

Neo-Platonic Origins of the Dome of the Rock

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Qubbah al-Sakhrah, or the Dome of the Rock, is the third most important sacred site of Islam after Mecca and Medina. As a shrine, it has several meanings. It marks a place in mythic history that connects Islam through Abraham to Judaism and Christianity. It also signifies and gives physical meaning to the legend of the *mi'raj*, Muhammad's mystical journey to heaven.¹ And as a centrally focused architectural form, it is an example of a sacred building type that expresses an axis mundi, a sacred point on the terrestrial plane through which a vertical axis connects the world to the cosmos. Also, after decades of Arab conquests, it signified Islam as a world religion. Islam became an established politico-religious force in the early medieval world by provocatively placing the symbolic center of the force, the Dome of the Rock, in the heart of Jerusalem, the holiest city of Judaism and Christianity. Finally, one function for the Dome of the Rock was probably to commemorate the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik's consolidation of Islam under his control following the civil war that had split the empire in the late 7th century AD.²

These are reasons why the Dome of the Rock was built. However, we still do not know why its builders chose its particular architectural form. Superficially, one can point to several Roman and Byzantine precedents and there is little doubt that the Arabs employed Armenian and Byzantine architects and craftsmen to construct and decorate the building.³ Also, its rigorously concentric form reflects its function as a pilgrimage site focused on the sacred stone of both Abraham's sacrifice and Muhammad's mythic ascent to heaven. The two layers of space around the stone, reinforced by the mosaic text on the outer arcade, suggest the customary circumambulation of believers anti-clockwise, similar to that around the *Ka'aba* in Mecca. However, the form of the building transcends these functions. The Dome of the Rock was the first monument of Islam executed as a work of art to express a symbolic purpose beyond its physical function. In Islam, form emerges from patterns, as it does in Nature: and also, as in Nature, form not only conveys meaning, but at times obscures it. As the 'Religion of Nature,' Islam has always insisted that the forms of every human endeavor must reflect the patterns of forces in Nature at all scales, whether perceptible or imperceptible, physical as well as metaphysical. The design of the Dome of the Rock is the purest architectural expression of this concept.

An Islamic monument of such immense religious and historical importance surely symbolized the foundation of the faith. The plan of the Dome of the Rock was a diagram of the core principle of Islam, *Tawhid*, which is the declaration of faith in a pure and transcendental unity, expressed as "There is no God but God." In Islam, all aspects of existence refer ultimately to this principle of Unity. *Tawhid* means that while all things in the universe are in some way dependent, conditional, and temporal, God is autonomous, perfect, and eternal.

In addition, the form of the Dome of the Rock marks a convergence of philosophies, one Islamic, the other Hellenistic. Much of the genius of the Arab's rapid conquest resided in their ability to co-opt aspects of indigenous culture from conquered peoples. The Dome of the Rock is

an excellent example of this. In addition to borrowing from available Roman and Byzantine architectural precedents (including the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulcher), The Umayyad caliphate adapted a philosophical model of cosmic order that was already widely accepted throughout the Hellenized Mediterranean world. So we find that the diagram of concentric circles that the Umayyads employed to symbolize the *Tawhid* in the plan of the Dome of the Rock coincided with an older cosmological model attributed to the 3rd century AD Neo-Platonic philosopher, Plotinus of Alexandria.

