

Article

God-Perfecting Man: Theurgical Elements in the Mysticism of Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (560/1165–638/1240) and Their Historical Significance

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Abstract: The following article aims at highlighting the theurgical tendencies in the teachings of the great Andalusī Muslim mystic Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (560/1165–638/1240). By “theurgy” is meant the influence of man on Divinity in its manifest external dimension, that is to say, the dimension of God that creates beings and is involved with their lives and fortunes, as opposed to His hidden essence. The category “theurgy/theurgical” is adopted from the modern academic study of Kabbalah, and is ultimately derived from Late Antique Neoplatonism. The bulk of this article is dedicated to analyzing relevant texts from Ibn al-ʿArabī’s oeuvre and elucidating the theurgical elements reflected in them, while the last two sections (5–6) present preliminary observations on the relevant links between Ibn al-ʿArabī, Kabbalah, and Late Antique Neoplatonism. It is argued that these three traditions should be studied together, as they shed light on one another.

Keywords: Islamic mysticism; Sufism; Spain; al-Andalus; Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī; neoplatonism; late antiquity; theurgy; Kabbalah



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*“Götter, wir planen sie erst in erkühlten Entwürfen,
die uns das mürrische Schicksal wieder zerstört.
Aber sie sind die Unsterblichen. Sehet, wir dürfen
jenen erhörchen, der uns am Ende erhört.”
(Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Sonette an Orpheus, II-24)*

1. Introduction

The teachings of the great Sunnī mystic Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (560/1165–638/1240) are doubtlessly one of the greatest intellectual and spiritual achievements of the Islamicate world during the so-called “Middle Ages”. These teachings, many aspects of which are both baffling from a philosophical point of view and radical from an Islamic religious perspective, have attracted the attention of admirers and critics alike, in the past and in the present.¹ It is not for nothing that Ibn al-ʿArabī is referred to as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (“the greatest shaykh”) by his followers, whereas his adversaries label him al-Shaykh al-Akfar (“the most heretical shaykh”). Indeed, the history of mysticism, philosophy, and theology in Islamic lands from the thirteenth century AD onwards cannot be fully understood without considering the great impact of Akbarian ideas on the development of Islamic thought and religiosity (on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s life and works, see [Corbin 1969](#); [Addas 1993](#); [Chodkiewicz 1993a](#); [Hirtenstein 1999](#); [Chittick 1989, 1998](#). On his critics through the ages, see [Knysh 1999](#)).

By no means has the impact of al-Shaykh al-Akbar diminished in the modern period. On the one hand, his writings continue to stir opposition among those who find his beliefs

theologically offensive (Homerin 1986), and, on the other hand, they function as a source of inspiration for spiritual seekers and intellectuals, in both the East and the West (see, for example, Abū Zayd 1983; Abū Zayd 2002; Ernst 2015; Taji-Farouki 2007; see also <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/>; accessed on 9 February 2025). Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought is thus still relevant even for modern man, who, as Nietzsche famously claimed, has witnessed the alleged demise of God. Indeed, scholars have attempted to highlight various features of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's mysticism that seem to exhibit affinities with contemporary ways of thinking or at least offer solutions to the existentialist conundrums of the age (see, for instance, Coates 2002; Almond 2004). In what follows, I will try to add one more, minor contribution to this scholarly enterprise, by emphasizing what I believe to be a somewhat overlooked aspect of Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought, namely theurgical elements or tendencies in his perception of the human–divine relationship. By “theurgy” I mean the influence of man on Divinity in its manifest external dimension, that is to say, the dimension of God that creates beings and is involved with their lives and fortunes, as opposed to His hidden essence. As I claim in the concluding section of this article, Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgical tendencies have much to offer us nowadays from a spiritual–philosophical perspective.

I adopt the label “theurgy/theurgical” with this specific meaning from the field of Kabbalah Studies, where it is commonly used to designate the manner in which the majority of Kabbalists from the late thirteenth century onwards have perceived and practiced the religious commandments of Judaism—the *mizvōt*, as prescribed by Jewish *halacha*, the equivalent of the Islamic *sharʿa* (see, for example, Idel 1988a, pp. 156–99; Wolfson 1988a, 1988b; Mopsik 1993; cf. “theurgy” in the indexes of Scholem 1977, 1995). Scholars of Kabbalah, in turn, have borrowed this term from the pagan Neoplatonic tradition of Late Antiquity. In Greek, the term *theourgia* (from *theos*, “God”, and *ergon*, “work”) literally signifies “God-work” or “divine work”, and hence the adjective *theourgikos*, “related to divine works”, and the noun *theourgos*, “performer of divine works”. In pagan Neoplatonic thought from the time of Plotinus's disciple Porphyry (d. ca. 305), and especially from the time of the latter's student Iamblichus (d. ca. 325) onwards, and based inter alia on prior occult–mystical teachings, as reflected above all in the famous *Chaldean Oracles* (Lewy 1978; Majercik 1989), *theourgia* implied a set of magical-like rituals performed by the philosopher–theurgist with the ultimate aim of effecting or inducing a direct and intimate connection with the Divine. Such rituals often entailed the singing of hymns and incantations, the uttering of divine names or attributes, employing geometric forms or written symbols (including letters), and, of course, the use of various material natural objects such as stones, plants, and sacrificial animals. The connection with the Divine thus achieved was perceived as leading to ecstatic and mystical experiences (for instance, visions of Gods and *henōsis*, “unification”, with them), divinatory knowledge, miraculous actions, and ultimately spiritual salvation (*sōtēria*). Neoplatonic theurgy was grounded in complex philosophical–mystical systems that included elaborate theologies, cosmologies, and psychologies (Dodds 1947; Rosán 2009, pp. 208–13; Festugière 1971; Sheppard 1982; Luck 1989; Van Liefferinge 1999; Shaw 2014; Uždavinys 2014; Helmig and Vargas 2014; Dillon and Timotin 2016, index, “theurgy”).

Like many other categories that are employed in the field of Religious Studies, the use of “theurgy” by scholars of Kabbalah (and by myself in the current article) is a modern academic construct. I believe, however, that this use is justified for two main reasons (see also Mopsik 1993, pp. 31–33). First, both Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists were profoundly engaged with the Neoplatonic tradition(s), and significant teachings of theirs exhibit the heavy impact of Neoplatonic notions. Certainly, this engagement was but one aspect of the general Islamicate reception and adaptation of Neoplatonic writings and ideas, a long and complex process that began in the ninth century (see, for instance, Adamson

2002) and continued for many centuries thereafter. Accordingly, from a broad historical perspective, the phenomenon designated by the term “theurgy” is not necessarily alien to the worlds of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists, although, as we shall see throughout this article (especially Section 5), there are significant differences between pagan theurgy and the medieval theurgy of Abrahamic mystics. Secondly, as I attempt to demonstrate in this article, reading Ibn al-ʿArabī through the lens of “theurgy” or with the category of “theurgy” in mind—and in comparison with Kabbalistic theurgy (see below Section 5)—sheds light on certain key aspects of his thought that seem to have been neglected or perhaps downplayed and even suppressed by modern scholars, possibly due to religious apologetic concerns (one prominent exception is Henry Corbin; see Corbin 1969, especially pp. 105–35). It is to highlighting and elucidating these aspects that I now turn.

2. Ontological Theurgy

Theurgical tendencies in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought are evident in his overall perception of the relationship between the Creator and the created (what may be termed “ontological theurgy”), as well as in his strong belief in the impact of man’s actions on this relationship (“practical theurgy”). According to al-Shaykh al-Akbar (Chittick 1989, 1998), the relationship between God and His created beings is reciprocal; the worlds at large and all beings that populate them are created by God—or rather, are brought out by Him from non-existence (*adam*) to existence (*wujūd*)—yet, at the same time, God Himself is in need of them, given that without creation and created beings, God cannot manifest His divine attributes (*ṣifāt*). To be sure, in terms of His inner hidden (*bāṭin*) and presumably unapproachable essence (*dhāt*), God is “Self-Sufficient and in no need of the worlds” (*ghaniʿan al-ālamīn*; Qurʾān 3:97). However, God’s attributes and the names (*asmāʾ*) in which they are embodied—the infinite divine energies of both a kind–compassionate and harsh–violent nature—cannot realize their full potential and come into effect without created beings. The latter, and man in particular, are thus loci or platforms (*mazāhir*, singular *mazhar*; *majālin*, singular *majlā*) for the appearance/manifestation (*zuhūr*) and ontological revelation (*tajallī*) of Divinity in its manifest external dimension (*zāhir*); this dimension, accordingly, is intimately tied to and intertwined with the fate of creation. Put differently and in more radical terms, without creation and man, God is imperfect and is unable to realize His own potential.

2.1. Cosmogony

In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view, Divinity’s need for creation and creation’s influence on Divinity are rooted in cosmogonic events, and are therefore embedded in the very nature or fabric of existence. In one key myth that resurfaces in four different versions in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s oeuvre—testifying to its enduring importance throughout his writing career—the divine names appear as protagonists in the dramatic events that lead to the creation of the universe. These names seek to actualize their dormant potential, yet realize that such an urge cannot be satisfied without created beings, their loci of manifestation. Consequently, they turn to their seven “leaders” (*aʾimma*, singular *imām*), which represent the creative, omniscient, and omnipotent powers of the Divine as well as its conflicting energies, that is, its generous–merciful and just–punitive attributes. Under the guidance of *allāh*, the supreme “all-comprehensive name” (*al-ism al-jāmiʿ*), the seven leaders bring about creation, thereby ending the plight of the divine names (for details see Fenton and Gloton 1993, pp. 12–13, 40–41; Elmore 2001; Ebstein 2018a, pp. 365–67). In another mythical portrayal of cosmogonic events (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 4, p. 202, chp. 72), al-Shaykh al-Akbar writes that prior to creation, God “was by Himself for Himself, rejoicing in eternity and delighting in perfection with self-sufficiency” (*fa-kāna bi-naḥsihi li-naḥsihi fī ibtihāj al-azal wa-iltidhād*

al-kamāl bi-l-ghinā l-dhātī). However, once the worlds came into existence, God's unity was irreversibly impaired, and He was "put in a strait" or "pressed" (*muzāḥama*) by the multiple forces active in creation, namely the conflicting divine names. Created beings, loci of the latter's manifestation, are thus responsible for God's tragedy—His loss of absolute unity: "the joy of unification and unity ceased due to the most beautiful names [see Qur'an 7:180 and more] and the aspects ascribed to Him that have multiple rulings" (*fa-zāla ibtihāj al-tawḥīd wa-l-aḥadiyya bi-l-asmā' al-ḥusnā wa-bimā nusiba ilayhi min al-wujūh al-muta'addida l-aḥkām*). (On the term "ruling", see Chittick 1989, p. 39 and index, "ḥukm"). The influence of created beings on Divinity—a seemingly negative influence, according to this specific passage!—is thus traceable to the very origins of creation and is an ontological feature of reality, as will also become evident in what follows.

2.2. The Mutual Dependence of Man and God

While the belief that created beings owe their very existence to God is fundamental to Islam and to the other two Abrahamic religions, the corresponding notion in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's thought that God too is in need of creation is much less obvious and therefore merits our attention. This radical notion is expressed in numerous passages and in diverse and audacious ways throughout Ibn al-ʿArabī's oeuvre, particularly in his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*), and in his celebrated *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*The Ring-Gems of Wisdoms*). As explained above, Ibn al-ʿArabī holds that without creation, the divine names cannot actualize themselves, and, accordingly, the Divine cannot manifest Itself as God (*ilāh*) or Lord (*rabb*; see, for example, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 9, p. 490, chp. 379, *rak'a* 2; vol. 11, p. 244, chp. 558, *al-ḥaḍra l-bārī'iyya*). From this perspective, God (in His manifest external dimension, not in His essence) is in greater need of the worlds than the worlds are of Him: "the need (*ḥāja*) of the [divine] names to influence (*ta'thīr*) the entities of the possible existents [*ā'yān al-mumkināt*, i.e., created beings] is greater than the need of the possible existents to have this influence manifested in them" (ibid., vol. 10, p. 386, chp. 463).

God's need for creation is likewise evident in the domain of divine knowledge, which presumably should be eternally perfect and immune to external influences. Al-Shaykh al-Akbar is quite fond of *ḥadīth al-kanz* ("the tradition concerning the treasure"), which he frequently quotes or refers to; in this tradition, God is reported to have said "I had been an unknown treasure, yet I wished to be known. So I created created beings; I made myself known to them, and they came to know me" (*Kuntu kanzan lam u'raf fa-aḥbibtu an u'rafa fa-khalaqtu l-khalq wa-ta'arraftu ilayhim fa-ʿarafūnī*; ibid., vol. 5, p. 357, chp. 146; vol. 8, p. 335, the beginning of chp. 351; Chittick 1989, p. 391, n. 14). In His solitude, God seeks to be known, and therefore brings beings into existence so that they may gain knowledge of Him. However, creation is also necessary for the completion of divine knowledge itself. To begin with, in their capacity as "permanent entities" (*ā'yān thābita*), that is, objects of God's eternal knowledge yearning to be brought out from non-existence to existence, created beings inform the very contents of divine knowledge; their nature and traits as well as their future actions (once they enter existence) dictate and determine God's knowledge of them in eternity. Divine knowledge in its metaphysical, timeless dimension is thus dependent on and reflects the unfolding fate and deeds of the *mazāhir* or "phenomena" in the earthly temporal realm (see, for instance, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 183–85, chp. 411, p. 190, chp. 413, p. 326, chp. 457; see also vol. 5, p. 394, chp. 153; Kars and Bahrani 2022, pp. 15–17; Chittick 1989, pp. 11–12, 83–88). In the same way that Eve is feminine and passive but at the same time masculine and active, given that she was originally created from Adam (Genesis 2:21–24; Qur'an 4:1; 7:189; 39:6), so too created beings have a dual status vis-à-vis the Divine: they are granted existence (passivity), but as "permanent entities" eternally rooted in the

divine mind, they dictate God's knowledge of them (activeness), thus placing Him in a position of passivity (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 393–94, chp. 463). As “Knower”, God “is under the constraint/subjugation of the object known, fluctuating in accordance with it...” (*al-ʿālim taḥt taskhīr al-maʿlūm yataqallabu bi-taqlībihi*; *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 283, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-rifʿa*). Moreover, since it is only through created beings that God is able to actualize all His latent powers as embodied in the divine names, it is likewise through them alone that He is capable of reaching full knowledge of Himself—thereby becoming truly perfect:

Perfection (*al-kamāl*) is loved for its own sake. His knowledge of His own self, may He be exalted, in respect of Him being Self-Sufficient and in no need of the worlds, belongs to Him alone. What remains is nothing other than the completion of the level of knowledge by means of newly-occurring [or contingent] knowledge (*bi-l-ʿilm al-ḥādith*), which is from these entities, the entities of the world, when they come into existence. The form of perfection thus appears through newly-effected and beginningless knowledge alike (*bi-l-ʿilm al-muḥdath wa-l-qadīm*), and the level of knowledge is perfected through both aspects.... (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 203–4 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, p. 191; on “newly-effected/contingent knowledge”, *al-maʿrifa/al-ʿilm bi-llāh al-muḥdath/a*, see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, p. 140, chp. 89; vol. 8, pp. 96–98, chp. 335)

