A Preliminary Outlook on al-Sha'rānī's Defence of Ibn 'Arabī and the Intellectual Milieu during Early Ottoman Egypt

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I. Introduction

1 Background

Many ground-breaking studies on the religiosity of the Mamluk period, which deal with various subjects ranging from theological debates among renowned scholars, the development of Sufi lodges and orders and the spread of a cult of saints in the society, to the close relation between the Mamluk ruling class and the local Sufis, have for the last few decades enriched our understanding of the religious milieux of medieval Egypt and Syria.[1] Yet little has been studied on the situation of Sufism in early Ottoman Egypt. As part of an effort to fill this gap in the scholarship, I will discuss in this article the heretofore unstudied texts of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565) in the hope of providing a preliminary to the study of Sufism and the intellectual climate in general during sixteenth-century Ottoman Egypt.

'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī is mainly recognised as the Shāfi'ī jurist. His writings on the equilibrium of the Sunni schools of law, entitled *al-Kashf al-ghumma* and *al-Mīzān al-kubrā*, were widely read in the later Islamic world.[2] He is also known by modern scholars as an important Sufi of his age whose hagiographies such as *al-Ṭabaqāt* provide valuable accounts of Egyptian scholars, mystics, and ordinary people, filling the gap left by the scarcity of chronicles in the first half of sixteenth-century Egypt.[3] Furthermore, researchers agree that al-Sha'rānī was a major apologist and populariser of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) whose mystical teachings caused a stirring among socially-oriented scholars during the Mamluk period. The number of works that al-Sha'rānī composed to defend Ibn 'Arabī is a testimony to the current view of al-Sha'rānī as an unmistakable advocate of the Great Sufi. However less attention has been so far dedicated to the details of al-Sha'rānī's doctrines as a follower of the school of Ibn 'Arabī, which will be the subject of this study.

There have been several studies that examine the relation between Ibn 'Arabī and al-Sha'rānī. Winter's study greatly contributed to the clarification of al-Sha'rānī's ideas in the context of the Ottoman dynasty. In Winter's view, the fact that the moderate Sufi al-Sha'rānī upheld the extreme teachings of Ibn 'Arabī should be explained from a socio-ideological perspective, rather than from a theological perspective [Winter 1982: 128]. This interpretation

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1 On this point, Homerin provides an overall literature review [Homerin 2013].

2 Two studies vividly elucidated al-Shaʿrānī's jurisprudential views [Pagani 2004; Ibrahim 2013].

3 For more details on historiographical writings of this period, see [Winter 1994; 2001; Weintritt 1998].

is based on the assumptions that Ibn ʿArabī was favored by Ottoman Sultans and was by the sixteenth-century considered to be the symbol of Sufism.[4] From here, Winter judges al-Shaʿrānī merely as an apologist for Ibn ʿArabī without giving a detailed analysis.

Johnson and McGregor shed light on al-Shaʿrānī's idea of saints, trying to situate it within the development of Ibn ʿArabī's sainthood theory. Johnson's dissertation in 1985 was certainly a remarkable attempt to interpret al-Shaʿrānī's idea of saints in relation to that of Ibn ʿArabī. It concludes with a statement that al-Shaʿrānī made some amendments to Ibn ʿArabī's distorted antinomian theory of sainthood by reconciling the sainthood (*walāya*) with the Islamic law, *Sharīʿa*. Johnson bases her argument on a conventional two-tier framework in which al-Shaʿrānī is regarded as a representative of "orthodox" Sufism whereas Ibn ʿArabī embodies "heretic" Sufism. Her assessment in turn was refuted by McGregor in 2005. Surveying al-Shaʿrānī's hitherto unstudied text of *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar*, McGregor illustrates how al-Shaʿrānī faithfully inherited Ibn ʿArabī's key issues on the sainthood theory. Although al-Shaʿrānī substituted some concepts into less problematic terminology, McGregor argues, al-Shaʿrānī should be seen not only as an apologetic defender of Ibn ʿArabī, but also as an exponent and transmitter of his thought [McGregor 2004: 390]. These previous studies certainly lead to a better understanding of al-Shaʿrānī's teachings as following Ibn ʿArabī. Nonetheless, in order to further advance our knowledge about medieval Sufism, it is necessary to analyze one of the most important teachings of Ibn ʿArabī that al-Shaʿrānī inherited from his Shaykh: namely, the cosmology based on the divine self-manifestation (*tajallī*).

Ibn ʿArabī was at the center of polemics in Mamluk Egypt. The "community-oriented *ʿulamāʾ*" such as the Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328) and the Shāfiʿī jurist Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1470) harshly accused Ibn ʿArabī's monistic view for fear of the danger it could bring to the soundness of Muslims' belief [Knysh 1999: 53]. These scholars reproached Ibn ʿArabī for promoting the heretical idea of identifying God with the world, the doctrine known among them as "the oneness of being" (*waḥdat-l-wujūd*). Their condemnation, however, invited the appearance of many, often apologetic, supporters of Ibn ʿArabī. They include al-Shaʿrānī's influential teachers, the Shāfiʿī jurist Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and the Shaykh al-Islām and mystic Zakarīyāʾ al-Anṣārī (d. 959/1520).

Al-Shaʿrānī often refers to the controversy that took place between al-Suyūṭī and the above-mentioned al-Biqāʿī. Al-Biqāʿī declared Ibn ʿArabī an unbeliever due to the latter's heretical notions of *ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *ittiḥād* (unification of God with creatures). In response to al-Biqāʿī's criticism, al-Suyūṭī justified Ibn ʿArabī's teachings by adducing four reasons: first, Ibn ʿArabī's works which contain antinomian statements have been interpolated by his antagonists. Secondly, a mystic's statements should be subjected to a charitable interpretation (*taʾwīl*) without being taken literally and at face value. Thirdly, Ibn ʿArabī's

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4 As for the centrality of Ibn ʿArabī's writings in Ottoman religiosity, see [Masters 2013; 114–119].

problematic utterances might have been articulated in a state of ecstasy, and hence he is not culpable for what he said under such a condition. Lastly, the articulator's intentions could have been different from those apparent at face value, and thus nobody should dare to declare him an unbeliever [al-Suyūṭī 1987].

