Ibn 'Arabi in the later Islamic tradition: The making of a polemical image in Medieval Islam

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Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam **by Alexander D. Knysh. Albany, SUNY Press, 1999 (xvi + 449 pages).**

Students of Islamic social, religious and intellectual history have long been aware of the central role played for centuries, in virtually every region of the Islamic world, by a certain recurrent polemic "image" of Ibn 'Arabi – one with little or no foundation in either the famous mystic's life or the actual content of his writings – in disputes involving such well-studied figures as Ibn Taymiya, Sirhindi, Simnani (and Kashani), Ibn Khaldun and even recent Egyptian national politics. Many other less-studied episodes from Ottoman, Mogul, Safavid and southeast Asian Islamic history have suggested that those incidents are perhaps only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg", and studies by Osman Yahya and Michel Chodkiewicz have pointed out the extensive available sources for a more wide-ranging examination of that remarkably persistent polemic tradition. Thus Professor Knysh's long-awaited study adds another set of important episodes helping to illuminate the genesis of that "polemical image". However, this massively erudite compilation (107 pages of dense footnotes and almost 40 pages of bibliographic references) is clearly intended for a scholarly audience intimately familiar

with the issues and personalities in question, with few concessions even to Islamicists from other fields (much less the "educated public"). So the following remarks are intended not only to indicate the contents of this book, but also to suggest something of the contexts (and limitations) which must be understood and provided by each reader in order to appreciate the wider significance of the episodes summarized here.

One must begin – as with so many books in Islamic studies these days – by insisting that it is the *subtitle* which in fact accurately describes the contents and context of this volume. As the author himself repeatedly indicates, and as even cursory readers of this journal are surely well aware, the polemic tradition in question at best provides a helpful set of indirect clues to the massive influence of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, disciples and schools of thought and even wider forms of spiritual practice more loosely associated with his work down to the present day. More importantly, Professor Knysh's case-studies are almost entirely limited to authors from the central Arab-speaking lands (with one chapter on a handful of Maghrebi writers and another on a work of Taftazani composed in Damascus), writing in the 150 years following Ibn 'Arabi's death in 1258 (in any case, prior to the Ottoman empire), immediately following the Crusades, Reconquista and the devastating Mongol invasions. This was (until recently, at least) a little-studied period of intense religious and institutional creativity, forging a wide range of new institutions, artistic, social and intellectual forms which furthered the spread of Islam, as a *world*-religion, into new areas of Asia and central Europe and which eventually came to characterize the normative Islam of those regions until at least the 19th century. Throughout this creative period, Muslims from the most diverse religious, cultural and artistic standpoints turned to the writings of Ibn 'Arabi not only to inspire, but also – and this is the crux of the perennial polemic whose origins are outlined here – above all to *justify* those new forms of cultural and religious life.

Thus the wider historical significance of the polemics examined by Professor Knysh lies (on both sides, although his book concentrates almost entirely on the detractors in this debate)

in their indirect role, as the reactions of a conservative learned elite to those far-reaching creative developments, in helping us to appreciate the detailed social and political dynamics of those cumulatively decisive changes in their various local contexts. His individual case-studies are most informative and most potentially significant when they enable readers to go beyond the sterile rhetorical gestures repeated almost unchanged over centuries, so that they can begin to appreciate the actual local political and social issues active in each case. In this regard, most non-specialist readers will probably gain the most by beginning their reading with pages 49–60, where Professor Knysh beautifully summarizes the particular political, social and institutional contexts underlying these polemics in the nascent Mamluk (and late Ayyubid) regime. While the particulars of that single situation are of course not applicable to the other cases he discusses, readers will at least be aware that similar constellations of locally disputed power, authority (in many domains) and change (and resistance to change) can be understood to underlie each of the other polemics he discusses.

To take the original case-studies in order, Chapter 2 begins with the earliest biographers (including contemporaries) of Ibn 'Arabi, where Professor Knysh points out that there is in fact virtually no sign of polemical issues or controversial behaviour – including both the *ad hominem* characteristics cited by later detractors or the more flagrant *karamat* mentioned by later supporters – in those early writings. Particularly interesting here are the somewhat distanced perspectives of contemporary Sufi observers – to which one could add the similar personal observations of Shams-e Tabriz, recorded in Aflaki's famous Mevlevi hagiography. Chapter 3, on the scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Salam, is interesting primarily by way of illustrating in detail for naive modern readers – as anyone who has worked with Islamic *tabaqat* and related materials at any period soon comes to realize – the multitude of ways that later writers were not only unashamed, but in fact fervidly creative, *re*-writers of earlier "historical" materials in order to further their own contemporary (and often highly personal) polemical purposes. What is most important at this crucial historical point – and which

constitutes, as it were, a key "missing" chapter of the overall story (available, at best, only to a handful of specialists) – is the larger picture of the rapid initial spread not only of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings (especially the *Fusus al-Hikam*), but also of the "monist" (*wujudiya*) literatures, both learned and especially poetic, associated with such key Arabic authors as Ibn Sab'in, al-Shushtari, and Ibn al-Farid.

