Review of Sufism and deconstruction: a comparative study of Derrida and Ibn #Arabi, by Ian Almond

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2512

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 164-165, 2006

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. Copyright is retained by Cambridge University Press.

REVIEWED BY JAMES W. MORRIS, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter; e-mail: j.w.morris@exeter.ac.uk

This thoughtful short volume of philosophical reflections by Ian Almond, a teacher of English literature at Bosphorus University, is another sign of the recent emergence of the translated, popularized Ibn ‘Arabi, like the poet Rumi, as an independent—albeit problematic—subject of inspiration for both creative writers and scholars from an increasingly wide range of disciplines. In this case, the juxtaposition of Derrida’s hermeneutics and the distinctive rhetoric of the *Fusus al-hikam* is rendered more meaningful by the author’s actual focus on the French philosopher’s elliptic readings of Meister Eckhart, the medieval philosopher and preacher whose remarkable parallels to the language and approaches of Ibn ‘Arabi have already been explored in important studies by M. Sells, R. Shahkazemi, and a number of other scholars writing in both Islamic and Western languages.

To begin with an essential clarification for readers of this journal, the primary intended audience of Prof. Almond’s work is clearly specialists in deconstructionism who are already familiar with Derrida’s works and related literatures. His particular focus in this study is on suggesting and illuminating certain philosophical potentials of Derrida’s thought through the careful evocation of a few central rhetorical and thematic “parallels” in the *Fusus al-hikam* that are already familiar to readers of that particular book. Hence, despite the essay’s title, there is no sustained interest in the wider works and contributions of Ibn ‘Arabi, much less in aspects of Sufism more generally.

Despite the manifest impossibility of summarizing any deconstructionist writer—given the intrinsically paradoxical, allusive, and often tortuously qualified language of both Derrida and his interpreter here—the basic stages of Almond’s argument are clearly reflected in the successive chapter titles. Beginning with the most obvious rhetorical features of the “deconstructive opposition to rational thought,” he moves on to evoke three sorts of deeper and, at least potentially existential implications of that challenging rhetoric that are already clearly
more explicit and fundamental in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, as indeed they are in the key earlier Neoplatonists (and other familiar non-Western parallels) who are also evoked in this study’s conclusion. Those three basic subjects of reflection—and familiar themes for any student of Ibn ‘Arabi—are the liberating potential of existential “perplexity” or confusion, the correspondingly rich hermeneutics of “infinite” unfolding meanings, and the unfolding spiritual “secret” of “mystery-tasting and abyssality.”

Scholars in the study of religion, including Islamic studies, will immediately recognize centrally recurrent themes in the scriptures and hermeneutics (both written and more practical) of every major religious tradition. In that light, such readers are likely to find most thought-provoking the author’s evocative extension of his “expanded” deconstructionist approaches, in his conclusion, to further parallels in the literary reflections of Blanchot, Benjamin, and Foucault—along with philosophers such as Heidegger, the Neoplatonists, and related non-Western sources only briefly alluded to here. Almond’s essays and arguments carefully map and reflect the intellectual and cultural “Babel” that manifestly confronts every conscientious philosopher and theologian today, whatever his or her own tradition or school of origin. Yet, despite the implicit pessimism of that biblical analogy, Almond’s pioneering efforts, like Ibn ‘Arabi’s, also courageously point to more positive, creatively constructive ways of transcending the unavoidable challenges of that global situation.

DOI: 10.1017.S0020743806381275


REVIEWED BY KAIS M. FIRRO, Department of Middle Eastern History, University of Haifa; e-mail: firrok@research.haifa.ac.il

In his interdisciplinary approach, Fuad Khuri weaves together from Druze history, economy, politics, and religion a “thick description” of the present culture of the community. His approach counters that of many scholars who insist on explaining Druze history, culture, political behavior, and even economic development on the basis of theological texts rather than by ethnographic observation. His anthropological insights enable him to distinguish between religion as a way of life or traditional practice and religion as dogma or theology and to present a more accurate interpretation of the difference between ‘uqqāl (wise and controlled people) and juhhāl (the ignorant and imprudent ones). Having interviewed a wide variety of people, he finds that the division between ‘uqqāl and juhhāl is a very arbitrary one. “It does not necessarily reflect the scope of religious knowledge . . . a jāhil (singular) may know more about the tenets of religion than many of the ‘uqqāl” (p. 182). He rightly concludes that, for the Druze, “the mundane and the sacred are so intricately intertwined that separating them becomes [a futile] exercise in hair-splitting” (p. 4). The same conclusion is drawn in a recent study by Isabelle Rivoal, Maîtres du Secret: Ordre Mondain et Ordre Religieux dans la Communauté Druze en Israël (2000).

Khuri’s introduction serves as an abstract of the whole work, explaining how culture and religion are merged into a “single formulation” in which the “religious becomes cultural and vice versa” (p. 1). This formulation is reflected in the community’s traditional customs, religious rituals, ceremonies, ethics, politics, and social fabric. Because each of the twelve chapters can stand alone as an independent essay, the author could not avoid repetitive argumentations, figures, and even expressions when dealing with central themes such as reincarnation, shrines, religious knowledge and practice, endogamy and exogamy, and migration and emigration. However, these central themes are combined to form a principal thesis through which he suggests that the Druze still constitute a cohesive community with strong attachment to their