As has been well noted by Winter, al-Shaʿrānī also defended Ibn ʿArabī by giving these apologetic reasons. Nonetheless, what distinguishes al-Shaʿrānī's defence from that of other apologetic scholars is that he upheld Ibn ʿArabī's teachings from a theological standpoint. One of these cases can be observed in al-Shaʿrānī's justification of the afore-mentioned doctrine of "the divine self-manifestation" (*tajallī*) and his attempt to situate it within the theological debates over God's incomparability (*tanzīh*) and similarity (*tashbīh*). Looking into the details of this theory will lead us to believe, as McGregor insisted, that al-Shaʿrānī was an ardent transmitter of Ibn ʿArabī's thought. It will also provide a very rough sketch of the theological milieu of early Ottoman Egypt, a subject that has been so far disregarded in current scholarship.

In the rest of this first chapter, I shall introduce the texts I am going to look at in the present study. In the following chapter, I will discuss al-Shaʿrānī's cosmology, which is rooted in the doctrine of divine self-manifestation. In the third chapter, the paper will elaborate upon how al-Shaʿrānī responded to the theologians' different approaches to revelation, which helps to clarify where he tried to situate the theory of divine self-manifestation. Based on the arguments of the second and third chapters, in the fourth chapter I will explain al-Shaʿrānī's attempt to justify the divine self-manifestation theory within the context of long-debated theological disputes. The paper will then conclude with propositions for further research.

2 Texts

In order to clarify the cosmological framework of al-Shaʿrānī, I shall mainly examine the hitherto unstudied text of al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya al-mubayyina li-ʿaqāʾid al-firaq al-ʿalīya*, which is one of his recently published writings.[5] The exact date of the composition is not known. Yet, it can be surmised from making reference to his preceding writings, of which the year of composition is clear, that the text was written after 945/1538–1539 at the earliest. This means that it is among the middle or later works of al-Shaʿrānī.[6] His views on Ibn ʿArabī and on Sufism in general do not appear to have changed drastically during his lifetime, for some of the discussions in *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya* are repeated in both his earlier and later texts.[7]

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5 Many of his writings in manuscript form were successively published in the last decade; *Al-Ajwiba al-marḍīya ʿan aʾimma al-fuqahāʾ wa al-ṣūfīya* (2002), *al-Qawāʿid al-kashfīya al-muwaḍḍaḥa li-maʿānī al-ṣifāt al-ilāhīya* (2006), *Mukhtaṣar al-iʿtiqād li-imām al-Bayhaqī* (2006).

6 His first and last works were written in 930/1523–24 (*Kashf al-ghumma*) and 964/1556–57 (*Laṭāʾif al-minan wa-l-akhlāq*), respectively. I do not address in this paper the detailed chronology.

7 Al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-jawāhir* (written in the 940s/1533–1542) and *al-Qawāʿid al-kashfīya* (written in 961/1553–54).

In the introductory remarks of the text in question, al-Shaʿrānī states that the work is based on what he learned by examining the works of various Sufis, such as the Andalusian Abū al-Qāsim Ibn Qasī (d. 546/1151–2), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. ca. 832/1428), and Egyptian Sufi Muḥammad Wafā (d. 765/1363) and his son ʿAlī Wafā (d. 807/1405). It is made up of twenty-three chapters, each of which discusses different theological subjects, including the issue of seeing God (*ruʾyat Allah*), intuitive knowledge of God (*maʿrifa*), applying figurative interpretation to the divine attributes, the process of the divine self-manifestation, the role of the Perfect Man (*insān kāmil*), and finally how to maintain a balance between God's incomparability and similarity. Al-Shaʿrānī writes that the aim of this work is to teach the learned people (*ʿulamāʾ*) how to understand each of the attributes of God mentioned in the Qurʾān and the hadiths in a proper way [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 18]. Nonetheless, in light of his frequent use of the expression "my brother," it is plausible that the text was addressed primarily to the local Sufis who gathered at his lodge (*zāwiya*) where he continued to transmit his knowledge throughout his lifetime.

The significance of *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya* lies in the following points: first, unlike his other Sufi writings such as *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-jawāhir* and *Kibrīt al-aḥmar* which are mostly composed of quotations from Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*, al-Shaʿrānī for the most part elaborates upon his own words in this text. Hence what is written in *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya* is considered to be al-Shaʿrānī's unique opinion. Secondly, it is one of the few texts in which al-Shaʿrānī expounds the doctrines of the divine self-manifestation and the Perfect Man. These theories play an important role among the followers of Ibn ʿArabī, but al-Shaʿrānī's inheritance of them has been disregarded.[8] Furthermore, it is among the few texts in which al-Shaʿrānī vigorously tries to reconcile the two opposing concepts of God's incomparability and similarity.

In this paper, I will further refer to two more unexamined texts of al-Shaʿrānī. One of them is *al-Qawāʿid al-kashfīya al-muwaḍḍaḥa li-maʿānī al-ṣifāt al-ilāhīya*. At the beginning of this work, al-Shaʿrānī observes that there are split positions with regard to how to understand the anthropomorphic attributes of God. The purpose of his composition is then to amend the wrong views that were prevalent among believers and to provide a correct understanding of divine attributes on the basis of Sufi doctrines. Al-Shaʿrānī does not explicitly state to whom the text was dedicated. Yet, from the plainness of the writing style and his constant references to famous, especially Egyptian, mystics, it is conceivable that his primary readership was the uneducated but literate Egyptian Sufis who had certain interests in

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8 The two theories are essential for Ibn ʿArabī's philosophy, for they help to explain the appearance of a plurality of the world from one Being. He developed a mystical cosmology in which the transcendent God manifests Himself to the phenomenal world through several steps. In this worldview, the Perfect Man is given the important role of combining God's transcendence with His immanence in creatures. In short, the Perfect Man functions as an intermediary between the divine world and the sensible world, maintaining the oneness of the cosmos. Ibn ʿArabī's various teachings of theology, ontology and epistemology all developed surrounding these two doctrines. [Landau 1959; Afifi 1979; Izutsu 1984; Chittick, 1989]

theological issues. He reiterates elsewhere in this work that it is impossible to resolve various issues concerning divine attributes without the mystical experience of the unveiling (*kashf*). What could be conjectured from this remark is a sort of disappointment, not to say disdain, on the part of al-Sha'rānī in his contemporary theologians, who appeared hopeless in his eyes to give clear-cut answers to theological questions from the community. I will also look at one of al-Sha'rānī's unpublished works, *al-Mīzān al-nafīsa fī 'ilm al-'aqā'id*, the primary theme of which is to resolve differences among the theologians over divine attributes and descriptions. As a way to achieve this, al-Sha'rānī again resorts to the cosmology that he inherited from Ibn 'Arabī. The author demonstrates that on the basis of the framework of divine self-manifestation there is no need to employ figurative interpretation. This work will also give us some interesting accounts of al-Sha'rānī's attitudes vis-à-vis theologians.

