

BOOK REVIEWS

* WILLIAM C. CHITTICK, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Pp. 215.

REVIEWED BY BERNARD WEISS, Middle East Center, University of Utah, Salt Lake City

In *Imaginal Worlds* William Chittick brings together revised versions of essays originally written between 1984 and 1992. To a large extent the book recapitulates discussions contained within his masterful opus on Ibn al-ʿArabi, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SUNY Press, 1989). However, whereas in that book he covered the entire landscape of Ibn al-ʿArabi's thought, in *Imaginal Worlds* he focuses on certain themes, especially the role of imagination within the cosmos and the diversity of religions seen as imaginal worlds. In particular, in his discussions of "ethics and antinomianism" (chap. 3) and religious diversity (Part III) Chittick takes us well beyond *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (chaps. 17 and 19). Furthermore, while Chittick includes translations of various passages from Ibn al-ʿArabi's writings, this does not form nearly so great a part of *Imaginal Worlds* as was the case with *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, which was to some degree an anthology of translated material.

Chittick writes as one very much involved in his subject matter. He writes not simply as a historian of thought but in large measure as an advocate. For him Ibn al-ʿArabi's ideas have relevance not only for the medieval world within which "the Shaykh" (as he customarily calls him) himself lived but for the modern world as well. He sees as regrettable the modern lack of interest in imaginal worlds (p. 11) as well as the modern preoccupation with knowledge considered as "facts that can be called up on a computer screen" (p. 43). His reason for attempting "to address a relatively wide audience" with these essays and to make "Ibn al-ʿArabi's ideas more accessible to nonspecialists" (p. 12) is obviously that he believes that Ibn al-ʿArabi has something to offer contemporary minds.

Chittick is concerned at various points in the book to demonstrate that Ibn al-ʿArabi—whose writings have often been maligned by conservative Muslims and were in fact in recent times banned in Egypt—was not at odds with mainstream Islam. The Shaykh emerges in Chittick's pages as thoroughly "Shariʿa-minded" (to borrow the phrase made famous by Marshal Hodgson) and as morally serious. The ideal life is for him a life of *takhalluq*, of conformity to God's attributes and character traits (*akhlāq allāh*), and this requires the guidance available to Muslims through the shariʿa. Furthermore, Ibn al-ʿArabi does not, in Chittick's estimation, water down basic eschatological notions by reducing them to metaphor. The world beyond—the interrogation in the tomb, the resurrection, heaven and hell, and so on—is as much a part of the cosmos, the imaginal realm in which the spiritual and corporeal come together, as is the present world. Ibn al-ʿArabi's piety is very much a piety cultivated with otherworldly consequences in mind.

Still, a number of not-so-mainstream features of Ibn al-ʿArabi's thought emerge in Chittick's treatment, and these relate to his famous doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. All religions, including Islam, fall short of capturing the fullness of the one unknowable, inexhaustible,

undifferentiated *wujūd* (an Arabic term which Chittick, in contrast to his practice in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, here chooses to retain rather than translate). In the imaginal worlds that religions inhabit, everything is a delimitation of the intrinsically nondelimited *wujūd*. In Islam this delimitation is expressed by the second part of the *shahādah*, "And Muhammad is His prophet." The *wujūd* becomes manifest through the entities that make up the cosmos, but cannot become fully manifest through any entity. Because all religions exist, each is in some sense a manifestation of the *wujūd*, and no one religion, even Islam, can claim to be an exclusive manifestation. Ibn al-ʿArabi's thinking about religious diversity is summed up in the proposition that all beliefs are true.

Chittick points out that Ibn al-ʿArabi's thinking on this subject is rooted in the Islamic notion of the multiplicity of prophets and diversity of shariʿas: the commands and prohibitions of the various shariʿas change over time with changing human conditions, and yet they all are of the same divine origin. It is not clear to me from Chittick's discussion, however, what the notion of Muhammad as the Seal of the Prophets meant for the relationship between Islam and other religions, according to Ibn al-ʿArabi. Nor is it clear to me what Ibn al-ʿArabi did with the notion, so fundamental to mainstream Islam, that revealed that religions other than Islam have been corrupted by their adherents. Does Ibn al-ʿArabi's teaching regarding religious diversity apply only to revealed religions in their original, uncorrupted form? Does his teaching translate into an espousal of religious pluralism in the here and now and into a tolerance capable of granting social equality to the religious communities?

We learn from Chittick that even atheism is for Ibn al-ʿArabi a sort of belief that, because it is no less than any other belief a manifestation of the *wujūd*, must be regarded as true (p. 139). This would suggest that the traditional notion of corruption of revealed religions did not, in Ibn al-ʿArabi's thinking, militate against the "truth" of current beliefs of adherents of these religions, and that his attitude toward non-Muslim religious communities was tolerant in the highest degree and his view of religions essentially pluralistic. To this we may add the fact that Ibn al-ʿArabi, according to Chittick, did not accept the notion of *eternal* punishment in hell, which traditionally was reserved for non-Muslims. God's wrath proves to be subordinate in the end to his mercy, not only for Muslims, but for all God's creatures.

In *Imaginal Worlds* Professor Chittick displays the same profound mastery of Ibn al-ʿArabi's complex thinking that was the hallmark of *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. In his effort to make Ibn al-ʿArabi's ideas accessible to non-specialists, he has in fact also made many of those ideas more accessible to those of us who claim to be Islamicists and even students of Sufism. The two books together constitute an enormous contribution to Islamic studies and will surely animate the thinking of reflective minds about *wahdat al-wujūd*, imaginal worlds, and religious diversity for a long time to come.