

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Sufi Path of Knowledge (Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination)*  
By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK, State University of New York Press, 1989.  
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In his introduction, partly in answer to the question 'What does Ibn al-'Arabī have to contribute to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the present age?', William Chittick singles out what he calls 'the two most comprehensive works we possess on Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings'. He is referring to works in European languages and the two he mentions are Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabī* and Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism—A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. 'Both works', he says, 'combine great erudition with a sympathetic understanding of their subject'. With regard to the former, he reminds us that 'in putting complete faith in reason, the West forgot that imagination opens up the soul to certain possibilities of perceiving and understanding not available to the rational mind.' He feels obliged to add however: 'In his zeal to revive the honour due to the imaginal realm, Corbin tended to de-emphasize the cornerstone of Islamic teachings, *tawhīd*, the declaration of God's Unity. It is as if Corbin was so entranced by the recovery of the imaginal that he had difficulty in seeing beyond it.' As to the other work mentioned, he says: 'Izutsu limits himself to an analysis of the mainly philosophical and metaphysical discussions of the *Fuṣūṣ*. Moreover he quotes copiously from the writings of Kāshānī to explain Ibn al-'Arabī's meaning, and Kāshānī is a third-generation commentator on the *Fuṣūṣ*, firmly entrenched in the line of Qūnawī and the movement to bring Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings into harmony with philosophy. Hence Izutsu's study is especially valuable for showing how the *Fuṣūṣ* was read by the later commentators and how the Shaykh's teachings were being integrated into the philosophical tradition, but it does not necessarily reflect the central concerns of the *Fuṣūṣ* itself, nor, with greater reason, those of Ibn al-'Arabī.' Chittick adds, also with reference to Izutsu: 'His personal predilections deeply colour his perception of Ibn al-'Arabī'; and he goes on to say of Corbin: 'More than Izutsu, Corbin is concerned with his own philosophical project as elaborated in dozens of books, several of which have now been translated into English. Any reader of *Creative Imagination* soon begins to wonder where Ibn al-'Arabī ends and Corbin begins.'

Of his own work he writes: 'The present study is an attempt to lead the reader into Ibn al-'Arabī's own universe in a language accessible to non-specialists. In writing the book, I tried to avoid any preconceptions as to what Ibn al-'Arabī should be saying or what he has to offer. Instead, my goal was to translate or 'carry over' his teachings as they are actually found, mainly in

the *Futūḥāt*, into a language which does justice to his concerns, not our concerns'. Of the treatise which is his main source, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (the Meccan Openings) he quotes its author's explanation of its title: 'Most of what I have deposited in this treatise was opened up for me by God when I was circumambulating His noble House or while I was sitting in a state of waiting mindfully for Him in His noble and exalted Sanctuary'. The word 'openings' might also have figured in others of his book titles, for he says: 'The books we have composed—this and the others—do not follow the route of ordinary compositions, nor do we follow the route of ordinary authors . . . My heart clings to the door of the Divine Presence, waiting mindfully for what comes when the door is opened.' Elsewhere, but in the same context, he writes: 'Inrushes have entered in upon me from God and nearly burned me alive. In order to distract myself from them, I have written down what can be written . . . I have also written books as the result of a divine command given to me by God in a dream or an unveiling'.

Referring to Osman Yahia's classification of Ibn al-'Arabī's works, Chittick reminds us that from the above-mentioned 'openings' or 'inrushes' there resulted about '700 treatises and collections of poetry', of which 300 appear to have been lost. Of the remainder, the *Futūḥāt* is by far the largest and it should fill about 17,000 pages in Yahia's critical edition which is now being published in Cairo. So far only ten of the projected thirty-seven volumes have appeared, but the full text is available in the excellent Cairo 1911 edition.

From this immense treasury, Chittick has chosen, for his own work, passages which throw light on the spiritual path and in particular on the way of the gnostics (*al-'ārifūn*) of whom Ibn al-'Arabī was so eminently one. Sufism as a whole is rooted in a perspective which lays more stress on knowledge than on love. But within this framework certain ways are relatively characterized by love which in any case, needless to say, must always be present. The gnostic poet 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ is often entitled 'the Sulṭān of those who long', and Chittick saw fit to entitle his study of Rūmī *The Sufi Path of Love*. But in this new work the perspective is that of knowledge within the framework of knowledge.