II. The Process of divine self-manifestation

This section discusses al-Sha'rānī's theory of divine self-manifestation, paying attention to how he differed from earlier members of the school of Ibn 'Arabī. Before going into the details, this section first provides a sketch of the background to this idea.

The original meaning of *tajallī* is "to appear, to come to light, to be clear or brilliant." When the term entered Sufism, it came to mean the mystical unveiling, i.e. God's revealing divine knowledge in man's heart.[9] Ibn 'Arabī and his followers combined the notion of God's revealing His knowledge in man's heart with that of God's manifesting or emanating His existence into the world. Thus, the term *tajallī* turned into a philosophical concept essential for their cosmology.

Ibn 'Arabī's major disciple and stepson Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) was the first to elaborate upon the idea of divine self-manifestation into a highly metaphysical doctrine. Al-Qūnawī identifies God with Being or Absolute Reality. He then states that Being is One, and everything other than Being is the result of delimitation and differentiation of Being [Chittick and Peter 1982: 6–10]. On the basis of this idea, al-Qūnawī summarized that all things in the world into belong to five classes, proposing what is known as "the theory of five divine presences," through which Being differentiates itself into every entity. These levels are basically composed of 1. God or Being, 2. the plane of the invisible Spirits where luminous entities of angels or intellects belong, 3. the plane of the Images and Imagination, in which the invisible things in the world of Spirits become corporealized, 4. the plane of the Corporeal Bodies, which is a world of visible and sensible things, and finally, 5. the Perfect Man, who encompasses all these preceding planes [Chittick 1982; Chittick and Peter 1982: 12 –15]. Other members of the School of Ibn 'Arabī more or less advocated the same doctrine

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9 '*tadjallī*,' *EI²*. (E. Geoffroy). In explaining the origin of the term tajallī, Sufis often refer to a passage in the Qur'ān, 7:143, where God appeared to the mountain in front of Moses.

with differences in designations and details.

God's creation of the world was thus philosophized as the process of divine self-differentiation into all entities (*taʿayyun*).[10] The antagonists of Ibn ʿArabī later criticized this idea of God's differentiating Himself into created things as heretical [Knysh 1999: 153–154]. However Chittick points out that the term *taʿayyun* originally assumed no significant meaning in Ibn ʿArabī's writings. It was al-Qūnawī who made the divine self-differentiation a central theme of the school of Ibn ʿArabī [Chittick 1998: 83]. This will explain why al-Shaʿrānī, whose object was to defend, and not to philosophize Ibn ʿArabī's "original" teachings, did not identify the divine self-manifestation with the divine self-differentiation.[11]

Al-Shaʿrānī was careful enough to distance himself from several groups under the influence of Ibn ʿArabī who, in al-Shaʿrānī's perspective, displayed an extreme idea of divine self-manifestation. One of these groups is "the people of the absolute oneness" (*ahl al-waḥda al-muṭlaqa*) [al-Shaʿrānī 2006: 120–121]. The "absolute oneness" was a derogatory expression originally used to denounce the monistic philosophy of Ibn Sabʿīn (d. 668–669/1269–71) of Murcia [McGregor 2004: 123; Chodkiewicz 1982: 37–38]. Yet it came to imply Ibn ʿArabī's philosophy among his antagonists by the end of the Mamluk period [Geoffroy 1995: 471]. Al-Shaʿrānī counted the shaykh of the Wafāʾīya order ʿAlī Wafā among the people of the absolute oneness, in spite of the fact that al-Shaʿrānī had a close relation with this order and gave ʿAlī Wafā the longest entry in *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* [McGregor 2004: 72]. Furthermore al-Shaʿrānī never associated the concept of the oneness of being, which had been an object of criticism throughout the Mamluk period, with Ibn ʿArabī's thought. Accordingly, al-Shaʿrānī did not invoke the teachings of Ibn ʿArabī's major disciples, such as al-Qūnawī, Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. ca. 700/1300–1), Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. ca. 751/1350), and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 730/1329), who contributed to the further development of the concepts of the oneness of being and divine self-differentiation.

It can be surmised from this that al-Shaʿrānī had little interest in the process of philosophizing Ibn ʿArabī, as was done by many of his predecessors. My speculation is that al-Shaʿrānī departed from the main Akbarian stream of elaborating upon the ontology of Being and shifted the emphasis to presenting Ibn ʿArabī's thought in a way that was acceptable to community-minded scholars. As a first step in reflecting on this observation, I shall now turn to al-Shaʿrānī's theory of divine self-manifestation.

Treading in the footsteps of Ibn ʿArabī, al-Shaʿrānī assumed that God's appearance has both hidden/unknown and visible/known aspects. On the one hand, there is God in Himself, or God's very Essence, who is radically different from any beings created; He is absolutely

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10 I took this translation of *taʿayyun* from Izutsu's study [Izutsu 1984].

11 In discussing the process of divine self-manifestation, al-Shaʿrānī also avoids using the term "effusion" (*fayḍ*), which, used by Ibn ʿArabī as well as by his followers, has a highly philosophical connotation.

transcendental and invisible to the world. On the other hand, God makes Himself visible by attributing Himself with various anthropomorphic attributes so that humans can have an understanding of Him; hence there are descriptions centered on God's nearness to humans such as "God seated Himself upon the Throne," "it was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer," "I draw near to him the span of an arm," "God descends to the world's heaven every night," God laughs, and gets satisfied, and becomes angry, and so forth [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 177–179].

Here al-Sha'rānī distinguishes between two levels of God in accordance with His relation to the world: first, God's hidden Essence independent from any created beings and second, God as the subject of humans' worship. They are respectively called 1. God at the level of Absoluteness (*rutbat-l-iṭlāq*) and 2. God at the level of Limitation (*rutbat-l-taqyīd*).[12] And to each divine level corresponds one divine self-manifestation. The first manifestation, which is called "the Absolute manifestation" (*tajallī al-iṭlāq*), occurs at the level of God's Essence. Al-Sha'rānī explains this as God's "manifesting Himself in Himself to Himself" [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 157–158]. According to him, nobody could understand anything about God at this stage except that His incomparability can be hinted at by revelation, as it goes: "there is nothing like unto Him" and "nothing was with Him." God then manifests Himself to the world through the second manifestation of "the Limited manifestation" (*tajallī al-taqyīd*). Al-Sha'rānī calls this "limited," for the absolute God qualifies His incomparability with anthropomorphic attributes in order to make Himself known among creatures. It is through these anthropomorphic attributes which God added to Himself, al-Sha'rānī argues, that one can know and feel closer to God [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 157–161].

