When propositioned with the question “If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only have one book with you, which would it be?” it is books like *Know Yourself* which come to mind. Why? The short answer is that it is a crystallization of transcendent wisdom that speaks across the religions and directs the reader to their innermost center. The book is proof that it is the Divine alone that makes the Divine known to the human individual and not the human ‘per se’ who can deign to know the Divine. It is not the human individual as a separate ego identity that comes to know the Divine, but the Divine in the human individual that comes to know Itself. From the purely human perspective, Divine’s grace and intercession are required.

The interesting way in which this work was introduced to the contemporary West is outlined in the introduction to the book under review. The first English translation was undertaken by Thomas Hunter Weir (1865-1928) and published in 1901 by the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* under the heading “Translation of an Arabic Manuscript in the Hunterian Collection, Glasgow University”. In 1976 it appeared
under the title “Whoso Knoweth Himself...” from the Treatise on Being (Risale-t-ul-wujudiyyah), and it was reissued in 1988 under the same title. Know Yourself is a new translation completed by using several Arabic manuscripts from libraries in the United Kingdom, Turkey and Syria. Cecilia Twinch, Senior Research Fellow of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society and translator of this volume explains why this revised translation is significant, “Know Yourself is intended to be as accessible as possible to people with no knowledge of Arabic and who do not necessarily have much knowledge of the cultural context of the book.” (p. 3)

Another curious phenomenon concerning this work is that while it is often attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi and undoubtedly was created under his spiritual influence, it was likely penned by Awhad al-Din Balyani (d. 686/1288). Balyani, a Persian Sufi master from Shiraz, was thought to have been a student of the Andalusian poet Shushtari (1212-1269), who in turn was an exemplary student of the Sufi philosopher Ibn Sab’in (1217-1268), a close contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as “the greatest master” (asb-Shaykh al-akbar). In fact, both Ibn Sab’in and Ibn ‘Arabi were from Murcia. The magnitude of Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence within the Islamic world is immense, he has produced what some estimate to be three hundred books, yet only ninety-three or so survive today. Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), pre-eminent Islamic philosopher and renowned scholar of comparative religion, speaks to Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence: “[I]t would not be an exaggeration to say that Ibn ‘Arabi is the most influential intellectual figure in the Islamic world during the past seven centuries, if the whole world is considered.”

1 The mystery that surrounds the authorship of this book has captivated Western intelligentsia and scholars alike:

Abdul Hadi—otherwise known as the Swedish painter and author Ivan Aguéli [1869-1917], who initiated the well-known French scholar René Guénon [1886-1951] into Sufism and founded the secret Sufi society Al-Akbariya in

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2 “Guénon was initiated [in 1912] by Aguéli into the Sufi tariqah, by receiving the barakab or blessing at his hands.” (Robin Waterfield, ‘Finding,’ in René Guénon and the Future of the West: The Life and Writings of a 20th-Century Metaphysician [Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2002], p. 29). It is worth mentioning that it was the Egyptian Sufi Shaykh Abd al-Rahman Ilaysh al-Kabir (1840-1921), who initiated Aguéli into Sufism in 1902 through the Shadhiliyah-‘Arabiyyah Tariqah and to whom Guénon dedicated his book Le Symbolisme de la Croix [The Symbolism of the Cross] (1931).
Paris in 1911—published an Italian version of the treatise in 1907, followed by a French translation which appeared in the journal *La Gnose* in Cairo in 1911. In the introduction to the French version, Abdul Hadi wrote that he was three-quarters of the way through his translation when he heard that the work had already been translated into English: ‘I don’t know where, or when, or by whom’. Although he notes that many manuscripts were attributed to Balyani or Balabani and other variations on the name, as well as to Suyuti, he was inwardly convinced that its author was Ibn ‘Arabi. (p. 70)

Professor Michel Chodkiewicz (b. 1929), formerly the Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, states that this book has been misattributed to Ibn ‘Arabi and that it was his disciple, Balyani, who wrote it, a view espoused also by Professor James Morris (b. 1949).

Martin Lings (1909-2005), Keeper of Oriental Manuscript in the British Museum and the British Library, wrote of the book’s significance: “It is one of the most important of all Sufic treatises.” 3 The reason for this remarkable appraisal is evident from the work itself.

Knowledge corresponds to multiple levels of Reality and not all knowledge corresponds to one and the same level. This is very important to understand. The two cardinal distinctions are the relative and the Absolute. This includes all modes of knowledge, from the sensible perception of the contingent to the direct or non-dual perception. Without this recognition, books like this one that speaks to the highest levels of spiritual realization can cause confusion in the mind of the reader. A sublime example of this and of integral metaphysics found in the perennial philosophy is made in the following statement found in this text: “You yourself are the object of your quest”. (p. 26) This may sound true for some, but what does this really mean? It is definitely not referring to “you” as you see yourself, but as a transpersonal identity. Statements like these are unintelligible to the empirical ego or rational mind and require a higher faculty of perception beyond the relative point of view, a cognitive vantage known within Sufism as the ‘aql or Intellect. It is this noetic faculty, sometimes known as the “eye of the heart”, which is immanent in the human individual and can directly perceive Truth. The

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following from the opening page preceding the text articulates whom the book is intended for:

We are speaking with those who have determination and energy in seeking knowledge of their self in order to know God, and who keep fresh in their heart the image of their seeking and longing for union with God, and not with those without aim or intention. (p. v)

It hardly needs mentioning that the pitfalls surrounding the contemporary seeker are myriad given the secular ambiance and the many spiritual parodies appearing to be authentic vehicles for spiritual realization. Religions in the contemporary world have become challenged with many ill-fated factors that did not previously exist in the manner that they do today. This is why seekers and travelers of the Path need to be ever more discerning about these matters.

