy instigated a rift in the epistemic authority of the Church, which in turn instigated a rift in its political and governing authority. What sort of epistemic/communicative shift is being hinted at through this historical meeting?

By bringing an “unobservable” into *observation* with the newly upgraded telescope, Galileo laid open the demonstrative potency of collective (and of course, accumulated) confirmation of notions and hypotheses regarding reality polemical to the Church’s positions to the same, by virtue of *empirical correspondence* and *consensual validation*. The Church, in opposition to this empirical epistemic authority made use of its own coercive authority (“prescription as coercion”), indeed for socio-political purposes and at that time also by

virtue of popular support and consensus, but in the gown of a truth-controversy about the nature of *the world*, not about the nature of the Church or of religion. In this sense, we could think of authority (regardless of it being religious, secular, or scientific) as arising when *one (or many) evidence his/her or their proximity to the real (the true) within a shared or sharable system of meaning.*

In any case, however one thinks of it, the important point is that *epistemic authority* in a positivist scientific paradigm is constituted in relation to objective “certainty”, “observation” of mind independent entities, and a commitment to *accuracy of language and generality of claims* (Inwagen, 107, 2015).

By descriptive epistemic authority I mean, *that authority which is open to collective (consensual) validation by empirical means, and which presumes the primacy of correspondent (normative) language.* By prescriptive epistemic authority, I mean the kind of epistemic *authority* in which subjective conditions are prerequisite to the access and/or relevance of a given “truth”, “knowledge”, or “realization”. Galileo, in this theoretical picture then, laid open the possibility of communication, which did not rely on the natural fact of the invisibility of the *other* so cherished by the Church and its already established epistemic superiority with regards to the “truth”, but rather, on the other’s responsibility to come in public and present a case, on the responsibility that, as Derrida says, consists of the “necessity of accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them.” (Derrida, p. 60, 1995).

The shift of authority is based fundamentally on a concern with the nature of reality, on the relation between reality and Christianity, about discrepancies of verification between observations, deductions, and commandments. Fast forwarding slightly into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and we find the rapid development of science emphasizing further the philosophy and the value of “objectivity” as the *sole access point to reality*. There are then three very tentative criteria I observe in the designation of truth within objective reality and the objective methodologies that emerge from it; *independence of reality (from the subject)*, *correspondence of language (or language as correspondence)*, and *consensus*, the intersubjective validation that confirms the scholar’s or scientist’s “objectivity”. And it is in view of these communicative and epistemic criteria of the scientific approach, that religion comes to be seen in the way it is seen, locatable externally to the subject, conceded to by the majority (the social), and therefore can be hypothetically understood by correspondence to this social manifestation, and its free, *legal, individual, and public* representatives.

I take seriously the centrality of the *self* to the entire paper for two reasons. Firstly, because in our context it is precisely in the parameters of the self that the “address of religion” is made, and made *comprehensible*. Secondly, it is in the parameters of the self that the study of religion, and indeed, social and human sciences in general seem to be divided. As we saw with Nishitani’s reversal of the question of religion upon the questioner, and as we will see in the cases of the phenomenology of religion and postmodernism, that human identity (and as such the identity of believer and academic alike) is much more *relational* and *variable* than to have a monolithic and defined role from which it views its subject-matter with secure preplanned certainty (method).

1.5 The case of the Phenomenology of Religion

The literal Greek origin of the word phenomenology comes from two words, *phenomena*, which means “appearance”, and “logos” which means logic, word, account, intended to point to the giving account of what and how “that which appears, appears to consciousness” on a first-person experiential level. Phenomenology was at first of course intended to further the rigorosity of *methodology* by relating it to the fundamental constituents of experience, but today, some might associate its practical developments with unscientific and subjective intuitions, having, as Sanford Krolick calls it, “a crisis in phenomenology’s methodological self-understanding” (Krolick, p. 192).

This crisis in the phenomenology of religion can also be traced in 1) the different understandings of how the phenomenological method should be applied to the study of religion, and 2) the difference between phenomenology in its philosophical sense and its (empirical) anthropological sense.

King, who we find in the introduction/foreword to Nishitani’s book, has a book titled *Introduction to Religion: A Phenomenological Approach*, in which he begins his discussion of religion, by presenting a typology of possible approaches to religion. He calls different “subject-religion” relations to point to different degrees of “internal-external” approaches.

The deeply internal standpoint with regards to religion, or in other terms, the believer’s standpoint which, if taken in a scholarly fashion becomes theology in the West, and the “Teaching”, the “Way”, or the “Truth”, in the East, is quite fittingly “the study of religion from within”, and it is this type of study of religion, which is most antagonistic to and antagonized by science, as it is the “faith perspective”. Next comes the “study of religion from the semi-within”, which King describes as, “the figure of the missionary, who deals with other traditions only to pull them ‘within’”. (King, p. 3, 1982). Third comes, the “study

of religion from the semi-without”; the semi-without, according to King, is the philosophical mode of engagement with religion born out of “the religious sense of wonder and inquiry.” However, he poses an important question right after, that is, “where shall one draw the line between the religious within or semi-within and the philosophic semi-without? When does a theologian-believer who uses all his logical reasons to expand his faith cease to be a theologian and begin to become a philosopher?” (King, p. 3, 1982). That is, how can we differentiate between “philosophy” that regards religion with a degree of conceptual “freedom”, and a philosophy motivated by an “apologetic” intention? Philosophy, after all, even by not taking the semi-within position, (which is the one I believe referred to most clearly in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy as it is concerned mostly with “coherence” and “actual existence”, both of which seem to be born out of justificatory (apologetic) or evidentiary concerns), cannot be said to be without. In a sense, philosophy, and particularly phenomenological existentialism, gives a considerable degree of attention to the realm of personal existence, and as such, are not totally without despite the *difference*. The fourth category of religious studies, according to King, is the one from without, which even though is represented in and by some philosophies, “...it is with the social sciences that the objective from-without approach to the study of religions has reached its fullest and most self-conscious development.” (King, p. 4, 1982).

But more importantly than the actual typology presented by King, is the reasons for which he presents this typology and in specific, as the introduction to his book. “These methods of study may be classified in terms of their basic perspectives or positions vis-à-vis religion itself. By so classifying them, we shall gain some sense of why the various methods operate as they do, of why each produces its own special kind of result, and of what relation each has to the others.” (King, p. 1, 1982) In fact, I view the whole of this paper, as a reflection on the way in which different methods have to religion, and how religion is viewed in each relation. The purpose is not to invalidate a particular approach while proposing another, but rather, to reflect on the “contrast” of approaches in relation to a particular religious tradition, as a way to think about religion.

Furthermore, putting King’s comments and observations about the differences of “philosophy of religion” between East and West in the framework of his own typology, I believe, helps to show how this concern with approaches to religion (as part of the study of religion) is perhaps more acute and viewed as more necessary in disciplines that give analytical primacy to existential, phenomenological, or more comprehensively for our purposes, *self-referential* registers of meaning and discourse.

A common phrase used in introductions to phenomenology of religion, and of course introductions to mystical approaches to life, is the one that is self-reflectively concerned about *where one should draw the line*, whether between the subject-scholar and the object of study, or of the actual meaning of religious phenomenon between the singular perspective of one's study and universal ambition of the field. For instance, King asks why it is considered unviable for a believer to perform phenomenology of religion, and that a phenomenology of religion can gain much from a believer who succeeds in detaching phenomena from belief. Archua Barua in her book *Phenomenology of Religion*, asks, "Can there be a meaningful dialogue between a phenomenologist and a believer?" (Barua, p. 7, 2009).

Where does one establish such a distinguishing line between one's relation to religion as academic and one's relation to it as believer/non-believer? Barua continues to consider this, "[i]f the believer himself or herself is able to recognize on the basis of the epoche the distinction between theology and the phenomenology of religion, one should not restrict the scope of phenomenology of religion only to those brands of scholars who are, by nature, non-believers." (Barua, p. 7, 2009). It is very interesting to me, that it is somehow taken for granted, that the non-believing scholars are more open to receiving or formulating a more objective, raw version of the phenomenology of religion, whereas it requires a degree of justification and distinction for a believing scholar that his belief is not affecting his phenomenology. Sometimes I wonder what conceptual differences it could trigger if, instead of dealing with religion as itself a phenomenon, to deal with it as a phenomenology of sorts. "In the case of Buddha a deep existential crisis, sparked off by his exposure to the life of suffering and to the mysteries of death and suffering, made him a contemplator and a phenomenologist." (Barua, p. 8, 2009). Barua again says "Buddhists for instance, were performing phenomenology long before it carried that name." If in defining "phenomenology" and "phenomenology of religion" one can casually connect that with some religious groups, precepts, or disciplines, this suggests quite strongly that either there is a bit of phenomenology *in* religion, or that there is a bit of religion *in* phenomenology, which makes their propositioning in relation or connection to each other as "phenomenology of religion" understandably unclear. Where can we locate "religion", or as Clifford Geertz describes the case more elaborately, "[o]ur problem, and it grows worse by the day, is not to define religion but to find it." (Geertz, 1971, p. 1)

In his article, "Through a Glass Darkly: What is Phenomenology of Religion?", Sanford Krolick notes that "it would be misleading to confuse a mere typology of religious institutions with a phenomenology in the philosophical sense, which concentrates on the

religious acts and contents in religious experience and explores their essential structures and relationships.” (Krolick, 195). So whereas phenomenology has the imprint of experiential knowing, or is concerned with “how objectivity is constituted by subjectivity?”, sometimes the term seems to mean the descriptive typology of religious phenomenon, or the description of religious rituals observed *as* phenomenon.

All in all, phenomenology’s proximity to the subject and to the immediacy of experience, makes it for me, among the most appropriate approaches to religion, as religion itself enjoys the same kind of proximity (address) to the subject and to consciousness as the seat of experience. A second reason why phenomenology (and not descriptive typology) is important for the study of religion is given by Louis Dupre as Barua explains. There must be a phenomenology of religion, according to Dupre, because

“...the transcendence of the object of religious intention appears within the religious experience itself, in its very constitution, and so no responsible or meaningful phenomenology dare ignore the degree to which, within the religious act, human symbolic creativity is provoked and saturated by an object that transcends it—or to be more precise, by an object that is intended as transcendent.” (Barua, p. 50, 2009)

And even though, the phenomenon is that which appears, to look for the traces of the transcendent in the realm of immanence, is simultaneously the only possible way in which a meaningful conversation about God can be had, and in deed, similar to Ibn ‘Arabi’s own approach (Chapter 2), in which the transcendent and the immanent are all the time, two polarities of a single *bewildering and bewildered reality*.

The transcendent dimension, is a pedagogic and dialectical one that always, as is expected, transcends its representatives. In a word then, “religion” should not be equated with the “religious” on the basis of an empirical criterion of certainty and *knowledge* aimed at a particular question. This is the case more generally with postmodernist literature, which for some reason happens to resonate with, or even illuminate certain aspects of religion that might be self-consciously concerned with language, meaning, and the “subject”, aspects that are born out of a conscious “counter-movement”.

1.6 The case of Postmodernism

Most of us think of scientists as those who really know how things are: they reveal the nature of nature; their knowledge of causal laws enables us to produce inventions that make a difference, like microchips; their standards of evidence, of verification and general consensus, which ultimately

control the paradigms or conceptual frameworks within which they work, are (or should be) the best we know (Butler, p. 37, 2002).

On the scientific front, postmodernism presents a case of a provokingly critical attitude regarding the premises and promises of science, but also enlightenment ideals more generally. Jacques Derrida's work on *deconstruction* has been seen as a major pillar in postmodernist discourse, despite the fact that Derrida himself and some of his commentators would object. John Zerzan describes the "content of deconstruction" in Derrida's philosophy: "...to see language as a constantly moving independent force that disallows a stabilizing of meaning or definite communication." (Zerzan, 7-8). Beginning as "a theme within aesthetics" postmodernism has spread to "ever wider areas" of our "cultural, philosophical, and political experience." Indeed, the notion that communicating definite and stable meaning is out of reach, that the definite relation between thought and language is doubtful in the first place, might seem to overturn Enlightenment ideals to the point that Zerzan gives a semi-definition of it as "modernism without the hopes and dreams that made modernity bearable." (Zerzan, 5). He views postmodernism as some sort of "celebration of impotence", which "subverts two of the over-arching tenets of Enlightenment humanism: the power of language to shape the world and the power of consciousness to shape a self." (Zerzan, 6).

Both of these doubts with regards to "language" and "consciousness"—as self-identity—obviously play into the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of the study of religion. Both of these doubts at the root of postmodernism, are deeply connected to the sense in which the "human" and therefore, the "free human agent" (the self/subject) are deeply exaggerated in Enlightenment discourse. Zerzar writes for instance, "So postmodernism reveals that autonomy has largely been a myth and cherished ideals of mastery and will are similarly misguided." (Zerzar, 6). In dispersing the authority of reason and of language to form either the *world* or the *self*, postmodernism reveals even more significantly, that the "subject", the "self", to be non-locatable, and unidentifiable.

But if we are promised herewith a new and serious attempt at demystifying authority, concealed behind the guises of a bourgeois humanist 'freedom', we actually get a dispersal of the subject so radical as to render it impotent, even nonexistent, as any kind of agent at all. Who or what is left to achieve a liberation, or is that just one more pipe dream? (Zerzar, 6-7)

On the other hand, supporters of postmodern thought and themes, see in it an important and distinctive view of the *nature of the self*, "which was a challenge to the

individualist rationalism, and the emphasis on personal autonomy, of most liberals.” (Butler, p. 50, 2002). Despite the “dispelling” effect of postmodern thought, and the loss of any anchoring absolute Cartesian point of reference, postmodernism addresses the self and its relation to language, in a way that resonates with a need in approaching or thinking about *religious language*, as to create a field in which discussions that are a combination of “within-without” perspectives, without definitive certainty in either nor both.

However, it does bring into more immediate focus, for each person independently, a concern with the “subject” and the “subjective”, not a focus on the unity and *self-affirmation* of reason, autonomy, and homogeneity, but rather, a focus on *subjectivity* that is other-affirmative, and which traces the *invisible* and *hidden* sources of authority and *consciousness*.

Indeed, the term preferred by postmodernists to apply to individuals is not so much ‘self’ as ‘subject’, because the latter term implicitly draws attention to the ‘subject-ed’ condition of persons who are, whether they know it or not, ‘controlled’ (if you are on the left) or ‘constituted’ (if you are in the middle) by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominates in the society they inhabit.” (Butler, p. 50, 2002).

As we will be referring to “self”, “subject”, and “subjective” a lot in the chapters to follow, this is a particularly important comment. I do not differentiate strictly between a free autonomous “self” and a servant-like “subject”, but whenever “self”/“subject”/“subjective” arise in the conversation, what is being hinted at is a *discourse of self-reference*, even when this conversation is devoted to the other. The self, thus, not as an isolated Cartesian ego, but the subjected/subjective individual in the *relational system*, “which is finally that of discourse itself.” (Butler, 2002, p. 52).

But what is the value of this position of “impotence” or more lightly, “incapacity” with regards to the definition and scientific value-neutral comprehension of the “phenomenon of religion”? The value, in my opinion, is twofold. First, it helps avoiding a direction in which we try to “answer the question of religion”, which in turn invites a different way of not only “how” to think about religion, but how to think *with* it. Second, it opens a way in which we can say something about religion, and simultaneously, of religion or *from it*.

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2. *The Rational and the Real in Sufi Literature and Practice*

العلم المستقر هو الجهل المستقر – النفري

“Fixed knowledge, is fixed Ignorance”—*al-Niffari (Niffari, p. 112)*²

The above quote by the tenth century Sufi mystic, Muhammad ibn Abdi L’Jabbar al Niffari, to whom the final chapter is dedicated, is basically the view and ethos of what I argue is the epistemic and existential foundation of “religion” which in the most basic terms says, *no guarantees, nor certainty*, as opposed to what is usually attributed to religion, as *certain belief*. I do not want to merely pose this insistence on *instability* and opposition to objective frameworks in order to translate it to a different set of terms and relations, but to try to understand the “intentionality” involved in this *celebration of incapacity*. Why is such opposition to rational appropriations and objective methods, strongly stressed in Sufi discourse? And how might there be similarities between this opposition and the contemporary *postmodern* celebrations of impotence?

Definitions of Sufism are plenty, and within the framework given by King, of “within-without” approaches to studying religion/Sufism, one would say, that the definition of Sufism appropriated will depend on *who* is giving it to *who*, that is, it is *part of Sufism’s “nature”*, to be defined in relation/relative to the questioner.

We are focused in this chapter on a few aspects of Sufism presented by another, much more famous Sufi writer, Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi, nevertheless, a rudimentary introduction to Sufism in general seems due. Returning to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy for a launching definition, the entry on Sufism defines it concisely, but not entirely as “(from Arabic *Sufi*, ‘mystic’), Islamic mysticism. The Arabic word is *tasawwuf*. The philosophically significant aspects of Sufism are its psychology in its early phase and its epistemology and ontology in its later phase.” (Audi, p. 888). I generally appreciate this launching definition with its interrelated relevant concerns with psychology, epistemology, and ontology. A definition of Sufism that is more attuned to its societal and organizational forms, might not stop at “Islamic mysticism”, but further specify the nature of this mysticism on its level of manifestation in social organizations, as a *hierarchical organizational structure revolving around the spiritual center (authority) of the ‘shaykh’ or ‘murshid’ (guide), loosely connected through voluntary social associations*, (Howell and Bruinessen, 2007).