Like Ibn 'Arabī, al-Sha'rānī offers certain mystic-linguistic accounts to this process of divine self-manifestation. According to what al-Sha'rānī says, the divine name "Allah," which is the designation given to God's Essence as a result of the first divine self-manifestation, is a synthesizing name that can comprise all the other divine names within it. Just as Ibn 'Arabī and his disciples, al-Sha'rānī distinguishes between two categories of the divine names in accordance with their relation to the world: the ones that exist independently without the world and the others that require the existence of the world by nature of their meanings. They are called respectively the names of incomparability (*tanzīh*) and the names of similarity (*tashbīh*). The names of incomparability, such as the Absolute One (*al-Aḥad*), the Rich (*al-Ghanī*), the Great (*al-'Azīz*), and the Holy (*al-Quddūs*), put God at the level of Absoluteness and express His transcendence from all entities; thus they do not require the existence of creatures as a part of their meanings [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 100].

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12 Following the terminology often used in the school of Ibn 'Arabī, the first level is also called "the presence of the absolute Oneness" (*aḥadīya*), for God at this level is completely disengaged from any trace of plurality, whereas the second level is "the presence of the relative Oneness" (*wāḥidīya*) which, still being a part of the divine Self and remaining invisible to creatures, carries within itself potential plurality in the forms of divine names and attributes [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 157–158; n.d.: fol. 2a–2b].

The other divine names, which are the names of similarity, refer to God at the level of Limitation and describe God in relation to the world. They include the One who rules (*al-Rabb*), the One who bestows mercy (*al-Raḥmān*), the One who provides (*al-Rāziq*), the One who exercises power (*al-Qādir*), the One who creates (*al-Khāliq*), the One who grants benefit (*al-Nāfiʿ*), the One who gives life (*al-Muḥyī*), and so forth [al-Shaʿrānī, 2007: 100]. These names inevitably seek the presence of creatures in order to realize their meanings through them. The name "the One who rules" or "the Lord," for example, necessarily demands the existence of the one who is ruled over, i.e., His servant (*marbūb*), for its meaning "the Lordship" to be properly understood. The same holds true of other divine names of similarity; *al-Raḥmān* seeks the one upon whom mercy is bestowed (*marḥūm*), *al-Rāziq* for the one who is given provision (*marzūq*), *al-Qādir* for the one upon whom power is exercised (*maqdūr*), *al-Khāliq* for the one who is created (*makhlūq*), and the like. Due to this necessity from the side of divine names, al-Shaʿrānī says, the second divine self-manifestation, "the Limited manifestation," takes place. He explains this as "God's manifesting Himself into the rest of divine names" [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 168, 179]. In this way, creatures come to receive existence from God as receptacles of the divine names of similarity.

It does not follow from here that God first lacked the names of similarity and acquired them after the creation, an idea that can suggest imperfection in the divine self. To this, al-Shaʿrānī adds that God had already possessed all the divine names, such as the Lord, even before the creation of His servants. Al-Shaʿrānī bases this view on the notion of "the permanent entities" (*aʿyān thābita*) developed by Ibn ʿArabī [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 161–163]. To put it very briefly, the permanent entities are the archetypes of all existing things that reside in divine knowledge before and after creation. Lying between God's invisible knowledge and the visible created world, they are said to be neither existent nor non-existent [Izutsu 1984:152–192; Takeshita 1982: 243–260; Bashier 2004: 102–106]. They "have not smelt the fragrance of existence" [Akkach 2005: 118]. The servants of the Lord are potentially present with God in the form of permanent entities, and therefore God is always referred to as the Lord or the Creator without the actual appearance of creatures [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 90–91].

It has to be noted that al-Shaʿrānī does not dedicate many pages to explaining the divine self-manifestation theory. Besides, his explanation is often laconic and blunt. He simply states that there are two divine levels, of Absoluteness and of Limitation, and that there are two corresponding self-manifestations. Whereas Ibn ʿArabī and his disciples go on discussing the process of Being's self-differentiation down to the levels of vegetables, mines, and minerals, al-Shaʿrānī does not seem to have shown any interest in this topic. Rather, he carefully avoids quoting from *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya* passages that discuss the divine self-manifestation into the corporeal world.[13] By staying away from the details and remaining silent on some of

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13 The lack of his interest in this subject can be observed from a passage in *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya* where

the problematic ideas proposed by Ibn ʿArabī, al-Shaʿrānī might have hoped to dodge the attacks of Ibn ʿArabī's opponents. After a rather laconic account of divine self-manifestation, al-Shaʿrānī then proposes the justification of this doctrine by situating it within the theological sphere.

III. Disputes over God's incomparability and similarity
1 Overview of the issue

In order to understand the theological climate against which al-Shaʿrānī was voicing his opinions, this chapter first gives a summary of various theological positions over two divine notions of God's incomparability and similarity. It will then illustrate al-Shaʿrānī's views on the Ḥanbalites' literalism and the rational theologians' figurative interpretation, respectively.

Throughout history, Muslim theologians have discussed how to resolve self-contradictory remarks in revelation. Islam declares God's absolute otherness and transcendence from the world, as is stated in "there is nothing like unto Him" [42:11]. In theology this concept of God is called "the assertion of God's incomparability" (*tanzīh*). On the other hand, the Qurʾān and the hadith describe God with various anthropomorphic attributes as if comparing God to humans: "And He is the Hearing and the Seeing" [42:11] and "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" [2:115]. This concept is known as "the assertion of God's similarity" or "the likening of God to His creation" (*tashbīh*). In traditional theology, these two terms of God's incomparability and similarity were considered diametrically opposite and incapable of coexisting in harmony. Muslims were divided according to which of the theological notions they stressed, leading to the emergence of different theological groups. In brief, there were three theological positions regarding this issue.

The first group insisted upon accepting the literal meanings of anthropomorphic attributes, affirming the likening of God to His creation. If the Qurʾān reports, for example, that God has two hands, they believed the verse to be literally true by declaring that God has a corporeal body like humans. They were vehemently criticized by most of the Sunni theologians as *mushabbiha* (anthropomorphists), *ḥashwīya* (scholars of little worth) and mujsassima (corporealists).[14]

The second group, represented by rational thinkers such as the Muʿtazila, adopted a figurative interpretation in order to denounce an anthropomorphic view and to guarantee God's incomparability. For instance, God's hands were interpreted as standing for His power

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al-Shaʿrānī quotes Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*. After writing down several passages from Chapter 352 on "the world of imagination" (*ʿālam al-khayāl)*, al-Shaʿrānī bluntly stops citing the following sentences without any notification. In the part al-Shaʿrānī does not quote, Ibn ʿArabī discusses the idea of God's descent to the world of sensation and sensory things in which God takes up the forms of corporeal bodies and accidents. The similar case of avoiding particular paragraphs or inserting new sentences can also be observed in al-Shaʿrānī's *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-jawāhir*.

