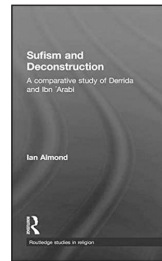


Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi.

By Ian Almond.

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Reviewed by Atif Khalil



When William C. Chittick published his encyclopedic *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* almost thirty years ago, he made readily available to the English speaking world, for the first time, lengthy excerpts drawn primarily from the thirteenth century Andalusian thinker's most comprehensive summation of Sufi thought in the *Meccan Revelations*. Chittick's most significant contribution, arguably, lay in the virtually unparalleled lucidity with which he introduced and translated a range of key passages authored by a medieval figure notorious for his often elliptical and allusive style of writing. This was a tremendous accomplishment for a single scholar, the full extent of which can be measured today by SPK's standing as probably the most widely cited secondary source in the field of Ibn al-'Arabi studies.

In his work Chittick expressed a hope that the book would allow non-specialists to go a step further and draw out some of wider pertinence of Ibn al-'Arabi's vision for the modern world. A little more than a decade ago, the literary scholar Ian Almond, currently a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar, took just such a step. Relying primarily on Chittick's SPK, and, to a lesser extent,

Ralph Austin's translation of the mystic's *Bezels of Wisdom*, Almond produced the first major comparative study of Ibn al-'Arabi and a modern thinker – in this case, the late denizen of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. It is unlikely that this is the kind of comparison Chittick was anticipating, since in SPK he criticized those very theorists for whom “language determines all of reality.” But Almond would make a relatively good case to demonstrate that the overlaps between deconstruction and Ibn al-'Arabi are sufficient enough to allow us to conclude, at least tentatively, that both thinkers, though coming out of very different traditions, arrive at some very similar conclusions about the nature of truth, rationality and hermeneutics.

Almond opens his study by drawing attention to the analogous ways in which Ibn al-'Arabi and Derrida have respectively approached their explorations of “the Real” (*al-Haqq*) and “La difference.” He highlights how, for Ibn al-'Arabi, philosophical and theological attempts to systematically map out the nature of God or the Real fail because of reason's inability to comprehend the immensity of the divine plenitude (*al-tawassu' al-ilabi*). According to the mystic, the major schools of Islamic theology and philosophy construct “images” or “forms” of God which exclude other possible images and forms. But because God assumes all forms, He cannot be restricted to or confined by any one of them. The truth lies in realizing both the inability of any form to enclose the Real, as well as the legitimacy of each and every expression of It. This is not a negative theology, which, premised on the radical otherness of God, is forced to negate all similarities. Such a theology only presents us with half the picture. The “actual situation” lies in being able to simultaneously affirm — against the law of non-contradiction — both the Real's radical transcendence and immanence. This, however, remains impossible for a human mind entrapped in the “shackles of reason,” in a mode of thinking which operates on the basis of binary opposites. Since these opposites are only dissolved in God, reason remains forever incapable of comprehending His fullness.

Almond compares Ibn al-'Arabi's unthinkable Real with Derrida's siteless, nameless, non-temporal difference, which, according to the French philosopher, is “literally neither a word nor a concept” (29). Although in his day Derrida objected to the theologizing of difference, some of his critics continue to accuse him of espousing a very secular version

of the God of negative theology. Derrida's reasons for this disavowal lie in negative theology's (purported) concern with extrapolating a super-essence hidden behind the infinite range of attributes whose ontological realities it denies. For Derrida, although negative theology deprives God of the usual theological categories, it then goes on to acknowledge His ineffable mode of being, thereby defeating its intended purpose. This, in his view, cannot be done of difference. Partly because Ibn al-'Arabi's vision of the Real does not fall into any of the available Western theological systems, Almond finds the Real and difference "uncannily analogous" (36). The objections Derrida raised against the theologizing of difference do not properly apply, for Almond, to Ibn al-'Arabi's notion of *al-Haqq*.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this study lies in its discussion of Sufi and deconstructionist hermeneutics. Here Almond explores one of the most interesting ideas found at the heart of the two thinkers: the infinity of the text. For Ibn al-'Arabi this infinity only properly applies to sacred scripture in so far as it embodies divine speech. Far from univocally encapsulating a single message, the revealed Word, for the Muslim mystic, contains an infinite reservoir of meanings, each of which was intended by its divine author. Every time one draws out a particular meaning of a Koranic verse or expression, that meaning was, for Ibn al-'Arabi, divinely determined, even if it reflects the reader's own very unique and personal context. It is as if God knew beforehand every possible situation in which the text would be read, and thereby intended every possible meaning. Almond compares this view with that of Derrida, for whom the semantic depth of any given work exists not on account of the author intending every possible meaning, but because there is, in the post-structuralist sense, quite simply no author. What occupies the author's place, instead, is a "centerless plurality of interpretive contexts," each of which generates a unique sense which could not have been foreseen by the individual credited with the text. In other words the "aybassality" of the Derridian text is rooted not in the enduring presence of the author, as it is for Ibn al-'Arabi, but in his or her complete semantic absence. This absence or void confers upon the text its infinite elasticity since there is no predetermined and fixed meaning to hermeneutically constrain the work. For Ibn al-'Arabi, the source of this elasticity lies not in a void, but a tremendous, authorial *presence*: God remains forever present before the reader. Almond concludes that even though the processes through which texts acquired

their infinities fundamentally differ for both thinkers, the end results of Derridean and Akbarian hermeneutics remain essentially the same.