You have a share in [the divine attribute of] *ṣamadiyya* [meaning that all beings necessarily have recourse to God], because newly-occurring [or contingent] knowledge of Allāh (*al-maʿrifa bi-llāh al-ḥāditha*) is only through you. You are the object of recourse concerning this knowledge, given that it only appears through you, and so you are the object of recourse concerning that which does not appear save through you. (*ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 483, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-ṣamadiyya*)

He [God] is omniscient (*ʿālim*) through me. If I were not, through whom would He be knowledgeable (*ʿāliman*)? For I have granted Him knowledge, while He has granted me existence; and so, matters between Him and me have become entangled.... (*ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 111, chp. 400; see also *ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 490)

The divine form has reached perfection through you.... (*al-ṣūra l-ilāhiyya bika kamulat*; *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 59, chp. 514)

The idea that the Creator and the created—the two sides of reality's equation, as it were—are “entangled” or inseparably “bound together” (*irtibāṭ*), given that both sides need and demand (*ṭalab*) each other, resurfaces time and again in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's writings (see, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. 10, pp. 309–10, chp. 451, pp. 429–32, chp. 470; see also *ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 22–33, chp. 364; vol. 11, pp. 59–60; Kars and Bahrani 2022, pp. 15–17). The divine names and the “permanent entities” are family members or brothers who assist each other in their mutual quest for manifestation and existence (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, pp. 96–97; vol. 9, pp. 28–29. On the notion of a “family relationship” between men and Gods in certain Late Antique Neoplatonic theurgical writings, see Luck 1989, p. 190). From Ibn al-ʿArabī's perspective, even the widespread philosophical belief that God is the only entity whose existence is necessary by means of its own essence (*wājib al-wujūd*, *wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*) is not straightforward as might seem at first. True, the existence of created beings is possible (*imkān*), hence their ontological definition as “possible existents” (*mumkināt*); it is only God who can salvage them from non-existence by granting their “permanent entities” existence. However, it is precisely for this reason that God needs His created beings in order to gain victory over the assumed “absolute non-existence” (*al-ʿadam al-muṭlaq*); without them, there is really no meaning to either “existence” or to “non-existence”. Created beings are therefore God's “assistants” (*anṣār allāh*) in His battle against non-existence, enjoying in

this context a status of close friends or allies (*wilāya*) of the Divine (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, pp. 392–93, chp. 153; vol. 11, p. 60; cf. vol. 8, pp. 334–37; vol. 9, p. 529, chp. 381).

By no means is there existence proper save from two roots (*fa-lā yaṣīḥḥu l-wujūd aṣlan illā min aṣlayni*): one root, adjacent to the side of the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*), is ability (*al-iqtidār*), and the second root is receptivity (*al-qubūl*), adjacent to the side of the possible existent. Neither root is independent in existence nor in bringing-into-existence. (*fa-lā istiqlāl min al-aṣlayni bi-l-wujūd wa-lā bi-l-ijād*; ibid., vol. 10, p. 429; see also vol. 5, p. 140; vol. 10, p. 189, chp. 413; vol. 11, p. 341, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-jalāl*)

Accordingly, the expression “Self-Sufficient and in no need of the worlds” should be restricted to the divine essence, not to the manifest external dimension of Divinity (God’s names), or otherwise interpreted differently than is commonly understood (for details see ibid., vol. 3, p. 340, chp. 70, *waṣl fī faṣl qubūl al-māl anwāʾ al-aṭāʾ*; vol. 8, pp. 511–12, 541–42, chp. 360, p. 565, chp. 361, *athar* 6, p. 580, chp. 362; vol. 9, pp. 166–68, 248, 266–67, chp. 369, *waṣl* 5, *waṣl* 17, and *waṣl* 22; vol. 10, pp. 247–48, chp. 429, p. 432; vol. 11, p. 232, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-ʿizza*, p. 244; Chittick 1989, pp. 9, 49, 60, 86, 319, 327).

3. Theurgy in Practice

As mentioned above, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theurgical tendencies are likewise evident in his belief that man’s actions, which are inevitably performed either in accordance with the *sharīʿa* or contrary to its directives, influence the relationship between the Creator and the created, which in itself is grounded in a theurgically oriented ontology. “Practical” theurgy is thus the natural corollary of “ontological” theurgy.

3.1. The “Influence” (*Taʿthīr*) of Man on God

Ibn al-ʿArabī does not shy away from emphasizing in the most daring ways the influence of man’s actions, particularly his religious works (*aʿmāl*), on Divinity in its manifest external dimension; in fact, it often seems that he delights in stressing the theurgical power of man. This is evident above all in his frequent and explicit use of the root *ʿ.th.r* and its derivatives when referring to the relationship between man and God and specifically between human religious works and their divine object or target, so to speak. According to al-Shaykh al-Akbar, following or disobeying the commandments of the *sharīʿa* in general, and praying to God or remembering Him (*dhikr*) in particular, influence (*taʿthīr*) or leave traces (*āthār*, singular *athar*) and impressions (*rusūm*, singular *rasm*) on the Divine, thereby triggering a corresponding response from God (see, for instance, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 6, pp. 485–86, chp. 217; vol. 10, pp. 233–34, chp. 424; vol. 11, p. 149, chp. 548, pp. 231–32, 275, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-baṣṭ*). “Receiving a trace,” Ibn al-ʿArabī clarifies, “is a change in the receiver” (*fa-inna qubūl al-athar taghyīr fī l-qābil*; ibid., vol. 4, p. 560, chp. 73, question 114). Indeed, Divinity changes or passes from one state to another (*istiḥāla*) in accordance with the states and actions of created beings, including religious works such as repentance (ibid., vol. 8, p. 458, chp. 356; see also Chittick 1989, pp. 96–112). “. . . The changes that appear in existence are the rulings of the [different levels of] preparedness of the possible beings. . .” (*al-taghyīrāt al-zāhira fī l-wujūd hiya aḥkām istiḍādāt al-mumkināt*, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, p. 20, chp. 327. On the concept of “preparedness” or “aptitude”, see Chittick 1989, index, “preparedness”; cf. the notion of *epitēdeiotēs*, “suitability” or “aptitude”, in Neoplatonic thought, in Shaw 2014, pp. 93, 95–97, 165, 246). Religious works are thus “movements” (*ḥarakāt*) that stir the Divine, causing It to respond (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 9, pp. 538–40, chp. 382). It should be noted that in Arabic magic and astrology, *taʿthīr* sometimes denotes the influence of magical substances and means on various objects as well as the influence of stars or planets on our world and the reciprocal manipulation of these astral energies

by certain knowledgeable individuals (see, for example, [Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 2011](#), pp. 12–13, 46–48, 86, 88–94 [in the Arabic section]; [Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 2015](#), pp. 125–30 [in the Arabic section]; [Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 2019](#), pp. 118–19 [in the Arabic section]; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 1, p. 551, chp. 25; vol. 7, pp. 420–21, chp. 307; [Coulon 2017](#), p. 80, and index, “taʿthīr”; and see [Saif 2015](#), pp. 9–45).

The following passage well illustrates al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s belief in the ability of man to “influence” God. Having stated ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 9, p. 24) that the relationship between our world and God is similar to the relationship between the body (*jism*) and its spirit (*rūḥ*), respectively, Ibn al-ʿArabī adds that

Completion of knowledge in knowing Allāh (*thumma min tamām al-maʿrifa l-mawḍūʿa fī l-ʿilm bi-llāh*) is [to realize] that the body has intellectually-perceived and known traces (*āthāran maʿqūla maʿlūma*) in the spirit, given the various types of knowledge-by-tasting (*ʿulūm al-adhwāq*) that the [body] offers, which the [spirit] cannot know save through the [body]. The spirit similarly has sense-perceived traces (*āthār. . . maḥsūsa*) in the body, which every animal witnesses from its own self. So too is the world with the Truth; Allāh has manifest external traces (*āthār ḡāhira*) within it, which are the states (*al-aḥwāl*) in which the world fluctuates (*yataqallabu*). . . The Truth, glorious is He, has also notified that the world—in respect of that which He has legally imposed upon it (*min ḥaythu mā kallafahu*)—has traces, of which we would not know were it not for Him acquainting us with them. Thus, if we follow His messenger in that which he has brought to us regarding Allāh’s obedience, then He will love us, we will make Him pleased, and He will become pleased with us. He has likewise notified us that if we disobey Him, do not follow His command, and defy Him, we will cause Him to be angry and wrathful with us. And that if we beseech Him, He will answer us (*wa-idhā daʿawnāhu ajābanā*); beseeching is thus His trace, while answering is our trace. . . (ibid., vol. 9, p. 25)

Following the *sharīʿa*—obeying God’s commandments and prohibitions, as embodied in the Qurʾān and in the Prophet’s *sunna*—causes changes in the divine dynamics, in the power relations between God’s conflicting names: those reflecting divine satisfaction and love as opposed to those that reveal divine anger and wrath. Note especially the effect of calling to God or prayer (*duʿā*) mentioned in this passage; although the concept of *ijābat al-daʿwa* and the figure of *mujāb al-daʿwa*—the righteous “friend of God” (*walī*, plural *awliyā*), “whose calling to God/prayer is answered”—are well known and widely discussed in Islamic and specifically Ṣūfī literature predating the rise of Ibn al-ʿArabī (see [Gramlich 1987](#); [Khalil 2011](#)), still, al-Shaykh al-Akbar emphasizes in a radical and unprecedented way the influence in this context of the human agent on the Divine. Prayer and its outcome are not a mere fulfillment of divine will and decree, but rather form an intricate bilateral mechanism—God orders or commands man to pray (“beseeching is His trace”), while man’s prayer, in turn, forces God to respond (“answering is our trace”). Human prayer thus affects the very dynamics of Divinity (on prayer, see also the following section). In general, meticulously following the divine legal commandments (*farāʾid*) is our act of generosity (*karam*) towards God, since we are responding to His request as expressed in the *sharīʿa* ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 5, pp. 168–69, chp. 95).

To be sure, Ibn al-ʿArabī never tires of warning his reader lest he forget that God is the definitive “influencing” agent in creation. “Allāh is the agent [behind all] things (*al-fāʿil li-l-ashyā*); no *himma* of any created being nor any manifest external or inner hidden means (*sabab*) can influence them” (ibid., vol. 6, p. 527, chp. 229. On the term *himma* see below Section 3.2); “There is no influencer save Allāh” (*wa-lā muʾaththir illā llāh*; ibid., vol. 11, p. 279, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-khaḍḍ*; see also vol. 9, pp. 489–90, 496–97, chp. 379, *rakʿa* 8; vol. 10,

pp. 21, 25, chp. 385). In al-Shaykh al-Akbar's unified vision of existence, the multitude of phenomena and all that takes place in the created worlds are nothing but diverse ontological revelations of the one-and-only God—they are different forms (*ṣuwar*, singular: *ṣūra*) in which the same divine entity manifests itself. From this perspective, the question of “who influences who” is really meaningless: it is the Divine that is the real agent in creation, the only true existent (see, for example, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946](#), pp. 126–31, 183–85 = [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016](#), pp. 113–20, 171–74). Nevertheless, and despite the fact that everything—including man's actions—is presumably predetermined by God's knowledge and will, the way the Divine is revealed or takes form within creation is dependent on created beings, the loci of manifestation for God's names; hence, the influence that human actions in general and religious works such as prayer in particular—eternally rooted in their metaphysical “permanent entities”—exercise on Divinity. “The matter revolves between the influence of the Truth on creation and [the influence of] creation on the Truth” (*fa-l-amr dāʾir bayna taʾthīr ḥaqq fī khalq wa-khalq fī ḥaqq*; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 4, p. 146, chp. 72, *waṣl fī faṣl al-iḥṣār*, and see the entire discussion there from p. 143; see also *ibid.*, vol. 10, pp. 188–89, chp. 413). Ultimately, God cannot evade the rules governing His own creation; as a created being is passive by his very essence (*munfāʿil bi-l-dhāt*), so too is the Creator passive or affected by that being's prayer (*ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 349, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-ijāba*; see also *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 340, chp. 302). Similarly, God is compelled, constrained, or subjugated (*taskhīr*) by His servants in the same way that a king, when defending his subjects or serving their needs, is in fact under their dominion. And akin to the divine commandments and prohibitions embodied in the *sharīʿa*, human beings too command (*amr*) and prohibit (*nahy*) God when beseeching Him—they request certain things from God and implore Him to prevent others, thus “imposing” on Him their demands in the same way that He “imposes” His *sharīʿa* on them (*Ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 72–73, chp. 72, *waṣl fī faṣl al-niyya li-l-iḥrām*; vol. 6, pp. 37–38, chp. 178, *minaṣṣa wa-majlā naʿt al-muḥibb yuʿāniqu ṭāʿat maḥbūbihi*. . .; vol. 8, pp. 457–58; vol. 10, pp. 325–26; vol. 11, pp. 281–83; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946](#), pp. 193–94 = [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016](#), p. 182. On the magical connotation of *taskhīr*, see [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946](#), p. 158 = [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016](#), p. 145; [Saif 2017](#), pp. 331, 333–34, 337, 339–41, 344–45; [Coulon 2017](#), index, “taskhīr”. Cf. the question of *anagkē*, “compulsion” of the Gods, in Late Antique Neoplatonism, in [Luck 1989](#), pp. 191–92, 199). In this sense, God is not really “free” (*ḥurr*), because in the same way that He “acts at will” (*taṣarruf*) with man or manipulates him (*taṣrīf*; on these terms, see below Section 3.3), so too man, in a certain respect, “acts at will” with God or manipulates Him, forcing Him to respond to his requests ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 6, pp. 469–70, chp. 214; vol. 10, p. 58, chp. 389).

