

to Dr. Chittick

Celebrate the Solstice THIS WINTER'S NIGHT



CD and cassette

Recapture the vibrant, Earth-centered roots of the holidays with the unique music of MotherTongue

Abbyss Distribution

48 Chester Rd; Chester, MA 01001
Phone: 413-623-2155 fax: 413-623-2156

Other related titles available

Free 100+ page catalogue - 1000s of items

The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe



This biography describes the astonishing life of Walter Russell and reveals how we can tap these same secrets. Knowing the rhythm of creation enabled Dr. Russell to master all five fine arts and be called the American DaVinci.

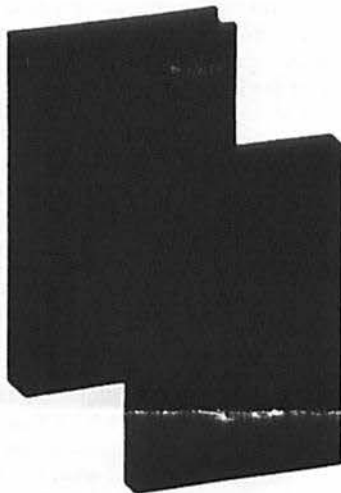
Walter and Lao Russell wrote books and a Home Study Course describing the science of creation. Learn about this universal systems model which is congruent with ancient wisdom traditions and how to apply God's creative process in your life.

Call or write for hardcover book (\$7.95 ppd.) or free catalog.

University of Science & Philosophy,
Swannanoa Palace, Box 520,
Dept. G • Waynesboro, VA 22980
1-800-882-1.0VE (5683)

REVIEWS

The Greatest Shaikh in Focus



roughly the same period, he was a frequent contributor to the renowned Eranos conferences in Ascona, Switzerland. Through these forums Corbin exercised a great influence on leading religious scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Gershom Scholem and on the psychologist James Hillman, who (ironically, perhaps) credits Corbin with inspiring Hillman's "archetypal psychology."

Undoubtedly Corbin's contribution to Islamic studies has been immense, and some of his subtle interpretations of Sufi doctrine remain unparalleled in European discourse to this day. Nevertheless, as Michel Chodkiewicz points out, Corbin's contribution has been heavily colored by his long-term involvement with Twelver Shi'ite and Ismaili interpretations of Ibn 'Arabi. As William Chittick has pointed out in his voluminous work *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (reviewed in GNOSIS #20), "Corbin tended to de-emphasize the cornerstone of Islamic teachings, *tawhid*, the 'declaration of God's Unity.' It is as if Corbin was so entranced by the recovery of the imaginal that he had difficulty seeing beyond it."

Both Chittick, a professor of religious studies at the State University of New York, and Chodkiewicz, the director of studies at L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, have attempted to rectify these imbalances. It could be said that for English-speaking readers, Chittick's contributions have paved the way for Chodkiewicz's *Seal of the Saints* and *An Ocean Without Shore*. In these works Chodkiewicz sheds light on two important subcategories of "the greatest shaikh's" teachings: how Ibn 'Arabi conceives of prophethood and "sainthood" or *unlaya*, and how Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics are firmly grounded in Qur'an and Islamic law. The first task is executed brilliantly in *Seal of the Saints*, and the second is accomplished with equal acumen in *An Ocean Without Shore*.

Readers should be forewarned that neither of these books serves as an introduction to Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy — which in any case is difficult, though rewarding, to approach. In addition, both books require considerable knowledge of Sufi doctrine, particularly that of Ibn 'Arabi's school, as well as a working knowledge of the Qur'an and *sunnah* (or traditions of the Prophet).

But given these ideal prerequisites, no serious student of Sufism or of mysticism in general should avoid wrestling with the intricacies of Chodkiewicz's interpretations. Without diminishing the contributions of several other fine scholars (including Chittick), nobody since Corbin has, to my mind, approached Chodkiewicz's intuitive

Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi by Michel Chodkiewicz, translated by Liadain Sherrard. Islamic Texts Society, 5 Green St., Cambridge CB2 3JU, England, 1993; 192 pp., \$39.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, The Book, and the Law by Michel Chodkiewicz, translated by David Streight. State University of New York Press, State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246, 1993; 184 pp., \$19.95.