Although some readers may wonder whether at least a few of the convergences Almond highlights might in fact be a bit forced, Almond's intention, as he makes it clear in the introduction, is not to transform the Muslim mystic "into a postmodern theorist, anymore than it is to desire to 'islamicize Jacques Derrida...producing a Jacques of El-Bair" (2). On the whole he seems to remain faithful to this intention. In fact, near the end of the work, after recapping a long list of similarities, Almond confesses that Derrida and Ibn al-'Arabi remain "very different thinkers." With that said, despite the general scholarly rigor which characterizes this very learned comparative study, this reviewer did find at least two instances of textual misrepresentation. In both of these cases a passage from Ibn 'Arabi was distorted to push a point of comparison with Derrida. The distortion becomes apparent when the section he quotes is compared with the full text in Chittick. It is true that Ibn 'Arabi is a difficult writer, and much in his extensive literary corpus is open to interpretative disagreement, but in these instances, at least, Almond's readings of the Muslim mystic do not seem to find any textual justification.

The first of these occurs in chapter three, where Almond proffers the view that according to Ibn al-'Arabi the Koran remains, despite our best interpretive efforts, an essential mystery, that its actual meanings remain impenetrable. "[N]one of our interpretations," he writes, "actually have anything to do with the holy word. The Koran is a book about which we can know nothing" (72). Almond's apparent purpose behind such a bold claim is to highlight a supposed parallel with the Derridean notion of the absence of a primary ur-meaning in any given text. The logic of this parallel is that if the primary and most fundamental meaning of the Koran remains unknown, it is just the same as if it were non-existent. To support this interpretation, Almond cites the following passage from Ibn al-'Arabi:

...others lift up the Book from its bed, since interpretation on the part of the learned ('ulama) has made the Book lie down after it had been standing. The person to whom God has given success comes and makes the Book stand up after it had been lying down. In other words, he declares the Koran incomparable with his own interpretation (72).

But the full passage in SPK reveals that Ibn al-'Arabi is actually saying quite the opposite: that although the truest meaning of Islam's holy text cannot be obtained through one's limited reflective effort, it *can* be attained through divine inspiration. The full passage, not cited by Almond, continues from where he ends:

Then God gives to such people [i.e. those 'given success,' who halt at their own interpretative efforts] untainted knowledge. God says, 'None knows its interpretation, save only God and those rooted in knowledge.' God teaches them that to which the written revealed word goes back, that is, the meanings he had deposited in it (cited in SPK, 200).

The other instance occurs in chapter four where Almond explores some of the similarities between the place of the "secret" in Derrida and Ibn al-'Arabi. Here Almond quotes a passage from Ibn al-'Arabi which appears to suggest that one of the consequences of the unveiling of a secret is that it may lead the recipient of that unveiling to no longer believe in an aspect of the religious law about which there is irrefutable communal consensus (106). Almond cites this passage to suggest that the mystic harbours a genuine fear of the nihilistic threat that rests in the disclosure of certain kinds of esoteric knowledge. But the full context of the passage makes it rather clear that Ibn al-'Arabi is not describing an authentic experience of mystical unveiling, but a "caprice of the soul," a "hidden deception," and a "strong divine guile" that simply appears in the form of such a revelation. He says of this supposed secret, "in our view this is nothing, nor is it anything in the view of the Folk of Allah. Anyone who relies upon it is totally confused" (cited in SPK, 257).

Another problem in this otherwise well researched comparative monograph is the absence of any mention of the closest work we have to a full study of Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutics, Michel Chodkiewicz's *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY, 1993). Had Almond consulted this magisterial work of scholarship, authored by Europe's dean of Ibn al-'Arabi studies, he would have, in the very least, realised some of the problems in the final sub-section of his third chapter entitled "inconsistencies," where he argues that the objections both thinkers raise against certain misinterpretations of texts — either their own as in the case of Derrida, or the Koran as in the case of Ibn al-'Arabi — contradict their infinitising hermeneutics.

Although this objection may be warranted in the case of Derrida, it cannot, as Chodkiewicz's study would have made clear, apply to Ibn al-'Arabi. This is because according to Ibn al-'Arabi,

As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in a certain language of a certain people, and then those who speak that language differ as to what God meant by a certain or group of words, each of them – however differing their interpretation may be – effectively comprises what God meant, *provided that the interpretation does not deviate from the accepted meaning of the language in question*. God knows all these meanings, and there is none that is not the expression of what he meant to say to this specific person (italics mine, cited in Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore*, 30).

In other words, any infinitising hermeneutics of Scripture must be constrained by the conventions of the Arabic language. The mystic's dismissal of certain Koranic interpretations as "far fetched" or "corrupt" is therefore, contrary to Almond's claim, entirely consistent with his overall hermeneutic scheme. This interpretive constraint does not eliminate Scripture's semantic inexhaustibility, because, like a bottomless well of limited circumference, it still manages to retain its infinite depth.

The work is also marred, though at a much less significant level, by numerous Arabic transliteration errors. This is rather surprising considering these errors escaped detection not only by both the peer-reviewers and editors of Routledge, but also of the two prestigious journals, *Philosophy East and West* and *the Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, where three of the five chapters were initially published, albeit in slightly different form. The errors can be found in the journal articles as well.

These shortcomings aside, Almond's study is an extremely creative and penetrating analysis of two very difficult thinkers. Almond is a philosophically sensitive and poetic writer with a talent for textual archaeology and an uncanny ability to identify convergences where others would simply pass them by. His articulate explications of abstruse points of Derridean and Akbarian thought might even allow this book to make a good introduction to either of the two thinkers, it much the same what that the late Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutzu did for Lao Tzu and Ibn al-'Arabi in *Sufism and Taoism*.