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Exploring Literature in Islam Beyond (Secularized) Christian Normativity in Western Academia

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Abstract: Anyone specialising in Islamic theology at a Western university is aware of the fact that their teaching and research will either be recognised by the institution as falling under the category of "Islamic Studies" or "Divinity". In the first case, Islam is predominantly considered a cultural phenomenon and studied as such. In the second case, for reasons that have to do with what Marianne Moyaert in her latest book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* has conceptualised as "Christian normativity" and the "religionisation" of other faiths, Islamic theology is de facto understood as Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*). In both cases, the understanding of how Islam theorises and practices theology is significantly restricted, when not altogether ignored. This article unpacks the genealogy of the secular version of a Christian epistemic framework that dominates the study of Islamic theology in the West and engages with the issues related to its application in the field of Islamic theology. In doing so, it opens a critical space for the investigation of Islamic literary productions as both dissensual and consensual theological terrains, through the analysis of the poetry of two theologians and polymathic scholars from two different periods of Islamic history, namely Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) and Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb (d. 1390/1971).

Keywords: Islamic theology; Islamic poetic; hermeneutic; Islamic epistemology; *kalām*; patterns of religionisation; dereligionising the study of Islam; Marianne Moyaert; Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235); Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb (d. 1390/1971)

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1. The Need to De-Religionise Islamic Theology and Re-Theologise Islamic Literature

Anyone specialising in Islamic theology at a Western university is aware of the fact that their teaching and research will either be recognised by the institution as falling under the category of "Islamic Studies" or "Divinity". In the first case, Islam is predominantly considered a cultural phenomenon and studied as such. In the second case, for reasons that have to do with what Marianne Moyaert in her latest book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* has conceptualised as "Christian normativity" and the "religionisation" of other faiths, Islamic theology is de facto understood as Islamic *speculative* theology (*kalām*). In both cases, the understanding of how Islam theorises and practices theology is significantly restricted, when not altogether ignored.

In Islam, the science of *kalām* covers dogmatics, speculative theology, and polemics and is indeed what comes closest to Christian theology as studied in Divinity Faculties. It has thus been the science that orientalists have solely focused on when studying Islamic theology. However, any scholar taking an emic approach to Islamic epistemology would confirm that *kalām* was never meant to be the sole representative of Islamic theology, that the *mutakallimūn* have never claimed monopoly over theological discourse, and that in fact many theological reflections and positions have been developed outside *kalām*. Being outside the discipline does not mean in opposition to it, nor of course in ignorance of it, or complete independence from it, but rather in complement to it, in cross-pollination and co-construction striving towards a theological language that would be articulated on various levels, from the syllogistic to the experiential.

In this regard, the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Islamic Theology* Tim Winter acknowledged that "many issues which most readers will recognise as theological were treated by Muslim civilisation in a wide range of disciplines" and that "by limiting themselves to the disciplinary boundaries imposed by medieval Muslims themselves, Western treatments of Islamic theology have often neglected the wealth of properly theological discussions appearing outside *kalām* in the civilisation's literature" (Winter 2008, pp. 2, 4). Despite this recognition and William Chittick's broad definition in the same volume of theology in Islam as "God talk through all its forms" (Chittick 2008, p. 221), the chapters included focused on works of *kalām*, *akhlāq* (ethics) and *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), with no serious analyses of works of imagination.

In the same vein, the general editors of the Islamic section for the St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology launched in 2023 recognise the full breadth of Islamic theology by including other disciplines, for instance *falsafa* (philosophy), *taṣawwuf* (mysticism), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence).[1] By broadening the scope of theological enquiries to other Islamic disciplines of learning, the project also makes room, by default, for the inclusion of literature and the arts. However, at this stage, the theological analysis of Islamic literature may be described, at best, as a work in progress.

To be sure, the field has been significantly developed by scholars who have published ground-breaking articles and monographs on mystical poet-scholars of Islam and on the relation between mysticism and the arts. For instance, the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Islamic spirituality and mystical traditions in relation with the arts comes to mind, as well as that of Carl Ernst on al-Ḥallāj's poetry, Leonard Lewisohn's and Franklin Lewis's work on Persian mystical poetry, Thomas Emil Homerin's translation of Qayṣarī's commentary on the *Qaṣīda al-mīmīya al-khamrīya* and his translation and verse-by-verse commentary of *Naẓm al-sulūk* (Poem of the Sufi Way) by Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Lourdes María Alvarez's edition and translation of works by the prominent Andalusian Sufi mystic and poet Abū al-Hasan al-Shushtarī, William Chittick's work on Rūmī or Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī, and more recently, Joseph E. B. Lumbard's study of Aḥmad al-Ghazali's poetry and "the metaphysics of love", Kazuyo Murata's study of Rūzbihān Baqlī, Cyrus Ali Zargar's extensive work on Sufi aesthetics, ethics, and mysticism, and Arjun Nair's work on the commentaries of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's and Ḥāfīz's poetry. Scholars of the works of Ibn 'Arabī in English, such as James Morris, Stefan Sperl, Stephen Hirtenstein, Michael Sells, Claude Addas, and Denis McAuley, have also been working at the intersection between metaphysics, aesthetics, and mysticism. Victoria Holbrook's work on Şeyh Galip and other Ottoman poets, Mahmud Erol Kilic's work on Ottoman Sufi poetry and poetics, Frances Pritchett and Shamur Rahman Faruqi's work on Ghalib and Urdu poetry, Attas' work on the sixteenth-century Sumatran Sufi writer Hamza Fansuri, and Oludamini Ogunnaike's work on Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's poetry and other West African *madīḥ nabawī* poets are all pivotal contributions in the development of this field of research.

However, these contributions tend to focus on individual poet-scholars and do not address the question of the inclusion of theology *in literature* and the capacity of literature to generate theology in Islam on a more systematic level. Furthermore, an exploration into Islamic spirituality by way of literature cannot be considered equivalent to an exploration of the theology of that literature at large. Mysticism and theology are not equivalent, and treating them as synonymous amounts to a confusion between genus and species. Indeed, while mysticism may be considered a branch (species) of theology (genus), the opposite cannot be true. Therefore, when scholars discuss the mystical poetry of so and so, they are not engaging with the full remit of "God-talk" as Chittick presented Islamic theology, but with a branch of it, just as speculative theology (*kalām*) would constitute another branch.

While commanding and building on the scholarship referenced above, while in fact acknowledging that my work would never have been possible without their publications, I would still caution against using the word "mystical" and this article is in part explaining why we should prefer "theological". There may be a strategic element in choosing the term "mystical" literature in a Western secular academic environment, making Islamic literature more palatable perhaps to a secular and "non-committed" readership, but this preference comes at the price of diluting the theological foundations inhering in Islamic poetic.

Therefore, my article aims to investigate the structural and historical resistance to the re-integration of (Islamic) literature in theological studies at Western universities, and to question the resulting institutional separation between "mystical" Islam and Islamic theology "proper".[2] Instead, I propose to unpack the ways in which the poet-scholars of Islam and their commentators would conceive of the fundamental epistemic articulations between the experiential and the speculative. With this article, my intention is to provide a theoretical intervention, based on late developments in the field of critical/decolonial comparative religious studies, and in particular the work of Moyaert, to help rethink the frames used in the study of Islamic theology in Western academia.

From an Islamic perspective, the unpairing of literature from the pursuit of the knowledge of God as supported in theology on the one hand and the reduction of theological discourse to speculation on the other hand are perplexing and problematic moves. To be sure, Muslim scholars from the classical period onward have devised systems to ensure a coherent classification of the sciences and provided definitions for each science under the "ten principles" (*al-mabādi' al-ʿashara*) template.[3] According to this template, the sciences are given their own separate set of questions and topics, methodologies, objectives, corpuses, and so forth.[4] Therefore, it should be clear from the outset that for Muslim scholars, the science of speculative theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) is not the science of Sufism (*'ilm al-taṣawwuf*) and is not the science of literature (*'ilm al-adab*[5]). However, distinction does not imply dis-association, and the *mutakallimūn*, the Sufis, and *udabā'* (men and women of letters) do not assume that their respective sciences have the upper-hand in representing theology in its entirety, given precisely that God-talk cannot be encompassed by any human being or discipline.