Numerous scholars have argued that the foundation of Islamic philosophy was Greek philosophy. When the Byzantine Emperor Justinian closed the School of Athens in 529 AD, he ended a thousand years of Greek philosophy in its homeland. Classical scholarship shifted to schools in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq that had been Hellenized centuries earlier.⁴ When the Arabs conquered the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, they readily absorbed Classical mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy. However, Islam was not interested in Greek philosophy for purely intellectual reasons. Islam adapted Greek thought to help justify and structure the nascent religion and to direct it toward a 'natural theology.'⁵ When the Arabs captured Alexandria in 641 AD, they inherited the largest collection of Classical texts in the medieval world. Alexandrian scholarship focused on the Neo-Platonic teachings of Plotinus (205 – 270 AD) and when the Arabs first encountered his work, he was considered on a par with Plato and Aristotle. 'Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad caliph who ordered the construction of the Dome of the Rock about fifty years after the capture of Alexandria, was the first Islamic leader to aggressively pursue the task of translating Greek texts into Arabic. By 692 AD, he had consolidated military and political control over the subject peoples of the new empire and by making Arabic the official language of the empire he asserted Arab control not just over the bureaucracy but over literary sources of ideas as well.⁶ Among the first texts to be translated from Greek to Arabic were the *Isagoge* by Plotinus' editor, Porphyry of Tyre, and the *Theologia* by the 5th century AD Neo-Platonist, Diodochus Proclus. Both of these texts were derivatives or paraphrases of Plotinus' principal treatise, the six-volumes of the *Enneads*.⁷ The best-known translations of Plotinus' work were completed after the construction of the Dome of the Rock: that by Ibn al-Muqqafa between 721 and 759, that of Ibn Na'imah al-Himsi (d. ca. 850), that of Abu Ya'qub al-Kindi (d. ca. 870), that of Abu 'Uthman al-Dimishqi (ca. 900) and that of Ishaq ibn Hunayn (d. 910). However, Neo-Platonic thought was taught throughout the region of the earliest Arab conquests and must have entered the intellectual and theological life of Islam at a much earlier date. Therefore, I do not mean to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between Plotinus' work and the design of the Dome of the Rock, but rather a fortuitous convergence of ideas from different cultures.

It was in the contest of ideas that Plotinus' philosophy soon proved useful to the Umayyads. The Arabs' success was paradoxically a threat to their identity. The speed with which the Arabs overran the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Syria soon created a religious crisis for them. Islam mounted an already crowded stage of competing theologies in the newly conquered territories, not just Christianity and Judaism, but also a host of Syriac, Egyptian, and Persian religions that had extensive philosophical and literary traditions. In this context, Islamic theologians eagerly sought ways, on the one hand, to defend the original precepts of Islam from theological dilution and, on the other hand, to cast their new religion in terms that would in some way transcend the competition. The Hellenistic philosophical tradition provided a solution to both challenges. Neo-Platonic principles of hierarchy and emanation fit well with fundamental conceptions of *Tawhid* as the immutable Unity from which all forms emerge and to which they must all ultimately refer. In Islam, theology is inseparable from all other aspects of human endeavor, including politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that we will discover that Islam's use of Neo-Platonic philosophy eventually assumed a political dimension.

Plotinus argued in the *Enneads* that the cosmos is a rational, living whole solely because it is attuned to the spiritual principles of life, unity, and reason that exist beyond itself. A feature of Neo-Platonism that was attractive to the rationalist philosophers of early Islam was its fusion of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Pythagorean concepts. As James Miller has explained, "While the harmonic cosmology, erotic psychology, and idealistic ontology of Plato were doctrinal bases of Plotinus' vision of world-order, the old philosophy to which he remained uncompromisingly loyal also encompassed the musical mathematics of Pythagoras and certain Aristotelian doctrines of causality, motion, intellection, and actuality traditionally regarded as consonant with Platonism."⁸ To Plotinus, the cosmos was a Living Being that animated and governed its countless physical manifestations by means of a consistent system founded on pure intellect that linked everything by cause-and-effect. The inexorable force of life demands that its myriad parts conform to its laws. To illustrate this view, Plotinus used the analogy of the precise choreography of a complex dance:

"... one might say that the whole Living Being activates its own universal life, always moving its greatest parts within itself and causing them to change positions. It coordinates the configurations of its limbs relative to each other and to the whole, and organizes their diverse positions and their consequences. Acting as a single living creature in motion, it holds its limbs in a manner similar to the poses and posturings and configurations of a dancer. Its activities correspond these in several respects. The parts forming the poses are not the causal agents creating the gestures, but simply things acted upon, limbs put in place; the active cause is the being who wills the poses into existence. Thus moving as a unit, it is so constituted that by its nature it has inevitably combined into itself both that which is acted upon and that which acts, both object and subject of its activities."⁹