² From Niffari’s *Mawqif of the Presence Chamber and of Letter (67:16)*.

However, an important comment usually on the mouths of proponents of Sufism and Muslim scholars of Islam, has to do with the suffix “-ism” which accompanies much of “modern terminology”. Seyyed Hussein Nasr, as well as the British imam and researcher Timothy Winter (also known as, Abd El Hakim Murad) both, distinguish the “indigenous term” of *tasawwuf*, in its Arabic resonance, from the English term in one major way. The latter is a noun, an entity to which there is identity and belonging, while the former is a verb, *an act*, a performance and a way of orienting oneself within one’s given context, and not to a common “Sufism”, but a variety of acts of *tasawwuf*.

Weismann writes in “Sufism in the Age of Globalization”, that “The translation of the term *tasawwuf* to Sufism by Western scholars should not be seen merely as an attempt to reflect the classical concept; it is actually a reconstruction of its content in the light of modern perceptions.” (Weismann, 261). And so, whereas “Sufism” would more generally be a discussion of the phenomena outside its “classical conception”, in our context it indicates more a *performance* internal to a religious stance and which contrasts sharply with a Salafi/objective stance.

Along the lines of this ambiguousness of Sufism, we find in the *Forward* to Annemarie Schimmel’s book, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, how her first statement is a cautious and absolvent declaration that “[t]o write about Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, is an almost impossible task.” (Schimmel, xvii, 1975). This is perhaps due also to the fact that Sufism depends in part upon realizing, admitting and affirming a “mystery”, or an (self)-existence that is always underlined by a lack of knowledge, an alienation that provokes, governs, and underlies any “*struggle for (the real)*”, and which provokes a simultaneous “*struggle against (the unreal)*”. Consequently, we find in Sufism a critical attitude towards scholarship or “books” as a value on their own.

True gnosis, namely the gnosis of the one, is not attained through books, and many a legend tells how a Sufi who had reached, or thought he had reached, his goal threw away his books, for: “Books, ye are excellent guides, but it is absurd to trouble about a guide after the goal has been reached” (Schimmel, 17, 1975)

On the other hand, there is also an infinite importance placed on language, on letters, and despite the fact that Sufis were critical of the “bookishness of scholars...it is a fact that they themselves were among the most productive writers in Islamic history.” (Schimmel, p. 2) In addition to this, the “Sufis claimed that the whole wisdom was included in the letter *alif*, the first letter of the Alphabet and symbol of God.” (Schimmel, 18). *This ambiguity* between

the critical attitude towards “bookishness of scholars”, to be further explored in this chapter, and the centrality of speech acts (such as *zikr*) and language to the very constitution of being, is not only relevant to preserving the meaning of religion from ideological preferences, but also deeply relevant to the recognition that, as Geertz puts it, “Worship and analysis are simply impossible to carry out together, for the one involves being thoroughly involved, caught up, absorbed in one’s experience, in what one is living through, while the other involves standing back and, with a certain detachment, looking at it.” (Geertz, p. 108).

But in any case, one can still discuss main themes in or of Sufism that particularly show the centrality and dynamics of “experiential knowing” (existential/phenomenological) in relation to ritual practice and hermeneutics, and hopefully as a consequence, get a “closer” or more “relevant” conception of religion and religious authority, not in any social context, but as an operative concept in the boundaries of the single individual. In Erik S. Ohlander’s article titled “Early Sufi Rituals, Beliefs, and Hermeneutics”, he discusses three themes in early Sufism and how these themes can be seen as formative of a hermeneutical model of the Quran (interpretation by allusion) that is fundamentally contrary or different than the Salafist and literalist interpretative traditions/discourses.

The first theme is that of *impatience*, or “the insatiable and all-consuming desire to know or to experience God in the here and now rather than in the hereafter.” (Ohlander, p. 56) The theme of impatience, is strongly connected to the source of man’s intellectual and spiritual endeavors, and also, the point of psyche to which much of spiritual practice, including the Zen “mystifying encounters”, is aimed at taming, while at the same time actualizing its potential. A second very important theme in Sufism, is the distinction between layers of phenomenal existence, following the binary divine Names of *Zahir* and *Batin*:

Evinced in literature belonging to a fairly early period in the history of Sufism, the overarching metaphysical orientation of this mythopoesis was one which differentiated between two complementary levels of phenomenal existence, namely that which is apparent, plain, outer, and exoteric (*Zahir*) and that which is hidden, obscure, inner, and esoteric (*Batin*). It is this basic metaphysical binary which has served, more so than any other, as a master structuring or framing device within and across diverse levels of act and discourse amongst Sufi communities from the formative period forward.” (Ohlander, p. 57).

A third and final theme common in Sufi literature, and closer to our more phenomenological concern, arises from the previous idea of a metaphysical distinction in the levels of phenomenal existence, and that is, that such layers of “deeper meaning not readily apparent”

are nevertheless “conceptually, discursively, and even physically accessible.” The first word in the verse that inaugurates the revelation of the Quran is indicative of this; “Read!” or “Recite!”—*Ikraa*’. The theme that arises then, is “a qualitative distinction [very important in our context] between rational, discursive knowledge (*‘ilm*) and its soteriological implications and entailments and non-rational, experiential knowledge (*ma’rifa*) and its mystical implications and entailments.” (Ohlander, p. 58). Both of which are seen to be equally conducive of unearthing layers of existence that “are not readily apparent”.

Such layers of existence however, do not exist in an “extraordinary” or “supernatural” realm that is unrelated to the *givenness* encountered by the “phenomenal self”. It is precisely when the mundane givenness of reality that is contrasted with the “extraordinary” becomes itself *non-ordinary* that Sufism, or mysticism, or religion more generally, concerns itself. It is when an ordinary occasion all of a sudden carries infinite significance in itself, *as* itself. Sufism is then concerned with *perception* (*Idrak* – Arabic) in a more general sense than sense-perception, perhaps would be clearer to use *perceptivity* instead, to mean the more general sense of *witness/realize*. It is rightly a “vocation, discipline, and science” of tuning *perceptivity* to *witness to* or *stand before* the non-ordinary, which is after all, quite ordinary (Lings, p. 11).

Instead of a “vocation, discipline, and science” for the tuning of perception in relation to its eternal and unobservable source, Sufism and religion more generally of course, can at any time become a vehicle for the closing off of perception. Instead of a “pursuit for the real”, it can be a defense against it. So let us assume that there is a hypothetically distinguishable mode of Sufi practice, in which the highest pitch of concern is a “pursuit for the real” while *simultaneously* acknowledging other possibilities which are perhaps, responses to ailments, rather than a genuinely mobile “pursuit”.

In any case, the “pursuit” conceived religiously, is not eventually terminated at a “conclusion” but is rather an *alignment*, pursuing an alignment with the *real* is not a concluded pursuit, but a *lived* one. If it seems to be concluded, or if it needs to be concluded, religion and divinity itself would eventually become determined, correspondent, and to prove it so, must be “codified” objectively in language and in act, which in turn generates a problem and may be a crisis of authority. And while some attempt to defend the correspondence of miracles in the Quran to “*actual existences*”, the miracle of the given and ordinary, which far exceeds any *retold* miracle, is still veiled under this concern of “proving” the correspondence is there, or not there.

As non-correspondent textual realities, a different dialogue occurs with regards to such vexing notions as *afterlife*, *miracles*, and *omnipotence*. For an example, a reverse way of viewing the issue of afterlife, is not whether it *actually exists*, but rather, why it is that human consciousness finds it believable and sometimes indeed boring to exist now, as human, on Earth, and finds it extraordinary, supernatural, to conceive of its sequel. How is it that the idea of a resurgence of individual consciousness is more absurd, from the perspective of being alive now, than the existence of individual consciousness already? These questions are really provocations for the self and for imagination, taking seriously its own capacity to ask and enact any *what if* situation. The Qur'an often uses this *what if* language explicitly, such in the verse—*iza zulzilat al ard zilzalaha*--“And *if* the Earth rumbles” (99:1), inviting the reader/reciter/hearer to an *imagination* of the Earth and the rumbling, in a relational play of language; “*When (if)* the sun is wrapped up. And when (if) the stars fall, dispersing. And when (if) the mountains are removed...A soul will *then* know what it has brought [with it].” (81: 1-3...14). The intended provocation of such notions, is even more directly put in this manner than I am presenting it, in Surat Ya-Sin,

And he [man] presents for Us a similitude and forgets his [own] creation. He says, “Who will give life to bones while they are disintegrated?”

Say, “He will give them life who produced them the first time; and He is, of each creation, Knowing. (36:78-79)

In other words, as if what is being said is, you pose the question without paying attention to where and what you already are. *Had you paid attention, you'd be just as or even more surprised*. As Kierkegaard says, “one never reasons in conclusion *to* existence, but reasons in conclusion *from* existence.” (Kierkegaard, 74, 1999). The Qur'anic response was not an “answer” in the usual satisfactory sense, but a “questioning of the question”, a bringing back to another question that highlights what already is (the first time) and its relation to the “questioner”.

2.1 Sufism in Context:

The main question I asked myself during my undergraduate study as a philosophy student particularly after having been introduced to the “philosophy *of* religion,” was the question of the *difference* between philosophy *and* religion. Perhaps, during the period in which I was studying Hegel tentatively, that the idea of religion culminating in philosophy

both confused and intrigued me. It intrigued me because it posited the idea that there is such a “logic” underlying religion, and that if one were to tap into it philosophically, it would be revealed, and what was merely belief becomes knowledge, or that belief is merely a step on a *process-way* to something else, to something certain. It confused me, because it posited the notion, that it is possible to replace religion with its essential or elementary intention in a systematic philosophy and/or science (secularization more or less). I admit, I first enjoyed the notion of getting to the same (the divine, the real) without having to pay the same dues (debts/*dayn*) in a “religious” frame. But later on, and without knowing why exactly, I disliked the notion that religion should or could be *sublated* by a “higher” or more objective *picture* of reality, whether through philosophy or science. I took a more interpretative turn towards the Islamic valuation of language itself, and the notion that the Quran, as the word of God, is a “miracle” and that a “picture” cannot be final, but cyclical in a way. Moreover, I noticed that religion, despite its rudimentary presentation in comparison with philosophy and science, was pervasive in human interactions on media, in politics, in science, in family, in friendly debates.

There was a sense in which religion had a more *performative* intention, that it was not merely stating how the world is (like science in particular) nor how it should be (like philosophy) but, as the Arabic term for religion (*din*) already indicates, incites and obliges a kind of individual and collective path-taking towards *reality*, or, indebts (*yu-din*) consciousness with a rhythmic (ritualistic) return to the *real*, as *other*, and as therefore, the unknown or unseen—*ghayb*, that absence (and transcendence) which extends indefinitely beyond the immediate, and returns to it. Perhaps this is why the “theological turn” in French phenomenology has a lot to do with the “phenomenology of the unapparent”, and which, “reoccurs, mimed and reinvented, through Jacques Derrida and Michel Henry,” (Prusak, p. 26). Asking and responding in affirmative to the question of whether what distinguishes the “theological turn” in phenomenology is “[t]he opening [ouverture] to the invisible, to the Other [Autre]...” (Prusak, p. 17).

As we have seen with Nishitani and “Eastern philosophy of religion,” there is a sense in which “philosophy” needs to be *existentialized*, that is, to have to do with life itself (with the self that questions), and its endeavor is viewed in relation to the “good life” in Socratic terms. This explains why even philosophy professors in the Japanese context which King discusses, find it complementary if not necessary to *existentialize their intellectualism*, for as King writes, “the ‘real’ world for Zen Buddhism would seem to be the experienced, the lived-in, the existed-in, context of human life; the philosophic and/or scientific names given to

what surrounds us are considered of secondary importance to the religious, that is, fully existential life.” (W.L. King in Nishitani’s *Religion and Nothingness*, xv).

From this question of the difference between philosophy and religion comes the discussion of difference between the epistemic authorities assumed in both. However, it is a difference that as the first chapter has shown, is more clear and comes to full maturity in science, and especially visible in “human sciences”. We hinted that the phenomenological field of “communication” is where this difference should hypothetically so far be traced. In other words, *how can the difference in ways of communication between religion and science, reveal more about their epistemic assumptions and therefore intentions, in their respective discourses?* This is more of a reminder question than one to be dealt with now.

2.2 Ibn ‘Arabi: Brief Introduction

The centrality and importance of Ibn ‘Arabi’s figure and work within Sufism and the more general Islamic public cannot be overstated. He is both the focal target of fundamentalist (Salafist) attacks on Sufism, therefore labeled by those *al sheikh al akfar* (the most infidel sheikh), but he also represents the culmination of Sufi philosophy and intellectual production, and therefore called by followers or admirers of Sufism, *al sheikh al akbar* (The Greatest Sheikh). In addition to the centrality of his figure and work within Islamic history, he is amongst the most researched Sufi thinkers in our contemporary times for reasons belonging to what some might call the cosmopolitan nature of his work itself, and the more general and contemporary context of *theo-political* strife in which his works are studied. In one of his famous poems, he expresses this cosmopolitan view of religions,

My heart can take on
any form:
a meadow for gazelles,
a cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah,
the scrolls of the Qur'an.³

³ From Ibn ‘Arabi’s *turjuman al ashwaq*.

Ibn ‘Arabi was born on the twenty-seventh of Ramadan 560 A.H., or the seventh of August 1165 A.D. in the town of Murcia in Andalusia (modern day Spain) to an Arab family. His full name is Muhammad b. ‘Alī b. Muhammad Ibn al-‘Arabi al-Tā’ī al-Hātimī. He seems to have grown up in a strongly religious family, as three of his uncles became followers of the Sufi way. From an early age, Ibn ‘Arabi accompanied Sufi masters of which he gives account in his writings, but had not joined the Sufi way formally until the age of twenty. He travelled from Spain towards the East, and in Mecca was inspired to write his Magnum Opus *al-Futuhat al Makkeyya (The Meccan Openings/Revelations)* which is composed of 570 chapters, all of them “revealed” to Ibn ‘Arabi by a Divine self-disclosure or revelation according to him. From 1223 A.D. until his death in 1240 A.D. Ibn ‘Arabi settled in Damascus where he finished working on the *Meccan Revelations*, his *Diwan*, and during that time also wrote *The Bezels of Wisdom* “as the synopsis of his teachings” (Austin, p. 11, 1980).

As for his style of writing, we could mention here a connection or a similitude between Ibn ‘Arabi’s *intention* in writing, and others like Nietzsche, Derrida, or the Zen Buddhist Koans with their mystifying intention. Kierkegaard’s writing was described by Roger Pool in his book *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* as follows: “Kierkegaard writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some meaning that could be directly appropriated.” (Evans, p. 154). Kierkegaard always talks of “my reader” and associates his reader with the Single Individual, a concept that is at the heart of his epistemology. C. Stephan Evans goes on to explain that “Kierkegaard cannot offer us objective truth because he is seen as committed to a view of language and meaning similar to that of Derrida and Lacan.” (Evans, p. 154). A view of language that is unstable and unarrestable in concrete correspondences. Not in a similar way, but out of a similar view and intention, Ibn ‘Arabi’s (and for that matter, Niffari’s) writings and ideas, can have the same description applied to them. Sa’diyya al-Shaikh notes that in Sufi epistemology there are “layers of meaning [...] always present in seemingly fixed phenomena”, and that therefore “knowledge is recognized as being infinitely layered and expansive—it reveals more or less of itself depending on the state of the seeker”. She concludes that a “Sufi epistemology is theoretically more open to the ways in which truth claims are constantly shifting and are often reconstituted at different levels.” Consequently, “Sufi *methodology* recognizes that language mediates between mystical truth and transient social realities and that such a mediatory process is inevitably dynamic and fluid.” (Shaikh, p. 115, 2012). And like Kierkegaard’s use of paradox and irony, Ibn ‘Arabi’s “use of paradoxes

might be seen as intentional—a clever, useful, and affirmative means of luring the reader into dismantling given assumptions and categories.” (Al-Shaikh, p. 115, 2012). Chodkiewicz notes in the introduction to Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futuhat Makkeya, Meccan Revelations*, that “[Ibn ‘Arabi’s] writings, for all their initial difficulty, are carefully designed to awaken the particular spiritual insights and meanings accessible to individual readers in their specific situation and stage of spiritual development.” (Chodkiewicz, p. 11).