For the next section (Chapter 4) summarizes Ibn Taymiya's extensive and – as is often the case with his remarks – *relatively* nuanced and well-informed critiques which, as Knysh rightly observes, (a) have tended to set the tone for virtually all the later condemnations (from a vast range of intellectual and sectarian positions), particularly in their restriction to a handful of "shocking" *topoi* drawn piecemeal from the *Fusus*; and (b) are totally tendentious and unreliable, in their focus on the pretended ethical and religious dangers of "monism", either as characterizations or as critiques of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings. Indeed, on a more positive note, in highlighting Ibn Taymiya's generally positive appreciation of a wide range of Ibn 'Arabi's works (including the *Futuhat*) prior to his discovery of the *Fusus*, Professor Knysh actually introduces a key theme and important qualification to which he returns in each subsequent chapter: i.e., the distinctive *ambivalence* of almost all learned critics who are known to have actually *read* any of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, whether that be expressed in the pointed ambiguity and diversity of their remarks for different audiences and occasions, or in those many cases where a prudent attitude of public "hostility" is frequently belied by other evidence – as in a telling contemporary anecdote concerning the late Fazlur Rahman – of private reading, study and even teaching. Given Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive style of writing, any serious study of his work is necessarily a demanding (one might even say lifelong) task, and the active engagement of mind and spirit required to begin to understand his intentions, on even the most superficial level, is profoundly incompatible with a "polemic" attitude of any description.

Indeed the recurrent citation of public book-burnings and the frequent executions and other tribulations of scholars

caught up in local political intrigues – dramatic incidents that are perhaps especially numerous in the revealing Chapter 7 (on "Ibn 'Arabi in the Muslim West") – are an indispensable reminder of the mysteries, for the non-expert reader, and often unexplored *particularities* of each of the specific socio-political contexts actually underlying the "polemics" in question; the historian who digs deeply enough inevitably discovers that the battles in question involved far more than words and theological concepts. (Cf. the similar role of Marxist–Leninist polemics in Stalinist Russia or other socialist regimes.) In this regard, for readers with limited background, the discussion of the life and fate of the famous Grenadan vizier and litterateur Ibn al-Khatib (one of the rare "defenders" of Ibn 'Arabi discussed in any detail here) is a particularly vivid painting of the extraordinary circumstances facing creative intellectual and religious spirits in many regions at this time. However, one of the important virtues of Professor Knysh's juxtaposition of so many cases from a fairly limited time-period is to highlight the primacy – in actual historical terms – of the *particular* local contexts and situations, thereby combating, as he often points out, the misleading stereotypes (of the type "legalism vs. Sufism", "sharia" vs. antinomianism, oppression vs. "liberty", etc.) which often arise from uninformed (or later polemic) encounters with one or another of these disputes. (In this regard, his most detailed case studies demonstrate some of the same clarifying virtues of Carl Ernst's classic study of the actual political contexts of classical Sufi martyrdoms.) One of the especially important "particularities" of Ibn 'Arabi's image (even polemic) in the Maghreb highlighted here is the way it was closely associated at first with his earlier Maghrebi writings – i.e., *not* the *Fusus al-Hikam* and its philosophic commentators, as typically throughout the later *Mashriq* – and was often directly connected in polemics there (albeit in blatant contradiction with Ibn 'Arabi's own teachings!) with the ongoing North African and Andalusian historical experience of would-be Mahdis and politically active Sufi reformers, or with disputes between various Sufi groups.

Chapters 5 and 8 deal, in historical succession, with a representative range of polemics in Egypt and the central Arab lands. These cases highlight the repetition of earlier critical motifs and the frequent ambivalence of *'ulama'*, who by this time were often themselves intimately bound up in the core institutions and practices of various forms of Sufism and popular *wali*-centred forms of religious life. Those influential forms of religious life necessarily found important support and financing among the Mamluke rulers of Egypt in ways which presaged the dominant structures of Islamic religiosity, far more widely, for centuries to come. If Knysh's account of the deeper background and context of those polemics is relatively summary in those chapters (and virtually absent in his theological summary of a derivative polemic by the much later Taftazani in Chapter 7), his historical approach is far more detailed and helpful in Chapter 9, "Ibn 'Arabi in the Yemen", which constitutes the most detailed and adequate account of the local context of this genre of polemics. There he enables the reader to follow the intrigues and complex power-struggles (and more lasting socio-cultural developments) in which these polemical writings were only one, often relatively superficial weapon, exactly as we can clearly situate and contextualize literally almost identical polemics today in the context of the Egyptian parliament or revolutionary Iran (or at certain points in the past, in light of the detailed contextual studies mentioned in the opening paragraph).

Once we have grasped the local, immediate factors in each of these polemics – and have recognized their unbridgeable distance from actual writings and teachings of Ibn 'Arabi himself – one might still ask if there is not some deeper significance to the recurrence and longevity of this particular polemic, quite apart from the particular historical meanings of each individual case and incident. (This is a particularly challenging question in that each of the world-religious traditions can be seen as being "defined", to some extent, by a range of similarly profound – and long-lived – internal and external tensions.) Professor Knysh, in his introductory and concluding remarks, alludes to such questions while suggesting much caution, as

befits a conscientious historian. Certainly one is not likely to arrive at an adequate formulation of this deeper question – not to mention any sort of responsible "answer"! – without radically calling into question the fundamental assumptions of the medieval *'ulama'* (which curiously often seem to be presented as accurate and self-evident even in the more analytical passages of this study) regarding their supposedly "authoritative" role in creating, defining, and preserving "religion" and religious "community". And it is worth noting that students of religion who would attempt to formulate that further question in an adequate and comprehensive fashion even today still tend to turn to Ibn 'Arabi, directly or indirectly, and openly or surreptitiously, and increasingly *whatever* the historical religious tradition in question . . .

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