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Towards a Holistic Approach to the Study of Islamic Theology in Western Academia

A Response to (Secularized) Christian Normativity by Way of Literature

Zusammenfassung

Wer sich an einer westlichen Universität auf islamische Theologie spezialisiert, ist sich dessen bewusst, dass seine Lehr- und Forschungstätigkeit von der Institution entweder als ›Islamwissenschaft‹ oder ›Theologie‹ kategorisiert wird. Im ersten Fall wird der Islam überwiegend als kulturelles Phänomen betrachtet und als solches studiert. Im zweiten Fall wird islamische Theologie de facto als islamische spekulative Theologie (*kalām*) angesehen. Diese Betrachtung stammt aus Gründen, die Marianne Moyaert in ihrem neuesten Buch »Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other« als ›christliche Normativität‹ und ›religionisation‹ anderer Glauben konzeptualisiert. Wie der Islam Theologie theoretisiert und praktiziert, wird in beiden Fällen erheblich eingeschränkt, wenn nicht gar völlig ignoriert. Dieser kurze Aufsatz befasst sich mit der problematischen Anwendung der säkularen Version eines christlichen epistemischen Rahmens auf das Studium islamischer Theologie. Auf diese Weise eröffnet dieser Aufsatz einen kritischen Raum für die Untersuchung islamischer literarischer Werke als sowohl dissensuelles als auch konsensuelles theologisches Terrain, und zwar durch die Analyse von Ibn al-Fāriḍ (gest. 632/1235) und die theologisch-literarischen Kommentare, die seine Gedichte hervorriefen.

Summary

Anyone specialising in Islamic theology at a Western university is aware of the fact that their teaching and research will either be recognised by the institution as falling under the category of ›Islamic Studies‹ or of ›Divinity‹. In the first case, Islam is predominantly considered as a cultural phenomenon and studied as such. In the second case, for reasons that have to do with what Marianne Moyaert in her latest book »Christian Imag-

inations of the Religious Other« (2024) has conceptualised as ›Christian normativity‹ and the ›religionisation‹ of other faiths, Islamic theology is de facto understood as Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*). In both cases, the understanding of how Islam theorises and practices theology is significantly restricted, if not altogether ignored. This short essay engages with the issues related to the application of the secular version of a Christian epistemic framework to the study of Islamic theology. In doing so, it opens a critical space for the investigation of Islamic literary productions as both dissensual and consensual theological terrains, through the analysis Ibn al-Fāriḍ's (d. 632/1235) and the theological-literary commentary his poetry elicited.

About the Author

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Prior to these positions, she was teaching and research fellow at the Center for Islamic Theology at Tübingen University, Germany, and has lectured in France at the University of Montpellier in English Studies and Comparative Literature since 2011. She has thus gained research expertise in the fields of early modern British orientalism, postcolonial and decolonial literatures and theories, translation studies, Arabic studies, as well as Islamic epistemology, theology, and Sufism.

Her latest publications include a monograph *Appropriations and Reconfigurations of Arabic, Persian, and Indic Literatures in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain. Orientalism and the Recreation of the Islamicate Canon* (Oxford UP, 2025), a co-edited volume *Islam and New Directions in World Literature* (Edinburgh UP, 2022), and articles published in *Religions*, *Open Theology*, *Philological Encounters* and many other renowned journals. She has made much of her work accessible via her Academia page: https://nettesheim.academia.edu/ClaireGallien/. In preparation are two important projects: first a special issue with Open Theology titled »Theology as Literature in Islam« and second a monograph tentatively titled *Epistemology as Beauty in Islam. Tartīb al-'Ulūm and the Theological, Aesthetic, and Ethical Foundations of the Organisation of the Sciences in the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Islamic World*.

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Anyone specialising in Islamic theology at a Western University is aware of the fact that their teaching and research will either be recognised by the institution as falling under the category of ›Islamic Studies‹ or of ›Divinity‹.[1] In the first case, Islam is predominantly considered as a cultural phenomenon and studied as such. In the second case, for reasons that have to do with what Marianne Moyaert in her latest book »Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other« (2024) has conceptualised as ›Christian normativity‹ and the ›religionization‹ of other faiths, Islamic theology is de facto understood as Islamic *speculative* theology. In both cases, the understanding of how Islam theorises and practices theology is significantly restricted, if not altogether ignored.

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1   A longer version of this article including more theoretical and historical input and including the study of the poetry of Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb (d. 1390/1971) has been published since working on this piece for CAMPUS and is now on available on open access with the *Religions* journal (Gallien, 2024: https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101190).

