

WAḤDAT AL-WUJŪD AS POST-AVICENNIAN THOUGHT: COMPARING WRITINGS ON THE BASMALA BY IBN ‘ARABĪ AND ‘ABD AL-KARĪM AL-JĪLĪ

Rüdiger Lohlker
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
E-mail: ruediger.lohlker@univie.ac.at

Abstract: The article has a two main aims: situating the (post-)Akbarian ideas in the context of Islamic post-classical, esp., post-Avicennian thought and moving the field of the study ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī away from the focus on one work, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, to the inclusion of a broader specter of writings regarded as minor texts. The article proposes a rhizomatic reading of the sources to re-open the field of analysis. At the same time, the article argues for *wahdat al-wujūd* as a main element of post-classical Islamic discourse sharing a framework with post-Avicennian thought. Reconfiguring the field of the study of writings on *wahdat al-wujūd* this will allow for an analysis of the field not an analysis of selected works. The analysis will be done by a close reading of a set of works focussed on the *basmala* as one of the most important formulae. This is not an analysis of the letters and its interpretations but much more of the post-classical philosophy and the relation of the Sufism of *wahdat al-wujūd* to it. The article discusses the role of the writings of al-Jīlī and Ibn ‘Arabī. The analysis of the field of writings of al-Jīlī opens a perspective on *wahdat al-wujūd* as an interrelated field of meanings beyond the focus on single works and its possible intertextual references.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *wahdat al-wujūd*, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, *al-Kaḥf wa al-Raqīm*.

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Introduction

It is a well-established fact in historical research that the *basmala* was known even outside Qur’ānic contexts. It had been “placed at the head of the Pact of Ḥudaybiyya in 6/627–628. Many letters and epistles to the pagans, Jews, and Christians of Arabia also open with it.”¹ Due to its occurrence in the Qur’ān it may be regarded as one of the most important formulae in Islamic history. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on the role of the *basmala* in Islamic discourses.

The following lines will explore the development of the thoughts of the school of *waḥdat² al-wujūd* focusing on this most important phrase of the *basmala³* stretching from Ibn ‘Arabī to ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī and beyond. This study will use a rhizomatic⁴ reading of the sources to understand the unfolding of the web of meaning of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in a post-Avicennian context.⁵

Starting from the claim of Wisnovsky “that the turn in Sunnī *kalām* was [...] Avicennian, not Ghazālīan”⁶ we may broaden the view to a more comprehensive view including all aspects of Islamic

¹ Theodor Nöldeke, *The History of the Qur’an* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 277.

² The transcription used in the quotations is not changed.

³ Curiously even the invitation to the We ceremony of the award of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant has the *basmala* at its head. This is in line with the tradition of putting Arabic, Hebrew, or Syriac formulae at the head of German academic documents in early modernity referring to the ‘sacred philology’, i.e., philological studies of the Bible and all the languages thought to be helpful to understand the text of the Christian Bible. Hartmut Bobzin, “Immanuel Kant und die Basmala: Eine Studie zu orientalischer Philologie und Typographie in Deutschland im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 25 (1993), 108-131.

⁴ For the concept of rhizome as a network structure based on ideas of Deleuze/Guattari applied to non-modern Islamic texts cf. Rüdiger Lohker, “Islamische Texte – Bewegungen der Deterritorialisierung und Umordnung der Dinge,” in Kurt Appel (ed.) et al., *Religion in Europa heute: Sozialwissenschaftliche, rechtswissenschaftliche, hermeneutisch-religionsphilosophische Perspektiven* (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2012), 193-208.

⁵ We will leave out other rhizomes of post-classical Islamic discourse like that focussing around Mullā Ṣadrā.

⁶ Robert Wisnovsky, “One Aspect of the Avicennian Turn in Sunnī Theology,” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004), 65-100: 65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0957423904000013>. We are leaving aside the complex relation of Ibn ‘Arabī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, see Binyamin Abrahamov, “Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Attitude towards al-Ghazālī,” in Y. Tzvi Langermann (ed.), *Avicenna and his Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 101-115.

intellectual culture after the 12th century CE. Thus, the following lines have to be understood as part of the ongoing research on post-classical Islam after this Avicennian turn. The idea of talking about the ideas of Ibn Sīnā and its impact on later Islamic thought is dauntingly broad. Thus, we will have to focus on one aspect. As Wisnovsky said:

“Before Avicenna, *falsafa* (Arabic Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy) and *kalām* (Islamic doctrinal theology) were distinct strands of thought, even though a good deal of cross-fertilization took place between them. After Avicenna, by contrast, the two strands fused together and post-Avicennian *kalām* emerged as a truly Islamic philosophy, a synthesis of Avicenna’s metaphysics and Muslim doctrine.”⁷

This synthetic post-Avicennian thought is a rhizome characterized by several ideas⁸ like the critique of representationalism by Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī⁹, God’s knowledge of particulars¹⁰, the reality of the non-existent object of thought¹¹, the essence-existence distinction¹², the possibles (*mumkināt*)¹³ or the soul-touching on every aspect of later Islamic discourse.¹⁴

⁷ Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna and the Avicennian Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92-136: 92.

⁸ We are aware, the list could be enlarged. For the sake of brevity, the list is highly selective.