Eventually, as each reader becomes more familiar with the actual existential referents—the ‘reality’ (haqa’iq)—underlying Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontological and cosmological discussions, it will become clear that those discussions are *also equally phenomenological* descriptions of the stages and settings of the larger process of realization.” (Morris, in Ibn ‘Arabi, 1988, p. 13)

R.W.J. Austin notes in the section titled “His Thought” how Ibn ‘Arabi “combines the scholastic expertise of Ghazali with the poetic imagery of Ibn al-Farid, the metaphysical daring of al-Hallaj with the stringent orthodoxy of al-Muhasibi, the abstract categories of the Neoplatonists with the dramatic imagination of Rumi, and the abstruse science of the Kabbalist with the practical wisdom of the spiritual guide.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 24). As such, Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought is not easily discernable, he shifts between discursive modes, in the same way or for the same reason that Kierkegaard shifts between pseudonyms, in order to address a reality irreducible to any mode alone. In relation to modern philosophy, the article introduces Ibn ‘Arabi as “the greatest of Muslim philosophers, provided we understand philosophy in the broad, modern sense and not simply as the discipline of *falsafa*,... (Chittick, web) Elsewhere, in the section on Ibn ‘Arabi’s “methodology”, it is noted that Sadr al-din Qunawi (one of Ibn ‘Arabi’s earliest and most prominent students), “differentiates Ibn ‘Arabi’s position from that of *falsafa* and scholastic theology (Kalam) by calling it *mashrab al-tahqiq*, “the school of realization”:

Tahqiq is indeed the cornerstone of Ibn ‘Arabi’s vast corpus, so it is important to have a sense of what it means. The word is derived from the same root as *haqq* and *haqiqah*, key terms in all the sciences. *Haqq* means true, real, right, worthy, and appropriate (in modern times, it is used to speak of human “rights”); *haqiqah* means reality and truth.

One of the main themes in Ibn ‘Arabi, and which predominates over the other themes, is that of Oneness of Being, or *Wahdat al Wujud*. This coinage, is a concise and multifaceted one, but which is nevertheless not coined by Ibn ‘Arabi and never expressed by him in that

way. According to the Stanford encyclopedia, the term *wujud* for Ibn ‘Arabi carries a specific significance in his *tawhidic* philosophy (philosophy of unity). The concept of *wahdat al wujud* is closely connected to other concepts in the history and development of Sufism onwards, such as Oneness of Perception, “having regard to a very important tension in human experience between perception and being, subject and object, the knower and the object of knowledge.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 26). However, Ibn ‘Arabi’s use of the term *wujud*, “did not intend to make any distinction but, by choosing the word *wujud*, to convey the meaning of the Oneness of both Being and Perception in the perfect and complete union of the one and only Reality [*al-haqq*]. This is because the Arabic word *wajada* carries both ideas, that of being and therefore objectivity, and that of perception and therefore subjectivity, both of which he sees as being one in *the* Reality.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 26).

The root for the word *wujud*, is W-J-D, pronounced *wajada*, and means “to find”, “come across”, “be conscious of”, “enjoy”, “be ecstatic”. The word *Wajada* indicates “finding” in reference to both that which is found, the object (*wujud*), and he or she who finds, the subject (*wajid*), the finder. *Wujud* then, indicates the occurrence of Reality in the moment of existence/perception. It is perhaps an addition, but two other derivatives from the same root, particularly relevant to Sufism, are first, the word *wijdan*, which has no English equivalent and expresses “affectivity” or rather, the “affective body”, the focal receiver of affect in the human being. That which is received, by or in one’s *wijdan*, is an affect. The second term, stemming from the same root, is *wajd*, which expresses one of the eleven or so synonyms or degrees of love in Arabic, and is a love that is all-consuming, existential, and intellectual. In other words, the term *wujud* is used to designate “existence” because “what exists is what is found and experienced.” (Chittick, web). The quality and “location” of this *finding* and this *experience* is pointed to in the other two terms presented; *wijdan*, *wajd*, the mediators and functions of that which is *found* (reality/existence), and that which does the *finding* (consciousness/perception).

Existence, for Ibn ‘Arabi then, is a moment in the life of the cosmos, mediated by the human *function*, represented by and for Ibn ‘Arabi in the prophet Adam, who is described in his first chapter as, the only being whom God has “unite[d] the polarity of qualities in...” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 56), that is to say, the only *being* who “shares in the Self-consciousness of the Reality.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 49).

“The Reality” for Ibn ‘Arabi is an even more important term. *Al haqq* in Arabic is simultaneously the “true, right, real, deserved, proper, and established”. In addition to many other derivatives of course, *al haqq*, is also one of the Divine Names, The Real. While using

it as a “name”, Ibn ‘Arabi designates certain epistemic and ontological attributes that accompany this term, which rejects any determination. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabi defines *al haqq* as “nondelimited being (*al wujud al mutlaq*)”, and yet,

“[i]t possesses such utter nondelimitation that it is not delimited by nondelimitation. God possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimitation prevents Him from delimitation. On the contrary, He possesses all delimitation, so He is nondelimited delimitation” (Chittick, web)

That is, to emphasize the ineffability and indefinability of God or self, is not defining him as un-definable, since it is in fact this undefinable being (*al wujud al mutlaq*) which defines, possesses, and is the source of beings (*al mawjudat*) (Chittick, web). The self, cannot grasp itself in the same way it cannot grasp God, and consequently, the more God is defined, the narrower the self’s width, response, and transformation.

...the dynamic methodology of saying and unsaying also suggests a mystical pedagogy—apophatic language both reflects and encourages a state of experiential openness and dynamism within the aspirant. Michael Sells discusses Ibn ‘Arabi’s *al-insan al-Kamil* as characterized by a state of perpetual transformation (*taqallub*). This dynamic state simultaneously reflects the infinite nature of the real and of the microcosmic *al-insan al-Kamil*, never allowing for fixed and static notions of God or self. (Shaikh, 2012, p. 114).

2.3 Sufi Opposition to Rational Thought

Huwa la Huwa—He not He!

In his article, “Clarifying Phenomenologies in the study of religion” Jonathan Tuckett quotes Oxby’s criticism of phenomenology of religion, saying “...that there are as many ‘phenomenologies’ as there are ‘phenomenologists.’” (Tuckett, p. 75). Coincidentally, or not coincidentally, there is a Sufi proverb that states almost the exact same observation with regards to “religion”, with one exception, *it is not a criticism*, “the paths to God, are as many as the selves (or breathes) of creatures”—*al turuq lilah bi’adad nefous al khala’iq*.

At the beginning of his article, Ian Almond notes that “over the past fifteen years, scholars from departments of comparative religion and theology around the world have been rediscovering in their own religious traditions various precedents for Derrida’s

deconstructive⁴ writings, a trend there is certainly every reason to encourage.” He gives examples of figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Samkara, Lao Tzu, and Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani, who as he says “have all been credited with deconstructing the rigid logocentric assumptions within their own respective faiths, rescuing a more authentic spirituality from the legalistic metaphysics of their times.” (Almond, p. 22). Within the Sufi tradition, many thinkers can be said to have had a deconstructive stance towards the logocentric assumptions of scholars and theologians of their time. The second figure we will discuss in the final chapter, is, in my opinion an exaggerated and illuminating example of this deconstructive stance, yet not in a public polemic such as Ibn ‘Arabi.

The intellectual and theological environment in which Ibn ‘Arabi was writing his mystical philosophy, was one divided between two major strands of thought, generally designated by Almond as schools of *Tanzih* (transcendence or incomparability) and schools of *Tashbih* (immanence or comparability). Such questions have been debated for centuries by the philosophers of the Kalam and “provided the parameters of a very wide debate...” (Almond, p. 26). For Ibn ‘Arabi, *ahl al nazar* (The People of Reflection) seem to have been trapped in an “either/or” binary thinking which he found to be incongruent with the *scope* and *simultaneity* of the Real. A second and related aspect of *Kalam* which Ibn ‘Arabi “would have resented is its claim to a knowledge of God through reflection and reason (*nazar*, ‘*aql*), the kind of knowledge that for Sufis could only be obtained through ‘tasting’ and ‘unveiling’ (*dhawq*, *kashf*.” Almond continues, “In all of these definitions, [of Kalam by Ibn Rushd, al Farabi, Ibn Khaldun] a certain theme is constant: the acquisition of divine knowledge in order to justify social and legal practices, facilitate hermeneutics, systematize theology, and ascertain exactly what is orthodox and what is heresy, (*ilhad*).” (Almond, p. 26). To understand Ibn ‘Arabi’s objection to 1) the binary “either/or” thinking with regards to God and self, and 2) the primacy of “reason” in relation to what he calls “divine knowledge”, we must look at Ibn ‘Arabi’s characterization of the Real, in relation to which his objections make (epistemological, and existential) sense.

2.4 The Real

For Ibn ‘Arabi simply put, *al-haqq* is the name he gives to the unknowable source of all effects and actions and which “cannot be described by any of them”. Almond considers

⁴ Deconstruction according to Niall Lucy’s *Derrida Dictionary*, “...begins, as it were, from a refusal of the authority of determining power of every ‘is’, or simply from a refusal of authority in general.” (Lucy, 11).

four of the characteristics that Ibn ‘Arabi associates with the *real*, namely, incomparability, infinity, unrepeatability, and impossibility of the *real*. These four epistemological obstructions that Ibn ‘Arabi gives as *reasons against reason*, are meant to explain how philosophers and theologians restrict the Real for, ultimately, reasons related to power/politics/authority, or not too far from it.

2.5 *Incomparability*

When a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through his consideration. Hence he considers only a god which he has created through his consideration”—Ibn ‘Arabi.

This quote from *al futuhat al Makkeyya*, explains what Ibn ‘Arabi means by the “God created in belief” or the “God of belief”. This same impulse of highlighting and acknowledging only one’s “god which he has created through his consideration”, is for instance a common error in the procedures and biases that scientists must also deal with, for almost identical reasons and belongs to “subjectivity” in general.

“Chamberlin, in other words, was worried about an all too human tendency—affecting scientists, students, and lay people alike—to fall in love with a particular explanation because it ‘feels’ right, and to unconsciously engage in one of the most common cognitive biases (and logical fallacies): the selective bias towards remembering ‘hits’ (favorable evidence) and forgetting ‘misses’ (unfavourable evidence), which, incidentally, is one of the prevalent reasons so many people fall for pseudoscientific notions,....”
(Pigliucci, pp. 52-53).

Similarly, for Ibn ‘Arabi the god of belief “changes according to the disposition of the believer.” But, regardless of the particularly considered god that each believer attaches to, “Ibn ‘Arabi has a generally benign attitude towards such constructs, as long as the believer is aware of the ‘actual situation’—that is, the artificiality of his/her God.” (Almond, p. 27). However, it is very important to note as does R.W.J. Austin in the introduction Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Bezels of Wisdom*, that “far from being a dismissal of the “god of belief”, illusions and imagination for Ibn ‘Arabi are *an important part of the reality’s self-realization*.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1980, p. 39). Thinkers who Ibn ‘Arabi was responding to, were thus seen as constructing their

theologies upon an “empty construct”, one which acquired this aura of authority due to their disposition towards their belief. Similarly, Almond notes,

“...just as Derrida sees all metaphysical thinkers as basing their thought systems upon illusory moments of ‘self-presence’—a ‘center’ that is never really the center, a signifier that can only lead to other signifiers— Ibn ‘Arabi sees all reflective thinkers as building their ideas about God on something that is not really God. In both cases the philosopher falls victim to a certain illusion—the unquestioning conviction that the semantic foundation of the thinker’s thought-system (“God”, “experience”, “reality”, “innocence”) is somehow sufficient in itself, and requires no further justification.” (Almond, p. 27).

In this regard, Ibn ‘Arabi is pushing forth the incomparability of the *Real (God)*, over against philosophical and theological constructions, that due to their presence within the bounds of *self*, can fall victim to overriding the *actual situation*; the *real* situation, and become centered and identified with a concept of God. In fact, this danger, in a theological sense, is a danger of *shirk* (idolatry), partnering God with other than God.

2.6 Infinity of the Real

In addition, the impossibility of comparing the name of God, to any conceptual or theological construct, it is also absurd for Ibn ‘Arabi that in so doing, the “philosophers and thinkers have seized upon one or two images and attempted to found their epistemologies on them, mistaking them for the Real itself.” This aspect of the *real* is what I earlier called “scope”, that Ibn ‘Arabi claims the theologians and philosophers are reducing. In this sense, “all theologies for Ibn ‘Arabi are idolatries (*shirk*) if they do not take into account the infinite range of divine possibilities in addition to their own.” (Almond, p. 27-28) It is this notion of “infinity” of the Real that constitutes the second pillar of Ibn ‘Arabi’s objection to positivist schools of thought. Although Ibn ‘Arabi has many positive things to say about reason, his insistence on the theologian’s ignorance of God’s infinite semantic richness pervades both the *Fusus al-Hikam* and *the Futuhat*.” (Almond, p. 28).

Almond compares this aspect of Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussion of the *infinity of the Real*, to Derrida’s discussion of the “preface”, and his exploration of “how various thinkers have sought to restrict the possibilities to their own interpretations... In Dissemination, Derrida is particularly interested in the Hegelian preface—how Hegel sees, and doubts, the *Vorwort* as a way of ensuring that certain unacceptable interpretations of his work will never take place.” (Almond, p. 28). Both Ibn ‘Arabi and Derrida then object to the “reduction” of possibilities,

albeit, not for the same reasons, a point that Almond feels is important to be made as to remain faithful to his caution not to “turn a thirteenth-century Sufi into a postmodern theorist, any more than...to ‘Islamize’ Jacques Derrida...” (Almond, p. 22). For Ibn ‘Arabi there is what Almond calls a “theological” concept at the root of his objection, and that is, God’s inexhaustible divinity, while for Derrida, his objection “stems more from a belief in the unarrestable play of forces within the text, rather than any theological concept of its infinite unfathomability.” (Almond, p. 28).

In any case, Ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of the infinity of Real is directly related to his next characterization, and which is according to Almond, “closer to the structure of Derrida’s own approach”, namely, the *unrepeatability of the Real*, (Almond, p. 28).

2.7 Unrepeatability:

The fact of the *real’s* infinite repository of images, is directly correlated to Ibn ‘Arabi’s third reason for his opposition to reason. It would be counter the notion of infinity, if the *real* had to repeat an occurrence (or an interpretation) which has already occurred, it would be, in a sense, in a need to a recycle itself, implying a scarcity or finitude. Consequently, for Ibn ‘Arabi the Real, “...in all of its manifestations, never repeats itself. [His] main justification of this is the Qur’anic verse “*Each day He is upon some new task.*” (55:29). It is not only Ibn ‘Arabi’s position of course, as he himself quotes Abū Talib al-Makki saying, “God never discloses Himself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice.” (Almond, p. 29).

In this context, philosophy and theology, as long as they are not aware of the *actual situation*, and so long as “reason” constitutes their self-determined certainty, become ways of “fossilizing God’s dynamism”. Reason, in the way that is discussed, is the impulse for predictability, and control. This becomes even clearer with Ibn ‘Arabi’s etymological archaeology of the word for reason, ‘*akl*:

In the Futuhat, Ibn ‘Arabi points out that the root meaning of the word for reason (‘*aqil*) comes from the same root as the word for “fetter” (‘*iqal*). It is a convenient etymology for the Shaykh, whose main objection to the philosophers and theologians is that they narrow and limit a “Divine Vastness” (*al-tawassu’ al ilahi*) that is without attribute or limit.” (Almond, p. 25)

A vastness that is threatened by a certain impulse at “imposing a banality and a predictability upon God that Ibn ‘Arabi clearly feels is misplaced.” (Almond, p. 29). And

because the *real* does not repeat Himself in a single form to “two individuals, nor in a single form twice”, and because these individuals themselves are part and parcel of the happening of that *reality*, the Real is also *simultaneous*.

For Derrida, the impossibility of repetition “stem directly from the potentially infinite number of different contexts in which a text can be read and reread.” (Almond, p. 31). But to add more to some of Derrida’s own discussion of *origins*, *centers*, and the “Freudian critique of self-presence”. In the chapter “Structure, Sign and Play” in his *Writing and Difference*, he discusses what he calls an *event* in the “history of the concept of structure” (Derrida, 1978, p. 351).

...it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a center in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence—but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute...Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play, (Derrida 1978, 353-354).

In this passage, Derrida mentions the “desire for a center” driving the constitution of a structure (theological/philosophical/scientific), and how the “center” (God, in religion) is revisited and substituted infinitely. A center which is not a “center” but a non-locus, a “function”, and in the terms of this paper, a center that is *variable* and *relational*, and which takes *language* itself, or “discourse” as the site of the relation to the center (the religious experience), and not its map.

This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse—provided we can agree on this word—that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida, 1978, p. 354).

Hence, for Derrida, repetition does not only amount to *restricting interpretation*, but in itself exposes the artificiality of determining “presence” to a *center* which is a *function* in a system of *differences*. Another way to translate this into our general theme within Ibn

‘Arabi’s terms, that God, as the *transcendental signified* is intended as such, without being determined by the framework of *theophany/creation* (differences), from which *his name* constitutes an origin that is a *relational variable; a name*. An origin and a center that is in Ibn ‘Arabi’s terms a “multiple loci of manifestation”, and which constitutes a framework of communication, without assuming a determinable *presence* to the center of that framework.

2.8 The Impossibility of the Real

In opposition to the object-oriented logic which posits the “either/or” binary that is preliminary to structures and centers, one can posit the *impossible simultaneity* represented in the conjunctive “*and*”. In the article by Ahmed Achrati titled “Arabic, Qur’anic Speech and Postmodern Language. What the Qur’an Simply Says”, he discusses what is called the *Wa-Wa* style of discourse, after the Arabic *wa*, “and”, which Achrati expresses, is “marked by an apparent redundancy and disjunction of events...” (Achrati, p. 178).

