

Interview Questions

William Chittick

1. How did you meet with and start to work on Ibn Arabi?

I spent my junior year in college (1964-65) at the American University of Beirut. As a history major, I focused on the history of Islam and found “Sufism” interesting. I quickly became acquainted with Ibn Arabi’s name as a great Sufi teacher. I continued work on Sufism, specifically Mevlana, when I returned to America. Then in the fall of 1966 I went to Iran to learn the necessary languages. I enrolled as a PhD student in Persian literature at the University of Tehran (in the foreign students program), and after three years of classes began work on my dissertation, which I had decided to do on a master of Ibn Arabi’s school of thought, namely Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492). Meanwhile I read the *Fusus al-hikam* from cover to cover—over a period of five years—under the direction of the great Japanese linguist and philosopher Toshihiko Izutsu, who used to spend a few months of the year in Tehran. I left Iran in 1979, and, after publishing my *Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (1983), I began a systematic reading of Ibn Arabi’s major work, *al-Futuh al-makkiyya*. I published my first book on Ibn Arabi (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*) in 1989.

2. In your book “Imaginal Worlds”, you say that Ibn Arabi is like a lighthouse who seek to find a way in the dead-ends of modern and post modern thought. Could you please tell us what you mean by this?

Modernity, beginning with the Enlightenment, attempted to build new societies on the basis of reason, but a reason that is cut off from any access to the suprahuman. The leaders of the West devised political systems (democracy, socialism, etc.) constructed on the basis of human notions of social and political wellbeing, tacitly denying any reality beyond this life. The result of this experiment was failure, as witnessed by the monstrous occurrences of the twentieth century, the bloodiest period of human history. Postmodernism is a twentieth century reaction to the failure of modernism. The basic insight of the post-moderns is that all political and social systems are based on power structures that work to the benefit of those in power. Therefore, the postmodern theorists have tried to show that appeals to rationality, justice, equality, freedom, and all the other slogans of modernity are in fact attempts to consolidate the power of those who already have it. However, postmodernism offers nothing to replace the modernity that it seeks to destroy.

Ibn Arabi is, I think, the greatest philosopher/theologian ever to appear in Islamic civilization. Rooting himself in the sources of the Islamic tradition (Koran, Hadith) and following in the Prophet’s footsteps on the path to God, he was able to re-vision the whole Islamic tradition in terms that are not limited by the symbolic and mythic language

of the Islamic sources. He provided a thorough, rational analysis of the limitations of rational thought and showed the way to complement rationality with spiritual practice and visionary understanding. He addressed in unparalleled detail and with enormous sophistication all of the root issues of human existence—God, the universe, the human soul, the purpose of life, ethical and moral development.

Ibn Arabi provided the Islamic tradition with the intellectual ammunition to avoid the pitfalls of exclusive reliance on reason. Such exclusive reliance in the West had led the most important thinkers to deny the underlying bases upon which all human civilizations had been built. Islam sums up these bases in terms of the three “principles” (*asl*) of Islamic. First, *tawhīd*: there is a single, Ultimate Reality upon which all reality depends absolutely. Second, prophecy (*nubuwwa*): Human beings, because of their peculiar gift of rationality and freedom, can break the balance between the Ultimate Reality and perceived reality. The only thing that can save them from destroying themselves, individually and socially, is guidance from that Reality. Third, the Return (*ma`ād*): All apparent reality goes back to its source, and, when human beings go back, they will be held responsible for everything in which they were free to make choices. Ibn Arabi demonstrated the truth of these propositions in myriad ways with such convincing arguments that it became impossible for any thinker to reject them. In contrast, all three of these principles were denied by modern thought, and they survived only on the margins of society. Mainstream thinking came to be dominated by two intertwined products of the Enlightenment: (1.) ideology, or the belief that humanly devised systems can improve the human race. (2.) scientism, or the belief that only modern, empirical science provides real knowledge of the universe. Notice that ideology always rests upon claims to be based upon “scientific” understanding of man’s place in the universe.

In short, Ibn Arabi provides Muslims with the means to see into the false premises of the political, social, and economic ideologies that rule over the modern world and bring about ever-increasing social dissolution, and, in response to that dissolution, ever-increasing totalitarianism. I am not suggesting that Ibn Arabi offers the solution to our modern predicaments—we must find our own solutions. But he does offer unparalleled insights into the meaning of the human situation. Without understanding where we have gone wrong, we will never be able to discover how to go right.

3. In the same book, you say that Ibn Arabi is known in the West as the defender of the “unity (encounter) of religions”. How does Ibn Arabi see the unity of religions and what is its significance in today’s world?

Ibn Arabi speaks of the unity of religions on the level of principles, not applications. Like other Muslims, he looked upon other religions—inasmuch as he was aware of their existence, given that he had practically no exposure to them—as somehow deviated from the right path. What he does provide, however, is thorough exposition of why the Ultimate Reality demands a multiplicity of prophetic manifestations and why these are true in themselves, whether or not human beings live up to those teachings or

deviate from them. It is impossible to understand what Ibn Arabi is saying without appreciating the God's wisdom and mercy in providing a multiplicity of paths whereby human beings can achieve everlasting happiness.

This is important because of the nature of the world we live in, where people increasingly are taught that each religion teaches that it is the unique owner of truth and salvation. This notion is then used by unscrupulous ideologues and political leaders to foster hatred, strife, and war.

4. What does Ibn Arabi's concept of "Station of no station" mean?

It means that the highest perfection that human beings can achieve—the highest “station” or “standing place” (*maqâm*)—is beyond our imagination and understanding. Those who do achieve it—such as the Prophet Muhammad and some of his outstanding followers—cannot be defined. They are not this or that, in contrast to everything else, which is something. Like God himself, they embrace every possibility and they respond to every situation, to every moment of existence, in the most appropriate and proper manner. In contrast, all other human beings are limited by where they stand—their individual identities, their hopes and fears, their occupations, their families, their loves, their hates. Everyone other than the most perfect human beings—even saints—are colored by specific divine attributes. Only those in the Station of No Station have no inherent and intrinsic attributes, no qualities, no colors. They stand in “colorlessness” (*bî-rangî*) as Mevlana calls it, and they assume an appropriate color in every situation in keeping with the divine wisdom.

5. In İstanbul, you will present a speech on "Wisdom of Animals". Could you tell us a little about your speech, why have you chosen this theme?

Ibn Arabi talks about practically everything, and he often does so in terms of the wisdom of this prophet or that prophet, as in his book *Fusûs al-hikam*, “The Ringstones of the Wisdoms,” in which twenty-seven prophetic figures are described in terms of the divine wisdom that they make manifest. But he also teaches constantly that everything in the universe makes the divine wisdom manifest. In his categorization of the things of the cosmos, he describes the twenty-eight levels of cosmic manifestation. Three of these are minerals, plants, and animals. I have been working on his cosmology for some years, and I thought this would be a good opportunity to summarize what he says about one of the twenty-eight cosmic levels, not least because, especially in the West, a good deal of attention is paid by ecologists and others to the importance of animals in the world.

Most people think that human beings are special, and of course they are special, because they alone have the ability to rise up in their stations and achieve nearness to God, even becoming so near that they stand in No Station. But most people are self-centered, self-righteous, and indifferent to other human beings, not to speak of animals. Their indifference to the divine wisdom in things takes away any claim they may have to

be superior to animals. Ibn Arabi argues persuasively that animals are much closer to God than most human beings, and people have a great deal to learn from them. If people could simply imitate the real nature of dumb beasts, they could achieve human perfection.