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# From the *Meccan Openings*: The Myth of the Origin of Religion and Law

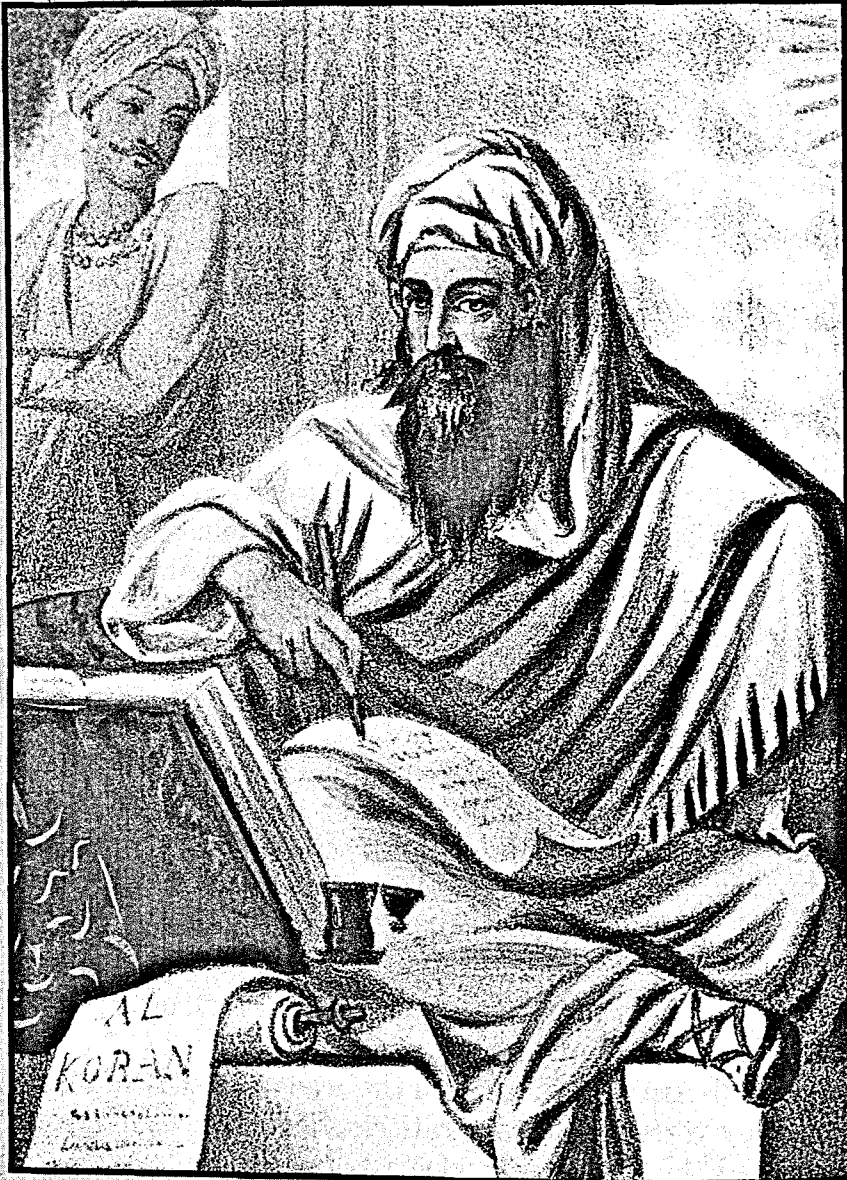
William C. Chittick



Islam has produced no greater mystical theologian and philosophical visionary than Muhyî al-Dîn Ibn al-'Arabî (born in Murcia, 1165; died in Damascus, 1240). He synthesized Islamic law, theology, philosophy, mysticism, cosmology, psychology, and other sciences in a manner that has for the past seven hundred years wielded tremendous influence over Islam. His *Meccan Openings* (*al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*), which will fill more than fifteen thousand pages in its new edition, provides a few glimmers and flashes of the luminous sciences he acquired when God "opened" for him the door to the "Treasures of Unseen Generosity." Ibn al-'Arabî wrote several hundred other works, at least three hundred of which are extant.