In Islam, the science of *kalām* covers dogmatics, speculative theology, and polemics and as such is what comes closest to Christian theology as studied in Divinity Faculties. It has thus been the science which orientalists have given preference to when studying Islamic theology. However, any scholar taking an emic approach to Islamic epistemology would confirm that *kalām* was never meant to be the sole representative of Islamic theology, that *mutakallimūn* have never claimed monopoly over theological discourse, and that in fact many theological reflections and positions have been developed outside *kalām*.

A welcome change in the debate has been the late development of the Islamic section for the St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology which seeks to recognize the full breadth of Islamic theology by including other disciplines, for instance *falsafa* (philosophy), *taṣawwuf* (mysticism), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence).[2] By broadening the scope of theological enquiries to other Islamic disciplines of learning, the project also potentially makes room for the inclusion of literature and the arts. However, Islamic literature remains yet to be analysed on proper theological grounds in the West – if studied at all, it has been through the lenses of literary analysis, cultural and social history, and the study of mysticism. To be sure, these perspectives are relevant, but they cannot replace theological analysis.

Indeed, writers of Islamic poetry and imaginative prose were in their vast majority theologians and polymathic scholars. Literature, and poetry in particular, has been unremittingly used by *mutakallimūn* to convey and engage with dogmatic and theological truths, especially when directed to non-specialist circles, and to articulate encounters with the Divine and modes of knowing Him which cannot be captured through syllogisms. Engaging with the imaginary has thus never been conceived in oppositional or disjunctive terms from engaging with scientific knowledge. Rather, just as the heart is presented in traditional Islamic psychology as the locus of knowledge, supplementing the limited rational capacities of human beings, so too does the imaginary complement the speculative to attain Truth and form the *insān kāmil* (perfected human being).

At this juncture, Moyaert's work enables us to unpack the epistemic consequences of the (secularised) Christian normative – what Moyaert calls ›patterns of religionization‹ (2024: 1) – on the study of Islamic theology. Her own intervention in the fields of comparative theology and interreligious hermeneutics was born out of a discomfort with the ways in which the study of other faiths was conducted at Western universities, namely how Christian scholars are effectively setting the agenda, producing theologies of religious ›others‹, and ultimately Christianising (what she also calls ›religionising‹) other traditions (2014: 68; 2024: 56-59, 258). Instead of being attentive to the ways in which others represent their own faiths and to the questions which are relevant and important to them, theologies of religions have, according to Moyaert, instrumentalised other traditions in order to generate further intra-Christian dialogues and debates (2013: 81).

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2   The section is piloted by Dr Alexander Wain as Academic Editor, and Dr Maria Dakake, Prof. Lejla Demiri, and Dr Timothy Winter, as Senior Editors. See the presentation page of the section: https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam.

Pushing against the religionising posture, Moyaert contends that comparative religion should engage in deep learning *across* (as opposed to just *about*) other traditions, pay attention to the theological complexity of other faiths, and preserve ›hermeneutical openness‹ (2016). An instance of hermeneutical openness has meant calling into question the location of theology in texts alone and focusing instead on rituals as locations for the theologisation of life and for enacting inter-religious theology (Moyaert 2016; 2018; 2019). Inspired by the revisionist works of scholars in comparative theology, such as Moyaert, but also Francis X. Clooney, and Catherine Cornille, as well as by the critical and seminal interventions of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Talal Asad, Shahab Ahmed, and Wael Hallaq,[3] I offer a brief examination of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's (d. 632/1235) *Diwān* in the attempt to read his poetry as theology and to ›de-religionise‹ Islamic theology.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ is primarily remembered in the West as a Sufi poet, at the expense of his scholarly career. Before becoming a poet, Ibn al-Fāriḍ received a full education in the traditional sciences. In particular, he was a student of Shāfiʿī *fiqh* and of *ḥadīth* with al-Qāsim Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 527/1203), a Damascene traditionist of high reputation. He went on pilgrimage to Mecca and stayed to study there for several years, and eventually returned to Cairo, where he became a respected scholar and teacher of *ḥadīth* sciences at al-Azhar. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's progress along the mystic path as Sufi master and divinely inspired poet was retraced by his grandson ʿAlī (fl. 735/1334), who composed the *Dībāja* or *Adorned Poem* on the life of his grandfather. This mystic biography was meant to appear in the introduction to the definitive collection of his grandfather's verses ʿAlī had also prepared, namely the *Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*. Thomas Emil Homerin argued that this account of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as a saint and inspired oracle, so popular in the later Sufi tradition, has obscured the literary dimensions of his poetry (1994: 96).

