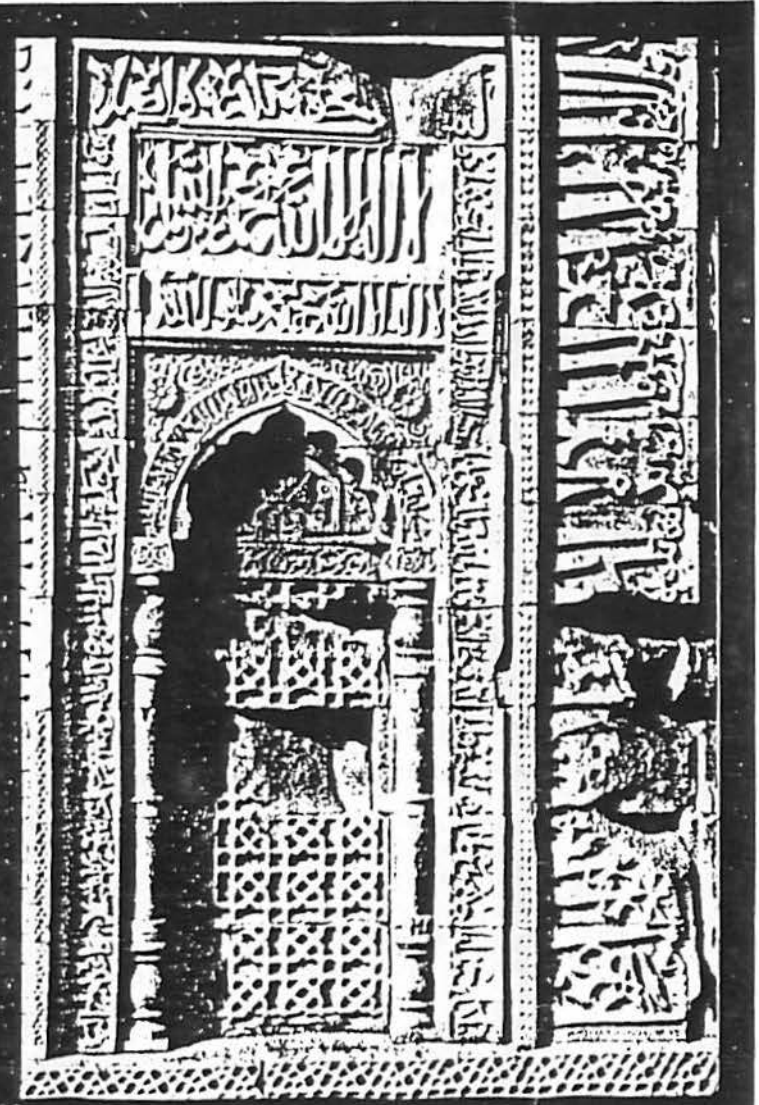




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BOOK REVIEWS

Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-^cArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity

by W. C. Chittick

Albany: State University of New York, 1994, 208 pages.

Ibn al-^cArabi is acclaimed as the "greatest master" in Sufism. His greatness, I think, lies in the way he combines contrary ideas with his notion of imagination. For example, in his *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* he writes:

My longing sought the Upland and my affliction the Lowland
... they are two contraries which cannot meet; hence my
disunion will never be repaired. What am I to do? What shall
I devise? Sighs have risen aloft and tears ... The camels,
footsore from the journey, long for their homes and utter the
plaintive cry of the frenzied lover.

"Upland" here refers to the realm of the Divine; the higher reaches of the Divine throne, the place of victory. "Lowland" refers to the realm of humans; the place of defeat. These contraries can never be reconciled existentially. Are sighs and longings futile, then, or do they serve some purpose? Ibn al-^cArabi teaches that human longing expresses itself in the *imagination* of union/reconciliation, just as camels footsore from a journey in the desert "reach" home through their "lofty thoughts" i.e. imagination. In other words, although disunity is not overcome existentially, it can be overcome in thought.

The importance of imagination is highlighted in the story of Ibn al-^cArabi's meeting with Nizām, a woman renowned for her beauty, eloquence and asceticism. Ibn al-^cArabi seems to have longed for an intimate friendship with her, but could not hope for the possibility of physical union owing to her ascetic way of life. He thus found thought/imagination as the vehicle of "union". Thought, for him, was actuality; a state prior to actuality. It was perhaps this methodology of union/harmony which he applied to the Upland/Lowland poles. That is to say, although existential union of God with humans is not possible in the Reality of this life, it is possible through Imagination (also called voluntary death or *mawt irādī*); a point which Ibn al-^cArabi emphasizes and which is well brought out by both Henry Corbin (*Creative Imagination*) and William Chittick.

There is a sense in which Chittick's much larger and more comprehensive work, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (with its extensive translations of passages from *Futūhāt*) is closely connected to the volume under review, a collection of essays written between 1984 and 1992 and edited afresh for the purpose of publication. In his own words:

In ... *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, I proposed that Ibn al-^cArabi's teachings on Imagination may suggest that something was lost when the mainstream intellectual tradition in the West dismissed Imagination as a faculty that can acquire real and

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significant knowledge. My attempt in the present book *Imaginal Worlds* is to show how an understanding of the cosmic and even metacosmic role of Imagination can help students of religion focus on issues that are central to the great commentarial traditions but tend to be pushed aside in modern studies because of disinterest in *Imaginal Worlds*.