We have already ascertained that such an inferior one may command his master (*qad yaʾmuru sayyidahū*) and the master will answer his command, becoming his property [or falling under his possession/sovereignty, *fa-yaṣīru*. . . *mulkan lahu*] through this response, even if it is from his own choice (*an ikhtiyār minhu*). It is then proper to say concerning the master that he is the property of the property (*mulk al-mulk*), since he has answered the command of his servant, and his servant is his property; for one who is commanded and answers, the name “the commanded one” becomes proper for him, and this is the meaning of “property”. If the master answers the command of his servant, who is property, then he turns himself into the property of his property through his answering. This is the utmost descending of God (*al-nuzūl al-ilāhī*) towards His servant, that He has said to him “call me and I shall respond to you” [cf. Qurʾān 40:60; 2:186]. And so the servant says to Him “forgive me”, “have mercy on me”, “assist me”, “restore me [to my former state, *ujburnī*]”, and He does so. Allāh says to him, “call to me, pray, give alms, persevere, station yourselves at the frontier and fight

[for Allāh's sake, *rābiṭū jāhidū*]", and he obeys or disobeys, but the Truth, glorious is He, answers His servant concerning that to which he has called Him, on the condition that He busy Himself exclusively with his call [*bi-sharṭ tafarrughihī li-du'ā'ihī*; cf. [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 9, p. 490]. Yet, the trace of the influencer may also be an action without a command, like a servant who disobeys, and his disobedience stirs (*fa-yuthīru*) anger in the soul of the master, and he punishes him; the servant has thus caused his master to punish him through his act of disobedience—had he not disobeyed him, that which appeared from the master would not have appeared. Otherwise, he forgives him, and likewise concerning obedience, he rewards him. So from this relation as well, He is the property of the property—that is, the property of him who is His own property. This is what all the divine legal codes (*al-sharāʿī*) have brought (*ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 424–25, chp. 73, question 16. On *mulk al-mulk* in this context, see also vol. 9, p. 496; vol. 10, pp. 303–4, chp. 449; vol. 12, p. 364, chp. 559, *wa-min dhālika manzilat al-imām fī l-anām*; cf. [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946](#), p. 71 = [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016](#), p. 49; Qurʾān 3:26; [Al-Tirmidhī 1992a](#), pp. 29, 45, 68, 129–30, 175; [Al-Tirmidhī 1992b](#), vol. 2, p. 209, *aṣl* 245).

3.2. The Theurgical Mechanism of Sharʿī Praxis

What are the practical aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgical tendencies? What do theurgical operations, so to speak, consist of? Naturally, religious commandments as prescribed by the *sharʿ* serve as the basic tools for such operations. Specifically, al-Shaykh al-Akbar holds that meditative "concentration" or "awareness" (*ḥuḍūr*, literally "being present", or *istiḥḍār*, "causing someone/something to be present [in the mind]"), "intention" (*niyya*), and ritual purity (*ṭahāra*) are crucial for the success of religious works, which, as explained above and as we shall also see in what follows, change the dynamics of Divinity (see, for instance, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 7, p. 226, chp. 290; vol. 10, pp. 468–69, chp. 481. On ritual purity in this context, see *ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 546, chp. 177, *al-ʿilm al-awṭāl*). This theurgical understanding of intention is quite different from its commonplace perception in Islamic law in general and in Sūfī ethics and psychology in particular (see [Van Ess 1961](#), pp. 144–49; [Rapoport 2010](#), esp. pp. 207–12; [De Francesco 2014](#); [Altaf Mian 2023](#)). Ibn al-ʿArabī believes that a mystic is thus able to turn his religious works (*ʿāmal*, or *ʿibādāt*, singular: *ʿibāda*) into autonomous living beings; he is able to create (*khalq*, *iqāma*, *inshāʾ*, *tjād*) "forms of religious works" (*ṣuwar al-ʿāmal/al-ʿibādāt*) that praise God (*tasbīḥ*) and ascend (*ṣuʿūd*) to the upper divine worlds (for instance, to the divine "throne", *al-ʿarsh*). Through "sincerity" (*ikhhlās*, that is, performing a religious deed for God's sake alone; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007](#), p. 187), "intention", "concentration" / "awareness", and *himma* (on which see below), and through the meticulous performance of *sharʿ* commandments, the mystic's religious works come to life and a divine spirit is blown into them (*nafkh al-rūḥ*), in the same way that Jesus, on the basis of his knowledge of letters and divine names, created a living bird out of clay according to God's "command" (*amr*) or with His "permission" (*idhn*; see Qurʾān 5:110 and [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 1, pp. 508–10, chp. 20). Such works—sometimes referred to as angelic forces—exist forever and are able to secure God's pardon and forgiveness (*ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 237, chp. 292, *al-nikāḥ al-ghaybī l-muntij*; vol. 10, pp. 468–69). We may say therefore that the creative ability of man—of divine origin, no doubt (see below Section 3.3)—which enables him to "bring into being" (*takwīn*, see Section 3.3) and even to fashion the very image of his worshiped God (Section 5), likewise serves him in charging his religious deeds with an animated, divine energy; with this energy, he dispatchs his works upwards in an attempt to affect the higher worlds and obtain various benefits, whether personal or communal, spiritual or material ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 11, pp. 246–49, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat*

al-taṣwīr, pp. 257–59, *ḥaḍrat al-wahb*; see also vol. 2, pp. 125–26, chp. 58; vol. 7, p. 134, chp. 284, pp. 421–22, chp. 307; vol. 11, pp. 154–55, chp. 551; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1995](#), pp. 184, 217. For similar conceptions in Kabbalistic theurgy, see [Idel 1988a](#), pp. 188–97; [Lachower and Tishby 1989](#), vol. 2, pp. 592, 597–614, 625, 629, 810; vol. 3, pp. 941–1075, 1439).

Unsurprisingly ([Ebstein 2014](#), pp. 33–122; [Sartell 2021](#); [Rašić 2021](#)), al-Shaykh al-Akbar likewise views human speech and its most basic constituents—the letters, which have magical-like “special properties” (*khawāṣṣ*)—as endowed with theurgical potency and as theurgically effective when combined with religious works (on the magical and alchemical “science of special properties”, see [1942–1943](#), vol. 2, pp. 61–95; [Coulon 2017](#), index, “*khawāṣṣ*”). In referring to Qurʾān 35:10, Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that when uttered with the proper mystical mindset, a “good word” (*kalima ṭayyiba*) becomes “embodied” (*tajassud*) in a form or “assumes its shape” (*tashakkul*). Specifically, God inserts a divine creative breath (*nafas*) into the mystic’s heart, and this breath, in turn, is formed or shaped in accordance with the “thoughts” (*khawāṭir*) present in the heart. When the mystic then utters a word (or a combination of words), the air assumes the form or shape of its letters, and both shapes or forms—the one issuing forth from the heart and the one shaped in the air by means of the letters—are joined together and then ascend. If the word (or combination of words) is accompanied by a religious work (*amal*), this work functions as a *burāq*, a divine angelic beast (*markūb*) on which the word/s and letters “ascend” to Allāh ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 11, pp. 284–85, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-rifʿa*; cf. *ibid.*, p. 262, *ḥaḍrat al-arzāq* and vol. 8, p. 422, chp. 353. Cf. the mystical linguistics of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī in [Sviri 2002](#), esp. pp. 229–31, 238–9. For “linguistic theurgy” in Kabbalah, see [Idel 1992](#), esp. pp. 51–52, 57–58, 66–69). Thus, in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s eyes, the theurgical operation brings the mystic into direct intimate contact, both spiritual and physical, with the very source and stuff of creation—the divine breath (*nafas al-raḥmān*, “the breath of the All-Merciful”), consisting of God’s words and letters, which form the building blocks or DNA, as it were, of the universe (in addition to the references at the beginning of this paragraph, see also [Chittick 1989](#), pp. 125–30; [Chittick 1998](#), pp. xxviii–xxxv, 69–72). Man’s speech creates angels; a good word (*kalima*) creates merciful angels, a bad one vengeful ones. Accordingly, with certain types of religious formulae, man can increase the number of merciful angels and even transform the vengeful ones into compassionate forces ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 7, pp. 163–65, chp. 287; cf. *ibid.*, p. 237).

It should be noted that Ibn al-ʿArabī is quite fond of the aforementioned term *himma*, well known in the Ṣūfī tradition and which usually denotes man’s concentrated mental-spiritual energy. According to al-Shaykh al-Akbar, it is by means of his *himma* that the mystic is able to influence the Divine as well as the physical and spiritual worlds around him, resulting in miraculous acts and even in the creation of various objects or beings ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 1, p. 510, chp. 20, p. 550, chp. 25; vol. 4, p. 464, chp. 73, question 41; vol. 5, p. 52, chp. 73, question 153; vol. 6, p. 81, chp. 186, p. 110, chp. 192, pp. 527–29, p. 638, chp. 268; vol. 7, p. 259, chp. 293, pp. 419–21, chp. 307; vol. 8, pp. 553, 559, the beginning of chp. 361 and *athar* 1, pp. 564–65, *athar* 6; vol. 9, p. 267, p. 527, chp. 381; vol. 10, p. 20, pp. 380, 382, chp. 463, *quṭb* 1; vol. 11, p. 349; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007](#), pp. 54 [cf. [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1997](#), p. 19], 91, 125–8, 164, 169, 186, 195; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946](#), pp. 88–90, 158 = [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016](#), pp. 72–73, 145; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1948a](#), p. 63. On *himma* in mystical as well as magical contexts, see also [Corbin 1969](#), pp. 221–45 and index, “*himma*”; [Saif 2017](#), pp. 323, 331, 343; [Saif 2021](#), p. 56; [Lala 2023](#)). Obviously, employing one’s *himma* also yields mystical experiences, given that the *himma* penetrates the upper and divine worlds; it compels God to quench man’s thirst for divine knowledge and satisfy his desire to be intimate with Him (see, for example, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1995](#), pp. 286, 298–99, 414–15;

Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007, pp. 146–47). No wonder, then, that a powerful *himma* is a faculty shared by both prophets and their heirs, the “friends of God” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1948b, p. 15).

In general, the purpose of the mystic’s intention and concentration/awareness while performing the commandments of the *sharīʿa* is to actualize the theurgical potential that is inherent in any given religious work (*amal*) in itself (*bi-dhātihi*); neither created beings nor God in His manifest external aspect can avoid the influence of works when meticulously performed by the chosen mystic (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, pp. 215–19, chp. 342; cf. *ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 251, chp. 345). Every organ or limb in man’s body has specific religious works that are assigned to it, and each work or type of works yields certain “miraculous acts” (*karāmāt*) and certain kinds of divine knowledge via that limb (*ibid.*, vol. 11, pp. 94–95, chp. 526; and see mainly Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007, especially pp. 96–230, *martaba* 3). One may note that in occult literature, *amal* sometimes signifies the magical operation (see, for instance, Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 1957, vol. 4, pp. 332–33, 336, 369, 374–76, 426–27, 429–43; Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 2011, pp. 26, 49, 56–69 [in the Arabic section]; Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ 2019, pp. 157–58 [in the Arabic section]; see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 1, p. 528, chp. 22, pp. 556–58, chp. 26; vol. 5, p. 26, chp. 73, question 135, p. 488, chp. 167, the second heaven; vol. 6, p. 136, at the beginning of chp. 198, pp. 304, 306, chp. 198, *faṣl* 27; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, p. 155 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, p. 142). In addition, as is well known, the theory of *amal* or syntactic influence is central to the Arabic linguistic tradition (Levin 1995). Both connotations—the occult and the linguistic one—may also be at the background of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s emphasis on the influence of religious *ʿamal* (note also the double connotation of *taṣrīf*, which will be discussed below in Section 3.3: both the “manipulation” of phenomena and morphological “conjugation” or grammatical “declination”).

Given that the universe and all that occurs within it are ongoing manifestations of divine names, it follows that by performing religious works, the mystic can assist Divinity in Its process of manifestation, and likewise mitigate or moderate the just–punitive forces of God, His harsh and violent energies. Certain passages in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *al-Futūḥāt* offer us in this context a closer glimpse into the actual workings of human theurgy by means of *sharīʿi* commandments. For instance, Ibn al-ʿArabī writes that almsgiving (*ṣadaqa*) pacifies God’s wrath (*ghaḍab*) and saves one from an evil death. Although this statement is rooted in the *Ḥadīth* and echoes earlier Jewish sources (see, for example, Ibn Balabān al-Fārisī 1991, vol. 8, pp. 103–4; Proverbs, 10:2; 11:4; and *The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat*, 156:b), al-Shaykh al-Akbar deliberately emphasizes the “influence” of man on God, referring to the “trace” (*athar*) that almsgiving leaves in the “divine relationships” (*al-nisab al-ilāhiyya*), that is, the divine names (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 3, pp. 311–14, chp. 70, *Waṣl fī faṣl mā tataḍammanuhu l-ṣadaqa min al-athar fī l-nisab al-ilāhiyya wa-ghayrihā*). Similarly, Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that *kaffārāt*, viz. religious works like almsgiving or fasting that are performed in order to atone for certain transgressions,

Were established in the divine law (*shurriʿat*) simply in order to function as veils (*ḥujuban*) between the servant and the befalling afflictions to which he has exposed himself by committing transgressions. . . Thus, when [the name] “the Avenger” (*al-muntaqīm*) brings the misfortune that was sent down, having been necessitated by this transgression, these works [the *kaffārāt*] are found covering the [transgressor] in the shelter of their wing, guarding him; they have become a shield over him and a means for his protection. The name “the Pardoner” (*al-ghaffār*) rules (*ḥākim*) over these *kaffārāt*. And so, the misfortune cannot find any way of piercing through; the threat (*al-waʿīd*) cannot pierce through the [servant] due to the prevailing sovereignty (*sulṭān*) of this work called *kaffāra*. . . (*Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 414, chp. 306)

By performing a specific religious action (almsgiving, fasting) as prescribed by the *sharīʿa*, man is able to avoid the punitive–violent energy of certain divine names, through the utilization of others that embody mercy and forgiveness. In other words, performing religious works in the right way (with *ḥudūr*, for example; see in this context *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 226) grants man the ability to manipulate the manifest external dimension of Divinity for his own benefit.² This is why the divine names “fear” man, because, in effect, he has power over them:

Each and every one of the divine names that governs and rules in any given state (*al-wālī fī l-ḥāl ṣāhib al-ḥukm*) fears [the name] *allāh* because it has knowledge of the names at His presence that oppose it (*tuqābilu ḥādḥā l-ism*). Such a name says: “In the same way that He had entrusted me with this specific locale in which my ruling was then manifested, though I had not governed it [before], [in the same way] He might discharge me (*qad yaʿzilunī*) by means of another governor”, i.e., by the ruling of another divine name. Nobody is more knowledgeable than the divine names, and so, nobody fears *allāh* more than them [cf. Qurʾān 35:28]. For *allāh* acts at will with them by having them entrusted [with governments] and discharged (*lahu l-taṣarruf fīhā bi-l-tawallī wa-l-ʿazl*), and this is [reflected in] that which occurs within existence. There is that which occurs as a result of a request from the cosmos (*an suʾāl min al-kawn*), and there is that which occurs without a request but rather happens when the period of the ruling ends, in which case it is an abrogation (*fa-yakūnu naskhan*). As “fearing *allāh*” is applied to the knowledgeable ones from among contingent beings, and since contingent beings may request that the rulings of the divine names be removed, the divine names that rule in any given moment fear the request of contingent beings to remove their ruling from that specific locale. . . The divine names thus fear *allāh* because He can discharge and appoint, and they fear the world because it may request and because *allāh* may accept this request. . . (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 499–500, chp. 494)