With so vast a source the book could scarcely have been a small one, and its original size was such that the author felt bound to put eight of the chapters on one side with a view to some future publication. As it now is, there are about 500 very densely printed pages, divided into seven parts, each subdivided into chapters, further subdivided into sections. Part 1, entitled 'Overview', is a prefiguration of the entire book and prepares us for the other six parts which are entitled 'Theology', 'Ontology', 'Epistemology', 'Hermeneutics', 'Soteriology' and 'Consummation', being devoted respectively to the Supreme Archetype, to Being and creation, to knowledge and its various faculties, to faith, reason and interpretation, to the spiritual path as such, and to the ultimate goal.

The teachings of 'the greatest Shaykh', as Ibn al-'Arabī is often called, are presented to us in the main by preparatory paragraphs followed by direct quotations. About half the book is in fact by the sage himself, admirably translated, with a most generous supply of bracketed Arabic terms. Moreover

the presenter of these texts has implacably abstained, in what he himself has written, from intruding extraneous ideas, so that the entire book may truly be said to belong to the author of the *Futūḥāt*.

To give some idea of how Chittick prepares his readers for the Shaykh's texts perhaps we cannot do better than quote from the opening of chapter 1, 'The Divine Presence', which begins with a section on 'Finding God': 'How can I find God? Ibn al-'Arabī maintains that all human beings must seek to answer this question. Having answered it, they must then set out to verify the truth of their answer by finding God in fact, not in theory. He refers to those who have successfully verified the truth of their answer as the People of Unveiling and Finding (*ahl al-kashf wa'l-wujūd*). They have passed beyond the veils that stand between them and their Lord and stand in His Presence . . . To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*ḥayra*) not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one's way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time . . . The difference between the Finders and the rest of us is that they are fully aware of their own ambiguous situation. They know the significance of the saying of the first Caliph Abū Bakr: 'Incapacity to attain comprehension is itself comprehension'. They know that the answer to every significant question concerning God and the world is 'Yes and no', or, as the Shaykh expresses it, 'He/not He' (*huwā lā huwā*).

Is it then not possible to transcend this bewilderment and to have a purely positive knowledge of God? The part answer, 'None knows God but God', is repeated many times throughout the book. But there are also frequent references to a well-known *ḥadīth qudsī* which is here translated: 'My servant draws near to Me through nothing I love more than that which I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him I am his hearing through which he hears, his sight through which he sees, his hand through which he grasps, and his foot through which he walks.' The Shaykh's comments on this, taken from different parts of the *Futūḥāt*, form the main substance of three particularly important sections of Chittick's book. 'From this *ḥadīth* are derived the technical terms "the nearness of supererogatory works" (*qurb al-nawāfil*) and "the nearness of obligatory works" (*qurb al-farā'id*).' Whereas in the former nearness God is the servant's hearing and seeing, in the latter the servant is God's hearing and seeing, which the Shaykh holds to be the higher of the two states. He even goes so far as to say, with reference to the annihilation (*fanā*) which belongs to the nearness of supererogatory works: 'If any affair causes a thing to leave its root and veils it from its own reality, that is not an eminence in the view of the Tribe, since it gives you the situation in contradiction to the way it is, thereby making you one of the ignorant'. This last word is somewhat surprising in view of the Absolute Knowledge which is only made possible by the relative 'ignorance' in question. But the Shaykh is here bent on emphasizing one aspect of a thing, and in doing so he concentrates on it to the exclusion of other aspects. In a considerably later passage of the *Futūḥāt* however he re-establishes the balance. 'The perfect human being has supererogatory works in addition to his obligatory works. When the servant draws near to Him

