

## **Ibn ‘Arabi and the Contemporary West: Beshara and the Ibn ‘Arabi Society**

*Isobel Jeffery-Street*

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Although the thought of the Andalusian Sufi Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) has become increasingly popular in the West during the last century, only very recently has there been any attempt to analyze his contemporary reception. Isobel Jeffery-Street’s recent study on Ibn ‘Arabi in the West – with its dual focus on the Beshara School “for the study of esoteric education” and the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society – offers a fecund starting place for such analysis, since these interrelated institutions have been two of the most significant sources for the growing Western recognition of Ibn ‘Arabi over the last thirty years.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s eclectic, unitive metaphysics has a long-standing and popular correlation with the so-called doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the Unity of Existence [or Being]), although he never used such particular phraseology.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the book’s conceptual lynchpin and that of the Beshara School itself is formed around this idea, which the author blithely reifies as central to Ibn ‘Arabi’s “complex Neo-Platonic Gnostic system” (p. 6, n. 13). As if directly reflecting the variegated discourses from which Beshara emerged during the 1970s, this study combines rather antiquated categorizations of “Oriental Sufism” (p. 6) with New Age rhetoric of global spiritual revival. Accordingly, Jeffery-Street aims

to demonstrate how the Beshara School interprets and utilizes Ibn ‘Arabi’s concepts in its courses of esoteric education, and how the students of the school and the school’s other activities have encouraged an expanding network of influences in an increasingly global setting. (p. 2)

Taking up a lesser, but equally important, part of the work is a survey of the society’s formation, including its academic projects and scholarly journal. Jeffery-Street specifically situates her book “within the academic discipline of the study of religion” through an application of “the ‘phenomenological’ approach to its theory and methodology” (p. 18). Thus, this work seeks to rigorously ground any popular New Age appeal within a discourse geared toward an academic audience.

The author appropriately begins with the charismatic life of Bulent Rauf (d. 1987), “a highly educated scion of an aristocratic Ottoman family” who became a founding force behind the spiritual organization of the Beshara Trust,

originally established in 1971 (p. 35). As Jeffery-Street notes, “[t]he first central theme of the Trust and its school were those of the ‘Unity of Existence’, ... initially through a consideration of the basic unity behind all religious traditions” (p. 43). Chapters 2 and 3 then track the trust’s development and its subsequent school from its more casual beginnings to the school’s expansion and formalization. As the author notes, from the very start Beshara students believed “that they had important work to do in bringing to humanity the knowledge of the Unity of Existence as expounded by Ibn ‘Arabi...” (p. 65).

Chapter 4 offers “summaries of the principal texts and teachings of the works of Ibn ‘Arabi used for study by the Beshara School” (p. 89). Here, the author selectively draws from William Chittick’s *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (2005) “to provide the general reader with additional clarification of some of the complicated themes encountered” (p. 89). Although Jeffery-Street is cautiously aware that the school’s use of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works in translation “could themselves be liable to misinterpretation,” she nevertheless confidently concludes that “his key metaphysical themes taught in the Beshara School have not shifted since his lifetime” (p. 90). In chapter 5, the author returns to her focus on the Beshara School, its course content, and the understandings of participants regarding its nature. Here, for example, she records how the school’s present principle recently “explained that Beshara is a *new impulse*.... It is from Reality (or God), like a revelation, but it is also something new.... ‘*We are God manifesting Himself...*’” (p. 129, emphasis original).

Chapters 6 and 7 explore students’ verbal accounts of their own experiences as participants in the school and the annual pilgrimage to Turkey, respectively. Included here are descriptions of how the lives of individuals within the material contexts of their various professions have been transformed as a result of their education at the Beshara School. For example, Jeffery-Street notes that after a six-month residential course, an Israeli fashion designer began creating clothing in light of Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings that is intended to allow women to be “attractive through their Being” (p. 163). She has thus come to understand that “her clothes are an intentional expression of Reality, or ultimately in fact the Reality (God) expressing itself” (p. 162). “Through wearing clothes made by this student,” Jeffery-Street observes, “women can come to realise and begin to know their essential self...” (p. 163).

The final two chapters focus on the Beshara Trust’s outreach and subsequent creation of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, respectively. Indeed, the society’s attendant academic journal, which was first published in 1982, along with its annual symposiums, has made an enormous intellectual impact via the contributions of some of the world’s most important scholars in the field.

