Rethinking Ibn ʿArabī: A Review

Introduction

Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi is an ambitious work that attempts to situate Ibn al-ʿArabī studies, particularly the *religio perennis* movement, within the sociopolitical intellectual trends of modern thought, from Kant's reformulation of religion to Frithjof Schuon's 'racialist' universalism.

I would like to begin by highlighting what I particularly enjoyed about this work, and there are a couple of key areas where I believe *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi* excels. First, in many ways, I believe that Lipton has masterfully engaged the Andalusian mystic in a meaningful conversation with contemporary thought, albeit only at the peripheries, through the mediation of western appropriations of the Sufi master's writings. Nevertheless, Lipton establishes a precedent unique in its brilliance of penmanship necessary to continuing the research found in works like Ian Almond's *Sufism and Deconstruction* and Peter Coates' *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought.*

Second, regarding one of the central hypotheses in *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi,* that the Andalusian mystic unequivocally adheres to the superiority of both the Muhammadan Law (*sharīʿa*) and

ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya (spiritual reality of the Prophet), I concur that these sentiments are clearly present in Ibn al-'Arabi's two main works: *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Meccan Openings) and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Bezels of Wisdom). In my own dissertation, *Sainthood Between the Ineffable and Social Practice: Jesus Christ in the Writings of Ibn al-'Arabi and Later Sufism*, I highlight this recurring motif of Muhammadan superiority many times in Ibn al-'Arabi's writings.

With these contributions in mind, I would like to transition now to my criticisms of Lipton's work. Although, as mentioned above, the author's central argument is supported by extensive evidence by Ibn al-'Arabi's own words, there are some other, seriously problematic components of this work - both in terms of content and methodology - that undermine the author's overarching narrative. For the sake of clarity, I will begin first by discussing my critiques of the book's content then conclude by highlighting certain problems I found in its methodology.

Content

One of the main conclusions that emerges from *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is that the *religion perennis* movement is a purely modern invention, created by Frithjof Schuon and colored by the thought of one of the paragons of modern philosophy, Emmanuel Kant.

Notwithstanding the validity of claiming that *religio perennis*, as a historical movement, is a purely modern invention, I'm not sure I agree with Lipton that perennial and universal tendencies in religious thought are themselves modern. Does the author intend to say that there was absolutely no one during Ibn al-'Arabi's own time who sought to find the universal elements among all the world's religions? Especially in a religiously pluralistic environment as that in 12th-13th century Iberia?

If we are to agree with Lipton that there is indeed a tendency among members of the contemporary *religio perennis* movement to de-historicize Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, then we should also cast the same critique against the author of *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, regarding his treatment of perennialism and universalism as a purely modern phenomenon.

Of course, Lipton's critique of modern perennialism is intertwined with his emphasis on the *religio perennis* movement's rendering of religion as a 'collection of beliefs', whereas as Lipton states, Ibn al-'Arabi perceives religion as obedience to a *sharīʿa*, or divine law. Although Ibn al-'Arabi does describe *sharīʿa* as servanthood and emphasizes its importance throughout his works, to render the Akbarian understanding of religion only in this way is an oversimplification of the Andalusian mystic's vision.

First, in the *Meccan Openings*, Ibn al-'Arabi specifically states that the jurisdiction of *sharīʿa* halts with the end of the physical world, whereas *ḥaqīqa* has authority in *ākhira*. This quintessential relationship between *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* is extensively explored by Ibn al-'Arabi in the *Meccan Openings*, in one of the largest chapters concerning the inward aspects of *sharīʿa*. There, the Andalusian mystic sometimes provides inward interpretations that invert certain outward rulings. It is surprising that Lipton chose to leave out any cursory discussion of this relationship between *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* and its discussion in the *Meccan Openings* from his work.

