

**IZUTSU'S APPROACH TO  
THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS:  
AN ASSESSMENT OF HIS *SUFISM AND TAOISM***

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**Introduction**

Doing comparison is man's 'business as usual'. Even the simple person does it in his daily affairs in order to get a better choice. However, to do it scholarly or scientifically has been evidently and exceptionally the concern of sophisticated minds throughout the ages. Especially when the comparison involves belief systems or religions toward which complete neutrality or objectivity is almost impossible.<sup>1</sup> Hence arose the important question on "who should carry out the exercise" and "how it should be carried out" in the long and fierce debates among the scholars and students of modern study of religions.

As for the former, there seems to be no conclusive and objective answer as to whether the student of comparative study of religions must be a religious or non-religious person (skeptic and atheist). And it is quite unlikely to have such an answer,<sup>2</sup> since the very question is actually problematic. Because, in the final analysis, man has never been human, and cannot continue to be so, without a "set of value" in which he/she believes to be the ultimate *truth*, so that based upon this "set of value", he/she judges, evaluates, and selects. Accordingly, it will certainly make no difference whether we call it religion or not.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yet according to Søren Kierkegaard, "religion is something that toward which neutrality is not possible." [Quoted in Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 9].

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, for instance, tries to discuss in his *Comparative Religion* the question and concludes finally with an answer which is in favour of the religious. [Geoffrey Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, [1962] 1976), pp. 65, 120].

<sup>3</sup> That religion has been the main source and supplier of value is self-evident and commonly

Whilst the latter, apparently the major discussions are addressed mainly to the issue of “descriptiveness-normativeness” or “objectivity-subjectivity” along with the types of approach to the study of religions (i.e., psychological, sociological, anthropological, historical, phenomenological, etc.),<sup>4</sup> neglecting the issue of what we may call “representation”, which is equally (if not more) important to be taken into account, in order for the study to have its expected validity, credibility and commendability. This is true especially when the study involves a comparison between two or more religions. Otherwise, in the absence of the valid representation, it will be invalid, non-credible and non-commendable.

However, as far as my humble readings can tell, there are only very few scholars who really have paid due attention to this issue of “representation”, although many of them may have implemented this principle implicitly in their works. From the classical scholars, among these few, is Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī (d.381 AH/922 CE),<sup>5</sup> a prominent Muslim philosopher, who deliberately addressed this issue and made it crystal clear in the introduction to his work on “comparative study of religion” under the title *al-I‘lām bi-Manāqib al-Islām*, in which he compared “six world religions” between each other.<sup>6</sup> He was fully

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undeniable. But evidently, the ideologies and *isms* have remarkably functioned the same throughout the ages. In this regard, Paul Tillich observed that:

The outside observer is always an inside participant with a part of his being, for he also has confessed or concealed answers to the questions which underlie every form of religion. If does not profess a religion proper, he nevertheless belongs to a quasi-religion, and as consequence he also selects, judges, and evaluates. [Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 2].

Since by design they are usually meant as alternative to religions *proper*, some modern scholars simply call them “quasi-religions” [see: Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*], or “worldviews”, “semi-religions”, “weltanschauungs” [see: Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs* (London: Harper Collins, 1996)].

<sup>4</sup> See a critical analysis of this issue: Anis Malik Thoha, “Objectivity and the Study of Religion,” in *Intellectual Discourse*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2009, pp. 83-92.

<sup>5</sup> He is Muḥammad ibn Abī Dharr Yūsuf al-‘Āmirī al-Nisābūrī, well-known as Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī, born in Nisābūr in the beginnings of 4<sup>th</sup> century AH, died in the same city in 381 AH/922 CE. [Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-‘Āmirī, *al-I‘lām bi-Manāqib al-Islām*, edited by Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ghurāb (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī li al-Ṭibā‘ati wa al-Nashr, 1387 AH/1967 CE), p. 6].

<sup>6</sup> Based on the Qur’anic *āyah* 17, sūrah al-Ḥajj:

﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّالِحِينَ وَالصَّانِعِينَ وَالْمَجُوسَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا إِنَّكَ اللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ﴾

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aware that many of the writers and researchers had, wittingly or unwittingly, ignored this important issue. Further he said:

The description of merit of a thing against the other by way of comparing between the two could be right or otherwise. The right form is subject to two conditions. First, one must not make comparison except between the two similar types, i.e. he must not resort purposely to the noblest thing in this, then he compares it with the lowest in its counterpart; nor must he resort purposely to a principle among the principles of this, then he compares it with a branch among the branches of the other. Second, one must not resort purposely to a qualified property in some sect, which is not extensive in its whole, but then he attributes it to all of its classes.

