

Ibn ʿArabī

Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī

Date of Birth: 28 July 1165

Place of Birth: Murcia, Spain

Date of Death: 10 November 1240

Place of Death: Damascus

Biography

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-ʿArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī, as he signs himself, stands at a critical juncture in the history of Islam and Islamic thought, during the flowering of Almohad, Ayyubid and Anatolian Seljuk power. As an exceptional mystic and writer, he exerted an unparalleled influence on later Sufis and scholars throughout the Muslim world. His numerous writings bridge the divide between a largely oral, informal spiritual culture and an increasingly written and formalized one, in which the Sufi *ṭarīqas* were to play a dominant role. One of several prominent figures who left before the collapse of Arab rule in al-Andalus and came to live in the Levant, he can be regarded as the major exponent of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) of his age, a veritable ‘reviver of the religion’ (Muḥyī l-dīn), as he was known even in his own lifetime.

Ibn ʿArabī’s life is unusually well-documented, primarily through his own testimony but also through the details incidentally furnished by the *samāʿ* certificates on his numerous works (listing the names of those present at the readings, the place and date of the reading, etc.). It can be divided into three discrete phases: born in south-eastern Spain, he spent the first 35 years of his life in the Maghrib, the western lands of Islam that stretched from al-Andalus to Tunis; he then embarked on the pilgrimage and spent the next three years in or around Mecca, where a series of dramatic experiences initiated the writing of several works including his magnum opus, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* ; the final phase of his life was spent in the Levant (Mashriq) and Anatolia, where he raised a family and, in addition to an unceasing literary output and instruction given to numerous disciples, became adviser to kings and rulers. He settled in Damascus, where he lived and taught for 17 years. According to his own testimony, he wrote nearly 300 works, of which over 100 survive in manuscript: these include many classics such as the encyclopaedic *Futūḥāt* in 37 volumes (in two recensions) and the quintessence of his teaching, the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, which generated numerous commentaries by writers over the centuries. He died at the age of 75 in 1240 and was buried in the Ṣāliḥiyya district by Mt Qāsiyūn. The present-day tomb complex was established by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I in 1516, and remains an important place of pilgrimage.

Ibn ʿArabī’s visionary capacity was in evidence from a very early age, and he describes his spiritual journey in terms of following in the footsteps of the prophets, beginning with Jesus

whom he calls ‘my first teacher, who never neglects me for an instant’ and ending with Muḥammad (*Futūḥāt* i.223; ii.49; iv.77). In his early teens, at a time when he had undergone no formal preparation or study, he experienced a dream-vision of Jesus, Moses and Muḥammad, as a consequence of which he had his famous meeting with Ibn Rushd (see Hirtenstein, *The unlimited mercifier*, pp. 53-58). This impelled him to dedicate his life entirely to God and to abandon the career laid out for him by his father, of serving in the entourage of the Almohad sultan. Having given away all his belongings to his father, he embarked on a 17-year course of spiritual training at the hands of various masters, men and women, in al-Andalus and the Maghrib, many of whom he describes in his *Rūḥ al-quds*. He describes his first teacher, al-‘Uraybī, as being of a Christic (‘*ṣawī*) spiritual disposition, whose first instruction shows a remarkable similarity to gospel teaching (see *Rūḥ*, p. 76; *Sufis of Andalusia*, p. 63; Matthew, 6:6). His many spiritual experiences are detailed in various works, including a vision in Cordova in which he saw the spiritual realities of all the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad (*Fuṣūṣ*, 110).

The Jesus that Ibn ‘Arabī describes appears very much a Muslim prophet, although he is at pains to point out his special saintly qualities. In his ‘*Anqā’ mughrib*, written in 1199 while he was still in al-Andalus, he gives a lengthy and complex exposition of the Seal of Universal Sainthood, a personage whom he would later openly identify as Jesus but one that he was careful to only refer to in coded letters in the ‘*Anqā’* – which gives an indication of the sensitivities that existed in the face of the threat from the Christian north in his homeland. He viewed Jesus’ second coming, eagerly awaited by Christians and many Muslims, as the appearance of the Saint par excellence, who ‘will descend at the end of time as heir [to Muḥammad] and seal’, clarifying the inner meaning of religion for all believers. Equally, he viewed himself as the heir of both Jesus and Muḥammad, being the Seal of Muhammadian Sainthood (*Futūḥāt* i.244, ii.49; Hirtenstein, *The unlimited mercifier*, pp. 139–41). He also describes what he calls the particular spiritual knowledges that Jesus possesses: the knowledge of letters and breath, the science of the creative *fiat* (*kun*), the reviving of the dead (physically and spiritually).

