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## Book Review

William C. Chittick. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Pp. xii, 478, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

This book\* is not so easy to assess, since its author consciously refrains from any sweeping generalizations about the Shaykh's teaching, letting him speak without intermediaries and thus presenting his ideas as "they are actually found" (p. xx). The author also refuses to extract the essence of what Ibn 'Arabi is saying, anxious to "do justice to his concerns, not to our concerns" (ibid.). Such an approach, sound and balanced as it is, may daunt a non-specialized reader who is not accustomed to the Shaykh's highly personal ways of conveying his doctrines. In fact, such a reader will have to face a vast body of first-hand material only slightly (though skilfully) arranged by the author in accordance with the major themes of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, mostly *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*. Hence certain criticisms regarding disorderly presentation of ideas, unnecessary repetitions, overlapping passages found under different rubrics, and, finally, intended vagueness, or "obfuscation", as the author prefers to call it, may well be addressed to the Shaykh himself and not to his interpreter who just faithfully follows in the wake of his "undisciplined" thought.

Here one major point arises. Evading an interpretation not in the sense of the translation of the original Arabic text, but in the sense of an attempt to elucidate what may be assumed as its "true meaning", the author leaves the reader almost entirely unassisted amidst the deep sea of Ibn 'Arabi's thinking, which, as one can easily recollect, has turned out to be fatal to many an experienced sailor. To emphasise this point Chittick furnishes a brief critical account (pp. ix-xxiii) of some previous attempts to elucidate Ibn 'Arabi's *Weltanschauung*, namely the studies of Henri Corbin and Toshihiko Izutsu. The author argues that these two researchers represent two major approaches to the Shaykh's legacy: one highly individual,

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according a central role to his insights into the subtle realities of *mundis imaginatis* and his exegetical methods, the other limiting itself to an analysis of the mainly philosophical and metaphysical discussions of the *Fusûs al-hikam* and heavily drawing on the subsequent tradition of its interpretation. The studies of both scholars, claims the author, have fallen short of their goal, i.e. to provide unbiased and adequate descriptions of the Shaykh's doctrine. Among the reasons underlying their failure, Chittick names the scholars' insistence on the theoretical aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought at the expense of its important practical implications – an approach introduced by Sadr ad-din al-Qunawi (d. 673/1274), the spiritual heir of Ibn 'Arabi, and continued by the former's numerous disciples. Chittick's departure from the al-Qunawi tradition intimately related to the text of the *Fusûs*, the tradition which dominated both Muslim and European studies of the Shaykh's doctrines, finds its most vivid expression in the author's focus on *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* with only casual references to the *Fusûs*, and several other minor treatises. One may observe that in this respect the author is treading in the steps of Michel Chodkiewicz whose *Le sceau des saints*, Paris, 1986, and more recent *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, Paris, 1989, of which he was the editor, seem to have opened a new stage in the study of Ibn 'Arabi in the West, in so far as the emphasis has switched from the *Fusûs* to the Shaykh's *magnum opus*. The results achieved by both scholars are impressive and show that such an emphasis is really worthwhile.

The book under review is divided into seven parts treating various aspects of the Shaykh's teaching. The first part: "Overview", together with the "Introduction", provides a brief analytical description of its basic elements, the knowledge of which is essential for the comprehension of the long quotations from *al-Futûhât* that appear in the other parts. The author explains the meaning of such motifs of Ibn 'Arabi's discourse as "unveiling" (*kashf*) and "finding" (*wujûd*), "tasting" (*dhawq*) and "bewilderment" (*hayra*), "being" (*wujûd*) and "nonexistence" (*'adam*), "Divine Attributes" (*as-sifât*), "intermediate world" (*barzakh*), "imagination" (*khayâl*), "microcosm" (*'alam saghîr*), "divine self-disclosure" (*tajallî*), "new creation" (*khalq jadîd*), "Perfect Man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*), etc.

The structures of the other parts ("Theology", "Ontology", "Soteriology", etc.) are somewhat more elaborate, since they fall into sections and subsections in which short introductory notes and concise explanations are followed by long translations of the relevant

passages from *al-Futūhāt* and occasionally from some other of the Shaykh's writings. Of course, sometimes their relevance may be disputed by the reader educated in the Western philosophical tradition on account of recurring digressions from the main topic and because of the deliberate obscurity characteristic of Ibn 'Arabi's style. Some concepts and ideas appear again and again under different titles reflecting the Shaykh's intellectual priorities and favourite motifs. The author is particularly wary of pleasing a Western audience by trying to separate out what may be appreciated by it as "interesting" and "congenial". The exposition flows uninterrupted, pursuing the elaborate course of the Shaykh's thinking with its sometimes annoying deviations, constant references to the Koran and *hadīth* corpus, repetitions, hair-splitting discussions of grammatical subtleties, etc. As if to justify his method of presentation of material the author points out that "any attempt to avoid repetition would mean tearing the ideas out of context and imposing upon them a systematic exposition foreign to the original texts" (p. xxi). By the same token, one may refer to the author's approach to the translation of technical terms occurring in Ibn 'Arabi's writings. Sometimes the translation tends to be almost literal. Such an approach evidently aims at rendering the meaning of Arabic roots, which with their complex connotations are skilfully employed by Ibn 'Arabi for the elucidation of his views. However, from time to time the translation seems too literal, which results in an obscuring of the actual meaning instead of clarifying it. To give some examples: the author's rendering of the word *istidrāj* as "leading on step by step" (see pp. 257, 267, 374, etc.). Ibn 'Arabi seems to imply the word's usual meaning which is quite common in Muslim theological writings, i.e. "enticement", or "temptation", but this meaning, I am afraid, cannot be easily guessed from the author's translation. I am also not sure that the word *al-qawm* (lit. "people") should be rendered by the ambiguous technical term "Tribe" instead of the more simple "Sufis" (passim.). *Ma'lūh* as "divine thrall" sounds a little odd, and I do not know whether English style allows "to sanctify the heart from the stains" (p. 111). It is a personal opinion, but I sometimes cannot help feeling that the author's vocabulary seems too idiosyncratic. At the same time, I have spotted what may be regarded as an unnecessary divergence from the original meaning of the Arabic word: *rasmī* (lit. "formal", or "outward") used with regard to the word "definition", which is rendered as "imperfect" (p. 279).

These of course are minor quibbles utterly insignificant in compari-

son with the translator's spectacular achievement. On the whole, the quality of his work is excellent, and his adequate solutions to the problems posed by the extremely complicated Arabic text cannot but arouse the admiration of his colleagues.

However, I venture an opinion that this book will not be as eagerly accepted by a wider public which must be well read in both Muslim theology and mysticism to appreciate its indisputable merits. In any case, it presupposes a good deal of sympathy for Ibn 'Arabi's genius which alone will enable the reader to follow the intricacies of the Shaykh's thought, carefully preserved by Mr Chittick. I am sure that, in spite of the difficulties, the book should be studied by all those interested in Ibn 'Arabi's heritage and that of Sufism in general. I cannot but support the statement on its back cover according to which "William Chittick takes a major step toward exposing the breadth and depth of Ibn al-'Arabi's vision." Moreover, exhaustive indexes supplied by the author together with notes and bibliography make *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* an indispensable reference book to both present and future students of the Shaykh's thought. For all this William Chittick must accept our wholehearted gratitude.

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