Whenever the intelligent one observes these two conditions in comparing between things it will be easy for him to fulfill all the portions of comparisons adhering to the right in his exercise.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of whether al-‘Āmirī, in his work, was committed to what he had stated above or not (this is subject to further research), it is worth emphasizing here that these two principles of comparative study espoused by him in this passage – i.e., (i) the two (or more) objects of comparison must be of the same level in all respects, and (ii) each of them must be the qualified “representative” of its constituents – are logically and incontestably self-evident.

Meanwhile, among the modern scholars in the comparative study of religion, who have the same concern is Robert Charles Zaehner (1913-1974). He stated vividly in his *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* that:

It is quite absurd, for example, to quote the late philosophic mystic, Ibn al-‘Araby, as an authentic exponent of the Muslim Tradition since he has been rejected by the majority of the orthodox as being heretical.... *Such a ‘method’ has nothing to commend it.* It merely serves to irritate those who are genuinely puzzled by the diversity of the world’s great religions.<sup>8</sup>

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Al-‘Āmirī confined the number of world religions to six only: Islam, Judaism, Sabeanism, Christianity, Magianism, and Polytheism. [see Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-‘Āmirī, *op. cit.*]

<sup>7</sup> The original Arabic text is as follows:

إن تبيان فضيلة الشيء على الشيء بحسب المقابلات بينهما قد يكون صواباً وقد يكون خطأ . وصورة الصواب معلقة بشيئين: أحدهما: ألا يوقع المقايسة إلا بين الأشكال المتجانسة، أعني ألا يعتمد إلى أشرف ما في هذا فيقيسه بأرذل ما في صاحبه، ويعتمد إلى أصل من أصول هذا فيقابله بفرع من فروع ذلك . والآخر: ألا يعتمد إلى خلة موصوفة في فرقة من الفرق، غير مستفيضة في كافتها، فينسبها إلى جملة طبقاتها . ومتى حافظ العاقل في المقابلة بين الأشياء على هذين المعنيين فقد سهل عليه المأخذ في توفية حظوظ المقابلات، وكان ملازماً للصواب في أمره. [al-‘Āmirī, *op. cit.*, p. 127].

<sup>8</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 31. (emphasis added).

It is clear that, according to both al-‘Āmirī and Zaehner, in order for the comparative study of religions to be credible and commendable, it must fulfill the requirements of “representation” adequately.

### **Preliminary Assessment of Izutsu’s Approach**

Perhaps, the book entitled *Sufism and Taoism* is the only work of Professor Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993) which might fall under the discipline of comparative study of religion, in its narrowest sense. Although it is unclear whether he has purposely wished it to be so or not, yet he did make it clear that it is a work meant for a comparison. Moreover, according to him, it is a structural comparison between the two “worldviews” – one of which is sufistic (Islamic) and the other Taoist, that have no historical connection. He said further:

[T]he main purpose of the present work in its entirety is to attempt a structural comparison between the worldview of Sufism [Islam] as represented by Ibn ‘Arabī and the worldview of Taoism as represented by Lao-tzū and Chuang-tzū....

[T]he dominant motive running through the entire work is *the desire to open a new vista in the domain of comparative philosophy and mysticism*.<sup>9</sup>

The term “worldview” and “*weltanschauung*” is increasingly used in the contemporary religious and philosophical studies to mean religion exchangeably.<sup>10</sup> And on top of that, the work is deliberately written by the author to facilitate the existing inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue by providing an alternative ground to the current practices, which he calls “meta-historical or transhistorical dialogue”, borrowing Professor Henri Corbin’s term “*un dialogue dans la métahistoire*”.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the main task of this essay is focusing exclusively on this particular issue of approach used by Professor Izutsu in this particular work, in order to assess the extent to which it is logically and comparatively adequate, credible and commendable. No doubt at all that his extensive study of the key philosophical concepts of Ibn ‘Arabī

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<sup>9</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, [1983] 1984), p. 1. (emphasis added)

<sup>10</sup> See the footnote 3 above.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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(1165-1240) and Lao-tzū and Chuang-tzū, taken independently, is exceptionally excellent, as so are his other works seem to be. However, when it is seen from a comparative perspective properly, taking into account that it is principally meant by the author as a comparative study – and not just any comparison but a structural comparison between the two worldviews, a crucial question is indeed in order. It is a question on whether the issue of representation for these two worldviews has been addressed adequately in this work or not. In other words, whether the representatives (figures and thoughts) selected by Izutsu in this work do represent adequately the two worldviews respectively, that is, Ibn 'Arabī for Sufism and Lao-tzū and Chuang-tzū for Taoism.

