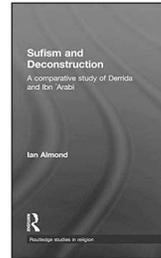


# Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi.

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

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