Achrati goes on to discuss how the “and” and the conscious subjective “I” are similar in that both are *in between*. An objective process, one which posits from the start “either/or” binary thought, does not assume this mid-position of consciousness as *the between*; “Located between memory and intention, and very much like the *wāw*, the “I” is the event that adds to the layers of past what unfolds in the future.” (Achrati, 197).

The “I”, being in that sense like the *waw*, in the “between” of things like a “link”, “synthesis”⁵ or an “isthmus”, is itself marked by a certain impossibility at self-definition being always open-onto the future, being always “neither/nor”. Having itself a (sometimes unbearable) dynamism, the “I” can and often does take sides, that is, abandons its intermediary realm of the simultaneity of being, and *identifies itself*, or feels the urge to resolve a certain ambiguity by taking recourse in an “either/or” resolution, this perhaps is what we call dogmatic or ideological rigidity. In a sense, this principle of the impossibility of the Real, or its simultaneous transcendence and immanence, stretches the psyche into a *tolerance of ambiguity*, a psychological and epistemological virtue in the context of the “pursuit of reality”, and within science itself.

But the conjunctivity of the Arabic *wāw* also conveys a sense of unity and belonging that is constitutive of the essence of being ... (Achrati, p. 197).

⁵ Kierkegaard defines the self as a “synthesis between opposites” in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

This issue of the impossibility of the Real, elaborates on a point we have talked about earlier, namely, the *actual situation*. With regards to Ibn ‘Arabi’s contemporaneous debates, “one pole emphasizes the absolute transcendence (tanzih) of God, the other His immanence, but neither have understood the *actual situation*—that the Real can actually be both at the same time.” (Almond, p. 33). The intolerance towards the actual situation of this *impossibility of the Real, or its impossible simultaneity*, is very much related directly to reason, or to the impulse which prioritizes rational ordered thought and references, to the exclusion of other registers of *reality*, or “subjectivity”.

It is perhaps here that the cryptic formula that was quoted at the beginning of this section makes most sense, *huwa la huwa*, He not He, simultaneously. Everything is Him and not Him, more than a statement of truth, this is an epistemological principle, that “anything meaningful” as one article on paradox and humor has it, “has a double meaning. This is so because no thing is identical with itself” (Murphy, p. 27). Ibn ‘Arabi notes, that those who argue for God’s incomparability all too often reference the Qur’anic verse that says “Nothing like unto Him” and those who argue for his comparability, reference his many names and attributes that are also human attributes. Ibn ‘Arabi then proceeds to argue for his impossible position and referencing the same exact verse in its totality, or at least, until its end, “Nothing like unto Him, and He is the *all-Hearing, the all-Knowing*” (42:11).

From a deconstructive angle, Ibn ‘Arabi’s insistence on the simultaneity of everything being He/not He (*huwa la huwa*) is an important step: it acknowledges the illusion of the dualism, the fundamental mistake of believing God to be either ‘this’ or ‘that’, transcendent or immanent, ‘out there’ or ‘in here’. As long as rational thought conceives of God in terms of binary oppositions, ‘opposing the reports brought by the messengers’ in order to establish ‘true’ knowledge of God, then ‘reflection can only roam in its own specific playing field (*maydan*), which is one of many fields. Because of its committal to simplistic, logocentric law of identity (is God X or Y?), reflective thought finds itself a priori unable to grasp the true complexity of God. Moreover, in observing how the ‘one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him,’ Ibn ‘Arabi seems to anticipate Derrida’s own reasons for his objections to binary thought; namely, that whenever two terms are opposed to one another (spirit/flesh, nature/culture, speech/writing), a hierarchy always ensues; one half of the term is artificially privileged over the other for ultimately ideological purposes.” (Almond, p. 34).

The question to which this chapter was dedicated is, in what way and for what reasons does Sufism, or some thinkers and figures in Sufism’s history, oppose rational binary

thinking, and what does this opposition have to say about the nature of the religious conception of “reality” and the religious address, as understood and appropriated in Sufi literature and discourse? We still have not discussed adequately the “way” this opposition takes form in the Sufi practice, which is a point left to a discussion closer to *authority* and *communication*. However, we did touch upon the reasons why this opposition is stressed, and have come to a further elaboration on the different notions of the *real* underlying religious (Sufi) and scientific registers of discourse. In summary, Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of the Real, and the epistemologically related principles with which he attempts to preserve the “unknowability of the Real”, namely, incomparability, infinity, unrepeatability, and impossibility, begs us to ask, about the practical reasons for emphasizing subjective *reality* in relation to the “religious address” and the question of epistemic authority.

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3.

Kierkegaard and Bergson in Context

Both Kierkegaard and Bergson have their respective contributions to make in our context. In part, they provide some of the basis from which the questions of this paper are raised, and hence, provide us with relevant concepts and frameworks in which we can discuss further what is meant by *a priority concern (address) with subjective reality*. I first want to pick up the theme that ended last chapter, with regards to a conscious and intended *opposition to reason*, its deconstructive gestures, epistemological restrictions, and the driving motivation of freeing the *real* and/or *writing*, from the “shackles of reason”. The *real*, in a Kierkegaardian sense, that which should be prioritized even above the most universally embracing concepts, values, and truths, is the *Single Individual* as “existence”.

The *single individual* constitutes the existential basis of religion as he engages and conceives it through Christianity in particular. On the basis of this existential primacy of the single individual as the “truth, the real” Kierkegaard’s epistemological assumptions are equally variant. His works are themselves published under various pseudonyms, each assuming a subjectivity (a stage on life’s way, as one of his books are titled) that constitutes the fundamental “subjective position” according to which, there are differences in how “truth”, “knowledge”, “reality” and “meaning” are *related* to, and consequently, to what extent these assumptions are inclusive (ontologically relational) or exclusive (ontologically independent). The import of Kierkegaard is that religion, in at least one of its senses, is an address and discourse, a dialogical drama about *and* through precisely this *subjective mobility of inwardness*, and as such, *subjective mobility* itself should hypothetically be assumed and accounted for in approaching and studying “religion”, which therefore cannot be “located” anywhere satisfactory for observation and comprehensiveness.

3.1 Kierkegaard in Context:

There are fewer thinkers who have tackled the difference and dynamics between the “objective question of religion” or of “objective reflection” with regards to religion, and the “subjective question of religion”, than has Kierkegaard. Much the same as with Sufism’s distinction between *ilm*/science and *ma’rifa*/knowledge (gnosis) the latter necessitating a “qualitative/perceptual” and self-referential register of meaning (taste) to be prioritized, Kierkegaard constantly refers to “concrete particularity”, to “essential knowing” versus

“accidental knowing”, to the non-quantitative or *qualitative transition/leap* from one sphere of *existence* to another (which is preliminarily *absurd*, unnecessary, and “opposed to reason”), and most importantly with relation to the whole paper, to an *ever-reconstitutable/re-structurable* concept of religion, in which the single individual is the main actor (above the universal). In fact, Kierkegaard provocatively suggests that “[i]t is impressed upon us, in a curiously indirect and satirical way, and even if the lesson goes unheeded, that the guidance of science in *this matter* misguides.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 109). So the prioritization of the individual, is not merely a call for individuality to be constituted in law, but the implications of the category of “singularity” as constituting individual existence on a philosophy of religion, or a religious philosophy. How would the *religious address* be appropriated and viewed, if we posit it in its primary relation to the singularity of consciousness, rather than a general or common understanding of “humanity” or the “social order”?

Describing himself as a “religious poet”, that he is a writer who “is nothing of a philosopher; he is, *poetica et eleganter*, an amateur writer who neither writes the System nor *promises* of the System, who neither subscribes to the System nor ascribes anything to it.” (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 34). Seen to be the “father of existentialism”, we find again in Kierkegaard the provocative convergence of “religion” with “non-religion”, theists take pride in the fact that he is a Christian, while atheists extract the existential “core” from a Christianly inspired language. Taking seriously the fact that the source or founder of “existentialism”, a philosophy whose main categories are self-referential *qualities* of *individual existence* (including *anxiety, despair, self, irony, inwardness, existential stages, absurd, leap, sacrifice, temptation, repetition, trembling, love, duty, objective and subjective reflections, essential and accidental knowing, and indirect communication*) are inspired through a *religious life* bent on philosophy, suggests already that the *existential* realm in which Kierkegaard reflects on religion and which is addressed primarily by religion, is limited to a self-referential register in the life of the *Single Individual*. By self-referential is meant a reflection on religion, not in terms of doctrines, speculation, or history but in terms of “movement”, of dynamism, and “stages on *life’s way*” from the point of view of the *subjective* individual, rather than from the point of view of the “objectivity” or “universality” of a theory, science, theology, or philosophy of religion.

The questions that will hopefully guide this chapter onward, will be regarding Kierkegaard’s distinction between different conceptions of “truth” along “objective” and “subjective” modes of reflection and communication.

Kierkegaard has been received in two main ways, between those who read him as a realist, making truth and doctrinal claims, and those who see in him a proto-poststructuralist (Hannay, 1998, p. 9). In as much as I am arguing for and from Kierkegaard's position that "the truths of ethics—and indeed those of religion—being directly related as they are to the lives of 'poor existing individuals', must be continually rethought and reassessed by the subjective beings for whom such truths matter" (Dooley, 2001, p. 4), our reading of him will be through the latter camp. I believe this illuminates some aspects of Sufism's "ways" in its similarly motivated resistance to the impatience to *know* or *identify*, but also helps to illuminate the reasons for the theoretical limits of a scientific study of religion.

3.2 Truth for Kierkegaard

In contrast to the idea of truth couched in the first chapter; truth of religion as the objective correspondence between the theoretical and the empirical or phenomenal, Kierkegaard continually argues that, when religion/Christianity is under consideration, *and as long as it is the interest of the single individual who is seeking his/her own relation to truth*, the notion of "identity of thought and being" as objective correspondent truth is seen to be *irrelevant* and sometimes even *obstructive* to what is sought religiously⁶. Religion being bound and absorbed in the *actuality of life*, renders the *identity of thought and being* to be "...an illusion because when 'being' is thought, it is transformed into possibility and one 'abstracts' from its actuality, which is bound up with its concrete particularity." (Evans, 164). In general, for Kierkegaard to "think about some concrete reality is always to apply to it some concept and for Kierkegaard a concept is essentially a possibility, a possible way of being." (Evans, 164). He thus constitutes or observes a constitution of polarity in the human being, an impasse between the concreteness of an existential life and the abstractness of speculative or historical thought, and along the same lines, the concreteness of *subjective truth*, and the abstractness of *objective truth*. This perhaps resonates with Geertz's comment that "[w]orship and analysis are simply impossible to carry out together,..." (Geertz, 1971, p. 108)

The different senses of "true/truth" are, like the different senses of the "real/reality" in the previous chapter, splintered between different *epistemic authorities* expressed in Kierkegaard in terms of a polarity between "subjective reflection" and "objective reflection". Being a polarity, or a binary, allows Kierkegaard to view his other more existential concerns

⁶ "Religiously" in English can also carry the meaning of "seriously", or "scrupulously" (Geddes & Grosset, 653).

of “movement” and “transition” and “stages on life’s way”, in terms of a spectrum of possible relations a subject/person can have between these two views and relations of/to *truth*. The relevance of his discussion to our context, lies in the need we have to elaborate on the different senses of truth and reality, on the conceptual level of our “subjective” structural relation to “truth”, between two different paradigms or registers of language and meaning; namely, science (or objectivity more generally), and religion.

Kierkegaard declares in an intentionally provocative opposition to his contemporaneously *general* philosophical world, particularly Hegelian philosophy, science, and the Church that “truth is *subjectivity*” (Kierkegaard, 1846). However, “[t]he thesis that truth is subjectivity is explicitly said to apply only to a particular kind of truth, the truth that is ‘essential’ to human existence, and it is clear enough for Kierkegaard this means moral and religious truth, the truth about how human life should be lived.” (Evans, 172). So it is not that Kierkegaard does not believe in any objective truth, but rather,

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual’s relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 199).

What Kierkegaard expresses here concerning religion and subjective truth, is expressed the same by Eric Fromm with regards to his conception of love, “love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an *attitude*, an *orientation of character* which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole.” (Fromm, 1956, p. 36). In that sense, religion too, and its concern with the reflection on the “individual’s relation” is “not primarily a relationship to a *specific*” divinity or truth but “is an *attitude*, an *orientation of character* which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole.” Perhaps a closer look at Kierkegaard’s critique of “objectivity” in its various methodological manifestations (between speculation and historical views) is important to understand what Kierkegaard views as the uniquely *subjective* concern of religion/Christianity.

In the introduction to his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard writes,

You may indeed complete a house even if it lacks a bell-pull, but in a scientific structure the lack of a conclusion has retroactive power to make the beginning doubtful and hypothetical, i.e., unsystematic...[the speculating philosopher] reads and reads, he grasps something, but above all he puts his hope in the clarifying reflection that the conclusion will cast over the whole.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 15)

Primarily important of course, is this notion that a systematic philosophy promises that “it’s only when the end has been reached that everything will become clear.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 14). In other words, religion in an objective scientific structure, is invalidated until hypothetically the “system” which grasps it is completed. The problem with this is obvious, namely, that the first transition from “non-believer to believer” already assumes a “qualitative transition” in which uncertainty and incompleteness is part and parcel of the structure or rather, movement of belief. Thus, “...to want to quantify oneself into faith along this path is a misunderstanding, a delusion, [for fear of succeeding] in transforming faith into something else, into another form of certainty, substituting *probability* and guarantees...” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 13). The delusion according to Kierkegaard, is from a certain attitude or reception of what “faith” means, or how it used to be a life-time accomplishment and now taken for granted as a given, as a phenomenon perhaps? “The system’s presupposition that faith is given dissolves into a conceit into which the system has deluded itself, that it knows what faith is.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 16) This is extremely relevant to what we brought up with regards to religion as phenomenon or empirical field of inquiry. It is assumed that religion, or the question of religion has its response in the “religious”, the empirically associated variables of religious forms. However, the religious for Kierkegaard seems to always be self-referential, not selfish, but as he says, “...without having understood Christianity, since I merely pose the question, I have nevertheless grasped this much, that it wants to make the single individual eternally happy, and that it presupposes precisely in the individual himself *this infinite interest in his blessedness as condition sine qua non*; an interest by virtue of which he hates father and mother, and doubtless also cares less about speculative systems and world-historical outlines.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 17).

The first chapter, “the historical view”, is concerned with the view of Christianity as a “historical document”. The important task for Kierkegaard in this view would be to “obtain completely reliable reports of what the Christian doctrine really is.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p.

21), even if nowadays the focus is not on doctrine but on secularization and/of religious authority, the task would still be to trace the reports, trace the empirically viable events that shows the changes, movements, and transformations of the religious field. In this sense, and here Kierkegaard sounds a lot like some of the quoted Sufi passages from last chapter how “[f]aith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come straightforwardly.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 26). The historical view as he says would result in the subject despairing “straight away, because nothing is easier to see than that with regard to history the greatest certainty is after all only an approximation, and an approximation is too little to base his happiness on...” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 21). However, I should note that perhaps the audience that Kierkegaard is assuming in his address, what he calls “my reader”, is the reader particularly interested in his “eternal happiness” or “eternal truth” and I do not read it as a statement about the historical study of religion, only the historical study of religion for someone interested in his own relation to religion, or more generally, to the real understood as grounded in selfhood.

But looked at in another way (i.e., objectively), the phenomenal is a deception...compared to the Hegelian principle, that the external is the internal and the internal the external, it is indeed highly original. But it would be even more original not only were the Hegelian axiom admired by our age but also had it retroactive power to abolish, in historical reverse, the distinction between the visible and the indivisible Church. The invisible Church is no historical phenomenon; it cannot as such be observed objectively at all, because it is only in subjectivity.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 47).

In other words, he is not concerned with whether an objective approach to religion has its admirable results in its objective way, but that a religious interest, or an individual interested in his/her own existence, cannot be satiated by such methods *precisely because* they are objective. Westphal describes Kierkegaard’s conception of faith in these terms, “Faith is not merely beyond reason, it is against it.” (Westphal, p. 143). On the other hand, Kierkegaard doesn’t seem to suggest that only a Christian in the sense that he understands Christianity can have an infinite interest in his own happiness, or be able to realize such an interest, rather he explicitly expresses that “only two kinds of persons can know anything about [Christianity], those who with an infinite passionate interest in their eternal happiness base this, their happiness, in faith, upon their believing relationship to Christianity, and those who with an opposite passion (but in passion) reject it—the happy and the unhappy lovers.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 46).

As for the “speculative view” it has the main “virtue of being without presuppositions”, it starts from what is given, and thus the one assumption it makes is that Christianity is a given. “It is assumed that we are all Christians...speculative philosophy is far too civil...once it was at the risk of life that one dared to profess oneself a Christian, now doubting that one is so is something to worry about.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 44). That is, it abstracts from the “struggle” that is a concrete and particular process, with a certain kind and understanding of “risk”. Another aspect of the speculative view for Kierkegaard is perhaps relevant to the ambition of transforming religion into the content of a philosophy or a theory; in his words, “converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept” (Kierkegaard, 1849, p. 34).

Of course if Christianity is essentially something objective, then the observer too must be objective. But if Christianity is essentially subjective, it is a mistake if the observer is objective. For with all knowledge where the object of knowledge is the very inwardness of the subjectivity, it is also the case that the knower must be in this state. (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 46-7).