As far as Taoism is concerned, I think nobody will dispute or disagree with Izutsu. For all scholars (insiders as well as outsiders) on this religion unanimously recognized Lao-tzū and Chuang-tzū as founders of Taoism, and their thoughts as representing the mainstream of Taoism.<sup>12</sup> Thus, such a question of representation does no longer arise. (Therefore, this essay will not touch this issue with regard to Taoism). But the case is totally different with regard to Ibn 'Arabī in Sufism, let alone in Islam. Although his followers and admirers recognized him as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the greatest master),<sup>13</sup> his thoughts are by no means the mainstream of Sufism. Yet, contrary to that, they are considered by the majority of 'ulamā' (Muslim scholars) as deviating from the mainstream of Sufism and, above all, of Islamic thought in general. The main charge against Ibn 'Arabī is his unusual and unorthodox thought which is commonly identified as pantheism, the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Since this line of sufistic thought has never been known in the early tradition of Islam, especially in the Prophet's tradition, the Muslim scholars tend to consider it as heresy or heterodoxy (*bid'ah*).<sup>14</sup> Hence, later on, many of

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<sup>12</sup> All references on world religions and faiths confirm this fact. See for instance: Huston Smith, *Religions of Man* (New York, Cambridge, London: Perennia Library – Harper & Row Publishers, [1958] 1965); Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, [1969] 12th impression 1982); S. A. Nigosian, *World Faiths* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> The title of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the greatest master) for Ibn 'Arabī became well-known after Sultan Salim I issued a decree in 922 AH to build a mosque in Damascus on the name of this Sufi master. [See Dr. Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥājj Yūsuf, *Shams al-Gharb: Sīrah al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī wa-Madhabuh* (Aleppo: Dār Fuṣṣilat, 1427/2006), p. 16].

<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Taqīyy al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyyah in his *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, Vol. 2, p. 143; 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddimah*, (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabah al-Hilāl, 1983), pp. 206, 297; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Uthmān Al-Dhahabī,

the contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Abū al-Wafā' al-Taftāzānī, term it as “heretical Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-bid'ī*) to be distinguished from the one which is “traditional” (*al-taṣawwuf al-sunnī*) following the mainstream tradition of Islam. And because the former is more philosophical in nature, it is also known as “philosophical Sufism” (*al-taṣawwuf al-falsafī*).<sup>15</sup> At any rate, the foregoing discussion has clearly shown that the place of Ibn 'Arabī in Sufism is far beyond the mainstream. Therefore, any attempt to introduce this *Shaykh* as representative of Sufism is methodologically questionable.

This question becomes more vibrant, pertinent and crucial when the comparative study is meant specifically as an attempt to embark on propagating certain agenda (be it ideological, philosophical or religious), such as *philosophia perennis* which is very controversial and to which Professor Izutsu seems to belong and subscribe ardently, or, rather idealizes. It is well-established that scholars in the discipline of comparative study of religion are particularly very sensitive to such an agenda, emphasizing the necessity to freeing it from any sort of attempts that would eventually divert and disqualify its neutrality and objectivity. Regardless of the question pertaining to the possibility and impossibility of full-fledge neutrality and objectivity, Izutsu rather spells this agenda out clearly following his conviction with “*un dialogue dans la métahistoire*” or “meta-historical or transhistorical dialogue”, as he states:

And meta-historical dialogues, conducted methodologically, will, I believe, eventually be crystallized into a *philosophia perennis* in the fullest sense of the term. For the philosophical drive of the human Mind is, regardless of ages, places and nations, ultimately and fundamentally one.

I readily admit that the present work is far from even coming close to this *ideal*.<sup>16</sup>

Although *philosophia perennis*, as a school of philosophy, badly needs in itself to be studied and analyzed further, but since the main concern of this essay is on the issue of methodological approach employed by

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in his *Siyar al-A'lam al-Nubalā'*, Vol. 23 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 11<sup>th</sup> Printing, 1422 H./2001M.), pp. 48-9.