In addition, writers of Islamic poetry and imaginative prose were, in their vast majority, theologians and polymathic scholars. They would teach in *madrasa*-s, at their home, and in *zawīya*-s, so that each space would have its preferred sciences associated with it and its own modes of acquisition, while being connected with the other places of learning about God and about creation. Literature, and poetry in particular, has been unremittingly used by *mutakallimūn* to convey and engage with dogmatic and theological truths, especially when directed to non-specialist circles and to articulate encounters with the Divine and modes of knowing God, which cannot be captured in syllogisms. Engaging with the imaginary has thus never been conceived of in oppositional or disjunctive terms from engaging with dogmatic knowledge. Even when the poetic output of the scholars–visionaries were deemed border-line to consensual theology, a plethora of commentators would run to their defence and expose the ways in which their verses could be reintegrated into dogmatic theology. This has been the case for the dissensual wine-poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ who is the focus of one part of this article. Rather, just as the heart is presented in traditional Islamic psychology as the locus of knowledge, supplementing the limited rational capacities of human beings, so too does the imaginary complement the speculative to attain Truth and form the *insān kāmil* (perfected human being).

The issue arises when Islamic theology is studied in non-Islamic or secular contexts, where the unpairing between theology and literature has become a case of epistemic dis-association. The causes for such a dissociative unpairing in the West are related to historical developments and in particular the advent of secular modernity and the development of the doctrine of positivism in Western scientific discourse since the nineteenth century. In this context, the avowed goal of positivist thinking has been to "free" science from "subjective" interference in order to produce "objective" knowledge. According to positivist ideology, only a limited number of disciplines would be deemed free of subjective interferences and worthy of scientific engagement. The realm of the aesthetic was reserved for the expression of subjectivity and severed from other scientific discourses. Such epistemic partitions, as well as the relegation of faith to the domain of the subjective and personal, are fundamentally foreign to the Islamic episteme. One of the lingering effects of the implementation of the positivist and secular framework on the study of Islam has been to limit the study of Islamic theology in the Global North context to dogmatics and speculative theology (*kalām*) and of removing Islamic literature from the corpus of primary sources to be taught in theology courses.

These remarks should in no way be interpreted as undermining the inclusion of Islamic "theology" within larger Divinity Departments or Faculties in the West. On the contrary, the inclusion of a theological version of Islam (as differing from "anthropological", "historical", or "political" versions) proves crucial in diversifying the representation of Islam in the West and in recognising its intellectual and spiritual contributions. However, because the institutional frame, namely the modern secular Western university, is exogenic to the tradition, this inclusion comes with a series of challenges. How can the Islamic tradition express itself when the language provided—the concepts, tools, and methodologies used in research and teaching—is borrowed from another tradition, as opposed to being organically developed? And how can the Islamic tradition express itself when the institution fails to acknowledge the effect of the structure on the scientific content produced? Thus, while recognising the benefit of Islamic studies being taught at Western universities, it is crucial to critically engage with the frame offered and scrutinise its impact on how Islam is conceived of and on what it is allowed to say (Andersson 2024).

For instance, calling Islam a "religion" is already producing a form of discourse, which is exogenic to it. As early as 1986, Talal Asad was proposing to replace the word "religion" with "discursive tradition" to avoid Christian back–projections (Asad [1986] 2009, p. 130; Asad 2015, pp. 166–214; I. Ahmad 2015, pp. 259–79; with Anjum 2018, pp. 55–90).[6] According to Asad, a discursive tradition makes room for a diverse and evolving set of discourses and practices. While recognising the authority of foundational texts, such as the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, it also makes room for non-scriptural and non-articulated traditions, such as acts of worship or imitation of the Sunna. This framework of a shared articulated and non-articulated discursive tradition constitutes the space from where debates and diversity of opinions in Islam have occurred. In a similar move, the contemporary Muslim theologian and philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas states in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Al-Attas 1995) that "[t]he concept couched in the term *dīn*, which is generally understood to mean *religion*, is not the same as the concept *religion* as interpreted and understood throughout Western religious history" (Al-Attas 1995, p. 41) and then expounds on the four primary significations of Islam as *dīn*, namely indebtedness, submissiveness, judicious power, and natural inclination (Al-Attas 1995, pp. 42–60).

At this juncture, Moyaert's work enables us to unpack the epistemic consequences of the (secularised) Christian normative—what Moyaert calls "patterns of religionization" (Moyaert 2024, p. 1)—on the study of Islamic theology. Her own intervention in the fields of comparative theology and interreligious hermeneutics was born out of a discomfort with the ways in which the study of other faiths has been conducted at Western universities, namely how Christian scholars are effectively setting the agenda, producing theologies of religious "others", and ultimately Christianising (what she also calls "religionising") other traditions (Moyaert 2014a, p. 68; 2024, pp. 67–71, 309). Drawing from Cuthbertson (2018), Dreßler (2019), Nye (2019), and Thatamanil (2020), Moyaert offers a genealogy of what she conceptualises as "patterns of religionization" to refer to co-dependent profoundly political processes of "selfing" and "othering" that are predicated on religious difference (Moyaert 2024, p. 1). She underlines that one must ask who the cultural agents in the process of religionization are and who is empowered to label what counts as religion or not.

Instead of being attentive to the ways in which others represent their own faiths and to the questions that are relevant and important to them, the theology of religions has, according to Moyaert, instrumentalised other traditions in order to generate further intra-Christian dialogues and debates (Moyaert 2013, p. 81). According to her, the aim of the theologians of religions has never been inter-religious discussions, where Christianity is put in a position of vulnerability and allows itself to be touched and changed in the encounter (Moyaert 2011, 2014b), but rather to force other traditions to contribute into discussions that did not concern or benefit them in the first place.

The field of comparative theology was developed in this context, as an attempt to push against what she calls the *Hinein-interpretierung* of other traditions, namely the projection of one own's biases and frameworks (*hinein*) on the study of other faiths (Moyaert 2019, p. 25; 2024, pp. 8, 261). Instead, comparative religion should engage in deep learning *across* (as opposed to just *about*) other traditions, pay attention to the theological complexity of other faiths, and encourage hermeneutical openness (Moyaert 2016, pp. 3, 20, 240 n°1). Putting theory—in this case hermeneutical openness—into practice, Moyaert called into question the assumption that human beings only theologise in texts and proposed to focus instead on rituals as spaces of theologisation and of the enactment of inter-religious theology (Moyaert 2016, pp. 1–18; 2018; 2019).

Inspired by the revisionist works of scholars in comparative theology, such as Moyaert, but also Francis X. Clooney (2010); Clooney and von Stosch (2018), and Catherine Cornille (2013, 2021), as well as by the critical and seminal interventions of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Talal Asad, Shahab Ahmed (S. Ahmed 2015), and Wael Hallaq (2018, 2019),[7] I examine, in the course of this article, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's (d. 632/1235) and Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb's (d. 1390/1971) *dīwān-s* in an attempt to read their poetry as theology and to investigate what a "de-religionisation" of Islamic theology would look like.

2. Intervening in Speculative Theology and Theological Debates: The *Dīwān* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ

Ibn al-Fāriḍ is primarily remembered in the West as a Sufi poet, at the expense of his scholarly career. Before being a poet, Ibn al-Fāriḍ received a full education in the traditional sciences. In particular, he was a student of Shāfiʿī *fiqh* and of *ḥadīth* with al-Qāsim Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 527/1203), a Damascene traditionist of high reputation. He went on pilgrimage to Mecca and stayed to study there for several years and eventually returned to Cairo, where he became a respected scholar and teacher of *ḥadīth* sciences at al-Azhar. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's progress along the mystic path as a Sufi master and divinely inspired poet was retraced by his grandson ʿAlī (fl. 735/1334), who composed the *Dībāja* or *Adorned Proem* on the life of his grandfather. This biography was added in the introduction to the definitive collection of his grandfather's verses that ʿAlī had also prepared, namely the *Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*. Thomas Emil Homerin argued that this account of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as a saint and inspired oracle, so popular in the later Sufi tradition, has obscured the literary dimensions of his poetry (Homerin 1994, p. 96; 2001, pp. 295–97).