14 "Anthropomorphism," *EI³* (L. Holtzman).

or His blessing. Swartz writes in the introduction of his study: "in contrast to a literalistic interpretation of language which assumes that language has only one level of meaning, *viz*., what might be called the surface (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the text, *taʾwīl* insists that language sometimes admits of at least two levels of meaning, the obvious, literal meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) and a tropic or metaphorical sense (*majāz*)" [Swartz 2007: 57–58]. The rational theologians induced a metaphorical meaning, e.g. God's Essence from a literal sense, e.g. God's face. Yet traditional scholars derided the Muʿtazila for divesting God of His attributes (*taʿṭīl*) and making God something void.

Lastly are those who aimed to defend the authority of revelation without applying figurative interpretation, often regarded as taking an intermediary path between these two positions. On the whole, many Ḥanbalite and early Ashʿarite theologians upheld this third path [Abrahamov 1996: 5–6]. They stressed the necessity of believing the sacred text as it is written, but without likening God to His creation. Their attitude is known by the famous formula "*bi-lā kayfa*," i.e., "without asking how," or "without attributing corporeal qualities to God" [Abrahamov 1996: 6]. According to this group, one must believe that God has two hands as the scripture reports, on the condition that God's hands are different from humans' corporeal hands. The nature of divine hands is never known, but a man has to believe in it. This is to read the divine descriptions with the notion that God transcends the world or with the notion of *tanzīh* [Frank 1991: 159, 171; Abrahamov 1995: 365–367; 1996: 1–18; Swartz 2002: 46–64]. Using the statement that Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 179/796) is reported to have said, this formula is concisely described as follows: "God's sitting upon the Throne (*istiwāʾ*) is known (*maʿlūm*), but its modality is unknown (*al-kayf majhūl*). The belief in the *istiwāʾ* is obligatory (*al-imān bi-hi wājib*), and the inquiry about it is an innovation (*al-suʾāl ʿan-hu bidʿa*)" [Abrahamov 1995: 366]. Abrahamov remarks that this method of *bi-lā kayfa* maintains the divine incorporeality against the notion of likening God to His creation and preserves the authority of the scripture against the notion of divesting God of His attributes, and on the other hand attests to man's inability to know the divine essence [Abrahamov 1996: 6]. Although this third position was central to the early Ashʿarite theologians, later Ashʿarite theologians such as al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) and al-Juwaynī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (d. 478/1085) gradually deviated from the *bi lā kayfa* formula and turned to rational faculties. Like the Muʿtazila, they began figuratively interpreting the sacred verses in order to make them harmonious with their reason [Watt 1990: 90–92; Abrahamov 1996: 7].

It was this method of figurative interpretation employed by the Muʿtazila and the late Ashʿarīya to which al-Shaʿrānī opposed. His theological stance then looks similar to that of the Ḥanbalīs. In fact, he curiously defended the Ḥanbalīs from the accusation of anthropomorphism, which I shall mention in the next section.

2 Al-Shaʻrānī's view on the Ḥanbalīs

The Ḥanbalīs on the whole tended to take divine anthropomorphic attributes in a literal/plain sense, by stating that they should be accepted at face value without asking how exactly they apply to God. Although they endorsed the formulation of "without asking how" in order to avoid assimilating God to creatures, the scholars in support of figurative interpretation attacked them for preaching a heretical idea of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh* or *tajsīm*). Already by the fourteenth century, the Shāfiʻī jurist Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), the prominent Ashʻarī theologian who al-Shaʻrānī makes reference to from time to time, condemned Ibn Taymīya's literalist interpretation. Many of al-Shaʻrānī's contemporaries in the sixteenth century, such as the Shāfiʻī jurists Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Ramlī (d. 957/1550) and Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1567), both of whom were important teachers for al-Shaʻrānī, also took an opposing position to Ibn Taymīya. One of al-Shaʻrānī's most famous disciples, the Shāfiʻī jurist and mystic ʻAbd al-Raʼūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621), shared the same view with al-Ramlī and Ibn Ḥajar and criticized Ibn Taymīya's literalist approach [el-Rouayheb 2010b: 281–284].

In contrast to this theological trend of condemning the Ḥanbalīs in Egypt, al-Shaʻrānī interestingly took a rather sympathetic attitude towards them. Observing that the Ḥanbalīs had been falsely charged with corporealism, al-Shaʻrānī argued that the Ḥanbalīs, such as Abū Yaʻlā (d. 458/1066), Abū Muḥammad al-Tamīmī (d. 488/1095), Ibn ʻAqīl (d. 513/1119), and Ibn Taymīya were genuine proponents of the doctrine of God's incomparability (*tanzīh*), and not of anthropomorphism. In order to verify this point, al-Shaʻrānī quoted several words of the Ḥanbalī jurists, especially those of the founder Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥanbal (d. 241/855):

> It is necessary to believe firmly that God is in the heaven and the earth, and that He seated Himself upon the Throne without modality (*bi-lā kayfa*) in a way that is appropriate to God. Therefore we do not figuratively interpret the description, nor explain that with our rational faculties, nor question its modality […] nor divest God of it, nor disprove it, as far as God attributed that description to Himself in the revelation. And all the knowledge about it belongs to God, and we strongly reject corporeality (*tajsīm*) and anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) [al-Shaʻrānī n.d.: 59b].

Like the Ḥanbalīs, al-Shaʻrānī also believed that the rejection of figurative interpretation and the endorsement of the *bi-lā kayfa* formulation were the ways of the early scholars, the salaf, and that the knowledge of the real meaning of anthropomorphic expressions had to be returned to God [al-Shaʻrānī 2007; n.d.: 59b]. Al-Shaʻrānī's position on the divine attributes, however, is not identical to that of the traditional Ḥanbalīs. While taking a favorable stance on this group, al-Shaʻrānī nonetheless regarded them as those who only attested to God's

incomparability without God's similarity, and hence as imperfect.

