

REVIEWS: GENERAL

in the reader. And mistakes such as wishing *God's Created Speech* by J. R. T. M. Peters upon F. E. Peters (p. 1179) drive one to doubt the rigour of the work.

Obviously there will be discrepancies and inequalities in a huge collection of this kind, though it is sad to come across faults without having to look too hard. The many excellent essays it includes reward the search, but they deserve better attention than they appear to have received.

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0.7914-3403-6

THE SELF-DISCLOSURE OF GOD: PRINCIPLES OF IBN AL-'ARABI'S COSMOLOGY. By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK (SUNY Series in Islam). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998. XL + 483 pp., \$24.95 (pb).

William Chittick is one of the world's foremost translators of, and commentators upon, Ibn al-'Arabī. He is Professor of Comparative Studies at the State University of New York, Stony Brook and has published numerous related and relevant books in the fields of Šūfī and Ibn al-'Arabī studies. Most significant here are his *Imaginal worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the problem of religious diversity*, and *The Sufi path of knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysics of imagination* (hereafter referred to as SPK). Chittick is one of the most lucid guides to the complex forest of Ibn al-'Arabī's thought. His SPK was based primarily on *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan openings)*. *The self-disclosure of God* also takes the *al-Futūhāt* as its primary focus, translating more than one hundred chapters and sub-sections. Chittick tells us that in this present volume he 'continues the investigations' which were begun in SPK but with the focus on cosmology. He notes:

One major difference between this volume and SPK is the manner in which I have attempted to contextualise the discussions. It is relatively easy to have Ibn al-'Arabī say what one wants him to say. Critics and devotees have quoted him selectively for centuries, and modern scholarship has continued in the same path ... It was my purpose in SPK to let Ibn al-'Arabī speak for himself ... In this work [*The self-disclosure*], I have attempted, as much as possible, to put discussions into the context not only of Ibn al-'Arabī grand project, but also of the specific topic that he is presenting. In contrast to SPK, I have seriously tried to avoid quoting snippets of text and brief passages. Moreover, in contrast to that work, I have tried *not* to drop anything in the midst of a passage. (pp. IX-X)

This is a remarkable book, both in terms of its size (over 500 *double columned* pages!) and its content. Its structure is magnificently simple. After an introduction there are three main sections followed by appendices, notes, bibliography and indices. The introduction surveys, *inter alia*, the principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology as well as some of his basic themes such as the names of God, existence and non-existence, *tanzīh* and *tashbih*, modes of knowing, human perfection, and the *Barzakh*. The three main sections comprise large chunks of translation from the *Futūhāt* under the headings of 'God and the cosmos', 'The order of the worlds' and 'The structure of the microcosm'. Chittick is well aware of the dilemmas faced by any translator from Arabic but especially by the translator from Ibn al-'Arabī's voluminous corpus. With these and other dilemmas Chittick shows himself to be *al-Murshid al-Akbar*. In the absence of a complete translation of the *Futūhāt* (the implementation of which Chittick clearly believes would

and interplay with intellectual disciplines inside and outside Islam. The first sections in Volume one are maybe the most familiar, on the intellectual background and the growth of philosophy during the classical period in the eastern and western parts of the Islamic world. Here can be found essays on such key figures as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā among a generous collection of discussions about other famous and not so famous individuals and schools.

There follow sections devoted to philosophy and Ṣūfism in the period before Ibn 'Arabī, later Islamic philosophy mainly in Iran up to the early eighteenth century, and Jewish philosophy within the Islamic world up to the fourteenth century. The sections in Volume two deal with the component aspects of philosophy, its influence in Europe, continuing developments in some of the main Islamic nation states, and lastly the ways in which Western scholarship has approached the discipline called Islamic philosophy.

This is a true diversity, and it becomes rather disparate after the opening section containing the familiar history of classical times. The editors intend this, they say, in order to emphasize that the discipline did not cease with late medieval controversies but has continued to flourish down to the present. And here a problem arises. For in trying to maintain this continuity the collection seems often to take for granted the fact that the true tradition of philosophy in Islam is found in the Iranian world. Seyyed Hossein Nasr explicitly states this in his Introduction (p. 17), and it is suggested in such a manner as devoting the longest single essay to the thirteenth century Shī'ī thinker Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (chapter 32); he is given nearly 60 pages compared with the average of 20 for everyone else. While the editors may have been justified in advancing a claim that the Iranian world has provided much fertile ground for philosophical speculation, they have maybe taken a preference too far in appearing to imply that Iran is its true Islamic home.

A history of this kind is presumably a work in which scholars might expect to find authoritative analyses and students general information. But for whatever reason there is not enough of the staple presentation and interpretation of ideas to satisfy either. While some of the essays fit exactly the requirements of providing necessary facts of life and works, outlining the main features of an individual's or school's thought, and suggesting the main questions which arise from studying them, many more either ramble over unnecessarily full biographical details and activities unrelated to philosophy, or assume so much prior knowledge that they fail to locate their subjects properly in their intellectual context.