⁹ Cf. Fedor Benevich, “Perceiving Things in Themselves: Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī’s Critique of Representationalism,” in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 30 (2020a), 229-264. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S095742392000003X> and Fedor Benevich, “Representational Beings: Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and Avicenna’s Mental Existence,” in *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 87, no. 2 (2020b), 289-317. <https://doi.org/10.2143/RTPM.87.2.3289006>.

¹⁰ Cf. Fedor Benevich, “God’s Knowledge of Particulars: Avicenna, *Kalām*, and the Post-Avicennian Synthesis,” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 86, no. 1 (2019), 1-47. <https://doi.org/10.2143/RTPM.86.1.3285913>.

¹¹ Cf. Fedor Benevich, “The Reality of The Non-Existent Object of Thought: The Possible, The Impossible, and Mental Existence in Islamic Philosophy (eleventh-thirteenth centuries),” *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 6 (2018), 31-65. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198827030.001.0001>.

¹² Cf. Fedor Benevich, “The Essence-Existence Distinction: Four Elements of the Post-Avicennian Metaphysical Dispute (11-13th Centuries),” *Oriens* 45, no. 3-4 (2017), 203-258. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18778372-04503004>.

¹³ A distinction is made by Ibn Sīnā between the being that essentially is (*bi-dhātihī*), but must not be. Terminologically speaking, it is a possible being (*mumkin al-wujūd*).

Since there has been no thorough research of this field yet, a discussion of the state of research is not necessary. There are only two slightly outdated academic publications on works of al-Jīfī relevant for this study discussed at the appropriate place. Recent works on *al-Insān al-Kāmil* by Morrissey are irrelevant for this article. The only study relevant for our analysis is by Atlagh.¹⁵ Who is not able to assess the role of *al-Kahf* adequately.

We are still lacking a thorough internal and rhizomatic analysis of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and its relation to the later Islamic discourse. This study will provide a first analysis in this field.

Post-Avicennian and (post-)Akbarian Discourse

Part of later Islamic discourse, esp., on universals is a debate between Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1389/90 CE) and Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (d. 1431 CE). Al-Taftāzānī was one of the most influential Iranian and Central Asian philosopher-theologians in the fourteenth century while al-Fanārī was one of the most prominent Anatolian and Egyptian proponents of the Akbarian ideas in the fourteenth and fifteenth-century Anatolia and Egypt.¹⁶

To summarize the arguments discussed by Nakanishi, we may quote his conclusion:

“Al-Fanārī refutes the critiques directed against the theory of *waḥdat al-wujūd* by referring to preceding traditions. On the one hand, he refers to the existence of the “Universal Spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-kullī*) in the external world [...]; as indicated above, this term is widely used in the Akbarian [...] tradition to signify the Sublime Pen and the First Intellect. On the other hand [...], he refers to those post-Avicennian philosophical arguments advanced elsewhere by the critics, namely by al-Ṭūsī and al-Taftāzānī

It is impossible not to be Ahmad Milad Karimi, *Licht über Licht: Dekonstruktion des religiösen Denkens im Islam* (Freiburg i. Br./München: Karl Alber, 2021), 671.

¹⁴ Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Post-Avicennan Islamic Philosophy and the Study of Being,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1977), 265-271. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ipq1977173343>.

¹⁵ Cf. Ridha Atlagh, “Le point et la ligne: Explication de la *Basmala* par la science des lettres chez ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Gīlī (m. 826 h.),” *Bulletin d’études orientales* 44 (1992), 161-190.

¹⁶ Yuki Nakanishi, “Post-Avicennian Controversy over the Problem of Universals: Sa‘daddīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1389/90) and Šamsaddīn al-Fanārī (d. 1431) on the Reality of Existence,” in Abdelkader Al Ghouz (ed.), *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century* (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2018), 358-374.

themselves—sometimes without alteration, sometimes with modifications [...]. Through such argumentation, al-Fanāri most likely aims to rebut the critiques by using the very arguments endorsed by the critics themselves. That is to say, his refutation of the critiques is based largely on his reception of preceding philosophical discussions, at least as far as the problem of universals is concerned.”¹⁷

Following Nakanishi, we may understand the post-Avicennian post-Akbarian thought as part of the intense debates of the post-classical discourses. Thus, there has been a vivid debate between philosophers-theologians and other members of the post-Avicennian tradition. Do we find indications for an internal debate of this kind among members of the (post-)Akbarian tradition?

Caner Dagli mentions in his study on mysticism and culture the significance of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037 CE) for “the later school of *wahdat al-wujūd*”.¹⁸ He says: “It is the conceptual and linguistic framework that he bequeathed to later generations of Islamic philosophers and Sufi doctrinal thinkers.”¹⁹ He adds some thoughts about the influence of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) and Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191 CE). Taking these remarks as a starting point, we will consider as the turning point of the development of the tradition of *wahdat al-wujūd* the growing influence of Avicennian concepts since the end of the 13th century CE. Wisnovsky²⁰ stresses the influence of the ideas of Ibn Sīnā on Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī and the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school of thought:

“In a similar fashion, some central ideas of al-Suhrawardī and Ibn ‘Arabī—two thinkers usually viewed as mystics who departed radically from Avicenna’s philosophy—can be seen upon closer examination to be responses to Avicenna’s theories. To be more precise, their ideas can be seen to be responses to the systematized theories of the new Avicennian philosophy of thinkers such as al-Rāzī. [...] And Ibn Arabī’s rejection, in his *Inshā al-Dawāir* of the theory that existence is something superadded, can be seen as part of his larger effort to come up

¹⁷ Nakanishi, “Post-Avicennian Controversy”, 369.