Reviewed by Yannis Toussulis

The two books I am about to review concern the illustrious thirteenth-century theosopher of Sufism, Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi (in shortened form, Ibn 'Arabi), acknowledged by many Sufis as the "greatest shaikh" (*shaikh al-akbar*). Just as Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi has served as an "Axis of Love" by transmitting the core teachings of Sufism in poetic form, Ibn 'Arabi has functioned as an "Axis of Gnosis" through his philosophical analysis of the "Unicity of Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*).

There is no doubt that Ibn 'Arabi's works constitute a veritable encyclopedia of classical Sufism. There is also no doubt that along with mystics such as Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, and Isaac Luria, Ibn 'Arabi ranks among the greatest Western representatives of radical nondualism. Yet until the 1990s very few translations and commentaries of Ibn 'Arabi were available to us.

Among all of the interpreters of Ibn 'Arabi the most influential to date has been Henry Corbin (1903-1978). From 1954 until his death, Corbin was a professor of Islamic studies at both the Sorbonne in Paris and at the University of Tehran. During

subtlety. I would be surprised if Chodkiewicz were not himself a practicing member of Ibn 'Arabi's "Akhbarian" tradition, which Chodkiewicz intimates is still very much alive today.

In *Seal of the Saints*, Chodkiewicz reveals a typology of sainthood based upon the notion of "prophetic inheritance." While this concept in general is well-accepted by Sufis, it is still extremely controversial in mainstream Islam. The idea of anyone "inheriting" prophethood from Muhammad, who is considered to be the "seal" or the last of the prophets, is repugnant to most Muslims, many of whom still consider Ibn 'Arabi highly suspect. That this suspicion was (until recent times) largely a fundamentalist rather than mainstream response is amply documented in *An Ocean Without Shore*.

Nevertheless Ibn 'Arabi's assignment of prophethood to Sufi saints such as the "Axis of the Age" (*Qutb al-Zaman*, the foremost spiritual representative of humanity at any given time), as well as to the Qutb's regents, remains deeply shocking to most Muslims, including many Sufis. This shock is hardly dispelled by the fact that Ibn 'Arabi bases his claim upon a substantiated saying of the Prophet Muhammad which says that

"the learned are the heirs of the prophets."

Although he produces credible evidence that the saints alone are worthy of the name "learned" (*uluma*), Ibn 'Arabi has run afoul of conservative interpreters of Islamic law then and now because of his assertion that only a perfected saint can correctly interpret the Qur'an and its laws. The saint can do so through a complete and essential interiorization of both the law and its source, the Qur'an, for, according to Ibn 'Arabi, "The perfect man is the brother of the Qur'an." For Muslims, the following commentary is well worth considering:

Out of divergence in legal questions God has made both a Mercy for his servants and a widening (*ittisa*) of what he has prescribed for them to do to show their adoration. But the *fuqaha* [legalists] of our times have restricted and forbidden, for those who follow them, what the Sacred Law had widened for them. . . . That is one of the gravest calamities and one of the heaviest constraints in the matter of religion. Now God said that "He has imposed nothing difficult on you in matters of religion" (Qur'an 22:780).

Throughout *An Ocean Without Shore* Chodkiewicz exhaustively documents how all of these "Akhbarian" precepts are carefully grounded in a profound (and accurate) hermeneutics of the Qur'an. In *Seal of the Saints*, he reveals Ibn 'Arabi's detailed description of various types of saints, who, in an ascending order of perfection, culminate in a group known as the *afrad* ("solitaries") or *malamiyya* ("those who draw blame upon themselves"). The reader should be wary of associating the "blame-worthy" of Ibn 'Arabi with simple *qalandars* (antinomian dervishes), or with modern "Sufis" who completely eschew Islam, or for that matter with the so-called "super-order" of Sufism known to Turkish Sufis as the *malamiyya* (although this "order" does in fact draw much of its inspiration from Akhbarian shaikhs). Instead, as Chodkiewicz explains in *Seal of the Saints*,

