Review of The sufi path of knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysics of imagination, by William C. Chittick

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is much richer than it is for many other Arabian tribes, simply because Sulaym lived in the Hijaz and had close contacts with Medina and Mecca, the primary focus of our sources' interest. For many other Arabian tribes, even some very important ones—Kinda, Hanifa, Azd—it would be difficult to draw much of a picture at all, without making some cautious inferences drawn from evidence of what appear to be similar societies in different times or places. The second point is that Lecker himself may owe more of his understanding of jahili customs to relatively modern ethnology, or at least to much later literary sources, than he admits. For example, he makes passing reference (p. 21) to payment of blood-money among Sulaym. Typically, he never explains what the significance of the event might have been among Sulaym, but I suspect that any explanation he might venture (or assume) is rooted in a knowledge of vengeance systems among kinship groups that owes much to studies by modern ethnologists.

It is more than merely difficult to write history without some reference to the present; it is, in fact, both impossible and meaningless.

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This is the first English introduction to Ibn 'Arabi's truly magnum opus, the Meccan Illuminations, and the first introduction designed to prepare non-specialist readers to explore that famous mystic's writings on their own. (That a work of almost 500 double-column pages can still be termed an introduction is a reflection at once of the breadth of Ibn 'Arabi's own ambitions, the very length of the Futuhat itself—a text as prolix as his better known Futas al-Hikam is condensed—and the ongoing depth of that writer's influence in later Islamic civilization.) Previous scholarly works on Ibn 'Arabi, including the classic studies by Nyberg, Asin-Palacios, Corbin and Izutsu, have typically sought to present what those authors believed to be most relevant or interesting to their own diverse modern audiences. Whatever the merits of those various approaches, only specialists already well acquainted with the Arabic texts could judge how adequately they conveyed the original and to what extent their interpretations (as is almost inevitable with Ibn 'Arabi) had taken on an inspired life and direction of their own. Thus the specific focus on Ibn 'Arabii's own aims in this most recent study is not simply a function of the anthologizing method—which could easily have been applied to generate yet another "system," as with the famous Islamic commentators on whom Prof. Chittick has written in the past. More important, it also reflects an ongoing, collective scholarly effort that has done much in recent years to bring into clearer focus the particular intellectual and social contexts of Ibn 'Arabi's (and many other Sufis') writing and teaching, thereby liberating the appreciation of his creative personal contributions and often original perspectives from the centuries of later philosophic and poetic reworkings and religious polemics that have come to be associated with his name. (Those efforts are especially well represented in the recent major biographical studies by M. Chodkiewicz and C. Addas, soon to be available in English translation.)

The overall presentation and order of subjects in this volume is that adopted by Ibn 'Arabi himself (following earlier Kalam) in the doctrinal summaries within his own introduction to the Futuhat: it begins with the cosmic theological and ontological context of human action (parts 1-3 here), and then continues in greater detail with the processes and pitfalls of spiritual realization (the soul's "Return," parts 4-7), which for this mystic involve above all the indispensable symbolic workings of the (individual and cosmic) "Imagination"—hence the subtitle of this work. But while this initial division might suggest the sort of systematic philosophic approach so typical of one influential line of later Muslim commentators, from Qunawi on down to Mullâ Sadra and Sabzawârî, readers will find that Prof. Chittick's careful reliance on Ibn 'Arabi's own words, through nearly 700 translated passages selected from the entire Futaht, happily gives a very different and more readable, less abstract picture of his work. In fact, this second section actually conveys the human, experiential "inside" (the batin) of what was at first presented in more abstract theological terms, in such a way that students familiar with mystical writings from different religious traditions will quickly grasp the common principles and concerns expressed here in a complex symbolic vocabulary grounded in the Qur'ân and hadith.

But the more difficult opening theological and philosophic discussions here do provide the common language (primarily Qur'ânic) and conceptual framework that is assumed throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writings; and this is certainly the aspect of his work most unfamiliar to virtually all modern readers. (The translator [p. xxi] has prudently put off for a separate, later volume a promised survey of the mystic's cosmology, cosmogony and influential theories concerning the macro- and micro-cosmic "Perfect Man.") The remaining two-thirds of this work, however, are devoted to the more practical side of Ibn 'Arabi's writing, focusing on the detailed, highly practical "spiritual phenomenology" of that intimate dialectic between scriptural sources and guidelines, rational considerations, and
the “content” and essentially operative intentions of Ibn ʿArabi’s own writings—works whose highly distinctive rhetoric was never adequately imitated even within later Islamic tradition. Like other classics in that tradition, but with its own puzzling and creative style, the Futūḥāt was meant to mirror each student’s uniquely individual state while drawing the more inquisitive into a compelling process of discovery involving their whole being. Readers who complete this volume should be well prepared to see how that is so, and to continue that exploration.

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This monograph, which grew out of a contribution to a symposium at Exeter University, has two basic themes, one dependent on the other. The first is that according to the Ḥanafī school of law, to which the monograph is limited, the peasants, as kharāj payers, had original property rights of ownership over the lands they held. Later they lost those rights because of many factors that cannot be dealt with now. Their continued presence on the land was construed by later Ḥanafī jurists as an ijiṣrah or rent based not on a contract of rent, as the classical jurists had demanded, but on a presumed voidable contract of rent, as those later jurists allowed. Thus the payments made by peasants for the use of their lands were transformed from the nature of a tax (kharāj) to that of a rent (ijīṣrah) payable to the administrators of huge estates belonging to waqfs, or to a rentier class whose interests later jurists sought to protect.

The second theme is that whereas most writers on Islamic law had stressed that the doctrines of the schools of law had been established as early as the tenth century, with little change thereafter, except in minor fields of civil law, basic changes, such as those mentioned above, involved questions of finance and public law, thus altering our conception of the unchangeability of Islamic law.

The monograph does not lend itself to bedtime reading; it demands total absorption and continued mental reference to those two themes in order to digest its rich fare. In fact one is advised to read the concluding chapter first in order to keep one’s bearing while reviewing the intricacies of juristic thinking on kharāj payments as proof of ownership, on the “com-modification” of the productive use of land in an ijiṣrah contract.