

application of *ta'wil* Such hermeneutics, in their view, complemented *tafsir*, the mode of formal interpretation in Muslim thought, and did not reflect a dichotomised way of viewing scripture. Rather, it attested to the divine use of language in multiple ways, particularly as

like branches reaching into Heaven, to identify the visible which glorifies Him, but it also seeks to penetrate to the roots, to retrieve and disclose that which appears invisible.

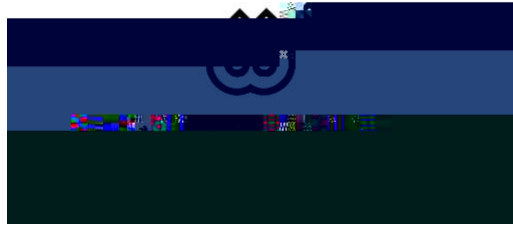
In his works, *al-Risalah al Durriyah* and *Rahat al- 'Aql*, the Fatimid philosopher Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. 1021) juxtaposes a discussion of speech and language to his exposition of the concept of God and *tawhid*. He argues that languages grow out of words which are composed of letters which allow words to signify specific meanings. But words as well as languages are contingent and relative. Since God is not contingent but absolute, language, by its very nature, cannot appropriately define Him in a non-contingent way and take account of that which makes God different from all that is contingent. Thus, language in itself fails to define God as befitting His glory. Language, however, is a beginning, because it is the foremost tool for signifying and representing the possibility of what God is. The fact of being human and possessed of an intellect compels one to speak of and inquire about the agent from whom existentionation (or origination) comes forth. Thus, when one speaks of God, one does not necessarily describe Him as He is, but one has affirmed that He is indeed the originator of all that we employ to understand and describe His creation.

The appropriate mode of language which serves us best in this task is, according to al-Kirmani, figurative language. Such language, which employs analogy, metaphor and symbols, allows one to make distinctions and to establish differences in ways that a literal usage of language does not permit. It can also impel thought to



employs a special system of signs, the ultimate meaning of which is unveiled by the proper application of *ta'wil*.⁴

Articulating Transcendence: God Beyond Being and Non-



incomplete, since the denial takes account only of characteristics of material creations (*makhluqat*) and not of spiritual entities (*mubda'at*). If one is to adopt the path of negation, he argues, then it must be a complete negation, denying that God has either material attributes or spiritual ones, thereby rendering him beyond existence (*ays*) and non-existence (*lays*).

In formulating such a sweeping concept of *tawhid*, Sijistani assumes three possible relations between God and His Creation: God can either resemble His creation entirely, in part, or not at all. In order to affirm the total distinction implied in *tawhid*, the third relation is the most appropriate, involving a total distinction from all forms of creation. Basing himself on a



existence; and they could not logically be conceived of, one without the other. Such mutuality cannot be associated with God, for to conceive of existence as emanating from Him necessitates multiplicity in its source, which is its very essence. For al-Kirmani, then, the only absolute way in which creation and *tawhid* can be distinguished is through a much sharper definition of that which is originated through *ibda*, namely the First Existent or the First Intellect. He states:

It did not exist, then it came into existence via *ibda* and *ikhtira*, neither from a thing, nor upon a thing, nor in a thing, nor by a thing, nor for a thing and nor with a thing. (Kirmani, *Rahat al-'Aql*, trans. Hunzai, p. 165)

Like the number one, it contains all other numbers, which depend on it for their existence. Yet it is independent and separate from them, and it is the source and the cause of all plurality. In order to establish the singularity of the First Intellect, he refers to what the ancient sages (*hukama*) have said:

From the First Existent, which is the First Cause, nothing comes into existence but a single existence ... or the Prime Mover moves only one, even though by it many are moved. (Kirmani, *Rahat al-'Aql*, trans. Hunzai, p. 166)

Having used the arguments of the ancients for the purpose of validating his point, al-Kirmani is nevertheless quick to separate himself from the view that all these attributes can then be applied to God, for that would compromise his insistence on absolute transcendence. They can only apply to the First Intellect, which in his scheme now becomes the Source, that which is inherently the synthesis of the One and the many (*Jami' li-l-wahdah wa al-kathrah*). At this stage, anterior to time and space, the two qualities were in the First Intellect, but they comprise the dual dimension that relates the First Intellect to *tawhid*, as well as to the role by which its generative capacity can be manifested. With respect to God, the First Intellect exists to sanctify Him. Such sanctification (*taqdis*) on the part of the First Intellect reflects the nobler aspect of its dual dimension, where it is an affirmation of its own createdness and distinction from God. On the other hand, the sanctification generates a state of happiness and contentment within it, which produces actual and potential intellects, which in turn become the causes for the creation of the subsequent spiritual and material realms. Al-Kirmani distinguishes in the First Intellect



spiritual and material realms are not dic

spirit are united under a higher genus. Though they require different linguistic and rational





process in discovering and opening up new possibilities for reformulating scriptural meanings.

Quoting Nasir al din Tusi (d. 1274), who wrote during the Alamut

Corbin suggests

that to come into this world should not be confused with corporeal presence in the world of



Interpretation of Narrative, ed. M. J. Valdes and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 122.

4. Professor Nasr, commenting on the notion of *ta'wil*, suggested a definition that he attributed to the late Henry Corbin - comprehensive way of understanding the wider connotation of *ta'wil* is to see it at one level as suggesting a mode of reading the scriptural text and deciphering its verbal meaning, and also

haqq). There is thus one text, but it has two aspects: *zahir* and *batin*, a referential aspect and a fundamental one. In this connection, see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), particularly chap. 3; and Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), which draws from the work of Paul Ricoeur.

5. David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) p. 2.

6. Henry Corbin, *Nasir-e-Khosraw: Kitab-e-jami' al-Hikmatain* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve,

Narratives in Ismaili Thought *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. R. C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), pp. 167-68.

8. Henry Corbin, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1983), p. 42.

9. , p. 57.

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