ON THE THEORIES OF 'IBDA' AND TA'THİR

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In his seminal work on patterns of thought in Western culture, Arthur Lovejoy pointed to a central problem in our thinking about God. He wrote: ¹

But the God in whom man was thus to find his own fulfilment was, as has been pointed out, not one God but two. He was the Idea of the Good, but he was also the Idea of Goodness; and though the second attribute was nominally deduced dialectically from the first, no two notions could be more antithetic. The one was an apotheosis of unity, self-sufficiency, and quietude, the other of diversity, self-transcendence, and fecundity... The one God was the goal of the 'way up,' of that ascending process by which the finite soul, turning from all created things, took its way back to the immutable Perfection in which alone it could find rest. The other God was the source and the informing energy of that descending process by which being flows through all the levels of possibility down to the very lowest.

The thinking of Western man, then, was caught in the interstice of the Biblical traditions (Bible, New Testament, and Qoran) which spoke of God as an active, anthropopathic, fecund being and of the Hellenic traditions which spoke of God as perfect, immutable, and self-sufficient. Western man was caught between God’s "eternal self-containedness and [His] perpetual self-diffusiveness". ² In addition, this conflict of basic images presented the problem of how one was to relate to this double God. For the thinkers of the medieval Judaeo-Islamic milieu this dilemma clearly expressed itself in a pair of concepts: creation-emanation and philosophic mysticism. It is the first of these two conceptual problems that this essay addresses.

² Ibid., 87.
The theory of 'Ibdā' and 'Inbi'āth

The problem of creation-emanation has several aspects. The first: On the one hand, the Scriptural traditions taught that God was radically different from this world, that His being and the being of all of creation had nothing in common, that He was absolutely transcendent. On the other hand, the emanationist traditions taught that God and the world were in some way continuous, that He had let something (of Himself) overflow into reality, and hence that His being and the being of creation did have something in common. For a religious thinker who participated in both the Scriptural and emanationist traditions, the problem, then, was: Is there continuity between reality and God, or is there a radical existential gap?3

Within the Ismaili tradition of Islam, the option of the radical existential gap was chosen and the contrast between the being of God and the being of creation was expressed by the use of two terms: 'ibdā' and 'inbi'āth. The term 'ibdā' (verb: 'abda'a) was used only of the First Being with the clear meaning of a radical coming-into-being while the term 'inbi'āth (verb: 'inba'atha) was used of all subsequent spiritual beings with the clear meaning of coming-into-being by emanation. Corbin has put it very clearly:4

3 If one assumed both options to be true, the question was: Given both the continuity and the discontinuity of the ontological relationship between reality and God, how does one express that? These problems were dealt with by Wolfson in his series of articles on the meaning of the term ex nihilo (Studies in the History and Philosophy of Religion, ed. I. Twersky and G. H. Williams [Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1973]—hereinafter: “Studies”—I: 199-233). Another aspect of this problem—whether the creative/emanative act was an act of will or necessitation—was also dealt with by Wolfson.


The quotation, here, is from Trilogie, 40. For al-Kirmānī, cf. Rahat, part three,