Complementing Homerin's study of the carefully crafted and polished nature of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, as well as challenging his restrictive interpretation of its Sufi reception, I argue that both conceptions of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as ›inspired oracle‹ and ›gifted poet‹ occlude a fundamental aspect of his *Dīwān*, namely that it was read by the poet, his contemporaries, and later Muslim theologians, as theology, as a space to search for God through Beauty,[4] to translate the attributes of the Divine into human language, and to articulate mystic encounters.

The *Dīwān* is composed of love poems *(ghazal)*, odes *(qaṣīda)*, as well as a number of quatrains and riddles. All the poems evoke religious themes, with two explicitly mystical odes, namely *al-Khamriyya* (Wine ode) and *Naẓm al-sulūk* (trans. *The Poem of the Way* by A. J. Arberry, 1952), which focus on the Sufi practice of remembering God through litanies *(dhikr)* and the intoxicating effects of *dhikr* leading to mystical union. As such, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry became for some

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3   See the bibliography for titles by these authors which have been formative in my own intellectual journey for thinking the questions and issues this article raises.

4   I refer here to the transmitted truth that »Allah is beautiful and loves beauty«. The full *ḥadīth* is from 'Abd-Allah ibn Masʿūd, who narrated that the Prophet said: »›No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's-weight of pride in his heart.‹ A man said, ›What if a man likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?‹ He said, ›Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people.‹« The *takhrīj* for this *ḥadīth* is *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (n° 131) and *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī* (n° 1999) amongst others.

scholars theologically controversial. Indeed, I should emphasise that the controversy around his poems, which took place in 874/1469 Cairo, was not triggered by his comparison of *dhikr* to wine and praise of intoxicants, which are prohibited in the Qurʾān. Needless to say, Muslim scholars were aware of the difference between a literal (*ḥarfī*) and a metaphorical (*majāzī*) reading of a poem. Rather, the issues – at least the stated ones for which we possess archival documentation – were theological.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetic oeuvre became controversial not during his lifetime, but later, starting towards the end of the thirteenth century, when commentaries of his poems were circulating and reaching into the late fifteenth century, with the involvement of the scholar and polemicist Ibrāhīm b. ʿUmar b. Ḥasan al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480). The latter composed several lengthy pamphlets aimed primarily at Ibn al-Fāriḍ,[5] and focusing on monistic theology and the poet's inappropriate use of metaphors when describing God as ›beloved‹ and the love of God as an intoxicant (Homerin 1994: 143-44; Knysh 1999: 209-22; Guo 2001: 121-48). In fact, monism is less to be found in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry itself than in late commentaries of his work, in particular *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā*, by scholars such as Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300), Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. c. 730/1330), and Dāʾūd Ibn-Maḥmūd al- Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), who were all scholars and mystics of Islam, as well as proponents of the Wujūdī school (Homerin 1994: 28–32).[6]

These commentaries were instrumental in feeding suspicions around the doctrinal acceptability of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's oeuvre. Based on them, leading scholars from the late thirteenth century onwards opposed Ibn al-Fāriḍ for circulating belief in divine incarnation in creation (*ḥulūl*), mystical union with the divine (*ittiḥād*), or monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which, they asserted, undermined the absolute distinction between Creator and creation. The tension around Ibn al-Fāriḍ's al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā is palpable, for instance, in the commentary that 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) wrote in defence of the poet at the time of the controversy ignited in Cairo around 1288 by the Shāfiʿī judge Ibn Bint al-Aʿazz (d. 695/1296), proving the genuine quality of his mystical experiences and the soundness of his religious beliefs (Homerin 1994, p. 30). Later opponents of the waḥdat al-wujūd, misinterpreted as a crude form of pantheism and incarnationism, doctrine found in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā included the Ḥanbalī jurist Aḥmad Ibn Ḥamdān (d. 695/1296), the noted grammarian Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344), and the Ḥanbalī legal scholar and theologian Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328).

Homerin was able to trace continuations of the theological controversy surrounding Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetic oeuvre in the scholarly circles of late fifteenth-century Cairo (Homerin 1994, pp. 60–75).

