

Book Review: An Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book and the Law

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Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book and the Law*. Trans. David Streight. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993. Hbk 184 pp.

Although Ibn 'Arabi has been the most influential Muslim thinker for the past eight centuries, his works being read by devotees spanning from Malaysia to North America, the overall unity or coherence of his writings have not received systematic attention. Michel Chodkiewicz's *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book and the Law*, originally published in French under the title *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn 'Arabî, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris, 1992), is the first recorded attempt to analyze the 'architecture' of the Shaykh's writings. At the same time, this study examines Ibn 'Arabi's Qur'anic and legal hermeneutics. What becomes immediately apparent when reading *An Ocean without Shore* is that the centrality of the Qur'an in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi entails that any treatment of the organization of his oeuvre a fortiori requires a prior exposition of his understanding of the Qur'an, and, by extension, the shari'a. Chodkiewicz demonstrates how Ibn 'Arabi's Qur'anic hermeneutics is informed by one ostensibly straight-forward principle, which is that the form of the Word takes precedence over every other consideration. This is a point upon which most Muslim exegetes would agree. Yet Ibn 'Arabi means something quite different by this. For Ibn 'Arabi, the way the Word 'is', that is, its very form, is of a divine order, and it is the meaning of the text. One of the implications of this position is that there can be no superfluities in the Qur'an. Each verse, each word, and even every particle is there for a very specific reason. Qur'anic exegesis for Ibn 'Arabi is therefore inextricably linked to the way words appear to us and the meanings they signify. It is the Arabic language which determines the possibilities of the meanings of a given verse (however contrary these meanings may be). That is to say, in order for an interpretation of a verse to be valid, it must conform to the regular grammatical and lexical usage of the Arabs. If this condition can be fulfilled, then the interpretation is valid. If the language entertains the possibility for the verse to mean what it means, then it must, of necessity, be one of the meanings intended by God. The meanings are not fixed, nor does one verse have to mean the same thing all the time for the same individual or circumstance. We learn through Chodkiewicz's observations that for Ibn 'Arabi it is the divine Word alone which allows us to penetrate its secrets. To understand the book we must travel within the

revealed Word and its world of meanings. This can only happen once we have transcended ourselves, therefore allowing for the Word – and not our own reason – to lead us along the way. Human reason can, by its very nature, never capture the entire message of revelation since revelation is supra-rational. Reason consequently falls short and does not allow for the full range of meanings of the Word to emerge. It can only tie one down (etymologically, the

Arabic root 'QL connotes the idea of 'shackling' or 'tying down').

Ibn 'Arabi maintains that there is a divine descent into the hearts of the faithful every time they read the Qur'an, revealing as much of itself to them as their states will allow. The servant who is deaf to the divine Word will not perceive its presence, and will thus read without understanding. But for the one whose inner ears are alert, one who has died to himself, the Word will penetrate his heart and he will thus be able to understand its message through divine teaching. When the Word does not descend into the hearts of the faithful, interpretations of it are at best limited, and in all such cases they can never capture the full possibilities of the message of the Word. Only when one returns to the state of being unlettered (ummi) – a quality which belonged to none other than the Prophet – can he understand the import of the Word. Ummyyya is a state of infancy in which the heart receives truth without any veil obstructing its reception. But the dross of duality implied by the human ego is what bars us from allowing the Word to penetrate our hearts. The Prophet, whose heart was not tainted by knowledge acquired by reason, who was in that primordial state of 'spiritual infancy', was thus the perfect

receptacle for the divine Word, for his heart was pure enough to receive it in its entirety.

Many of Ibn 'Arabi's unconventional interpretations of certain Qur'anic verses are outlined in *An Ocean without Shore*, such as his equating the kafirun (the 'infidels' or 'truth-concealers') mentioned in Q 2:5-7 as none other than the highest type of saints, the malamiyya ('those who call blame upon themselves'). Such an interpretation is indeed very faithful to the Shaykh's hermeneutical principle that the interpretation of a verse must conform to the rules of the Arabic language. Ibn 'Arabi explains that the word kafir comes from an Arabic root meaning 'to sow' and hence to 'hide': "The kafirun are those who, as the malamiyya, hide their spiritual station. They are the sowers who hide their seed in the earth." (Cited in Chodkiewicz, p. 50)

This type of hermeneutic introduced by Ibn 'Arabi allows for the multiplicity of interpretations of the text to emerge, but it also has a very significant bearing upon the architecture of his works. Chodkiewicz presents how Ibn 'Arabi's writings, particularly his *Al-Futuh al-Makkiyya*, are intimately tied to the structure of the Qur'an and how his works are nothing but a journey within the sacred Word itself. With respect to Ibn 'Arabi's corpus, its very structure enables the reader to take his journey within the Word, but this time in reverse order. The various chapters

of his books act as filters which distil the Word and allow for the mystic to embark upon the homeward journey.

Ibn 'Arabi certainly sees language as having a divine origin, for it is the only way the divine communicates itself to us. One may say that there are many non-linguistic ways in which the divine reveals itself, such as in nature. But for Ibn 'Arabi everything is the 'word' of God, which is why he says that the universe is nothing but the 'Breath of the All-Merciful', a term which he takes from a famous Prophetic tradition. The All-Merciful 'breathes out' and all that is in the cosmos form as articulations of the Word within the Breath. From this perspective all language and all words have a divine origin. Ibn 'Arabi also has a lot to say about the limits of language in expressing the divine: if the divine reveals itself through language and we know it through language, it is also hidden by what it says, and hence Ibn 'Arabi also maintains, like many other mystics, the ineffability of the divine, paradoxically, through language itself. Ultimately, all words, all sounds, all cosmic reverberations return to their Principle, their Source, and thus their primordial silence.

With regard to Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the law, it is often said that he belonged to the no longer extant Zahiri madhhab, founded by Dawud b. Khalaf (d. 884 CE). Why Ibn 'Arabi is believed to have been a member of this school is primarily for two reasons. On the one hand, his approach to the law is very strict and 'literal', and on the other, he is known to have written a partial commentary on a Zahiri legal compendium penned by none other than Ibn Hazm. Yet Ibn 'Arabi allows for qiyas or analogical reasoning in matters of the law whereas the Zahiri school does not. And, as Chodkiewicz convincingly argues, Ibn 'Arabi clearly states in two places in his Diwan that he is not a follower of the Zahiri legal school nor any other school of law for that matter. Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the law is simply based on two principles: (1) whatever the shari'a has not explicitly forbidden belongs to the category of original licitness (al-ibaha al-asliyya) and (2) all legal opinions carried out by those qualified to interpret the law are valid, and can thus be followed.

In the final chapter of this book Michel Chodkiewicz returns to Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of the law, this time focusing on his exposition of the inner significance of the ritual acts of Islam with specific reference to the canonical prayers. It is only through such a hermeneutical process envisioned by Ibn 'Arabi - where the form of the divine Word dominates man's very being such that he journeys in the world of the Word - that he can realize the full significance of the ritual acts ordained by the law. It is only through the outer that the inner can be penetrated. Once the inner has been penetrated it is not simply a question of discarding the outer. Rather, when the inner is understood in its full plenitude it will be realized that that which allows access to it -

namely the outer - itself contains everything, for the *haqiqah* is the *shari'ah*, and the *shari'ah* is
.the *haqiqah*

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