

His book is a valuable and exciting contribution to our understanding of this important but rather obscure period of Islamic culture.

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IMAGINAL WORLDS: IBN AL-'ARABĪ AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY. By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. Albany, SUNY Press, 1994. vii, 208pp. \$18.95 (pb.).

The present study is best described in the author's own words, as an attempt 'to address a relatively wide audience with the hope of making Ibn al-'Arabī's ideas more accessible to non-specialists' (p.12). There are many areas in this book which Professor Chittick has already discussed in his *Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination: The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1989). However, the present study is not a résumé of the author's earlier work—rather, an excellent summary and interpretation of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings prepared from the major source books of Ibn al-'Arabī. All ten chapters of this book were originally written by the author between 1984 and 1992 for specific conferences, or collective works; most of them have appeared or will appear elsewhere (cf. p.178, note 12). But according to Chittick's statement they have been revised and most of them drastically changed so that they are in effect, new compositions, coherently giving Ibn al-'Arabī's overall view of things.

This book is divided into three parts with the following major headings: Human Perfection, Worlds of Imagination, and Religious Diversity. In the first part, Chittick explains Ibn al-'Arabī's basic understanding of the role of human beings in the universe and his concept of human perfection. In the second part he looks Ibn al-'Arabī's views on the various implications of the World of Imagination, the fundamental role played by Imagination in the cosmos and in human beings, Revelation and Poetic Imagination. Chittick attempts to show 'how an understanding of the cosmic and even meta-cosmic role of imagination can help students of religion focus on issues that are central to the great commentarial worlds' (p.11). But is imagination the same as fantasy? The author does not discuss this issue. In the third part Chittick illustrates a few of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings on the nature of belief, religious diversity, and theory of religion. Exhaustive indexes including a useful list of translated passages, and thorough documentation help to make this work—devoted to the teaching of one of the most controversial among all Sufi authorities—an extremely valuable tool for further research as well.

Professor Chittick's central purpose is to illustrate Ibn al-'Arabī's perspective of religious diversity. We live and work in cultures which are wrestling with issues related to religious pluralism, religious freedom, and cultural diversity. As scholarly activity in the area of religion increases, it becomes more and more obvious that few phenomena in human history are separable from religious beliefs and practices or, in more recent times, from reaction against these beliefs and practices. Those Muslims who are aware of the issue of dialogue take certain positions on how they should evaluate religions other than Islam. There are some who focus exclusively on the Shari'a and 'condemn non-Muslims as unbelievers, sometimes any Muslims who do not agree with them. On the other extreme are found those who ... assume that the good and the sincere among the believers in other religions—like good Muslims—will reach salvation' (pp.3-4). This study focuses on the third position taken by Ibn al-'Arabī, which is unity and diversity of religions, a position taken by many sufis as well as by Schuon (*The Transcendent*

Unity of Religions, London, Faber and Faber, 1953), Nasr (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York, Crossroad, 1981) and Professor Chittick himself. The author seems to be convinced that Ibn al-'Arabī can 'act as a beacon for those looking for an exit from the impasses of modern and post-modern thought' (p.2), but he does not illustrate what those 'impasses' are. He also alludes to a great variety of methodological approaches employed by specialists in the academic study of religions which according to him 'are firmly rooted in the experience of modernity undergone by the West' (p.5) but he does not discuss those approaches. His overriding concern is to convey and analyse the approach adopted by Ibn al-'Arabī for religious pluralism as a variety of Imaginal Worlds—hence the title of this work—which are different self-disclosures of the non-delimited *wujūd* (Being). This approach to religious diversity is conveyed excellently by Chittick and the book is worthy of consideration by both specialists and students who study religions, and Muslims who are aware of dialogue among religions.

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RETHINKING ISLAM: COMMON QUESTION, UNCOMMON ANSWERS. By MOHAMMED ARKOUN. Translated and edited by ROBERT D. LEE. Oxford, Westview Press, 1994. 139pp.

The approach of the author to Islam may be called integrationist, for the goal of this brief Socratic-style book, deftly rendered into English by Robert Lee, is to integrate Islam with other worldviews and indices of change that characterize the modern age. Though Mohammed Arkoun does presume Muslim identity as the paramount socio-cultural marking, he constantly tests its viability against rival claims, both religious and secular, to the ideal community which the Qur'ān and Muhammad its Messenger announced.

For Arkoun the central message of Islam must be uncompromisingly modern. Neither separate from it, nor alien to it, Islam has been, and continues to be, challenged by the modern world. Yet it is not a one-way challenge, for at the same time that Islam is challenged, Islamic norms and values contribute to the reciprocal challenge to secularism which all revealed religions collectively raise on behalf of humankind.

Arkoun's approach is at once historical and self-critical. An unabashed pluralist, he challenges the twin phalanxes of theology and ideology with rapier-like semiotic thrusts. Even in magnificent translation, his is not an easy prose to decode. He revels in ellipses and strings of qualifiers while shunning *ex cathedra* pronouncements and sweeping generalizations. Consider the first section of *Rethinking Islam*. It is appropriately labelled 'Imagining Islam' and begins with the rhetorical question: 'Can one speak of a scientific understanding of Islam in the West or must one rather talk about the Western way of imagining Islam?' Arkoun affirms the second option:

It is true that the sort of Islamic discourse common to fundamental movements, especially those engaged in the most decisive political battles, proposes the powerful image of a single, external Islam, the ideal model for historic action to liberate the world from the Western, imperialist, materialist model. The media in the West seize upon this monolithic, fundamentalist view of Islam that dominates the contemporary Muslim imaginary and transpose it into a discourse suitable to the social imaginary of Western countries without any intermediate critique from