Ibn al-ʿArabī presents his theurgical understanding of man’s religious works as standing midway between two theological camps or extremes: those who attribute all actions primarily to man (presumably the *muʿtazila*), and those who claim that God alone is the sole agent in creation (the *Ṣūfis* and the majority of *Sunnīs* since roughly the tenth century; see Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 6, pp. 502–5, chp. 222). In al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s eyes, both man and God have “a relation to the [religious] work” (*nisba ilā l-ʿamal*; *ibid.*, pp. 504–5), but not in the way that *Ashʿarīs* would conceive of the matter in the framework of their theory of *kasb* (the human “acquiring” of a divinely ordained action). On the one hand, God bestows existence upon man, and His names appear through him; consequently, man’s actions are nothing but a manifestation of divine existence and power. On the other hand, the specific forms and ways in which this manifestation occurs are dependent on the “permanent entities”—they are a product of the “ruling” (*ḥukm*) or “trace” (*athar*) of the “preparedness of the entity of the possible existent” (*istīdād ʿayn al-mumkin*). Man, the locus (*mazhar*) of God’s manifestation, influences God in His process of self-revelation through his individual “preparedness” or aptitude (*ʿayn al-ʿabd lahu istīdād khāṣṣ muʾaththir fī l-zāhir*; *ibid.*, p. 505; see also *ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 72–73), that is, through his nature and traits as eternally present to the divine mind in his “permanent entity”. This intricate and reciprocal relationship is reflected in the “opening *sūra*” of the Qurʾān (*al-fātiḥa*), which forms the legally binding core of prayer and other rituals. According to a famous *ḥadīth* much favored by al-Shaykh al-Akbar, *Allāh* is said to have “divided prayer between myself and my servant” (*qasamtu l-ṣalāt baynī wa-bayna ʿabdī*), given that the “opening *sūra*” consists of two halves: one dedicated to God’s

praises, and the other to human requests (see, for instance, [Muslim 1991](#), vol. 1, pp. 296–97, *Kitāb al-ṣalāt*, *bāb* 11, # 38 and 40). Ibn al-ʿArabī writes the following:

The preparedness [of the possible existent] has caused Him who manifests Himself (*al-zāhir*) to say: ‘and it is You from whom we ask help’ [Qurʾān 1:5]. Due to the influence-through-ruling of the preparedness of this praying entity, the One who manifests Himself addresses the name “the Helper” to help him in his work (*yukhāṭibu dhālika l-zāhir bi-athar istīdād hādihā l-ʿayn al-muṣalliya bi-l-hukm al-ism al-muʾin an yuʾinahu ʿalā ʿamalihi*). This is because the ruling of the possible-existent’s entity has appeared (*ṣahara*) in Him who manifests Himself, if indeed his preparedness offers inability and weakness. The saying [in this Qurʾānic verse] of Him who manifests Himself is, after all, the tongue of the possible-existent’s entity; nay: it is the saying of the possible existent through the tongue of Him who manifests Himself. ... ([Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 6, p. 505)

Presumably, God acts through the passive organs of man ([Ebstein 2018b](#)), and even man’s prayer and beseeching are nothing but a manifestation of divine activity. However, in reality—in both its metaphysical dimension, namely the relationship between the “permanent entities” and divine knowledge, and its earthly physical expression—man determines the actual form and outcome of the divine dynamics; or better yet, the form and outcome of the divine dynamics in the temporary created realm—how man acts, and the consequences of his action—dictate God’s knowledge of them in the eternal realm, through the “permanent entities” that are involved in this action and function as its metaphysical roots. In this sense, Ibn al-ʿArabī is truly a phenomenologist; “the intelligent one should be with what occurs at present [or: in the current state], for that is the form of the matter as it is in itself” (*wa-l-yakun al-ʿāqil maʿa l-wāqī fī l-hāl fa-inna dhālika ṣūrat al-amr ʿalā mā huwa ʿalayhi fī nafsīhi*; [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 10, p. 397, chp. 463, quṭb 10). And so, if one truly observes and mystically analyzes the “phenomenon” (*mazhar*) of a human being praying, one comes to realize that this individual is actually manipulating the Divine: he is activating a certain name (“the Helper” in the passage above) for his own personal—or perhaps some collective—benefit. Divinity has no choice but to respond, because this specific action and the individual’s nature and qualities that produce it dictate divine knowledge of them in the eternal metaphysical realm (the realm of the “permanent entities”); divine knowledge, in turn, is the basis for the creation of this action—or rather, for granting it concrete existence in our world. In the same way that man cannot bypass his ontological need for God in order to exist, God cannot evade man’s influence on the ways in which His names appear and operate in creation (on prayer in general in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought, see mainly chp. 69 of the *Futūḥāt*; [Corbin 1969](#), pp. 246–71; [Abrahamov 2019](#), pp. 76–120).

3.3. The Manipulating Power of the Chosen One: “Bringing into Being” (*Takwīn*), “Creation” (*Khalq*), and “Viceregency” (*Khilāfa/Niyāba*)

As explained above, Ibn al-ʿArabī holds that man’s theurgical power—his ability to influence both the created and the divine realms—in effect derives from God; after all, all in creation is an ontological revelation of Divinity. The manifestation of divine power is most evident in the actions of certain individuals who, in addition to strictly following the obligatory commandments of the *sharīʿa* (*farāʾid*), assiduously perform supererogatory works (*nawāfil*). Such works transform these chosen individuals into living channels through which God’s creative power can then flow. For example, remembering God incessantly (*dhikr*) or performing other supererogatory works of a verbal nature (*qawl*) endow one with *takwīn*—the ability to create by uttering the divine existentiating command “be!” (*kun*; see, for instance, Qurʾān 16:40; [Sviri 2007](#)), “in the same way that an obligatory commandment grants you [the ability] to say to the Truth, exalted is He, ‘do!’ and He does”

(Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, p. 141, chp. 89). It is not for nothing that al-Shaykh al-Akbar views supererogatory works as essential for being provided the power of *takwīn*; in his view and according to his radical interpretation of the famous *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* (“the tradition concerning supererogatory works”; Ebstein 2018b), diligently performing *nawāfil* grants the *walī* God’s love, and as a result, the *walī*’s organs serve as a means through which Divinity operates in our world. In this way, the *walī*’s tongue becomes divine, hence his ability to create through the pronunciation of *kun* (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 11, pp. 476–78, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-wijdān*). The operation of *takwīn* is carried out through the mystic’s *himma*; the mystic concentrates his mental–spiritual energy on the object that he wishes to existentiate, and God “ties” (*yūʿalliqu*) his saying to the actual “bringing into being” of the object (ibid., vol. 10, pp. 396–97, chp. 463, qutb 10; cf. vol. 4, p. 464; vol. 6, pp. 9–10, chp. 178, *waṣl nuʿūt al-muḥibbīn/fa-min dhālika l-ittibā li-rasūl allāh*. . . . On *takwīn*, see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007, pp. 124–25). From a different perspective, Ibn al-ʿArabī clarifies that man is ontologically a naked “servant” (*abd*), bereft of all attributes, existence, and power; it is only when God brings him into existence and “clothes” him with the name *allāh*—that is, when this name is manifested through him—that he is able to “bring into being” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 11, pp. 247–48; cf. vol. 4, pp. 463–64, chp. 73, question 41; and see Kahan 2024). Elsewhere (for instance, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, p. 24, chp. 73, question 131; vol. 7, pp. 168–70, chp. 288; vol. 11, p. 161, chp. 554; see also Chittick 1989, pp. 30, 187–88, 239, 302; Ebstein 2014, pp. 146–51), Ibn al-ʿArabī makes it clear that it is the “perfect human being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in whom the divine names are fully manifested and who serves as an earthly manifestation of the name *allāh*, the “all-comprehensive name”; this name comprises all other divine names, generous–merciful and just–punitive alike. Accordingly, it is by means of the “perfect human being” that God is able to fully manifest Himself in creation (through the totality of His conflicting names) in His all-encompassing unity (specifically through the name *allāh*). Thus, the power of the “perfect human being”, who, in the current age, is embodied in the figures of the leading mystics of Islam (headed by Ibn al-ʿArabī himself), not only affects created beings (whether in the sublunary world or in some upper spiritual realm), but also the Creator Himself, in His manifest external dimension, viz. the divine names (on the “perfect human being” in general, see Chodkiewicz 1993a, 1993b; Takeshita 1987). No wonder then that according to al-Shaykh al-Akbar, the human power to “bring into being” is likewise directed at God, in the simple act of prayer; in the same way that God’s *kun* operates via a “trace” (*athar*) that it casts onto its object about to be created, so too human prayer is an act of “commanding” (*amr*) and “bringing into being”, whose affected target is God Himself and the outcome of which is a divine “response” (*ijāba*) to this prayer (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 322–23, chp. 456, p. 404, chp. 464).

Ibn al-ʿArabī goes so far as to call the chosen mystic who has the ability to “bring into being” (or “bring into existence”, *ījād*) and who uses it with the proper “courtesy” (*adab*, see below Section 3.5) a “creator” (*khallāq*), notwithstanding the fact that his power to create ultimately derives from God. God is not the sole creator in the universe, since man likewise has a share in this ability, but is rather the “best of creators” (*aḥsan al-khāliqīn*), according to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s radical understanding of Qurʾān 23:14 (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 6, pp. 491–92, chp. 219; vol. 8, pp. 19–20, chp. 327; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007, p. 174. Cf. the view of theurgy as human participation in the creative activity of the Demiurge according to the Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus, in Shaw 2014, pp. xxv, xxx–i, 17, 23–26, 50–64, 124, 130–31, 133, 175, 179, 200). After all, man, through his “permanent entity”, dictates God’s knowledge of him and his actions, including the operation of *takwīn*; the mystic’s *takwīn* is therefore a shared operation of the human and the Divine—the chosen one determines the content of divine knowledge in the metaphysical realm, and, accordingly, God grants his action or saying in the earthly sphere the power to existentiate whatever “permanent entity” his

“permanent entity” wishes to bring into existence (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 396–97; vol. 11, pp. 476–78). Such creative activity includes religious works as well; for instance, meditative *dhikr* formulae (singular: *hijjir*) like *lā ilāha illā llāh* (“there is no God save Allāh”) are “created” by the mystic and become autonomous living beings that “praise” God and assist the mystic in achieving various spiritual and material goals. As explained above in Section 3.2, the mystic is a “creator” of all the “forms” of religious works performed by him, which are therefore like the bird of clay fashioned by Jesus (ibid., vol. 8, pp. 421–23, chp. 353; vol. 10, p. 406, chp. 464; cf. vol. 10, pp. 446–47, chp. 474). To be sure, the mystic can indulge in such a “creating” activity (*khalq*) only if he has a “permission” (*idhn*) from God (ibid., vol. 12, pp. 429, 498, chp. 560, *waṣīyya wa-īyyāka an tuṣawwira šūra bi-yadika*... and *wa-īyyāka an tuḥshara yawm al-qiyāma mā a l-muṣawwirin*), or more precisely, only if he does so following a “divine command” or “Allāh’s command” (*amr ilāhī, amr allāh*). This “command” is what sets the miraculous acts of prophets and *awliyā* apart from sheer magic or sorcery (*sihr*; see Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 158–60 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, pp. 145–47; Ebstein 2020, pp. 180–82). It is significant that in discussing man’s ability to “create”, al-Shaykh al-Akbar (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, pp. 104–5, chp. 335) refers to a passage in the famous work *al-Filāḥa l-nabaṭiyya* (*The Nabatean Agriculture*) that describes a sorcerer’s “bringing into being” of a human being—what is known in the Jewish tradition as a *golem* (for the original passage, see Ibn Waḥshiyya 1995, vol. 2, pp. 1317–19; see also Hämeen-Anttila 2003. On the Jewish *golem*, see Idel 2019; Idel 2003, pp. 239–41). The concept of “bringing into being” of a human being is also elaborated on in the alchemical and magical corpus attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān (Kraus 1942–1943, vol. 2, pp. 97–134; cf. Fahd 1995–1997, p. 25), a corpus likewise familiar to Ibn al-ʿArabī (see below Section 5). *Al-Filāḥa l-nabaṭiyya*, like other works of a scientific and occult/magical nature that will be mentioned below in Section 5, was well known in al-Andalus (Fahd 1995–1997. On the work in general, see Hämeen-Anttila 2006; Coulon 2017, pp. 121–34; Van Dalen 2021). Unsurprisingly, certain Jewish compatriots of Ibn al-ʿArabī similarly read this work or were aware of it (see, for example, Halevi 1977, pp. 16–17 [a, 61]; Krinis 2013, p. 40), and at least one (see Jospe and Schwartz 1993, p. 190 and n. 19) refers specifically to the aforementioned passage on the creation or “bringing into being” of man. I shall return to the links in this context between the Jewish and Islamic Spanish milieus below in Section 5.

It is above all the “perfect human being” who is given the power of *takwīn* and *khalq*, and who is thus able to “act at will” (*taṣarruf*) or “have his own way” (*taḥakkum*) in creation, that is, manipulate (*taṣrīf*) the physical and spiritual worlds and their inhabitants (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 4, pp. 462–65, chp. 73, question 41; vol. 8, pp. 550–60, the beginning of chp. 361 and *athar* 1. On *taṣarruf-taṣrīf* and *taḥakkum* in this context, see also ibid., vol. 1, pp. 550–51, chp. 25; vol. 5, p. 558, chp. 177, *al-nawʿ al-rābī*; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2007, p. 169. On the magical and alchemical connotations of *taṣarruf-taṣrīf*, see Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 152, 155 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, pp. 140, 142; 1942–1943, vol. 1, index, “*taṣrīf*”; Coulon 2017, index, “*taṣrīf*”. On *kun* of the supreme mystics, see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, p. 62, chp. 73, question 154, *fa-minhum al-ḥāsīdūn*). These are, in fact, some of the key features or prerogatives of *khilāfa/niyāba*—of being “Allāh’s viceregent on earth” (*khalīfat allāh, nāʾib*; ibid., vol. 4, pp. 462–65; vol. 7, p. 259; vol. 8, pp. 521–23, chp. 360, *niyāba* 3, pp. 539–40, *waṣl taṣarruf al-nāʾib*...; vol. 10, pp. 380–84, chp. 463, *quṭb* 1). Ideally, a *khalīfa* is also a political figure, like the Prophet Muḥammad and the “rightly guided caliphs” (*al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidūn*), who ruled after him; all were “perfect human beings” who combined what we would call a mystical way of life with political activities, which were ultimately aimed at implementing God’s will and command on earth, as embodied in the *sharīʿa* (in which case, *taḥakkum* would also mean to hold political–legal sway over others). However, a *khalīfa* need not be a political figure, as is the case with the Prophet’s heirs, the “friends

of God” who have attained the level of the “perfect human being”, namely mystics like Ibn al-‘Arabī himself. Akin to the Prophet and to the “rightly guided caliphs”, and despite the fact that they do not necessarily rule in the ordinary, political sense of the word, such mystics serve as loci or platforms for the full manifestation of God’s names in creation; both the generous–merciful and just–punitive attributes of God appear through them, “in their opposition to one another” (*alā taqābulihā*; *ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 558; see also Ebstein 2018a, pp. 368–71). The role of these senior mystics as mediators between the Creator and the created is twofold: on the one hand, they preserve created beings from harm, the worlds owing their physical existence and spiritual welfare to their continued presence and actions at all times. On the other hand, God needs His chosen ones in order to fully manifest Himself within creation in an all-comprehensive and balanced manner. The “perfect human being” achieves this double goal through his ability to “manipulate the divine names” (*bi-taṣrīfihi l-asmā’ al-ilāhiyya*; Ibn al-‘Arabī 2010, vol. 8, p. 557; see also vol. 5, p. 558), that is, by influencing the dynamics of Divinity’s external manifest aspect. “The perfect governor [*wālī*, from the same root as *walī*] is one who connects (*wālā*) the divine names one to the other, ruling between them in truth [or: by means of the Truth]” (*fa-l-wālī l-kāmil man wālā bayna l-asmā’ al-ilāhiyya fa-yahkumu baynahā bi-l-ḥaqq*; *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 509, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-imāma*). This radical statement can be interpreted as referring either to the name *allāh* or to the “perfect human being”, but in any case, as mentioned above, the latter serves as a locus for the manifestation of the former, and so, the chosen one, like the name *allāh*, combines (*jāmi’*) within himself all the conflicting divine names, bringing equilibrium to Divinity. The divine names therefore “thank” God’s viceregent, the “perfect human being”, their *imām* (“leader”), for granting them life and sustenance (*rizq*; Ibn al-‘Arabī 2010, vol. 2, p. 562, chp. 69, *faṣl bal waṣl fī imāmat al-fāsiq*; vol. 10, p. 460, chp. 478. Cf. Idel 1988a, p. 165 for the theurgical notion found in Kabbalistic and Hasidic sources according to which the people of Israel “sustain” God [*mefarnesīm*]; and cf. Mopsik’s definition of “action conservatrice”, in Mopsik 1993, p. 41).