Each word in this exposition attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi/Balyani is concisely situated to provide the directness of the Absolute. It is an unperishing elixir of other-worldly wisdom that seekers and travelers alike can be nourished by and, by grace, transfigured, bridging the transcendent and the immanent, rendering human identity in all of its complexity transparent and perceptibly Divine. “He is seen everywhere, according to the Quranic verse, Wherever you turn, there is the face of God [2:115]. Yet at the same time, God remains beyond our perception, Eyes do not perceive Him [6:103]. He is both transcendent and immanent, and He unites all opposites in Himself.” (p. 64) Again from one perspective the Divine is wholly other [“There is nothing like Him” (42:11)] and from another perspective the Divine is intimately close [“We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (50:16)]. In the Divine both can exist simultaneously without contradiction, as there are distinct levels of perception depending on the understanding of the human individual. According to Islam and its spiritual or Sufi psychology, the acme of human identity is none other than the Supreme Identity: “By the word ‘self’, the Prophet meant ‘being’. The being of the one who reaches this spiritual level is no longer their being whether inwardly or outwardly, but it is the very being of God.” (p. 45) Examples of transcendence and immanence, and of their identity, are found unanimously across the religions.

The primordial nature or fitrah that each human individual is born with is immutable despite the veils of forgetfulness that distort this
integral identity. This primordial nature nonetheless is always present despite the human individual’s experience in the world of duality. From this point of view we can understand the following statement: “There is no need for any change since that person was not the existence of their own essence but was simply ignorant of the knowledge of their self.” (p. 32) In the end only the Divine can know the Divine; Shankara states a similar principle in a slightly different manner, “Only the Self [Atma] knows the Self [Atma]”. With the continual remembrance of the Divine, the human individual is aware of its innate primordial nature. The Qur’an makes this clear: “Verily in the remembrance (al-dhikr) of Allah do hearts find rest!” (12:28) With the gradual obscuring of the primordial nature, one loses one’s way and cannot obtain salvation through any identity except one’s innately endowed nature. In fact to deny our primordial nature is, as Meister Eckhart expresses, paradoxically only to reaffirm the Divine as nothing exists outside the Divine: “The more he blasphemes, the more he praises God.” A non-dual understanding is elaborated here: “in reality there is neither union nor separation, distance or closeness, since union is only possible between two things and if there is only one there can be neither union nor separation.” (p. 37) Again, the reason for this is that nothing exists outside the Divine Unity, affirmed in the Islamic tradition by the principle of tawhid. From the point of view of Sufi metaphysics, Ibn ‘Arabi teaches the doctrine of wabdat al-wujud, the “Oneness of Being” or the “Unity of Existence”. The interconnectedness of the whole of Reality is made evident in passages such as: “When this secret is revealed to you, you will know that you are not other than God but that you yourself are the object of your quest.” (p. 26)

A final and important point covered in this work links to the issue of religious pluralism and ecumenical dialogue which is essential in today’s world. Each human collectivity has its own messengers sent by the Divine as articulated in the Qur’anic: “For every community [umma] there is a Messenger” (10:47). We need to go beyond approaches that solely advocate tolerance or coexistence among the world religions (undoubtedly worthy goals) to a deeper appreciation of the inner unity underlying the diversity of the faith traditions. The esoteric or mystical dimension is underscored in the following: “No sent prophet, perfect saint or angel brought close knows Him. His prophet is He, His messenger is He, His message is He and His word is He. He sent Himself
from Himself, through Himself to Himself. There is no intermediary or means other than Him. There is no difference between the sender, that which is sent and the one to whom it is sent.” (p. 19)

*Know Yourself* deserves to be included in every spiritual seeker's and traveler’s library, especially in a time when religion and spirituality have become so removed from the daily life of the human collectivity. Those interested in Sufi psychology, including perennial psychology, will also find this volume to be important. In our challenging age, having good books like this one becomes indispensable. It goes without saying that books alone cannot take the place of a formal spiritual affiliation nor can they be a substitute for spiritual guidance, as it is all-too-easy to lose one’s way on the Path. Yet books can serve an important role in the spiritual life and can certainly be a tremendous support. This sublime and slender volume, while originating within the Islamic tradition and its inner dimension of Sufism, contains keys that are found universally across all of the sapiential traditions. In essence, it is a condensed version of the essential truths found within the perennial philosophy, the heart of all religions. We are grateful for this revised translation of this remarkable book attributed to Ibn 'Arabi/Balyani which has been made available once again to readers in the West.