The same holds true for the early Sufis before Ibn ʿArabī, such as al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), al-Junayd (d. 298/910) and al-Qushayrī (465/1072) [al-Shaʿrānī n.d.: 61b–65b]; in al-Shaʿrānī's view, those early Sufis also attested to God's incomparability without God's similarity, thus failing to affirm the two divine notions at the same time. It was only after Ibn ʿArabī that a path to achieving the state of "seeing God with two eyes" or combining God's incomparability and similarity was finally opened. Al-Shaʿrānī mentions two of his Sufi teachers who attained this ideal level: ʿAlī al-Marṣafī (d. 935/1528-29) and ʿAlī al-Khawwāṣ (d. 939/1532) [al-Shaʿrānī n.d.: 44b, 66b].

With respect to rational theologians, al-Shaʿrānī took a negative attitude towards them. He reiterated that the application of figurative interpretation to the sacred texts does not solve anything and that rather it causes disharmony among them. In the next section, I will examine al-Shaʿrānī's refutation of rational theologians' figurative interpretation in order to further clarify his position vis-à-vis theologians.

3 Al-Shaʿrānī's denial of figurative interpretation

Al-Shaʿrānī blatantly refused applying figurative interpretation to the scripture (ta'wīl) through which literal meanings of revelation are bended in favor of the interpreter's understanding. This position could be easily expected from a follower of Ibn ʿArabī, who also showed little sympathy towards rational theologians' usage of this formula. Recalling that neither prophets nor the salafs interpreted the anthropomorphic attributes, al-Shaʿrānī accused the rational theologians of their lack of perfect faith (kamāl al-īmān); they only trust what their reason accepts, not what God revealed [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 96].

The rational theologians' purpose for resorting to figurative interpretation was to avoid anthropomorphism or likening God to creatures, and to preserve God's incomparability with the world. However, al-Shaʿrānī denounces this formula by proving first that the result of figurative interpretation leads to another anthropomorphism, and that anthropomorphism between God and creatures does not occur in reality. In the following, I shall discuss each of his refutations respectively.

Al-Shaʿrānī first denies figurative interpretation by showing that it only brings about another anthropomorphism. He explains this point using the following verse, that God "seated Himself upon the Throne" (istawā ʿalā al-arsh) [7:54]. Affirming the literal meaning of this verse means anthropomorphism, admitting that God has a corporeal body like humans do. In order to avoid likening God to His creation, the rational theologians figuratively interpreted "God's sitting upon the Throne (istiwā')" as "God's subjugating the world" or "God's taking authority over creatures (istīlā')." According to al-Shaʿrānī, this interpretation derives from the meaning of a piece of poetry istawā Bishr ʿalā al-ʿIrāq ('Bishr subjugated

Iraq').[15] By changing the literal meaning into abstracts, the theologians aim to maintain the incorporeality and the incomparability of God. However, the moment one figuratively interprets seating as "subjugation," he brings about another anthropomorphism. In this regard al-Shaʿrānī recounts:

> Then the following thing became certain for us: God is not similar to the corporeal bodies (*al-ajsām*) and thus He does not become physically settled (*mustaqirr*). Also God is not similar to the meanings (*maʿānī*) and hence His sitting (*istiwāʾu-hu*) does not become the meaning of His subjugation (*istīlāʾ fī-qahr*). If this is the case then we will say: whoever related God to the meanings had already slipped into likening God (*tashbīh*) to temporally originated meanings […] while both of them are temporally originated. […] They only shifted from likening God to one temporally originated being to assimilating God to another temporally originated being [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 95–96].

When figurative interpretation is employed in order to avoid likening God to temporally originated beings, by the very meaning the rational theologians have just drawn, God undergoes another temporal change; the meaning of "God's subjugating the world" itself becomes another temporal thing. In the end one only moves from one anthropomorphism to another as long as he relies on reason.

Al-Shaʿrānī gives another example from the hadith to further illustrate this point: "Our Lord descends to the heaven of the world." The rational theologians assert that the literal meaning of this hadith implies God's physical movement from one place to another. Hence the act of descending (*nuzūl*) has to be figuratively interpreted to mean either the angel's descending or the divine order's descending. Whichever the theologians may choose, argues al-Shaʿrānī, this interpretation after all leads to restricting God's revelation to a particular direction, either of the angel or of the divine order, and this is the very anthropomorphism they were trying to avoid [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 162].

Al-Shaʿrānī next refutes figurative interpretation by demonstrating that anthropomorphism does not actually occur in revelation. Quoting Ibn ʿArabī's text, which is reportedly not extant, al-Shaʿrānī writes that a figurative sense (*majāz*) does not originally exist in Arabic (*kalām al-ʿarab*) and that every expression is employed in a literal sense (*ḥaqīqa*) [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 94]. On this point al-Shaʿrānī adds:

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15 As for the details of this poem, see [Swartz 2002: 153–159]. This is the interpretation mainly adopted by the Muʿtazila. Most Ashʿarite authorities, however, do not accept interpreting *istiwāʾ* as *istīlāʾ* [Frank 1991: 118, n. 22].

> When they said that "someone is a lion," they put it that way in a literal
> sense. This is based on their language in which whoever courageous is
> referred to as a lion. Hence they employed this designation, i.e. a lion, not in
> a figurative sense but in a literal sense (*ḥaqīqatan*) [al-Shaʻrānī 2007: 94].

Generally speaking, a lion literally stands for a kind of wild animal and figuratively means
a courageous person. However, on the basis of the quotation above, "someone is a lion"
literally, not figuratively, means that someone is courageous. Here, a wild lion is not likened
to a courageous person, for both of them point to a different reality. The same thing is said of
the anthropomorphic accounts in the scripture. God's hands or eyes are referred to not in a
figurative sense but in a literal sense. Therefore, al-Shaʻrānī suggests, a man does not need to
interpret revelation in order to induce a hidden metaphorical meaning; such a figurative sense
does not originally exist in Arabic. God's hands or eyes convey divine realities different from
those of creatures, although human beings never know what they really are. Al-Shaʻrānī also
uses a linguistic argument and says:

> If the matter is based on what is quoted above, then you will understand that
> all reports that occur in the Qur'ān and the Sunna where reference to the
> divine hand, eye, side, fingers and so forth is made, none of them requires
> the likening of God to creatures (*tashbīh*). This is because the likening of
> God to creatures occurs only through employing certain expressions such
> as [prepositions] "like" (*mithl*) which means being equal, or "as" (*kāf*)
> of an attribute. The things other than these two expressions are nothing
> but equivocal terms (*alfāẓ ishtirāk*). Hence when the anthropomorphic
> attributes were reported in the Qur'ān and the Sunna, they were attributed
> to each entity (*dhāt*) in accordance with the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of that entity
> [al-Shaʻrānī 2007: 94][16]

The likening of God to creatures requires such prepositions as "like" and "as." Yet the
scripture does not use these prepositions when it describes God with anthropomorphic
expressions, e.g. "God created Adam with His both hands." From here al-Shaʻrānī concludes
that the likening of God to creatures does not occur in the divine revelation. Hands and other
attributes are nothing but equivocal terms that are applicable to both God and His creation.
Even if the same word is used, the reality of God's hands is totally different from the reality
of corporeal hands.