[The blameworthy] blend into the 'amma, the main body of believers: no apparent asceticism, no excessive visible devotions, no manifestly supernatural intervention in their very ordinary lives draws people's attention to them. The "blame" is both

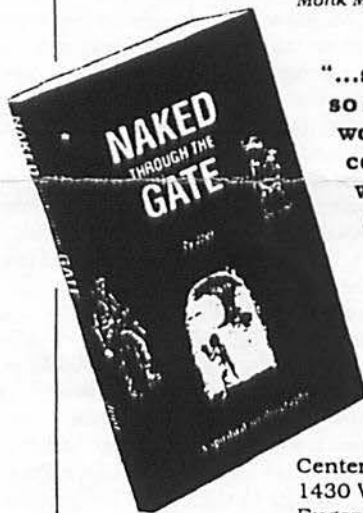
continued on next page

"Highly-recommended."

L. A. Resources

"A remarkable, unremittingly honest and, at times, beguilingly ingenuous, autobiography."

Monk Magazine



"...so entertaining, so seamlessly woven, so compellingly written, that it reads like a fiction bestseller."

Meditation Magazine

Order thru your local bookstore or send check to

Center for Sacred Sciences
1430 Willamette St. #164A
Eugene, OR 97401-4049

Shipping \$1.75 first copy
\$1.00 each additional copy

QUALITY PAPERBACK
\$11.95

FREE CATALOG OF
TAPES AVAILABLE

Saluting the Thoughtful Reader

ROBERT BRIGGS
ASSOCIATES



TRADE BOOKS • BROADSIDE EDITIONS

Arthur M. Young on the geometry of meaning
and the reflexive universe

Joseph Campbell on erotic irony

Colin Wilson on the Laurel & Hardy theory
of consciousness

Stanislav Grof on ancient wisdom and modern science

Robert Briggs Associates • Lake Oswego, Oregon

Call for a free catalog

1 • 800 • 447 • 7814

IBN 'ARABI continued from page 81

what they inflict on themselves in a ceaseless effort to detect their own imperfections, and that to which they are subjected by the élite: the *fuqaha'* and the Sufis (in this case Sufis who are still far from the end of the Way).

It is these people whom Ibn 'Arabi considers to be the "inheritors" of the Prophets and to be endowed with a proper, in-

wardly illumined, understanding of the Law and the Way. Anyone inspired to any degree to become a gnostic (*arif*) of Sufism should struggle to understand Ibn 'Arabi's analysis of the Unicity of Being and his understanding of prophethood and sainthood. In attempting to do so, one would be well advised to study Michel Chodkiewicz's fine interpretations. Indeed these works themselves could be held to be a method of *suluk*, of "traveling" the Sufi Way. ■

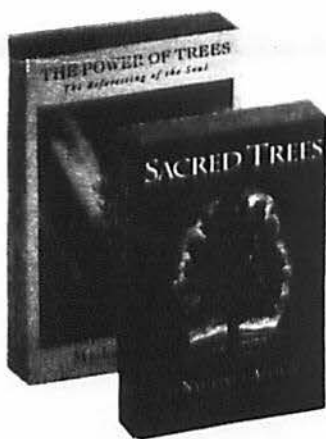
importance throughout history.

In addition to all of its useful information, the book is handsomely illustrated. The artwork alone is testament to our ongoing affinity for trees, both in Western countries and in cultures throughout the world. From ancient Persian and Hindu texts to modern North American photography, the graphics often made me stop and ponder the artist's message as much as the author's.

Nor does Altman make any bones about his political take on trees. "We human beings owe our lives to trees," he states at the outset. "If we truly felt ourselves a part of the environment, cutting down a tree . . . would be viewed with shock and indignation, just as if a person dumped a barrel of crude oil on our dining room floor." I don't have a dining room and I've never seen crude oil, but his point here is unmistakable, as it is throughout the book: don't mess with trees.