Since for Kierkegaard Christianity is interested in each single individual’s relation to eternal happiness, or the truth about how one should live, it becomes clear why he considers objectivity to be a “most unfortunate category” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 29) with regards to Christianity, for in fact, “Christianity protests against all objectivity; it wants the subject to be infinitely concerned with itself.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 109). It becomes clear why an objective reflection with regards to “religion”, as from a religious point of view, cannot according to Kierkegaard be relevant to a religiously interested or motivated question:

But for the speculating philosopher the question of his personal eternal happiness just cannot arise, for the very reason that his task consists in getting more and more away from himself, and becoming objective, thus vanishing from himself and becoming speculation’s contemplative power...This can also be expressed as follows: speculative philosophy simply prevents the problem from emerging, so its whole answer is only a mystification.

(Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 49).

In general, there is a sense one gets from reading Kierkegaard, of a caution not to confuse “knowledge” with “faith”, and confusing “objective knowledge” with “subjective knowledge” and therefore their related notions of “truth”. he considers that “in such a precarious position...much effort, much fear and trembling, will be required if he is not to

fall into *temptation and confuse knowledge with faith.*” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 26). And with regards to the kind of objective approximation of truth with “proofs”, he asks, “For whose sake is the proof furnished? Faith has no need of it, indeed must even consider it its enemy.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 27).

In a subjective register of truth and meaning, particularly with regards to one’s intimate appropriation of the religious address, the discussion can always seem to be too self-referential. That nothing from outside is allowed to be the concern of everyone, but only me myself, is not just a selfish drive, but a responsibility. “The problem concerns only me by myself; partly because if properly posed it will concern each in the same way; and partly because all the others have faith already as something given, as a trifle they do not even think very highly of, or as a trifle that only amounts to something when tricked out of.” (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 18). However, Kierkegaard’s emphasis that the knower cannot know absolutely the objective truth of religion or the actuality of existence paints Kierkegaard with a Kantian brush that separates the *noumenal* from the possibility of knowing something absolutely. There seems to be a skeptical outlook but as C. Stephan Evans notes, Kierkegaard

...has his own answer to the skeptic, one that emphasizes what might be called the noumenal quality of the thinker’s own existence. The existing individual can know himself as actuality without transforming that actuality into possibility. The individual subject ‘is able to know what lives within him—the only actuality that does not become a possibility by being known and is not something that can be known only by being thought.’ (Evans, 164).

He continues to note how this can be interpreted to mean that Kierkegaard is saying that the only “thing in-itself” that can be known is the agent’s own reality, and thus that one must take a skeptical position about the ‘external world’.” (Evans, 165). The crucial question for Kierkegaard then, when it comes to the question of religion, “is not whether a person’s beliefs are objectively right but whether the person has the right kind of relationship to what is believed.” (Evans, 173). The obvious question this raises, and which is extremely relevant in the context of the current Islamic puritanical movements running rampant, is how do we view or evaluate the “sincere Nazi” or “sincere ISIS fighter”? Evans emphasizes that “[i]n the end, his position is not that what a person believes is unimportant but that how a person believes is crucially important.” (Evans, 173).

3.3 Essential Knowing, and Reason as Established Order

Perhaps in the notion of “essential knowing” that Kierkegaard’s differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity comes to be clearer as valued in relation to “existence”.

All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowing whose relation to existence is essential, is essential knowing. Essentially viewed, the knowing that does not inwardly in the reflection of inwardness pertains to existence is accidental knowing, and its degree and scope, essentially viewed, are a matter of indifference. That essential knowing is essentially related to existence does not, however, signify the above-mentioned abstract identity between thinking and being, nor does it signify that the knowledge is objectively related to something else as its object, but it means that the knowledge is related to the knower, who is essentially an existing person, and that all essential knowing is therefore essentially related to existence and to existing. (Dooley, 2001, p. 3)

To return to the premise and theme of resistance to reason, two things can be said. First, as Kierkegaard associates reason with what he refers to as the “established order” (society, church, mass media) it does not pertain to “essential knowing”, since the established order is, according to him, an abstraction from the existing individual. Reason for Kierkegaard, is not merely a “truth tracking faculty” in the human, but also a process and as such, cannot be directly assimilated without simultaneously becoming a mimesis of a pattern already established. Reason, in one of its senses, is the *established order* and in that sense alone, must be opposed for the sake of the existing individual’s singularity, and for the sake of preserving the very order opposed. This brings me to the second point to be made about this, namely, the *teleological suspension* which makes sense of this opposition to reason, not on its own merit as a dogmatic and irreversible opposition, but a teleological one, meaning, a temporary opposition hypothesized to be part and parcel of the growth to selfhood, part of an awareness of what Ibn ‘Arabi called earlier the “actual situation”.

3.4 The Single Individual, the Crowd, and teleological suspension

There is a common reading of Kierkegaard as a philosopher of isolated subjectivity, Mark Dooley notes that “[u]ntil recently, Kierkegaard was appraised as a champion of isolated subjectivity, individuality...’objectless subjectivity’” (Dooley, xiii), and consequently, that his concern for ethics, politics, and society are overridden by his concern for the *paradox of faith* that the “*single individual, though bound by the universal, is higher than the universal*” (Kierkegaard, 1844, p. 26). In a sense, what Kierkegaard is arguing is

that religion is not all about “ethics” nor is ethical existence the highest possible existence for a human being. Faith is a separate and paradoxically higher sphere. It is true that Kierkegaard views the religious address in an exclusive relation to the single individual, however, it is not accurate to conclude from that fact alone that his philosophy doesn’t carry strong political and social ramifications. In fact, Mark Dooley’s book *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Responsibility*, in his own words “[b]uilds upon the work of these commentators [such as Merold Westphal and C. Stephen Evans] by drawing out the ethical and political implications of Kierkegaard’s work by coming at his writings from a specifically Derridean perspective.” (Dooley, 2001, p. xiii).

The political perspective is inseparable from his prioritization of the “single individual” as a category of religious thinking, hiding within it a *non-deconstructable* otherness, non-deconstructible in the sense of Kierkegaard’s “doubly reflected” reason⁷. In his book *Provocations*, in the section titled “The Individual”, he says this of God’s address,

Every call from God is always addressed to one person, the single individual. Precisely in this lies the difficulty and the examination, that the one who is called must stand alone, walk alone, alone with God. Hence, everything that makes it appearance statistically is not from above. If anyone construes this as a call, you can be sure it is from below. (Kierkegaard, 1844, p. 313).

And yet, in the introduction to the same book, Charles E. Moore notes that “the single individual is decisive in forming community.” (Kierkegaard, 1844, p. 64). This is so, because Kierkegaard distinguishes between two concepts of social togetherness or collectivity, that of the community and that of the crowd. While the former is a “community of neighbors” in the sense of individuals gathered as individuals in an *event* without dissolving into a collective togetherness, the latter is an “abstraction in which one loses himself”, is deeply related to “cowardice”, and is not represented by “any one”. He says of it, that in relation to truth, the crowd is “untruth”. He also relegates it to nature in a manner that reminds me of Bergson’s own approach to be discussed later in this chapter; “Instinctively, ‘man’ has a tactic he uses against ‘spirit’: Let us form a crowd!” (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 243).

⁷ From Mark Dooley’s *Politics of Exodus*, “...‘doubly reflect’ reason. This is not the reason of speculative philosophy, nor is it enlightened reason, but it is a form of ethical or religious reason, or reflection, that is guided by the appeal from the other for a response to his or her plight. The ethics of responsibility does not give up on reason, but seeks rather to make it more liberating and engaged and less dispassionate and impartial.” (p. xxi).

It is this paradoxical priority of *singular relationality* to God, the real, the right, the true, whether in religious registers or in scientific ones that is necessary, in order to prevent falling in the *temptation* of relating through the abstract established order of the crowd (idolatry), and treat it in Kierkegaard's terms, as a *court of last resort in relation to truth*. There is, in other words, a methodological concern from the side of the subject, with regards to *how* truth is related to, and how it transforms in different situations and caught up by different authorities. This concern translates into an almost doctrinal opposition to theology and system-building, and redraws religious thinking in the bounds and dynamics of singularity, of consciousness, and of relations to others, and to the Real.

The single individual is decisive in forming community. He can at any moment become higher than community, specifically, as soon as 'the others' fall away from the eternal. The cohesiveness of community comes from each one's being a single individual before the eternal. The connectedness of a public, however, or rather its disconnectedness, consists of the numerical character of everything. Only the single individual guarantees community; the public is a chimera. In community the single individual is a microcosm who qualitatively reproduces the cosmos. Community is certainly more than a sum, but yet it is truly a sum of ones. The public, on the other hand, is non-sense—a sum of negative ones, of ones who are not ones. (Kierkegaard, 1844, p. 241).

By staying outside the reasonable and established order, or by continually suspending it in *return* to the self, the individual can play the role of reforming, or reconstituting the social. Religions themselves have been founded and established by peripheral characters who are outsiders to the system. The Quran, in its own words, speaks of the tension between the established and the revealed: the command "follow what Allah has sent down", has been expectedly met with resistance from the "crowd", almost exactly in the Kierkegaardian sense, fencing *itself* with the rationale: "Rather we will follow what we found our forefathers practicing. Wasn't it the case that their ancestors didn't understand a thing and were void of guidance." (2:170). And for Kierkegaard, his "ethical exemplars (Socrates, Abraham, and the God-man) are outlaws to a degree, on the margins of all established ethical and religious paradigms." (Dooley, 2001, p. 5).

Having the rationale for a *suspension of the ethical* in the service of what is higher, and yet unknown, and also ethical, Dooley writes how

[t]he aim of the teleological suspension of the ethical is to reinforce the fact that our ethical codes are ineluctably open to revision, since they are the formulations of existing individuals

who are always in the process of becoming, forever subject to the vagaries of time and contingency. (Dooley, 2001, p. xviii).

I want to stress, perhaps unnecessarily, that our concern is not the “ethical” dimension of religion, nor to formulate or argue in relation to an ethical philosophy, the point to be taken is rather, that there is in the “teleological suspension *of the general/ethical order*”, a more epistemological and existential concern which is the one relevant to us.

Approaching Kierkegaard through a Derridean lens, invites Dooley to link Kierkegaard’s logic of mobility, contingency, time and *becoming*, with responsibility which as he says, “...requires us to keep both the *law* and our *dominant* ethical codes open to revision so as to serve the interests of existing individuals and not the reverse.” (Dooley, xix). However, the suspension does not amount to a “leveling of the ethical” but, a responsibility that is constituted in a “teleological reconfiguration”, (Dooley, 2001, p. xix).

...[Kierkegaard] might have realized that the one abiding concern throughout is how to release the ethical from the sclerosis of dogma so as to keep it focused on what is essential and primary in all ethical considerations, that is, the single individual.” (Dooley, 2001, p. xix)

3.5 The Leap (*Knowing not to know*)

“Climacus borrows the category of the leap from Lessing, who says that ‘accidental historical truths could never become evidence of eternal truths of reason’ and that ‘the transition whereby one will build an eternal truth on a historical account is a leap’ (CUP, 79)” (Westphal, 2010, p. 134).

Kierkegaard’s concept of the *leap* (understood to be the leap *off/to* faith) is interwoven in our context by now, with a number of other points discussed. The leap, also known as the “qualitative transition”, or what I earlier called “movement” and “mobility”, is a *subjective movement*, a resolution to/by a decisive choice, which cannot be quantitatively and automatically determined. For an example, he talks about “skepticism” not as a problem of logic to be *solved*, but a “willed standpoint” and “[t]o the degree that skepticism rests on a resolution, it can only be ended by a resolution.” (Evans, 164). What does that mean

epistemologically? That there is a “knowing” that is constituted in “knowing not to know” (as Derrida’s chapter subtitle on Kierkegaard’s, *Fear and Trembling* has it) in the very moment of taking a step that (curiously) calls for knowing. He writes in the third chapter of his *The Gift of Death*, titled “Whom To Give To”, that “[e]ven if one thinks one knows what is going to happen, the new instant of that happening remains untouched, still inaccessible, in fact unlivable.” (Derrida, 54). Fear and trembling themselves are constituents of the leap, they define the fact that the *leap* is always underlined by a non-knowledge, an absurdity from the point of view of the subject before springing into the leap.

In line with our original contextualizing theme of an intentional provocation and opposition to reason, to objectivity, to definition, Ferreira notes that Kierkegaard tells us first about the leap in the context of what we can call the “folly of proving God’s existence”, and there “it is tied to the concept of letting go. Climacus highlights the limits of demonstration when he remarks that what passes for demonstration is usually only a case of developing ‘the definition of a concept’.” (Ferreira, 209).

The *leap*, as a concept expresses the contrast between existential transitions between subjective and objective requirements. Objectively, in the language of Kierkegaard, the transitioning is quantitatively dialectical, follows the immanent spirit of reason and is characteristically “direct and immediate”. *Direct and immediate* refers to “the cumulative, automatic, Hegelian type of transition in which something passively ‘flops over’ by ‘immanental necessity’” (Ferreira, 210). On the other hand, his concept of a “qualitative dialectics”, involves a “*meta-basis eis allo genos (transition from one genus to another)*” (Ferreira, 207), a “letting go” which is initiated by a “leap” or vice versa. Ferreira comments that the leap is “curiously active yet passive” (Ferreira, 210).

Moreover, the *leap* is essentially silent. Derrida relates in his book Abraham’s teleological suspension (as a leap to/by faith) to “responsibility”. The responsibility with which the individual must deal with the leap to/by faith, is a singular responsibility or in Derrida’s terms “absolute responsibility” between the secret subjective individual and God, contrasted with the “general responsibility” of the *universality of ethics*. The importance of religion remaining in the parameters of the single individual, as a matter of consciousness, is therefore paramount for every individual and every religion.

3.6 Direct and Indirect Communication

Along the lines of “essential” and “accidental” knowing, the notion of indirect communication in Kierkegaard relies on a similar distinction with regards to “secrecy” or

“privacy”. First, he distinguishes between direct and indirect, with relation to “subjective” and “objective” thinking, and the briefly mentioned notion of “double reflection”. Through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, he writes, “ordinary communication, objective thinking, has no secrets; only doubly reflected subjective thinking has secrets; that is, *all its essential content is essentially a secret.*” (Turnbull, 13)

What Kierkegaard here calls “essentially a secret”, is really not a matter of “keeping” a secret but *being* one. The single individual in the inwardness of a singularly accessible phenomenal self, is *essentially* a secret. This secret, which is the subject, can communicate and be communicated only “indirectly”.

The prospect of indirect communication is related for us also to the question of religious authority. For the form of communication must carry traces of the kind of authority religious authority is. “Prescription” as we mentioned before and will discuss in the coming chapter, is a communicative qualification, in the sense that it is not the content of the prescriptive communication that matters, but the prerequisite movement of the subject, which opens up the communication to the self. In other words, the indirection is intended to *involve* the reader/subject/believer in an activity of sorts. A short yet dense example that perhaps needs a separate study, is the repeated Qur’anic command to “Say!”. In context of course, God tells the Prophet to “say” this or that in response to a certain event or occasion. But the “say” is involved in the verse as part of it. The point being, that command of “saying”, the “Say!” of the verse, is first an act of reminder of something already known, and second, more important than the assimilation of the knowledge in what is said. Even if the knowledge is assimilated already, the command “say”, keeps it in a living state, reminded by the *saying*, and reminding to *say*.

Ambiguity as indirect communication then, besides being a kind of communication in which the purpose is not merely to say something, but to say something in such a *way* as to elicit a response *in or from* the listener/reader/subject, (a response can be a silent one). Turnbull, in his article on Kierkegaard’s indirect communication and ambiguity, quotes Vanessa Rumble’s statement that “if a single characteristic can be cited as *central* to the practice [of indirect communication], it is the communicator’s simultaneous presentation of opposing qualities...The text’s artfully sustained *ambiguity* draws attention to the multiplicity of possible readings of a work and the reader’s activity in appropriating it.” (Turnbull, 15). Ambiguity in communication, or as a form of communication, can be easily likened or compared with Ibn ‘Arabi’s style of writing, and conceptually, to the notion of the *impossibility of the Real*, in which the simultaneous *tanzih* and *tashbih* (comparability and

transcendence), or in fact, the simultaneity of “anything being ‘He, not He—*huwa la huwa*”, is similarly a restriction of *saying something definitively* about God, that ambiguity is in fact, a necessary condition of realization: “[True] guidance means being guided to bewilderment, that he might know that the whole affair [of God] is perplexity, which means perturbation and flux, and flux is life.” (Almond, 32).

The “simultaneous presentation of opposite qualities” is the point of bewilderment, and their resolution is not “either/or” resolution, but a tolerance of ambiguity that, if held to its most honest end, resolves itself *in* “perplexity”. For just this intention, indirect communication exists, and for this reason I believe religion, in the specific way received by certain types of religiosities, is an indirect form of communication that seeks to guide us to bewilderment, not necessarily by shocking us with “miracles” let’s say, but perhaps, and this is the argument of the paper, by opposing that faculty or function, which reduces the phenomenological freshness of *perceptivity* to a kind of indifferent and uninspiring perception of the *same*. Religion seeks in its indirect ways, to re-inspire perceptivity by undermining what is *taken for granted* as ordinary.