In other words, Chittick's main objectives in putting together *Imaginal Worlds* are:

- to develop Ibn al-ʿArabi's teachings on Imagination in the context of the modern preference for a scientific methodology which not only reduces Reality to the phenomenal world, but tries to understand this Reality by treating it as a machine with countless separate parts, which can be studied and defined by using reason;
- to show that Imagination as a faculty can acquire real and significant knowledge.

He tries to achieve these goals by:

- expounding the human faculty of Imagination in the light of the cosmic and metacosmic role of Imagination;
- expounding how and in what sense the knowledge thus gained is real and significant for human existence on earth – in the present case, in the specific context of religious diversity.

Obviously, the central question the reader faces is how the section on "Religious Diversity" fits into Chittick's explication of Ibn al-ʿArabi's concept of human or cosmic Imagination. What has Imagination to do with "solving the problem" of religious diversity?

We may say that variety in religions represents various epistemologies or ways of reducing rational or imaginal perceptions into dogmas, laws, theologies or, in Chittick's terminology, "knots". This naturally results in conflict, for each "knotting" is different from the other. This is why diversity is perceived as a problem. Chittick, however, tries to show that religious diversity is not a problem. It is a way the Real "desires to bring about human wholeness and felicity." The purpose of "knotting" is to "enable humans to move from disequilibrium to harmony, from many to the One . . . from dispersion to unity, from ignorance to knowledge . . ." "Knottings" achieved through reason enable humans to orient themselves toward the Real; Imagination enables them to move beyond each "knotting" toward the goal of Unity (the Real), the particular manifestation of which are "knots" of beliefs.

There are, thus, two basic human outlooks: the Intellectual (reason) and the Intuitive. These orientations are contraries which do not seem possible to reconcile. One leads to the "knotting" of experience, the other to "dis-knotting". The Intellec-

tual orientation defines experiences and things and, in so doing, alienates itself from other definitions of similar things and experiences. It is exclusivistic and, in the realm of religion, is compared with the external forms of religion which stand on their own "knotting" vis-a-vis the particular others (religions). It affirms diversity in a negative sense; that is, diversity is a problem to be solved. Much of the resources of religious people are thus spent in accounting for the existence of other religions. Often other religions are branded as spurious, needing correction or assimilation. In contrast, the Intuitive orientation does not define anything. It accepts ambivalence, contradictions and change. Excessively flexible, it is compared to the esoteric forms of religions. It affirms the notion of unity and ignores the reality of diversity. The locus for the imagination is the heart (*al qalb*). As Ibn al-ʿArabi writes,

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and convent for Christian monks, and a temple for idols and a pilgrim's *Ka'ba* and the tablets of the torah and the book of the Qur'ân; I follow the religion of love, whatever way love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.

Chittick highlights these two orientations and sees them as two extremes which need to be balanced or reconciled. In the context of Islam, one extreme is represented by "those who focus . . . exclusively on Shari'ah and the divine rigor." This group is quick to condemn anyone who does not follow their way. Conflict is thus inevitable. The other extreme is represented by "those who . . . [define] human relationship with God almost completely in terms of Love." The tendency here is to ignore Diversity in the name of God's all embracing Mercy. Unity is taken to be the reality, and the real existence of diversity is denied.

Chittick disapproves of the mainstream intellectual tradition in the West which is comparable to the Intellectual orientation and dismisses an Intuitive orientation *a priori*. He underlines the need for Intuitive orientation and recalls Ibn al-ʿArabi's observation that

He who does not know the status of Imagination has no knowledge whatsoever.

In other words, if one's Intuition is not employed in the human quest for the knowledge of "Upland", no true understanding is possible. No knowledge of God is complete through the intellect alone, for reason is an insufficient guide to felicity.

Chittick, however, is not proposing that reason must be abandoned in favour of an Intuitive orientation in one's search for knowledge. It is not a question of either/or; rather, Chittick sees both orientations as necessary. The third approach he proposes is based on Ibn al-ʿArabi's own reconciliatory methodology, which seeks the reconciliation of contraries, rather than balancing or separation. He explains that the First Approach (the way of Reason) affirms and creates diversity, viewing it as a problem

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to be solved. Here the principle of Exclusivism rules. The Second Approach (the way of love/intuition) affirms unity, disregarding diversity. The Third Approach appreciates diversity and guides movement toward felicity through various essential "knottings", combining both reason and love. The "knots" are essential for two reasons:

- they create a positive orientation toward the real, the goal of human quest;
- an affirmation of "knots" results in actual and specific phenomenal knowledge of the Real in particular loci, and affirms the particularities of this World.

Thus the affirmation of "knots" maintains the Master's (the Real) roots in this world while He remains the perpetual goal to be realized. Reason necessitates reduction of the Real in "knottings". Indeed, without "knottings" the world would not exist. Reason thus maintains a separation of He/not He, Diversity/Unity, God/not God, Human/God . . . This separation need not be maintained in Imagination which can cross delimitations and boundaries of separation in knowing felicity and unity, despite phenomenal diversity. Diversity is neither ignored nor deemed a problem. It is a blessing, moving the seeker in the direction of felicity. In elucidating this, Chittick has produced a commendable work of scholarship which is a feast for every student of Religion, and particularly the student of Ibn al-^cArabi's thought.

David Emmanuel Singh

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Islamic Economic Systems