

THE PHILOSOPHY OF IBN 'ARABI

Rom Landau

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By

ROM LANDAU

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PREFACE

Ibn 'Arabī is possibly the most significant thinker of Islam. Yet he is far less widely known in the Western world than Ibn Sīnā, Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd or even Al-Fārābī. By and large, the legend of his pantheism and his obscurity persists in a world little aware of what he actually wrote and taught. The late R. A. Nicholson and Dr. A. E. Affifi are the English-speaking world's chief contribution to Ibn 'Arabī studies. The present essay attempts to fill, however inadequately, the gap that remains. It touches only upon some of the main ideas in Ibn 'Arabī's vast and complex system, and ignores innumerable other aspects. Apart from my own interpretations and illustrations of some of Ibn 'Arabī's puzzling ideas, I do not claim any special originality for this study. I hope, nevertheless, that even so concise an introduction to him might offer some notion of his philosophy, and induce the reader to seek out the original sources. For the sake of those unable to read Ibn 'Arabī in the original, I have included a number of his texts in English.

Apart from Ibn 'Arabī's own writings, especially the *Fuṣūṣ* and the *Futūḥāt*, the chief authorities on whom I have based my text are Miguel Asín y Palacios, R. A. Nicholson, and, especially, Dr. Affifi, whose book, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muḥyīd Dīn-Ibnul 'Arabī* (Cambridge University Press, 1939) might well claim to be the clearest survey in English of a difficult but fascinating subject.

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PART ONE

ONE

THE LIFE OF IBN 'ARABĪ

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Hātīmī al Andalusī, commonly known as Ibn 'Arabī (or Ibnul 'Arabī), came from a pious family in which Ṣūfī interests were a tradition. His ancestors belonged to the Arab tribe of Tayy. At some time or another they moved from the Middle East to Southern Spain which, from the beginning of the 8th century, had been ruled by Arabian princes. By A.D. 1164, when Ibn 'Arabī was born in Murcia, in South-Eastern Spain, Muslim dominance in the Iberian peninsula had passed its peak and, indeed, was declining towards extinction. But Spanish intellectual life was still illumined by the after-glow of Moorish civilization. During the preceding three centuries, the intellectual zest and material splendour of Cordova and Seville surpassed those of Paris and possibly even of Constantinople. The Muslims of Spain had transmitted to Europe much of the wisdom of the Greeks; and with their co-religionists in Syria, Persia and Iraq had produced a corpus of philosophical and scientific knowledge that was to leave a deeper imprint upon European civilization than any other foreign culture, before or since.

At the beginning of the 12th century, an Arab youth in Andalusia had practically the whole of the then available knowledge spread before him in the schools and libraries of Southern Spain. Zoroastrian and Manichaean lore, Hebrew and Christian theology, Greek philosophy and mathematics, and every kind of

Muslim intellectual achievement were by then formulated in manuscript, and there was no dearth of scholars to expound. It seems that Ibn 'Arabī, with his exceptional spiritual curiosity grasped every opportunity to profit from all available sources. At the age of eight he was in Lisbon where he received the rudiments of Muslim orthodox education. Besides learning the Qur'ān, he studied the principles of Islamic law. A few years later we find him in Seville, since 1170 the capital of the Moorish Empire of the Almohades. He remained there for some thirty years, continually employed in the study of the various branches of Islamic learning. During that time he also travelled extensively in both Spain and Morocco, and, in 1201, decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. He may have sought thus to escape from the simmering political upheavals in Spain and from the vigilant eyes of the learned *ulema*, who would look askance at a Ṣūfī scholar of distinctly unorthodox views. In the East, he visited not only Mecca, where he lived and taught for a while, but also Syria, Iraq and Asia Minor. By that time, his saintly life and his impressive record as a teacher and thinker had earned him great renown. Wherever he went, gifts were bestowed upon him, which later he passed on to the poor.

It was during his sojourn in Mecca and Damascus that Ibn 'Arabī wrote most of his books, especially the fundamental *Fuṣūṣu 'l-Ḥikam*, known in English as either *Gems of Philosophy* or *The Bezels of Divine Wisdom*, and *Al Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (*Meccan Revelations*). We have no exact knowledge of the number of books he wrote. He himself mentions almost three hundred. These comprise theology, mysticism, biography, philosophy, Quranic commentaries, and poetry. Ibn 'Arabī died in 1240 in Damascus, where his grave can be seen to the present day.