

Islamic Studies  
Vol. 40 Summer 201

no. 2

34036

William C. Chittick. *The Self-Disclosure of God*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1998. Pp. 483. Hardcover. ISBN 0-7914-3403-6 alk. Paperback. ISBN 0-7914-3404-4.

Almost a decade after the publication of *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*,<sup>1</sup> William Chittick has fulfilled his promise made in that book about a volume on Ibn al-'Arabi's "Cosmology" in the form of a highly readable but synthetic account of Ibn al-'Arabi's teachings.

The publication of *The Self-Disclosure of God*, in "SUNY Series in Islam" under the editorship of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, not only brings to fruition a decade of work and reflections of its author but also marks an important event in the translation of the works of one of Islam's most profound *muḥaqqiq*, as Chittick likes to call Muḥyī'l-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn al-'Arabi (560/1165–638/1240).

Though thematically related, one immediately notes a major difference in the two works. *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* was Chittick's labour of love in the making, *The Self-Disclosure of God* is his more confident walk in the delightful garden of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's imaginal world.<sup>2</sup> One also notes a certain clarity achieved through a consistent process of reflection in the period between the publication of the two works. Thus, one notes that certain key

<sup>1</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> "Imaginal", a word bequeathed to us by late Henry Corbin, is distinct from "imaginary", which is no more than our individual fantasies. See "Introduction" in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, ix.

terms have been re-translated in the present work with greater care and precision, there is an emphatic confidence in the presentation of Ibn al-'Arabi's concrete imagery in as concrete a language as English would allow, and there is an over-all plan of the book that imparts its internal unity and cohesion.

But these are only the first and most apparent aspects of this monumental work which attempts to reconstruct Ibn al-'Arabi's cosmology for a contemporary reader—a daunting task by any standard. In order to appreciate the immensity of the task, we need to realize that the author had to contend with not only the inherent difficulties of rendering Ibn al-'Arabi's terse and sophisticated discourse into English which leans toward abstraction (*tanzih*) rather than imagery (*tashbih*)—a problem that all translators of the Qur'an have also faced. In addition to these general problems, there are others, specific to Ibn al-'Arabi's works, as Chittick notes in reference to the major surviving work of Ibn al-'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (The Makkan Openings): "...The work is enormously long and, in places, extraordinarily difficult. When Ibn al-'Arabi waxes poetical, as he often does, it is sometimes impossible (for this reader at least) to understand what he is getting at. The richness and profusion of the imagery, the constant allusions to diverse stations of the spiritual journey, the strange symbolism mixed with classical literary tropes, make the task of deciphering the passages truly daunting. Even supposing the translator has understood what is being said, the problems of rendering the words into comprehensible English, without mountains of commentary are, at this point, insurmountable" (p. x).

But these technical problems notwithstanding, we have 483 pages of densely packed text (two columns per page), neatly divided into three sections ("God and the Cosmos"; "The Order of the Worlds" and "The Structure of the Microcosm") along with notes, bibliography, indexes of sources, indexes of the Qur'anic verses and *Hadith*, proper names, terms and Arabic words—all of which enrich the text and its understanding.

Anyone coming to this seminal work is awed by the painstaking scholarship that has gone into its making: the conscious effort to be as close to the Arabic original as possible in the translated passages, the care taken in consistency, the clarity of concepts and precision of language, and perhaps most of all, the sensitivity shown in communication of the complex text. Chittick is extremely interested in a meaningful communication with the reader and that lends a degree of intimacy to the book which goes well with the nature of the subject.

"God and the Cosmos", the first section of the book, forms the first layer of traditional Islamic triad: God, the world, and the human being (or metacosm, macrocosm, and microcosm). Divided into four chapters, "*Wujūd*

and the Entities, Perpetual Self-Disclosure, The Face of God, and Veils of Light", it deals with the basic concepts "that aid in understanding God in terms of the cosmos, and vice versa" (p. xxvii). The Second section, "The Order of the Worlds" investigates, in three chapters, the roots of the order, the unity of manyness, hierarchy and ranking in excellence, the divine and the cosmic relations, the modalities of *wujūd* and the worlds of the cosmos. The last section of the book, "The Structure of the Microcosm" studies, in three chapters, the mysteries of spirits and bodies, self and soul, the nature of guidance and the imaginal Barzakh. It investigates the nature of the human being, considered as an image of the whole cosmos. This bare outline of the range of topics does not do justice to the richness of the topics covered, but merely provides pointers to the work which demands careful attention of all who are interested in Islam and Ibn al-'Arabī.