The formal structure of the dance is concentric, an emanation of effects from the First Principle, the One, or fundamental Unity. In the original Greek, Plotinus employs words in reference to the First Principle that are neuter (*to hen* and *to agathon*) because he insists that the unity of the First Principle is absolute to the extent that no predicates may be applied to it, not even that which indicates existence. Following Plato's thought, 'being' implies 'being something'; therefore 'being' is by definition limited in form, in space, and in time. However, similar to the Islamic conception of *Tawhid*, the One is neither a being nor the sum of beings. Neither does the One think, because thought requires the separation of the object from the subject – a duality. The One is formless but it is the principle of form, number, dimension, order, and limit. To Plotinus, the First Principle is always apart from the effects it produces. However, the One does not act to produce the effects of reality, for to

do so would again imply the duality of object and subject. The effects of form simply emanate from the One analogous to the Pythagorean concept (also adopted by Arabic mathematicians) that One is not a number but rather the basis, or pre-condition, for all numbers to come into existence. Likewise, according to Plotinus, the First Principle neither conceives nor determines the emanations of reality that proceed from it; they become out of necessity, as do the numbers that emerge from One.¹⁰ Muslims, predisposed to Neo-Platonic reasoning, found Plotinus' concept of the One to be congruent with their conception of *Tawhid* as a transcendent Unity that was not detached but embedded in Nature, as a precondition for reality.

In Plotinus' model, the Second Hypostasis, or *Nous*, emanates from Unity. As Being, in the Platonic sense, it is the totality of all forms and ideas. Because *Nous* is pure intellect, its structure relies on the fundamental duality of object and subject. "*Nous* is, for Plotinus, both thought and object of thought, both Divine intellect and the Platonic World of Forms, the totality of real beings."¹¹ Unlike Plato, Plotinus does not conceive of *Nous* as a world of static, universal norms. Instead, it is "an organic living community of interpenetrating beings which are at once forms and intelligences, all awake and alive, in which every part thinks and therefore in a real sense is the whole. *Nous* is infinite and immeasurable, because it has no extension and there is no external standard by which it could be measured, but finite because it is a complete whole composed of an actually existing number (all that can possibly exist) of Forms, which are themselves definite, limited realities."¹² Though structured as a duality, *Nous* is not conditional or mutable. To the contrary, it is a stable state of supreme contemplation upon the One that was its cause. This relation between Forms and Intellect was particularly attractive to Muslims because it rationalized their understanding of the fundamental Law of Nature that produces variety in Unity.

The Third Hypostasis is *Psyche*, or the Soul. Because it is the domain of discursive thought, *Psyche* cannot possess an object of contemplation in stasis but must seek it through reasoning. The continuous, restless movement of the Soul is the cause of space and time. The essence of *Psyche* is its desire to unite with the One. It is also endowed with hope and memory. And whereas *Nous* maintains contemplative stillness because it possesses Being as a whole, *Psyche* can know Being only one part at a time. *Psyche* is therefore characterized by a restlessness animated by its perpetual aspiration to join the One to the extent that its nature permits. In addition, *Psyche* has two levels of meaning. At its higher level it acts as the principle of intelligent direction in life, while at its lower level it is the innate force of life, that is, Nature. Beyond this is the sphere of unintelligible matter, devoid of purpose or direction.

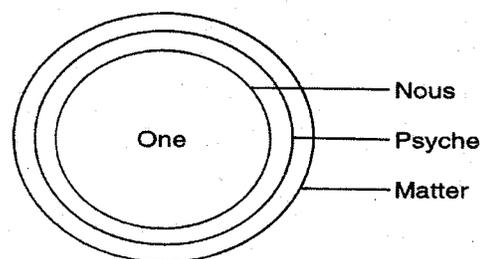


Fig. 1. Plotinus: the diagram from the *Enneads* depicting the hierarchical emanation of *Nous*, *Psyche*, and Matter from the One.

Undoubtedly, the reason Plotinus' teachings were among the first Greek texts to be translated into Arabic was because Muslim philosophers and theologians recognized a close correspondence between the *Enneads* and the revelations of the *Qur'an*, particularly the precept of *Tawhid*. The two sources share a single formal structure that relies on hierarchy and emanation. In both intellectual traditions, reality expands outward in rigorously ordered spheres from a perfect Unity to base matter.