Though Ibn al-'Arabî had mastered the academic study of theology and was thoroughly versed in the dry ratiocination of the contemporary doctors, he avoided the standard theological approach, relying instead upon images, symbols, analogies, and allegories derived primarily from "openings" and "tastings" deeply rooted in the Koran and in the sayings of Muhammad. In the text that follows from the *Meccan Openings*, as in all

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*Mohammed, the prophet.*

his works, he constantly returns to one basic theme: All things are intimately interrelated through their common roots in the Divine Reality. The universe in its indefinite multiplicity is nothing but the outward manifestation of God's names. The Koran tells us that God is the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate, the All-Forgiving, the All-Loving, the Creator, the Willing, the Knowing, the Powerful, the Mighty, the All-Holy, and so on. For Ibn al-'Arabî these names are the keys that unlock the door to the invisible world. Everywhere we look we see the "properties" and "traces" of the names within each created thing.

Unique among creatures, human beings display all of God's names, which explains why man alone was created "in God's image" and given dominion over all other things, each of which manifests only some of God's names. But people cannot fully actualize the divine names they possess unless they heed the revelation delivered by the prophets in general and Muhammad in particular. By following the scriptural guidance, they can return to their proper and primordial relationship with their Creator.

Reason or "intellect" (*'aql*), even in the best of circumstances, provides insufficient knowledge of God. It can understand that God in himself is infinitely transcendent and forever unknowable, but through its own resources it can tell us nothing about God's immanence and self-disclosure (*tajalli*) in all things. In contrast, revelation offers complete knowledge of God, combining the transcendence grasped by the intellect with the immanence that appeals to the imagination (*khayal*). Only when intellect works harmoniously with imagination on the basis of the prophetic message can a man realize the divine

names within himself and achieve human perfection. Ibn al-'Arabî calls those who combine intellect and imagination the "People of Unveiling," that is, those who have witnessed the lifting of the veils between themselves and God. He writes,

The common people perceive God's immanence, the People of Unveiling perceive both his immanence and his transcendence, and the men of intellect understand only his transcendence. God combined the two perceptions in his elect.<sup>1</sup>

In the following passage, a transla-

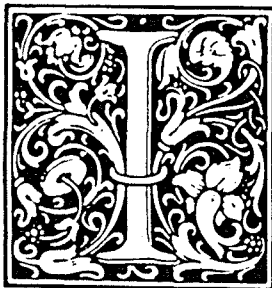
All things are  
intimately  
interrelated  
through their  
common roots in  
the Divine  
Reality.

tion of chapter 66 of the *Meccan Openings*,<sup>2</sup> Ibn al-'Arabî recounts God's creation of the universe and his sending of the prophets. Though this theme is central to the Koran and common in Islamic texts, Ibn al-'Arabî provides a mythic account probably unique in Islamic sources, explaining in the process that revela-

1. *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, n.d.), 2: 116.3.

2. *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, 1: 322-25; also ed. O. Yahya, (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyyat al-'Ammat Li'l-Kitāb, 1977), 5: 91-105.

tion is not something added to the cosmos as a kind of afterthought, but is intrinsic to existence. In the beginning, when God first promulgated principles and laws by which human beings were to live, he did so to put them into harmony with the nature of things. Without what Ibn al-'Arabî calls elsewhere the "Universal Balance," human beings would drag the world into chaos, since they manifest the properties and traces of a tremendous variety of divine names, whose outward properties and traces conflict. Is God not the Merciful and the Wrathful, the Exalter and the Abaser, the Forgiving and the Vengeful, the Life-giver and the Slayer? If the names were to manifest their traces without any unifying rule and universal balance, the world would be destroyed.



