

# Kitâb al-inbâh 'alâ tarîq Allâh

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## REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Le *Kitâb al-inbâh ‘alâ tarîq Allâh* de ‘Abdallâh Badr al-Habashî: un témoignage de l’enseignement spirituel de Muhyi l-Dîn Ibn ‘Arabî. Translated and edited by Denis Gril, *Annales Islamologiques* XV (1979), Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire, pp. 97-146 (introduction and translation) and 104-170 (Arabic text and indexes).

This short, but remarkably dense and insightful “Book of Awakening to the Path of God” (No. 287 in O. Yahya’s classification of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings) is truly a hidden treasure. Completed before Badr’s death in 618/1219, this selection of some 79 of Ibn ‘Arabî’s spiritual “sayings” and directives by one of his closest disciples and lifelong companions (for whom, among others, he composed such major works as the *Futûhât*, *Inshâ’ al-Dawâ’ir*, *Mawâqî‘ al-Nujûm* and the commentary on his *Tarjumân al-Ashwâq*) offers an invaluable glimpse of his more personal activity and

practical teaching as a Sufi master. Because of the more intimate, practical focus of this treatise — which, not surprisingly, reflects both the wider body of traditional Sufi thought and practice, as well as spiritual experiences and temptations familiar to almost every reader — it offers a valuable complement to the emphasis on Ibn ‘Arabî’s more distinctive metaphysical teachings and formulations (especially in the *Fuṣūṣ*) that has frequently coloured subsequent presentations of his work both in Islamic countries and in the modern West. Not only does the very form of the work, with its juxtaposition of quotations on such apparently diverse topics and levels of experience and understanding, faithfully convey much of the flavour of the living relations between a master and his disciples, but it also reminds us, both explicitly and implicitly, of the many problems posed by the context of oral teaching and spiritual practice in which Ibn ‘Arabî’s other writings were also originally composed.

At the same time, the extraordinary range of this work (stylistically, as well as in its subject matter), combined with its simplicity and economy of expression, would qualify it (given the necessary annotation) as an excellent introduction to the inner dimensions of Islamic spirituality more generally, and even as a fascinating collection of meditations on the spiritual life for readers without any particular background in either Ibn ‘Arabî or Sufism. The striking accessibility and universality of these meditations (ranging from gnomic “*hikam*”, resembling the celebrated Sufi aphorisms of Ibn ‘Atâ’ Allâh, to longer, subtle analyses of spiritual states much like the chapters on the *maqâmât* in the *Futûhât*) flow from Badr’s consistent choice of sayings focusing *directly* on the soul — and formulated with the finesse and subtlety of expression that characterise all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing — while the theological and metaphysical dimensions of that experience most often appear only in the background. At the same time, the variety of spiritual states and conditions evoked here defies summarisation: the “Path of God”, as Badr repeatedly indicates, extends to all the creatures, and the

“awakening” Ibn ‘Arabî is pointing to takes place on many levels. Clearly his work is by no means intended exclusively for “beginners”, and we expect that many readers will eventually find it to be the sort of spiritual classic which takes on renewed depth and meaning at each reading.

More specialised students of Ibn ‘Arabî or of Sufism in its historical aspects are likely to find this work equally intriguing for other reasons. To begin with, it points to the still largely unstudied dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work and subsequent influence as a practicing shaykh and spiritual teacher (as manifested, eg., in the *khirqā akbârîya*), while at the same time it offers a salutary reminder of the considerable limitations of all literary evidence in this realm. (It is no accident if Badr places his master’s pointed advice on how one should approach and benefit from the sayings of the “people of God” at the very centre of his book, nos. 39 and 40.) Secondly (and again like much of the *Futûhât*), this book gives the reader an immediate impression of the concrete, practical context and recurrent spiritual (and mundane) realities underlying the relatively theoretical discussions of metaphysics, Islamic theology or the “stages of the Path” in much of the Sufi literature now available in translation. Thus the student of Ibn ‘Arabî will quickly recognize here many of the key themes and characteristic emphases to be found throughout his writings: his insistence on integral respect of the letter of Revelation; the supreme rank of the “Knower through God” (*‘âlim bi-Allâh*) and his “return” to a transformed awareness of the manifest forms of creation; the central ontological and spiritual functions of the imagination; his stress on true “servanthood” (*‘ubûdîya* and the related spiritual virtues) as the most effective approach to God; the uses and limitations of the intellect; etc. But here, as Badr (and his master) no doubt intended, the reader is obliged to confront those issues as they arise directly in his own experience.

Professor Gril is to be commended not only for having brought this work to the attention of a wider public, but also for the quality of his Arabic edition (based on six

manuscripts, the oldest less than a century after al-Habashî's death), the elaborate index of technical terms (pp. 147-164), and his elegant translation — especially remarkable given the difficulties of these often highly condensed and sometimes technical Arabic expressions. The introduction (pp. 97-103), in addition to discussing the manuscripts, summarizes the references to al-Habashî scattered through Ibn 'Arabî's work (virtually our only biographical sources) and briefly presents a few of the most characteristic themes of this book. The few footnotes referring to corresponding passages in the *Futûhât* and other work offer essential background for some of the more laconic passages, but the translator — not surprisingly, in a scholarly Arabic journal aimed at specialists in this domain — has not attempted to provide the more extensive annotation and explanation (both of traditional Sufi vocabulary and of Ibn 'Arabî's own ideas) that might be needed by more general readers. In view of the special qualities and potentially broader interest of this book (and the relative inaccessibility of the *Annales*), we may hope that Prof. Gril, who is ideally equipped for the task, will eventually publish a separate, expanded version of his translation, and that the availability of this Arabic edition will soon encourage the preparation of an English translation as well.

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