Taken together, these books promote a better understanding of how we relate to our natural environment. These insights are invaluable. In a world still struggling with the contradiction of how it will both preserve and make use of that environment, such knowledge and understanding can only be a positive addition to the debate. ■

I Think That I Shall Never See . . .



The Power of Trees: The Reforesting of the Soul by Michael Perlman. Spring Publications Inc., P.O. Box 222089, Dallas, TX 75222, 1994; 264 pp., \$17.

Sacred Trees by Nathaniel Altman. Sierra Club Books, 100 Bush St., San Francisco, CA 94104, 1994; 288 pp., \$16.

Reviewed by Ken Textor

A book devoted to a deeper appreciation of trees may at first seem like a contradiction in terms. After all, trees die to give birth to a book, whether it's printed on recycled paper or not. But perhaps that is the greater lesson of these two books: trees have always been a source of spiritual incongruity. Since human history began, we have worshiped and revered them while we have cut them down and used them. And in a way, we continue to live with the same basic contradictions today.

Michael Perlman's book does a masterful job of thoroughly exploring the well-spring of this conundrum. *The Power of Trees* is the kind of book that reveals to the reader something previously unknown, though perhaps suspected. It offers new insights into one's own relationship to the natural world, mostly through psychological explorations

of how other people relate to trees. Thankfully, these explorations are conducted without a lot of psychological mumbo jumbo from bored dilettantes. Perlman's explorations mostly involve ordinary people who just happen to have come up with extraordinary ideas about trees.

To keep the book on a contemporary keel, many of the conversations revolve around what happens to trees when they are lost. Specifically, Perlman talks to people who lived through the two most devastating hurricanes to strike the East Coast in recent years: Hugo and Andrew. From this point of view, Perlman shows he is a skilled interviewer, bringing out comments that startle. When he talks to a hard-headed forester in South Carolina, the interviewee becomes unexpectedly confessional about post-Hugo destruction:

When I got into the national forest and saw the areas, the stands that I was familiar with and worked in — well, I just cried. 'Cause it was just too devastating to see this 100-year-old longleaf [pine] just laid flat as far as the eye could see. . . . I really did have to pull off the road for a minute, it affected me so much I . . . just couldn't continue drivin'.

Historical and literary perspectives are also offered to explain our special feelings about trees. But this is not a political tome. All perspectives are given a voice, that of cynics as well as believers. Perlman is on a journey of exploration, not exhortation. It was a journey I was happy to join.

In *Sacred Trees*, the journey is a bit more prosaic and narrowly defined. Nathaniel Altman has exhaustively researched how trees have been a part of our religions, medicines, cultures, and rituals throughout history. His book assembles this mountain of information into readily accessible units and will be a valuable resource for those wishing to know more about trees and their

About Our Reviewers

Mark Richard Barna is a free-lance writer based in Berkeley, California.

Gary Lachman wrote "The Fate of the Earth According to Rudolf Steiner" in *GNOSIS* #33.

Scott Lowe is an associate professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Dakota.

Michael McNierney wrote "The Dark Speech of God: Dreams and Visions in Ancient Christianity" for *GNOSIS* #22.

Vivian Deziak Politzer is a free-lance writer focusing primarily on the psychological and spiritual issues of women.

Robin Robertson, Ph.D., is the author of *Beginner's Guide to Jungian Psychology*, published by Nicolas-Hays (reviewed in *GNOSIS* #27).

Ken Textor, a former boatmaker and cabinet-maker living in Maine, wrote "Why Knock on Wood?" for *GNOSIS* #28.

Yannis Toussulis, a licensed M.F.C.C. and Ph.D. (cand.), has practiced family psychotherapy and Sufism in San Francisco for fifteen years.

Sam Webster, M.Div., Mage, is director of *Crescent Ritual Works*, a center for the study of ritual and Pagan culture.