   The same idea holds true of the afore-mentioned Throne verse, in which God is said to

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16 This argument can also be observed in *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*, although al-Shaʻrānī does not mention this.

have "seated Himself upon the Throne." Al-Sha'rānī writes that "seating oneself" (*istawā*) is a common expression that is applicable to various things; but the reality is that each indication of "seating oneself" differs from one another and there is no inferential link between them. Therefore, al-Sha'rānī insists, it is inappropriate to apply the meaning of "Bishr subjugated Iraq" to "God's seating Himself upon the Throne" in the first place [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 96].

Thus, on the basis of al-Sha'rānī's view one does not need figurative interpretation to avoid anthropomorphism. But what is then the reality of God's seating Himself upon the Throne, or the meaning of God's creating Adam with both His hands? Could humans know anything about it? Following the traditionalists' approach, al-Sha'rānī answers in the negative to this question. A man cannot perceive the modality (*kayfīya*) of anthropomorphic accounts. In his view, what is required of Muslims with regard to the anthropomorphic passages is, as the traditionalists argue, to delegate (*sallama*) to God the knowledge of these meanings without figurative interpretation and without questioning their modality, and to believe firmly that they are indeed divine attributes [al-Sha'rānī 2007: 162].[17] As suggested previously, regardless of several similarities between al-Sha'rānī's approach to the scripture and that of traditionalists, there still exists a clear difference between the two, for al-Sha'rānī is unquestionably in line with the school of Ibn 'Arabī, whose mystical teachings traditionalists often find difficult to accept.

In al-Sha'rānī's perspective, neither the Ḥanbalīs nor the Ash'arīs were able to realize the divine self-manifestations at two different levels, thus leading to the long-debated theological disagreements among them. As indicated above, it was not until the appearance of Ibn 'Arabī that the two opposing notions were finally synthesized, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

IV. Synthesis of God's incomparability and similarity
Now I turn to al-Sha'rānī's argument on the reconciliation between God's incomparability and similarity on the basis of divine-self manifestation. He thinks that rational theologians' lapse concerning the understanding of divine attributes converges at the following point: their failure to recognize the reality of divine self-manifestations in which God reveals Himself on two different levels. If they had witnessed this truth, says al-Sha'rānī, they would not have needed figurative interpretation and the theological disagreements could have been removed. In this regard al-Sha'rānī notes:

> Return the words that give God's incomparability to the level of Absoluteness,
> and the words whose appearance gives God's similarity to the level of

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17 It should be noted that al-Sha'rānī does not employ the term *tafwīḍ* (leaving the knowledge to God) in his texts. *Tafwīḍ* is a formulation that Sunni scholars normally associate with the way of the *salaf* in contrast to the *ta'wīl*, which is ascribed to the later scholars of the *khalaf* [el-Rouayheb 2010b: 275–302].

Limitation. Then difference will be removed from you and a contradiction
will disappear from all the divine revelation [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 157].

Apparently, al-Shaʿrānī reads the traditional theological doctrines of God's incomparability
and similarity within the Sufi context of divine-self manifestation [al-Shaʿrānī 2006; 2007;
n.d]. In his view, all the seemingly controversial descriptions of God need to be delegated to
either of the two divine levels; for example, descriptions such as "there is nothing like unto
Him" and "nothing was with Him" should be justly ascribed to the level of Absoluteness,
whereas anthropomorphic attributes such as "God seated Himself upon the Throne" and "it
was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer" should be understood in relation to the level
of Limitation [al-Shaʿrānī 2007: 177].

Since God manifested Himself through two levels of divine self-manifestation, there
are of course two different kinds of divine attributes in revelation. By realizing the truth that
the contradictory passages actually attest to God at two different levels and by classifying
each divine attribute into its corresponding level appropriately, al-Shaʿrānī argues, the long-
debated arguments over God's incomparability and similarity will be resolved harmoniously.
He underscores that it is through none other than the mystic experience of the unveiling or
witnessing (*shuhūd*) that the truth of divine self-manifestation is fully disclosed. In this way,
al-Shaʿrānī bridges theology and Sufism, with the latter helping to solve the problems of the
former. It is clear at this stage that al-Shaʿrānī's approach to the reading of the Qurʾān and
Sunna differs from that of traditionalists, who do not approve of mystic ideas of divine self-
manifestation nor the unveiling as a way to interpret revelation.

This is the mystical reconciliation of God's incomparability and similarity and the
balance that al-Shaʿrānī hoped to maintain between the two notions. Ibn ʿArabī's cosmology
of divine self-manifestation was thus presented as a means to resolve the theological
arguments. Al-Shaʿrānī's ardent efforts to incorporate one of Ibn ʿArabī's most important
doctrines into the field of theology and to present it in an acceptable manner among scholars
and to society at large would have made it easy for the Shaykh's teachings to spread in the
Arab world.

As many researchers have already pointed out, Ibn ʿArabī's mysticism itself was
dedicated to the resolution of this continuing paradox of divine attributes [Chittick 1992: 27–
28; Murata 1992: 51–55; Winter, T. 2008: 6]. Other members of the school of Ibn ʿArabī such
as al-Qāshānī and al-Jīlī also picked up this subject, noting that both God's incomparability
and similarity are essential elements to divine self-manifestation [Izutsu 1984; Lo Polito
2010: 130–137]. In order to assess al-Shaʿrānī's contribution with regard to this argument
more precisely, in the next paragraph I shall take a brief look at what Ibn ʿArabī explicates on
God's incomparability and similarity.

According to Chittick, Ibn ʿArabī undoubtedly approved of God's similarity with creatures, for in accordance with his theory of divine self-manifestation into the world, all things are in some way similar to God. Since each being is a locus of the divine names and attributes, it is a matter of course that a kind of similarity is observed between God and His creation [Chittick 1989: 114]. Yet Ibn ʿArabī also reiterates that the created beings are nothing but reflections of the absolute God. Hence, even if things become similar to God in terms of the divine names and attributes, God's Essence can never be disclosed. From this point of view, the world is not identical to God after all. To put this in Chittick's words, things are "He/not He" [Chittick 1989: 114].