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5   The two most important pamphlets by al-Biqāʿī are *Taḥdhīr al-ʿibad min ahl al-ʿibad bi-bidʿat al-ittihad* (Warning the Servants of God Against Those Who Stubbornly Espouse the Innovation of Unificationism) which focuses on Ibn al-Fāriḍ, although Ibn ʿArabī's ›fallacies‹ were also addressed. *Tanbiḥ al-ghābi ilā takfīr Ibn ʿArabī* (The Awakening of the Unaware to Ibn ʿArabī's Unbelief), was dedicated solely to Jibn ʿArabī. Knysh informs us that both works were edited in 1372/1953 by the anti-Sufi Egyptian scholar ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Wakil under the title ›The Destruction of Sufism‹ (*Masra' al-tafawwuf*) (Knysh 1999: 364).

6   The term designates the proponents of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy of divine unity, later known as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being).

The dispute was sparked by a public reading of al-Farghānī's commentary on *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā*, reminding us of the fundamental role of poetry in the oral transmission of knowledge, including elements of the creed and their scriptural, as well as rational evidence.The full controversy is detailed by Homerin in From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint (Homerin 1994, pp. 62–73) and ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life (Homerin 2001, pp. 243–47) and I shall not repeat what Homerin has already exposed. Suffice it to say that in the end, the controversy turned in favour of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, who was exonerated from all charges of heresy, while many of his opponents were publicly disgraced by the sultan Qāʾit Bāy (r. 872-901/1468-96).

I am more interested, at this stage, in thinking about the ways in which we read this controversy today and in particular the interlocking between literature and theology played-out in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry. Indeed, Homerin's emphasis on the fact that the outcome of these controversies further elevated Ibn al-Fāriḍ's saintly reputation lends itself to the too facile reading of the disputes as stories of public defamation opposing the conservative camp of al-Biqāʿī to the progressive camp of Ibn al-Farīḍ. Sadly, the tired dichotomy of ›conservative‹ versus ›progressive‹ or ›moderate‹ Islam has, I contend, obfuscated the serious theological contentions that inhere in Ibn al-Farīḍ's poetry.

Al-Biqāʿī was not just any narrow-minded personality in fifteenth-century Mamluk Cairo. He was a remarkable polymath, expert in Qurʾān commentary, Shāfiʿī jurisprudence, theology, *ḥadīth* criticism, biography, history, mathematics, and poetry (Saleh 2010). He had received his education in Damascus, where he studied with Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448), in Jerusalem, Alexandria, and in Cairo, where he became a favourite student of the highly regarded *ḥadīth* scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), a classmate of al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1492), and a colleague of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). Al-Biqāʿī's education centred on the sciences of the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth, fiqh*, grammar, poetry, arithmetic, logic, and theology. Walid Saleh also notes that he was a gifted poet and a friend of the poets of his age, a book collector, and an avid reader of literary anthologies as evidenced by his private library.

He was appointed official reader of the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* for the Mamlūk sultans, and Qurʾān commentator in the Ẓāhir mosque in Cairo. After a first complete cycle of Quranic interpretation, which lasted twenty years, he decided at the beginning of his second reading cycle in 860/1456 to write a Qurʾān commentary based, as Saleh explains, on the science of *munāsabāt* (proportionality), by which al-Biqāʿī meant »the causal connection between successive verses in the *sūra*, whereby each verse builds on the previous verse and anticipates the subsequent verse, thus achieving the overall aim of the *sūra*« (Saleh 2010). This massive Qurʾān commentary of 22 volumes titled *Naẓm al-durar fi tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar* occupied most of the last twenty-three years of al-Biqāʿī's life, secured his reputation, and is a major contribution to the discipline of *ʿilm al-tafsīr.*

Al-Biqāʿī was a theologian and scholar of Islam with no particular animosity towards poets or distaste for poetry. Quite the opposite. He was himself a poet, a reader of poetry, and had befriended most of the poets of his time. In fact, al-Biqāʿī's reaction to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry is best understood by taking into account his reputation as passionate polemicist and unyielding scholar, as well as the hermeneutical status imparted to poetry. If poetry held no theological stake, then al-Biqāʿī would not have bothered to attack his opponent through this corpus in particular.