¹⁸ Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn al-‘Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 49.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicenna’s Islamic Reception,” in Peter Adamson (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 190-213: 206-207.

with a theory of oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and thereby salvage Avicennian ontology in the face of another attack on the Avicennian claim that existence is superadded to quiddities, but this time by Averroes, not al-Suhrawardī.”

This may be read as a glimpse of the conversation between Ibn Sīnā and Ibn ‘Arabī (including Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī) and the authors involved. The scholars of the Ottoman Empire developed their own brand of post-Avicennian ideas influenced by the Ottoman rhizome of *waḥdat al-wujūd*; al-Fanārī has already been mentioned.

For the (post-)Akbarian thought of *waḥdat al-wujūd* South Asia is a place for the intersection of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and post-Avicennian thought. It may also be regarded as a space connecting these ideas with Southeast Asian Islam.

A prominent proponent of this multiple intersections was Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (d. 1648 CE) one of the well-known thinkers of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* tradition in South Asia. Most of Muḥibb Allāh’s writings are still in manuscript form; we may mention his commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* of Ibn ‘Arabī.²¹ His *Taswīyya* shows a unique blend of post-Avicennian and post-Akbarian ideas²² demonstrating the dynamics of the discussion among the *waḥdat al-wujūd* tradition in post-Sirhindī times, although we have to stress that the assumed pivotal role of Aḥmad-e Sirhindī (d. 1624 CE) in 17th century CE is the result of his appropriation by nationalist and some Islamic discourses in the 10th/20th centuries CE.²³ Another interesting case of the South Asian conversation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is al-Lakhnawī in the eighteenth century.²⁴ To give further insights into the field of *waḥdat*

²¹ Cf. Yāsir Ḥojjatī Najafābādī, Mehrdād Chatrānī, and Maḥbūbe Ḥorāsānī, “Mo‘arrefī, Sharḥ-e Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam-e Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī” wa-bar rasī wa-wāzhehā-ye mahjūr-e fārsī-ye ān,” in *Pažūbesh-e zaḅān-o adabiyāt-e fārsī* 53 (1398 h.sh.), 75-100 and Malika Mohameda, *The Foundations of the Composite Culture in India* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2007).

²² G. A. Lipton, “The Equivalence” (*al-Taswīyya*) of Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī: *Avicennian Neoplatonism and the School of Ibn ‘Arabī in South Asia* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cf. Thomas W. Dahnhardt, “The Doctrine of the Unicity of Existence in the Light of the Eighteenth Century Indian Sūfī Treatise: The ‘Waḥdat al-Wujūd’ by Baḥr al-‘Ulūm ‘Abd al-‘Alī Anṣārī al-Lakhnawī,” *Oriente Moderno* 92, no. 2 (2012), 323-360.

al-wujūd, we will look into several works of the school related to the *basmala*

Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah

There are some well-known parts of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* that allow for some insights into the thoughts of Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE) on the *basmala*.²⁵ For a better understanding it is helpful to look into the structure of the first chapters of the *Futūḥāt*. The first chapter²⁶ is about the *rūḥ*, the spirit, the first manifest principle of the universe, and all its aspects, esp., the intimate relation between it and the author of the *Futūḥāt*. The second chapter²⁷ discusses the letters²⁸, the highest principles or beautiful names (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*)²⁹, forming the world and the book; the third³⁰ looks into the divine transcendence and the difference between God and creation (*tanẓīh*)³¹ and the fourth covers issues like the beginning of the world (*bid’ al-‘alam*) and the stages of the highest principles or beautiful names (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*). The fifth chapter, however, is more pertinent to our discussion. Its title is “Knowing the secrets of in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful and the *fātiḥa* in one respect.”³² Since we know that Ibn ‘Arabī wrote not a conventional book when

²⁵ For a first attempt of an analysis cf. Rüdiger Lohlker, “Das *bā’* bei Ibn ‘Arabī: Aus den Mekkanischen Eröffnungen,” in Rüdiger Lohlker (ed.), *Der Buchstabe bā’ – Texte zur Einsheit des Seins in der Tradition Ibn ‘Arabī* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2016), 21-27.

²⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Vol. 1, 79-85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-144.

²⁸ For the study of the letters in the *Futūḥāt* cf. Michel Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Ibn ‘Arabī: Les illuminations de la Mecque* (Paris Albin Michel, 2021), 165-282.

²⁹ “God possesses all possibilities, as summarized by His names. He is God precisely in virtue of the relationships which the names denote. He is Lord (*rabb*) because of the vassal (*marbūb*), Creator because of the creature, Powerful because of the object of power, Knower because of the objects of knowledge, and so on. Without the creation that actualizes His names, God would not be a god, even though, in His Essence, He is “Independent of the worlds.” In the same way, man is not man until he brings the divine attributes latent within himself into actuality.” (William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 275).

³⁰ Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Vol. 1, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, s.d.), 144-153.

³¹ Chittick, *The Sufi Path*, XXII.

³² Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Vol. 1, 157.

composing the *Futūḥāt* it may be possible to glean some information from studying one chapter (and additional information from others).

