CHAPTER 3

Intellectual Currents and Debates

1 Qūnawī’s Work in Relation to Ibn ‘Arabī’s

The previous chapters should already have provided an idea of the extent to which the figure of the Shaykh al-Akbar looms large over Qūnawī’s life and work. Indeed, however important Qūnawī may have been as a spiritual master in his own right, one cannot ignore the fact that he is – and always has been – known primarily as Ibn ‘Arabī’s stepson and foremost disciple. At least some attention, then, should be given to the issue of how his writings stand in relation to those of his master – especially as this question has, over the years, given rise to a number of contentious interpretations and clichés. The pages that follow are intended to give an overview of where their writings coincide or differ, taking as terms of comparison the three broad areas of doctrines, structure and style.

Starting with their doctrinal content, we should recall that Qūnawī himself is keen to stress that his works are not simply the product of a bookish study of his master’s teachings. Rather they are the fruits of inspiration and, as such, are imbued with the specific “taste” (dhawq) that derives from his “spiritual distinction” (ikhtiṣāṣ). But this does not mean that he seeks to assert his originality by contradicting Ibn ‘Arabī. From Qūnawī’s point of view, to do so would only serve to undermine the value of his writings: just as the divine revelations reflect the unity of their source, so, as he explains in the Iʿjāz al-bayān, is it

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1 That this was true even during Qūnawī’s lifetime would seem to be confirmed by Jandī’s describing him as the “khalīfa of the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood” (cf. supra, p. 24), and also by the comments - cited earlier - of the contemporary chronicler, Karīm al-Dīn al-Aqsarāʾī: “In those days the Shaykh al-Islām was Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad, who was a thoroughly learned man and a perfect teacher, versed in all manner of disciplines, particularly the science of hadith, for which he was renowned in both East and West, and also for the fact that his father, Majd al-Dīn Isḥāq, was one of the companions of the divinely inspired master, Muḥyī-l-Dīn Muhammad al-ʿArabī”. (Musāmarat al-akhbār, in Akhbār-i-Salājiqah-i-Rūm, p. 419).

2 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī famously described him as the “chief interpreter of the Shaykh’s words,” adding that “one cannot grasp the essence of the Shaykh’s discourse regarding the question of the oneness of Being (waḥdat al-wujūd), in a manner compatible with both reason and sacred law, save by following and understanding [Qūnawī’s] verifications”. (Nafaḥāt, p. 555).
“inconceivable that any divergence should arise between the great Friends [of God] regarding fundamental divine principles”.

Accordingly, Qūnawī’s oeuvre, while retaining its specific taste, contains, nonetheless, the key elements of Ibn ʿArabī’s teachings. The most important of these will be considered in detail as occasion demands. For the moment one may briefly cite the doctrines of existence envisaged as continual theophany; the all-embracing nature of the perfect man; the world envisaged as the articulation of the breath of the All-Merciful; the barzakh as an intelligible common boundary; the metaphysical symbolism of the mirror; the immutable essences; the relative nature of the concept of divinity; the superiority of supra-rational “unveiling” (kashf) over reason; and the existence of a “specific face” (wajh khāṣṣ) through which all beings remain directly connected to their divine principle: all of which feature prominently in Ibn ʿArabī’s Futūḥāt and Fuṣūṣ, not to mention the many shorter treatises, and all of which play a key part in Qūnawī’s synthesis.

At the same time, it is important to observe that the roots of other crucial elements of this synthesis appear as no more than brief allusions in the works of the Shaykh al-Akbar. This is notably the case, for example, with the doctrines of the “divine secret” (al-sirr al-ilāhī), the “ascension of dissolution” (miʿrāj al-taḥlīl), and the “self-disclosure of the Essence” (al-tajallī al-dhātī), each of which will be examined in due course. Nor, by the same token, should it be forgotten that some of the most influential elements of Qūnawī’s oeuvre are – so it would seem – absent from the works of his master, or far less noticeable at any rate; the most prominent examples in this respect being the metaphysical theory of “determination” (taʿayyun) and “non-determination” (al-lā taʿayyun), the doctrine of the “divine affairs” (shuʿūn), and the idea of intra-substantial causality.

Nevertheless, because of its special relevance to the present chapter, there is one question that deserves particular attention here: we are referring, of course, to the theory of the “oneness of Being”, or "waḥdat al-wujūd", which, over the centuries, has become both the best-known and most controversial doctrine associated with the Akbarian school. As for this doctrine’s roots, they are to be found in Ibn ʿArabī’s assertion that true Being (wujūd) belongs to God (al-ḥaqq) alone, such that the sole measure of existence that things possess is

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3 Ṣūṣ, p. 44. (See Appendix 3, Text G).