The author is not satisfied to simply root the Akbarian understanding of religion within *sharīʿa*, but also attempts to historicize Ibn al-'Arabi's spiritual hierarchy of saints within worldly politics, specifically the office of the caliph. Lipton states that Ibn al-'Arabi sought to claim the post of *khatm al-walāya al-muḥammadiyya* for himself due to the absence of a worldly caliph, a highly problematic hypothesis. First, the notion of *khatm al-walāya* was not created by Ibn al-'Arabi. It was originally termed by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, and it would be tenuous to claim that both al-Tirmidhi and Ibn al-'Arabi explore this notion due to political upheavals in their milieus.

Second, what Lipton does with such a positioning is to invert Ibn al-'Arabi's own cosmology where the physical world is meant to intimate the spiritual world, not the other way around. This is evident in the *Meccan Openings* where the Andalusian mystic describes *sharīʿa* as the shell that covers the essence, *ḥaqīqa,* as well as other extensive discussions on *marātib al-wujūd* (levels of existence), where creation, including the physical, imaginal, and spiritual worlds are perceived as sequential theophanies. This Akbarian theme has been elaborated upon by countless commentators since Ibn al-'Arabi's time, most auspiciously the Akbarian school of thinkers from al-Qunawi (d. 1273) to Abdul Rahman Jami (d. 1492).

Of course, Lipton's objective seems to thoroughly historicize Ibn al-'Arabi's life and career. While we do concur that the Akbarian thought is thoroughly molded by Neo-Platonist trends, this still does not legitimize Lipton's inversion of Ibn al-'Arabi's own cosmology, perhaps an unintentional 'Copernican turn' by Lipton himself, as an effort to historicize the Andalusian mystic.

Lipton also sets his focus on Christianity as a prism through which to critique perennial appropriations of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought. By selectively reading Ibn al-'Arabi, a recurring problem in *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, Lipton presents the former's position on Christianity as a religion that should be allowed to exist in Muslim lands only if Christians pay the *jizya* (poll) tax. Once again, Lipton problematically roots Ibn al-'Arabi's thought within the law. While it is true that the Andalusian mystic emphasizes time and again in the *Meccan Openings* that the laws of previous prophets have been abrogated by the Muhammadan Law, there are other excerpts, which Lipton has chosen not to include in his book, that problematize this argument.

Most importantly, in the *Meccan Openings*, Ibn al-'Arabi provides the following validation of the Trinity:

> As for *ahl al-tathlīth* [people of the Trinity], then salvation is hoped for them. This is due to what the trinity contains of *fardiyya* [individualization/oddity of number]. Since oddity is one of the traits of the One, they are *muwaḥḥidūn tawḥīd tarkīb* [those who affirm oneness compositely]. Therefore, it is hoped that they will be enveloped by *al-raḥma al-murakkaba* [composite mercy].
> Therefore, they are called *kuffar* because they hid the second within the third whence the second became between the one and third like *al-barzakh* [isthmus]. So, perhaps the people of the Trinity will be with those who affirm *tawhid* in *ḥadrat al-fardāniyya* [the presence of individualization/oddity of number], but not *ḥadrat al-waḥdāniyya* [the presence of oneness].
> This is how we witnessed them in *al-kashf al-maʿnawī* [intelligible unveiling]. We could not distinguish between those who affirm oneness and the people of the Trinity save in the presence of individualization, for I did not see even their shadow in oneness. Instead, I perceived their entities in individualization and those who

affirm oneness in the presences of *waḥdāniyya* [oneness] and *fardāniyya* [individualization].

This is not simply a toleration of Christology but an actual metaphysical argument, from the perspective of *ḥaqīqa*, that establishes the trinity as a type of *tawhid*. Ibn al-'Arabi continues to state that those who believe that God is threefold, or more, are automatically saved. Now, if Lipton were to argue, correctly, that Ibn al-'Arabi is only able to make such a statement from a superior position, as a Muslim-Muhammadan saint, then we would concur and repeat our initial objection that the *jizya* tax should not be the standard, then, through which to gauge Ibn al-'Arabi's position on the validity of other religious traditions.