Generally speaking the *basmala*, esp., of the *fātiḥa* plays a special role in the *Futūḥāt*. On the one hand, Ibn 'Arabī specifies that only the *basmala* of the *fātiḥa* can play the role of empowering the believers,³³ and on the other hand the *basmala* is part of a two-fold movement:

“If Revelation *descends* from God towards humanity, the route for the *viator* is symmetrically an *ascending* route that, contrary to the usual order of the Qur'ānic Vulgate, leads the *murīd* from the last sura of the Qur'ān [...] to the first one, *al-fātiḥa* [...] the one in which the person is given the ultimate *fath*, definitive illumination. In other terms, it becomes a question of climbing back from the extreme point of Universal Manifestation (which the last word of the Qur'ān, *al-nās* [humanity], symbolizes) to its Divine Principle (which is symbolized by the first sura, *Umm al-Kitāb* [...], and, more exactly, the point of the *bā'* in the *basmala*).”³⁴

But the structure of the Qur'ān may also be read in a descending route starting with the *fātiḥa*. Having stated the systematic position of the *basmala* in the *Futūḥāt* according to Chodkiewicz, we will have to turn to the textual data. To some researchers, the internal organization of the *Futūḥāt* appears to be enigmatic or chaotic. Following the key Chodkiewicz provides, we may say:

“The inexplicable succession of the chapters then becomes perfectly coherent, and the relationship that we have pointed out becomes demonstrable without exception in each of their texts. In fact, it can be observed in their very titles by anyone who has a familiarity with the Qur'ān. A few examples serve to illustrate: the third *manẓil* (chapter 272), *manẓil tanẓīb al-tawḥīd*, the “abode of the transcendence of Unicity,” corresponds in an obvious way to the third sura from the last, *al-Ikhlāṣ*, whose theme is divine unicity; the fourth (chapter 273), *manẓil al-halāk*, “abode of perdition,” corresponds to sura *al-masad*, which describes the punishment of Abū Lahab; the sixth sura *su'ūdān*, that is (always counting from the end of the Qur'ān forward) to sura *al-Kāfirūn*, whose theme is the rejection of idolatrous beliefs. The nineteenth *manẓil* (chapter 288), “abode of recitation,” corresponds via the same rule to sura *al-'Alaq*, where the

³³ Cf. Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 148.

³⁴ Chodkiewicz, *Ocean*, 148.

Prophet is ordered to recite the Revelation that the angel is transmitting to him; the forty-seventh (chapter 316), “abode of the Divine Pen,” corresponds to sura *al-Qalam*—and so forth up to the one hundred fourteenth and last *manzil*, the *manzil al-jāmi’a*, “the abode of Totalizing Immensity,” which is the one where the being, having arrived at the end of this initiatory voyage, realizes the secrets of the “Mother of the Book.” Given the key, the reader can complete the enumeration.”³⁵

The Qur’ānocentric structure identified by Chodkiewicz seems at first sight, to be a less philosophically impregnated terminology than the usual terminology to be expected in post-Avicennian Islamic thought. The centrality of the concept of being (*wujūd*), however, is the ontological meeting point of the (post-)Avicennian and the (post-)Akbarian ideas. As Lizzini writes:

“According to Avicenna, metaphysics—and no other science—can (and must) establish the existence of a First absolute Principle. Physics, which deals with bodies and their movement, can explain no more than motion [...] and, unable to answer the fundamental ontological question about the origin of the world’s *being*, it simply anticipates the idea of the Principle that metaphysics demonstrates.”³⁶

From this perspective, Avicenna is not Aristotelian: metaphysics must explain the transition from non-being to being, an atemporal transition which does not exclude eternity from what is caused to be. His idea is entirely consistent with Greco-Arabic Neo-Platonism [...]. At the same time, Avicenna includes the Aristotelian conception of a world eternally in movement in his system: hence the notions of matter, form, potency and act are elaborated to answer the question of the origin of the world’s eternal existence. In keeping with Proclus (and against John Philoponus’s position [...]), Avicenna considers the world to be “instaured” or absolutely created (*mubdaʿ*) and at the same time establishes that it is eternal and eternally in motion, as Aristotle’s physics and metaphysics teach. He therefore posits a Principle of the world’s existence (*wujūd*) that does not correspond to the prime unmoved mover [...]. Indeed, according to Avicenna, in metaphysics, the efficient cause is a cause of existence [...]. It is only in this sense that metaphysicians conceive the Principle as an agent. At the same time, since it is first and perfect [...], the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lizzini, “Ibn Sina’s Metaphysics”.

Principle must also be a final cause [...]. The idea of aim must then be (aporetically) shifted from the level of movement to that of being: the final cause is not a cause of movement but the same efficient cause that makes things exist (*mujīd*). Therefore, the First Principle is a cause in every respect [...].”³⁷

We may conclude that this is part of the framework of the post-Avicennian discourse framed by (post-)Akbarian thought. Let us now turn to the textual data gained from a close reading of the *Futūḥāt*!

