

Review of *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* by William C. Chittick (SUNY Press, 1994)

*Imaginal Worlds* is a rewritten compilation of numerous journal articles about Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) that Bill Chittick has written over the past ten years. The book, intended for a general audience, is divided into three sections: the role of human beings in the universe, the fundamental role of imagination as a human-cosmic interface, and the relationship of belief and religious diversity.

With over five hundred works (one of which, *Futuhat al-makkiyya*, will be over 15,000 pages in its new edition), Ibn al-ʿArabī is clearly the greatest Muslim theoretician of the imagination whose experiences are a veritable treasure for those interested in the world of the imagination and mystical experience. As Chittick eloquently explains, imagination is “in-between-ness” betwixt the spiritual and material worlds, an “extraordinary reality” where allegedly impossible events (according to Cartesian reason) happen exactly as scripture and myth describe. Comprehending the realm of the imagination allows one to conceptualize how spirits can become embodied and bodies can become spiritualized. In this regard, Chittick has opened up new vistas in religious studies, forcing modern readers to reconsider phenomena (across traditions) that have been dismissed as magic, superstition, and fanciful hagiographical stories.

In addition, *Imaginal Worlds* presents fresh perspectives on salvation that run counter to a common Muslim view that only Muslims will go to Paradise. According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, there are 5105 degrees of paradise of which only twelve belong exclusively to Muslims. He explains a universal principle: people experience after death the inner condition they have created for themselves before death, implying that individual Muslims, Jews, and Christians each go to their individually created version of Heaven or Hell. One significant message of this book is that there are authoritative Islamic interpretations stating that non-Islamic paths eventually lead to God.

This raises the intriguing question of Islam in relationship to other world religions. On what basis has mainstream Islamic scriptural interpretation a priori declared all non-Islamic

religious traditions categorically superseded after the advent of Islam? To what extent has this exclusivist interpretive stance been a function of political power relationships which have functioned to legitimize Islamic governments ruling over non-Muslim communities? As humankind is experiencing an increasingly religiously pluralistic world, the issue of Islam and religious diversity is a timely one for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Chittick is challenging Muslims to reexamine Islam's claim to be the only true religion (like John Hick has done in the context of Christianity).

The issue is one of interpretation. In this regard, Chittick sidesteps confronting the issue of whether non-Islamic revealed religions are equally valid paths to salvation. One consensus of Muslim religious scholars could agree that theoretically the revealed religions of the book (*ahl al-kitāb*) are true but in practice their scriptures have been so “distorted” (from a Muslim point of view) that even in Muhammad's day there were no practicing Jews and Christians. Chittick's selective reading emphasizes the extraordinary visionary reality experienced by Ibn al-Arabī but neglects a necessary discussion of the conventional reality lived by ordinary Muslims whose religious identity often requires supports of credal belief and strict performance of ritual. Such issues lead back to asking on the practical/conventional level to what extent and why it has been important for Muslims to believe that their tradition is the only valid path to salvation.

Occasionally the reader is reminded of Ibn al-Arabī's grounding in Islamic law, e.g., “[N]o one has proclaimed the absolute necessity of observing the Shariah with greater vigor than Ibn al-Arabī” (p. 39) and “[T]he Shariah provide[s] the only fully reliable source of the proper balance between reason and imagination” (p. 166). These statements are juxtaposed with “[A]ll beliefs lead to God” (p. 146) and “The Shaykh acknowledges the validity of other scriptures of other religions” (p. 20). Because Chittick does not clearly explicate the dynamics between these two poles of exclusivity and inclusivity in Islam, a reader could easily come to

the conclusion (as many so-called Sufis in the West already have) that one can disregard Islam and the shariah and still be a Sufi. It would be a mistake to assume that mainstream Islam has been a religion that accepts other traditions as equals. Islamic inclusivism puts itself exclusively at the top of a pyramid of hierarchical relativism. Theoretically all paths lead to God but when forced to make decisions in one's finite human life why would anyone (from a Muslim point of view) choose to follow an explicitly inferior, i.e., non-Islamic, way?

This work demonstrates again that Chittick is an articulate and insightful interpreter of Ibn al-'Arabī. Usually he masterfully contextualizes the ideas in his books with issues and perspectives of the larger Islamic tradition to make his painstaking research accessible both to a general and specialist audience. In this case, a general audience will be stimulated in the discussion of imagination and its role in human religiosity. However, I would be hesitant to assign this book to undergraduate students if the intent were to discuss the issue of religious diversity and Islam. Surely "there are as many paths to God as there are human souls" but non-specialist readers need to understand the implications of what this means conventionally in Islam before exploring exegetical perspectives in the extraordinary context of Ibn al-Arabī.

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