Complementing Homerin's translation and study of the carefully crafted and polished nature of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry (Homerin 2011), as well as challenging his restrictive interpretation of its Sufi reception, I argue that both conceptions of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as "inspired oracle" as "gifted poet" occlude a fundamental aspect of his *Dīwān*, namely that it was read by the poet, his contemporaries, and later Muslim theologians, *as theology*, in other words as a space to search for God through Beauty,[8] to translate the attributes of the Divine into human language, and to articulate mystic encounters.

The *Dīwān* is composed of love poems (*ghazal*), odes (*qaṣīda*), and quatrains and riddles. All the poems evoke religious themes, with two explicitly mystical odes, namely *al-Khamriyya* (Wine ode) and *Naẓm al-sulūk* (trans. *The Poem of the Way* by A. J. Arberry, 1952), which focus on the Sufi practice of remembering God through litanies (*dhikr*) and the intoxicating effects of *dhikr* leading to mystical union. As such, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry became, for some scholars, theologically controversial. It must be underlined that the controversy around his poems, which took place in 874/1469 Cairo, was not triggered by his comparison of *dhikr* to wine and his praise of "intoxicants", which are prohibited in the Qur'ān. Needless to say, Muslim scholars were aware of the difference between a literal (*ḥarfī*) and a metaphorical (*majāzī*) reading of a poem. Rather, the issues—at least the explicit ones for which we possess archival documentation—were theological.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetic oeuvre became controversial not during his lifetime, but later, starting towards the end of the thirteenth century, when commentaries of his poems were circulating and reaching into the late fifteenth century, with the involvement of the scholar and polemicist Ibrāhīm b. ʿUmar b. Ḥasan al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480). The latter composed several lengthy pamphlets aimed primarily at Ibn al-Fāriḍ.[9] Al-Biqāʿī's concerns were traces of monistic theology in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry and the poet's inappropriate descriptions of God as "beloved" and the love of God as an intoxicant (Homerin 1994, pp. 143–44; Knysh 1999, pp. 209–22; Guo 2001, pp. 121–48). In fact, this interpretation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, in particular *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā*, in monistic terms was largely the result of the works of its later commentators, such as Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300), Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. c. 730/1330), and Dāʾūd Ibn-Maḥmūd al- Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), who were all scholars and mystics of Islam, as well as proponents of the Wujūdī school[10] (Homerin 1994, pp. 28–32). As Homerin writes:

> Clearly, then, these commentators are crucial to an understanding of Ibn Ibn al-Fāriḍ's postmortem metamorphosis. Their conviction that Ibn Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verse was a personal account of monistic religious experiences led to his portrayal as a great mystic of the Ibn al-ʿArabī school, and this interpretation of him was a vital link between the earliest biographies of Ibn al-Fāriḍ the poet and later accounts of Ibn al-Fāriḍ the saint. (Homerin 1994, pp. 29–30)

These commentaries were instrumental in feeding suspicions around the doctrinal acceptability of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's oeuvre. Based on them, leading scholars from the late thirteenth century onwards opposed Ibn al-Fāriḍ for circulating belief in divine incarnation in creation (*ḥulūl*), mystical union with the divine (*ittiḥād*), or monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which, they asserted, undermined the absolute distinction between Creator and creation. The tension around Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā* is palpable, for instance, in the commentary that ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) wrote in defence of the poet at the time of the controversy ignited in Cairo around 1288 by the Shāfiʿī judge Ibn Bint al-Aʿazz (d. 695/1296), proving the genuine quality of his mystical experiences and the soundness of his religious beliefs (Homerin 1994, p. 30). Later opponents of the *waḥdat al-wujūd*, misinterpreted as a crude form of pantheism and incarnationism, doctrine found in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā* included the Ḥanbalī jurist Aḥmad Ibn Ḥamdān (d. 695/1296), the noted grammarian Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344), and the Ḥanbalī legal scholar and theologian Ibn Taymīyah (d. 728/1328).

Homerin was able to trace continuations of the theological controversy surrounding Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetic oeuvre in the scholarly circles of late fifteenth-century Cairo (Homerin 1994, pp. 60–75). The dispute was sparked by a public reading of al-Farghānī's commentary on *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā*, reminding us of the fundamental role of poetry in the oral transmission of knowledge, including elements of the creed and their scriptural, as well as rational evidence. The historical record that we have for this controversy is the vehement condemnations issued in the form of legal opinions (*fatāwa*) by leading jurists in Cairo, such as the chief Ḥanafī judge, Ibn al-Shiḥnah (d. 890/1485), his son ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 921/1515), the chief Ḥanbalī judge, ascetic, and Sufi, ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Kinānī (d. 876/1471), and the Shafiʿī jurisprudent and hadīth scholar Ibn Imām al-Kāmilīya (d. 874/1469), and also the biography of Muhammad al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), and the tract *Ṣawāb al-jawāb* written by the most acerbic of Ibn al-Farid's critics, al-Biqāʿī, introduced earlier. The full controversy is detailed by Homerin in *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint* (Homerin 1994, pp. 62–73) and *ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* (Homerin 2001, pp. 243–47) and I shall not repeat what Homerin has already exposed. Suffice it to say that in the end, the controversy turned in favour of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, who was exonerated from all charges of heresy, while many of his opponents were publicly disgraced by the sultan Qāʾit Bāy (r. 872-901/1468-96).

I am more interested, at this stage, in thinking about the ways in which we read this controversy today and in particular the interlocking between literature and theology played-out in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry. Indeed, (Homerin 2016)'s emphasis on the fact that the outcome of these controversies further elevated Ibn al-Fāriḍ's saintly reputation lends itself to the too facile reading of the disputes as stories of public defamation opposing the conservative camp of al-Biqāʿī to the progressive camp of Ibn al-Farīḍ. Sadly, the tired dichotomy of "conservative" versus "progressive" or "moderate" Islam has obfuscated the serious theological contentions that inhere in Ibn al-Farīḍ's *al-Tāʾīya al-kubrā* and in the interpretations of his commentators.

Al-Biqāʿī was not just any narrow-minded public figure in fifteenth-century Mamluk Cairo. He was a remarkable polymath, expert in Qurʾān commentary, Shāfiʿī jurisprudence, theology, *ḥadīth* criticism, biography, history, mathematics, and poetry (Saleh 2010). He had received his education in Damascus, where he studied with Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448), in Jerusalem, Alexandria, and in Cairo, where he became a favourite student of the highly regarded *ḥadīth* scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), a classmate of al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1492), and a colleague of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). Al-Biqāʿī's education centred on the sciences of the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, grammar, poetry, arithmetic, logic, and theology. He was, as Walid Saleh noted, a gifted poet and a friend of the poets of his age, a book collector, and an avid reader of literary anthologies as evidenced in the contents of his private library.

He was appointed official reader of the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* for the Mamlūk sultans and Qurʾān commentator in the Ẓāhir mosque in Cairo. After a first complete cycle of Qurʾānic interpretation, which lasted twenty years, he decided at the beginning of his second reading cycle in 860/1456 to write a Qurʾān commentary based, as Saleh explains, on the science of *munāsabāt* (proportionality), by which al-Biqāʿī meant "the causal connection between successive verses in the *sūra*, whereby each verse builds on the previous verse and anticipates the subsequent verse, thus achieving the overall aim of the *sūra*" (Saleh 2010). This massive Qurʾān commentary of 22 volumes titled *Naẓm al-durar fi tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar* occupied most of the last twenty-three years of al-Biqāʿī's life, secured his reputation, and is a major contribution to the discipline of *ʿilm al-tafsīr*.