The fifth chapter about the secrets of the *fātiḥa* and the *basmala* starts as usual with a poetic introduction setting the tone for the following text. As the starting point of the knowledge of being (*ma‘rifat al-wujūd*) and the beginning of the world (*‘ālam*) he mentions the great copy (*al-muṣḥaf al-kabīr*) read out loud by the ultimate Truth as is the Qur’ān. “Hence, the world is letters (*ḥurūf*) written down on the parchment of being (*wujūd*) spread out.”³⁸ We may interpret the role of the writing and the reading out as an indicator for the realization of superior truth *in* the world. This leads him to the beginning of the writing, the *fātiḥa* and the *basmala*, to descend from and ascend to according to Chodkiewicz the “key to guidance (*hudā*)”³⁹ or the linguistic expression of the First Principle and all its aspects.

He refers to the divine names (*asmā’ ilāhiyya*) as the cause for the world’s existence. They are the most important factors in this respect. The *basmala*, however, is the initial word and the beginning of the world and of its emergence (*ẓubūr*). Esp., after the world emerged (*ẓahāra*) three names stand out. Allāh is the all-comprehensive (*jāmi’*) including all other names. *Al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* are described as His specific attributes (*sifāt*).

Turning to the *basmala* itself, Ibn ‘Arabī says: “bism with *bā’* let emerge the being (*wujūd*); by the point (*nuqṭa*) the worshiper (*‘ābid*) and the worshipped (*ma‘būd*) are distinguished.” He introduces the Sufi al-Shiblī (d. 334 AH/945 CE):⁴⁰ “He was asked: ‘Are you al-Shiblī? I am the point below the *bā’*.’” This is called by Ibn ‘Arabī the *bā’* of distinction (*bā’ al-tamyīz*). In a detailed exposition of the meanings of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Vol. 1, 158.

³⁹ Ibid and for the following ideas.

⁴⁰ Florian Sobieroj, “al-Shiblī,” in Peri Bearman et al., *Encyclopaedia of Islam* Second Edition (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012).

the *bā'* we read about the different aspects of the *bā'* related to the cosmological doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī stressing again that the *bā'* expresses the beings (*manjūdāt*) and its movement.⁴¹

Thus, Ibn 'Arabī clarifies in detail the role of the letters of the *basmala*. We may stress his reference to compassion (*rahma*) as a natural outcome of the explanation of the *bā'*.⁴² For the sake of space, we will refrain from discussing each. Nevertheless, we may state again the Qur'ānocentric view described by Chodkiewicz.

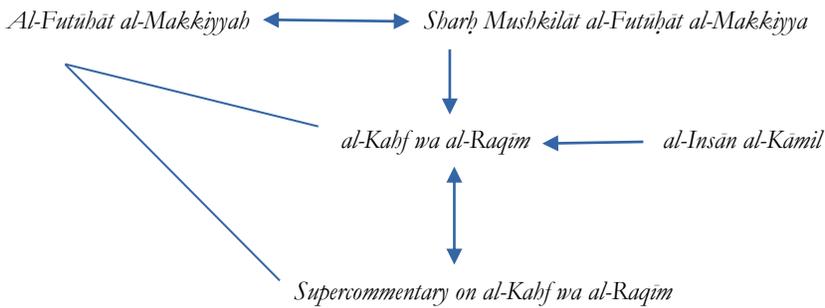


Diagram: Part of the Rhizome of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*

1. *Kitāb al-Bā'*

To finalize the discussion of the *bā'* we will follow the rhizome of *bā'* to a small treatise by Ibn 'Arabī the *Kitāb al-Bā'*, the book of *bā'*.⁴³ A short quotation will give an idea about his view of the letter *bā'* in this treatise.

“It is the sublime letter. The visible (*majhūra*) *bā'* is part of the visible (*majhūr*) world since it is the source of the manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) [of existence]. It is the cloak (*thawb*) donned by the one who lets [the being] emerge. Therefore [the letter] will be brought forth in the form [God gives] by his word (*kalima*). He is concealing himself by the emergence (*ẓuhūr*) of the letter, The realization of knowledge (*ma'rifā*) of the knowing (*'arīfūn*) is only done through the *bā'*, the views of the persons viewing [God] (*shāhid*) are only seen through the *bā'*, the

⁴¹ Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Vol. 1, 158-159.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Kitāb al-Bā'* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1954); Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, “MIAS Archive Report: Catalogue of Ibn 'Arabī's Works.” Last modified November 19, 2001. <https://ibnarabisociety.org/>, No. 71.

verifiers (*muḥaqqiq*) verification only happens through the *bā’*. It is everything, emerges in every thing and effects in every thing.”⁴⁴

Once again the first letter of the Qur’ān and by it the revelation itself become the central aspect of knowledge. A letter like the *bā’* is the prime tool of attaining being (*wujūd*), knowledge, and truth. To complement our findings we will add some remarks on chapter 559. Ibn ‘Arabī says: “The Imam being clear (*mubīn*), he is the one who/prescribes the clear (*mubīn*) orders for his servants (*‘abīd*).”⁴⁵ Again it is a holistic view of being clear (*mubīn*) as it is in respect to the being or existence. Then he discusses all aspects of this guidance and the immutable entities (*‘ayān thābita*) (cf. below). Turning to the *basmala*, he tells his fellow seeker (*walī*) that there three parts as in a marriage contract (*nikaḥ*): the two witnesses (*shahīd*) and the legal guardian (*walī*). This is related to the secret (*sirr*) of the *basmala* and the pre-temporal imperative *kun!* (Be!), thus, saying that the non-existent (*ma’dūm*) does not exist.⁴⁶ This elliptical speech act marks the process of the emergence of being by the first imperative and then the unfolding of being through the *basmala* as the final point.

