

Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity

By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Pp. 208. Price HB US \$18.95. 0-7914-2249-6.

If anyone asked me to recommend a book which would serve as an introduction to the thought of Ibn al-'Arabī, this would be it. It is unusual to find such clarity and unity in what was originally a series of different lectures, especially in connection with a thinker who produced so much difficult material as Ibn al-'Arabī. Chittick is of course well known as an interpreter of the latter's thought, and here he takes as the main theme the issue of religious diversity. Ibn al-'Arabī does not see the existence of religious diversity as a source of confusion, but rather as one of the many signs that God's mercy is greater than his anger, so that ultimate salvation is available to all his creatures. The Prophet incorporated in his own self all the human perfections held by all the previous prophets, and the revelation he received—the Qur'ān—collects all prophetic knowledge in a single whole. Other prophets also have a valid view of divine reality, albeit possibly not such a complete one, and can offer guidance to humanity. Of crucial significance here is the idea on which Ibn al-'Arabī places so much weight, of human activity only taking us as far as the door to approach God. It is for God to decide whether or not to open the door and allow the seeker in, and God can do this, Chittick suggests, regardless of the precise religious background of the seeker.

Chittick picks out as worthy of special attention the theory of imagination. Here he claims that Ibn al-'Arabī differs from other thinkers in giving imagination a ground in objective reality. Imagination becomes the principal constitutive element in both the mind and the universe. The forms which fill the universe, including us and our minds, are related to God as the contents of dreams are related to the dreamer. Chittick claims that this represents an important break from other, and predominantly Western, forms of thought, which tended to dismiss the idea of imagination as a faculty that can provide genuine and significant knowledge. Imagination tends to operate as a *barzakh*, an intermediary between two forms of reality or world, as a notion which needs to be defined in terms of both. This is a very fruitful notion for Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysics, since it enables him to link three distinct levels of reality—the universe as a whole, the macrocosmic world, and the microcosmic world. When he calls the universe 'imagination' he is pointing to its intermediary status between the absolute *wujūd* of God and utter nothingness. We cannot say that both God and the world exist, since that is to imply that the world exists in the same sense that God exists, which is plainly just wrong, and so we are driven to say that the world does not exist. Yet we know that in a sense it does exist, and indeed that God's signs are displayed within it. It is like the images we see in dreams. In a sense they do not exist, since nothing objective corresponds with them to match the way we experience them. On the other hand, they do exist in the sense that when we are dreaming we treat them as real and having importance for us. Imagination is the intermediary between the spiritual and the corporeal worlds, and its intrinsic ambiguity

represents the basically illusory nature of the distinctions which we make from our limited points of view.

The analysis of imagination connects with the earlier discussion of mercy having precedence over anger. Imagination links the different aspects of reality, while reason distinguishes between them. People who use reason alone tend to separate reality into its different constituents, which results in a loss of an understanding of the divine presence in everything. Imagination can repair this defect and allows us to establish links and weaken differences. What is required is a balance of reason and imagination, but imagination should be in the controlling position. God's identity with reality is more fundamental than his difference, although the latter is important also, since without it we fall into *shirk*, associating God's manifestations with God himself. Reason alone allows us to understand that reality exists behind each image, but extended too far it destroys the imaginal coherence of the nature of reality as propounded by faith. We end up with the notion that each revealed religion represents a unique imaginal world with the aim of allowing human beings to move from illusion to reality. Each religion expresses in its own terms the goal of human existence through distinguishing between what people are now and what they might be, and in presenting practical advice as to how to establish greater harmony with reality.

I have three reservations. It is not at all clear that Ibn al-'Arabī's views on imagination are as distinctive as Chittick suggests. Certainly the way in which he applies imagination to the nature of reality is distinctive, but the basic notion of imagination as a source of objective knowledge is firmly represented in Western philosophy, and it runs as a theme right through the works of Aristotle, Kant, and Wittgenstein. Secondly, it would have been useful to have known how far Chittick sees himself as going in a different direction from Henry Corbin on the imaginal, since there seems to be a very close link between their views and even terminology. Finally, on religious diversity I am not at all sure whether Chittick is arguing that the idea that God's wisdom demands religious diversity follows from Ibn al-'Arabī's thought, or whether it is directly established in his thought. That is, is this a conclusion which Ibn al-'Arabī directly made, or is it something which Chittick is arguing he could (or should) have made? Like all good books, this one raises more questions than it settles, and we owe a tremendous debt to Chittick for throwing so much light on such a difficult and yet important area of Islamic thought.

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Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050–1200

By THOMAS E. BURMAN. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994. Pp. 407. Price HB not given. 90-04-09910-7.

In the year 1085, after Alfonso V had taken the ancient capital of Toledo, the Christians there began to study Islam, for missionary and controversial