Book Reviews


Stephen Hirtenstein’s goal in his book is to provide “a clear overall picture of this man’s [Ibn ‘Arabi’s] extraordinary life and achievements” for “the general reader.” Other recent books on Ibn ‘Arabi, he rightly tells us, “have mainly been addressed to a specialist and sophisticated audience.” In his goal he is largely successful, making this a welcome addition to the growing literature on Ibn ‘Arabi in English.

The book is divided into five parts, for a total of seventeen chapters. The first introductory part consists of two chapters. The first of these focuses on “the Andalusian ideal,” that is, the harmony of the three Abrahamic faiths in a flourishing literary and cultural environment. It then remarks on the destruction of that environment by the “Columbine spirit,” the desire to capture the unknown and exploit it for purely human ends, eventually leading to the polarizations and divisions characteristic of the modern age. The second chapter discusses Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective on “oneness and singleness,” suggesting that it provides a standpoint from which to recapture some of the harmony that has been lost.

The remaining four parts of the book provide an overview of Ibn ‘Arabi’s career according to his geographical location: Andalus, the journey to Mecca, the travels after his *hajj*, and Damascus. This organization of the book is not unlike what Claude Addas has done both in her long Quest for the Red Sulphur and her short Ibn ‘Arabi. Unlike Addas, however, Hirtenstein provides numerous rather long quotations from Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. The majority of these contain anecdotes, accounts of meetings with other scholars,
and descriptions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own visionary experiences. Throughout there is the attempt to highlight Ibn ‘Arabi’s “genius,” so the author refers on occasion to Einstein and other acknowledged modern icons to suggest something of his status.

The picture that emerges of Ibn ‘Arabi is that of outstanding mystic who had repeated visions of God and the prophets and all sorts of miraculous meetings with the saints. A good deal of attention is paid to Ibn ‘Arabi’s importance as a thinker and his intellectual radiance, but not nearly enough to suggest anything like the sophistication of his endeavours. Moreover, the reader might well be left with the impression that Hirtenstein’s almost hagiographical account offers fairly the picture of him retained by later generations of Muslims and explains why people took him so seriously. That would be a gross misrepresentation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s role in Islamic history. The details of his visionary life have only come out in modern biographies, especially the work of Addas.

The reason Ibn ‘Arabi was so influential among Muslim scholars for six hundred years has almost nothing to do with the testimony of his visions, and everything to do with the power of his synthesis of the major schools of Islamic thought—fiqh, falsafah, kalām, and tasawwuf. Muslims, like most other premodern peoples, had little interest in biography, recognizing that it pertained to the ephemeral rather than the permanent. It is only in modern times that people have become obsessed with knowing the details of their forbears’ lives, especially the dirty linen. Add to this the general trend of more recent historiography, which insists that everyday life provides the real key to understanding the past, and we can see why a book like this would have been impossible to imagine in the Islamic world before the twentieth century.

One could engage in a great deal of quibbling about Hirtenstein’s choice of terminology or interpretation of the meaning of the passages that he quotes and explains, but that would be to lose sight of the book’s goal, which is simply to offer a relatively simple introduction and to stir up interest in a “spiritual genius” by bringing out his extraordinary interior life. Despite the many passages about teachings that are not at all easy to follow, the book succeeds admirably, and in doing so has brought together the most complete compendium of autobiographical passages available. Those who want more academic rigour and intellectual meat should refer to the many studies that Hirtenstein duly acknowledges.

Claude Addas’s Ibn ‘Arabi is a fine overview of his life and teaching, reminiscent of her longer study but by no means simply a rehash. Writing as a careful historian who is completely sympathetic with Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective, in eleven short chapters Addas traces the development of Ibn Arabi’s career
from childhood onward. She pays a good deal of attention to his students and the controversies that his and their work began to stir up a few generations after his death. She is much more concerned than Hirtenstein to situate him in his Islamic context and to suggest that the hostility that he has met with in the modern Islamic world has little to do with his teachings and much to do with ideology.

Addas’s book is not as “reader-friendly” as Hirtenstein’s, but it will have more appeal to those familiar with Islamic history and interested in Ibn ‘Arabi’s role in the development of the tradition. Those wishing for a sense of the actual content of his writings, however, will find the text much too terse to satisfy. Even her Quest for the Red Sulphur is too brief to do that.

William C. Chittick


In his new book, Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi‘ presents a comprehensive and detailed exposition of the reasons for the failure of Arab intellectuals to come to terms with modernity and its contemporary step-children, capitalism and globalization. His discussion centres on the social and economic changes that have occurred in the Arab world since the eclipse of colonialism and dawn of the nation-state, and the challenges that such changes have brought. Two events dramatically accentuated these challenges in the Muslim world in the late twentieth century, the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the defeat of Iraq by United Nations forces in 1991. According to the author, these events contributed to the globalization of capitalism and domination of contemporary Arab society, precipitating an identity crisis in the Arab-Muslim world. Abu-Rabi‘ sees this as a time of intellectual confusion for the Arab intelligentsia, who alone are capable of acting as legitimators of power and its system of values.

In his methodical evaluation of this problem, the author presents his study in two parts, “Themes” and “Thinkers.” The first part is dedicated to a