

## An Interview with Professor William C. Chittick

BY MICHAEL PITTMAN

One of the more prolific scholars working on Ibn al-'Arabī and Sufism today is Professor William Chittick who teaches in the Department of Comparative Studies at SUNY Stony Brook, Long Island. In addition to his analytical works about Ibn al-'Arabī (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge, The Self-Disclosure of God*), he has written a volume on Jalāluddīn Rūmī (*The Sufi Path of Love*), as well as numerous other works, translations and articles on Sufism and Islamic philosophy. One meets a diverse student population at Stony Brook. Sitting in many of his classes as well as his office, I quickly realized that Professor Chittick has a knack for making the difficult works of Ibn al-'Arabī intelligible to his students. I recently had a chance to talk with him about Ibn al-'Arabī, his thought, his writings and the relevance of his work to that of Rūmī. As I spoke with Professor Chittick, he presented a mosaic-like view of Ibn al-'Arabī's thought and, in particular, Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of the heart. What follows is a summary of the conversation that ensued.

M.P.: 'Heart' is one of the principal terms used in Sufism, as well as in Ibn al-'Arabī's and Rūmī's work. So why don't we start the conversation with Ibn al-'Arabī's use of the word 'heart'.

W.C.: As with other issues, Ibn al-'Arabī doesn't define his terms consistently, so that we could provide only one definition for a word such as heart. Ibn al-'Arabī is dealing with this terminology in the context of a long history of Islamic thought beginning with the Koran and the *ḥadīth* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and Islamic theology and philosophy, not to mention the whole development of Sufism. He has 600 years of history before him and he is very much aware of how terms have been used by various people over this long period of time. Ibn al-'Arabī's basic understanding of heart goes back to the etymological meaning of the word, which means to change, to fluctuate and to be turned upside down. There are two or three other salient words, but *qalb* is the central and most important term he uses.

The Koran uses the word repeatedly, 100 times or so, normally as a noun, except in some instances where other forms of the word are used. The word itself (*qalb*) is used in the Koran to mean 'heart', and if one reads all the verses in which the heart is mentioned it becomes very clear that 'heart' is the center of consciousness, the center of human awareness. *Qalb* is closely associated with intellect or understanding, as it is with all of the functions of the mind. The emotions are also located in the heart, but this is a secondary meaning. A sound heart is the mark of a human being who is in proper relationship with the divine. And it is illness in the heart that is the cause of human difficulties and human problems.

M.P.: In the West, we have a sense of the center of awareness lying, in a more restricted sense, within the mind. How does the notion of reason figure into Ibn al-'Arabi's notion of the heart and its capacity to comprehend or experience God?

W.C.: As Ibn al-'Arabi explains the nature of human awareness through his writings, he brings out two basic dimensions to human understanding. One is the rational side that tends to separate, to analyze, to abstract, to pull apart essences and embodied instances and, in relation to God, to consider God as transcendent and incomparable. The other aspect of human understanding is the dimension of the imagination, and its function to see things in their embodied instances and to understand things as symbols, as representing higher realities, and, in relation to God, to view Him as immanent and present.

Ibn al-'Arabi's understanding of proper human intelligence is that it balances between intellect and imagination, that is, it sees God as both transcendent and immanent at the same time. However, since the heart is the locus of our consciousness and awareness, and because we are made in the image of God, we cannot see God as both transcendent and immanent at one and the same time. Therefore, as the heart beats it fluctuates, and the proper fluctuation and change of the heart is to go back and forth between the vision of immanence and the vision of transcendence. He calls this "seeing with two eyes." God's incomparability and similarity have to be kept in balance, but there is an instantaneous, moment-by-moment change of awareness, so that in each instant one has a new vision of the presence and the absence of God. In one moment one sees God present and in the next moment one sees God absent and so on, *ad infinitum*. This is God's self-disclosure. And, as Ibn al-'Arabi says, "He discloses himself through the universe and the human soul, he never repeats himself, and this goes on forever."



Professor Chittick

M.P.: So, the realm of experience of the heart is God's self-disclosure. How does this realm relate to Ibn al-'Arabi's understanding of the imagination and the intellect, and to the figure of the gnostic, or one who knows God?

W.C.: The intellect fixes things, it stabilizes them, and it establishes them. Whereas the heart, quite the opposite, loosens them and lets them fluctuate. Therefore the heart of the gnostic (*'arif*) fluctuates in keeping with the self-disclosure of God, which never repeats itself. The intellect of the rational thinker fixes things because the rational mind understands things to be precisely this way and not that way, whereas the gnostic understands that nothing is just this way or just that way, everything is constantly changing. The eye of the gnostic has been transmuted, it *actually* sees. He is not imagining things anymore, but actually sees the images of God present.