It is this relationship—what in another context one might call the "Tao"—that God reveals to human beings through religion and law. These two are absolutely necessary to establish peace and stability in the human domain and harmony and equilibrium in the world of nature. Moreover, the revealed principles of religion are far more important than man-made laws, since revelation alone directly discloses the unseen realities—the divine names—that determine the nature of the universe.

Ibn al-'Arabî's ontological presuppositions will be unfamiliar to those not versed in the theology of the Christian Middle Ages. In brief, everything in the universe remains in a state of "possibility" as long as God

has not given it existence. By "possibility" is meant equidistance between existence and nonexistence; as long as neither predominates in the possible thing, it remains but a virtuality known by God. When God "creates" it, he gives "preponderance" to its existence over its nonexistence.

A certain historical interest is added to the present passage because of the allusion at the end to Ibn al-'Arabî's meeting as a young man with Averroes (d. 1198), the great philosopher of Spain who influenced the West more than any other Muslim thinker except perhaps Avicenna. Note that Ibn al-'Arabî portrays him not as the opponent of revealed religion, as he is often described in the West, but as a great master of intellect who defended revelation. Already in Ibn al-'Arabî's time Averroes was more remembered as a doctor of the revealed Law than as a philosopher; in any case, he remained largely unstudied throughout the Islamic world, while Ibn al-'Arabî's teachings spread to its every corner.

It should probably be pointed out that this passage does not apologize for certain events that have taken place in the name of Islam over the past few years. Careful reading will show that Ibn al-'Arabî criticizes two groups of people, the same two that he attacks in many other passages of his works: worldly, fanatic mullahs and skeptical thinkers who misuse intellect. When the first group adopts the ideologies of the second, even though dressing them in Islamic robes, the result can only spell disaster for Islamic civilization.

#### TEXT

The expression "divine names" points to the realities of the things as they are in themselves. So pay attention to what you will hear, and do not

imagine multiplicity or an existential gathering! What we want to explain is only the hierarchy of intelligible realities, which are many with respect to relationships, but not with respect to real existence, for, with respect to his Essence, God is One.

From the standpoint of our existence, our existential need, and our possibility, we know that we are derived from a Preponderator from whom our coming into existence requires many, diverse relationships. In the Koran, God alludes to these relationships as the "Most Beautiful Names." As the Speaker, God named himself the names at the ontological level of his Divine Being, which cannot be shared by anyone, for he is One God, and there is no other God.

After this introduction, which concerns the origin of the subject, the appearance of God's traces in the cosmos, and the giving of preponderance to the possible universe, I say:

#### CONFERENCE OF THE NAMES

The names gathered together in the presence of the Named. They gazed upon their own realities and meanings and sought the manifestation of their own properties and traces in order that the entities of things might be distinguished. For Creator, Ordainer, Knower, Governor, Differentiator, Originator, Form-giver, Provider, Life-giver, Slayer, Inheritor, Grateful, and all the rest of the divine names gazed upon themselves, but they did not find anything created, governed, deployed, or nourished. They said, "What can be done so that the entities of things—within which our properties become manifest—may enter into existence, so that our authority can be demonstrated?"

The divine names—which some of the realities of the cosmos demanded after the cosmos' own entity was man-

ifested—went to the name Originator. They said to him, "Perhaps you can give existence to these entities so that our properties may become manifest and our authority established, for the presence within which we now dwell is not able to show our traces."

Originator said, "That pertains to the name Powerful, since I am under his scope."

Now this state of affairs came about because the possible things in their state of nonexistence—thus, abasement and existential need—asked the divine names:

Nonexistence has blinded us from

Reason or  
"intellect"  
provides  
insufficient  
knowledge of  
God.

perceiving one another and from knowing what God requires you to do with us. So if you were to make manifest our entities and clothe them in the robe of existence, you would be doing us a favor and we would undertake the appropriate veneration and reverence. Moreover, your sovereignty becomes genuine only if we are actually manifest; but today you possess sovereignty over us only potentially and virtually. So what we seek



from you is what you should be seeking to an even greater degree from us.