To be sure, it is perfectly possible to read the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ in non-religious terms and outside an Islamic episteme. This is precisely what happens to his *diwān* when translated for a contemporary secular readership for instance. The issue lies in it becoming dominant to the point that other modes of reading are treated as non-existent or irrelevant. Thus, even though Ibn al-Fāriḍ and his opponents were operating from within a theological framework, the theological issues they raise or theological points they make are overlooked. An emic interpretation would necessitate first a recontextualization of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry in the context of the ›popularisation‹ of Shādhilī Sufism in fourteenth-century Egypt (Hofer 2015). Given that poetry had been for a long time, in fact reaching back to pre-Islamic times, the preferred mode of writing to reach a popular or broad audience, as opposed to a more specialist one composed of *mutakallimūn* for instance, the fact that Ibn al-Fāriḍ expressed theological views in poetry had a definitive political and social impact. Similarly, the methodology and function of the discipline of polemics has to be taken into consideration in order to grasp al-Biqāʿī's contentions, more than two centuries after the event. Finally, a significant grasp of Islamic theology is required in order to unpack the theological contentions present in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry and in al-Biqāʿī's response.

During his lifetime, al-Biqāʿī was involved in three major controversies. The first one, centring on the status of the Bible in Islam and the legality of using the Bible as a source to interpret the Qurʾān, was studied by Walid A. Saleh (2007; 2008a; 2008b). The second one, studied by Homerin, is concerned with Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), monistic theology, the notions of *ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *ittiḥād* (unification) (Homerin 1994: 55-75: Knysh 1999: 209-23). And the third one, commented upon by Eric L. Ormsby, dealt with theodicy and al-Biqāʿī's opposition to al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) formulation regarding God's grace (Ormsby 1984).

As Khaled El-Rouayheb explained in *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*, more specifically in his chapter on ›The Spread of Mystical Monism‹, the term *taḥqīq* (verification) in Sufi terminology was first embraced to attest a mystical/experiential authentication of the truth of divine presence, complementing a propositional/rational type of verification about the existence of God (2015: 235-71, esp. 235-36). Even though it was very clear at the beginning that »the unity is experiential, not ontological«, experiential *taḥqīq* later developed into the theological concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence).[7] The concept itself underwent an epistemic shift in support of monistic ontology, namely the belief that God *is* existence and, conversely, that existence *is* one and divine, starting in the seventeenth century with Aḥmad al-Qushāshī (d. 1661), Ibrāhīm Kūrānī (d. 1690), Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Rasūʾī Barzinjī (d. 1691), Qāsim al-Khānī

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7   These are the terms of Bakrī in *Taʾbīd al-minna*, fol. 110b, completed in Mecca in January 1552, quoted by El-Rouyaheb 2015: 244. Another fundamental note, is that the theological concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* which although commonly attributed to Ibn ʿArabī is in fact derived, as William Chittick and James Morris have argued, from the works of his early commentators, including his disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274) and Qūnawī's students Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 1300) and Muʿaiyyd al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. ca. 1296), and later with the commentators of the more controversial *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* such as ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshhānī (d. 1335) and Dāʾūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350) and into the fifteenth century with the Ottoman scholar Meḥmed Fenarī (d. 1431), the Indian scholar ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Mahāʾimī (d. 1432), and the Persian scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī (d. 1492). (Chittick 1989: xii-xiv; 1991: 7-27; 1994: 70-111; Morris 1986: 733-756).

(d. 1697), and continuing in the eighteenth century with ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731) and Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī (d. 1749) (2015: 236). However, as El-Rouayheb argues, »[t]he most prominent fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Arab mystics […] were much more cautious about embracing ontological monism« and this development was »largely linked to the spread in the Arab East of Sufi orders such as the Khalwatiyya from Anatolia and the Shaṭṭāriyya and Naqshbandiyya from India« in the seventeenth century (2015: 236).

El-Rouhayeb's study of the sixteenth-century theological treatises by Sufi theologians Shar'anī (d. 1565) and Ibn Maymūn al-Maghribī (d. 1511) clearly shows that both admired and engaged with Ibn ʿArabi's works while at the same time avoiding or resisting ontological monism (2015: 238-40). This is also the case with Ibn Maymūn's disciple ʿAlwān al-Hamawī (d. 1530), and in Egypt with Zakariyya al-Anṣārī (d. 1519), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), and with the theologian and poet Muḥammad b. Abī l-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (d. 1586). They all confirmed Sufi terminology and the role of experiential knowledge but were also extremely careful to avoid the confusion between *waḥdat al-wujūd* as experiential reality and *al-waḥda al-mutlaqa* (absolute unity, or ontological monism).

In a short treatise entitled *Taʾbīd al-minna fī taʾyīd al-sunna*, al-Bakrī quoted and endorsed the position of Taftāzānī in distinguishing between two Sufi positions. In the first, which Taftāzānī had sympathy for, the advanced mystic is overwhelmed by the direct experience of God to such a degree that their consciousness of other things fades away. In the second, which Taftāzānī denounced as contrary to Islamic faith, God is made identical to the concept of absolute unity (*al-waḥda al-mutlaqa*), existence is made strictly one, and multiplicity in the phenomenal world is declared nothing but a mirage (El-Rouhayeb 2015: 242).

