

# It's All in Your Imagination



**The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination** by William C. Chittick. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 12246, 1989; 478 pp., \$24.50 paper.

In a previous article in GNOSIS #7 introducing the work of Ibn al-'Arabi, I concluded that "we are still waiting for a scholar and writer who can make him accessible for our generation." From the scholarly side of the equation, at least, Chittick's *Sufi Path of Knowledge* provides such access. It is both the most detailed presentation of the work of Ibn al-'Arabi to appear in the English language and the easiest to read.

Apart from translations of a few of his shorter works, all of the major studies of Ibn al-'Arabi have, until now, been based on the *Fusus al-Hikam* (*The Bezels or Seals of Wisdom*). This work is the first to be based on the *Futuh al-Makkiya*, or *Meccan Revelations*, a much longer work. (In the Arabic original, the *Fusus* is only about 150 pages, whereas the *Futuh* runs to about 17,000 pages!) Chittick's book includes the translation of about 300 pages of Arabic text, as well as an equivalent amount of introduction and commentary.

As someone who has struggled with understanding the *Fusus*, I find that the translations in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* are refreshingly clear and straightforward — what a pleasure to be able to comprehend a passage by Ibn al-'Arabi the first time I read it through! SUNY Press also deserves a great deal of credit for the tasteful design of the book, which reproduces a fine Persian miniature on the cover, and which presents the text in two columns of type on each page, shortening each line of text and making it more digestible. Well-organized and well-indexed, this is an approachable, handsome, comprehensive, and affordable work.

The ideas of Ibn al-'Arabi suggest many parallels in the world of philosophy, psychology, mysticism, and comparative religion. As a visionary author who gave rise to a school of metaphysical thought and mystical science — actually to many such schools — Ibn al-'Arabi makes use of a specific technical vocabulary, the translation of which is an all-important question. Most previous translations have added an extra layer of difficulty by attempting to translate Ibn al-'Arabi into the language of the Western philosophical tradition. Yet, though even Muslim scholars tried to systematize his thought, Ibn al-'Arabi did not write systematic philosophy. He drew freely from philosophical language, as he did from the language of Scripture, to describe his own vision of a universe of relations between the human realm and the divine. To learn this language and grasp what it describes requires a sharp intellect, but even more a sharp imagination.

Ibn al-'Arabi has already created his language; his translator need not create it again. But the translator who jumps too quickly into telling us what this language means in philosophical terminology keeps us from learning what it has to teach. Let us take a term such as *huwiyah*, for example, which is usually translated as the divine "Ipsity" — an abstract and unfriendly term which serves to alienate readers untrained in philosophy. Chittick avoids the needless abstraction, giving us instead the literal translation of the term, which is God's "He-ness." At one point Ibn al-'Arabi describes God's "He-ness" in terms of the "self-disclosure of the Essence." The words are carefully chosen — in Chittick's English as in the original — and yet the phrase reads smoothly and the language makes sense. Language need not be obscure to convey a profound idea.

Chittick often includes the Arabic transliteration of important terms and seems to be consistent in the English equivalents he assigns. Thus the reader gradually gains confidence in mastering not only the basic vocabulary, but the fundamental ideas it represents.

But as pleased as I am with Chittick's general approach to translation, in one important case I am very disappointed. He goes along with previous authors who translate *insan al kamil* as the "perfect man." Yet the term does not indicate a faultless or polished personality so much as the ripened state of a mature human being. I much prefer the term "complete human being," which is more in keeping not only with the outlook of feminism and of Jung, but also with the spirit of

Sufi teaching.

While Chittick avoids taking too much of a philosophical approach, he tries to avoid taking too much of a psychological approach as well. He warns that "the tendency to become transfixed by the multiple apparitions of the One represents a danger. . . . It is clear, for example, that certain varieties of Jungianism divinize the imaginal world [so that] . . . we are left with polytheistic multiplicity, and the 'gods' are reinstated as real entities possessing insuperable differences." Such an approach, Chittick says, "needs to be tempered by more attention to the ultimate Unity lying behind the theophanic facade of created existence." At the same time, he warns, we must "emphasize the essential role which Ibn al-'Arabi accords to imagination."

I would say that Chittick is quite right in seeking to strike a balance in emphasis between imagination and Unity. Yet there is another dimension to Chittick's approach: his focus on the Islamic aspect of Ibn al-'Arabi's work. Personally I have no problem with the inclusion of materials which show that, despite his profound universality, Ibn al-'Arabi was a devout Muslim who expected as much from his students. But there is an aspect of Chittick's approach that may constitute a real limitation: His interpretations tend to emphasize orthodoxy (in the literal sense of rigorously "correct doctrine") over mystical insight.

We find a vivid example of this in Chittick's presentation of texts contrasting the categories of obligatory and supererogatory Islamic prayers (that is, prayers required of all the faithful as opposed to those which are optional). He cites a fascinating text in which Ibn al-'Arabi describes "what is called a knowledge of 'tasting'" and says, "I have tasted . . . and felt the burning at the sensory level during my invocation of Allah through Allah. There He was, and I was not. I felt my tongue burning up . . . with a sensory, animate suffering in the organ."

Here we have a personal account of the practice of *dhikr Allah*, the "remembrance of God" in which Ibn al-'Arabi came to an experience in which it was not he who was witnessing God, but God who was witnessing "Himself" through him. What I find most remarkable about Chittick's commentary is that he ventures no interpretation of this experience at all. Instead he relates it deadpan, as if the only point of interest were the classification of ritual practices which accompany this text. He informs us that "though Ibn al-'Arabi declares that the nearness of supererogatory works is possessed by the gnostics, the perfect men, and the Prophet himself, he states that the nearness of obligatory works is higher."

There is an irony hidden here, since any kind of spiritual exercise, like the one related above, would be considered an inferior, supererogatory act. Is Ibn al-'Arabi pulling our legs? Or does he actually mean that the obligatory act of five prayers a day represents something higher than the experience he has just described? Ibn al-'Arabi's answer as Chittick presents it is as follows:

Through supererogatory works, God is the servant's hearing and his seeing. Through obligatory works, the servant is the hearing and seeing of the Real, and by this the cosmos is established.

Such a statement cries out for interpretation, which Chittick does not supply. I would interpret it to mean that when we approach our spiritual practice not only as a quest for God but as an act of divine service, we allow for a stabilization of the relationship between Creator and creation to the point where "the cosmos is established." By ranking obligatory practices higher than supererogatory ones, Ibn al-'Arabi would be pointing to this higher level of service, while affirming the value of conventional religious discipline whatever one's level of attainment.

I cannot really fault Chittick for choosing to play the role of straight man as he relates the quicksilver message of such a consummate artist and gnostic as Ibn al-'Arabi. Perhaps it is because Chittick has effaced himself in relation to his source that he has been able to translate so much of the output of the "greatest *shaykh*" of Sufism with such grace. For this we should be grateful. Yet there remains an unfinished task for others to pick up: to show what kinds of meanings we seekers might find within *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.  
—Ya'qub ibn Yusuf

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