However, both Neo-Platonism and Islam conceive of this hierarchical emanation in reverse as well; that is, the purpose of each outer sphere is to contemplate the center, the One, directly. The unmediated connection of all being to the First Principle, or *Tawhid*, was the most compelling attribute of the new religion.

Even though construction of the Dome of the Rock preceded the major translations of Plotinus, by the time it was constructed the pervasive character of Neo-Platonism in eastern Mediterranean cultures had had a profound influence on the development of Islamic philosophy and expressions of its faith. A succession of Islamic treatises in following centuries echoed the impact of Greek ideas on the young religion. One example is the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa* (The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) written by a group of philosophers, probably residing in Basra in the ninth and tenth centuries AD. The *Rasa'il* were a compendium of Islamic philosophical concepts that had probably been conveyed in an oral tradition and in fragmentary texts for several centuries. They restated Plotinus' teachings in Islamic terms as an emanationist hierarchy originating in the Creator (*al-Bari*). Using Plotinus' simile of the sun, they described the spontaneous emanation of the Universal Active Intellect (*al-'Aql al-Kulli al-Fa'al*), comparable to the *Nous*, from the One as light pours forth spontaneously (*fiyd*) from the eye of the sun. Likewise the Universal Soul (*al-Nafs al-Kulliyya*), or *Psyche*, is the next sphere, followed by Prime Matter (*al-Hayula 'L-Ula*).¹³ Furthermore, the *Rasa'il* linked Plotinus' model to Pythagorean numerology by assigning the meanings of numbers to the concentric spheres. Creation, therefore, resembled the formation of numbers from One. Following the One at its center, the Active Intellect had the attributes of Two by virtue of the duality of object and subject; the Universal Soul represented the fusion of opposites to form a third entity, life, and so had the attributes of Three; and Prime Matter had the attributes of Four because matter assumes form in space, a process symbolized by the four vertices of the first spatial figure, the tetrahedron.¹⁴

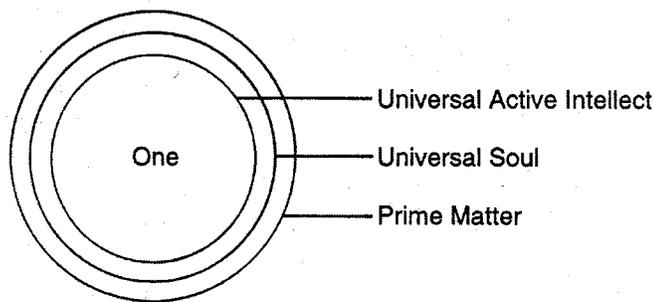


Fig. 2. *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa*: the diagram of the emanationist model of Reality.

We find an expression of these ideas in the plan of the Dome of the Rock, whereby a series of concentric rings emanate from the sacred stone. A sequence of circles and squares relate the rings to one another as precisely as Plotinus' description of celestial choreography. If we inscribe the central stone in a circle, then a square formed of four tangents to the circle identifies the positions of the four principal piers of the first enclosing arcade. A larger circle encloses the first square and, again, we can construct a second square from four tangents to the larger circle. This produces the position and dimension of the second arcade. Another iteration of this procedure produces the size and position of the outermost wall of the building. This geometric progression creates a consistent proportional relation among circles and squares. Each circle encloses precisely twice the area of its predecessor; the same is true of each pair of squares. Likewise, the radius of each circle is larger than its predecessor by a factor of the square root of two; and the same relation holds for the ratios of sides among the progression of squares. This system produces three rings of mass and three spaces.

The innermost, that encloses the stone, is inaccessible and represents the One. The next space, by virtue of its proximity to the center and the visual dominance of a low stone railing at its inner boundary, has a strong suggestion of facing inward toward the stone. It is not a space for movement, but rather encourages prayer and contemplation, comparable to Plotinus' description of the immobile *Nous* reflecting in stillness its relation to the One. The third, outermost space is visually removed from the center. Pilgrims cannot see the stone from this space. It is clearly intended for circumambulation, a circular movement that reflects Plotinus' description of the endless motion of *Psyche*, or the Soul, in its search for some means to unite with the One. Finally, through the four entrances that pierce the outermost ring and face the cardinal directions of the terrestrial plane, lies the world of Base Matter.