Much of the responsibility for this must sadly be laid before the editors, who appear to have allowed their contributors considerable freedom and then failed to apply the blue pen. Thus we find such perversities as the same scholar being treated in detail twice, Saadiah Gaon on pp. 679–681 and again in chapter 40, and Shah Waliullāh in chapter 37 and then on pp. 1067–1070; the omission of Hunayn Ibn Iṣḥāq from the account of the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Islamic world in chapter 6 and of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān from that of modern Indian philosophy in chapter 62; more being said about Muḥammad Iqbāl in the chapter on Egypt than in that on Pakistan; and the claim in chapter 1 that *falsafah* is rooted in scripture being contradicted by the definition of it in chapter 3 as a 'foreign science'. While contributors should understandably be accorded competent freedom, glaring repetitions, omissions and contradictions should have caused some editorial hesitation.

Incidental infelicities, such as God being called a creature (p. 253, first line; is this a mistake for Creator or a loose synonym for 'entity?'), and what is presumably a translation from a French original being left as the opaque 'Thus one can speak of the free will, or the knowledge, of God only metaphorically' (p. 339), stir up apprehension

occupy not one but several lifetimes), Chittick's translations and commentaries will guide both scholar and student for many years to come with lucidity, care and sensitivity.

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'AZĪZ NASAFĪ. By LLOYD RIDGEON. (Curzon Sufi Series.) Richmond, Curzon Press, 1998. xiv + 234 pp., £35 (hb), £14.99 (pb).

'Azīz Nasafī is often referred to in the literature on Sufism, yet there has not up to now been a comprehensive guide to his thought and works. He lived at a particularly creative period, and a very difficult time for the Islamic world, when the Mongols devastated Central Asia. It is often suggested that Sufism became especially popular given its ability to help the local Muslim population find some sort of inspiration during the troubles. Also, of course, the absence of a strong central religious authority enabled more heterodox forms of theory and practice to flourish. The author explores in some depth the nature of the historical context, and then goes on to describe Nasafī's ontological views, his account of the theory of knowledge, the nature of the Sufi path, visionary experience and unity with God, and what is involved in the perfection of human beings. There is also an account of Nasafī's works and an evaluation of his contribution to Sufism as a school of thought. The text is illustrated throughout by many translations, which are very helpful in giving the reader something of an idea of the style of Nasafī.

There are many virtues in this book, in particular the determination of Ridgeon to avoid the easy platitudes of much work on Sufism. For example, he does not assert, as do so many, that the mystical views of the Sufis are closely linked with Neoplatonism, or with the thought of the falāsifa in the Islamic world. He shows that while there may be correspondences between some of these concepts, they are generally used very differently, and it is important to note the context within which such concepts are used. There is little to be gained by making loose connections between quite disparate systems of thought, as he quite rightly argues. The other point which Ridgeon makes is that Nasafī is far from an original or creative thinker. His chief role was as an expounder of other people's ideas, although he was far more than just a conduit. He was capable of explaining clearly ideas and arguments which are very unclear, and one of the notable features of his works is his ability to present the Sufi message in a way which makes it appear rational and accessible to anyone. Nasafī manages to avoid many of the controversies to which Sufism was subject by taking a moderate line. He rejects the antinomian tendency in Sufism, stressing the significance of following a normal Islamic way of life, and not emphasizing asceticism in too radical a manner. However, for some the ascetic life and a highly original approach to God might be appropriate. For Nasafī, the significance of humility lies in the fact that we cannot rule out alternative forms of coming close to God.

This inclusive aspect of his account of Sufism is quite compelling, and excludes neither the mutakallimūn nor even the falāsifa as thinkers who have useful and valid points of view. The fact that we cannot pin-point Nasafī as a Shi'i or otherwise is also interesting. It is hardly surprising that he became so influential, since his accessibility is obviously something which he worked hard to refine. It is a shame that we tend to concentrate on thinkers who pride themselves on their obscurity, yet without commentators like Nasafī their views would remain obscure and little known. This is not to suggest

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that there is anything shallow in his thought, and the ways in which he teases out the subtleties of appreciating the tanzīh/tashbih relationship, the incomparability/similarity dichotomy which underlines our relationship with God, is always impressive and searching. I am not sure that Nasafī is always as pellucid as Ridgeon makes him out to be, and the author has tended to translate the passages which are less poetic and more perspicuous.

Ridgeon has produced an intelligent and scholarly book which no-one concerned with Sufism can afford to miss. In fact the book would serve quite well as a general guide to many of the leading ideas of Sufism itself.

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