We will now turn to the partial commentary of al-Jīlī on the *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*!

2. *Sharḥ Muṣkilāt al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*

Al-Jīlī comments on chapter 559 of the *Futūḥāt* mentioned before. The commentary covers some sections of the first part of the chapter.⁴⁷ The reason may be that Ibn ‘Arabī says it is a chapter comprising all other chapters and, esp, the secrets (*sirr*) contained therein.

There are only small passages mentioning the *basmala*. In one place al-Jīlī says: “The divine word that reveals knowledge (*‘ilm*),

⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Kitāb al-Bā’*, 5-6.

⁴⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, Vol. 8, 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁷ Our remarks are based on the critical edition of Angelika al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit und die Stellung des Menschen: Die Sichtweise ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Gilīs auf der Grundlage des “‘Sharḥ Muṣkilāt al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya”* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998) (who still has al-Kilānī as the author’s name) and the edition of al-Kayyālī published in 2009.

omnipotence (*qudra*), and will (*irāda*), that is the word *kun* (Be!).⁴⁸ Hence, a relation to the pre-eternal enunciation of the divine word is established. Indeed, the *basmala* and the *ba'* emerge as the linguistic expression of the First Principle and all its aspects.

Then al-Jīlī says that Ibn 'Arabī states clearly this „by his word ‘The Allknowing (*'alim*) said’, i.e., the attribute (*sifa*) of knowing, that establishes ‘inevitably’ (*lā budda minhū*) the word *kun* to let appear these immutable entities (*a'yān thābita*) in [divine] knowledge (*'ilm*) and its emergence (*kburū*) in the world of essences (*'ālam 'aynī*). About the word *kun* he [Ibn 'Arabī] he enunciates clearly with His word ‘In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’.⁴⁹

Thus, the word of creation is interconnected for al-Jīlī with a term deeply imbued with Avicennian discourses: the idea of immutable entities (*a'yān thābita*), well known by Ibn 'Arabī⁵⁰, and his metaphysics can be regarded as part of the conversation on Ibn Sīnā's notion of *mumkinat*, the possibles⁵¹ and the post-Avicennian discourses taken up by al-Jīlī.

The following paragraph starts with some 'knowers' (or gnostics) (*'arīfūn*) saying that “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” said by one 'knowers' (or gnostic) (*'arīf*) is like God's saying 'Be!' (*kun*). Al-Jīlī moves on commenting on the relation of creator and creation as an intense intersecting rhizome including the *basmala* and the names of God included in the *basmala*, the Compassionate (*rahmān*) and the Merciful (*rahīm*) as the two witnesses (*shāhid*) in a marriage contract (*nikāh*), and God as the *walī*, the legal guardian (cf. above), Thus, “in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’ is enshrined the secret (*sirr*) of the two marriage contracts emerging: the highest truths of the Truth (*haqq*) and the highest truths of the creation (*kbalq*).⁵²

⁴⁸ Cf. al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*, 90 and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ Mushkilāt al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya l'Ibn al-'Arabī*, in 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-Manāẓir al-Ilahīyya*, ed. 'Aṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2009), 85-160: 112.

⁴⁹ Cf. al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*, 90 and al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ Mushkilāt*, 112.

⁵⁰ Cf. Egbert Meyer, “Ein kurzer Traktat Ibn 'Arabī's über die -a'yān at-ṭābita,” *Oriens* 27/28 (1981), 226-265. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1580568>

⁵¹ Muhammad Kamal, “Avicenna's Necessary Being,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 6 (2016), 194-200: 198. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2016.62018>

⁵² Cf. al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*, 91; al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ Mushkilāt*, 112.

Hence, the creator and creation are connected as the spouses are by the provisions of the marriage contract.

The discussion of the *basmala* is continued by exploring the nexus of *kun* and the *basmala* and the importance of the *basmala* and the *fātiḥa*, the role of the Qur’ānic revelation and the beings (*manjūdāt*). In the next paragraph, we find some considerations about the role of the *basmala* in day-to-day actions.⁵³ For our study the remark about *al-Kahf wa al-Raḥīm* as an all-encompassing (*‘alā tafṣīl wa al-ijmāl*) study on the *basmala* is important.⁵⁴

3. *al-Insān al-Kāmil*

But, nevertheless, we will have to mention the remarks of al-Jīlī in his *al-Insān al-kāmil* on the *fātiḥa*, i.e., the *basmala*, too.⁵⁵ It is well-known that the concept of *al-insān al-kāmil* is central for Sufi traditions.⁵⁶ Al-Jīlī says that the *fātiḥa* is called *sab‘ mathānī*, the seven repeated.⁵⁷ “They are seven attributes (*ṣifāt*) of the self (*nafsiyya*): living (*ḥayāt*), knowing (*‘ilm*), willing (*irāda*), being powerful (*qudra*), hearing (*sam‘*), seeing (*baṣar*), and speaking (*kalām*).”⁵⁸ He mentions that being (*wujūd*) is subdivided in the creation (*ḵalq*) and the Truth (*ḥaqq*).⁵⁹ We will not follow his arguments in detail, but mention his remark that he dedicated a treatise to the *basmala*, the *al-Kahf wa al-Raḥīm*.

