

An ocean without shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the book and the law

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Book Review

An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, The Book and the Law. Michel Chodkiewicz (trans. D. Streight), SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1993, 184 pp.

In most areas of scholarship there are one or two books so uniquely rich in their depth of insight, breadth of understanding, and richness of expression and illustration that even their individual footnotes become, as it were, the seeds of whole volumes of research in later generations. This deceptively short volume, which so ably condenses the fruits of decades of intensive study and reflection on Ibn 'Arabi (as well as his disciples and heirs throughout the Islamic world) is clearly just such a landmark in 'Akbari' studies. Its basic unifying theme – familiar enough to even the novice reader of Ibn 'Arabi today – is the Qur'anic (and Prophetic) inspiration and aims of all the Shaykh's writing. But here Professor Chodkiewicz, referring primarily to the 'ocean' of *al-Futûhât al-Makkîya* as well as a host of other untranslated (and often unedited) texts and commentaries, has systematically developed that theme to a depth that goes far beyond academic philology and amply illustrates the profoundly transforming power of Ibn 'Arabi's own 'spiritual hermeneutics' of Islamic scripture. For those interested in the Shaykh's own life, this volume also highlights some of the deeper roots of his own extraordinary personal claims with regard to his 'realization' of the Qur'an and the inner dimension of prophecy, themes which are examined in more detail in two other recently translated studies, *The Seal of the Saints* (by the same author) and Claude Addas' biography, *The Quest for the Red Sulphur*.

There is no question, then, that this is in many respects an 'advanced' work, almost an agenda (as well as an indispensable reference work) for future study: indeed very few modern scholars could honestly lay claim to the familiar mastery of Arabic, of the Qur'an and hadith, and of so many different writings of the Shaykh and his disciples which this book

often presupposes. On the other hand, serious students of Ibn 'Arabi will recognize many familiar themes from the works that are available in translation, and – while acknowledging how much of this 'ocean' still remains uncharted – will surely be challenged to re-read and re-explore those available texts from new perspectives. The author's Introduction (pp. 1–18) is an especially striking illustration of that process. At first reading, the Introduction may seem like nothing more than history: a highly condensed survey of the far-reaching 'manifestations' of Ibn 'Arabi's work for centuries throughout the Islamic world, focusing especially on the recent research by the author (as well as his many colleagues and students from France and the Arab world) that has helped to bring out the actual social bases (tariqas, ethical manuals, etc.) for the popular spread of Ibn 'Arabi's insights, especially in the Ottoman period, far beyond the line of his avowed disciples and commentators. By the time one has completed reading the book, however, it will be quite evident just how and to what extent those same historical data are also meant to illuminate the nature and seriousness of the Shaykh's meta-historical claims concerning the 'Seal of the saints' and his special inner relationship with both the Qur'an and the 'Reality of Muhammad'.

Each of the book's five chapters richly illustrates, at progressively deeper levels of expression and meaning, the full Qur'anic inspiration of all of Ibn 'Arabi's works. Not surprisingly, the first two chapters highlight themes and typical methods of scriptural interpretation – such as Ibn 'Arabi's consistent focus on the 'letter' of revelation even in his apparently most original (or outrageous) insights; his stress on the ongoing, 'perpetual descent' of the inner meanings of the Qur'an within each purified heart; or the metaphysical 'universality' of the Qur'an and the Source of all prophecy – which should be familiar to most students of the *Fusûs al-Hikam* and other widely available works. The second chapter also includes a very clear and accessible summary of Professor Chodkiewicz's seminal research on two major topics in the Shaykh's teaching: his discussion of the various types and ranks and functions of the 'friends of God' (from Chapter 73 of the *Futûhât*), and his uniquely irenic understanding of the principles of *fiqh*, with its compelling practical and intellec-

tual relevance to the contemporary Islamic world.

The following two chapters, though, explore territory which has until now remained largely uncharted, at least in Western scholarship. Chapter 3 demonstrates in rigorous and convincing detail – focusing on the long *Fasl al-Manâzil* in the *Futûhât* – the multitude of precise ways in which the order, inner structures, and language and style of the Qur’an underlie the corresponding arrangement and meaning of all the Meccan Illuminations, including literally thousands of passages or allusions that would have remained mysteriously indecipherable without these essential ‘keys’. Chapter 4 extends the same approach to revealing both the internal structure of other major works (such as the early *Kitâb. al-Isrâ’*, the *K. al-‘Abâdila*, the *K. al-Tajalliyât*), and, even more significantly, to suggesting the ‘networks’ or ‘constellations’ of Qur’anic allusion that form fundamental linkages – of both inspiration and cross-referential explanation – between chapters or sections of the Qur’an, the *Futûhât*, and each of Ibn ‘Arabi’s shorter works. While scholars and students of these untranslated (and often unedited) works may have intuitively felt, and even occasionally deciphered, some of these inner connections and allusions, the systematic results of Professor Chodkiewicz’ methods and examples here (summarized in 35 pages of dense notes) are rich enough to orient the research of several generations of future scholars. Indeed anyone who has wrestled directly with the constantly recurrent mysteries and opaque passages to be found throughout the Shaykh’s writings may well consider these two chapters to constitute a sort of ‘Rosetta Stone’ in the gradual deciphering of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work.

The final chapter, focusing on the integral relationship between religious practice and spiritual realization in all the Shaykh’s writings, returns to a topic and illustrations (from the *Fusûs al-Hikam* and other translated works) familiar to a wider audience. Again the detailed analyses and synopses here – of the interplay between right actions and the attainment of *karamât* in the *Mawâqî’ al-Nujûm*; of the roles of God and the individual soul in prayer in the *Tanazzulât Mawsiliya*; or of the constant allusions to the inner dimensions of *salât* throughout Tirmidhi’s famous ‘spiritual questionnaire’ in Chapter 73 of the *Futûhât* – fully demonstrate both the

author's mastery of the entire 'Akbari' corpus and the spiritual richness of these many texts that still await translation in order to reach the wider audience they deserve today.

Any brief account of Professor Chodkiewicz' book, with its massive illustration of the impact of the Qur'an and (selective) hadith on every dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's writing, almost inevitably suggests a sort of 'apologetic' or narrowly sectarian approach and an intention – on the part of either the Shaykh or his modern interpreter – that is in fact almost diametrically opposed to the actual state of affairs. Readers familiar only with the many modern Western studies emphasizing the 'universality' of the Shaykh's outlook, in particular, might find this approach somewhat surprising. But this apparent paradox is no mystery to students familiar with Ibn 'Arabi's own writings: as they know from their own experience, it is easily resolvable once one begins to appreciate the 'Reality' (to use the Shaykh's own expression) to which Ibn 'Arabi is actually referring. And few secondary studies in this field bring the reader closer to that constantly revelatory, more than intellectual, experience of the Qur'an than this remarkable work. It is itself an extraordinary illustration of that 'ascension into meaning' (*mi'râj al-kalima*, to borrow Souad al-Hakim's apt expression) which so uniquely typifies Ibn 'Arabi's own style and approach to revelation.

The English translation, which includes a substantial index of Qur'anic verses and technical terms (but not, unfortunately, of hadith references), is quite readable on the whole, an especially commendable achievement given that so much of the original French text already consists of translations of Ibn 'Arabi's notoriously complex language and close study of difficult Arabic linguistic, religious and grammatical expressions.

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