In explaining the role of Adam and his prerogatives as God’s viceregent on earth (*khalīfa, nā’ib*)—Adam being the prototype of the “perfect human being” in his various manifestations throughout sacred history—al-Shaykh al-Akbar explicitly refers to the human ability to influence Divinity (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2010, vol. 4, pp. 462–65). He states that the “special properties” of the divine names and letters, knowledge of which was granted by God to Adam (see Qur’ān 2:31; cf. Genesis 2:19–20), are what enabled Adam (and likewise all other “perfect human beings”) to “act at will” (*taṣarruf*) in the different spiritual and physical worlds, influencing (*ta’thīr*) their inhabitants through *takwīn* and the use of divine names and letters. Letters, it should be remembered, are indissolubly linked to the divine names—names are composed of letters, and letters form the very fabric of existence (see the relevant references above in Section 3.2). According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, names and letters are likewise the tools by which the chosen one manipulates the external manifest side of Divinity:

Some [letters/names] influence [or leave a trace in, *lahu athar fī*] the most protected and supreme abode (*al-jānib al-aḥmā l-a’lā*), which is the place of the relations [*al-nisab*, viz. the divine names]. Only the prophets and messengers, may Allāh’s peace be upon them, know this singular influence and its names, which are the names provided by the divine legal code (*asmā’ al-tashrī’*). Performing works by means of these divine legal codes is what influences this abode of relations (*wa-l-‘amal bi-tilka l-sharā’i’ huwa l-mu’aththir fī hādha l-janāb al-nisbī*); it is a mighty, unperceivable abode, which the Truth, glorious is He, has established as the place of His secrets and locus of His revelations. ... (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2010, vol. 4, p. 463)

Through the use of letters and names, the chosen one can influence the aspect of Divinity—the divine names—that is unattainable to the common believers. True, knowledge of such matters is said in this passage to be held solely by the prophets and the messengers, as opposed to non-prophetic knowledge of letters and names, which is also shared by magicians, for example; indeed, a magician can affect the physical realm and perhaps certain parts or aspects of the spiritual worlds as well, but definitely not Divinity Itself. However, there is no doubt that in Ibn al-ʿArabī's eyes, the theurgical–prophetic heritage is passed on to the prophets' heirs, the supreme mystics, who, in any case, can also be defined as “prophets”, since they enjoy non-legislative or “general prophecy” (*nubuwwa ʿamma*), as against “legislative prophecy” (*nubuwwat al-tashrīʿ*; see Chodkiewicz 1993a). This secret esoteric heritage (“the place of His secrets”) is what enables the chosen ones to discover the theurgical use of divine names that appear in the Qurʾān and in the *Ḥadīth* (“provided by the divine legal code”) and to “perform works” by means of the *sharīʿa* that affect the dynamics of Divinity.

Certainly, and once again, al-Shaykh al-Akbar insists that all *takwīnī* works in general and those executed by the “perfect human being” in particular are essentially divine; God works through His chosen ones, who, from this perspective, serve as a passive channel for divine energy and action in the world (Ebstein 2018b). In addition, in one passage Ibn al-ʿArabī clarifies that a mystic who has the “divine power of bringing entities into existence” (*al-quwwa l-ilāhiyya fī ṭjād al-ʿyān*) can only change the states (*taghayyur al-aḥwāl*) of already existing entities; that is, he can manipulate the condition of beings that God has already created in some form. He cannot “bring into existence that which does not exist” (*ṭjād al-maʿdūm*). From this perspective, absolute or full *takwīn* belongs to God alone, and mystics who focus all their energy on achieving the power of *takwīn* (*ahl/aṣḥāb al-takwīn*) are inferior to those who concentrate first and foremost on God Himself, rather than striving to acquire His creative abilities (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, pp. 29–32, chp. 328, pp. 521–23, 564–5; vol. 10, pp. 194–97, chp. 415). However, and as explained above in Section 3.1, this is but one side of the equation; the other, complementary side is the influence of the “perfect human being”—through the sheer existence of his being as well as by means of his theurgical actions—on Divinity and its mode of operation within the universe. Indeed, such a duality or tension likewise characterizes the theurgical thought of Iamblichus; in his view (see Shaw 2014, pp. 55, 80, 90–97, 125–26, 137, 173, 210, 233–34), man's theurgical actions are literally “divine works”—that is to say, they are really the *energeia* (“activity”) of the Gods flowing through their human recipient/instrument. This view was not necessarily shared by all Neoplatonic theurgists, and another possible way of understanding *theourgia* would be “works concerned with Gods”, that is, directed at Gods, in the same way that *theologia* means a “science/discourse whose object are the Gods” (see Stang 2011, pp. 4–7). At any rate, the Neoplatonic cosmos of Iamblichus, like that of Ibn al-ʿArabī, amounts to a grand epiphany of the Divine; the theurgist aims at tapping into the divine energy in creation, allowing it to flow through him. Iamblichus's theurgist–philosopher is thus both divine and human (Shaw 2014, pp. 57, 165, 211), like Ibn al-ʿArabī's “perfect human being”.

In this context, one may ponder for a moment on the actual meaning of divine selection, so central to Ibn al-ʿArabī's theory of the “perfect human being”, for according to al-Shaykh al-Akbar, one does not choose to be a prophet or a *walī*, but is elected as such by God's timeless will and knowledge. However, the fact that the content of divine knowledge is said by Ibn al-ʿArabī to be dictated by the “permanent entities” themselves seemingly implies that it is, in reality, the phenomenon itself (*mazhar*) of any given “perfect human being” that, via its “permanent entity” in the eternal metaphysical realm, brings about its own selection. Put differently, God does not create this or that person as a prophet or *walī*, but rather grants existence to the “permanent entity” of any given prophet or *walī*; one's chosenness is

thus metaphysically predetermined by God—but in accordance with the actual unfolding fate of his (or her) *mazhar* in the historical earthly arena. If such an understanding is correct, it would mean that in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's eyes, the human subject may indeed wield tremendous power over God, especially if he is a "chosen" individual. Yet this does not imply that mystics should necessarily manifest such power, as will become clear in Section 3.5.

3.4. Combating Satan Through Theurgy

As I will emphasize in Section 5 of this article, there are striking similarities as well as essential differences between Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgy and Kabbalistic theurgy, which merit a separate, in-depth study. One important difference pertains to the Kabbalistic concept of the "other side", *ṣiṭrā aḥrā* in Aramaic. This concept, developed, above all, in the Zoharic corpus and, under its influence, in many Kabbalistic works produced through the ages, reflects the belief in the existence of an evil, dark realm, which parallels the divine world of emanations (the ten *sefirōt*) and which serves as the spiritual source of the Jews' rivals through the ages. From a theurgical point of view, various religious works are aimed at weakening or even pacifying this "other side" (see, for instance, Lachower and Tishby 1989, vol. 2, pp. 445–546). Nothing akin to this extreme and gnostic-like concept can be found in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought; there is no evil dimension emanating from Divinity that is in a constant struggle with It, neither in the metaphysical realm nor on the plane of history. On the other hand, there is always Satan, and in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's view, certain religious works assist man in his fight against Satan. Thus, for example, Ibn al-ʿArabī believes that in terms of its theurgical power, the *basmala*—the formula *bi-smi llāh al-rahīmān al-rahīm* ("in the name of *allāh*, the Merciful and the Compassionate"), which is uttered before commencing an action—functions like *kun* (see also below Section 3.5). The name *allāh* in the *basmala* grants man "protection" (*iṣma*) from Satan:

When we invoke the name *allāh* over our works (*fa-lammā sammaynā llāh ʿalā aʿmālīnā*) when commencing them, we become alone with them [without Satan; *tawahḥadnā bihā*] and protected (*uṣimnā*) from the participation of Satan. This is because the divine name is the one that deals with [Satan] himself (*huwa lladhī yubāshiruhu*), intervening between us and him. Some who enjoy [mystical] unveiling (*bāḍ ahl al-kashf*) witness this repelling [that occurs] between Satan and the divine name [that issues forth] from the servant when commencing [a work]. When a servant has this quality, he is [acting] with a clear proof from his Lord [*kāna ʿalā bayyina min rabbihi*; see Qurʾān 11:17], he has escaped and is salvaged from this participation, remaining guarded and protected (*fī l-ḥifẓ wa-l-ʿiṣma*) in all his works and states. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, pp. 423–24, chp. 353)

In the same way that in Kabbalah the combination of the right "intention" (*kavvana*) and action is perceived as preventing the forces of *ṣiṭrā aḥrā* from participating in religious works, thus thwarting their attempt to infiltrate the holy realm and affect the balance of the *sefirōt*—the realm of God's attributes and names, His manifest external dimension—so too in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought the combination of the right *niyya* and action (the *basmala* uttered by the mystic) is meant to safeguard the believer and prevent Satan from "participating" in his works. In the passage above, the divine name *allāh* is employed in order to achieve a spiritual or perhaps material goal—the protection from satanic powers while performing this or that action (cf. the danger of having evil spirits/daemons gain control over man during theurgical or magical rites in Late Antique Neoplatonism, in Shaw 2014, p. 95; Luck 1989, pp. 197–98, 208–9).

3.5. The Limits of Practical Theurgy: “Courtesy” (*Adab*) vis-à-vis God

The notion that man ought to refrain from manifesting his divine abilities out of “courtesy” (*adab*) towards God is central to the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī and is, at the same time, rather subtle and complex. A full discussion of this issue, including its roots in earlier Ṣūfī sources, falls beyond the scope of the current article, but a few words on its relevance to our topic—al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s theurgical tendencies—are obviously in order (for more details, see [Gril 1993](#); [Chiabotti et al. 2017](#)). From Ibn al-ʿArabī’s standpoint, “courtesy” is in principal necessary for the “friend of God”, given his capacity to influence both creation and the Creator in His manifest external dimension. By openly revealing such a capacity, the mystic runs the risk of falling into human vanity, of failing to remember and maintain his ontological status of “servanthood” (*ubūdiyya*) vis-à-vis God, who alone—in theory—should enjoy *rubūbiyya* or *siyāda*, that is, being a master over creation (see also [Lala 2023](#), pp. 11–13). In addition and from a broader perspective, the tension between, on the one hand, the mystic’s desire to fully manifest his power, to manipulate, change, and improve the world around him, and, on the other hand, his profound understanding that reality is as it should be and therefore ought to be left untouched and unhampered by human action—this tension between activity and passivity is perhaps universal, and, in any case, can be found in diverse traditions. Consider, for example, the Taoist concept of *Wu Wei*, “non-doing” (on this concept and its relation to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought, see [1966–1967](#), vol. 2, index, “wu wei”, and see also vol. 1, pp. 264–72). Certain aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theory of *adab* may have been heralded by a number of Late Antique Neoplatonic philosophers like Iamblichus or the great Proclus (d. 485), who viewed theurgy as central to man’s spiritual quest, yet seem to have felt uneasy with its magical-like aspects, or more precisely, with the notion that man can compel the Gods to fulfill his own selfish needs, whether spiritual or material (see [Luck 1989](#), p. 211; [Shaw 2014](#)). At any rate, there may also be a degree of practical caution or prudence (*taqīyya*) in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s *adab*, possibly also a didactic approach. Mystics in Islam, especially radical thinkers like Ibn al-ʿArabī, have often been criticized and attacked by the learned establishment and political regime (see, for example, [De Jong and Radtke 1999](#); [Knysh 1999](#); [Sirriyeh 1999](#)), and it is conceivable that Ibn al-ʿArabī was afraid lest his teachings be interpreted as legitimizing magic, thereby endangering himself and his followers. His writings, after all, were primarily directed at his fellow companions and students on the mystical path, hence the need to caution them against instigating such misinterpretations. Moreover, from an educational point of view, an aspiring novice should not think of himself as a miracle-worker and as a “perfect human being” whose mission is to assist Divinity in its ongoing process of self-revelation, but rather should primarily focus on strengthening his “servanthood”.