It is through the right realization of the heart that the proper relationship with the universe, with God, and

with the One and the Many can be established. Those of us who haven't achieved this realization have to attempt to achieve it and, in Ibn al-'Arabī's terms, the way to do this is to imitate the Prophets and the Friends of God. And the usual way is to follow the way of *taḥqīq*, the way of verification and realization. *Tabqīq* is to understand the realities of things and to recognize that each thing has a *ḥaqq*, a reality, a right, a proper due, and that everything has to be given what it is properly due. You begin this way of realization from multiplicity, that is, from where you are. And, of course, it's impossible to comprehend multiplicity. Multiplicity is infinite; the only way to comprehend multiplicity is in unity. To fully understand how things are interrelated, how things fit in, how multiplicity fits into unity, you have to see with both eyes. If you only look at multiplicity, you are lost, since you become completely dispersed in this world of infinite beckoning, and if you look only at unity, you are totally abstracted from the world, you cannot function and cease to exist humanly.

What the modern period now calls the intellect is a kind of distorted imagination and it is not what Ibn al-'Arabī would call the intellect. The basic function of the intellect in terms of understanding, for Ibn al-'Arabī, is to perceive the transcendent Unity of God. That is, the separation of all things from the Divine, and how God is infinitely beyond all. If you're talking about a rational faculty that doesn't recognize God beyond all, you're talking about a rational faculty grounded in immanence, the presence of reality on the level of our everyday experience, and this is a distorted imagination. Reason, for example, as it is used in science and technology, has a very specific application: laws and ways of analysis, which have very useful technological consequences in terms of control. However this type of reason is not the type of reason that is at issue in Islamic texts. The philosophers are not interested in that kind of reason, even though they did develop mathematics; it was the philosophers who were the actual scientists. But the sciences were always in the service of developing the practical and theoretical intellect in order to achieve human perfection, which was understood as a transformation and unfolding of the soul; we're talking about philosophy as a spiritual discipline.

This was what philosophy was for: it was an alternative way, a way that many found complementary to the Islamic practices of dealing with the human soul. It was a very limited endeavor, in the sense that very few people were involved with it then, as now, of course. But nowadays you also get this very sharp distinction between reason and imagination, and the workings of the imagination and the whole artistic realm and this sort of thing. Again, this would be very alien to the Islamic way of looking at things. Art and imagination have to be put into harmony with the vision of the Unity of God; and Islamic Art is very much concerned with balance, patterns, equilibrium, geometry; all of which are expressions of a hidden Unity.

One feels that in all typical Islamic Art there is an overarching vision tying it all together. This is even truer in poetry because it's the most popular art form, the one that is fused with people's lives. More than any other art form, poetry was developed to a high degree in all the Islamic languages. This is particularly true of all great poets, especially in the non-Arabic speaking world, for example in Persian: Rūmī, Ḥafīẓ 'Aṭṭār, Sa'dī, and others in Urdu and Turkish. These poets were completely immersed in the Sufi tradition. They were using the imagination in order to call forth the presence of God in the soul through the sense of beauty. Rūmī is the poet who is most explicit about this: all beauty is divine beauty. So when we recognize things for what they truly are we can experience God in things. In other words, this is the eye that sees God present, the eye of imagination in Ibn al-'Arabī's terms; but behind it is the eye that sees God's transcendence. He was very explicit about this.

M.P.: For Ibn al-'Arabī the central capacity for perceiving and experiencing God's unity is the imagination and, to a lesser extent, the intellect, both of which are situated in the heart. Yet, for the poets and for Rūmī in particular, the focus seems to be on relating to God through the quality of love. How does the intellect figure into Rūmī's notion of the heart?

W.C.: It is not that the intellect is forgotten in Rūmī, not at all; he has many, many explicit references to intellectual discernment and the recognition of Divine Unity and Divine Transcendence, as well as the recognition of the Divine Presence. The first thing to notice about Rūmī is that he basically puts love at the center of his concerns. For him love is a transforming power that needs to be experienced, and poetry is the best way to stir up that feeling of love, the sense of love, the experience of love in the heart. He writes his poetry with the aim of inciting the listener to love God. In one of his verses he says, "What is love?" And he replies to his own question, "Infinite thirst." "So," he says, "let me explain the water of life." He's trying to explain the water of life in his poetry so that your thirst will increase, so that you'll feel this pull towards that water and recognize that you are infinitely thirsty, that it is human nature to be infinitely thirsty. That is what we have to awaken in ourselves. Rūmī says, "Don't look for water, look for thirst." It's thirst you have to find; then, if you become thirsty, you'll see water bubbling up everywhere. But it's thirst you have to strive for before you're going to find any water. So, don't look for God, endeavor to become thirsty; awaken that thirst in your soul and then you'll find God everywhere. Rūmī's entire work, all of his 75,000 verses of poetry, is all designed to stir up love in the heart, because that's the seat of love.