Again, we notice the important role of *al-Kahf* in the context of the works of al-Jīlī. It may be regarded as part of the rhizome of the thinking of al-Jīlī. Thus, the focus on *al-Insān al-Kāmil* as the most important work of al-Jīlī is slightly overstating the role of this book and owed much to the European tradition of focussing on great works. We may think of other offshoots of the rhizome of al-Jīlī like *al-Isfār ‘an Risālat al-Anwār fīmā Yatajallā li-Ahl al-Dhikr min al-Anwār*.⁶⁰

⁵³ Cf. al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*, 94; al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ Mushkīlāt*, 113-114.

⁵⁴ Cf. al-Massri, *Göttliche Vollkommenheit*, 95; al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ Mushkīlāt*, 114.

⁵⁵ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-Kāmil fī Ma’rifat al-Awākhir wa al-Awāil*, ed. ‘Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2016), 183-187.

⁵⁶ Fitzroy Morrissey, *Sufism and the Perfect Human: From Ibn ‘Arabī to al-Jīlī* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 2 erroneously seems to understand al-Jīlī’s book as a merely historical phenomenon ignoring the vivid Indonesian discussion.

⁵⁷ We will not discuss this concept here.

⁵⁸ al-Jīlī, *al-Insān*, 183.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-Isfār ‘an Risālat al-Anwār fīmā Yatajallā li-Ahl al-Dhikr min al-Anwār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2012).

4. *al-Kahf wa al-Raqim*

The most important work on the *basmala* in the tradition of *wahdat al-wujūd* is, according to al-Jīlī himself, *al-Kahf wa al-Raqim*.⁶¹ We add, however, the supercommentary on the commentary (*sharḥ*) on the *basmala* by al-Jīlī (d. 1424 CE). The title is well known following the story in Sura 18, *al-Kahf*. The supercommentary was written by an up to the now unknown author. There are few academic studies on the main text (*matn*) most of them focussing on *al-Kahf*.⁶²

The main topic discussed at the beginning of *al-Kahf wa al-Raqim* is the omnipresence of God.⁶³ Then he starts with the discussion of the *basmala* turning to the letter *bā'* contained in the *basmala* and being the first letter of every *sūra*. A very interesting passage reads changes the relation of the dot and the letter *bā'*:

“The dot said to the *Bā'*, ‘O letter, indeed I am your origin because out of me you have been composed. But then it is you who in your composition are my origin. Because every portion of you is a dot. So, you are the whole and I am the portion, and the whole is the origin while the portion is the derivative. However, I am truly the origin, because composing you is in my nature and essence. Do not look at my projection outside you and say, *this protruding is not [part of] me*. Indeed, I only see you as having my own identity. And if not for my presence in you there would not be for me such a relation with you. Until when will you turn away from me in your exteriority and place me behind your shoulders? Make of your interior your exterior, and of your exterior your interior. Do you not realise my unity with you? If not for you I would not be the dot of the *Bā'*, and if not for me you would not be the dotted *Bā'*.”⁶⁴

And “the *bā'* said: “My master you realized you are my origin and I⁶⁵ learned that the root and the branch are two things.”⁶⁶ Thus,

⁶¹ Cf. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī and Anonymous, *Sharḥ al-Kahf al-Raqim fī Sharḥ bi’smi-llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, ed. ‘Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2013) and Abd-el-Karīm el-Jīlī, *Un commentaire ésotérique de la formule inaugurale du Coran*. ed./transl. Jâbir Clément-François (Beirut: Dar al-Bouraq, 2002).

⁶² E. g., Rüdiger Lohlker, “Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī and the Praxis of Hadīth,” *Ulumuna* 25, no. 1 (2021), 36-56. <https://doi.org/1020414/ujs/v25i1.435> or Nicholas Lo Polito, “‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī: Tawhīd, Transcendence, and Immanence” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2010).

⁶³ The edition and translation of Lo Polito 2010, *Tawḥīd* is slightly outdated.

⁶⁴ Lo Polito, *Tawḥīd*, 80.

⁶⁵ Not following the translation of Lo Polito 2010.

the interconnectedness and intersectionality are part of the letter and the dot beneath the letter. The dialogue goes on but we will not follow it here. We have to stress that for al-Jīlī it is not the letter (*rasm*) that is the true linguistic representation of the First Principle but the dot beneath the *rasm*! The part on the *bā’* is followed—quite naturally—a lengthy elaboration on the letter *alif*. We may mention another way of speaking about the *bā’*:

“The dual meaning of *the Ba’* is in the manifestation of the Truth to Himself, [and this] in the natural context of His essence (*Dhāt*), which is the second facet. Because the Truth—may He be praised and exalted—offers two perspectives of Himself: the perspective of essential unity, in which God does not look at what one calls *creation*, because in this perspective there is no creation [as yet]; the perspective of essence, in which God looks at a level called *creation* (*Kbulq*), a level which is a differentiation of His Essence, and this differentiation is named *attributes*.”⁶⁷

The relation of the letter and the creation is unfolded here bringing in the essence (*dhāt*) and the attributes. This unfolding of the attributes reminds of the immutable entities (*a’yān thābita*) mentioned before. *Al-Kahf* gives a list according to the 40 stages (*marātib*)⁶⁸ he mentioned in his *Marātib al-Wujūd*.⁶⁹