I would like to stop at one final recurrent problem in *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi* before offering some final remarks about the content of this book. In multiple instances, Lipton disappointingly dismisses what he describes as 'contradictory' statements by thinkers like Schuon and Shah-Kazemi. To make matters worse, Lipton uses as reference Aristotle's Law of Contradiction as a standard through which to make these judgments.

While in normal circumstances it would be a valid criticism, in the case of Ibn al-'Arabi it belies a serious misunderstanding of his thought. Lest I'm accused of sympathizing with and supporting the *religio perennis* movement, Ibn al-'Arabi himself inverts logic many times by positing, for example, that if A entails B, then B also entails A, even if A does not equal B. After explaining that B causes A because, simply, without B, A cannot be a cause, Ibn al-'Arabi emphasizes that this understanding can only be achieved through *kashf* (unveiling), not *ʿaql* (rational faculty).

Of course, our intention is not to blur the line between Ibn al-'Arabi's own words and those by thinkers in the *religio perennis* movement. Yet, I cannot help but perceive Lipton's recurrent dismissal of these figures' focus on contradiction as a rhetorical tool to itself be a misunderstanding of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, especially pertaining to the *ḥayra* (perplexity) of the simultaneous superiority of the Muhammadan Law and validity of other faith religious traditions. Taking all this into consideration, there seems to be a more serious problem underpinning Lipton's endeavor in this regard.

In short, Lipton collapses the multiple layers of meaning at work in Ibn al-'Arabi's thought to a singular focus that constricts the expansiveness of *sharīʿa* according to the Shaykh. It is from this perspective that the former aims to neatly present the Andalusian mystic as a Muslim scholar who simply sought Islamic domination above other religious traditions. The other excerpts mentioned above, and many others, that contend with this argument are simply not mentioned in *Rethinking Ibn al-'Arabi*.

But then, what do we do with these two sets of visions in the Andalusian mystic's writings, one that presents a pro-Islamic superiority of the Muhammadan Law and another that, for example, validates the Trinity as a type of monotheism? It is precisely here that contradiction emerges as a necessary Akbarian tool to instigate perplexity and, in turn, a higher state of reflective contemplation in the reader. It is this distinction between the rational reading and meditative ingestion of Ibn al-'Arabi's works which is altogether missing from *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*. Instead, Lipton continuously presents his own reading of the Andalusian mystic as the only way to read him, as though it is the intention of the Andalusian mystic himself.

Does Ibn al-'Arabi believe that the entire gamut of reality and a nuanced perception of the perplexity underlying the universe and how it manifests God to be available only to completed and perfected Muslim saints, most probably yes, but that does not preclude that even plants and animals, not to mention human beings from other faith traditions, can also receive unique knowledge of God, through their own *wajh al-khāṣṣ* (specific Divine direction).

I do not believe Ibn al-'Arabi is as concerned with the validity or invalidity of other religions as Lipton himself is or as he presents the Andalusian mystic. Rather, the former's project, I posit, is of knowing God in the myriad of creation, both Islamic and otherwise, from that superior Muhammadan position.

Methodology

My central critique against Lipton's methodology in *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi* revolves mainly around the author's obsessive attempt to historicize everyone, from Ibn al-'Arabi to Schuon, but himself. It is a glaring oversight in the book that Lipton continuously unleashes scathing criticisms against

Schuon's Kantian lens using none other than paragons of post-modernist and post-colonial thought. Of course, this is hardly a problem by itself, and as I mentioned beforehand, the thorough interweaving of contemporary thought in this book is a breath of fresh air. However, this is not the case when the author problematizes the thought of prominent contemporary figures in the Western academy, such as Hossein Nasr and William Chittick, by historicizing their Weltanschauungs and does not include even a single paragraph of his own position and thought process as a figure in the same academic tradition.

It is not clear whether figures like Chittick, Hossein Nasr and Shah-Kazemi, as western specialists on Ibn 'Arabi, do form a set of primary or secondary references for the author. It appears, by problematizing their appropriation of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought, that he regards them as primary references open for interrogation. And yet, this approach is revisited by the omen of the lack of academic self-reflection in all chapters of the book. Lipton does not care to tell the reader of his position as a post-modernist, clearly post-colonial, thinker in the academy.