3.7 Bergson’s Spectrum of Religion(s).

In Henry Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, there is a strong resemblance to some of Kierkegaard’s intuitions, expressed not so much in Kierkegaard’s literary rhetoric and opposition to science, reason, or the public in general, but nevertheless, accounting for “opposition to intelligence” in his more objectively accommodating philosophy. And like Kierkegaard’s Single Individual, Bergson also thinks about mysticism and mystics as borderline figures whose function with regards to society, or the “established order” (reason, theology, science, philosophy) can be likened to Kierkegaard’s *teleological (reconfiguration) suspension*. Primarily important in this comparison, is Bergson’s valuation of mysticism, his distinction between *dynamic and static* functions and forms of religion, and his understanding of religion in relation to “nature”—the vital impetus, consciousness, and motion.

He criticizes explanations that attempt to account for religion by demonstrating its *necessity* to life: “[a]nd the explanation is the same in psychology as in biology: the existence of a function is accounted for, when we have shown how and why it is necessary to life. Now novelists and dramatists are certainly not necessities; the myth-making faculty in general does not correspond to a vital need.” (Bergson, 1935, p. 166) This in particular reminds me of Nishitani’s question of *what kind of necessity religion is?* Philosophical concepts in general

for Bergson, but in our case particularly, philosophies of religion "...are to be judged not by their logical coherence, but their power of giving us sympathetic appreciation of different shades of experience; they must be 'supple, mobile, and almost fluid representations, always ready to mold themselves on the fleeting forms of intuition.'" (Emmet, 232).

More in line with where we are coming from in Kierkegaard, a general reading of Bergson's text easily connects with some of the points we mentioned from Kierkegaard. For instance, he says that "moral life will be rational life", and yet, "...because we have established the rational character of moral conduct, it does not follow that morality has its origin or even its foundation in pure reason." (Bergson, 1935, p. 85). I want to explore in more focus some of Bergson's own ideas and distinctions. In particular, I want to explore his "two sources" of morality and religion, the relation between "religion" and "mysticism" in this context and in ours, and the place of the "individual" in this relation. Finally, through presenting these three elements, I would like to contextualize this paper within Bergson's framework.

3.8 The Two Sources of Morality and Religion:

In his book, Bergson makes a distinction between two types of morality and religion, "static" and "dynamic". He spends a lot of time discussing the purpose of static religion with regards to "social preservation", and its method of operation through what he calls the "myth-making function". However, along with our context of an opposition to self-determination through reason, language, and object-oriented reflection, he writes,

We have been dealing with the first function of religion, that which directly concerns social preservation. Now let us come to the other. Once more we shall see it working for the good of society, but indirectly, by stimulating and guiding individual activities... We must always remember that the sphere of life is essentially that of instinct; that along a certain line of evolution instinct has to some extent made room for intelligence; that this may lead to a disturbance of life; that nature, in such circumstances, has no other resource than to set up intelligence against intelligence. The intellectual representation which thus restores the balance to nature's advantage is of a *religious* order. (Bergson, 1935, p. 129).

A clear and obvious difference between the two authors dealt with in this chapter has already shown itself, namely, that when we talk about "Life" we are in the "sphere of instinct". I do not think that Kierkegaard would say the same, rather, he would speak of "existence and *existing*" as the sphere of life. However, Kierkegaard is intentionally

provoking the “highest pitch of subjectivity” thereby the very concept of “life” would probably not be exclusively about instinct, or “instinct” would not be about “biology”, viewed subjectively. On the other hand, Bergson is amalgamating several registers, from “experience”, “introspection”, and “intuition” (which account for the subjective) to “creative evolution”, “natural tendencies”, and “instinct” (which account for the objective).

The occurrence in mystics of just such an [perceptive] experience would then make it possible to add something to the results already established, whilst these established results would reflect back on to the mystical experience something of their own objectivity. Experience is the only source of knowledge. (Bergson, 1935, p. 248).

What is relevant about Bergson’s distinction between *two sources of religion*, is first, that the primary relation of religion, is not with “man” as such, but with *nature, life, consciousness*, and the *elan vital—vital impetus*, which through their interaction with “matter” (meaning the matter of objective reality), brings it to life in human form. What is essential for him then, is not the relation of religion directly to that which is “human”, but indirectly addresses the foundation of that form, the *vital impetus* of life and creative evolution, which he has come about “...by following as closely as possible the evidence of biology...” (Bergson, 1935, p. 249). This, for me, opens up the question of religion from its bracketed situation in the “religious” and breaks the notion that what religion is can be deduced from the patterns of its empirically observable power relations, cultural forms, or historical transformations. Something about politics is learned, by studying the politics of religious discourse, and something about history and something about culture, through looking at religion, but as Sanford Krolick says with regards to the phenomenology of religion that observes and categorizes “facts”, that “[s]uch an approach merely succeeds in offering a rationalization for similarities obtaining between diverse religious objects and appearances. It does not really illuminate those essential structures which are the very condition for the possibility of the religious mode of being.” (Krolick, 196). It is somehow the component of human life (individually, socially, culturally) that dialogically works to reconstitute the *relation* of individualities to this life. Religion in a sense, follows Bergson’s description of “life” as, a “reality that is making itself in a reality that is unmaking itself” within the individual, the social, the political and the cultural.

The other even more important point, is that when intelligence is set up *against* intelligence in order to reconfigure the vitality of intelligence to its natural balance, that such

an opposition is from and of the “religious order”. It is a process that is entirely internal to “religion”. Hence, separation of the religious spheres from “other” spheres, virtually petrifies religion, makes it indifferent, because it is made different and separate. Along the lines of a question asked by my first professor of Sufism in the American University in Cairo, “Is Sufism a kind of religion, or is religion a kind of Sufism?” Bergson makes the claim that “Religion is to mysticism what popularization is to science”, inverting the relationship between mysticism and religion with regards to a more fundamental reality from which religion emerges. He answers in favor of the idea that “religion is a kind of Sufism”. This inversion is first, in relation to the study of religion itself, that the core of a religion is often in a counter-tendency to what is usually attributed and empirically prioritized as *that* “religion”. In that sense, a philosophy of religion has more to learn from mysticism than it does from static forms of religiosity, unless the philosopher is interested in a historical, social, or political dimension, which then can be just as much a historical, social, or political account, in association with religion but not *of* religion. Philosophy of religion should prioritize the mystical dimension of religion, precisely because mysticism shares Bergson’s concern for concepts and terms that are “supple, mobile, and almost fluid...”. Second, this point in particular explains why I conflate between Sufism, religion, and mysticism throughout the paper.

Finally, a last input from Bergson relates to the singularity of religious thinking, or of thinking about religion with regards to its essence, which is in the single individual. That is not to say that the more we understand the “individual” the more “open” forms of religion and morality will become more understandable, but to say that the only chance we have of comprehending religion, is by relating its address to the individual, who has two registers.

Whichever of these two methods be adopted, in both cases the foundations of human nature have been taken into account, whether considered statically in itself or dynamically in its origin. The mistake would be to think that moral pressure and moral aspiration find their final explanation in social life considered merely as a fact. We are fond of saying that society exists, and that hence it inevitably exerts a constraint on its members, and that this constraint is obligation. But in the first place, for society to exist at all the individual must bring into it a whole group of inborn tendencies; society therefore is not self-explanatory; so we must search below the social accretions, get down to Life, of which human societies, as indeed the human species altogether, are but manifestations. But this is not going far enough; we must delve deeper still if we want to understand, not only how society “constrains” individuals, but again

how the individual can step up as a judge and wrest from it a moral transformation. (Bergson, 1935, p. 100).

Conclusion:

Before leaving Kierkegaard and Bergson, let me recuperate the reasons why they were relevant to the paper as a whole, and how their terms and approaches help contextualize it. Starting with the question of the relation between the question/study of religion and its object of study, we decided to bring in Sufism as representing a religious discipline heavily focused on the subjective dimension of the religious life. We did so, in order to contrast this focus with the academic and objective focus of a “science of religion” and of objectivity. Kierkegaard and Bergson provide precisely the kind of thinking about religion that leaves open registers of thought and *self*-reference/exploration that does not wish to determine what religion essentially is in definitive language. Despite the fact that Bergson does give a few definitions, he does so in relation to a polarity (such as the one Kierkegaard employs) between “static” and “dynamic”, and so the definitions are merely relative to these concepts, and are themselves *orders of nature* itself and addresses Life in its depth, not as “man” or “human”, but as consciousness.

The next chapter, about the text of an obscure Sufi from the ninth century A.D.E (second century A.H.), comes in this context in several ways. First, it is an example of what I repeatedly called the *dialogical relationality* of the *religious address*. Second, it is an example of how, in line with Bergson’s inversion, mysticism is the origin of religion and religion is the memory of mysticism, simply because mysticism provides a discourse in which “supple, mobile, and fluid” language is employed on a *religious order*, and in relation to “religious experience”. Finally, it is an example of a *deconstructive* Sufi text, and from which the notion of “prescription” as the quality of religious authority arose.

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Al-Niffari: Against Siwa

“He said to me: The veils that can be communicated, are but a speck of the veils that cannot be communicated.” (Nwya⁸, 1973, p. 240-1)

For Al-Niffari, as for others in Sufism, there is only two: God who *is the Real*, and *al Siwa* (Everything other-than-He) the “unreal”. And there are no guarantees as to whether one’s actions are in one or the other, one must act in faith. With regards to writing, reflection, and *science* (‘ilm), Niffari recalls God’s command to him, “Neither write nor study nor reckon nor examine” (Niffari, *mw 34:14*⁹, p. 70), because all of these can flip over from a concentration on the Real to a dispersion in Siwa, other-than-real. This is so, because along the lines of Kierkegaard’s understanding of truth, “something I am willing to live and die for”, Niffari writes, “[t]ruth is that which, were the people of heaven and earth to turn you from it, you would not be turned: falsehood is that which, were the people of heaven and earth to invite you to it, you would not comply” (Niffari, *mw 52:2*, p. 89). Truth, is not in the text, but in the *relation* held between the text and the reader, and such a relation can only be governed by an “infinite concern”.

So far we have only tentatively mentioned the concept of prescription whenever we wanted to make a hypothetical contrast with the epistemic authority that was, also hypothetically, relegated to the question of religion appropriated scientifically/objectively. We have brought up the concept in the context of “epistemic authority”, and contrasted it with *correspondent and consensual* authority, dictated by the independent object. We have also brought it up in the context of *ways* of communication, and mentioned the ideas of *advice-command*. And finally, we have brought it up in the discussion of the *real* in our rudimentary relationship to it as *given*, prescribed as a *given order*. In this one concept, the three questions of epistemic authority, existential primacy, and communication are addressed.

I propose to think of “religious authority” as *prescriptive* not to justify an institutional hierarchical authority into the religious social field, but to realize that whenever a necessity

⁸In most cases, I will quote Niffari’s statement directly from the text translated by Arberry (1934), with the rare exception of a “mawqif” (statement) that either showed up in a secondary reading, and which reference some of Niffari’s texts that were published in later years in Paul Nwya’s *Nusus Sufiyya Ghayr Manshura, 1973*, or in Saeed Ghanemy’s *Al-Niffari: Nusus Sufiyya, 2007*. Wherever the latter is quoted, the translations are my own.

⁹I will use “mw” to indicate “mawqif”, the technical term for one of Niffari’s passages, followed by the number of the mawqif from which an address is made. In that case, 34 is *Mawqif (or Standing) of the Ineffable*, and the 14, is the “address” quoted above.

for prescription arises, the *religious* is there with it, or even more importantly, that prescription is a description of the way in which *meaning* impresses itself upon us, so that whenever a need for meaning arises, prescription also arises. Additionally, I want to take the aspect of religion that seems most controversial, and examine it rather disinterestedly, without accusing nor assuming in it the intention for “coercion” or a sheer desire to “control”, and instead to see in it simply an epistemological/existential principle. Examples of prescriptive authority outside the “religious” could include treatment programs such as the Narcotics Anonymous in which a previous x-addict prescribes for an addict a “program” he himself had treaded, or simply “following a course” in a university, prescription and the ethics of the religious are there with it to regulate *meaning*, between individual and course (of action). But as this concept itself emerged from a reading of Muhammad ibnAbdiL’Jabbar al-Niffari’s book, I would like to discuss the aforementioned concept in the framework of this much less known Sufi figure, and his text.

Al Niffari is a discrete Sufi wanderer from the 9th – 10th century A.D. E (3rd-4th centuries A.H) whose life, very little is known about, partially due to the fact that he lived in the “period of Sufi silence”¹⁰ following the brutal killing of al-Hallaj.

Jamāl al-Marzuqi relegates the reason for his neglect in the fact that Niffari himself did not write about his private life as other Sufis did. “This fact, Marzuki continues, might be added to al-Niffari’s errant life, which he spent in travel and solitude while having no fellowmen and disciples.” Saeed al-Ghanemy notes also in his introduction to Niffari’s text, that “his sincerity with his experience/experiement (*tagroba*) has obliged him to avoid even documenting it” (al-Ghanemy). Others, like Sami al-Yusuf suggested that the reason is that al-Niffari “committed himself to the principles of *taqiyya* (dissemination) and *takattum* (secrecy),...” (Qudsi, 409). Chittick on the other hand, explains his reason as follows: “He has not received nearly as much attention as he deserves mainly...because of the extreme density and obscurity of what he is saying”, or rather, *how* he is saying what he is saying. (Chittick, 2008, p. 188).

In any case, Niffari has left his imprint on Sufism and on the wider culture despite his own personal mystery. Some of his passages, such as “the more the vision expands, the expression narrows”—*Izaittasa’at al ru’yadakat al ebara*—(Niffary, *mw* 28:2, p. 64), has

¹⁰An expression used by the Egyptian scholar of Islam, *Youssef Zidan*, on his 2011 Ramadan program, *Al-‘Awliya’*, (*The Awleya – The Saints*)—*Literally*, “*protector, guardian, custodian*”—*implies*, a “*friend of God*”.

become a common saying considered a folkloric proverb whose author is generally unnoticed. Qudsi also compares Niffari with Bistami, first in the concept of *wuqūf* to be discussed later, but contrasting his general impression as follows,

What would be seen as a demonstration of the intense emotional experiences of Bistami became, in al-Niffari's work, a result of an intellectual and well-calculated act of writing. While Bistami's shatahat were an expression of living the emotional mystic state, the texts of al-Niffari could be seen as a deep study of the mystical state." (Qudsi, 411)

In Sufism more generally as we have come to see, "bewilderment" is precisely what the human is ideally "guided to". Ibn 'Arabi had said "know that the whole affair of God, is to be guided to bewilderment". That is, in explicit opposition to the theologians, and I would add scientific/objective goal of dispelling the *hayra* (to answer the question is the goal) and that the dispelling of *hayra* is a sure sign of progress in knowledge.

Sufi language of union would turn on its head the theological sense of *hayra*, finding in the irreducible character of the enigma a key to the language of mystical union. But this revalorizing of bewilderment was not an abandonment of theological disputation. In many instances Sufi language of mystical union interiorizes within its own movement both sides of the argument. (Sells, 1996, p. 96).

The question of religious authority for us in this context, can be seen as the question of the meaning of this dialogical interplay between "human agency" and "divine attributes" and is not directly a question about social forms of religious authority that arise with it. What Mark Chaves calls "religious authority", and defines as "reference to the supernatural" cannot in this context be appropriate for several reasons. First, even without the supernatural being referenced and without a particularly religious life, the type of authority that belongs to a "religious structure" is still in play, between "human agency and consciousness" and the *epistemic transcendence* of the real, that cannot be reduced to a matter of supernaturalism, if that is at all a *reduction*. Second, "supernatural" seems to express a certain realm of communication that exceeds what is conceded to, or what is hypothetically akin to be conceded to. Instead of the binary of "natural/supernatural", we should think of religious authority as a matter of our subjective constitution in the limits of singularity, and the degree to which subjectivity is able to recognize how the "incapacity to perceive perception is perception", or in Niffari's terms, veiled by a "near veil" rather than a "far veil". Niffari

writes God's address to him: "O Servant! Veil yourself from knowledge by knowledge, and you will be veiled by a near veil. Do not veil yourself from knowledge by ignorance, lest you be veiled by a far veil." (Chittick, 1996, p. 196). What counts for a question of authority for us, and of religious authority in particular, is not its relation to "nature", but of the induced relation of perception to its own "incapacity", not as a limitation of autonomy, but as an opening to a "double" perception, and a re-configurable self-relation.

4.1 A Note on Translation

There is one official translation of all of Niffari's text, or at least the two main books contained therein, "The book of spiritual Stayings" and "The book of spiritual Addresses". Therefore, I will necessarily be referring to this translation, even though, in other sources such as Michael Anthony Sells' *Early Islamic Mysticism*, where he writes an entire chapter on Niffari, translating it instead and I believe more accurately as *The Book of Standings—Kitab al-Mawaqif*. An excerpt from Sells' book gives a brief and accurate, yet not extensive, explanation of the word:

The basic radical, w/q/f, yields the primary verb form *waqafa* (to stand, stop, halt). However, Niffari uses the less common causative form of the verb, *awqafa*, meaning "to make someone stand." He then employs the standard verbal noun *waqfa*, not in its normal sense as the act of standing, but in a causative sense, from the point of view of the one standing, as the act of being stood somewhere. (Sells, 1996, p. 282).

