

Review of The Sufi path of knowledge: Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics of the imagination, by William Chittick

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REVIEW:

The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabî's Metaphysics of Imagination. By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. Albany: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS; 1989. Pp. xii + 478. \$74.50 (cloth); \$25.50 (paper).

This is the first English introduction to Ibn 'Arabî's truly *magnum opus*, the *Meccan Illuminations*, and the first introduction designed to prepare non-specialist readers to explore that famous mystic's writings on their own. (That a work of almost 500 double-column pages can still be termed an introduction is a reflection at once of the breadth of Ibn 'Arabî's own ambitions, the very length of the *Futûhât* itself—a text as prolix as his better known *Fuṣûṣ al-Hikam* is condensed—and the ongoing depth of that writer's influence in later Islamic civilization.) Previous scholarly works on Ibn 'Arabî's, including the classic studies by Nyberg, Asin-Palacios, Corbin and Izutsu, have typically sought to present what those authors believed to be most relevant or interesting to their own diverse modern audiences. Whatever the merits of those various approaches, only specialists already well acquainted with the Arabic texts could judge how adequately they conveyed the original and to what extent their interpretations (as is almost inevitable with Ibn 'Arabî) had taken on an inspired life and direction of their own. Thus the specific focus on Ibn 'Arabî's *own* aims in this most recent study is not simply a function of the anthologizing method—which could easily have been applied to generate yet another "system," as with the famous Islamic commentators on whom Prof. Chittick has written in the past. More important, it also reflects an ongoing, collective scholarly effort that has done much in recent years to bring into clearer focus the particular intellectual and social contexts of Ibn 'Arabî's (and many other Sufis') writing and teaching, thereby liberating the appreciation of his creative personal contributions and often original perspectives from the centuries of later philosophic and poetic reworkings and religious polemics that have come to be associated with his name. (Those efforts are especially well represented in the recent major biographical studies by M. Chodkiewicz and C. Addas, soon to be available in English translation.)

The overall presentation and order of subjects in this volume is that adopted by Ibn 'Arabî himself (following earlier Kalâm) in the doctrinal summaries within his own introduction to the *Futûhât*: it begins with the cosmic theological and ontological context of human action (parts 1-3 here), and then continues in greater detail with the processes and pitfalls of spiritual realization (the soul's "Return," parts 4-7), which for this mystic involve above all the indispensable symbolic workings of the (individual and cosmic) "Imagination"—hence the subtitle of this work. But while this initial division might suggest the sort of systematic philosophic approach so typical of one influential line of later Muslim commentators, from Qunawî on down to Mullâ Sadrâ and Sabzawârî, readers will find that Prof. Chittick's careful reliance on Ibn 'Arabî's own words, through

nearly 700 translated passages selected from the entire *Futûhât*, happily gives a very different and more readable, less abstract picture of his work. In fact, this second section actually conveys the human, experiential "inside" (the *bâtin*) of what was at first presented in more abstract theological terms, in such a way that students familiar with mystical writings from different religious traditions will quickly grasp the common principles and concerns expressed here in a complex symbolic vocabulary grounded in the Qur'an and hadith.

But the more difficult opening theological and philosophic discussions here do provide the common *language* (primarily Qur'anic) and conceptual framework that is assumed throughout Ibn 'Arabî's writings; and this is certainly the aspect of his work most unfamiliar to virtually all modern readers. (The translator [p. xxi] has prudently put off for a separate, later volume a promised survey of the mystic's cosmology, cosmogony and influential theories concerning the macro- and micro-cosmic "Perfect Man.") The remaining two-thirds of this work, however, are devoted to the more practical side of Ibn 'Arabî's writing, focusing on the detailed, highly practical "spiritual phenomenology" of that intimate dialectic between scriptural sources and guidelines, rational considerations, and personal spiritual experience (the *naql*, '*aql* and *kashf* of so many generations of later interpreters), deeply rooted in earlier Sufism and Islamic spirituality, which is the central leitmotif in all of Ibn 'Arabî's teaching. Throughout this volume, both in the notes to the translations and in his own explanatory comments, Prof. Chittick (responding to a neglected dimension of some earlier presentations) has especially emphasized and carefully identified the Islamic *scriptural* framework and inspiration of all of Ibn 'Arabî's writing. As a result, the extensive (and reliable) indexes of Qur'anic verses, hadith sources and technical terms provided here will no doubt serve as a helpful tool for students of both earlier and later Sufi traditions. (Indeed in some ways this volume now provides perhaps the best available English example of a coherent, comprehensive spiritual commentary on the Qur'an itself.)

Finally, a special word of explanation-and simultaneous caution-is required concerning the method of translation and broader pedagogical approach adopted here. Students of Ibn 'Arabî, beginning with the earliest commentators, have always had to wrestle with his incredibly creative, multifaceted use of Arabic language and scriptural symbolism; and interpreters for a modern audience (above all, given the immense scope of the *Futûhât*) are faced with the additional problem of explaining detailed scriptural references and technical vocabularies in the vast range of Islamic disciplines that were relatively familiar to Ibn 'Arabî's own disciples. Throughout these faithful and close translations, Prof. Chittick has intentionally selected a single English word to translate each of the key Arabic terms, and has carefully introduced the many complementary meanings of those technical terms (often using Ibn 'Arabî's own explanations) at their first occurrence. This procedure has the obvious--indeed indispensable--advantage of obliging serious readers to enter into the mystic's own resonant semantic and symbolic universe, but it could also lead to fundamental misunderstandings for less careful students who might happen to skip over (or simply forget) the complex original explanations of the underlying Arabic terms.

The same guiding pedagogical intentions are expressed in the organization and selection of translations throughout the book. This is *not* in any way the sort of topical anthology or popular sourcebook that one could pick up in order to locate "Ibn 'Arabî's

views" on a particular question, or that is designed to summarize yet another "mystical philosophy." It is thoughtfully designed as a whole in such a way that the new topics and translations in each section integrally build on and presuppose material and terminology more fully presented in earlier chapters. Thus, it is quite essential for students not already intimately familiar with these texts to read this book through attentively from the very beginning. The result of that approach, for those who can devote the requisite attention to these translations, is that they will surely come to appreciate the profound inseparability of literary form and context from the "content" and essentially *operative* intentions of Ibn 'Arabî's own writings--works whose highly distinctive rhetoric was never adequately imitated even within later Islamic tradition. Like other classics in that tradition, but with its own puzzling and creative style, the *Futûhât* was meant to mirror each student's uniquely individual state while drawing the more inquisitive into a compelling process of discovery involving their whole being. Readers who complete this volume should be well prepared to see how that is so, and to continue that exploration.

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