

Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity. William C. Chittick, Published by the State University of New York (SUNY) Press, Albany, New York, 1994. 208 pages.

William Chittick and his publishers have rendered a significant service for reflective Akbarians who wish to understand the greatest Shaykh more deeply. Under three interconnected themes – human perfection, worlds of imagination, and religious diversity – *Imaginal Worlds* brings together ten essays written over the last decade and published in a variety of places, including symposia proceedings of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society. Not content merely to make these thoughtful essays readily accessible, Chittick has substantially rewritten and revised them to eliminate unnecessary repetition and to exhibit an architectonic unity in their contents. He has been admirably successful in doing both. For those who have found his monumental *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (SUNY Press, 1989) daunting, the volume under review could serve as an introduction and guidebook for the longer work. Yet it stands on its own as a survey of major Akbarian themes.

Throughout his essays, Chittick is concerned to draw together and interweave metaphysical, ethical and psychological dimensions of the Shaykh's thought and to show that they are rooted in his profound spiritual experience, including his remarkable grasp of, and devotion to, Islam. Beginning with a detailed discussion of *wahdat al-wujud* – term, Chittick notes, not used by Ibn al-'Arabi but suitably applied to his ontology – Chittick shows how the Shaykh would have understood it. This opening allows Chittick to inaugurate a discussion of the Divine Names and their relevance to the macrocosm, the microcosm (the human being) and the perfect human being. He returns to the Most Beautiful Names again and again, because they are essential to all three. Every time Chittick discusses the Names, he broadens our perspective and adds subtlety to it. They are the unifying theme of these essays.

In a fascinating chapter, 'Ethics and Antinomianism', Chittick clearly and convincingly demonstrates that human character traits are rooted in the Divine Names, showing that character traits are rooted in the Divine Names, showing that Akbarian ethics derive

from ontology. All Names, including those generally associated with blameworthy character traits, are disclosures of Deity. No trait can therefore be blameworthy in itself. Rather, human misunderstanding or misuse of the creative power of a Name as it manifests in a person results in the judgment of blameworthiness. But existence (*wujud*) is one, which implies that all things are properties and effects of the Divine Names. 'This means', Chittick explains, 'that in the last analysis nothing can be found but various modalities of *wujud*, or various relationships and attributions' (p. 47). Being is one, but relationships are many. Outside being, there are no things in themselves, only relationships, each of which is a bridge (*barzakh*) between other changing relationships and between the world of plurality and the Names, themselves self-disclosures of, and bridges to, Reality. Only the prophetic tradition as embodied in the Shari'ah provides accurate guidance in ethics and spiritual development by situating actions in their proper contexts.

In his concern to elucidate how Ibn al-'Arabi's ethics are wedded both to his ontology and to the prescriptions of the Shari'ah, Chittick regrettably addresses only crude antinomianism, which declares that spiritual knowledge places one above normative ethics. The cliché that the line between genius and insanity is thin has become so threadbare that one might miss the truth behind it: both the genius and the deranged move beyond conventional reality. The genius, however, may attempt to translate his insight into language and forms of understanding which can elevate ours; the insane demands that we acknowledge their 'reality' without connecting it to ours. Anyone whose consciousness is spiritually transformed, that is, whose very structure of thinking, feeling and perceiving is changed, does move beyond conventional views of normative ethics. He or she neither rejects nor mocks moral principles which are held to limit others, but his or her understanding of them is necessarily vastly expanded. Normative ethics become soul ethics, an integral part of the spiritual pilgrim and not just a set of rules to be followed. Were such not a result of spiritual insight, the illumination itself would be suspect. Thus, the line between crude antinomianism and the illuminated soul will also appear thin to those of lesser vision. Chittick modestly avoids this admittedly treacherous territory; but Ibn al-'Arabi did not.

Chittick provides a clear account of the Shaykh's explanation of religious diversity, which is resonant with his account of blameworthy character traits. Being is one and therefore the source

of all beliefs, and every belief must have some connection with existence to exist itself. Nonetheless, every belief is limited; none can encompass the whole of *wujud*. To the degree that a belief is misguided, it is because of the less than perfect development of the believer. Our preparedness for understanding determines the beliefs we have. (Here a comparison with the Hindu view of absolute and relative truth and preparedness for insight would be enlightening. But Chittick, wary of superficial similarities and of ideas taken out of context, does not indulge in such considerations.) Those who follow the Qur'an do not follow the only path to God, but they follow the straightest path, which is 'the road of felicity' (p. 146).

On the basis of the Shaykh's view of religious diversity and the necessity for it, Chittick attempts a generous and inclusive perspective on all religious traditions. Yet his refusal to note comparable standpoints in other religions, notably Hinduism, Buddhism, mystical Christianity of the later Middle Ages, and even Taoism, gives his account a cold edge not found in the Shaykh. The tension between Ibn al-'Arabi's boldness - it caused trouble in his lifetime and after - and Chittick's caution (noticed earlier in the discussion of antinomianism) here shadows the exhilarating conclusion of the volume. In the end, the Shaykh's own words win through: 'Be in yourself a matter for the forms of all beliefs, for God is wider and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting (belief, world view) rather than another'. (p. 176). For Ibn al-'Arabi, there is no problem of religious diversity.

In dealing with these themes, Chittick broaches many subjects not touched on here, as essay titles indicate: 'Revelation and Poetic Imagery'; 'Meetings with Imaginal Men'; 'Death and the Afterlife'; and 'A Myth of Origins'. The entire volume merits close reading and sustained reflection. Thought not always luminous, Chittick's essays are invariably illuminating, and the careful reader will discern a certain beauty and integrity of thought in Chittick's consistently sober prose. Useful indices are included, along with a select bibliography. Unfortunately, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* by Michael Sells containing two exquisite essays on Ibn al-'Arabi, apparently appeared in print too late to be included.

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Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science

By René Guénon. Translated by Alvin Moore, Jr., Compiled by M. Valsan, and edited by Martin Lings. Cambridge, England: Quinta Essentia, 1995. Pp. 369. 20 diagrams. \$ 35.95, cloth; \$ 22.95, paper.

Even among those who have become interested in mythology and symbolism, it is too often forgotten that "myth," itself from the Greek *mythos*, is related etymologically to mystery and has to do precisely with the "Divine Mysteries," while "symbol" comes from the Greek verb *sympallein* meaning to put together or bind, that is, to unite a thing with its origin. The French metaphysician and mathematician René Guénon stands as a beacon of light in guiding us to the understanding of symbols and in asserting with certitude the root of symbols in the immutable archetypes which are reflected on different levels of cosmic existence.

Despite the significance of so many of his works such as *The Crisis of the Modern World*, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Time*, and *The Symbolism of the Cross* (all published in English but now out of print), *Fundamental Symbols* is perhaps the most important after *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* (which appeared in English in 1945 and is also no longer in print). As Martin Lings, himself the author of a major work on symbolism entitled *Symbol and Archetype*, states in his preface,

The universal language of symbolism is as old as humanity; and the light which Guénon throws on the intelligence and the intellectual unanimity of the ancient world is enough to dispel forever any lingering illusions about primitive man that we have subconsciously retained from our education.

In this work, Guénon not only speaks about various symbols which concern religion, art, the traditional sciences, and life itself, and in fact provide the language of both sacred art and sacred science, but also discusses the meaning of symbol in general. He demonstrates why symbols are rooted in the ontological reality of things, having their source in the noumenal and archetypal levels of reality rather than in the merely human or psychological.