The names replied, "What the possible things have said is correct!" So they fell to seeking the same thing.

When the names approached the name Powerful, he said,

I am under the scope of the name Willing, so I cannot bring any of you into actualized existence without his approval. The possible thing itself does not give me the ability to do that. First the Commander's command must come from his Lord. When he commands the thing to enter into created existence, saying to it 'Be!', then he empowers me, and I undertake to create the thing. So approach the name Willing. Perhaps he will give preponderance to and choose the side of existence over the side of nonexistence. Then I, Commander, and Speaker will join together and give existence to your traces.

So the names went to the name Willing. They said to him, "We asked the name Powerful to bring our entities into existence, but he deferred the command to you. What do you decree?" Willing said, "Powerful spoke the truth! But I have no news about the property of the name Knowing with respect to you. Does he have prior knowledge that you will be given existence, so that we can specify it for you, or does he not? For I am under the scope of the name Knowing. So go to him and mention your situation to him."

So they went to the name Knowing and reported what the name Willing had said. Knowing said, "Willing spoke the truth! And I have prior knowledge that your traces will be

given existence. But courtesy must be observed. For we have a presence that watches over us, and that is the name Allah. So let us all go to him, since he is the Presence of All-Comprehensiveness."

So all the names gathered together in the presence of Allah. He said, "What is on your mind?" So they told him the story. He said, "I am the name that comprehends your realities and I denote the Named, who is an All-Holy Essence described by Perfection and Transcendence. Stay here while I confer with the Object of my denotation." So he entered in upon the Object of his denotation and told him what the possible things had said and what the names were discussing. The Essence said, "Go out, and tell each one of the names to become connected to what his reality requires among the possible things."

So the name Allah went out, next to him the name Speaker, acting as his spokesman to the possible things and to the names. He told them what the Named had said. So Knowing, Willing, Speaking, and Powerful established their connections, and the first possible thing became outwardly manifest through the specification of Willing and the property of Knowing.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LAWS

Once the entities and the traces had become manifest in the created universe, some of them exercised authority and dominated over others in keeping with the names with which they were connected. As a result, the entities began to quarrel and dispute. Then the possible things said, "We fear lest our order be corrupted and we return to the nonexistence from which we arose." So they called upon the names:

"O names! If your properties were

to follow a known balance, a designated boundary, and a leader to which you all go back, that would preserve our existence and the traces that you display in us. That would be best both for us and for you. So go to Allah! Perhaps he will present to you someone who can set a boundary at which you can stop. If not, we will be destroyed, and you will no longer display your effects!

The names replied, "This is in everyone's best interest and the most excellent of courses!" Hence, they did what they were asked, saying "The name Governor will communicate your situation." They informed Governor, and he said, "I will do so."

The name Governor entered the presence of Allah and reemerged with Allah's command to the name Lord to "do what the best interest requires in order to preserve the entities of the possible things." The Lord took two viziers to help him, the name Governor and the name Differentiator. God says, "He *governs* the affair, he *differentiates* the signs; haply you will have faith in the encounter with your *Lord*" (Koran 13:2), who is the "leader." So look how appropriate is the Word of God, employing expressions that fit the state that is demanded by the actual situation.

The Lord set down boundaries and established customs by which the kingdom might be set in order and "to test which one of them is better in works" (Koran 11:7). God made two kinds of boundaries and customs: One kind is called "wise government," which he cast into the primordial disposition of the great human beings. Hence they set down boundaries and established laws through a power they found in themselves; they did so in every city, place, and clime, in accord-

ance with what was demanded by the constitution and nature of those areas, since they knew what wisdom demanded. Thus they preserved the property, lives, families, relatives, and kinship relationships of the people through what was known as the "laws."