Al-Bakrī was also a renowned poet and the preface to his *Diwān* contains a disclaimer that his poetry is about experiential not ontological unity, a condemnation of those espousing ontological monism, and an endorsement of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, calling him »the *qutb* (Pole)« of his time and »the Imam, complete and unique, who to heights of truth with truth ascended« (Al-Bakrī, *Taʾbīd al-minna,* fol. 109a-b; Al-Bakrī, *Tarjumān al-asrār* fol. 3a, 112b-113a, and 184b; El-Rouhayeb 2015: 243-44). This ›rehabilitation‹ of Ibn al-Fāriḍ by the sixteenth-century jurist and Sufi poet al-Bakrī indicates that Ibn al-Fāriḍ was eventually read past the heated late fifteenth-century polemics and in a manner that was more congenial to the poet's theological propositions and his metaphorical use of language.[8] For instance, in *Naẓm al-sulūk* (Poem of the Sufi Way), Ibn al-Fāriḍ had restated his theology by rejecting the notions of *ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *ittiḥād* (unification):

> So in the clearer of two visions
> I have a sign
> that keeps my creed free
> of any incarnation.
>
> (Homerin 2001: 155)

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[8]   As a side note, it is to be remembered that one of the problematic points defended by al-Biqā'ī in his pamphlet *Ṣawāb al-jawāb* had been to state that Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry could not be read metaphorically.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ is cautious to back his theological conception of union with Quranic and *ḥadīth* literature so that his theology comes as a logical conclusion to what is already stated in the revealed sources. Book-ending the verses excerpted here, the poet quotes the *ḥadīth* where the angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muḥammad and his companions in the form of a handsome youth named Diḥya al-Kalbī. While the Prophet saw the angel behind the form of the youth, his companions only saw Diḥya. The angel Gabriel was clothed in a human form, that only the prophetic vision could see through. After his theological statement, the poet quotes the Qur'ān (Q 6: 9):

> And in the Qur'an, undeniably,
> there is mention of ›disguise‹;
> I have not transgressed the two truths:
> the Book, and traditions of our prophet.
>
> (Homerin 2001: 155)

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's theological position in the rejection of incarnation and union can be glossed in a longer explanation, whereby one would have to expose the difference between union or incarnation, which implies two entities becoming one, and true spiritual vision, whereby the entities peopling the world are forms clothing the presence of the divine. There is no »becoming one«, only the experiential recognition of real ontological oneness behind and beyond the mistaken perception of duality and plurality. Diḥya is the form or the disguise through which revelation has become apparent to the Prophet, who no longer sees Diḥya, or the spirit as incarnated in Diḥya but sees through Diḥya. Instead of long and prosaic explanatory developments, the language of poetry allows the poet to create three successive vignettes to support one theological point, namely the rejection of *ḥulūl* and *ittiḥād*. The lyric here is not a diminished version of *kalām* for less advanced readers; rather, its compacted form and striking images allow for the clear articulation of theological points.

To conclude, the existence of fierce controversies around poetical statements points to the theological relevance of poetry and to its theological stakes, both in a scholarly and more popular milieux. The controversies around Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *dīwān*-s also underline the productive tensions between poetry and theology – »tension« in the sense that poetry could be interpreted in adversarial terms to default dogmatic orthodoxies, and »productive« in the sense that poetry could ignite a series of commentaries clarifying or further obfuscating Ibn al-Fāriḍ's theological points and productive in the sense also that it encouraged further expositions by the poet himself in other poems as I have tried to show with the extract from *Naẓm al-sulūk*. Muslim scholars engaging in literary prose and poetry, such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ but also al-Bakrī, were not just exploiting the esoteric and transgressive potential of literary imaginaries and metaphors, they were also using them to score, clarify, and refine theological points. Thus, the application of secular or ›religionized‹ frameworks onto Islamic literature and theology, and the failure to take into account how Muslim authors of poetry, tales, and apothegms were also highly reputed theologians, have impaired the critical study of Islamic theology, and its articulation in literature. Moyaert's work has been instrumental in challenging these patterns and creating a space where Islamic theology can be acknowledged and analysed both outside the exposition of dogmas and syllogistic thinking and in relation to them.

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