Conclusion

I finish here by bringing together my criticisms of the content and methodology in *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi* and asking an important question: *What are the political underpinnings and consequences, if any, of this book?* I do not mean by this question to suggest that Lipton has any hidden agenda in his work. Nevertheless, I do believe that both the arguments made support, whether intentionally or otherwise, a particular religious sensibility and appropriation of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought.

By presenting a particular vision of *sharīʿa*, read the law, as the heuristic through which Ibn al-'Arabi judges and understands Muhammadan superiority, Lipton seems to agree with a certain neo-traditionalist sensibility in the contemporary Muslim community, where Sufism is viewed singularly through the prism of moral-ethical imperatives as found, for instance, in al-Ghazali's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* and other works. In this highly curricular and text-oriented approach to Sufism, the path to *ḥaqīqa* is closed save to those who have mastered the necessary religious texts and achieved perfect obedience in *sharīʿa*. Ibn al-'Arabi problematizes such an approach in the *Meccan Openings* by stating that some may receive openings in *ḥaqīqa* in the beginning of the path. He

also states that those who perceive *ḥaqīqa* through the light of *sharīʿa* are at risk, whereas those who perceive *sharīʿa* through light of *ḥaqīqa* are protected.

This is not to deny the importance of the moral-ethical aspect of Sufism or high regard for works like the *Iḥyāʾ* among Muslim saints. However, the point here is that Lipton seems to regard this approach as the only possible lens through which to approach the thought of a Sufi saint like Ibn al-'Arabi. The case I make here is that the Andalusian mystic himself adhered to the different model of *suḥba* (companionship), where *ḥaqīqa* was always at the doorstep, whether through the mediation of the law, text or even a cat cleaning itself on the street, as sidi Abdul Aziz al-Dabbagh mentions in the *Ibrīz*. Most importantly, it was the *murshid* (Sufi guide) who mediated and channeled this *ḥaqīqa* for the *murid*, pending the latter's focus on *dhikr* (divine remembrance) and *tafakkur* (meditation).

Lastly, concerning Ibn al-'Arabi's own perennialism, we also cannot dismiss the explicitly universal sentiments in the *Meccan Openings* and *Bezels of Wisdom*. Statements such as: "Universe is *huwa/la huwa* (He/Not He)" emphasizes the divine presence in all things in the world, including pre-Islamic religious traditions. And just as certain verses of the Qur'an were abrogated as law - such as those legalizing drinking of alcohol outside of prayer - but affirmed in word, meaning and divine light, so are previous religions also abrogated in law, from a *sharʿī* perspective, but remain valid in divine light and meaning, from a mystic's perspective. This is hardly only Ibn al-'Arabi's opinion. Consider, for instance, Abdul Karim al-Jili, who states in his work, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, that the Tablets given to Moses contain tremendously powerful divine secrets that al-Jili could not mention to his readers lest they convert to Judaism!

I'm also moved to state, without exaggeration, that the neo-traditionalist movement's over-emphasis on the law, theology and the other rational sciences of Islam and concomitant censure against reading of Ibn al-'Arabi's works has led to a dearth in genuine Muslim commentaries and engagements with the Andalusian mystic's heritage. This is a problem that has been rectified specifically by figures, many of whom belong to the *religio perennis* movement, who have set out over the past few decades to write countless translations and commentaries on Ibn al-'Arabi's life and career. Many times, this is done with the utmost reverence to the Shaykh as a spiritual guide.

While Lipton has chosen to leave out the many criticisms of *fuqaha'* that Ibn al-'Arabi makes in his writings, often describing them as *ʿulamāʾ al-rusūm* (scholars of outer form only), we must not forget that it is many Muslim jurists and theologians who have disregarded Ibn al-'Arabi's heritage in the present day and only mention him as a reference, while those with spiritual, but not necessarily religious, sensibilities continue to carry his name with reverence.