In this context, it would perhaps be useful to distinguish between magic and miracle-working, on the one hand, and theurgy as defined in this article, namely the influence of man on Divinity, on the other. True, such a distinction does not appear in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s oeuvre, and the lines separating both types of human action are often blurred; ultimately, *siḥr* (“magic”, “sorcery”) and *karāmāt* (“miraculous acts”) are also based *inter alia* on the knowledge and use of the “special properties” of divine names and letters (see, for example, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 4, pp. 463–64; vol. 5, pp. 62–63, chp. 73, question 154, *wa-minhum al-sāḥirūn*, pp. 542–43, 546, chp. 177, *al-ilm al-awwal*; vol. 6, pp. 81, 110; vol. 7, p. 450, chp. 311; [Ebstein 2018a](#), p. 374, n. 59). In Late Antique Neoplatonism as well, the differences between magic and theurgy proper were not always clear or obvious, and philosophers who advocated theurgical rites were obliged to explain why they were distinct from sorcery ([Shaw 2014](#), pp. 42–43, 94–95, 191, 209–10; [Van Liefferinge 1999](#); [Luck 1989](#), pp. 188–89, 200–1, 211; [Stang 2011](#), pp. 3–4, 6. On magic versus theurgy, see also [Mopsik 1993](#), pp. 18–41). Indeed, it is precisely due to the close affinities between magic and theurgy

that Late Antique philosophers felt the need to distinguish one (profane) phenomenon from the (sacred) other. The same holds true for Ibn al-ʿArabī, at least from a certain perspective, and notwithstanding the fact that he does not use the term “theurgy” nor any corresponding Arabic phrase. After all, in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s view, miracle-working and “human manipulation of exterior and interior phenomena” (Saif 2017, p. 345), namely magic, may be erroneously perceived as affecting the Divine (theurgy), given that in an Akbarian universe, all phenomena in the micro- and macrocosm are ultimately manifestations of God’s names, hence the need to separate legitimate–real from nonlegitimate–fake wondrous actions. As mentioned above (Section 3.3), the “divine command” is what sets the miraculous acts of prophets and *awliyāʾ* apart from illicit and deceptive sorcery. Moreover, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī (see, for example, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 6, pp. 78–80, chp. 185; vol. 7, pp. 430–37, chp. 309; cf. vol. 6, pp. 81–83, chp. 186; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 126–31 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, pp. 113–20), whereas a messenger (*rasūl*) must manifest his miracles (*muʿjizāt*, *āyāt*), since they bear testimony to the veracity of his prophetic message, a *walī*—unless otherwise commanded by God—should hide his miraculous abilities and perhaps even avoid performing them altogether (on miraculous acts in the Ṣūfī tradition in general, see Gramlich 1987). Conversely, when it comes to the use of divine names in order to achieve a personal–spiritual or collective–beneficial goal—not to mention assisting Divinity in its continuous process of self-manifestation—it seems to me that in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s eyes, the supreme *walī* should carry out and inevitably performs what I term theurgical operations. These operations, nevertheless, must be executed in secret, given that Ibn al-ʿArabī regards the *malāmiyya* (or *malāmatiyya*)—those who adhere to the “path of self-blaming” (*malāma*)—as the noblest class of mystics (Chodkiewicz 1998. On the origins and historical development of the *malāmiyya*/*malāmatiyya*, see Sviri 2020, pp. 75–136). In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought, the *malāmiyya* / *malāmatiyya* are the epitome of true worship and human “servanthood”; standing above the ordinary mystics and Ṣūfīs (see, for example, Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 6, p. 80; vol. 7, pp. 430–37), they embody what every human being should aspire to—becoming (or realizing that he has always been) a passive and receptive instrument of God, a secret and unknown channel for divine self-revelation. The mystic should always maintain *adab* vis-à-vis God and never manifest his divine powers (unless he is ordered to do so), but while miraculous acts per se on the part of the *walī*, whether in secret or in public, are frowned upon in al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s world, theurgy as defined in this article stands at the very center of his teachings (in this context, see esp. Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, pp. 394–95, chp. 153). There is no meaning to religious experience and to the mystical path without an active interaction with the divine names; by the same token, there is no way for *al-insān al-kāmil* to execute his historical and meta-historical roles (Ebstein 2020, pp. 182–88) without intimately engaging the divine names. As explained above (Sections 2 and 3.1), the very fabric of existence and of our relationship with the Divine is theurgical by nature. One cannot escape this ontological truth, let alone a “perfect human being”.

I will give here two examples that illustrate the complex nature of *adab* in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought. Al-Shaykh al-Akbar states that the power of *kun*, that is, uttering “be!” in order to “bring into being” (*takwīn*), which in this world is hidden within man (*bāṭin*), will become fully manifested (*ẓāhir*) in the world to come, namely in paradise. Some mystics (*rijāl allāh*, literally “Allāh’s men”) manifest this power already in this world, while others—“the courteous ones” (*al-udabāʾ*)—wait for the world to come, out of courtesy (*adab*) towards God. It is possible that Ibn al-ʿArabī derived his teaching on this matter from Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) and ultimately from earlier figures whom al-Makkī quotes in this context, such as the famous Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. ca. 234/848; see Al-Makkī 2007, vol. 1, pp. 534–35, *faṣl* 32, the end of *maqām* 6; vol 2., p. 22, *faṣl* 32, *maqām*

7, pp. 137–38, *faṣl* 32, *maqām* 9, *dhikr makhāwif al-muḥibbīn*...; Keeler 2024, pp. 259–67). However, al-Shaykh al-Akbar adds that even a “courteous” mystic, who waives his right or relinquishes his power to utter *kun*, is still a “creator” (*khallāq*) in this mundane life by means of his religious works (see above Section 3.2) and the accompanying *basmala* (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 8, p. 423, chp. 353. On the difference between *takwīn* in this world and *takwīn* in the world to come, see also *ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 526–27, chp. 381; vol. 11, p. 122, chp. 536, p. 342, chp. 558, *ḥaḍrat al-jalāl*; and more). The *basmala* functions like *kun*, that is to say, it exercises *takwīn*, yet by choosing to employ the *basmala* rather than *kun*, the mystic expresses respect for God—it is “in His name” that he “brings into being” (on *basmala* and *kun* in this context, see also *ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 37, chp. 73, question 147, p. 63, question 154, *wa-minhum al-sāḥirūn*; vol. 6, p. 148, chp. 198, *faṣl* 4. On the power of *basmala* according to al-Hallāj [d. 309/922], mentioned in vol. 5, p. 37, see also *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 510; Massignon 1982, vol. 3, pp. 40, 44, 353–55; Massignon and Kraus 1936, pp. 22–23, 40–41, 61, 71, 84–85, 92, 101–3). Elsewhere in his oeuvre (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 1, pp. 550–52; vol. 5, p. 558; vol. 6, pp. 78–79; Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 128–29 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, pp. 115–17; see also Addas 1993, p. 241), Ibn al-ʿArabī favorably mentions the name of Abū l-Suʿūd b. al-Shibl al-Baghdādī, who, contrary to the famous ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlī (according to Ibn al-ʿArabī) and similar mystics, chose not to manifest his divine powers, “out of courtesy vis-à-vis Allāh” (*adaban maʿa allāh*; or *taẓarrufan*). Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that unless a prophet or a “friend of God” are commanded by God through an *amr ilāhī* to reveal their wondrous abilities, they should abstain from doing so, because it runs contrary to man’s natural state of “servanthood” (see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 140–42, chp. 409). Conversely, al-Shaykh al-Akbar emphasizes that Abū l-Suʿūd b. al-Shibl had no less power than al-Jīlī or any other *walī*, for that matter, and, what is more relevant to the current discussion, he states (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 551) that Abū l-Suʿūd was one of the senior mystics who had the capacity to “act at will with the divine names, seeking to bring down [powers] through them and from them” (*alladhīna lahum al-taẓarruf fī l-asmāʾ al-ilāhiyya fa-yastanzilūna bihā minhā mā shāʾa llāh*). With this capacity to manipulate the divine names, mystics like Abū l-Suʿūd are potentially able to perform all the miraculous acts that lower-level mystics seek to accomplish, including what we would call “magic”—for example, invoking the “spiritual/angelic powers” of planets, their *rūḥāniyyāt* (see also, for example, *ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 463. On *rūḥāniyyāt* in Islamic occult and Hermetic literature, see Saif 2021, esp. pp. 60–63). However, unless otherwise instructed by God, such high-level “friends of God” should remain hidden and anonymous (*akhfiyā*; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, p. 380; and more). Accordingly, the theurgical operations of a “courteous” (*adīb*) and *malāmī* mystic like Abū l-Suʿūd are forever concealed from the eyes of others (*ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 550–51; *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 110). Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the unimaginable power of such individuals that requires “courtesy” on their part, and one cannot help wondering whether *adab* in instances like this is not in itself a form of passive theurgy—affecting the Divine by allowing It to act freely without human interference (see, for instance, Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, pp. 170–75 = Ibn al-ʿArabī 2016, pp. 159–63). Indeed, supreme mystics who are *malāmīs* like Abū l-Suʿūd and who have wondrous abilities such as *takwīn* have been given “one thousand and two-hundred powers from the powers that influence the upper and lower worlds (*min al-qiwā l-muʾaththira fī l-ʾalam al-ʾalā wa-l-asfal*). If [such a *walī*] were to have even one single power of these dominate the cosmos (*al-kawn*), it would turn it to naught...” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 7, p. 350, chp. 303; see also *ibid.*, pp. 346, 349).

Many more passages on *adab* can be adduced and much more should be said regarding this matter. Can the supreme *walī* secretly perform theurgical operations in private, or should he abstain from such activities even if he is alone? And having meticulously performed such an operation, is it inevitably efficacious; that is, does God (via His names)

necessarily respond to the theurgical act, even if the mystic should have refrained from carrying it out? What kind of requests should the mystic address to God when beseeching Him by means of the divine names, and how should he frame such requests? Different passages in Ibn al-ʿArabī's oeuvre convey various answers to these and other relevant questions (see, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 542–43; vol. 11, pp. 114–16, chp. 533). Similarly, quite pertinent to the current discussion is the innate tension in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's thought between, on the one hand, the notion of man's ontological and *sharʿī* "servanthood" vis-à-vis God, and, on the other, *al-insān al-kāmil*'s natural status as God's viceregent on earth, who enjoys the ability "to act at will" on all levels (*marātib*) of reality through his divinely granted knowledge of the divine names (see, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. 7, pp. 171–74, chp. 288). This tension is one of the hallmarks of Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought, and certainly merits a monograph on its own. Acknowledging one's servitude and acting in full accordance with it does not necessarily exclude the possibility of exercising theurgical power; on the contrary, Ibn al-ʿArabī often emphasizes that a life of true and honest *ʿubūdiyya* may actually cause God to grant His chosen one the divine capacity to manipulate nature, to "act at will" within it, and to become its "master". Nature, in turn, becomes man's "handmaiden" (*wa-idhā kāna ʿabdan lī... aṭaytuhu l-taṣrīf fī l-ṭabīʿa fa-kāna sayyidan lahā wa-ʿalayhā wa-muṣarrifan lahā wa-mutaṣarrifan fīhā wa-kānat amatahu*; *ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 195, and more). Such intricate teachings obviously demand a separate, in-depth examination. At any rate, the discussion so far suffices to show the full extent of *al-insān al-kāmil*'s theurgical power in Ibn al-ʿArabī's eyes, notwithstanding the modesty and humility demanded of him.

It is important to emphasize that when reading Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, one gets the strong and undeniable impression that al-Shaykh al-Akbar was very knowledgeable about occult matters—the special properties of letters and names, astrology, magic, alchemy, and more (see, for example, chapters 15, 25, and 26 of the *Futūḥāt*, vol. 1, pp. 432–42, 547–59; vol. 4, pp. 463–64; Ebstein 2014, 96–101). Ibn al-ʿArabī probably acquired his knowledge of such matters from occult and esoteric literature that was prevalent in al-Andalus (see below Section 5) as well as from fellow mystics and teachers. In several passages, for instance, he mentions his beloved Andalusī master from Seville, the Shaykha Fāṭima bint Ibn al-Muthannā (see Addas 1993, pp. 25, 87–88), who had extraordinary powers:

We have met Fāṭima bint Ibn Muthannā, who was among the greatest righteous ones. She used to act at will in the world, and by means of the opening *sūra* of the Qurʾān, the special property of everything used to appear from her, producing a miracle (*wa-kānat min akābir al-ṣāliḥīn tataṣarrifu fī l-ʿālam wa-yazharu ʿanhā min kharq al-ʿawāʾid bi-fāṭihat al-kitāb khāṣṣat kull shayʿ*). I saw this from her. She used to imagine that everyone had knowledge of this. She used to say to me: "I wonder why anything should be impossible for someone if he has the opening *sūra* of the Qurʾān? Why does he not read it, and thereby achieve what he wishes? This is clearly nothing but a misfortune!" I served her and profited from her. (*wa-khadamtuhā wa-ntafāʿtu bihā*; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, p. 63; see also Ibn al-ʿArabī 2012, pp. 348–52)

Whether Ibn al-ʿArabī himself actually practiced the occult sciences is a question that cannot be answered here, and must await further research (including a close examination of his works' manuscripts). It is clear, in any case, that in Ibn al-ʿArabī's eyes, one cannot be a senior "friend of God" without such knowledge, particularly knowledge of the special properties of letters and names (see, for example, on *ʿilm al-ḥurūf* as *ʿilm al-awliyāʾ* in Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 5, pp. 62–63).

4. Creating the Creator

Many passages in al-Shaykh al-Akbar's oeuvre convey the notion that in essence, the very existence of God in His external manifest dimension is dependent on man, on his beliefs and actions. From an ontological point of view (see also above Section 2), one may say that since the divine names cannot manifest themselves without created beings, it follows that Divinity's existence as "God" (*ilāh*)—as a creating and governing Lord (*rabb*)—results from their own existence.

In the same way that we seek Him in order for our entities to exist, He seeks us so that His loci of manifestation appear (*li-zuhūr maẓāhirihi*). He has no locus of manifestation apart from us, and we do not appear save through Him; it is through Him that we know ourselves and know Him, and it is through us that the very thing that "god" necessitates/deserves is realized. "If not for Him, we would not be/ And if not for us, He would not be". (*fa-lawlāhu la-mā kunnā/wa-lawlā naḥnu mā kāna*; Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 4, p. 411, chp. 73, question 7; see also *ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 511)

The mythical notion that, in effect, created beings are the creators of God in His manifest external dimension is familiar from pagan religious thought, in both the East and the West, as well as from Kabbalistic theurgical teachings (Dodds 1947, p. 55 and n. 11; Olivelle 1996, pp. 14–15, 28–29; Patton 2008, p. 39, p. 217 n. 4; Lachower and Tishby 1989, vol. 3, p. 1160; Idel 1988a, pp. 173–91; Liebes 1994, pp. 70–80; Liebes 2000, pp. 141–48; Liebes 2008, p. 14). There are two main aspects to this notion, termed "théurgie instauratrice" by Charles Mopsik (Mopsik 1993, pp. 40, 549–631; concerning Ibn al-ʿArabī, see specifically *ibid.*, pp. 627–31). From the perspective of the "perfect human being", and as explained above, his being and actions are necessary in order to actualize the full potential latent in the divine names—to bring them into full and meaningful existence. Thus, regarding man's capacity as "creator", Ibn al-ʿArabī claims that in the same way that one creates animated "forms" of his religious works with a divine spirit (see above Sections 3.2 and 3.3), so too is he a "creator" (*khāliq*) of a living "form" of God (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010, vol. 10, pp. 445–47; vol. 11, pp. 246–47). Since God is fully manifested through the "perfect human being", the latter is His creator.

Be through Him, so that He will be/if you are not, then He too will not be;
For you are His creator/and you are created by "be!".

(*fa-kun bihi ḥattā yakun in lam takun fa-lā yakun*

fa-anta khallāq lahu wa-anta makhlūq bi-kun; *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 84, chp. 522).