In other places Ibn ‘Arabī touches on medieval Christian beliefs and spirituality, especially noting the tendency towards withdrawal from the world and worshipping God through representing Him in a sensory form, although he affirms the Islamic imperative of worshipping without external imagery (see ch. 36 in his *Futūḥāt*). He even declares openly that friends of God, i.e. saintly men and women, are to be found everywhere, in synagogues and churches at least as much as in mosques (*Tajalliyāt*, 80), a sentiment that demonstrates not only his own interfaith position but also the widespread tolerance and openness in Muslim society prior to the Mongol invasions of the Levant.

Primary Source

Selected bibliography of works by Ibn ‘Arabī with reference to Jesus:

‘*Anqā’ mughrib*, Berlin oct. 3266, fols 1-49v, dated 1201, Fez; printed Cairo 1954; trans. G. Elmore, *Islamic sainthood in the fullness of time*, Leiden, 1999

Risāla Rūḥ al-quds fī muḥāsabat al-naḥs, ed. M. Ghorab, Damascus, 1970; partial trans. R. Austin, *Sufis of Andalusia*, London, 1971

Risālat al-ittihād al-kawnī, ed. D. Gril, with trans. by A. Jaffray as *The universal tree and the four birds*, Oxford, 2006

Kitāb al-isfār ‘an natā’ij al-asfār, ed. D. Gril, Combas, 1994

Kitāb al-tajalliyāt, ed. Osman Yahia, Tehran, 1988

Tarjumān al-ashwāq, ed. and trans. R. Nicholson, London, 1911

Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam, ed. Abū l-‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī, Beirut, 1946, 1980²; trans. R. Austin as *Bezels of wisdom*, New York, 1980

Al-futūḥāt al-Makkiyya, 4 vols, Beirut, n.d.; rev. ed. Osman Yahia, 14 vols, Cairo, 1972–91

Secondary Source

W. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi. Heir to the prophets*, Oxford, 2005

J. Morris, *The reflective heart. Discovering spiritual intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Meccan illuminations* Louisville KY, 2005

S. Hirtenstein, *The unlimited mercifier. The spiritual life and thought of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Oxford, 1999

O. Abou-Bakr, ‘The religious other. Christian images in Sufi poetry’, in D.R. Blanks (ed.), *Images of the other. Europe and the Muslim world before 1700 (Cairo papers in social science 19)*, Cairo, 1996, 96-108

M. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the saints*, Cambridge, 1993

C. Addas, *Quest for the red sulphur*, Cambridge, 1993

W. Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge. Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics of imagination*, Albany NY, 1989

H. Corbin, *Creative imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, Princeton, 1969

O. Yahia, *Histoire et classification de l’oeuvre d’Ibn ‘Arabī*, Damascus, 1964

See also www.ibnarabisociety.org for articles and translations

Letter to Kaykā’ūs

Date: Uncertain; in or just after 1212-13

Original Language: Arabic

Description

In one of the rare places where Ibn ‘Arabī directly discusses the Christian community, he appears to be unusually orthodox in his approach. In a letter of advice to the Seljuk Sultan Kaykā’ūs I (Keykavus, r. 1211-20), written in response to the sultan’s letter to him dated 1212-

13, he exhorts the ruler to act justly towards his subjects according to Islamic law, and to use his power to exalt the religion of Islam. He states: ‘I tell you that among the worst things that can befall Islam and Muslims – and how few they are – are the ringing out of church bells, the public display of unbelief and the elevation of words of *shirk* (worship of other than God)’, in contravention of the Pact of ‘Umar (q.v.), the conditions of which he lists. He supports this view with a hadith of the Prophet Muḥammad, which states that ‘No church should be built in Islam, nor those of them which have fallen into ruin be restored’.

Significance

Although he refers to *ahl al-dhimma*, it is clear from this passage that Ibn ‘Arabī primarily means Christians, who were by far the most numerous religious community in Anatolia after centuries of Byzantine rule, and his apparently categorical statement should therefore be interpreted within that context. As he writes of himself earlier in the letter, ‘It is incumbent on him [Ibn ‘Arabī] to respond with religious counsel and divine political advice *according to what is suitable to the moment*’ (italics added). The mention of the conditions supposedly agreed between Christians and the second caliph becomes understandable as an exact parallel to the situation in which Kaykā’ūs found himself: a minority Muslim government in a primarily Christian environment. Furthermore, it was a time of great instability, in which the sultan was having to contend with a rebellion organized by his younger brother in alliance with the Christian king of Cilicia.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s stance might also reflect his earlier experience of the turbulent conditions in al-Andalus, where Christian power in the north was the major fear and was already beginning to spell the end of Islamic rule in Spain. Whether this should be viewed as less than tolerant depends on how religious tolerance is defined: the institutionalized discrimination in traditional Islamic societies was intended to prevent persecution and to allow for gradual conversion (cf. the experience of Jews and Muslims in Spain after the Christian conquest), and Ibn ‘Arabī’s advice to the sultan should no doubt be seen in that light.

Manuscripts

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Editions

The text of the letter can be found in *Al-futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, iv. 547.

Studies

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