These were the wise laws established by men of intellect as the result of an inspiration from God of which they were unaware. Thus were arranged and protected the best interests of everyone in the world wherever there was no revealed divine Law. The establishers of these laws did not know whether the laws would

The revealed principles of religion are far more important than man-made laws.

bring about nearness to God, or whether they would result in paradise or hell, or anything connected with the hereafter. These lawmakers did not even know that there was a hereafter and a sensory resurrection within physical bodies; or an abode within which there is food, drink, clothing, sexual relationships, and joy; and another abode within which there is chastisement and pain. For the existence of all that is possible, its nonexistence is possible, and they had no



*Pondering the law*

proof of the preponderance of one of the possibilities over the other.

Then these wise men came to know the divine sciences in themselves, such as the affirmation of God's unity, the glorification and veneration of God's majesty, the attributes of transcendence, the lack of any likeness or similarity. So those who knew this and understood it called it to the attention of those who did not know. They urged people to accept the correct view. At the same time the wise men told the people that intellects are limited with respect to their reflective powers and cannot pass beyond certain bounds; moreover, God effuses his knowledge into the hearts of certain of his servants and thereby teaches them "a knowledge from him" (Koran 18:65) . . . , and God has deposited within the

celestial world certain affairs concerning which some knowledge can be gained by drawing conclusions from the traces of those affairs in this elemental world. This is indicated by God's words, "He revealed to each heaven its command" (Koran 41:12).

Since they knew that no deficiency in any of the bodily members causes the body to die, they investigated the realities of their own souls: Becoming aware that the body perceives and moves according to something added to it, they investigated this thing and came to know it as their souls. They saw that the soul gains knowledge after having been ignorant, so they understood that even though the soul is nobler than the body, it is accompanied by poverty and need. Hence, they ascended through rational speculation

from one thing to another; each time they reached something new, they saw that it was in need of something else. Finally speculation took them to something that was in need of nothing, which had no likeness, which was similar to nothing, and to which nothing was similar. They stopped there and said: This is the First. It must be One in itself with respect to itself, and its Firstness and Unity must not accept a second, since there is nothing like it and nothing comparable to it. So they declared it to be one in existence. Then when they saw that the possible things had no reason of themselves to come into existence, they knew that this One had bestowed existence upon them. Hence, they acknowledged their need of the One and venerated it by negating from it everything by which the possible things were qualified. This is the furthest limit of intellect.

#### **THE COMING OF GOD'S MESSENGER**

While these men of intellect were busy with their own affairs, there arose among them a person of their own kind who had no station in knowledge in their eyes, since they did not believe that he was the possessor of sound reflection or correct views. He said to them, "I am God's messenger to you."

They said,

Let us observe justice. Look at his claim. Does he claim what is possible or what is impossible? It has been demonstrated to us by logical proofs that God possesses a divine effusion that he may give to whomsoever he will, just as he has effused it upon the spirits and intellects of these celestial spheres. All things share in possibility, so no possible thing is more worthy than others with respect to possibility.

Hence, we have to look at the veracity or falsehood of this claimant. Nor should we proceed to make either of these judgments without a proof, for that would be discourtesy on our part.

Then they said, "Do you have proof for the truth of what you claim?" So he brought them his proofs and they looked upon them. They saw that this person had none of the knowledge that reflection would have given, nor was any such thing known from him. So they came to know that he who "revealed to each heaven its command" (Koran 41:12) had revealed to each

**Revelation alone  
directly discloses  
the unseen  
realities—the  
divine names  
—that determine  
the nature of the  
universe.**

heaven the existence of this person and of what he brought. So they hurried to declare their faith in him and acknowledge his veracity. They came to know that God had given him knowledge of the sciences that he had deposited in the celestial world, which they could not reach by their own reflection, and that he had given him knowledge of himself that they did not have.

They observed that this person carried his knowledge of God to the weak-

minded common man, on whom he bestowed that which would set his intellect aright, and also to the man of great intellect and sound view, to whom he also gave that which would set his intellect aright. Hence they [the wise men] knew that this man possessed, through the divine effusion, something beyond intellect, and that God had given him a knowledge of that effusion and a power over it that he had not given them. They acknowledged his superiority over them, had faith in him, declared his truthfulness, and followed him. So he set down for them various acts whereby they could gain nearness to God. He taught them about possible things created by God and hidden from them and about what would come to them from him in the future. He told them about the Resurrection, the Gathering, the Garden, and the Fire.