The human being produces (*yunshiʿu*) in himself a form (*ṣūra*) that he worships, and so, while being a created being who is produced by Allāh as a servant, he is the form-producer (*al-muṣawwir*), who worships what he produces. "A servant produces nothing save his Creator/and is produced solely by the One who created him" (*fa-laysa yunshiʿu ʿabd ḡhayr khāliqihi wa-laysa yunshiʿuhu illā lladhī khalaqahu*)...". (*ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 247)

The other aspect of the mythical notion dealt with here is reflected in Ibn al-ʿArabī's anthropological theory of *al-rabb/al-ilāh al-muʿtaqad*, "the Lord/God of belief". According to al-Shaykh al-Akbar, the diversity of religious beliefs is a result of the diverse manifestations of God; every believer and every religious group worship the Divine in accordance with the specific forms in which It has ontologically and epistemologically revealed Itself to them, via the divine names. Every believer "creates" his own God and then worships him/Him (see, for example, *ibid.*, vol. 11, p. 32, chp. 504). This "created God" reflects the divine aspect or the divine name that is manifested in the form unique to that believer.

All religions are thus relative in the sense that they are a product of a certain human environment, of definite and limited loci in which God Has revealed Himself, yet by the same token, every form of worship is essentially true and correct (albeit illegitimate from a *sharī* point of view), since it ultimately represents one of God's infinite self-disclosures (for more details, see [Corbin 1969](#), pp. 184–215; [Chittick 1989](#), pp. 335–56; [Chittick 1994](#), pp. 123–76; [Abdel-Hadi 2025](#)). Such a relativist and pluralist view of religious diversity is likewise typical of the theurgical thinking of Iamblichus ([Shaw 2014](#), pp. xxv–i, xxxiii; [Stang 2011](#), p. 12) and Proclus ([Shaw 2014](#), pp. 246–47). Indeed, heralding Ibn al-ʿArabī, Late Antique Neoplatonists like Iamblichus and Proclus perceived the cosmos as a majestic conglomerate of divine epiphanies (see also [Beierwaltes 1986](#)), from the highest spiritual to the lowest corporeal strata, from the divine contemplation of superior beings to the subjective imagination of man in the sublunar world.

5. The Jewish Connection

In order to try and understand the historical background and historical significance of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgical tendencies, one must turn to the world of Jewish mysticism, as it developed in roughly the same period in which al-Shaykh al-Akbar was active (from the end of the twelfth century onwards) and in close geographical vicinity to where he spent the first, formative part of his life (the Iberian Peninsula). A comparison with Jewish Kabbalah will shed light on the relatively obscure prehistory from which a radical thinker like Ibn al-ʿArabī emerged. Certainly, such a comparison merits a separate and detailed study, which would highlight both the commonalities and differences between Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgy and that of the Kabbalists (on the links between Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought and Kabbalah, see [Kahan 2024](#) and the bibliography cited there). Here, I can only offer general observations and preliminary insights.

5.1. Differences and Commonalities

On the one hand, Kabbalistic theurgy can be characterized as a wide-ranging and comprehensive project, aimed at reinterpreting and remolding the very heart of Rabbinical Judaism—the *mizvōt* (“commandments”), as prescribed by the *halacha* (the Jewish *sharīʿa*), whether commandments that are binding and valid at all times (prayer, the Sabbath, etc.) or those that have been practiced in the distant past and that will be resumed in the messianic-redemptive future (for example, the sacrificial rites in the temple). The theurgical reinterpretation and remolding of commandments in Kabbalah is both theoretical and practical; that is to say, Kabbalists have strived to explain the theurgical mechanism of *mizvōt* and to prescribe for the Jewish practitioner the precise ways of achieving the theurgical goal—namely, the right intention (*kavvana*) that should accompany the performance of the commandment and the correct mechanical manner, so to speak, in which it should be executed. Judging by the centrality of Kabbalah (especially in its theosophical–theurgical form, as reflected above all in the literature of the *Zohar*, the famous *Book of Splendor* or *Radiance*) to the development of Jewish mysticism and Judaism at large from the late medieval period onwards, one may safely say that in historical terms, the theurgical project of Kabbalah was quite successful (see also [Mopsik 1993](#), pp. 635–36). Conversely, notwithstanding al-Shaykh al-Akbar's attempt to reinterpret in an esoteric and theosophical manner the *sharīʿa* in general and the basic commandments of Islam, the five “pillars of Islam” (*arkān al-islām*), in particular (see chp. 66–72 of the *Futūḥāt*; [Chodkiewicz 1993c](#); [Winkel 1993, 2000](#); [Chittick 1994](#), pp. 123–36; [Edaibat 2017](#); [Abrahamov 2019](#); [Lala 2022](#); [Dajani 2023](#)), I am not at all certain that the scope of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgical endeavor is as broad and wide-ranging as in Kabbalistic literature. Certainly, theurgical tendencies or elements do exist in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought, as I have attempted to demonstrate above,

yet such tendencies or elements hardly amount to a comprehensive theurgical project, let alone a practical one. Indeed, the passages in Ibn al-ʿArabī's oeuvre that actually provide instructions or at least incidentally convey down-to-earth advice on how to perform theurgical operations appear to be few and far between, and it seems that the concept of *adab* (above Section 3.5) played a key role in moderating and mitigating the practical aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgy (note, however, that in Iamblichus's writings as well, theurgical recipes or instructions are virtually lacking; Shaw 2014, pp. 52–53, 206). Is there an oral teaching in the Akbarian tradition(s) that has been passed down through the generations from teacher to disciple, from *shaykh* to *murīd*, regarding the practical application of various teachings explicated above? This question cannot be answered by the present author. At any rate and in addition, the erotic–sexual aspect of Kabbalistic theurgy (see Idel 2005a; Wolfson 2005) is by and large left unparalleled in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought. Finally, al-Shaykh al-Akbar's theory of *tajallī* and *zuhūr*, the divine self-revelation and manifestation in creation, and his concept of *ʿayān thābita* (“permanent entities”) further undermine any attempt to simplistically identify Akbarian with Kabbalistic theurgy. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's eyes, focusing exclusively on either the Creator or the created—on either divine omniscience and omnipotence or man's influence on Divinity—is erroneous; any given “phenomenon” (*mazhar*) is by nature a product of both sides, of both protagonists in the ontological drama of reality, forever “entangled” in their mutual dependence. From a philosophical point of view, al-Shaykh al-Akbar's theurgy is thus subtler, more intricate than Kabbalistic theurgy—possibly closer in this regard to Late Antique Neoplatonic theurgy, as reflected in the writings of philosophers like Iamblichus and Proclus. Obviously, such an impression must be confirmed or otherwise rejected and modified by scholars of Kabbalah.

On the other hand, both Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists perceive the Creator as being somewhat destitute; His need for created beings is no less pressing and desperate than their need for Him (Faierstein 1982). Both believe that man—particularly God's chosen one, the “perfect human being” (Ibn al-ʿArabī) or the righteous Jew (Kabbalah)—has the capacity and duty to influence the manifest external dimension of God, namely the divine attributes and names. In the case of theosophical Kabbalah, God's attributes and names are embodied in the ten *sefirōt*, as opposed to the inner hidden aspect of Divinity, the *ein-sōf* (“infinite”), equivalent to al-Shaykh al-Akbar's *dhāt* (the divine “essence”). From a certain perspective, the divine attributes and names in Kabbalistic and Akbarian teachings fulfill a function similar to that of daemons, Gods, and the souls of heroes in Late Antique Neoplatonism—mediators between the sublime One (*to hen*) and the corporeal world. At any rate, for Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists, God's attributes and names are of two types: kind, compassionate, and loving (*jamāl*, “beauty” in Islamic mysticism/*hesed*, “kindness” or “grace”, in Jewish mysticism), as against harsh–violent and just–punitive (*jalāl*, “majesty”/*dīn*, “judgement”). The human goal or mission is to assist the full and balanced manifestation of the divine attributes and names by means of a righteous and mystical life, which entails strict adherence to the *sharīʿa*/*halacha* and a meticulous and correct performance of religious commandments, accompanied by the appropriate theurgical “intention” (*niyya*/*kavvana*). Accordingly, human theurgy often entails the attempt to mitigate the harsh–punitive forces of God, by enhancing His generous or merciful energies, with the overall goal of realizing *tawḥīd*/*yihūd*—divine unity (cf. Mopsik's “action restauratrice”, in Mopsik 1993, p. 40). The deep affinity between Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists is thus undeniable.

5.2. Andalusī Prehistory

How and why did al-Shaykh al-Akbar and the Kabbalists come to develop such radical teachings, and what are their broad implications for the history of mystical traditions in the

Abrahamic religions, as they evolved from Late Antiquity through the medieval period to modern times? A theurgical worldview as reflected in Ibn al-ʿArabī's oeuvre and in many Kabbalistic writings is quite unconventional when compared to other perceptions of the human–divine relationship and of the religious commandments that were prevalent among Muslim and Jewish theologians, philosophers, and even mystics who predated the rise of al-Shaykh al-Akbar and the Kabbalists. Specifically, in relation to Ibn al-ʿArabī, his theory regarding the human influence on God is obviously out of line with the mainstream Sunnī theological view as it crystallized from roughly the tenth century onwards; it also runs counter to the classical Ṣūfī position as it evolved since the ninth century. After all, the majority of Sunnīs in this period believed that everything that occurs in creation is predetermined by God, including man's actions; in the Ṣūfī mystical articulation of this belief, man is nothing but a passive channel for divine activity. Yet, Ibn al-ʿArabī's theurgy is likewise problematic from a Muʿtazilī and even a philosophical point of view, given that the idea of human beings influencing the Divine is unthinkable—an outright abomination!—in the eyes of both the *Muʿtazila* (notwithstanding their belief in human free will) and the *falāsifa*. No wonder, then, that Ibn al-ʿArabī severely criticizes those who rely on their intellect (*aql*), on human reason and logic—namely theologians and philosophers—in order to comprehend the secret of the relationship between the Creator and the created. They think that if we assume a human influence on the Divine, the Divine becomes “newly occurring” or “contingent” (*ḥādith*) like His created beings. This, however, is a mistake, and a profound, mystical vision of the human–divine rapport necessarily admits of the human ability to affect God (see, for example, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 9, pp. 539–40). Al-Shaykh al-Akbar's theurgical tendencies are thus clearly at odds with mainstream theological, philosophical, and Ṣūfī beliefs, but, conversely, are found in an even more explicit and extreme form in the mystical teachings of his Jewish compatriots, the Kabbalists. Indeed, Kabbalistic theurgy too should be viewed as an unprecedented and radical phenomenon in the landscape of medieval Judaism, heavily influenced as it was by Islamic theological, philosophical, and mystical–pietistic currents of thought.

To be sure, scholars of Kabbalah in the last two generations or so habitually point to the Bible and to Rabbinical sources as the traditional infrastructure, as it were, of medieval Kabbalistic theurgy (see, for instance, [Idel 1988a](#), pp. 156–73; [Mopsik 1993](#), pp. 20–21, 33–65, 632–34, 645). In their eyes, Kabbalists from the late twelfth century onwards were reviving theurgical traditions that were latent or explicit in Biblical and Rabbinical literature (including *Hechalōt* [“palaces”] and *Merkava* [“chariot”] writings). Without excluding the important role that such antique and Late Antique traditions played in the evolution of various Kabbalistic conceptions, it seems to me that another, immediate historical perspective should be added to the academic discussion of the origins of Kabbalistic theurgy, namely al-Andalus, or more precisely, the Andalusī literary and intellectual legacy that seems to have shaped the mystical worlds of both Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists in various aspects, directly and indirectly. In the context of theurgy, it should be remembered that from the tenth century onwards, al-Andalus witnessed a proliferation of occult, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic writings; these writings in Arabic were either produced in the *Mashriq* (the East) or in al-Andalus itself, and in any case, incorporated earlier, Late Antique traditions or sources. Among these, one may note in particular the famous *Rasāʾil ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ* (*The Epistles of the Sincere/Pure Brethren*, on which see [De Callatay 2013](#) and the bibliography cited there; see also [De Callatay forthcoming](#)); treatises belonging to the alchemical and magical corpus attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān, the alleged disciple of the Shīʿī *imām* Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), some of which exhibit Shīʿī and Ismāʿīlī or proto-Ismāʿīlī tendencies ([Kraus 1942–1943](#); [Marquet 1988](#); [Lory 1989](#); [Coulon 2017](#), pp. 113–19); *al-Filāḥā l-nabaṭiyya*, mentioned above (Section 3.3); *Kitāb al-siyāsa fī tadbīr al-riyāsa* (literally and roughly *The Book*

of Governance concerning the Management of Leadership), attributed to Aristotle and known as *Sirr al-asrār* (in Latin: *Secretum secretorum*. For references, see [Saif 2021](#), p. 45, notes 128–9); and the well-known *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* (*The Goal of the Wise-One*, known in Latin as *Picatrix* and which was likewise translated into Hebrew; see [Plessner 1973](#); [Idel 1995](#), p. 24) and *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* (*The Degree of the Wise-One*). According to the most recent and plausible scholarly opinion, the *Ghāya*, which deals with astral magic, and the *Rutba*, dedicated to alchemy, were written by Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964), who was probably likewise responsible for importing *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'* (or part of the Ikhwānian corpus at least) to al-Andalus. Indeed, the *Rutba* and mainly the *Ghāya* reflect an acquaintance with the *Epistles of the Sincere/Pure Brethren*, Jābirian treatises, and the *Filāḥa* (see [De Callatay 2021](#) and the references given there to previous scholarship; see also [Fahd 1995–1997](#), pp. 30–31; [2014–2015](#), p. 245; [Coulon 2017](#), pp. 143–58). I submit that such writings, which, at a fairly early stage, were disseminated in a relatively small geographical territory (the Iberian Peninsula; see also [Burnett 1992](#)), contributed to the formation of a magical-like state of mind among certain thinkers who were mystically inclined and who were attracted to esoteric and occult ways of thinking. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*; having mentioned the “flawless philosopher” (*al-faylasūf al-tāmm*), who is able, through the study of various preparatory sciences, to attain to the two sublime sciences—namely magic and alchemy—the author addresses the reader in a typically Ikhwānian, mystical–philosophical parlance:

Oh one who observes (*al-nāẓir*), perhaps you will wake from the sleep of unawareness (*nawm al-ghafla*) so that you may witness the divine visions and spiritual sounds that the ancient wise-ones (*al-ḥukamā' al-awwalūn*) have witnessed. Then, that which issued forth from them will issue forth from you, and you will be active (*fā'ilan*) in your world, causing extraordinary influences by becoming similar to God as much as is humanly possible (*mu'aththiran li-l-āthār al-badī'a bi-ḥuṣūl al-shabah bi-l-ilāh 'alā ḥasab al-tāqa l-insāniyya*), as it is hinted at in His saying, powerful and mighty is He: “I am appointing a viceregent on earth”. (*khalīfa fī l-ard*, Qur'ān 2:30; [Pseudo-Majrīṭī 1933](#), p. 335; see also [De Callatay 2014–2015](#), pp. 247–48)

It is not very difficult to imagine why thinkers like Ibn al-ʿArabī were so impressed by such a discourse and the vision of man reflected in it, nor how they came to develop a worldview in which the powerful, chosen mystic, God’s true *khalīfa* and sole heir to the Prophet Muḥammad, is perceived as having the ability to influence the world around him as well as the external manifest dimension of Divinity. After all, this dimension, according to the unique Neoplatonic weltanschauung that evolved in al-Andalus ([Ebstein 2023](#)), is inextricably connected to creation and to the fate of God’s chosen ones in the framework of sacred human history. Theurgy and imitatio dei (*tashabbuh* in Islam) went hand in hand in Late Antique Neoplatonism ([Shaw 2014](#)); the link between the two, via such sources as the Ikhwān’s *Epistles* and the *Ghāya*, seems to have affected the thought of mystics like Ibn al-ʿArabī (see above Section 3.3; and see, for example, [Ibn al-ʿArabī 2010](#), vol. 5, p. 37). Note also the magical connotation of terms such as *tā'ṭhīr*, *taṣrīf*, *taskhīr*, and *'amal* employed by Ibn al-ʿArabī in his discussions of man’s relationship with the world and its Creator.