Ibn ʿArabī thinks that the faculty of reason (ʿaql) understands by its nature that God is not comparable with the created beings; it innately knows that "there is nothing like unto Him" [42:11] [Chittick 1989: 165]. However, as Chittick argues, reason only teaches a man "what God is not," attesting half of the truth of the divine reality. In order to realize the other half of the reality, one must attain imagination (khayāl) through the mystical unveiling. This faculty of imagination has the power to grasp "what God is," thus affirming God's similarity to creatures [Chittick 1994: 24].

The idea of imagination plays an essential role in Ibn ʿArabī's philosophy; ontologically, it is defined as an isthmus (barzakh) that stands between the Divine world and the creatures, thus connecting the two worlds. On the process of divine self-manifestation, it is through the faculty of imagination that invisible images of the higher planes, namely entities in God's knowledge, become corporealized before appearing in the sensible world. To witness this truth enables a man to understand that creatures are loci of some sorts of divine names and attributes, which appear as a result of divine self-manifestation [Chittick 1994: 24–27, 69–79; 1998: 331–338; Akkach 1997: 97–113]. To conclude, imagination allows one to affirm that God is similar to created beings, while reason only helps to assert God's incomparability. Based on Chittick's observation, Ibn ʿArabī tries to establish both reason and imagination as essential means to affirm God's incomparability and similarity, which bridges theology and mysticism [Chittick 1989: 184; 1994: 24].

Compared to Ibn ʿArabī's argument on the issue of God's incomparability and similarity, it will be fair to say that al-Shaʿrānī's thought is not as deep and sophisticated as his Shaykh's. Al-Shaʿrānī does not explore the function of imagination nor give a detailed analysis of "He/not He." It is also true that al-Shaʿrānī's central theme more or less overlaps that of Ibn ʿArabī; al-Shaʿrānī aimed to justify Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of divine self-manifestation by situating it in the field of theology, thus also establishing a sort of bridge between theology and mysticism. In view of these considerations, it will be easy to point out al-Shaʿrānī's lack of originality and put him aside as a poor epigone of the Great Sufi.

However, what we should not overlook here is the fact that al-Shaʿrānī chose to

focus on the issue of God's incomparability and similarity from among the wide range of topics proposed by Ibn ʿArabī and that he strove to prove the reconciliation between the two doctrines. The present study has pointed out that al-Shaʿrānī paid little attention to the process of philosophizing Ibn ʿArabī and instead advocated the mystical synthesis of different theological opinions within the framework of divine self-manifestation. What emerges from this observation is a blurred profile of intellectual milieu that al-Shaʿrānī must have been addressing. My speculation is that there were some divisions among the scholars or the community at large in sixteenth-century Egypt, and hence he felt it acutely necessary to provide an alternative view in order to bring harmony to the society.

In regard to the justification of Ibn ʿArabī's thought, it can be concluded that al-Shaʿrānī evidently shifted the emphasis from the controversial philosophical cosmology, in which God stands as the sole Being and the ephemeral world appears merely as a result of His reflection, to a more conciliatory reading of the divine self-manifestation in which mystical cosmology harmoniously conflates theological positions. Whether that change of emphasis made by al-Shaʿrānī induced a new current for interpreting Ibn ʿArabī still remains to be seen. Nevertheless, there is an interesting case that suggests that al-Shaʿrānī's work I have mainly examined in this paper had some influence on later Egyptian scholars. In a study that illustrates the emergence of "Sufi-asters" in Ottoman Egypt, el-Rouayheb refers to the Egyptian scholar ʿUmar al-Fāriskūrī (d. 1610). According to el-Rouayheb, this scholar reportedly refuted al-Shaʿrānī's *al-Mīzān al-dharrīya* as heretical, for it preaches the unification of God with creatures [el-Rouayheb 2010a: 364–367]. This is a surprising statement especially because al-Shaʿrānī is considered to be the law-abiding moderate Sufi within modern scholarship. At any rate, this example of al-Fārisukūrī can be regarded as an implicit testimony that certain scholars were aware of the influence and impact that al-Shaʿrānī's mystical teachings had upon the society of Ottoman Egypt.

V. Conclusion

In what has preceded, preliminary notwithstanding, I have discussed how al-Shaʿrānī attempted to justify Ibn ʿArabī's thought by proposing the theory of divine self-manifestation as a solution to the theological controversies over God's incomparability and similarity.[18] Unquestionably, al-Shaʿrānī was no less a mere apologist for Ibn ʿArabī than an ardent defender of his Shaykh. There is also no doubt that in developing his arguments, al-Shaʿrānī had in mind not only the presence of Ibn ʿArabī's antagonists but also rational theologians who were endorsing figurative interpretation. It seems that al-Shaʿrānī took the middle path between traditional *bi-lā kayfa* formula and figurative interpretation. Just as al-Ashʿarī and

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18 In one of his most famous and certainly less studied texts *al-Yawāqīt wa-l-jawāhir*, al-Shaʿrānī justifies Ibn ʿArabī's thought from other theological perspectives, which my research will analyze in the future.

Ibn Taymīya went in the middle of two extremes in their own context [el Omrai 2010: 101–116], al-Shaʿrānī chose his own middle way as a follower of Ibn ʿArabī in order to override school divisions of early Ottoman Egypt.

Many questions still remain to be answered: who was al-Shaʿrānī's main readership? Were they the learned elite groups, or the illiterate Sufis who happened to stay at his lodge? Could they be "the non-(scholarly) elite" (as Bori calls them) who, without having received an academic training in theology, still showed an interest in theological issues in order to be good Muslims [Bori 2013: 68]? If so, is it feasible to question the possible link between theology and the lives of ordinary people? Furthermore, did any major changes happen to the field of theology, as well as Sufism, under the reign of the Ottoman dynasty that may have led al-Shaʿrānī to write the series of hagiographies to establish the authority of Egyptian saints, Sufi-etiquette books to discipline both Sufi shaykhs and novices, and books to defend Ibn ʿArabī within the context of theology? Did al-Shaʿrānī's works play any significant role in the rehabilitation of Egypt after its being devastated by the new empire? What was the reception of his teachings?

Further research is needed in determining the extent to which al-Shaʿrānī's idea could change the present outlook of Sufism during early Ottoman Egypt, a transitional and fluid era that is among the least explored by current scholarship. On a larger scale, it will also lead to fascinating glimpses into the intellectual milieu of this period, which has long been regarded as stagnant. Identification and close observation of the primary sources should open up a new window to the broader understanding of the post-Ibn ʿArabī period.

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