Hence, all of the mawaqif begin with the formulaic phrase, "He stood me in ... and said to me ...". Arberry's translation itself is not at all times consistent, owing to 1) the untranslatable morphological associations of the Arabic, and 2) because Niffari himself uses the terms with different implications at different instances. I will therefore use Arberry's translation as a reference point, but I will not prevent myself from using Sells' lighter version of the same mawaqif, nor from translating some of the mawaqif myself if need be.

4.2 On the Style of *Kitab al-Mawaqif walMukhatabat*. (*Book Of Standings and Addresses*)

"My recollection is the electest thing I have manifested, and My recollection is a veil." For this recollection is contained in letters, and Niffari "unmasked the idolatry of the letter" (w. 370) at a time when Muslim orthodoxy was going more and more by the letter and becoming increasingly intellectualized. It was he who spoke of the *hijab al-ma'rifa*, "the veil of gnosis" (W. 380), which,

tender and subtle as it may be, can constitute the greatest barrier between man and God.”

(Schimmel, 1975, p. 81)

Structurally, Anne-Marie Schimmel references an observation by Pere Nwyia, who views Niffari’s whole work to be “...presented as a replica of Muhammad’s experience, a dialogue in which man becomes the confidant of God” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 81). It follows the style of dialogue present in the Qur’an, which is replete with scenes told through the interplay of the “he said—they said” back and forth retelling of a situation--*mawqif*. Composed of 77 sections, each of them called *mawqif* (*pl. mawaqif*).

In the previous chapter we mentioned the Qur’anic address of “Say!”, and pointed to it as being a “prescription” that is in the context of what we are discussing, even more important than what follows it, more important than the content of *what* is said, which can develop and disseminate according to unpredictable historical outlines and contextual differentiation. The saying, the say-able, and the unsay-able, converge together in the moment of dialogue, “revelation”, and obligation, as a sort of limit and form-ula. Prescription therefore implies dialogue and relationality, an implication that is characteristic to intersubjective relations, and the Qur’an is replete of stories told in the dialogical form which allows each *party* to speak from within its own subjectivity, as in the following example from the story of Moses and Pharaoh, where Moses is in conversation with God:

“Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, verily, he has transgressed all bounds in disbelief and disobedience and behaved as an arrogant tyrant. And speak to him kindly, perhaps he may accept admonition or fear God.”

“They said, ‘Our Lord! Verily! We fear lest he should hasten to punish us or lest he should transgress all bounds against us.’”

“He said: ‘Fear not, Verily! I am with you both, Hearing and Seeing.’ (20:43-45)

Linguistically, Sells makes a point with regards to the relation between the experience of “union”¹¹ and “language” so that “...when union becomes the central principle of a mystical dialectic, a transreferential aporia or perplexity is built within language, transforming its normal functions and structure.” (Sells, 1996, p. 89). In that sense of a “transreferential aporia”, it is often the case that the language of the *mawqif* is *against*

¹¹Sells relates the notion of “union” in Christian mysticism, to the double notion of *fanā’* and *baqā’* in Sufism.

language in the very moment it is speaking and addressing itself. Niffari says for instance, “Reality as described by letter is a letter, and the path to which letter leads is a letter” (Niffari, *mw* 55:4, p. 92), hence, the “bewildered tongue” and the “apocalyptic moment of truth” of which Sells speaks, and by which I basically understand, a non-argumentative *realization*, spoken, despite all possible contradictions in the form of a certainty, a prescriptive fact. And this perhaps is the most important point, that “union” or the *waqfa* in Niffari’s terms, “involves not only a passing away of self (*nafs*) but also a loss of discursive reason (‘*aql*’) or rather a *suspension*, since reason “functions upon the principle of self-identity.” (Sells, 1996, p. 93).

Indeed, the observation which concerns me most, and which does not only apply to Niffari’s own text but I would argue on the Qur’an or any religious text more generally, is that *pronouns* (he, they, we, I) as Sells notes, are “apparently” fixed identities. Like a mathematical formula, which is written the same way every time regardless of the values (identities) or its variables (pronouns), this *fixedness* is only apparent and exists only in the *relations* between variables. In the Qur’an, when a prophet is being asked to evidence or identify the God he alleges to speak on behalf, the response is usually “He who created you from a clot” or “The Lord of the heavens and the Earth”, or “He who created you the first time”, never dignifying the questioners with anything more specific (intentionally and provocatively), and instead, identifying the “name” in and through the relation it has with *existence*, with what already *is*. God’s identity, is a kind of relation that can be abbreviated here as “He Who...” for instance, “Created you from a Male and a Female” (49:13). To ask therefore about the correspondent reality of God or the name of God, is equivalent to removing this pronoun from its *relational identity*, along with its relevance to that which it supposedly relates to.

The three characteristics of a “formula” (analogically a mathematical formula) are indeed relevant to what is being discussed here, namely, a formula is made of *variables* and *relations* between variables, and once a formula acquires that name, it becomes in a sense *prescriptive*. In relation to the notion of a “play of pronouns”, variables are *pronouns that assume identities without identifying them*, and therefore “variability” as a complementary concept to prescription, is the *play of pronouns in their assumed identities*. In the words of Judith Butler, in her introduction to Derrida’s *Force and Writing*,

Indeed, we cannot even say, ‘there is an origin’ without attributing an ontological status to that which is outside the ontological field within which such claims could be made. This view does not imply that origins are simply made up or fabricated, but only that they are instituted, and in such a way that involves both an erasure and a deferral of the origin itself. *In this sense, we might say that the problem of the origin generates linguistic effects always at a remove from that origin.* (Derrida, 1978, p. xxii. *Italics added*)

The “play of pronouns” and the “origin” or “reference” of the pronoun, creates *linguistic effects*, because at its bottom one asks, “[b]ut ‘who’ is it who is related to ‘whom’?” (Sells, 1996, p. 191).

In a particularly clarifying passage on Niffari’s text Sells writes in his “Bewildered Tongues: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam”,

The syntax and parallel dialogue structures of the Niffari passage suggest a clear distinction between divine and human parties. But the intensity of the experience seems to pull at those divisions... The title of the standing, “Who are You and Who Am I,” also gives us cause to wonder about the security of a consistent and clear division of the two parties of the dialogue. Could the persons be reversed at key moments? ... One has the sense that beneath a seemingly consistent and clear division, another kind of oscillation occurs, an oscillation not so much of states (union to separation) but of references. The “I” that began as the human party seems to flow or overflow, momentarily, into the “he” that began as the divine party; the two referential motions run past or through one another, as it were. (Sells, 1996, p. 114-115)

On another note, Niffari is far from being an orthodox Muslim, and in some cases is viewed to have contradicted some basic tenants of “Islam” through his “shocking statements”. Qudsi writes that “It was al-Niffari who wrote on behalf of God: “If you see the fire drop yourself in it and do not run away”, perhaps pointing to the notion of crossing the *shari’a* as part of appropriating it, a *teleological suspension*, or simply as a *radical involvement* with the self.

In another place, al Niffari says that while the wayfarer (al-sā’ir) is proud of his prayers, the prayer itself becomes proud of the wāqif. More and more “shocking” statements that refer to the concept of Salāt appear in al-Niffari’s texts: “When knowledge calls thee, with all its conditions, at the time of prayer, and you answer it, you are separated from Me.” In yet another statement appears an attempt to contradict the Islamic idea of the manifold reward granted to him who does one good work by saying that a ‘good work is ten to him who sees Me not; but evil (sayyi’a) to him who sees Me.’ (Qudsi, 414).

And one of my favorites in this regard, “He stayed me in Culture/Politeness and said to me: Your entreating Me, while you do not see Me is an act of worship. Your entreating Me while you see Me is an act of derision.” (Niffari, *mw 9-1*, p. 38).

4.3 Niffari’s Terms

To begin with, what is a “mawqif” or “waqfa”? We have hinted at its preliminary linguistic meanings of “stopping”, “staying”, “standing” in a “situation” or *before a situation*. Ibn ‘Arabi, who has mentioned al-Niffari five times in his *futuhat* (Arberry, 8), describes the *waqfa* as a midway, a pause of preparation and re-configuration, a certain suspension and briefing between two *states (hal)*, *stations (maqam)*, *stages (manzil)*, *abodes (munazila)*, etc. subjectively speaking. “Ibn ‘Arabi tells us that this type of unveiling pertains specifically to the speech of God from behind a veil—‘It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil.’” (Chittick, 2008, p. 183; v. 42:51). Ibn ‘Arabi calls this “type of unveiling”, a “mutual waystation (*munazala*)” (Chittick, p. 188).

Arberry quotes Ibn ‘Arabi’s interpretation of the *waqfa* in his *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* as follows,

...the *waqif*: for as the mystic in his journey is transferred from one station in which he has experienced confirmation and presence, to another station for the same purpose, he pauses (*yaqif*) between the two stations, and during this pause (*waqfa*) emerges from the condition of the two stations, learning in this pause the practices (*ádáb*) proper to the station to which he has been transferred. (Arberry, 1934, p. 8).

In the introduction Arberry explains the *waqfa* with relation to the two other mentioned terms *‘ilm* (science, knowledge) and *ma’rifah* (gnosis, and sometimes “knowledge” when *‘ilm* is translated “science”). He writes, “*Waqfa* has intelligence of every *‘ilm*, but no *‘ilm* has intelligence of it.” (Arberry, 1934, p. 14). And again he says, “*Waqfa* is beyond farness and nearness, *ma’rifah* is in nearness, and *‘ilm* is in farness: *waqfa* is God’s presence, *ma’rifah* is God’s speech, and *‘ilm* is God’s veil.” (Arberry, 1934, p. 14). And perhaps closer to the notions and centrality of the “single individual” opposition he writes a page after, “The *waqif* is not approved by the theologians (*‘ulama’*), nor does he approve of them.” (Arberry, 1934, p. 15).

As for a comparison with Kierkegaard’s distinction between “accidental” and “essential” knowing, there is a lot of stayings that touch upon the same, “O Servant! A knowledge in which you see Me is the path to Me, and a knowledge in which you do not see Me is the

captivating veil,” or again, “O Servant! If knowledge does not expel you from knowledge, and if you enter from knowledge only into knowledge, then you are veiled from knowledge.” (Chittick, 2002, p. 196). This *stance* is all too common throughout the text as a whole.

A waqf [or waqfa] (“standing” or “staying”) is Niffari’s term for the state of being riveted, as it were, in a particular place at the divine presence. The term resonates with the Qur’anic “standing” of each person before the revelation of her destiny during the apocalyptic moment of truth...In a single ‘standing’ Niffari condenses a full range of language worlds and a complexity of referential and antecedental play.” (Sells, 1996, p. 92)

A *waqfa* is, more than anything, a point along a line. As such, it does not in itself have a universal imperative, but can be reduced and deconstructed in another *mawqif*, without regards to it as it were, paying heed only to the new moment, to *this waqfa* on its own terms. It is in this ultimate authority of the *standing*, over even earlier or other *standings* that seem to say otherwise or straight up contradict each other, that the opposition to “reason” or “science” in the general sense of the term as the attempt and endeavor to distill universally comprehensible and eternally valid laws, reconstructions, or definitions of religion, divinity, or reality as such, makes sense. It is opposed not because such a determination is not available (to the individual), but that its determination is not available to a consensus, or an object correspondent *in language*, but is rather, *language itself*. Niffari writes elsewhere, “He said to me, my making Myself known to you by means of an expression is a preparation for my making Myself known to you without an expression.” (Niffari *mw55:16*, p. 92-93)

In other words, the postmodernist discourse and problematization of language, reveals that the “statement” will not be able to refine its structure, meaning, universality, validity, and demonstration, simply by being discovered or defined appropriately, but that in the hypothetical situation where such an elegant proposition is set forth, its “truth” remains invisible, hidden behind “veils” in Sufi terminology, harboring its own *uncertainty principle*. These veils are merely subjective, and it is in dealing with language in its self, by focusing consciousness on the depth and possibilities of meaning in a single *repeated* word, verse, prayer, ritual, etc., language and consciousness are in a *game*. And it is this language game that gets prevented and petrified whenever the search or question of religion is an “objective” one, either a

petrification from “within” or “without”. He says of the waqfa, or in the waqfa, “He said to me, in staying there is neither establishment, nor annihilation, nor speech, nor act, nor knowledge, nor ignorance.” (Niffari, *mw 8:15*, p. 33).

4.4 Letter.

In Niffari’s text, “letter” usually stands for language as a whole, and perhaps, for language conceived along the legalistic and correspondent logic of *nazar* (theoretical reflection). But it stands also for entities, and beings, for separateness and delimitation. Along the lines of modes of knowledge, essential/accidental, and knowledge itself as “degrees of connectedness” - *ilm/ma’rifah/waqfa*, and in relation to language, Niffari writes in one of his standings,

He stayed (stood) me before Him, and said to me:

5. Theory is a letter which only practice modalises; practice is a letter which only sincerity modalises; patience is a letter which only resignation modalises.

7. All other-than-me (*siwa*) is a letter, and all letter is other-than-me (*siwa*).

23. The science whose opposite is ignorance is the science of letter, and the ignorance whose opposite is science is the ignorance of letter. Depart from letter, and you will possess a science which has no opposite, namely, the lordly; and you will possess an ignorance which has no opposite, namely (The real certainty—*Al-Yakeen al-‘haqiqi*). (Niffari, *mw 55*, p. 92).

4.5 Prescription, as an epistemological/existential concept.

He stayed me in Reminding, and said to me:

1. You are not established except by obeying the command, and you are not aright except by obeying the prohibition.
2. If you are not commanded, you incline: if you are not prohibited, you stay. (Niffari, *mw 13*, p. 45).

It is in my reading of Niffari that the concept of “prescription” first took form, preliminarily as the notion of *formula*, which was a description of religion as a whole, before the question of *authority* took more focused attention. His mawqif of

“command”, demonstrates the full implications of the concept, as a basis for thinking about “religious authority”, *but in such a way as to expand both the concept of prescription, which is not only religious, and for our purpose, to expand the conception of religion, which is not only prescriptive.* I have previously brought up the term in a tentative contrast with other forms of epistemic authority, peculiar in its unique way and purpose, to science in general. I brought it up in contrast to “empirical”, “public”, “demonstrative” and “consensual” epistemic authority. I brought it up again, as a way of communication (advice-command). And finally, we brought it up in the question of existentialism and ontology, where “reality” as such is prescribed (given), and where prescription can be viewed, in the words of Kierkegaard regarding irony, as an “existence qualification”, or the subjective quality of *being-in-the-world*, prescriptively.

In his article, “Beyond Castaneda and Don Juan”, Henry Bayman refers to a conversation between Carlos Castaneda and his teacher Don Juan Matus that can perhaps be a perfect representation of the underlying dynamics of “authority” in a religious, and particularly Sufi context. He observes a conversation in *Journey to Ixtlan*, where don Juan tells Carlos, “One of us has to change... And you know who” (Castaneda, 1972, p.28). He adds that “[t]his is exactly the nature of the Sufi Master/student relationship.” Going beyond the apparently obscure relation between Yaqui Indian Sorcery (presented through the controversial works of Castaneda) and Sufism, let us say that this cryptic formula is the slogan, as it were, of a relationship or a relatedness in which *prescriptive authority* is in play: *One of us has to change...and you know who.* Is this not the same conversation that occurs in the silent (or not) singularity of the human individual? Can God say the same thing to us, and render the “intentionally provocative” nature of the religious address, a playful trickery of communication and subjectivity? Is this not the structure of *belief* itself? More over, isn’t the same confronted by scientists in their attempt to *dis-cover* a truth? Would the experiment or the hypothesis speak to the scientist in the same manner, *one of us has to change...and you know who?* Isn’t this guided and guarded by the *belief* in the validity of the method?

In an objective framework, and for its appropriate object-related purposes, prescription as a concept related to “religious *epistemic* authority” presents a problem. The rise of science as an integrated method with its epistemic priorities, was partially in response and defiance of subjective prescriptive collective authority, by which historically is meant, politico-religious authority. In its natural intersubjective and subjective habitat, it is a technical epistemological/existential concept and a designation of “religious authority” within that

framework. Prescription is also a technical term of the *communicative form* associated with this epistemological framework, or what is the same, the concept of an epistemological prescription has implications on the form of communication and language it takes.

In other words, the “religious authority” that I want to explore as part of the dynamic self-relation of each individual, is not necessarily an authority of the other over the self, but of *otherness* as such, or in Derrida’s terms, a self-relation that is open to “the spacing of time” (Hägglund, 2008, p. 6), the willingness of the self to follow in an unknown territory, to follow prior to knowing, or, to see in the following a *hidden demonstration*, that is, a subjective demonstration. This of course brings up the question of agency and autonomy, does *this* “openness to the authority of the other as unknowability” entail a weakening of autonomy, a strengthening of it, or is it irrelevant? I do not intend to go on answering this question in the limited scope I have remaining here, but it’s a question I take on board when thinking about “prescription”, particularly as it entails the first option.