I believe that Ibn al-ʿArabī and certain other mystically inclined Iberian thinkers—for example, the Jewish Judah Halevi (d. 1141)—were affected by the occult, Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean, and Hermetic heritage of al-Andalus ([Pines 1980, 1988](#); [Krinis 2014](#); [Sviri 1996, 2021](#); [Ebstein 2014](#), esp. pp. 28–32, 90–92, 96–101, 210–12), incorporating some of its most basic conceptions into their idiosyncratic teachings, yet, at the same time, substantially modifying these conceptions in two crucial ways. First, in the case of al-Shaykh al-Akbar, man’s magical-like capacity to influence creation and the divine forces

immanent within it had to be reconciled with Sunnī and specifically Ṣūfī theological tenets; these included, above all, the belief in divine predestination and in man's utter passivity vis-à-vis God's omniscience and omnipotence. It also had to be suited to fit Ibn al-ʿArabī's unique mystical vision of existence, namely his teachings on *tajallī* and *zuhūr*, although it should be borne in mind that such a unified view of the cosmos was not at all alien to Late Antique Neoplatonism, as is evident in the writings of Iamblichus and Proclus, for example (Beierwaltes 1986; Shaw 2014). The result was a subtle and intricate form of Abrahamic theurgy, which was, on the one hand, extremely radical in comparison with previous Sunnī-Ṣūfī articulations of Islamic principles, and, on the other, rather moderate and mitigated in comparison with Kabbalistic theurgy. Indeed, it seems that the Kabbalists—heralded, it seems, by Judah Halevi (see, in addition to the references above, Bar-Asher 2023; Wolfson 1990–1991)—had fewer inhibitions in developing a theurgical form of their religion. This was perhaps due to the Biblical and Rabbinical heritage mentioned above, as well as to the absence of Jewish political power and political institutions—confronting criticism and even possible excommunication from fellow Rabbis is not as severe as facing the joint hostility of *ʿulamāʾ* and political rulers, the latter often being compelled to back the former in order to maintain their legitimacy; in such a case, the mystic's life might very well be at risk. The political fortunes of the Jewish people—exile and the loss of their sacred temple—may have also contributed to the formation of a Jewish image of Divinity as weak, vulnerable, and in desperate need of human support (cf. Mopsik 1993, pp. 639–43).

The second, crucial modification that Ibn al-ʿArabī and various Kabbalists introduced into their Andalusī occult, Neoplatonic, Neopythagorean, and hermetic heritage pertains to epistemology—i.e., to the role of the human intellect and reason in the process of acquiring knowledge. Whereas ninth- and tenth-century occult and Neoplatonic sources reflect an essentially philosophical–scientific approach, in which emphasis is placed on the centrality of the human intellect to the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge, mystics like Ibn al-ʿArabī did their utmost to downgrade the function of *ʿaql* in man's spiritual quest and in his pursuit of divine knowledge and divine power (Saif 2017; Ebstein 2019). True, Neoplatonism has always been somewhat mystical, and Neoplatonist philosophers like Iamblichus and Proclus who fervently advocated theurgy viewed it as superior to human intellectuality; in their eyes, philosophical learning and philosophical contemplation must be supplemented by theurgical operations, because only a theurgical way of life can lead the philosopher to *henōsis* with the Divine (Rosán 2009, pp. 208–13; Luck 1989; Shaw 2014). Still, it seems that Ibn al-ʿArabī and his Jewish compatriots went even further than Late Antique theurgists. The only way to gain proximity to God and attain true knowledge is divine selection, which, for al-Shaykh al-Akbar as well as for the aforementioned Halevi, is embodied inter alia in the “divine command”; this “divine command” is what links the chosen one to God, functioning as the channel through which he is able to receive knowledge that other, ordinary people—including philosophers and magicians—cannot even hope to obtain (Ebstein 2020). One may say that figures like Halevi and Ibn al-ʿArabī were dealing with a sort of cognitive dissonance: they were very much attracted to the occult and esoteric ideas prevalent in al-Andalus, yet, at the same time, they were well aware of their pagan origins and their philosophical–scientific framework, hence their attempt to incorporate these ideas into their Abrahamic mystical thought by detaching them from their pagan and philosophical–scientific roots. According to Halevi, his Kabbalist heirs, and Ibn al-ʿArabī, it is only in the *sharīʿa/tōra* that one is able to find verified knowledge, including practical knowledge that grants the chosen one(s) the ability to influence creation and the relationship between God and created beings. As Halevi states in this very context in his Judeo-Arabic masterpiece, *The Kuzari*, “... this is a divine legal code from God. Whoever wholeheartedly accepts it without arbitrarily employing his intellect in [attempting to

understand] it and without having his own way is better than him who arbitrarily employs his intellect and investigates (*wa-annahā sharʿa min ʿind allāh wa-man qabilahā qubūlan tāmmān duna an yataʿaqqala fihā wa-lā yataḥakkama fa-huwa afḍal mimman taʿaqqala wa-baḥathā*)” (Halevi 1977, p. 63 [b, 26]). Ibn al-ʿArabī and many Kabbalists would surely concur.

6. Conclusions: Historical Significance and Relevance to the Present

Much more work is needed in order to better understand Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theurgical tendencies—their roots; their possible indebtedness to earlier Sunnī mystical teachings (of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, for example) as well as to Shīʿī and Ismāʿīlī conceptions of the *imām* and his divine power (see, for instance, Amir-Moezzi 1994, esp. pp. 61–98; Amir-Moezzi 2011, pp. 193–230; Loebenstein 2003); their relation to other Neoplatonic theurgical systems, either pagan (Late Antiquity), Christian (Pseudo-Dionysius, for instance; see Stang 2011), or Jewish (Kabbalah); and, accordingly, their distinct characteristics.

Still, on the basis of the foregoing discussion, I would like to emphasize here three main points that bear on the history of theurgy and its possible relevance to contemporary thought. First, as regards its reemergence in the medieval period, mystical or theosophical theurgy is by no means unique to the world of Jewish Kabbalah, but is rather found in the Islamicate world as well (cf. Jones 2022, pp. 82–83). Accordingly, Muslim mystics like Ibn al-ʿArabī and Jewish mystics in the formative period of Kabbalah cannot be studied in isolation from one another; nor can both groups, who flourished in the so-called “Middle Ages”, be detached from earlier, Late Antique traditions, namely (in the context of theurgy) pagan Neoplatonism. It therefore seems to me that Kabbalistic theurgy should not be explained solely in Jewish terms, that is, as a secluded offshoot of Biblical and Rabbinical conceptions, unrelated to concomitant developments in the Islamic south. The growth of Kabbalistic theurgy appears to be a much more complex phenomenon than has hitherto been commonly assumed in scholarly literature, a phenomenon with diverse roots and various geological strata, as it were. Uncovering and reconstructing these roots and layers necessitates the close study of both Late Antique and medieval Arabic occult, Neoplatonic, hermetic, and mystical sources. In light of the intimate link between theurgy and what we would call “mysticism” in Late Antique Neoplatonism, it is not surprising to find such a link resurface—in an Abrahamic garb—in medieval Islamic and Jewish adaptations of Neoplatonic thought. After all, given their praxis-oriented religions, it was only natural for Muslim and Jewish mystics in al-Andalus who fell under the sway of Neoplatonism and occult-esoteric thought to reinterpret their legal-ritualistic systems (*sharīʿa/halacha*) in a theurgical manner. Gregory Shaw explains that Iamblichus’s prestige

Was due to his success in creating... a synthesis of worship and divine philosophy. In theurgy the highest thought of Platonic philosophy was fully integrated with common religious practices, and the immaterial gods were connected to the lowest sublunary daimons; in sum, heaven was joined to earth.... (Shaw 2014, p. 271)

Such a historical assessment is likewise relevant to al-Shaykh al-Akbar and many Kabbalists. This may seem banal to say, but it is vital to view Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists as continuing Late Antique Neoplatonism, forming crucial links in its historical development. By no means does this diminish their originality nor their Islamic and Jewish character, respectively; on the contrary, the depth and full meaning of this character are, in fact, fully understood only when taking into account the engagement of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Kabbalists with their Neoplatonic heritage.

Secondly, al-Shaykh al-Akbar’s theurgical tendencies should not be considered a marginal, obscure, and fleeting facet of Islamicate intellectual life and spirituality. As recent studies have shown (see, for example, Coulon 2017; Gardiner 2014, 2017a, 2017b,

2019, 2021; Melvin-Koushki 2012, 2018c, 2020, 2023; Melvin-Koushki and Gardiner 2017; Saif 2017, 2021), esotericism and occult sciences flourished in Islamic lands, especially from the late Middle Ages onwards, exhibiting more often than not the heavy impact of Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought. It is likewise hard to understand key developments in Islamic politics during this long and tumultuous period—namely, the rise of messianic figures and movements such as the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals (see, for example, Moin 2012; Melvin-Koushki 2018a, 2018b), and perhaps certain phenomena in the modern Middle East as well (see Chamankhah 2019)—without considering the impact of Akbarian conceptions of the “perfect human being” on articulations of political legitimacy. As is clear from the discussion above (Section 3.3), theurgical abilities are one of the main characteristics of Ibn al-ʿArabī's *al-insān al-kāmil* (on Ibn al-ʿArabī's later impact in this context, see also Morrissey 2020). Notwithstanding the fact that the Ṣūfī tradition has always recognized the potential power of “God's friend” (see, for example, Gramlich 1987), there is no doubt that al-Shaykh al-Akbar's approach to this issue is far more radical and unprecedented (compare, for example, his teachings on man's divine creativity [above Sections 3.3 and 4] to al-Ghazālī's [d. 505/1111] moderating interpretation of the divine names *al-khāliq-al-bārī-al-muṣawwir*, in Al-Ghazālī 1971, pp. 82–84). One may also wonder about the possible links between the theurgical anthropocentrism of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the European Renaissance. Is the image of man as formulated in Islamic sources like *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā* and Ibn al-ʿArabī's oeuvre—God's powerful viceregent on earth, a divine creator and manipulator of the physical and spiritual realms—an antecedent of Renaissance humanism? The impact of Kabbalah on Europe in this regard has been well noted (Wirszubski 1989; De León-Jones 1997; Idel 1990, pp. 15–16; see also Idel 1988b, 1994, 2004; Idel 2005b, pp. 181–94; and the relevant chapter in Idel 2011), yet the role of Islam in developing an Abrahamic mystical–theurgical type of humanism, in which man is perceived as standing at the center of creation, affecting both nature and the Divine, appears to be somewhat neglected. It seems to me that this role is vital for reconstructing the long history of theurgy leading from Late Antique Neoplatonism, through Kabbalah, to the European Renaissance and Western modernity (cf. Saif 2015; Hasse 2016).

Finally, I believe that Ibn al-ʿArabī's distinctive type of theurgy may nowadays offer us an alternative, challenging way of viewing our relationship with reality. This relationship is all too often perceived as problematic at best and as essentially negative at worst. Western philosophy as it evolved from the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries onwards is characterized by an extreme focus on human subjectivity, to such an extent that, in contradistinction to earlier phases in the history of Western thought, an often impassable barrier is conceived as severing man from the outside world, in terms of both epistemology (his ability to understand external reality) and ontology (the actual existence of this reality or the links that connect man to it). While such theoretical conundrums have always been part and parcel of humanity's philosophical and religious traditions since Antiquity, it seems that in the last few centuries, the tension in the West between the human subject and external reality has slowly but surely been brought to a state of a dichotomous crisis. Today, man may think and write about reality, yet in effect, this is nothing but an intellectual dead end; he has no way out of his subjective labyrinth and he will come to realize that such thinking and writing only reflect his inner individual world, or otherwise some sort of veiled socio-political power relations. And naturally, this includes what religious establishments and religious elites through the ages have had to say about God(s) and the human–divine relationship: all is a subjective or socio-political construct, often aimed at perpetuating certain modes of power abuse. However, al-Shaykh al-Akbar offers a different, more optimistic perspective, albeit one that is by no means simplistic or naive. In his baffling worldview, both human subjectivity and external reality are a manifestation of divine existence and

energies, and are therefore forever intertwined with each other as well as with their divine source. Mystically examining a specific *mazhar*, a “phenomenon” in either the macro- or microcosmos, leads one to realize that it is a product of both the Creator and the created, a simultaneous result of divine power and the nature and traits of that particular being. By the same token, the figure of God known and worshiped by the believer is continuously constructed by his active efforts, which serve as a channel for the self-existent power of the Divine; reality itself (ontology) and experiential knowledge of it and of its divine source (epistemology) converge to become a joint project, so to speak, of God and man, hence, the enormous power and responsibility of the human agent in Ibn al-‘Arabī eyes. However, as is evident from the discussion of *adab* above (Section 3.5), Ibn al-‘Arabī believes that man must balance his role as *khalīfa* and his ensuing theurgical power with modesty and humility, recognizing his finite contingent nature and his eternal status as “servant”. Here too lies a lesson for contemporary man, forever blinded by his technical achievements and tragic hubris.

D’une certaine façon, le Dieu révélé est le résultat de la Loi plutôt que l’origine de la Loi. Ce Dieu n’est pas posé au commencement mais procède d’une interaction entre le flux surabondant émanant de l’Infini et la présence active de l’homme. (Mopsik 1993, p. 639)

Mopsik’s statement can easily be applied to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. In response to the famous Nietzschean declaration mentioned at the beginning of this article, one may claim, in the spirit of al-Shaykh al-Akbar and the Kabbalists, that rather than lamenting the deceased gods of the past, it is, in fact, man’s ongoing mission to constantly (re)create the Divine in every act and thought of his, in each and every moment.

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Notes

- ¹ Here and elsewhere in the article, I employ the adjective “radical” in relation to Ibn al-‘Arabī and his teachings not in the negative sense of the word (“extreme”, “anti-traditional”, or the like), but rather to express the novel and daring aspects of his thought.
- ² I use “manipulation” here and elsewhere not in the common, negative sense of the term, but rather to signify the ability of the mystic to skillfully control and employ the divine names for some personal or collective goal, much like the meaning of the Arabic *taṣrīf* / *taṣarruf*, on which see below in Section 3.3.

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