

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK: *The Sufi path of knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination*. xxii, 478 pp. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989. \$74.50 (paper \$24.50).

This book, which offers a comprehensive selection of the thoughts of Ibn al-'Arabī in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, represents a long labour of love that has benefited enormously from the author's previous pioneer studies in Ṣūfism (Rūmī included) and from his personal contact with other scholars who have been labouring in this particular field. None the less, considering the size of the task and the complexity and highly abstract nature of the thought and of the argument, twenty years (p. xxii) preparing the ground, and six years since the book here was first conceived as the way of presenting Ibn al-'Arabī's encyclopedic composition, these days must count as something of a record. It is an achievement in itself, and one may note also the author's close cooperation with scholars of distinction who have themselves made considerable contributions in their writings on this work in particular: Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu and Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Aṣṭiyānī of Mashhad (whose *Sharḥ* is included on p. 415), to name but three.

Dr. Ian Netton, in his book, *Allāh Transcendent* (Routledge, 1989) remarked of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (p. 293):

... such works as *The Bezels of Wisdom* and *The Meccan Revelations* represent a massive conjunction or crossroads of ideas, themes, narratives, and dogmas that reflect a variety of other texts, profane and sacred, known and unknown. Much of the richness, of course, of both *The Bezels of Wisdom* and *The Meccan Revelations*—indeed, of the whole corpus of Ibn al-'Arabī—has yet to be mined, but Ibn al-'Arabī is known to have studied and been inspired by, for example, al-Hallāj (died A.D. 922), al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (died circa A.D. 932), Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī (died A.D. 874 or 877/8), and al-Ghazālī (A.D. 1058–1111). It would be apt to describe Ibn al-'Arabī's *Meccan Revelations* in Lévi-Strauss's term as a work of *bricolage*, for it is a huge, brilliant, but horrendously disjointed and disorganized amalgam of vision, dream and reality on the one hand, and material drawn from, or paralleled by, the Hellenistic, Neoplatonic, Islamic, ṣūfī and *ishrāqī*—to name but a few—universities of discourse on the other.

Bricolage is not a word that appears in Chittick's assessment of the content; nevertheless he concedes (p. xi) that the vast expanse of the discourse (its *envergure*, to crib a French aeronautical term) does present many problems in attempting to convey an impression of unity and coherence in partial translation:

The *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* is a vast encyclopedia of the Islamic sciences within the context of *tawḥīd*, the profession of God's Unity that forms the core of Islam. The book includes 560 chapters, several of which would be major books if published separately. Ibn

al-'Arabī discusses in copious detail the Koran, the Hadith, events in the life of the Prophet, the detailed rulings of the Shari'a, the principles of jurisprudence, the divine names and attributes, the relationship between God and the world, the structure of the cosmos, the make-up of the human being, the various human types, the path by which human perfection may be attained, the stages of the ascent to God, the ranks and kinds of the angels, the nature of the jinn, the characteristics of time and space, the role of political institutions, the symbolism of letters, the nature of the interworld between death and Resurrection, the ontological status of heaven and hell, and so on. The list could be extended for pages.

The range of the discussion is clear from the lay-out of this book, subdivided into seven parts: Overview, Theology, Ontology, Epistemology, Hermeneutics (which focuses especially on the Qur'ān, on Muḥammad himself, and on Commentary and *ḥadīth*), Soteriology, Consummation and Transcendence. The firm grip that Chittick has on the content is a major achievement. This book must be counted amongst the most important studies of Ṣūfism (and probably the major work on Ibn al-'Arabī) to have been published over the last decade. Further praise may be given to the author for the very comprehensive bibliographies, the references to Qur'ānic passages, *ḥadīths* and sayings, and the notes that furnish extra lexicographical assistance and source guidance. Throughout, Chittick frames those passages that he has translated within a matrix of summarized argument and theme. Important Arabic terms are bracketed in juxtaposed position where demanded. It would be idle to pretend that the work as presented can be recommended to the uninitiated, though Section I, Overview, if read together with the Introduction and several of Chittick's preparatory articles, are a fine introduction to Ibn al-'Arabī's thought and his discoveries in general. Other sections are tough assignments. In fact the total number of pages that are relevant to a discussion of the text, 381 pages, is misleading since the page lay-out appears in two well-printed columns. The book is thus far longer than it seems. The English style is clear and free from cryptic expressions. Its success and its shortcomings may be illustrated by comparing Chittick with Margaret Smith, who, in her *Readings from the mystics of Islam*, London, 1950, pp. 97–8, offers one example from the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Her attempt does not appear in Chittick's bibliography. Whereas Chittick (p. 214) offers a somewhat literal and matter-of-fact unravelling of a complex argument, Margaret Smith is more poetic and more sensitive and ultimately, I feel, more successful in reaching into the heart of the author.

Chittick in this passage amongst the Hermeneutics renders it:

The dark and luminous veils through which the Real is veiled from the cosmos are the light and the darkness by which the possible thing becomes qualified in its reality because it is an intermediary (*wasāṭ*). It only looks upon itself, so it only looks upon the veil.

Were the veils to be removed from the possible thing, possibility would be removed, and the Necessary and the impossible would be removed through its removal. Hence the veils will be hung down forever, and nothing else is possible. (III, 274.25, 276.9, 18).

Margaret Smith translates this same passage as follows:

The veils of darkness and light, by which God is veiled from the world, are only what describes the contingent, because it is in the midst and it looks only to itself and it does not look to what is within the veil. If the veils were raised from the contingent the contingency would be revealed and the necessary and the imaginable, because the veil is raised, but the veils continue to be a concealment, and it must be so. Consider this world in regard to the raising of the veil, for He spoke of consuming, by the glory of His countenance, the creature who apprehends it and sometimes He says of Himself that the creatures can see Him and not be consumed, declaring that the veils are raised in the Vision, and the Vision itself is a veil (p. 107).

To conclude, despite some disappointment in places as to the English rendering, I can only concur with Professor Annemarie Schimmel's wholehearted and enthusiastic reception of Chittick's work: 'a most important milestone in the study of Islamic mystical theology'. Time may well decide that it is of classic status.

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