Let us look more closely at the *mawqif* of command itself, as it appears in the text:

He stayed me in Command, and said to me:

- 1- *When I command you, depart unto that wherewith I command you, and await not with it your knowledge. If you await with my command the knowledge of my command you disobey my command.*
- 2- *And He said to me: If you execute not my command, except the knowledge of it be made clear to you, it is the knowledge of the command you obey, not the command.*
- 3- *And He said to me: Do you know what it is that stays you from executing my command, when you await the knowledge of my command? It is your self, which desires knowledge, so that it may be cut off from my will/duty (‘azimaty), and proceed according to its lusts/longings (hawaha) in the ways of knowledge. For knowledge has ways, and the ways have defiles, and the defiles have exits and highways, and the highways have contrariety. (Niffari, mw 14:1-3, p. 47).*

The impasse which this *mawqif* addresses, is that between knowledge and experience, knowledge and justice, knowledge and responsibility, knowledge and decision, in short, knowledge and God, who says about himself in another *mawqif*, “Reality is a quality of the real, and I am the Real”. (Niffari, *mw 4:13*, p. 30).

Elsewhere in the *mawqif* of the Presence-Chamber and of the Letter, he writes,

He stayed (stood) me in the Presence-chamber, and said to me:

18- The most hostile of your enemies only seeks to expel you from ignorance, not from knowledge.

19- If he prevents you from knowledge, he only does so in order to prevent you from ignorance. (Niffari, *mw*: 67, p. 112).

It is interesting to phrase the situation in these terms, as a difference between “dispelling of ignorance” and the “prevention of ignorance”, which imply completely different movements. *Preventing ignorance*, in this case particularly, could mean preventing the *desire to dispel ignorance*, which is *unrealistic*. However, it is not the prevention of ignorance in which one doesn’t know something and acknowledges that fact, but a “double ignorance”, in which one is ignorant of being ignorant and therefore, unable to acknowledge a fact at all. The command’s dynamic in the *mawqif*, and the purpose of it being a “command” and not merely a plea or a suggestion, is precisely to highlight a *provocative and preventive imperative*, to the stubbornness of the existential fear which underlie the obstruction of subjective movement.

This *mawqif* also explains, or demonstrates the dynamics that are supposedly simulated or taken in form in the Sufi master-disciple relationship. Al Ghazali, in his *E’hya’ ‘Iloum al-Din, Revitalization of the Sciences of Religion*, writes to the disciples of all masters, “know that your master’s wrong is more beneficial to you than your own right.” (Gibb, 1953, p. 110). Ibn ‘Arabi, in his *Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom* writes, “The ones who know, know by *following the prescriptions* of the Prophet. Knowledge is only acquired by people who love and fear God. If you see such a person...listen to him, agree with him, submit to him, even if the things he says surpass your understanding.” (Ibn ‘Arabi, 18).

I want to prevent the understanding of this kind of authority as “coercion” or a weak and unchosen type “submission” to its conception on the level of intention involved in “advice” and “demonstration” in a communicative context. In fact, there is a hadith tradition that says exactly that—*al-din nasi’ha*—religion is an advice, and the structure of advice, when it is not possible to come to a consensus with regards to the objective validity of the content of the advice, is *prescriptive*. One *gives* and *receives* advice, without guarantee of it being *followed* (if one is giving it) or of being *valid* (if one is receiving it).

However, this does not mean that religious communication and authority is only about command and following of course, but there is a dynamic. A Sufi story, recounts the letter exchange between a Master and his disciple, in which the latter asked, “Who should I follow after you are gone?” to which the master did not immediately reply, but on a page in

a book, he wrote to him, “Follow no one after I am gone”, which the student saw only after his Master’s death. So in a sense, *prescription* is a pedagogic dimension in the religious discourse and its type of authority, and for this reason, our fields of concern go back and forth between epistemology, existentiality, and communication. Despite Niffari’s strong emphasis on the need to follow and obey the command, he writes elsewhere, “when you know the knowledge which proceeds from Me, I punish you for following those who know, even as I punish you for following those that are ignorant,” and so the idea of following one command absolutely (God’s command), actually involves a liberation and emancipation from authorities that are beyond or outside of the individual’s self-relation or self-God relation, (“the knowledge which proceeds from Me”), and yet not from the individual’s self-determination, which therefore obliges a pedagogic *following of another*.

4.6 Authority:

Our primary question was concerned with the notion of “epistemic authority”, as the focal point of a reflection on “philosophy of religion” and its basic question of “what religion is”. As the notion of authority is intermingled with a myriad other notions and realities, we have contextually defined it, or whoever holds it, as “evidencing one’s proximity to truth/reality.” This “evidencing” occurs in the medium of communication, and is the focal point of a difference of “epistemologies”, for whereas one “evidences” by “direct communication”, the other evidences by “indirect communication”, and the “subjects/objects” of concern are of different discursive natures and intentions. That is specifically to say that the former epistemic authority is descriptive, while the latter is prescriptive.

4.7 Epistemological implications

More specifically, I posed the question in terms of epistemological differences involved in the discourse of each of science and religion. Why “science and religion”? Because, what is meant by “science” here, is not its strictest most successful methods and fields, but rather, “science” as a worldview, in which “objectivity” is its highest aim, and in which methodologies are bent on reaching it as much as possible. But more importantly, because “science” studies religion in such a fashion, and religion objects to its being studied by science (“Christianity protests against objectivity” Kierkegaard), we started by assuming a contrasting reflection on the epistemological, linguistic, and ontological presuppositions of science, with the equivalent (contrasting) presuppositions in the appropriation of the Islamic/Qur’anic religious address in Ibn ‘Arabi and Niffari..

The epistemological implications I believe are clear. Religiously, or whenever the “religious” is brought up in its “essence”, the singularity of consciousness must be considered. In turn, this implies that the object of knowledge, is consciousness’s self-relation, as such, “knowledge” is here strictly limited to a particular mode of knowing, which although includes others and the help of others, can only be appropriated, verified, and “known” singularly. Thus, on an epistemological level, prescription breaks with the “independence” of the reality in relation to which religion is a “relevant address”. Consequently, as the “independence” is negated, and the “self-reference” is affirmed, “language” as essentially part of the subjective realm of consciousness and meaning, breaks with the other two criteria; correspondence and consensus. It is not therefore, a language that “explains” the world and our existence in it as a theory would, from an external viewpoint presented through propositions, but a language that relates, reminds, and remembers a moment of subjective opening to reality; a language that is always-already in play, communicated by its relevance¹², not its correspondence. As such, any possible consensus is not due to an undeniable demonstration of an independent fact, truth, reality, but a convergence, a meeting, an event. A simple example is the difference between a person retelling the rich and vivid events of yesterday to a group which tries to reconstruct it mentally, and a group of persons who, despite having different experiences, have “met” in yesterday’s event and have the experiential reference of the entire landscape and occurrence. Consensus is possible, but more as a “similarity in tastes” based on a shared memory, than an irrefutable truth of fact. A consensus in which two agree that a meal tastes particularly good, take it on faith that they are sharing the same “taste”, because nevertheless, they are having the same experience, sharing the event. Niffari says, “Letter cannot inform of itself: how then should it tell of Me?” In that sense, a simple conversation in which two or more agree to the particularity of an experience, meet in faith, not in certainty.

4.8 Existential implications

In an existential register, the notion of prescription would be extremely related of course to the epistemological implications; that is, the fact of its singularity and embodiment. Prescription, is indeed life itself, or more specifically, my life, (again, the fact that death is always “my death”, is just as true with “life”, which is always my life and which cannot be lived by anyone else). I am prescribed to my own existence, in such a bewildering manner,

¹² Certainly a relation could be elaborated on with “relevance theory of communication” in Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*. 1986.

that existence itself seems to be a prescription, following a prescription. Perhaps related to God's blame to Niffari, "it's your self, it desires knowledge to separate itself from my will" (Niffari, *mw 14: 3*, p. 47), perhaps, the will of God, is in this context, the prescription of existing. To clarify, one can perhaps think of the example of suicide in this context of "existential prescription" as the utmost degree of negating the prescription, and affirming the self's own, (beyond or through death). Suicide is the real representation of *disbelief*, and not any doctrinal positions or philosophical objections, which in their context of a particular religious field, might very well be needed for the sake of the very God and the very religion that it objects to.

After all, the will of God and his prescription, is not only in religions, unless one thinks that God is a hypothesis in religion. The will of God and his prescriptions are not in language, as the Qur'an says, "We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein" (50:16), in the sense that, nature itself is prescriptive. And the whole endeavor of science, in this regard is the opposite of "anti-religion" or "anti-God". Rather, it is to observe, distill, and reconstruct the prescriptions (laws) of nature. But scriptural prescriptions are unlike prescriptions distilled by science from nature. The former arise from intersubjective relations and their limits (commands), but the latter arise from subject-object relations and their limits. Or what is the same, the "command/order of subject *and* subject" and the "command/order of subject *and* object". But as command, Niffari writes in another interesting *mawqif*, *Mawqif of Tranquility*,

"He stayed me in Tranquility, and said to me: It is the experience of Me: it establishes what it establishes, and effaces what it effaces.

And He said to me: It establishes what it establishes of my command, and my command enforces what it enforces of my law. My law goes forth with that which issues from my theory, and my theory prevails, and I cause you to witness that it prevails. That is my tranquility, and you witnessed: and that is my clear evidence." (Niffari, *mw 54:1-2*, 1934, p. 91).

It is interesting because of the association between the "command of God", with the "laws" that come forth from it, based on a "theory" that causes him who is "tranquil" to *witness its prevailing*, and its "clear evidence". In any of its registers, reality is "given", and by "given" I don't mean unchangeable, I mean received on the retina of the phenomenal self, as it were, and the implication is that, the more its *createdness* affirmed and related to by its relation to "God" (The real unknown), its *givenness* is phenomenologically accentuated. This in turn, is an accentuation of the

individual's relation to the *real* more directly, more "subjectively", the command, *al-Amr*, is not only "prescriptive" as in "without discussion", but also in the sense of "state of affairs" or "order", in its double sense of "command" and "form" or "system", as the one found in nature¹³.

4.9 Communicative implications

As the phenomenological field in which all of this discussion comes together, making clear observations on the *way*, the *how* of communication, and the conditions of communication in this regard is helpful. We could ask, what would be a notion of "prescriptive communication" that is not coercive, "dictatorial", but which nevertheless, acknowledges the subjective limits and their necessities with regards to language? What is the impulse behind a communication that demands to "Worship, until the certainty comes" (15:99), rather than guarantee the reality of "worship" first? In short, it is to overcome the *aporia* that we formulated as, "*one of us has to change, (either the limits of my speaking, or your state) and you know who, (since the former is unfeasible!)*".

Prescriptive communication is a type of "indirect communication" in Kierkegaard's terms, it is a communication that is "subjective". However, "indirect" here seems inappropriate, since the intention in it, is a 'direct assimilation/appropriation' by the "follower". Simply put in terms of "taste" again, it is safe to assume that in order to communicate to someone the *taste* of a meal that the latter does not recognize, one will have to go through the *recipe* of preparing that taste (following prescription), and then demand that the other *tastes for him/herself* (prescribing a following). In following a prescription, there is obedience, uncertainty, improvisation, in addition to so many other possible responses, rejection, disobedience, and disinterestedness. In prescribing a following, there is an advice, a suggestion, an order, a demand, and perhaps, from the subjective side, an ordeal. Note, that even after the meal is tasted, the taste is still *uncommunicated* in language, yet communicated by the *relevance of the experience*, itself outside of language and certainty.

The two implications of prescription on a communicative level, is as we earlier mentioned, "command and following", which are the movement of prescribing from either the *giving*, or *receiving* points of view. The notion of *command and following, must be*

¹³ The discussions of the relations between the form or system of nature and the notion of "God" as found in Paul Davis' *The mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* 1992 is relevant here.

understood, like epistemological and existential limits, to be arising out of limit-case communicative scenarios. However, just because they are limit-cases, does not mean these are rare cases. In fact, these are everyday cases.

From the side of following, once trust is established, “following” follows. That is, having faith, is not a matter of an ideological or ontological theory of God’s existence, but a preliminarily pragmatic trust (belief) which brings about an openness to “follow” in person. But also, in a ritualistic sense, having faith beyond the self. A comment I had received from the same professor of Sufism in the American University in Cairo with regards to “prayer” and “ritual”, had affected this view when, asking him about the “motivation” to pray pragmatically despite not believing in its efficacy and “actual” reward/punishment implications as literally true, his only comment was, “the ritual is more important than you.”

The ambiguity between trust and mistrust in following a command therefore, speaks of the dynamics between “knowledge” and “otherness”, or in other terms, the “seen” and the “unseen”, or “predictability” and “l’avenir”— “to-come”, to use a term from Derrida, or which is the same in Arabic, *mustaqbal* (future/or literally, “the (one) coming”), and *mustaqbil* (the host, or the (one) receiving).

4.10 Implications on the Question of Religion

My experience writing this thesis, was in a way, an experiment in and with its content. Having signed up for a philosophy of religion program, I attended the first semester, after which I decided to return to Egypt for a month. In this month, I got a chance to be closer to the *tariqa Burhaniyya* in Egypt, and have been attending their gatherings ever since. I took an insider’s position, in the sense that I conflated the principles, and allowed oppositions between the two programs to converge in me personally. This was partially a methodologically conscious decision, to take part in the *tariqa* process, and to do so in order to write from within the process, and simultaneously, to force an expression of this process in a language that is perhaps inhospitable to the terms of the experience, *academia*. In a sense, a mutual *suspension* was in play, on the one hand a *faith* resisting the objective impulse, by the practical involvement in *tariqa* and its practices despite its aloofness at times, and on the other hand an *academic writing process* resisting the subjective and slippery discourse of *belief*.

Prescription, particularly as I use it here. resists objective communication, in the sense of *independence, correspondence, and consensus*, by emphasizing three contrary principles; *self-reference, variability, and relationality*. A prescription, assumes dialogue, conversation, consciousness, where there is more than one “self” involved, where there is the “one” and the

“other”. Prescription arises because of a consciousness of a limit in language, a limit that is itself prescribed by the scope of inwardness and singularity. In granting the other and myself a singularity that is due, prescription becomes a friendly necessity in our communication and relevance, rather than a possible offense or desire to dominate. Arising from the ambitions of communication and the limits of existence, prescription communicates through subject-relations, not objective coded content. That is, it prescribes relations that demand each to relate to a certain (given) reality, “whose epistemic access according to Niffari...is in the contemplation of self-experience” (Coates, 2002, p. 38). Finally, prescription assumes variability, like the analogy of the formula in which the equation does not “correspond” to actual values in the strict sense of “actual” and of “correspondence”, but to possibilities, imaginative possibilities.

Conclusion:

Perhaps this next standing is a convenient *mawqif* with which to conclude:

And He said to Me, if your science (*ilm*) is circumscribed, you have no science. If your work (*amal*) is not circumscribed, you perform no work.

And He said to Me, if your work is obligatory, and none of it voluntary, your science is established but does not expand. If your work is voluntary, and also obligatory, your science is established and does expand.” (Niffari, *mw* 12:16-17, 1934, p. 45).

In general, this formula guided the whole thesis in relation to both questions of religion, and of science studying it. Niffari himself, is not making the distinction in these terms as such, or at all, but it is this relation between “science, knowledge” and “work, action”, that is both, cyclical and oppositional. The second major point on religion, being related to the “work” aspect in this formula, is the idea of “obligatory” only, or “voluntary, and also obligatory”. The point all along, has not been to argue that religion’s way of communication has to *enforce* an obligation, and that the obligation no matter my relationship to it, must like a *law*, be enforced. The point rather, has been that religion, viewed in this paper within the Islamic tradition and particularly its Sufi variant, is structurally built on the notion of *prescription*, which I will finally and paradoxically define here, as “voluntary obligation”, and which is the core of the religious life. Having both “theory” and “practice” involved, the religious life “weighs science in the balance of intention, and weighs works in the balance of sincerity.” (Niffari, *mw* 12:21, 1934, p. 45). It

is obligatory, at least because it recognizes the existential and epistemic limits that trample the communicative medium (language) by which *otherness* is opened unto. And it is voluntary, in the sense that the obligation is taken on board, accepted, that the otherness of the other, and of the obligation coming from him/her, is voluntarily welcomed.

As science emerged as a movement of freeing truth from the shackles of dogmatic authority by instituting and developing objective methodologies, I believe it is also this same emancipation itself that is restricting other forms of *relations* in which other notions of “knowledge”, “religion”, “communication” are perhaps more relevant, not to the methodology of studying religion, but, more importantly, to those studying it. To restrict knowledge, in a religious sense, is to block consciousness from direct inquiry into itself, and objectivity, despite having to go through certain subjective “reflections”, is prone to make this kind of restriction, despite the fact that having to do so, makes it engage with “subjectivity” in order to filter it out of the theory.

Finally, I want to remind and emphasize the central focus from which all notions discussed arose; namely, the *singularity of consciousness*, and the consequent restrictions and limitations in the communicative medium in which knowledge (as certain objective knowledge) gets verified and legitimized. One must not lose touch with one’s *dynamic particularity*, even in the midst of the *general*, be this “crowd”, “method”, or “identity”:

And He said to me: the principal thing is that you should have knowledge of what you are,
whether elect/particular or common/general.

And he said to me: If the particular does not act on the principle that he is particular, he
perishes.

(Niffari, *mw29: 4-5*, p. 65).

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