Al-Biqāʿī was a theologian and scholar of Islam with no particular animosity towards poets or distaste for poetry. Quite the opposite. He was himself a poet and a reader of poetry and had befriended most of the poets of his time. In fact, al-Biqāʿī's reaction to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry is best understood by taking into account his reputation as a passionate polemicist and unyielding scholar, as well as the hermeneutical status imparted to poetry. If poetry held no theological stake, then al-Biqāʿī would not have bothered to attack his opponent through this corpus in particular.

To be sure, it is perfectly fine to read the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ in non-religious terms and outside the Islamic episteme. The issue lies in its becoming hegemonic to the point of occluding other modes of reading and therefore treating them as non-existent or irrelevant. Thus, even though Ibn al-Fāriḍ and his opponents were operating from within a theological framework, the theological issues they raise or theological points they make are overlooked.

An emic interpretation would necessitate first a recontextualisation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry in the context of the "popularisation" of Shādhilī Sufism in fourteenth-century Egypt (Hofer 2015). Given that poetry was the preferred mode of writing to reach a popular or broad audience, as opposed to a more specialist one composed of *mutakallimūn* for instance, the fact that Ibn al-Fāriḍ expressed theological views in poetry had a definitive political and social impact. Similarly, the methodology and function of the discipline of polemics has to be taken into consideration in order to grasp al-Biqāʿī's contentions. Finally, a significant grasp of Islamic theology is required in order to unpack the theological points present in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry and in al-Biqāʿī's response.

During his lifetime, al-Biqāʿī was involved into three major controversies. The first one, centring on the status of the Bible in Islam and the legality of using the Bible as a source to interpret the Qurʾān, was studied by Walid A. Saleh (2007, 2008a, 2008b), and the third one, commented on by Eric L. Ormsby, dealt with theodicy and al-Biqāʿī's opposition to al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) formulation regarding God's grace (Ormsby 1984). The second one, studied by Homerin, is concerned with Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), monistic theology, the notions of *ḥulūl* (incarnation), and *ittiḥād* (unification) (Homerin 1994, pp. 55–75; Knysh 1999, pp. 209–23).

As Khaled El-Rouayheb explained in *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*, more specifically in his chapter on "The Spread of Mystical Monism", the term *taḥqīq* (verification) in Sufi terminology was first embraced to attest a mystical/experiential authentication of the truth of divine presence, complementing a propositional/rational type of verification about the existence of God (El-Rouayheb 2015, pp. 235–71, esp. 235–36). Even though it was very clear at the beginning that "the unity is experiential, not ontological", the experiential form of *taḥqīq* later developed into the theological concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence).[11] The concept itself underwent an epistemic shift in support of monistic ontology, namely the belief that God *is* existence and that existence *is* one and divine, starting in the seventeenth century with Aḥmad al-Qushāshī (d. 1661), Ibrāhīm Kūrānī (d. 1690), Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Rasū'ī Barzinjī (d. 1691), and Qāsim al-Khānī (d. 1697) and continuing in the eighteenth century with ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731) and Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī (d. 1749) (El-Rouayheb 2015, p. 236). However, as El-Rouayheb argues, "[t]he most prominent fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Arab mystics [. . .] were much more cautious about embracing ontological monism" and this development was "largely linked to the spread in the Arab East of Sufi orders such as the Khalwatiyya from Anatolia and the Shaṭṭāriyya and Naqshbandiyya from India" in the seventeenth century (El-Rouayheb 2015, p. 236).

El-Rouhayeb's study of the sixteenth-century theological treatises by Sufi theologians Shar'anī (d. 1565) and Ibn Maymūn al-Maghribī (d. 1511) clearly shows that both admired and engaged with Ibn 'Arabi's works while at the same time avoiding or resisting ontological monism (El-Rouayheb 2015, pp. 238–40). This is also the case with Ibn Maymūn's disciple ʿAlwān al-Hamawī (d. 1530) and in Egypt with Zakariyya al-Anṣārī (d. 1519), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), and with the theologian and poet Muḥammad b. Abī l-Ḥasan al-Bakrī (d. 994/1586). They all confirmed Sufi terminology and the role of experiential knowledge but were also extremely careful to avoid the confusion between *al-waḥda al-wujūd* as experiential reality and *al-waḥda al-muṭlaqa* (absolute unity, or ontological monism).

In a short treatise entitled *Taʾbīd al-minna fī taʾyīd al-sunna*, al-Bakrī quoted and endorsed the position of al-Taftāzānī in distinguishing between two Sufi positions. In the first, which al-Taftāzānī had sympathy for, the advanced mystic is overwhelmed by the direct experience of God to such a degree that their consciousness of other things fades away. In the second, which al-Taftāzānī denounced as contrary to Islamic faith, God is made identical to the concept of absolute unity (*al-waḥda al-muṭlaqa*), existence is made strictly one, and multiplicity in the phenomenal world is declared nothing but a mirage (El-Rouayheb 2015, p. 242).

Al-Bakrī was also a renowned poet, and the preface to his *Dīwān* contains a disclaimer that his poetry is about experiential not ontological unity, a condemnation of those espousing ontological monism, and an endorsement of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, calling him "the *qutb* (Pole)" of his time and "the Imam, complete and unique, who to heights of truth with truth ascended" (Al-Bakrī, *Taʾbīd al-minna*, fol. 109a-b; Al-Bakrī, *Tarjumān al-asrār* fol. 3a, 112b-113a, and 184b; (El-Rouayheb 2015, pp. 243–44)). This "rehabilitation" of Ibn al-Fāriḍ by the sixteenth-century jurist and Sufi poet al-Bakrī indicates that Ibn al-Fāriḍ was eventually read past the heated late fifteenth-century polemics and in a manner that was more congenial to the poet's theological propositions and his metaphorical use of language.[12] In *Naẓm al-sulūk* (Poem of the Sufi Way), Ibn al-Fāriḍ restated his theology by rejecting the notions of *ḥulūl* (incarnation) and *ittiḥād* (unification):

So in the clearer of two visions

I have a sign

that keeps my creed free

of any incarnation. (Homerin 2001, p. 155)

Ibn al-Fāriḍ is cautious to back his theological conception of union with Quranic and *ḥadīth* literature so that his theology comes as a logical conclusion to what is already stated in the revealed sources. Book-ending the verses excerpted here, the poet quotes the *ḥadīth* where the angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muḥammad and his companions in the form of a handsome youth named Diḥya al-Kalbī. While the Prophet saw the angel behind the form of the youth, his companions only saw Diḥya. Gabriel was not dwelling within a human being but clothed in a form. Only the prophetic vision could see through the form. After his theological statement, the poet quotes the Qur'ān (sura al-An'ām 6: 9):

> And in the Qur'an, undeniably,
> there is mention of 'disguise';
> I have not transgressed the two truths:
> the Book, and traditions of our prophet. (Homerin 2001, p. 155)

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's theological position in the rejection of incarnation and union can be glossed in a longer explanation, whereby one would have to expose the difference between union and incarnation, which implies two entities becoming one, and true spiritual vision, whereby the entities peopling the world are forms clothing the presence of the divine. There is no "becoming one", only the experiential recognition of real ontological oneness behind and beyond the mistaken perception of duality and plurality. Diḥya is the form or the disguise through which revelation has become apparent to the Prophet, who no longer sees Diḥya, or the spirit as incarnated in Diḥya but sees *through* Diḥya. Instead of long and prosaic explanatory developments, the language of poetry allows the poet to create three successive vignettes to support one theological point, namely the rejection of *ḥulūl* and *ittiḥād*. The lyric is not a diminished version of *kalām* for less advanced readers; rather, its compacted form and striking images allow for the clear articulation of theological points.