In this way messengers were sent according to the diversity of the eras and the multiplicity of situations. Each declared the truth of the others. None differed whatsoever in the principles in which they were grounded and about which they spoke, even if statutes differed.<sup>3</sup> Revealed laws were sent down, and statutes came to the people. The determining factor was the time and the situation, just as God has declared: "To each We appointed a Law and a path" (Koran 5:48). So the principles were in agree-

3. Ibn al-'Arabi's appreciation of the universality of prophethood and truth derives from Koranic verses such as "Every nation has its messenger" (10:47); "We sent forth among every nation a messenger, saying: 'Serve God, and eschew idols'" (16:36); and "We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people" (14:4).

ment, with no diversity in anything.

The people distinguished between these prophetic ordinances promulgated by God and the wise ordinances established by the sages in accordance with their rational powers. They realized that the prophetic way was more complete and that it came from God. They accepted what they were told about the unseen things and had faith in the messengers. None of them resisted except him who did not counsel his own soul through his knowledge, but followed his soul's caprice seeking leadership over his fellows, in ignorance of his own soul and its measure and in ignorance of his Lord.

#### THE INCAPACITY OF INTELLECT

Hence, the root and the cause of the establishment of the revealed laws in the cosmos was the desire to put the world into order and to provide the knowledge of God of which the intellect was ignorant with respect to its own reflection. In other words, the intellect cannot discover this knowledge independently by its own speculative power. Hence the revealed scriptures came down with it, and the tongues of the messengers and prophets spoke about it; then the men of intellect came to know that there were certain things concerning the knowledge of God in which they were deficient and which the messengers completed for them.

I do not mean by "men of intellect" those who nowadays speak about philosophy. I only mean those who followed the path of the prophets. In other words, they busied themselves with their own souls and with ascetic discipline, inner striving, spiritual retreats, and preparing themselves for that which enters in upon the heart from the celestial world when the heart is purified, that which has been

revealed to the celestial spheres. These are the ones I mean by "men of intellect." As for those who busy themselves with chatter, talk, and debate, employing their reflective powers to analyze the words in which the first principles were revealed, they are completely oblivious of the affair undertaken by those great men. The likes of those who are among us today have no worth in the eyes of any man of intellect. For they mock religion, show contempt for God's servants, and have reverence only for those who share the same rank as themselves. Their hearts have been overcome by love for the affairs of this world and the search for position and leadership. So God has abased them, just as they have abased knowledge. He has scorned them and derided them, letting them have access to the doors of the ignorant—the kings and the leaders. So the kings and the leaders also abase them.

The words of people like this are of no account. God has "sealed their hearts" (Koran 2:7), "made them deaf and blinded their eyes" (Koran 47:23), despite their extravagant claims, according to which they are the best of all creatures. Even the mullah, he who gives legal pronouncements in God's religion, is better than they, in spite of the paucity of his piety. For a person who has faith, even though he takes it only in imitation of others, is better than those who are "men of intellect" in their own view. God forbid that any intelligent man have the attributes of such as these!

We have met very few truly intelligent men. They are those who have the greatest knowledge of God's messengers, follow most carefully the prescriptions of Muhammad, and are most concerned with their preservation. They know the veneration due God's majesty, and they are aware of

the knowledge about himself that God gives only to his servants—the prophets and those who follow them—through the special divine effusion that is outside ordinary learning and that cannot be acquired through study and effort or reached by the intellect's own reflective powers.