Cosmology in the title of the book does not refer to the physical cosmology as understood in modern science, that is the branch of philosophy dealing with the origin and general structure of the universe, with its parts, elements, and laws, and especially with such of its characteristics as space, time, causality, and freedom or as this term is used in the branch of astronomy that deals with the general structure and evolution of the universe. Cosmology in Ibn al-'Arabī's works, as Chittick points out, "is the knowledge of marks or signs and the understanding of what they signify" (p. 3). Derived from the Arabic word *'ālam*, the word cosmos is etymologically linked to other derivatives from the same root: *'alāmah* (mark), *'alam* (signpost) and *'ilm* (knowledge).

In the Qur'ānic worldview, all things are but signs (*āyāt*) of God and the reality of a thing is determined by the degree to which it is capable of referring to God, the Real. Hence, Chittick suggests a definition of the term cosmology as "knowledge of the marks and signs and the understanding of what they signify. Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology is then a science of signs, an account and a narration of the significance of marks" (p. 3). A hallmark of Chittick's work is its semantics and conceptual clarity; each term is carefully defined before it is used; something that has always been the case in the Islamic intellectual tradition. Thus, we have a large number of excellent translations of technical terms which add to the repository of choice words for those writing in English. This, in itself, is a major contribution of the present work.

The thematic unity of the work also adds a certain degree of clarity to our understanding. Cosmos as defined above, leads to the understanding that it is that entity which is other than God; "everything other than God" which is to say "that it is everything other than *wujūd*". Strictly speaking, "*wujūd* belongs only to God, because *wujūd* is God" (p. 12). Ibn al-'Arabī's concept of God's love is succinctly explained in a remarkable passage from the *Futūḥāt* in which

Ibn al-'Arabī refers to the famous *al-ḥadīth al-qudsī*: "I was a Treasure but was not known, so I loved to be known; I created the creatures and made Myself known to them, so they came to know Me".<sup>2</sup> Chittick's translation of *Fatūḥāt* (2: 327.8)<sup>3</sup> reads:

How beautifully the Koran has expressed this with His words, *He will love them and they will love Him* [5:54]. For it employs pronouns of absence [i.e., third person] and future tense verbs. Hence it ascribes love's connection only to that which is absent and nonexistent. And every absent thing is a nonexistent thing in a relative sense. (p. 22).

The title of the book, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, owes its existence to one of the most fundamental terms used by Ibn al-'Arabī: *Tajallī*. Chittick mentions that before Ibn al-'Arabī was known as the great spokesman for *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he was known as the Companion of the Self-Disclosure (*Aṣḥāb al-tajallī*). "... Ibn al-'Arabī uses the term Self-Disclosure, to mean that God shows Himself to the universe inasmuch as *wujūd* is present in all things, or inasmuch as His names and attributes display traces (*āthār*) and properties (*ahkām*) in the cosmos; the configuration and forms left by these traces and properties are then known as "the creatures". It follows that everything in the universe, everything other than God, is God's self-disclosure, because everything displays *wujūd*, and, by having specific characteristics, it displays the traces of God's names" (p. 52).

By presenting Ibn al-'Arabī's work in a systematic form, Chittick has advanced the field and has enriched our understanding of one of Islam's most important *muḥaqqiqīn*. In addition, the work provides us with precise definitions of many technical terms from Ibn al-'Arabī's writings. Alphabetically arranged according to the English translation, the index lists all technical terms and their derivatives used in the work with page numbers referring to their first occurrence. Unlike *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, where technical terms and proper names were indexed in one index, here we have two separate indices; the thirty pages of index of terms is indeed a treasure house for all scholars who translate Islamic texts or write about things Islamic.

Muzaffar Iqbal

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<sup>2</sup> It would be pertinent to mention that according to a number of *muhaddithīn*, this *ḥadīth* is *ma-wḍū'ī* (fabricated). See, for instance, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-Ḥasanah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1979), 327; Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, *al-Asrār al-Marfū'ah fi 'l-Akḥbār al-Mawḍū'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), 179; and Ismā'il ibn Muḥammad al-'Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-Khaṣā'* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1351 AH), 2: 132. Ed.

<sup>3</sup> Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, reprint (Beirut: Dār Sādir. n.d.).