<sup>15</sup> Further detail, see for instance: Dr. Abū al-Wafā' al-Ghunaymī al-Taftāzānī, *al-Madkhal ilā al-Taṣawwuf al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1988); and Abū Muḥammad Raḥīm al-Dīn Nawawī al-Bantanī, *Madkhal ilā al-Taṣawwuf al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Amān, 1424 H./2003 M.).

<sup>16</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 469. (emphasis in the second paragraph added)

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Izutsu, we should confine ourselves to this approach leaving aside the study and analysis of this school of philosophy in detail to the other relevant works.<sup>17</sup>

It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that Izutsu's perennial tendency is not clearly spelt out in any of his works other than *Sufism and Taoism*. Not even in his *The Concept and Reality of the Existence*<sup>18</sup> and *God and Man in the Koran*<sup>19</sup> which are rightly supposed to address the point elaboratively and clearly. Probably this is the main reason why many of the students and scholars on Izutsu fail to notice this point. For instance, in his presentation under the title "Communicating Pure Consciousness Events: Using Izutsu to address A Problem in the Philosophy of Mysticism," Dr. Sajjad H. Rizvi from University of Exeter, UK, on the conviction of the possibility of 'pure consciousness experience' (PCE) of mystical experience, tried all out to argue that Izutsu is far from being a perennialist,<sup>20</sup> ignoring the very fact of text written by himself above which is quite straight forward and, thus, obviously self-evident. Indeed, even in this latter work of Izutsu, a careful and meticulous reading of the chapter "Existentialism East and West," will surely show, though by way of inference, the perennial tendency of Izutsu. He says:

.... Then we shall notice with amazement how close these two kinds of philosophy [Western existentialism and Islamic existentialism] are to each other in their most basic structure. For it will become evident to us that both go back to *one and the same root of experience, or primary vision, of the reality of existence*. This primary vision is known in Islam as *aṣālat al-wujūd*, i.e. the "fundamental reality of existence".<sup>21</sup>

The phrase "both go back to *one and the same root of experience, or primary vision, of the reality of existence*," is a typical expression of

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<sup>17</sup> There are studies on the perennial philosophy or *Sophia perennis*. And I have a humble contribution to this study in my book, *Al-Ta'addudiyah al-Dīniyyah: Ru'yah Islāmiyyah* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of the Existence* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (North Stratford: Ayer Co. Publisher, [1964] repr. 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Communicating Pure Consciousness Events: Using Izutsu to Address A Problem in the Philosophy of Mysticism," a paper presented in the *International Conference on Contemporary Scholarship on Islam: Japanese Contribution to Islamic Studies – The Legacy of Toshihiko Izutsu*, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 5-7 August 2008, and is included in this volume, pp. 157-170.

<sup>21</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of the Existence*, p. 27. (emphasis added)

the perennialism (*Sophia Perennis* or *al-Hikmah al-Khālidah*). “The Masters”<sup>22</sup> of this school of philosophy expressed it differently: René Guénon (1886-1951) used a phrase *the Multiple States of Being*;<sup>23</sup> Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), in *The Perennial Philosophy*, paraphrased it as “the Highest Common Factor;”<sup>24</sup> Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) called it *the Transcendent Unity of Religion*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism* is comparable to one of René Guénon’s *posthumous* collections entitled *Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism*.<sup>26</sup>

### **Why not Islam and Taoism?**

The foregoing analysis might lead eventually to such questions as, firstly, why Izutsu deliberately chooses *Sufism and Taoism* for his comparative study, rather than *Islam and Taoism*; and, secondly, why he chooses Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī *per se* among the prominent sufi figures. Of course, only Izutsu does know exactly the precise answer to this question. However, in the discipline of comparative study of religion today, scholars have discussed extensively the hypothetical definition of religion, and, thus, come up with some sort of typology of religions. Some of them have attempted to classify religions into “mystical” and “prophetic”, emphasizing that mysticism is “the highest type of religions”, as was commonly suggested by perennialists and transcendentalists. Accordingly, it is quite convenient for them to do a comparative study between Sufism and Taoism. Indeed, as I have just mentioned above, René Guénon wrote articles published later on in his *posthumous* collections entitled *Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism*. From this perspective, Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism* has been considered by some contemporary scholars, such as Professor Kojiro

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<sup>22</sup> In his works, Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon as “The Masters”.

<sup>23</sup> René Guénon, *The Multiple States of Being*, (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, [1932] 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Fontana Books, [1944] 3rd impression 1961).