through them, He loves him. And when He loves him, He is his hearing and his sight. When the Real is the sight of a servant in this manner, he sees Him and perceives Him through His sight, since his sight is the Real. Hence he only perceives Him through Him, not through himself. But no angel draws near to God through supererogatory works; on the contrary, they are all busy with obligatory works. Their obligatory works have absorbed all their breaths, so they have no supererogatory works. Hence they have no station which would result in the Real being their sight so that they could perceive Him through Him . . . Whenever the Real desires to burn away a faculty of His servant in order for him to acquire knowledge by way of tasting through lifting the veil that stands between man and the Real in respect to that faculty, He burns it away through the light of His face and fills up the fissure left by that faculty. If it is his hearing, the Real is his hearing at that time; if it is his sight or his tongue, the same is the case . . . This is the greatest joining (*ittiṣāl*) that takes place between God and the servant.' Elsewhere the Shaykh has said that instead of saying 'He/not he' the possessor of this state says 'I'. Here lies the answer—or an answer—to the question with which the paragraph begins.

Of great doctrinal importance, and not unconnected with these last considerations, is what Ibn al-'Arabī says about the immutable entities (*al-a'yān al-thābita*) which are the essences of all existent things as conceived by the Divine knowledge 'before' they are brought out, by the creative act, into the domain of finite existence. This doctrine, which explains so much that would be inexplicable without it, demands a very attentive study, and certain aspects of it are described by the Shaykh as 'an ocean in which the considerate thinkers (*al-nāzirūn*) perish, those who have not been given unveiling'. As far as the book is concerned, readers are advised not to stop short at the initial definitions of the immutable entities but to follow up the further references given under that heading in the index. Much stress is laid in some earlier passages on the great joy of entering into cosmic existence. But as one of the Qur'ānic bases for the doctrine, the Shaykh quotes the verse: 'There is no thing whose treasures are not with Us, and We do not send it down except in a known measure' (15, 21), which makes it clear that the entity is by no means fully represented by its projection into the cosmos. Nor can the joy in question be taken to proceed from any previous deficiency. The Divine Goodness radiates because it is in its nature to give, not because it is not Absolutely Self-Sufficient; and the desire of the immutable entities for cosmic existence must be understood as being bound up with the need for radiation. It is not metaphysically acceptable that transcendent entities which are 'with God' can be said to gain from being manifested at a less transcendent level. Moreover, it is they and not their manifestations which mark the end of the path. In part seven, 'Consummation', summing up what the Shaykh has said, Chittick writes: 'The traveller strives to "return" to his own root, which is nonexistence, the station of "God is, and nothing is with Him". This "nothing" (*lā shay*) as Ibn al-'Arabī often points out, is precisely the immutable entity within the knowledge of God, since there can be no claims to any ontological two-ness; there is but One Being. Yet, from a certain point of view, the "reality" of the servant—that is, his entity—must still be affirmed, so this is the station of the U . . . of Manyess

(*ahadiyyat al-kathra*), not the Unity of the One (*ahadiyyat al-ahad*) which only belongs to the Essence.' Let us also quote, with regard to the end of the path, from one of the Shaykh's many references to the Qur'anic verse 'He is with you wherever you are' (57: 4). He comments: 'That is, in whatever state you have in nonexistence, existence, and all qualities. Such is the actual situation. What takes place for the people of solicitude, the Folk of Allah, is that God gives them vision and unveils their insights until they witness this witness. This—that is, the gnostic's witnessing—is what is called "union". So the gnostic has become joined (*ittiṣāl*) to witnessing the actual situation. Then this union cannot turn into separation (*faṣl*), just as knowledge cannot turn into ignorance.'

Since the spiritual path begins in the psychic domain, and since the soul itself is the wayfarer, the master needs to be an adept in psychology. We are here, needless to say, very remote from modern psychology, which is no more than a naive attempt to engender an 'up-to-date' science that does not run counter to rationalistic and humanistic prejudices, and that therefore eliminates everything of which the so-called 'average man' has no experience. We say 'naive' because this lack of experience in no way liberates the faculties he knows from their dependence on what he does not know, any more than the fact that we do not see the root of a tree liberates its leaves and branches from dependence on that root. Our analogy is imperfect because the existence of the root can be verified by digging. But only Sufism and its equivalents possess the science of 'digging' to the Heart—not the bodily organ but the centre of the soul—in which the psychic faculties are rooted; and from the *Futūḥāt* as from some other Sufi treatises a truly valid science of psychology could be extracted, for the Shaykh dwells in considerable detail upon reason (*'aql*), reflection (*fikr*), consideration (*nazar*) and imagination (*khayāl*) with reference not only to their positive aspects but also to their limitations and their dangers. As to this book, the chapter on 'Acquiring Knowledge' in part 4, 'Epistemology', could in fact be supplemented by other sections to form a whole psychological treatise.

