

THE SUFI PATH OF KNOWLEDGE: IBN AL-'ARABI'S METAPHYSICS OF IMAGINATION

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The Sufi Path of knowledge is one of the latest of the dozen or so translations of Ibn al-'Arabi's works in European languages. Chittick's translation and commentary on parts of Ibn al-'Arabi's magnum opus, *Al-futuhāt al-makkiyya*, is the fruit of a growing scholarly, infrastructure over the past decades. Some of the important contributions include: Professor Suad al-Hakim's *Al-mu' jam al-sufi: al-hikma fi hudud al-kalima*, (Beirut, 1981) which illustrates 706 of Ibn al-'Arabi's technical terms in a 1311 page volume, Osman Yahia's preparation of a new edition of the *Futuhāt* with scholarly apparatus which will run into an estimated 17,000 pages, and the creation of a Muhyiddin Ibnal-Arabi Society in Oxford, England with a scholarly journal devoted to Shaykh al-Akbar.

An outcome of this, sustained effort is that Ibn al-'Arabi is starting to be presented in the religious context of Islam instead of being portrayed through comparative works (Christian, Hindu, Taoist or Buddhist) which have dominated western language studies of Ibn al-'Arabi. Chittick's work is a milestone in this regard because it decisively shows how Ibn al-'Arabi's work is integrally related to unfolding the inner meanings of the Qur'an, the central role of the Prophet Muhammad (S), his .sunnah, and adherence central to Islamic Law (Shari'ah). This obviously does not facilitate easy

accessibility to a non-Muslim audience unless the translator is also an accomplished commentator.

Nor does this fact necessarily imply that a Muslim audience will automatically have easy access to Ibn al-'Arabi. For the last six hundred years, especially in the eastern Islamic World, Qunawi's interpretation of Ibn al-'Arabi's *Fusus al-hikam* has concentrated on the metaphysical and theological aspects of Ibn al-'Arabi's writing. This one-dimensional school of thought has been closely associated with the philosophy of Nasir ud din Tusi and Fakhrud din Razi and has ignored Ibn al-'Arabi's emphasis on spiritual practice and his constellation of spiritual visions communicated in the *Futuhāt*. Thus some Muslim readers may have to suspend certain presuppositions concerning Shaykh al-Akbar to understand his thought in a larger context.

A third difficulty is that of paradigms. The vast majority of people reading a sophisticated book of this type in English have been educated with modern assumptions which put complete unquestioning faith in reason while ignoring all other modalities of perception, which one assumes were more prevalent in the thirteenth-century world of Ibn al-'Arabi. William Chittick masterfully bridges this "paradigm gap" while simultaneously elucidating the Islamic nature of Ibn al-'Arabi's writing to the non-specialist.

To date, the only other translation of any part of the *Futuhāt* in European languages is Stephane Ruspoli's translation of chapter 167, *bonheur L'alchimie du parfait* (Paris: Berg International 1981), which without commentary has limited usefulness. However, what does one do with a text like the *Futuhāt* which contains innumerable inexplicable allusions that are probably explained somewhere else in the text, which Osman Yahia probably will not have read and annotated until the year 2000. It would be humanly impossible to examine the hundreds of other books written by Ibn al-'Arabi to explain these allusions.

William Chittick has provided the reader, in his own words, “with a few table scraps” by dividing his material into chapters ranging from ‘The Names of God’ and ‘Existence and Non existence’ to ‘Understanding the Koran’ and ‘Pitfalls of the Path’. Few will not be satiated by Chittick’s banquet of table scraps even though less than one-percent of the Futuhat is in The Sufi Path of Knowledge.

Throughout the work, the translation approach and word choice are explained in a way to clarify the text to specialists and non-specialists alike. However, this book is no light reading. The author resorts to such terminology as ‘tenuities’ (p.261), ‘hylic entities’ (p.90) and ‘non-delimited thrall’ (p.371) to explain certain concepts. Perhaps this is a subtle way of reminding the reader that Ibn al-’Arabi’s texts were written for a limited audience who had a spiritual guide explaining the text in such a way to lead them to an actual spiritual experience.

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It is an anomaly that such a masterful translator as William Chittick would employ such loaded terms from a Christian religious context, e.g., Gnostics, saints, which western scholars have already recognized as being inappropriate in a non-Christian context. In addition, many scholars in the academic community would strongly object to the so-called non-gendered use of man. These details aside, The Sufi Path of Knowledge has set a new standard in the study of Ibn al-’Arabi that is not likely to be surpassed in the near future.

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