Ibn 'Arabi: Contemplation of the holy mysteries and the rising of the divine lights

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Book Reviews

Ibn 'Arabī: *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Lights*, translated by Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito. Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 2001. viii + 128 pages.

This carefully annotated translation of the core sections of Ibn 'Arabī's *Mashāhid al-asrār al-qudsiyya wa matāli' al-anwār al-ilāhiyya* (together with summaries of its preface and long "epilogue"), based on the earlier bilingual Arabic edition and Spanish translation by Su'ād al-Hakīm and Pablo Beneito (Murcia, 1994),[1] makes available to English readers for the first time one of the key works of Ibn 'Arabī's earlier Andalusian period. One of the most valuable features of the translators' annotation is their provision of key selections from the extensive commentaries by Ibn 'Arabī's own student Ibn Sawdakīn (in a MS in his own handwriting, dated 646/1258, claiming to represent Ibn 'Arabī's personal oral explanations of the symbolism in question) and by the famous Baghdadi woman Sufi Sitt al-'Ajam bint al-Nafās (MS dated 686/1287, just before her death), which provide an extraordinary window on the historical processes of assimilation and transmission of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings in the period immediately after his death. Ibn Sawdakīn's remarks clearly mirror the type of complex philosophical-metaphysical approach (the system of divine "Presences" and *tajalliyyāt*) associated with the commentary tradition of Qūnawī and his successors, while the selections from Sitt al-'Ajam already appear more deeply reflective of the experiential, personal emphases of later practical Sufi traditions. The authors' helpful Introduction – especially the section on "The Style and symbolism of the *Contemplations*" – also provides some invaluable keys, inspired by those earlier

1. The translators also refer (p.117) to a recent bilingual edition (based on a different manuscript with commentary by S. Qūnawī) and French translation by Stephane Ruspoli (Actes Sud, 1999), which we hope to review in a future issue.

commentators, for appreciating the overall structure and organisation of this work.

The distinctive literary structure, style and poetic approach of this remarkable text have clear, indeed explicit, affinities with Niffarī's *Mawāqif* and his *Mukhātabāt*, familiar to most western audiences today through the pioneering edition and translations of A. J. Arberry. That is, each of the successive fourteen "places of witnessing" that structure this work – stretching from the place of the human spirit's first "existentiation" and emergence from God to our place of ultimate judgement and metaphysical "return" – is phrased in terms of an intimate, dramatic dialogue with God that always begins with a series of consistently paradoxical divine "addresses" to a mysterious "servant/worshipper" (at once Ibn ʿArabī himself and, at least by implication, every human soul as potentially the cosmic "Complete Human Being" [*insān kāmil*]), followed by the equally paradoxical, but always instructive responses of that enlightened human addressee. However, in this case the interplay of divine instruction and human response is far more explicitly "pedagogical", consistently intellectual and overtly symbolic in structure and tone than in the more palpably experiential, directly expressive work of Niffarī (or even in Ibn ʿArabī's own more openly and mysteriously autobiographical *K. al-Isrā'*).

What the reader does encounter constantly here, as throughout the wider group of Ibn ʿArabī's youthful writings discussed below, is the same profound, seemingly all-encompassing mastery of an infinitely detailed web of symbolic understanding of Islamic scriptures (both Qur'an and hadith, with particular emphasis on the "science of (Arabic) letters" and their numerological equivalents), which is at once deeply personal–experiential and elaborately cosmological and metaphysical.[2] The

2. This peculiarly condensed and abstruse style often literally demands a more extensive commentary on every line of the translation. In a remarkable appendix (pp. 121–6, for the third *mashhad*), the two translators have provided a beautiful sample of the sort of indispensable commentary that is practically required – although it would inevitably be far longer than the original – for revealing the coherence and inner connections of each section of this work.

"contents" of that symbolism here, as so often in Ibn ʿArabī's writings, defy any attempt at summarisation, but are clearly coherent with all his other known compositions of that same period. And even beginning students of Ibn ʿArabī will recognise certain central, recurrent themes: for example, (1) the inescapability of "paradox" (from any intellectual perspective) in attempting to describe or reflect on the highest states of spiritual realisation; and (2) the practical necessity of following the paths of actual spiritual realisation (as opposed both to *taqlīd* and to all the intellectual or external–historicist approaches to revelation), (3) through adherence in detail to the actual unique prescriptions of the prophets, together with (4) the indispensable guidance and elaborations of their inspired spiritual "heirs" (the *awliyāʾ*). These latter three points, in particular, are clearly elaborated in Ibn ʿArabī's preface and especially in his long "epilogue", only briefly summarised here, which particularly highlight these fundamental practical lessons of all his lifelong writing and teaching.