The transformation of the heart, first of all, brings about a balance between God's transcendence and His

immanence. God is always the issue; there is no other issue. But when we're talking about Love, then it's personalized. It's removed from the abstractions of philosophy. Rūmī's language, or the language of Ḥāfiṣ or 'Aṭṭār, for example, or any of these Sufi poets, is immediately appealing. Rūmī is talking about love and all of us has had a taste of it one way or another. We can experience it and feel it radiating in that poetry, and we are drawn into the feeling, the sense of love. However, the content is also very important. Rūmī is constantly pointing out that we have to lift our sights, that we have to see higher and realize what it is that we love. He says, "Don't take water from the drainpipe." The water is coming from the sky. The things we love here are like gold plating. "Go back to the mine, the mine of Gold, don't go after the gold plate." We have to pull our sights high enough to realize that what we love is the God who loves us.

Since human beings are made in God's image, we must also have this attribute of Love. For Rūmī, and for Ibn al-'Arabī, this is a central fact of human existence. The fact that we are made in God's image means that we can love him fully because we embrace Him just as He embraces us. There is a mutuality here that is unique in the created world as we experience it. Therefore, the mystery is that He made Adam in his own image and this comes out in love. We can love Him and He can love us and this love is a single reality, which unites the two of us. This love embraces both His Immanence and His Transcendence and all His attributes as a unifying experience. To take it one step further, a point made by both Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūmī: given the fact that God is ultimately the only true reality, what is true in us is true because it is an attribute of God. It is God working through us. In fact, through us God loves Himself. God is both lover and beloved, He loves us and he is loved by us. But in loving us, He is loving Himself. And when we love Him, it is in fact He who is the lover in us. It is God Himself who is playing this game of lover and beloved.

In this same context, Ibn al-'Arabī lays a groundwork whereby you can deal with the much more basic human issue of worldview: how we look at the world in modern times, how we recognize priorities and acknowledge what is and isn't important in life. All of these are very important theoretical and philosophical issues. When we receive the modern worldviews from the recent past, they are accepted as self-evident, as the way things are. Ibn al-'Arabī destroys that whole world. He dismantles the world of reason, no matter what form reason takes, as being totally inadequate to human nature and human reality and he replaces it with a very well structured universe which is quite congenial with the mystic universes of, for example, the Semitic religions, or Hinduism, and various other traditions of the world. There are many commonalities among these traditions: the recognition of both transcendence and immanence, the recognition of layers of reality, the recognition that

human reality lies in human consciousness, where we locate the secret of our salvation, our self understanding and self-awareness. Ibn al-'Arabī brings this out and he explains it over and over from many, many different points of view. The more you read Ibn al-'Arabī, the more you see that Rūmī is standing right in the same place.

M.P. It is often quoted that Rūmī is the most popularly published poet in North America these days. Can you say more about how you see the significance of Ibn al-'Arabī in relation to Rūmī?

W.C.: With the help of Ibn al-'Arabī you can start realizing the depth of Rūmī's message and why the usual modern translations of Rūmī are totally inadequate. They misrepresent his world by suggesting that reason is one thing and love is something else, that we can put aside reason and devote ourselves to love by being a follower of Rūmī. We can't, this is an impossible task. Reason and love are complementary and both have to be dealt with. And the type of love that Rūmī is talking about can only be established, as he says over and over again, by a proper vision of things, by a proper understanding of things, by a proper, healthy intellect. A healthy intellect is defined by what it sees, by how it recognizes God's transcendence, among other things. The healthy intellect and the imagination are both essential elements of a sound heart. From this point of view, Rūmī and Ibn al-'Arabī are very, very complementary.

One benefit of an investigation into the world of Ibn al-'Arabī is that we can also understand that Rūmī is not unique, as he is often portrayed. He is smack in the middle of a tradition; he had many predecessors and numerous successors. What is unique about Rūmī is not what he is saying but his language. Rūmī has been able to combine the deepest insight with the most simple, basic language. There is a very funny anecdote about Rūmī and Qunawī that really epitomizes what makes Rūmī so special. Ṣadr al-dīn Qunawī, the step-son of Ibn al-'Arabī, was a close friend of Rūmī, and it is said that one day the two of them were sitting together in Rūmī's Sufi center in Konya, discussing matters of importance that great saints talk about. A disciple came up and asked permission from Rūmī to ask a question. Rūmī said, "Sure, come forward, ask the question." So, the question was asked, and Rūmī gave a very straightforward answer. The disciple kissed his hand in gratitude and went off. Qunawī turned to Rūmī and said, "I simply don't understand how it is that you can make the most erudite, sophisticated metaphysics sound so simple!" Rūmī turned to Qunawī and said, "Yes, but what I don't understand is how you can make the simplest ideas sound so complicated."

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