<sup>25</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, translated from French by William Stoddart (Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, [1978] 1981); and his *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, translated from French by Peter Townsend (New York, London: Harper Torchbooks, [1948] 1975); also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘The *Philosophia Perennis* and the Study of Religion,’ in Frank Whaling (ed.), *The World’s Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984), pp. 181-200; and his *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, [1981] 1988).

<sup>26</sup> René Guénon, *Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2003).

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Nakamura, a prominent Japanese scholar in comparative religion,<sup>27</sup> as a significant contribution which might offer a new vista in the field of comparative religion and interreligious dialogue. But then, whether Sufism is mysticism is actually a highly debatable question that badly needs further research and study. What is clear from the above discussion is that, as far as the Muslim scholars are concerned, they distinguished Sufism into *sunni* (traditional) and *falsafi* (philosophical). And even if philosophical Sufism could be readily labeled mysticism, it represents only a part, nay a small part, of Sufism.

As for the second question, it seems that Izutsu's selection of Ibn 'Arabī, and not other *ṣūfī* figures, as the representative of Sufism is simply because the main interest of Izutsu is actually to establish what he called a "common language" which, according to him, is a necessary ground for the projected meta-historical dialogues could be made possible. He put it as follows:

These considerations would seem to lead us to a very important methodological problem regarding the possibility of meta-historical dialogues. The problem concerns the need of a common linguistic system. This is only natural because the very concept of 'dialogue' presupposes the existence of a *common language* between two interlocutors.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, this "common language", which is in the form of "key-terms and concepts", is hardly to be found in the predominant and "authoritative" Islamic thought (*kalām*) and philosophy that are grounded directly on the Qur'anic and *Sunnatic* (traditional) principles as well-represented in the thoughts and works of, for instance, al-Ghazālī,<sup>29</sup> al-Qushayrī<sup>30</sup> and the likes. Somehow, this is a matter of fact that has been recognized and realized by Izutsu himself indirectly when he wrote his *God and Man in the Koran*, in which he dealt with these two grand key-terms and concepts mainly from Qur'anic perspective. In this work, the "common language", in the sense of that which he wanted eagerly to establish in his comparison between *Sufism and Taoism*, is completely absent, though the main thrust of the

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<sup>27</sup> Kojiro Nakamura, "The Significance of Izutsu's Legacy for Comparative Religion," a paper presented in the *International Conference on Contemporary Scholarship on Islam: Japanese Contribution to Islamic Studies – The Legacy of Toshihiko Izutsu*, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 5-7 August 2008, and is included in this volume, pp. 171-180.

<sup>28</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, p. 471. (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*.

<sup>30</sup> See his *Al-Risālah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990).

two works is almost, if not totally, the same, viz. about God and man.

Instead, the “common language” or “philosophical ground” for a comparative study, or a dialogue, between *Sufism and Taoism* is only to be found easily and definitely in such thoughts of the mystics or philosophers as that of Ibn ‘Arabī’s. Perhaps this is that can best explain the reason of Izutsu’s selection of Ibn ‘Arabī. But unfortunately the “common language” of those mystics is unintelligible, and thus, unacceptable by the majority of the *ṣūfīs*, let alone the traditional Muslim thinkers.

## **Conclusion**

Seen from a comparative perspective, Izutsu’s *Sufism and Taoism* might be listed under the discipline of comparative study of religion (in the narrowest sense of the term). It is even more so as Professor Toshihiko Izutsu has made it clear in the introduction and conclusion of the book. Scholars in the discipline have painstakingly been discussing and debating on subjects pertaining to the approaches or methodologies appropriate to conduct the study in order to ascertain its objectivity and credibility. It is particularly this crucial issue of approach that this essay has tried to focus on by assessing Izutsu’s contribution to the field. The main question of this essay has been the problem of “representation,” viz. how methodologically justifiable it is to do a comparative study between, on the one hand, the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī as representative of Sufism which is “unorthodox” in the Sufistic trends, let alone in Islam, and on the other, that of Lao-tzū and Chuang-tzū as representative of “the main stream” of Taoism.

Although the academic attempts made by this great scholar to explore and find alternative way that leads to the possibility of meta-historical dialogues must be duly acknowledged and credited, but taking into account the issue of “representation” mentioned above and looking at the underlying motive and main objective of the comparative study undertaken by Izutsu in this work, one is sufficiently reasonably justified to cast doubt on the credibility and commendability of the approach used by him and, in turn, on the common ground he proposed.