The translation of this work into English (after earlier Spanish and French versions) only highlights the dramatic emergence and new-found accessibility of a whole "family" of Ibn ʿArabī's earlier Andalusian/Maghrebi works composed in a similar style – i.e., an impenetrably hyper-intellectual, poetic, and systematically detailed scriptural symbolism, along with similar thematic content, and their inseparable focus on the inseparability of the author's (and potentially, each reader's) direct spiritual illumination and the complex expression of that enlightened understanding in terms of the interplay of corresponding metaphysical levels of cosmogony and eschatological realisation. The first – and for long, virtually the only – accessible representatives of this distinctive family of early writings were the texts edited and translated (in German) by Nyberg almost a century ago; but in the past two decades they have suddenly been joined by editions and translations (in French, English and Spanish) of intimately related texts by Suʿād al-Hakīm (especially the key *K. al-Isrāʾ*), D. Gril, G. Elmore, P. Beneito, and P. Fenton and M. Gloton. Indeed, given the actual *symbolic inseparability* – and initial impenetrability! – of each of these early poetic writings, serious

students and readers of Ibn 'Arabī, whatever their background and linguistic preparedness, can only plead for the publishers involved (despite the obvious economic costs) to recognise the fundamental need of serious students in each case for reliable, complete indexes of key symbols and scriptural references from the Qur'an and hadith.

As many readers will notice, the extreme difficulty and complex symbolic allusiveness of these *"Contemplations"* and so many related writings from Ibn 'Arabī's youth dramatically highlights the relative clarity and far more open and revealing "phenomenological", directly experiential depth and breadth of the author's later, "Eastern" period. For his more explicitly detailed writings of that mature period, such as the *Meccan Illuminations* in particular, are practically indispensable for any serious effort at interpreting and understanding otherwise "sealed" earlier texts like these *mashāhid*. There can be little doubt that Ibn 'Arabī's autobiographical reference to his receiving a decisive divine instruction, eventually marking out the second half of his active life, to undertake the *nasāha* (practical public spiritual "counselling") of all Muslims and their rulers – not just the spiritual elite – helps to explain this pedagogically key turning towards more discursive prose and more comprehensible, relatively explicit explanations (especially more detailed discussion of earlier spiritual writers and teachers, beyond the Qur'an and selected hadith), an approach which is so sharply contrasted with this purposefully obscure, albeit sometimes extraordinarily poetic, personal style of his earlier writings.[3] Incidentally, there is so far little evidence that the actual meanings or overall "contents" of his teachings actually changed significantly in the course of that profound pedagogical shifting of style and exposition, even if certain modern interpreters (usually motivated by contemporary religious polemics) have occasionally attempted to make such arguments by emphasising only narrowly selected passages of specific works.

3. The often puzzling poetic preludes to each chapter of the *Futūhāt*, along with many passages of later works, are striking reminders that Ibn 'Arabī certainly did not give up writing, from time to time, in the same difficult style of these youthful works!

Finally, one may hope that the key opening and concluding sections of this text (summarised here on pp. 111–20)[4] will soon be translated and published in full, as they so richly deserve. Ibn ʿArabī's detailed, coherent and extremely explicit arguments in those missing sections for the indispensable ongoing role – for both individual human beings and the communities which they guide and form – of spiritual insight and illumination, based on and flowing from the proper application and practice of the prophetic revelations and the ongoing guidance and living example of the "Friends of God", are infinitely more than just another scriptural Islamic "apology" for his own personal inspirations or the approaches of long-ago "Sufis". In our present historical circumstances, one would suppose that the unavoidable relevance for every human being – and by no means simply historical or cultural "Muslims" – of the immediately practical lessons (and warnings) contained in those poignant and impassioned remarks would be strikingly apparent to every thoughtful reader and student of Ibn ʿArabī's work.

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