The plan of the Dome of the Rock thus closely resembles the cosmological model that Plotinus described. The building is in this sense a *mandala*, a device for contemplating a metaphysical vision of the cosmos. Its concentric shells are precisely proportioned, shaped, and aligned to produce an unequivocal hierarchy that emanates from the sacred stone.

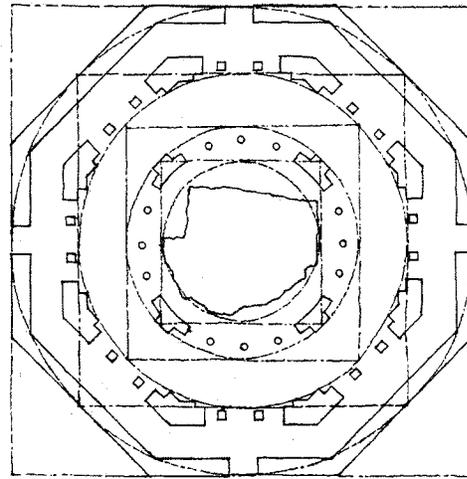


Fig. 3. The Dome of the Rock: the geometry of the plan by which nested circles and squares emanate from the center and produce a regular progression based on the relation of tangency. Each circle and square increases in area by a factor of 2 from its predecessor.

The compelling nature of this building reflects yet another dimension of Neo-Platonic thought. In the second *Ennead*, Plotinus used an allegory of an ill-fated tortoise to convey the inexorable progression of order in the cosmos:

"Those parts which move in opposition to that natural course will suffer, but those which are borne along as parts of the whole will fare beautifully. The former will be destroyed because they are unable to endure the order of the whole. Consider this analogy: a tortoise was caught in the midst of a great company of dancers as they were moving in an orderly advance and was trampled upon because it could not escape the orderly movement of the chorus. Yet if it had fitted itself into that movement, it too would have suffered no harm from them."¹⁵

As James Miller has explained, this was not an argument for blind, timid conformity. Plotinus was urging us to participate physically and intellectually in the harmonious, living cosmos. His story illustrates the rationality of obeying the natural order and of perceiving life from the perspective of the whole rather than of the part. "Had [the tortoise] only moved with the chorus, its life would have been improved as well

as saved. It would have 'fared beautifully,' contributing what it could to the aesthetic enhancement of the spectacle and sharing in the benefits of its harmonious order."¹⁶

I suspect that this aspect of Neo-Platonic thought became a central issue in a political struggle within the Umayyad dynasty and the design of the Dome of the Rock played an important role in the ensuing controversy. By the last decade of the 7th century AD, the Umayyad clan emerged from a civil war in control of the caliphate. Though now consolidated militarily, politically, and bureaucratically, the empire faced a theological challenge that threatened to split it again. Contestants in the civil war had grown to rely on non-Arab Muslims, the *mawali*, or clients, who were largely Persians and former Christians. These converts brought foreign values and ideas to Islam and increasingly influenced the philosophical foundations of the religion. Having endured Byzantine and Persian tyrannies, the *mawali* no doubt found Islam superior by virtue of its ostensibly egalitarian creed. The emergence of a new tyranny, an Imperial Islamic dynasty under the Umayyads, was therefore galling, and in the *mawali* view, anathema to the precepts of Islam. A movement grew among dissident theologians that challenged the legitimacy of the theocracy entrenched in Damascus.