While Jeffery-Street claims that her study “is the first to focus closely on one influential contemporary group who are actively involved with promoting and communicating Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings and philosophy in the UK and throughout the world,” (p. 265) elsewhere she briefly notes Suhar Taji-Farouki’s groundbreaking 2007 study *Beshara and Ibn ‘Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World* (p. 230, n. 78), which concentrates on the same subject matter and uses a similar phenomenological methodology (Taji-Farouki, p. 18). Although the two studies differ in their level of theorization – Taji-Farouki is ultimately concerned to show Beshara’s esoteric epistemology as a New Religious Movement, while Jeffery-Street concentrates on the participants’ spiritual and emotional experiences (p. 28) – they cover much of the same material outside of their respective fieldwork. Yet where Taji-Farouki is careful to acknowledge the ever-present danger of entangling the Beshara participants’ interpretative frameworks with that of critical scholarly analysis (Taji-Farouki, pp. 188-89), Jeffery-Street seemingly succumbs to such analytical slippage. For example, in her initial examination of Rauf she asserts:

From descriptions compiled through the data contributed by participants of the Beshara School and Ibn ‘Arabi Society, Bulent Rauf may be understood to have demonstrated the characteristics of a true spiritual teacher and even possibly of the “hidden saint” (*walī*) as understood in Islamic terms, particularly in the understanding of Ibn ‘Arabi. (p. 47)

What troubles here is not the common, *perhaps even necessary*, cultic assertion of Sufi disciples regarding the saintly rank of their master, but rather the use of such participant self-description within a supposed second-order analysis.

Similarly problematic is Jeffrey-Street’s uncritical association of Ibn ‘Arabi with religious universalism and the idea that he accepted all religions equally. While such an association has been normalized within Western treatments of Ibn ‘Arabi and is, as Taji-Farouki notes, “consolidated through an emphasis of the Oneness of Being as a unifying theme” (Taji-Farouki, p. 189), it does not reflect the Andalusian Sufi’s repeated metaphysical assertion of the Prophet Muhammad’s cosmic supremacy and an attendant acceptance of Islamic supersessionism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Jeffery-Street’s uncritical appropriation of universalist interpretive frameworks leads to oversimplifications of Ibn ‘Arabi’s complex ideas regarding “religion” and thus blatant contradictions, such as her assertion that Ibn ‘Arabi “does not reject outward polytheism, provided that the worshippers of images and idols realize that there is one Reality behind these forms,” while on the same page stating “[a]ccording to Ibn ‘Arabi, an aware-

ness of immanence alone leads to polytheism, which he strongly denounces” (p. 108).

Equally vexing is Jeffery-Street’s suggestion that while Ibn ‘Arabi and his Sufi coreligionists recognized the importance of Islamic law outwardly “for the benefit of the community,” they “were beyond law and doctrine in their inner search for the divine Reality...” (p. 4). Yet, Ibn ‘Arabi’s discourse is particularly notable for its lack of antagonism between external “communal” law and internal metaphysical “Reality.” Especially telling in this regard is the author’s selective use of secondary sources in chapter 4, where she quotes Chittick as noting Ibn ‘Arabi’s concept that God “gives to the creatures the best that he has, and that is *wujûd*, his own reality” (p. 96; Chittick, p. 45). However, she neglects to mention Chittick’s equally weighty assertion in the same work that for Ibn ‘Arabi “the Shariah is God’s law, and, as God’s law, it expresses the nature of *wujûd* itself” (Chittick, p. 131).

Jeffery-Street closes her study by relating how Ibn ‘Arabi’s “metaphysical concepts offer a persuasive spiritual understanding and articulation of the super-cultural and religious dimensions of *the wider phenomenon of globalization*, in all areas of life” (p. 265, emphasis mine). In the end, it is perhaps this uncritical reproduction of Beshara’s self-identification as a theophanic “*new impulse*” within a spiritualized image of globalization that proves most troubling. The celebrated spread and apparent commodification of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought (as seen in the example from the fashion industry above) is variously asserted to be part of the “ripple effect” of “Beshara’s philosophy ... in the outer world” (p. 175). And yet it is left untheorized in terms of any sociopolitical relationship among New Age spirituality, capitalist globalization, and neoliberalism.

While this book may offer a fascinating glimpse of Beshara’s projection of Ibn ‘Arabi through the lens of its own melioristic universalism, it gives much less of a critical explanation “for the ready adoption of his ideas” in the West than the author apparently had hoped (p. 264). While Jeffery-Street’s phenomenological method allows her study’s subjects to “speak for themselves” (p. 202), its uncritical implementation hinders her ability to adequately differentiate their hermeneutics from the discourses they interpret. As Jack Lightstone crucially warns: “To wholly adopt the subjects’ classifications ... is to become a member of the group, bound by its framework.”<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

1. See William Chittick, “Rūmī and Waḥdat al-Wujūd,” in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rūmī*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 71, 75, 87, passim.

2. See G. A. Lipton, "Making Islam Fit: Ibn 'Arabi and the Idea of Sufism in the West," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013), chap. 1.
3. Jack Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred: Mediation of the Divine among Jews in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4.

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