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Ibn Al-ʿArabī

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

Muhyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī is one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the past seven hundred years. Born in Murcia in present-day Spain in 1165, he set out for the western lands of Islam in 1200, traveled in the Arab countries and Turkey, and, in 1223, settled in Damascus, where he lived until his death in 1240. He wrote voluminously and attracted the attention of scholars and kings during his own lifetime. His magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings) – inspired sciences that were “opened” up to his soul during his pilgrimage to Mecca – will fill some 15,000 pages in its new edition. His most widely studied work, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom), is a short explication of the various modalities of wisdom embodied by 28 of God’s prophets, from Adam to Muhammad.

Ibn al-ʿArabī’s writings investigate every dimension of Islamic learning, from the *Qurʾān* and the *ḥadīth* (the sayings of Muḥammad) to grammar, law, philosophy, psychology, and metaphysics. His basic intellectual project was to illustrate the unity of all human endeavors and the underlying, interrelated functions of all human thinking. He cannot be classified as a philosopher, theologian, scientist, or jurist, though his works address most of the basic epistemological issues of these disciplines. He saw himself as an inheritor of the wisdom of the prophets, but one who was given the duty of explaining this wisdom in the subtlest intellectual discourse of the day – at a period that is looked back upon as the high point of Islamic learning. He provides no system, but rather a unified vision that is capable of spinning off innumerable systems, each of them appropriate to a given field of learning or level of understanding. He offers many ways of approaching the basic questions of human existence, such as the nature of reality itself, the role of God, the structure of the cosmos

the relationship of minerals, plants, and animals to other creatures. In short, he provides basic patterns for establishing complex systems of metaphysics, theology, cosmology, psychology, and ethics.

Ibn al-ʿArabī was followed by a number of major thinkers who systematized his “openings” in various ways, depending upon their own orientations and intellectual contexts. The diverse interpretations given to his works are especially obvious in a series of over 100 commentaries that have been written on his *Bezels of Wisdom* from the thirteenth century down to modern times. His stepson Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 1274) had probably the keenest philosophical mind among Ibn al-ʿArabī’s followers. Qūnawī in turn trained many disciples, several of whom wrote widely influential works. Saʿīd al-Dīn Farḡānī (d. 1296) provided systematic expositions of the teachings of both Qūnawī and Ibn al-ʿArabī in Arabic and Persian. Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d. 1289) was a poet who wrote a delightful summary of Qūnawī’s teachings in mixed Persian prose and poetry that helped popularize Ibn al-ʿArabī’s teachings. Muʿayyid al-Dīn Jandī (d. ca. 1300) wrote in Arabic the first detailed commentary on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Bezels of Wisdom*. The intellectual tradition established by Ibn al-ʿArabī and Qūnawī gradually merged with various branches of Islamic philosophy, yielding a wide range of intellectual perspectives that dominated the Islamic wisdom tradition down to the coming of Western colonialism.

In order to grasp Ibn al-ʿArabī’s importance for the history of scientific thought in Islam, one needs to understand his basic accomplishment, which was to establish an honored place in the Islamic intellectual tradition for supra-rational knowledge. From their inception in the eighth and ninth centuries, the mainline schools of theology and philosophy in Islam had endeavored to understand the Quranic revelation on the basis of rational modes of investigation taken over from the Greek heritage. Parallel to this, there developed a more practical, existential approach that found the goal of human life in direct experience of the presence of God. This second approach, which came to be called by the umbrella term “Sufism,” laid stress upon supra-rational modes of knowledge that are collectively known as *kashf* (unveiling), i.e., the lifting of the veils that separate the human soul from God. Unlike some Sufis, Ibn al-ʿArabī was not opposed to acknowledging the authority of reason. However, he maintained that unveiling was a higher form of knowledge, because it grows out of the unmediated perception of God’s actuality. In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s way of looking at things, reason tends innately to divide and discern. It eliminates connections between God and the cosmos and understands God as distant and transcendent. In contrast, unveiling works by seeing sameness and presence;

knowledge of God and of reality as a whole depends upon a happy balance of reason and unveiling. Only through this balance can God be perceived in appropriate modes as both absent and present, near and far, transcendent and immanent, wrathful and merciful. Ibn al-ʿArabī's works are devoted largely to explaining the vast range of these appropriate modes.

The long term effect of the marriage between reason and unveiling effectuated by Ibn al-ʿArabī is symbolized by his meeting when still a boy – of perhaps 15 years – with the philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes d. 1198). Ibn al-ʿArabī had already experienced the opening of the unseen worlds, and Ibn Rushd, who was a friend of his father, had asked to meet him. In the brief exchange that took place, Ibn Rushd asked if unveiling and reason achieved the same goals. Ibn al-ʿArabī replied, “Yes and no.” Then, in cryptic language, he affirmed that reason was a valid route to achieve knowledge of the nature of things, but he denied that it exhausted the possibilities of human knowing. In the West, the teachings of Ibn Rushd were employed to help establish nature as an autonomous realm of intellectual endeavor. Under the discerning eye of reason, God was abstracted from perceived reality, eventually becoming a hypothesis that could be dispensed with. The world of nature was now the proper site for rational analysis and dissection, and the result has been the ever-increasing fragmentation of human knowledge, with a total divorce between science and ethics. In contrast, Ibn Rushd was forgotten in the Islamic world, but Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers succeeded in establishing a harmony between reason and unveiling. Hence Muslim intellectuals were never able to conceive of nature as a realm cut off from God. If God is present in all things, then the ethical and moral strictures that he establishes through revelation need to be observed at every level. It becomes impossible to investigate the natural world without at the same time investigating its relationship with God and recognizing the moral and ethical demands that this relationship entails.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's career and teachings exemplify the dimensions of Islamic learning. The worldview to which he gave detailed expression provided a perspective from within which Muslim intellectuals were able to answer the deepest questions of the human mind. Ibn al-ʿArabī's achievements contributed to an intellectual equilibrium that refused to subordinate the spiritual demands of human beings to corporeal demands and that gradually established a vast framework within the context of which the intellectual disciplines came to be ever more united and interrelated. This holistic perspective on knowledge in turn prevented the fragmentation of the Islamic worldview and allowed no room for “declarations of independence” by specific

morality, and spiritual development lay at the heart of this perspective, it was impossible to divorce any branch of science or learning from these concerns.

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Ibn Al-A'lam

RAYMOND MERCIER

Ibn al-A'lam, Abū'l-Qasim ʿAlī ibn ʿIsa al-Husain, al-ʿAlawī, al-Sharīf was a tenth century astronomer, apparently established in Baghdad. The year of his death is recorded by Ibn al-Qifī as 375/985. The *Zij* (astronomical handbook with tables) which he wrote is lost, but substantial information about it may be gleaned from notices in the work of other astronomers. His work was patronized by the Būyid ruler ʿAdūd al-Dawla but suffered from lack of support in the disturbed period which followed his death in 372/982.

A near contemporary, the great astronomer Ibn Yūnus of Cairo, reports that Ibn al-A'lam had fixed the length of the year as 365; 45, 40, 20 days, determined the position of Regulus (α Leonis) in the year 365/975–6 as 15; 6 Leo, and also fixed the rate of precession, one degree in 70 Persian years. He remarks that Ibn al-A'lam was known everywhere for the exactitude of his observations and the extent of his geometrical knowledge.

Al-Bīrūnī in his work *Tamhīd al-mustaqarr li-tahqīq mā nā al-mamarr* (On Transits) gives the name of his *Zij* as *al-ʿAdūdī*, and incidentally provides values for

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