

Divine sayings: The Mishkāt al-Anwār of Ibn 'Arabī, 101 Hadīth Qudsī

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Divine Sayings: The Mishkāt al-Anwār of Ibn ‘Arabī, 101 Hadīth Qudsī. Translation and Arabic edition by Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt. Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 2004. Pp. x + 146; 59 pp. Arabic edition.

This remarkable personal collection of 101 ‘Divine Sayings’ – a particular sub-group of hadith, many included in the classical Sunni hadith collections, in which the original speaker is the divine Voice (speaking directly as ‘I’, which is quite rare in the Qur’an itself) – is perhaps the most succinct and direct introduction to the most central themes of Islamic spirituality in general, as well as an indispensable practical key for grasping the immediate existential roots and spiritual intentions underlying Ibn ‘Arabī’s often apparently abstract, prolix, and highly intellectualised formulations in his most famous longer books. Indeed once a reader is familiar with these particularly condensed and powerful sayings, it is difficult not to see most of Ibn ‘Arabī’s immense body of writing as something like a set of extended musical ‘variations’ on these quintessential spiritual themes. For while the hadith in general typically provide much more accessible applications and concrete illustrations of the general principles and challengingly complex symbols of the Qur’an, that relationship is particularly obvious in these often dramatic vignettes (many set at the Last Judgment, in paradise, or where God is directly and individually addressing every ‘child of Adam’), in which the existential import of hundreds of verses of the Qur’an is mysteriously condensed into only a few highly memorable Arabic phrases. As such, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *‘Niche of Lights’* – whose title alludes to his understanding of that central symbol in the Light-verse of the Qur’an (24:35) as the divine Logos, the all-encompassing noetic ‘Reality of Muhammad’ – is an endlessly evocative collection of spiritual meditations that surely belongs on many a shortlist of ‘desert-island’ books.

In this beautifully presented volume, the translators (and Arabic editors) have provided the first full English translation and critical edition of the Arabic text, with careful attention to the needs of different sets of readers. Previously, the only English access to the contents of this work had been through the discussion

of many of the same hadith in William Graham's pioneering study of the *ḥadīth qudsī* genre, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* [1977], which is still indispensable for more scholarly readers interested in exploring the textual nuances and historical background of many of the original hadith underlying Ibn 'Arabī's personal selections here; and very recently, through the wide-ranging, personal commentaries of Lex Hixon, together with Fariha al-Jerrāhī, in *101 Diamonds from the Oral Tradition of the Glorious Messenger Muhammad* [2002].

Like Ibn 'Arabī himself, who for dramatic effect has already very selectively 'framed' and intensified his personal selection of these sayings – often parts of much longer original hadith narratives – either by citing in many cases only the very 'heart' or pith of their spiritual message, or by citing as separate items several different parts of what was originally a single very long story, the translators here have focused their presentation initially on the actual texts and message of each saying, also providing some of the explanatory notes that are often essential to explain the meaning of unfamiliar Arabic expressions and contextual assumptions. Their index of the first translated lines of each saying, similar to what we are accustomed to finding with books of poetry, is particularly helpful for readers who may need to recall or locate a particular saying at a later date. However, at the same time they have not only fully translated in a separate section the entire original *isnād* (chain of transmitters from the Prophet) for each saying, but have gone on to give background explanations concerning some of the more important transmitters, especially those who personally taught and worked with Ibn 'Arabī, along with a detailed index of proper names (primarily of the individual transmitters associated with each hadith) which is particularly helpful for scholars interested in the roles of particular transmitters.

One of the most distinctive features of this book – especially when compared with the complex assumptions and distinctively challenging language notoriously typifying Ibn 'Arabī's most famous works – is the directness and immediacy of its teaching, in this English translation almost as much as in the original Arabic. Whatever the original 'audience' of these divine sayings

– which range from Muhammad and Gabriel, to other messengers (Moses, David), and on to the souls in Paradise or all the ‘children of Adam’ before (or after) their time of earthly testing – almost all of them are phrased and dramatically staged so as to immediately establish a particular kind of critical, dream-like state that simultaneously confronts and brings to consciousness the deeper awareness of our conscience, serving to highlight our own inner ‘judgment’ of our actions, motives and guiding assumptions about the divine (or the ultimate reality of our human situation). The specific ‘areas of examination’ highlighted here in fact constitute the central themes of all of the Shaykh’s own works, as of the traditions of Islamic spirituality more generally: the universality of the divine Compassion and Forgiveness, and the corresponding human responses of thankfulness, mutual love, charity and caring; the spiritual centrality of intention and pure devotion to God, of constant ‘remembrance’ and prayer; the ever-present pitfalls of restrictive belief and unconscious ‘hypocrisy’; and the ongoing intercessory roles (throughout life) of the prophets and Friends of God.

Since the essential meanings of these divine sayings themselves are accessible without extensive commentary – beyond the indispensable and uniquely individual one that Ibn ‘Arabī clearly means for each of his readers to provide – the translators’ Introduction (pp. 1–20) focuses on providing contextual material needed by all non-specialist readers, including a remarkably clear yet brief introduction to the whole traditional discipline and essential features of the study of hadith. Like recent biographers of the Shaykh (both S. Hirtenstein and C. Addas), they highlight in particular the very central role of the personal study and immediate interpretation and application of hadith – often contrasted in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings with the problematically mediated approaches of the sciences of *fiqh* – throughout every stage of his life and spiritual growth, from his early education to his final years of teaching in Damascus, where he (like his famous disciple Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī) was publicly best known as a student and teacher of hadith. (Thus the apparent loss of several other well-attested books of his relating to hadith, cited in this Introduction, apparently reflects important later institutional

turnings in the historical development of 'Sufism' and the corresponding wider interests in his writings and teaching.) The translators' emphasis in this Introduction on the key biographical role of lifelong hadith study both for Ibn 'Arabī and for so many of his spiritual teachers, companions and disciples is a helpful reminder of the key historical connections between influential Sufis of the earlier formative period and the *ahl al-hadīth* (epitomised in emblematic figures like 'Abdullah Ansārī and 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī), in their vigorous defence of the spiritually central 'anthropomorphisms' (*tashbīh*) illustrated by so many of these divine sayings against the restrictively rationalist critiques of the Mu'tazilites and others.

Finally, the very readable, beautifully printed new critical edition of the Arabic text included here is based on a profusion of very early, often fully voweled, manuscript copies (mostly preserved in Turkish libraries), which in themselves prominently illustrate both the gradual minor revisions of this work – paralleling, as the editors point out here, the textual history of the *Futūhāt* itself, which was originally inspired during the same prolific period of residence in Mecca as the original composition of this volume (in 599/1203) – and especially the ongoing major role of hadith study and meditation among at least the first two generations of Ibn 'Arabī's own disciples and their students. Particularly important in this regard are the translators' remarks about the key role of what is essentially an extended spiritual commentary on the majority of these particular divine sayings, that largely constitutes both the immense concluding chapter (560) of the *Futūhāt* as well as major eschatological chapters (64–65) near its beginning. Indeed throughout the *Futūhāt*, in language reminiscent of Niffarī's unforgettable dialogues with God in his *K. al-Mawāqif*, readers will also find scattered a number of other sections illustrating Ibn 'Arabī's own remarkable literary (and sometimes openly autobiographical) appropriation of this particular genre of 'divine Speaking', which include some of the most memorable creative passages in all his writing.

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