

FOREWORD

MICHEL CHODKIEWICZ

Born in Spain and having died in Syria, like the ‘blessed tree’ mentioned in the ‘Light’ verse of the Qur’an Ibn ‘Arabī (1164–1240) is ‘neither of the east nor of the west’, for he belongs equally to both. Recognized as the Spiritual Master *par excellence* (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*), he has been a source of inspiration and a definitive reference-point for the Muslim mystical tradition from Andalusia to China for more than eight centuries. Christian Europe, which since the Middle Ages had passionately studied so many Arabic authors, was for a long time unaware of him. It had to wait until the end of the nineteenth century before it began to discover some of the hundreds of works he has left us, and even then this interest was at first limited to narrow circles of Orientalists.

In contrast, the last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a sudden increase in the number of translations, critical editions, studies and commentaries on his works. Even more surprisingly, their audience has gradually extended to encompass readers who, a priori, have felt no particular attraction to Islamic culture, and indeed appeared to have no reason to be interested in writings of such intimidating depth. Undoubtedly, such readers felt that an academic approach which focused on the doctrinal authority Ibn ‘Arabī has exercised over sufism took into account only one aspect of the man. As an eminent figure of sainthood the *Shaykh al-Akbar* is thus not only a *Lesemeister*: he is also – and even more so, a *Lebemeister*, since he teaches us not only how to think, but how to live.

Witness, for example, the care he has shown in the five hundred and sixtieth (and final) chapter of his *Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*). Here, at the end of thousands of pages, where a vertiginous metaphysics is developed in a language of extreme technical

Foreword

precision, he gathers together, using very simple words, the rules of conduct from which, he tells us, both the wayfarer (*al-sālik*) and the one who has arrived at his destination (*al-wāṣil*) may benefit. For him – and for every spiritual master worthy of the name – the knowledge of the saints must take hold of the whole person. It is not addressed to the intellect alone.

It is for this very reason too that, within the immense Akbarian corpus, one finds alongside numerous scholarly treatises some quite short texts, which at first sight seem to fall within the domain of simple devotional literature. Yet the reality is utterly different. These prayers (*ṣalawāt*, *aḥzāb*, *awrād*), transmitted from master to disciple, are much more than pious litanies. They are inspired invocations, each structured around a series of Divine Names. Every Name conceals secrets and powers that are its own: it must arise at a precise moment in the recitation in order for it to be effective. Such effectiveness is not magic, however. It presupposes that certain conditions are satisfied, the most important of which is purity of intention. In addition, the diversity of these forms of prayer and the modes of their use – whether regularly or occasionally, at a particular time or not, recited alone or in groups etc. – reflect the variety of individual or collective situations, and of interior dispositions.

It is one of these prayers, *al-Dawr al-a' lā* (known also as the *Ḥizb al-wiqāya*), which can be found at the centre of the little book before you. At the centre, for it is surrounded by much precious information. Suha Taji-Farouki does not limit herself simply to establishing the text with rigorous exactitude, and providing a translation and transliteration of it. Combining a meticulous examination of written sources with patient fieldwork, she tells for the first time the long history of this prayer, identifying each of the personalities in the chains of transmission. Based upon many testimonies and from her own observations, she shows above all that the practice of the *Dawr* lives on today in very diverse milieux. With as much knowledge as empathy, she thus demonstrates the continuing currency of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching.

Paris, 2006