Thus, as scholars, such as Scattolin (1989, 1993, 2004), Homerin, and El-Rouayheb, have argued, the controversial interpretation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses as redolent of ontological monism, namely the idea that God is incarnate in or unified with creation (*ḥulūl wa ittiḥād*), was the work of his later commentators rather than the work of the poet himself. Without judging the validity of these controversies, their very existence points to the theological relevance of poetry and to its theological stakes, both in a scholarly and more popular milieux. The controversies around Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *dīwān*-s also underline the productive tensions between poetry and theology—"tension" in the sense that poetry could be interpreted in adversarial terms to default dogmatic orthodoxies, and "productive" in the sense that poetry could ignite a series of commentaries clarifying or further obfuscating Ibn al-Fāriḍ's theological points and productive in the sense also that it encouraged further expositions by the poet himself in other poems as I have tried to show with the extract from *Naẓm al-sulūk*. Muslim scholars engaging in literary prose and poetry, such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ but also al-Bakrī, were not just exploiting the esoteric and transgressive potential of literary imaginaries and metaphors, they were also using them to score, clarify, and refine theological points.[13]

3. Theology as an Academic Discipline

The move towards a "de-religionisation" of Islamic theology may be interpreted as synonymous to a form of epistemic decolonisation, connecting Moyaert's concept with the study of epistemic injustice (Grosfoguel 2013, pp. 73–90). Christian normativity has had an impact not only on how other religions have been perceived and studied[14] but also on how and when these other faiths are entitled to speak for themselves.

Today, Christianity understands theology to mean "the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith" and more generally "the systematic study of the ideas of a religion, including their sources, historical development, mutual relationship, and application to life" (McGrath 2016, p. 85). To be sure, this contemporary definition has been challenged by Christian theologians and philosophers, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988), Jacques Maritain (d. 1973), and more recently Catherine Pickstock and Steven Toussaint who have written on the role and importance of poetry and the poetic for Christian theology and its neglect in contemporary academic settings.[15] Yet, overall, the position is to consider theology as the systematic study of the fundamental tenets of faith, resulting in the formulation of an ordered, rational, and coherent account and defence of Christian faith and beliefs. The materials selected to elaborate this theological discourse are note collections of fables and poetry but the Bible, biblical exegesis, treatises containing the points of doctrine defined in the early oecumenical councils of the Church, and speculative essays from the European Middle Age to the modern and contemporary periods. In his chapter on "The Literary Genres of "Theology"" in medieval Christian Europe, Cédric Giraud explains that poetry and prose of a fictional type were not included in curricula, whether one looks at monastic schools, which tended to focus more on meditative reading, or urban schools, more focused on speculative reading (Giraud 2019, pp. 250–71). Intellectual activities in both schools would come under one of the three literary genres of *lectio, disputatio* or *predicatio*, along with their corollaries, namely *glossae, sententiae,* and *quaestiones*. However, when looking at the *madrasa* institution in Islamic lands, one is forced to recognise that religious learning is organised in a different way and was not restricted to *kalām* or the disciplines of *'ilm al-baḥth* and *khaṭaba*, which would be near equivalent to *disputatio* and *predicatio*, respectively.

The study of theology as proposed in universities today is marked by the development of the universities themselves in a post-Enlightenment ideological context. For instance, in France, the Revolution of 1789 led to a series of measures designed to eliminate Christian theology from the university curriculum. Elsewhere in Europe, secularism also reshaped the study of theology in fundamental ways. For instance, in Germany, F. D. E. Schleiermacher (d. 1834) in his *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* (1811) argued that theology had three major components, namely philosophical theology (which identifies the "essence of Christianity"), historical theology (which deals with the history of the church), and practical theology (which is concerned with "techniques" of church leadership and practice). While practical theology was taught at seminaries, philosophical and historical theology entered the modern university. Historical theology provides an important corrective to a static view of theology and also allows for the development of comparative theology. Philosophical theology, by developing rational arguments for proving the existence of God and by delving into religious metaphysics, has played a particularly important role in securing the presence of theology in universities.

Indeed, one legacy of European Enlightenment has been to depict faith as lacking in rational grounding and believers as being pre-committed towards their faith and incapable of "serious" academic inquiry. For instance, there has been a recent debate in Christian studies over the issue of commitment versus neutrality (McGrath 2016, p. 95). The debate is not new and remains unresolved. As McGrath explains, it was already under way in the twelfth century, between thinkers who believed that theology was about a committed defence of the Christian faith (Bernard of Clairvaux) and those who insisted that theology was an academic discipline, demanding detachment on the part of its practitioners (Peter Abelard).

To this day, some argue that "commitment" and "truth" are not compatible and that the only scholars who are intellectually qualified to study Christian faith are those coming from outside the religion (McGrath 2016, pp. 95–97). Those outside are presumed to be likely to ask the hard questions about intellectual credibility, methods, and ideas. On the other end of this spectrum, Latin American liberation theologians have been scathing about the notion of "academic detachment", regarding this as a severe hindrance to the cause of social justice and political transformation (McGrath 2016, p. 96). Contemporary philosophy of sciences and sociology have demonstrated that neutral scholarship does not exist but that it is always pre-committed to certain ideas and values, whether these are explicitly identified or not. At this nexus, the seminal work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his insistence on the fact that the "pre-structured lies everywhere" should be recalled (Bourdieu 1989, p. 15).

Although Islam is now included in some theological Faculties and Departments across Europe, this institutional and ideological background is not aligned with its conception of scientific enquiry, where even the domain of spirituality is constituted as a science and called as such, namely *'ilm al–taṣawwuf.* In addition, Islam and "other" faiths must operate in a context where Western (secularised) Christianity is in a position of relative epistemic domination, setting the agenda and defining how students engage with theology. In other words, Divinity faculties may "pluralise", but they do not decentre.

In Islam, *kalām* (speculative theology) is not considered the only and ultimate way for scholars to enquire into God-talk (theology), and the *mutakallimūn* (speculative theologians) have never claimed monopoly over theology. In addition, even though *kalām* occupies a distinctive place in the classification of the sciences and operates according to a distinctive template, its relation to *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), linguistics, and *adab* (literature) is not defined in exclusionary or adversarial terms. Indeed, *kalām* is also the place where theories of language are expounded and ontological enquiries into the realm of the possible and the impossible and the real and the imaginary are pursued. As such, the linguistic and ontological contents developed by *mutakallimūn* are fundamental to understand how poets envisaged their own relations to language and the lyric. Conversely, linguistics and literature in Islam may also be considered productive of theological discourses.

4. Apophatic and Experiential Theology in the *Dīwān* of Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb

Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb (d. 1390/1972) is remembered to this day as a man of great learning, an esteemed scholar and teacher, an author of works in various religious sciences, and someone who met with both the scholars and the masters of his age and who emerged as the pole of the Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* in Morocco. In their original biography appended to the revised edition of Ibn al-Ḥabīb's *Dīwān* (Ibn al-Ḥabīb 2022), the translators Abdurrahman Fitzgerald and Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk indicate that Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb was placed in a Quranic school at the age of five, where he memorised the Qur'ān, along with foundational texts in *naḥū* and *ṣarf* (grammar), *manṭiq* (logic), *'aqīda* (dogma), and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). He was accepted at the prestigious university of al-Qarawwiyyn in Fez and eventually taught in *fiqh*, *tafsīr* (exegesis), and *ḥadīth* there. In the mosque in the area of Qasbat al-Nawwar in the old city, he taught Ibn 'Ashir's *al-Murshid al-mu'īn*, which combines Maliki *fiqh*, Ash'ari *'aqīda* and Junaidi *taṣawwuf*, the *kalām* texts of al-Sanūsī, the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl, which is considered the epitome of Maliki *fiqh*, in addition to Imām Malik's *al-Muwatta*, and gave classes in Quranic exegesis.

This historical, intellectual, and religious background must be kept in mind when approaching his *Dīwān*. Indeed, while works in the religious sciences produced in the Eastern/Ottoman contexts have tended to be written in prose, many Moroccan (and, in fact, the West-African community of)[16] scholars have been inclined to opt for a versification of their scientific productions, including works of *kalām*. Thus, with his *Dīwān*, Ibn al-Ḥabīb partakes in this scientific tradition and uses poetry as a vehicle to convey and explore theological, devotional, and didactic contents.