The controversy turned on the question of *qadar*, or the ability of individuals to act with free will and to be accountable for their actions. The official Umayyad position was that God pre-ordained all human actions, as he did all other phenomena in the world. The doctrine of predestination, or *jabr*, conveniently included the behavior of the Caliphs, who were thereby absolved from the consequences of their actions, no matter how reprehensible. In the official view, power in every form was attributed to God alone; the power that individuals exercised was merely an extension of Divine power. Individual actions, whether having the appearance of being good or bad, were attributed to humans only figuratively as they were also to other forms of life (e.g., water flows and flowers bloom) without any implications of free will. Adherents to the rival *qadari* view eventually coalesced around what was later known as the *Mu'tazilite* movement that argued that by virtue of God's wisdom and justice, He could only command what was right and prohibit what was wrong. People were free to act on God's behalf or face the consequences. Those who disregarded God's will were responsible for their actions and subject to His judgment.¹⁷

The antithetical positions of *qadar* and *jabr*, of free will and determinism, raised fundamental questions about the Faith. From the perspective of the Umayyads, who were primarily interested in the consolidation of their political power, the libertarian position of *qadar* threatened the legitimacy of the dynasty. By the time the Umayyad Caliph, 'Abd al-Malik began planning the construction of the Dome of the Rock, he also needed to confront this vexing theological controversy. In addition to supporting determinist theologians who espoused the State-sponsored doctrine of *jabr* in schools throughout the empire, the Caliph seized the opportunity to infuse the first monumental work of Islamic art with symbolism that ratified the official position of the State. It is likely that 'Abd al-Malik interpreted the rigorously hierarchical and concentric plan of the Dome of the Rock as an expression of a totalitarian determinism emanating from the center and spreading throughout the cosmos, leaving no room for free will. On the one hand, the monument was a declaration of faith that paralleled the Neo-Platonic conception of God, while on the other, it was a metaphor for the irresistible, centralized power of the theocratic State.

So there are several compelling reasons why 'Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock in respect to the political and theological contests of his time. There is an essential difference in the meaning of the Dome of the Rock from that of the other sacred sites of

Mecca and Medina. The sites in Arabia were associated with the birth of Islam and remained entirely religious in significance. The Dome of the Rock, however, is inextricably connected to the creation of the first unified Islamic State. And, as we have seen, its symbolism crosses the boundary between purely religious ideals and political motivations. Neo-Platonic philosophy served both purposes well by confirming the theological principle of *Tawhid* and simultaneously providing a symbolic model for the emerging theocracy.

NOTES

¹Qu'ran 17:1.

²A common argument for its political function has been that its founder, the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik, built it in 692 AD as a counter-*Ka'aba* when Mecca was in the hands of his rival 'Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr. This hypothesis has been convincingly refuted by Sheila Blair who points out that 'Abd al-Malik had won the civil war before the Dome of the Rock was begun; that as a devout Muslim, or at least as an astute politician, he would not have committed such blatant blasphemy; and that the Dome of the Rock conforms to the custom of pointing toward Mecca, despite its concentric form, by means of a subtle shift in the pattern of mosaics on its outer arcade at the south portal which is the proper position of the *qibla*. See; Sheila Blair, "What is the date of the Dome of the Rock?" In *Bayt al-Maqdis, 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, ed Julian Raby (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1992), 77.

³Centrally domed structures, used as shrines, baptisteries, martyria, and mausolea, were common in Late Antique and Early Christian architecture, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean. The Dome of the Rock echoes the dimensions and the plan of the nearby Church of the Anastasis (Holy Sepulcher). See: Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 107; and Sheila Blair, 70.

⁴Major centers of Greek philosophy and theology were in Antioch, Harran, Edessa, Qinnasrin in northern Syria, and in Nisibis and Ras'aina in northern Iraq. These, however, depended to a great extent upon texts provided in the School of Alexandria. See: Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 13.

⁵Richard Walzer, *Greek Into Arabic, Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Cassirer, 1962), 35.

⁶Fakhry, 16-17.

⁷Fakhry, 33.

⁸James Miller, *Measures of Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 151.

⁹Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephan MacKenna (New York: Larson, 1992), 4.4.33.

¹⁰Plotinus, 3.2.2.

¹¹A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), 35.

¹²Armstrong, 36.

¹³Rasa'il 1, 53.

¹⁴Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists, An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 34.

¹⁵Plotinus 2.9.7.

¹⁶Miller, 147.

¹⁷Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford: One World, 1997), 14-17.