I saw one of the great ones among them [i.e., Averroes].<sup>4</sup> He recognized the knowledge that God had opened up to me without rational speculation or reading, but through a spiritual retreat in which I had been alone with God, even though I had not been seeking such knowledge. He said, "Praise belongs to God, that I should have

God effuses His  
knowledge into  
the hearts of his  
servants and  
thereby teaches  
them "a  
knowledge from  
Him."

lived in a time in which I saw 'one whom God has given mercy from him, and has taught him knowledge preceding from him' (Koran 18:65)." "God singles out for his mercy whom he will, and God is of bounty abounding" (Koran 2:105). ■

4. Ibn al-'Arabi's well-known meeting with Averroes is related or referred to in most accounts of Ibn al-'Arabi's life. Cf., for example, S.H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) 92-95; H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 41-42; Ibn 'Arabi, *Sufis of Andalusia*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 23-24.



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## ■ THE PRESIDENCY

**Introduction** *Marcus Cunliffe* 546

**The Jacksonian Revolution** *Robert V. Remini* 549

Remini examines the changing images of Andrew Jackson, particularly since Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. first developed the notion of a Jacksonian Revolution in the presidency.

**How Strong a President?** *Richard Rose* 564

Rose compares the American and French presidential regimes, relating both of them to particular historical and cultural circumstances.

**Presidential Politics: The Race Is On, the Stakes Are High** *Stephen J. Wayne* 574

Wayne focuses on the growing importance of self-promoting candidates and the eclipse of party power in presidential politics.

**Change and Continuity: The Presidency in Historical Perspective** *Leo P. Ribuffo* 585

Ribuffo discusses the uses and limits of presidential power from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan.

**Whirlwinds from the West** *Richard Jensen* 600

Jensen looks at the growing influence of the American West in winning presidential races and shaping the images of presidential candidates.



<b>■ THE JUDICIARY REASSESSED</b>		
<b>Strict Construction or Legal Creativity?</b>	<i>Morton A. Kaplan</i>	<b>608</b>
Kaplan defines the necessary relationship between judicial interpretation of the Constitution and communal standards of the Good.		
<b>■ THE DEMOCRATIC MODEL AND THE THIRD WORLD</b>		
<b>Observations on the Cultural Diversity of Non-Western Governments</b>		<b>621</b>
<i>Ernest W. Lefever</i>		
Lefever explores the limits and possibilities for self-government in the Third World.		
<b>■ ON VIRTUE</b>		
<b>Natural Law and Virtue</b>	<i>Ralph McInerney</i>	<b>632</b>
McInerney examines what is still relevant and applicable from the medieval natural law tradition.		
<b>■ A RECURRENT NOTE IN JEWISH LITERATURE</b>		
<b>Zionism and Judaism</b>	<i>Jacob Neusner</i>	<b>645</b>
Neusner looks at the return to Zionism as a theme in biblical and rabbinical literature.		
<b>■ ISLAMIC COSMOLOGY</b>		
<b>From the 'Meccan Openings'—The Myth of the Origin of Religion and Law</b>	<i>William C. Chittick</i>	<b>655</b>
Chittick examines the mystical vision of Ibn al-Arabi, the Islamic theologian, as found in his "Meccan Openings."		
<b>■ THE ARISTOCRATIC HERITAGE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY</b>		
<b>The Framers: Not Philosophes, but Aristocrats</b>	<i>Russell Kirk</i>	<b>666</b>
Kirk urges that we take another look at the social status of the Founding Fathers.		
<b>■ COMMUNISM IN BULGARIA</b>		
<b>The Case of Nikola Petkov</b>	<i>Charles A. Moser</i>	<b>677</b>
Moser explores the precedent established with the political execution of Nikola Petkov by the Bulgarian communist regime in 1945.		
<b>■ RETHINKING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION</b>		
<b>Was France the Fatherland of Genocide?</b>	<i>Laurent Ladouce</i>	<b>684</b>
Ladouce deals with the furor created in France by the uncovering of genocidal crimes during the French Revolution.		
<b>■ THE SOCIAL GOOD</b>		
<b>From Equality to Pluri-elitism: Terms of a Debate</b>	<i>Virgil Nemoianu</i>	<b>691</b>
Scholars debate the claims of individual excellence and equality.		