All poems relate to the themes of closeness to the Divine, love of the Prophet, and to the moral and spiritual developments of the seeker of knowledge as they enter upon and follow the Sufi path. In this regard, most of the poems contain passages of advice literature, an exposition of the way of the Sufis, and indications concerning reverence towards the saints and shaykhs of the Path. However, some poems in particular touch upon theological themes, sometimes approached from a dogmatic and sometimes from a more esoteric perspective. For instance, the fifth *qaṣīda* "The Tenets of Unity" (Ibn al-Ḥabīb 2022, pp. 135–42) centres on *tawḥīd* and may be read as a primer of *'aqīda* written in verse to facilitate memorisation:

> "God" means the One Who is independent of all else while all else depends upon Him.
>
> This independence from all else besides Him has thirteen Attributes—do not forget them:
>
> Existence, beginninglessness, and endlessness, incomparability, and absolute independence,

> Hearing, sight, and speech [which must be understood] according to the rules inherent in them.
>
> In His acts and decrees there is nothing which compels or constrains [Him]. Take heed.
>
> He is free to act or leave an act undone. Hold fast to what we've mentioned and be certain.
>
> The dependency of all else [upon Him] is itself completed by twelve [other] attributes:
>
> Knowledge, power, will, and also life. Realise the benefit.
>
> Add the He is Able, Willing, Knowing One, and the Living—do not stop with only the inherent.
>
> [Then] Oneness of Action, Attribute, and Essence which negates all multiplicity, ask those you trust!
>
> The temporality of the world, and the negation of its effects through nature or power—so reflect.
>
> Those are five and twenty Attributes and their opposites number the same, so count each one.
>
> (Ibn al-Ḥabīb 2022, pp. 135–38)

The poem continues with elements of belief concerning the Prophet and the Afterlife, the status of the Qur'ān, and the role of rulers, effectively rounding up all the main topics of an Islamic theological primer. In the passage quoted, where the Sufi poet-scholar is concerned with God-talk (theo-logos), he repeats the main tenets of faith established through Revelation and then explained in speculative reasoning. In other words, the list featured in the poem is an invitation to return to the Qur'ān, from where the tenets are derived, and the places where they are explained, namely *kalām* texts.

The poem in Arabic refers to the *awṣāf* (descriptives or attributes) of God (l.4 and l.9). Starting with God's absolute independence (*al-ghaniyyu 'an siwā'hu*), which is the essential meaning of *tawḥīd* and of monotheistic faith, the poet then moves to what in books of *kalām* are called the essential attributes (*ṣifāt dhātiyya*) of God, namely His existence (*al-wujūd*), eternity (*al-qidam*), everlastingness (*al-baqā'*), incomparability (*al-mukhālafa*) from other creatures, absolute independence (*ghināhu muṭlaq*), and His hearing (*al-sam'*), sight (*al-baṣar*), and speech (*al-kalām*), "which must be understood according to the rules inherent to them" (l.7 and l.8), namely not anthropomorphically. God acts and decrees in absolute freedom and possesses the other essential attributes of knowledge (*al-'ilm*), power (*al-qudra*) and will (*al-irāda*), and life (*al-ḥaya'a*).

Following this list of attributes, the poet adds a contentious point of doctrine on which theologians disagreed. First, it should be stated that the Mu'tazili school, one of the earliest schools in Islamic speculative theology, refused to support the idea of attributes of God as, according to them, the attributes that distorted His Oneness. By affirming God's oneness and at the same time listing all of His attributes, the poet is positioning himself against the Mu'tazila school. Both the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools affirm the existence of His attributes, while maintaining that his *ṣifāt* (attributes), *af'āl* (actions), and *dhāt* (essence) are of no resemblance whatsoever to those of His creation.

By stating that God *has* knowledge, power, will, and life (v. 10) but also that he *is* knowing, powerful, willing, and living ("Add that He is the Able, Willing, Knowing One, and the Living//do not stop with only the inherent", v. 11), the poet confirms the Sunni orthodox position, shared by both the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools, that the attributes of God are not accidents that come in and out of existence but that they are ascribed to His essence (He *is living*) and are also at the same time outside His essence (He possesses *something called Life*). According to Sunni orthodoxy, the attributes are co-eternal to the essence of the Divine and as such inseparable from it (they do not and cannot exist outside

His essence), while not being equivalent to God's essence either.[17] The poet concludes this part of the poem devoted to the attributes of God with the attribute of Oneness (*al-waḥdanīya*).

It should be noted that Ibn al-Ḥabīb opens his *Dīwān* with a *wird* (litany) of his own composition and which would typically be recited during gatherings of worship, followed with a long poem on the benefits of the *wird*-s. Thus, it is paramount for the contemporary reader of the published edition of the *Dīwān* to remember that the poems were not primarily written to be read in silence and on one's own. Of course, this is possible to do so, and in fact, this is how the author of this article approached and analysed them. However, the poems were essentially composed to be read out loud, recited in tune, following the specific stress patterns in which they were written, and in gatherings of worship. In fact, most of the poems are recorded by the members of the *Shadhiliyya* and available to listen on platforms such as YouTube or Soundcloud.

Such a relation to poetry, as a lived and shared spiritual experience, is significant in terms of the type of theology produced. Through memorisation by the students and seekers of knowledge and recitals in *dhikr* gatherings, when the names of God and litanies are repeated in tune, the knowledge of God as contained in the poems is not just pursued at a conceptual and speculative level but is also internalised. Thus, even when the poems do not reach the territory of mystical encounters, but perhaps merely expose and explain points of doctrine, the fact that they can be internalised through memorisation and repeated recitations means that God-talk has the potential to become embodied knowledge. Thus, poetry becomes the space for both the expression and experience of speculative theology through internalisation. Its recitals in gatherings allow for this embodied theological knowledge to become a collective experience of theologising.

In addition to "The Tenets of Unity", dogmatic poems include "Make Provision my Brother for Death", where the Afterlife is the main theme. Acts of worship (*'ibāda*), their purposes, and implications, namely the believer's deeper understanding of God's will and improved relation to Him, are discussed in "Reflection", "Asking for Forgiveness", and "Purification". Theology is not absent from poems dealing with esoterism either. For instance, in "O You who seek effacement in Allah", *fanā'* (self-annihilation in the presence of the Divine) is a central theme and it is coupled with the theological and controversial concept of monism, namely the presence of God *in* His creation. The question of monism has been the source of intense theological debates, since the difficulty is to acknowledge the presence of the Divine while maintaining absolute transcendence. These points are clarified in books of *kalām* so that it may be safely surmised that the poetry of Ibn al-Ḥabīb builds on them and implicitly takes side in debates that have preoccupied speculative theology for centuries.

In "Seeing the Divine" and "Unveiling", the question of knowing God comes to the fore in the language of apophatic and experiential theology. Apophatic (*ta'ṭīl*) theology has been debated in every school of *kalām*, from Mu'tazilism to Ash'arism, from the Maturidis to the literalists, and in Shi'ism, while experiential theology is framed by principles set out in the discipline of *taṣawwuf*.[18] Given the absolute transcendence (*tanzih*), incommensurable distance, and utter ineffability of God, theologians have asked the question of the language human beings have at their disposal to point towards Him and describe Him and their relations to Him. How does one convey the ineffable and how does one report on those experiences, which are beyond the realm of speech? The two possibilities are absolute negation and sensorial encounters through witnessing (*shuhūd*), tasting (*dhawq*), and hearing (*sam'*). While the syllogistic prose used in the discipline of *kalām* is not fitted to express this type of theology, scholars have found a solution in poetic expression.

Thus, Ibn al-Ḥabīb is part of a long line of theologians who have turned towards poetry when articulating non-syllogistic theology. For instance, Mullā Rajab (d. 1080/1669) is remembered to this day for his very strong position in favour of a radical apophatic theology and for his criticism of what he interpreted in his *Ithbāt* as the monistic tendencies in the theology of Mullā Ṣadrā (c. 1050/1635-40). Muhammad U. Faruque and Mohammed Rustom underline that Mullā Rajab's central argument (Mullā Rajab 2008–2015) is that the

Necessary Being and contingent beings can only share terms like "existence" (*wujūd*) and "existent" (*mawjūd*) in a manner that is homonymous and not synonymous (2017, pp. 3, 6). As Faruque and Rustom perceptively note, Mullā Rajab's main line of argumentation in the *Ithbāt* is interspersed between a string of selective citations in prose and verse, from various authorities ranging from Plotinus, al-Fārābī, theologians belonging to the "school" of Ibn ʿArabī, to Twelver Shīʿī Imams (2017, p. 4).