In connection with the heart (*qalb*), the Shaykh quotes many times the *ḥadīth qudsī* 'My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My believing servant does embrace Me', and more than once he quotes the *ḥadīth* 'The heart is between the two fingers of the All-Merciful (*al-Rahmān*); He makes it fluctuate as He desires.' The heart is man's faculty of spiritual perception, and we are continually reminded that fluctuation is the basic meaning of the root letters *qāf-lām-bā* from which the word *qalb* (heart) is formed. What has fluctuation to do with the heart? The answer given is that since the Divine Self-disclosures are never repetitive they need, as the place of their manifestation, a receptive faculty which has power to fluctuate and thus to adapt itself, unlike the reason which is rigidly fixed. In answer to a question put by one of his great predecessors, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, 'What is the goblet of Love?' the Shaykh says: 'The goblet of Love is the lover's heart, not his reason or his sense perception. For the heart fluctuates from state to state, just as God—who is the Beloved—is "Each day upon some task" (Qur'ān, 55: 29). So the lover undergoes constant variation in the object of his love in keeping with the

constant variation of the Beloved in His acts. The lover is like the clear and pure glass goblet which undergoes constant variation according to the variation of the liquid within it. The colour of the lover is the colour of the Beloved. This belongs only to the heart, since reason comes from the world of delimitation; that is why it is called "reason", a word derived from "fetter". As for sense perception it obviously and necessarily belongs to the world of delimitation, in contrast to the heart.'

Since there is no section of the book which is not of intense interest, these few aspects to which we have called attention may well seem to have been arbitrarily chosen. What of the chapters on 'The New Creation' and 'Cosmic Imagination' in the part entitled 'Ontology' for example, or those on 'Knowing God's Self-Disclosures' and 'Understanding the Koran', which come under 'Hermeneutics'? And in connection with this last subject, we might have mentioned, with illustrations, the wealth of Qur'anic commentary which is to be found in so many of the quotations from the *Futūḥāt*.

It might also be objected that what we have quoted so far offers little or no idea of the methodic essentials of the path which gives the book its title. One should bear in mind however that the *Futūḥāt* was written for Sufis, and for none but Sufis. The Shaykh could therefore take it for granted that all his readers would be familiar with these essentials, about which he himself had not—and could not have—anything new to say that is of fundamental importance. But he keeps us conscious, in the background, of what has to be done, as when he says, with reference to one who seeks to gain knowledge of things as they are in themselves: 'He should follow the path of the great masters and dedicate himself to retreat and invocation. Then God will give him direct awareness of that to his heart.'

To revert once more to our starting-point, the 'needs of the present age' which is so especially characterized by the over-activity of minds, this book offers such minds a solution, as much as to say: 'Since you will and must be active, then here is how.' But, strictly speaking, it is only necessary to know certain essentials, and a man might not be disposed to make the considerable mental effort that this book demands, and yet might nonetheless be qualified to follow, and have the need to follow, a path of knowledge rather than a path of love. From this point of view the title might have been made indefinite, but its definite article is to be justified by the author's intention not so much to trace out for us a path of knowledge as to throw for us a wealth of light from 'The Meccan Openings' upon the path of knowledge in general.

In conclusion, let us claim that despite regrets for our shortcomings we have at least said enough about the book to imply its great importance. To end our appraisal with something more than mere implication, we will go so far as to say that in its own particular field—which is by definition at the most profound and therefore the most exacting of levels—William Chittick's latest work must be estimated as one of the major scholarly achievements of this century.

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