4.1 Supercommentary on *al-Kahf wa al-Raqīm*

The supercommentary on *al-Kahf wa al-Raqīm* of al-Jīlī is written by an unknown author not identified yet. Nevertheless, it may be regarded as an important contribution to post-Akbarian discourses. We will not discuss all intricacies of the commentary again unfolding all aspects of the *basmala* far beyond the short original text of *al-Kahf*. There are only a few new aspects to the supercommentary,

We will again turn to the letter *bā’* and the dot! The commentator writes:

“*Al-bā’* [...] and God [...] makes the *bā’* a tool for non-existence (*i’dām*) and let something exist (*ijād*). He created the world (*‘alam*) and its power (*qudra*) as the one-pointed *bā’* emerging from the

⁶⁶ al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ al-Kahf*, 18.

⁶⁷ Lo Polito, *Tawḥīd*, 197.

⁶⁸ al-Jīlī, *Sharḥ al-Kahf*, 33-34.

⁶⁹ ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Marātib al-Wujūd wa Ḥaqīqat Kull Manjūd* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1999).

essential (*dhātīyya*) dot (*nuqta*)⁷⁰ who is the origin (*mansba'*) of the truths [...] The *bā'* is the expression of the divine power (*qudra*) moving cloaked in the garments of the being (*manjūdāt kanniyya*) in its diversity."⁷¹

Again the letter *bā'* is interpreted as the moving Principle of creation and being (*wujūd*) going on until the end of time.

Returning to the reading of the *Futūḥāt* by Chodkiewicz we may say the *bā'* becomes the ultimate goal of the process of attaining knowledge:

"Know that the realization of the *bā'* is the enunciation of your essence (*dhāt*). It is [...] want the True (*ḥaqq*) wants from His servants (*'ibād*) on their way to the Most Exalted, i. e., to the cessation of being (*fanā'*). This can be divided into seven stages (*marātib*).⁷²

The first stage of the cessation of being is oblivion (*dhuhūl*), i.e., the servant not feeling himself while being absorbed in remembrance (*dhikr*) of the most high Truth [...]

The second stage is leaving (*dhībāb*), i.e., the servant giving up his intentional acts (*af'āl*) when moving and leaving for the Truth [...]

The third stage is taking away (*salb*), i.e., the cessation of being of the attribute (*ṣifāt*) of the creation by the emergence (*ṣūbūr*) of the attributes of the Truth (*ḥaqq*) [...]

The fourth stage is self-effacement (*iṣṭilām*), i.e., the effacement of the essence (*dhāt*) of the servant so that the being (*wujūd*) of the essence of the Truth [is the only existing].

The fifth stage is the non-existence (*in'idām*) the cessation of the servant of his cessation of being. [...]

The sixth stage is the annihilation (*saḥq*), i.e., the disappearing of the servant feeling himself [...]

The seventh stage is the total effacement (*maḥq*), i.e., the disappearing of all his [(=the servant)] boundaries and the limits, be it corporeal (*jasmānī*) or spiritual (*rūḥānī*), at the same time."⁷³

⁷⁰ For the concept of the dot of al-Jīlī cf. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *Qāb Qawsayn wa Multaqā al-Nāmūsayn wa-Yalībī Kitāb al-Nuqta wa-Yalībī Kitāb al-Isfār wa-Yalībī al-'Aynīyya* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2016).

⁷¹ Anonymous, "al-Sharḥ," in *Sharḥ al-Kaḥf al-Raqīm fī Sharḥ bi'smi-llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, ed. 'Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2013), 42-255: 234.

⁷² We may be reminded of the *sab' mathānī*.

⁷³ Anonymous, "al-Sharḥ", 255

Again, the *bā’* appears to be the cause in every respect”⁷⁴ and, indeed, the Principle setting creation in motion, let it go on, and let it go.

Concluding Remarks

The present study opens several vistas for the analysis of the writing of the school of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. The first analysis may focus on the letter *bā’* and its attributes in the school⁷⁵ to gain insights from the real working of the ideas of the school. The second analysis demonstrates the fruitfulness of an analysis of the role of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in post-classical Islamic thought and its influence on the configuration of Islam may be. The third analysis will help to overcome the traditional distinctions of research on Islamic ideas along the lines of (pre-)classical disciplinary boundaries.

To summarize our findings, the traditional view making *al-Insān al-Kāmil* the only relevant work of al-Jīlī, the *summa* of his work, is not adequately understanding the textual production of al-Jīlī. Using a rhizomatic approach allows us to overcome the evolutionary view assuming earlier works as less relevant than *the* most important one. Situating (post-)Akbarian writings in the context of post-classical and, esp, post-Avicennian discourses makes us rethink the usual hierarchy placing Ibn Sīnā as a philosopher on top of the hierarchy of disciplines and Sufism and *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a somewhat peripheral set of ideas down below in this hierarchy. A truly post-colonial analysis should discard these hierarchies.

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⁷⁴ Lizzini, “Ibn Sina’s Metaphysics”.

⁷⁵ By ‘school’ we are not referring to the idea of a homogenous ‘school’.

- Anonymous. "al-Sharḥ," in *Sharḥ al-Kaḥf al-Raqīm fī Sharḥ bi'smi-llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, ed. 'Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2013.
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