One enlightening example that Faruque and Rustom (2017) analyse is when Mullā Rajab reasserts the principle of apophatic theology through citations drawn from [a] Plotinus's *Theologia* in Arabic, [b] a poem from the great Sufi metaphysician Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d. 720 AH/1320), and [c] a famous saying of Imam Riḍāʾ (d. 203 AH/817), the eighth Shīʿī Imam:

> If the meaning of [the term] '*wujūd*' with respect to God in His essence refers to the meaning of [the term] *wujūd* that is to be found in contingent things, it would follow that He too is created. [a] Aristotle [i.e., Plotinus] says, 'The Pure One is the cause of all things, but is not like the things'. It is therefore necessary that His *wujūd* be other than the *wujūd* of things. If not, then He would be like them.
>
> On the issue of God's transcendence (*tanzīh*), the Sufis have not even allowed [for God] to be named. This is what they say, '[He is] nameless, traceless, indescribable, and characterless'. How beautifully has the gnostic Shabistarī spoken concerning this issue!
>
> [b] His Essence is beyond quantity, quality, and modality. Exalted is His Essence above what they say[19]
>
> [c] In The Book of Divine Unity [by Ibn Bābūyah (d. 381 AH/991)], it is reported that Imam Riḍāʾ said, 'Whoever likens God to His creatures assigns partners to Him'.[20]

In Mullā Rajab's experience, thinking, and presentation, poets are theologians and theologians are poets, and therefore, Shabistarī's verse, itself reflecting poetical theology, sits perfectly well with other authorities to reassert the absolute transcendence of the Divine and contest Ṣadrian ontology, which, according to Mullā Rajab, supports a synonymy between God's *wujūd* and existence in the contingent realm of creation.

In the same manner, Sidi Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥabīb's poetry is replete with verses articulating apophatic theology. In "Seeing the Divine", the density of meaning that can be packed in a single verse is particularly well suited to express theological paradox, such as seeing the Divine through effacement or being in Presence through absence:

> O you who seek a vision of the Divine, rise above both the spirit and the form
>
> And stay with primordial non-being: be as if you are not—you who are effaced'.
> (Ibn al-Ḥabīb 2022, p. 228)

The One who is absolutely transcendent is not informed in the multiplicity of worldly forms and is not subject to division but belongs to the realm of absolute Union: "And neither the forms of actions nor myriad creatures will render that act multiple in any way" (Ibn al-Ḥabīb 2022, p. 229). As for human beings, belonging to the world of creation, their being-in-multiplicity is quintessential to their conditions. However, through training of the soul, human beings may rise above multiplicity and enter the realm of unity through contemplation (*shuhūd*). This form of experiential theology cannot be found in books of *kalām*, which rely solely on logic, and cannot be shared or transmitted through dialectical reasoning. As Imam al-Ghazali stated, argumentation will not help experience the sweetness of honey, the tasting of it is required.[21] Similarly, the inner contemplation of the Divine is tasted (*dhawq*), and therefore, language, as arranged syllogistically, cannot capture it and convey it. It is not its function either. To express and share this theological experience, poetic language, which allows for density, aporias, and paradoxes, is more adequate and therefore more intuitively used in Islamic theology. Thus, Ibn al-Ḥabīb uses the form of the *qaṣīda*, when for instance in "Seeing the Divine", he relates the experience of elevating oneself (*taraqqā*) above all that is perishing and of seeing (*rā'a*) existence without duality (*bi-ghaīyri thān*).

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have shown how the application of "(secular) religionised" frameworks, to borrow from Moyaert's terminology, has led to the production of a partial and distorted representation of Islamic theology and how the omission of poetic discourses as modes of theological expression has severely reduced our understanding of Islamic theology. Moyaert's work in critical/decolonial comparative theology has been instrumental in conceptualising the line of analysis I have pursued in this article and enabled an engagement with the problems inhering in applying secular and Christian frames when approaching Islamic epistemology and theology. In my analysis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry and biography and Ibn al-Ḥabīb's *dīwān*, I have shown how secularised and post-Enlightenment preconceptions about literature and the relation between the lyric/imaginary and the speculative have deeply impacted the ways in which their poetry is read, by whom, and how. I have also explained how, as theologian-poets, they conceived of poetry as a space where specific theological discourses other than the syllogistic mode prevalent in *kalām* can be articulated, in the forms of apophatic or embodied God-talks for instance.

One of the objectives of this article has been to conduct a critical analysis of the epistemic frames we use by default when studying Islamic "theology" at university today. Indeed, in privileging *kalām*, which is the closest equivalent to Christian theology in terms of sources, methodology, and objectives, academic research is bypassing other modes of theologising across other disciplines, including, in Islam, the science of *adab* or literary discourse. Therefore, this article is to be conceived of as an attempt to correct the default and restrictive appreciation of the scope of Islamic theology in contemporary academic studies and to open a space where it can be acknowledged and analysed in manners more comprehensive and congenial with its epistemic and experiential realities.

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Notes

[1] The section is piloted by Dr. Alexander Wain as Academic Editor and Dr. Maria Dakake, Prof. Lejla Demiri, and Dr. Timothy Winter, as Senior Editors. See the presentation page of the section: https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam (accessed on 18 September 2024).

[2] One colleague reviewing my article would for instance write that "Islamic poetry is Arabic poetry (or Persian, Urdu, etc.). There is no way poetry based on imagination can replace speculative theology", indicating the still lingering opinion that speculative theology is theology and that Islamic poetry may be studied in Modern Languages Department but has no place whatsoever in Divinity curricula.

[3] Scholars, such as Ibn Dhikrī al-Tilmisānī (d. 899 H), al-Maqqarī (d. 1040 H), Muḥammad b. Muṣṭafā al-Dimyāṭī al-Khuḍarī (d. 1278 H), and 'Abdullah b. Muḥammad Sufyān al-Ḥakamī (b. 1371 H), wrote lines on the first principles in their own works. The most well-known lines of poetry on the ten principles are composed by Shaykh Abū al-'Irfān Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Ṣabbān (d.1206 H) from Egypt. See (Verstaen 2022, pp. 9–14).

[4] The ten principles are as follows: 1. The definition—*al-ḥadd*; 2. The subject (matter)—*al-mawḍū'*; 3. The fruit—*al-thamara*; 4. The relationship (to other sciences)—*al-nisba*; 5. The virtue—*al-faḍl* (Its status amongst other sciences); 6. The founder—*al-wāḍi'*; 7. The name—*al-ism*; 8. The sources (of support)—*al-istimdād* (The sources utilised in its subject matter; 9. The judgment—*al-ḥukm* (The religious ruling on learning the science); 10. The issues—*al-masā'il*. See, (Verstaen 2022, pp. 9–14).

[5] On the conception of literature as science/craft in Islam, see (Ibn Khaldūn 2015, p. 644).

[6] For a subsequent formulation of the concept of "discursive tradition", see Asad's interview with Ovamir Anjum and with Irfan Ahmed. With Irfan Ahmad, he explains the concept is not in need of a revision but rather expansion as he recognises that "Tradition includes sustained argument among ulema as well as modern intellectuals who draw on Islam as a tradition. But there is also the problem of understanding the way language enters into various kinds of practice. These vary from regimes of practice to ritual practices like prayer (*ṣalāt*), and it raises the question of embodiment, especially habit. Because I have treated

embodiment differently in different places, there is a need to bring some of what I've said together in this 'revisiting'. In brief, tradition is the frame for the expression of both intellectual debates (and popular opinion), as well as for the teaching of beliefs and practices that goes on in a more quotidian way" (I. Ahmad 2015, pp. 266–67). And with Ovamir Anjum, he emphasised the need to take into account both the articulated and the non-articulated in the concept of discursive tradition: "I referred earlier to the difference between an argued-over, discursive tradition and a tradition which may not be articulable—motives, practices and attitudes for which one may not be able to give reasons and may not need to do so. It's important to think of texts and discourse, of course. My simple point is that intellectual discourse is not the only important part of tradition, and that tradition in its entirety is not a coherent whole; its elements are interconnected, sometimes supportive, sometimes in tension with and sometimes contradictory to other elements—as human life itself is" (Anjum 2018, pp. 89–90).

[7] See the bibliography for titles by these authors, which have been formative in my own intellectual journey for thinking the questions and issues this article raises.

[8] I refer here to the transmitted truth that "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty". The full *ḥadīth* is from 'Abd-Allah ibn Mas'ūd, who narrated that the Prophet said the following: "No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's-weight of pride in his heart.' A man said, 'What if a man likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?" He said, "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on people." The *takhrīj* for this *ḥadīth* is *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (nº 131) and *Jāmiʻ al-Tirmidhī* (n 1999) amongst others.

[9] 'The two most important pamphlets by al-Biqāʿī are *Taḥdhīr al-ʻibad min ahl al-ʻibad bi-bidʻat al-ittihad* (Warning the Servants of God Against Those Who Stubbornly Espouse the Innovation of Unificationism), which focuses on Ibn al-Fāriḍ. *Tanbiḥ al-ghābi ilā takfīr Ibn ʻArabī* (The Awakening of the Unaware to Ibn 'Arabī's Unbelief), was dedicated solely to ibn 'Arabī. Knysh informs us that both works were edited in 1372/1953 by the anti-Sufi Egyptian scholar 'Abd al-Rahman al-Wakil under the title *Masra' al-tafawwuf* (The Destruction of Sufis). See (Knysh 1999, p. 364).

[10] The term is used by Homerin (1994, p. 29) to designate the proponents of Ibn al-'Arabī's theosophy of divine unity, later known as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being).

[11] These are the terms of Bakrī in *Taʾbīd al-minna*, fol. 110b, completed in Mecca in January 1552, quoted by (El-Rouayheb 2015, p. 244). Another fundamental note is that the theological concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which although commonly attributed to Ibn 'Arabī is in fact derived, as William Chittick (1981, 1991) and James Morris (1986) have argued, from the works of his early commentators, including his disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274) and Qūnawī's students Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 1300) and Mu'aiyyd al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. ca. 1296) and later with the commentators of the more controversial *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* such as ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshhānī (d. 1335) and Dāʾūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350) and into the fifteenth century with the Ottoman scholar Meḥmed Fenarī (d. 1431), the Indian scholar ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Mahāʾimī (d. 1432), and the Persian scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī (d. 1492). (Chittick 1989, pp. xii–iv; 1991, pp. 7–27; 1994, pp. 70–111; Morris 1986, pp. 733–56).

[12] As a side note, it is to be remembered that one of the problematic points defended by al-Biqā'ī in his pamphlet *Ṣawāb al-jawāb* had been to state that Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry could not be read metaphorically.

[13] In a sense, my research resonates with scholars in the field of Islamic studies who have offered fresh interpretations of the role of the figurative/allegorical forms in the Islamic lyric. See in particular the works of Carl Ernst, for instance his chapter on "Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī's Interpretation of Ḥāfiẓ" (Ernst 2010) and Arjun Nair's articles "On Wine-Drinking in Sufi-Philosophical Islam" (Nair 2023) and "Poetry and Sufi Commentary" (Nair 2024).

[14] For instance, Moyaert talks about the refiguration of good and true Christianness as meek and humble, personal, a-dogmatic, de-ritualised, and a-political and about the subsequent negative views of Islam because of deviating from these norms (Moyaert 2024, pp. 250–53, 312, 313, 316–18, 328–29).

[15] *Herrlichkeit* is Hans Urs von Balthasar's (d. 1988) seven-volume work on theological aesthetics. It is comprised of *Schau der Gestalt* (Seeing the Form) (1961), *Fächer der Stile: Klerikale Stile* (Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles) (1962), *Fächer der Stile: Laikale Stile* (Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles) (1962), *Im Raum der Metaphysik: Altertum* (The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity) (1965), *Im Raum der Metaphysik: Neuzeit* (The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age) (1965), *Theologie: Alter Bund* (Theology: The Old Covenant) (1967), and *Theologie: Neuer Bund* (Theology: The New Covenant) (1967). Jacques Maritain's (d. 1973) most famous work is *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, translated in English in 1953. More recently, Catherine Pickstock and Judith Wolfe have co-edited a themed issue titled "Metaphysics and Poetics" for the journal *Modern Theology* (40.1, January 2024), where both Catherine Pickstock ("Metaphysics and Poetics", pp. 5–20) and Steven Toussaint ("Redeeming Poetics", pp. 21–45) make a case for the reappraisal of the role poetics in theology.

[16] The work of Rudolph Ware in *The Walking Qur'an*, Zachary Wright in *Realizing Islam*, and their co-authored *Jihad of the Pen* (Ware et al. 2019) with Amir Syed present numerous poetic works of "theology" by West African Scholars. Shaykh 'Umar al-Fūtī Tal's *Tadhkira al-mustarshidīn wa falāḥ al-ṭālibīn* (A Reminder for the Seekers and Success for the Students) and his *Safīna al-sa'āda li-ahl ḍa'f wa-l-najāda* (The Vessel of Happiness and Assistance for the Weak), Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbacké's versified treatise on Sufism *Masālik al-Jinān* (Pathways of Paradise), based on his oral teaching, his *al-Ṣindīd* (The Valiant One), and his *Mawāhib al-nāfi' fī madā'iḥ al-shāfi'* (Gifts of the Benefactor in Praise of the Intercessor), and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's theological and devotional versified teatise *Rūḥ al-adab* (The Spirit of Etiquette) are excellent examples of this.

[17] The Ash'ari theologians differentiated between two type of attributes, namely the attributes of essence (*ṣifāt dhāt*) and the attributes of action (*ṣifāt fi'il*). Here, the poet is strictly referring to attributes of essence so the opposition to Maturidism cannot be spotted. They maintain that attributes of entity are eternal and ascribed to the entity of God, while attributes of action are temporal and not ascribed to the entity of God. The Maturidis disagree on this point and caution even on the use of expressions such as "He is all-knowing by His knowledge" lest one construe His knowledge to be a mere tool separate from His entity. Rather they would say "He is all-knowing and He has knowledge and it is eternally ascribed to Him" (al-Ṣābūnī 2020, p. 62).

[18] See, for instance, Aḥmad Zarrūq's (d. 899/1493) *Qawā'īd al-taṣawwuf* (The Principles of Sufism) for an example of a text regulating Sufi practice so as to become knowledgeable in experiential theology while maintaining the absolute orthodoxy of the faith. Zarrūq call his *Qawā'īd al-taṣawwuf* an abridged version of his *'Uddat al-murīd al- ṣādiq*. Earlier similar literature framing experiential theology include al-Makkī's (d. 386/996) *Qūṭ al-Qulūb*, al-Suhrawardī's (d. 563-1168) *'Awārif al-ma'ārif*, and his *Adab al-muridīn*.

[19] Shabistarī (1880), *Gulshanirāz*, p. 10 (line 31). For a thorough study of Shabistarī's life and thought, see Lewisohn (1995). In this work, Shabistarī maintains that God is beyond name, trace, quality, and characterisation.

[20] The interspersed quotations appear in Mullā Rajab, *Ithbāt*, vol. 1, pp. 220, 223–24, 226. Translated in Faruque and Rustom, "Rajab ʿAlī Tabrīzī's Refutation of Ṣadrian Metaphysics", p. 190.

[21] The image is found in Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) introduction to the *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* ("Meccan revelations"), where he exposes the hierarchy of knowledge, with the science of reason at the bottom, the science of spiritual states in the middle, and the science of secrets at the top. The science of spiritual states are inaccessible to reason and can only be grasped through taste (*dhawq*). There, Ibn ʿArabī takes the example of honey or sexual pleasure, which needs to be tasted in order to be known (Ibn ʿArabī 1329/1911, vol. 1, p. 31).

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