

Review of *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi* by Michel Chodkiewicz. Available at: [www.fonsvita.com](http://www.fonsvita.com)

This book was originally written in French by Michel Chodkiewicz under the title *Le Sceau des Saints* and was published in 1986. It is the most important book on the concept of sainthood in the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabi. Chodkiewicz begins the book with a brief survey of the history of Ibn al-‘Arabi studies in Western scholarship and then devotes a good deal of time to discussing the idea of sainthood in Islam before Ibn al-‘Arabi. Here he shows how devotion to the saints in classical Islam was not simply a manifestation of popular piety. On the contrary, it seems to have been a natural consequence of Islamic practice.

Michel Chodkiewicz’s depth of knowledge into the subject matter is particularly noteworthy. Bringing over forty years of knowledge of the works of Ibn al-‘Arabi to this study, he draws on the many texts written by the Shaykh and presents his ideas in as coherent a fashion as possible. But he also takes into account what members of the school of Ibn al-‘Arabi had to say about their masters’ ideas, how thinkers in the later Islamic tradition responded to his notion of the Seal of Muhammad Saints, as well as the severe criticisms leveled against Ibn al-‘Arabi and members of his school by Ibn al-Taymiyyah and his likes.

Chodkiewicz does an especially good job in this book of showing how the *Haqiqah Muhammadiyyah* (The Muhammadan Reality) is at once the beginning of all sainthood in Islam and the end, as it were, and how this reality is percolated throughout the generation of Prophets and Messengers sent by God. His discussion of how the cosmic hierarchy, with the *Qutb*, *Awtad*, *Imams*, *Hawariyun* etc. (who are all *Afrad* at the same time) are a

physical “Refraction” of the Muhammadan light (*Nur Muhammadi*) was particularly appreciated; and especially how he was able to tie this in with the fact that the many generations of saints who belong to similar cosmic hierarchies are themselves in turn reflections of the refractions of Muhammadan light. The vast spiritual anthropology of the Sufi cosmic landscape is often overwhelming and this book certainly makes it much easier to understand the basic ideas upon which these complex hierarchies are based. At the same time, although it does seem like not enough was said about the connection between the *Insan al-Kamil* (the Perfect Man) and the role of the *Qutb* and the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood, Chodkiewicz did successfully manage to explain how it is that there could be other people after Ibn al-‘Arabi who also claimed to be Seals of Sainthood without fundamentally challenging the Shaykh’s exclusive claim to being the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood.

Furthermore, something must be said about the replies Michel Chodkiewicz offers to several of the interpretations of Ibn al-‘Arabi by the great Iranologist, Henry Corbin. Chodkiewicz seems to fundamentally disagree with any Shi‘i interpretation of Ibn al-‘Arabi insofar as such interpretations would make Ibn al-‘Arabi out to be a Shi‘i. The cause for alarm is justifiable, since it would be, in Chodkiewicz’s own words, difficult to “uncover a clandestine Shi‘ite in the writings of a self-confessed Sunni” (p. 5). At the same time, Corbin’s work on Ibn al-‘Arabi cannot be dismissed in just a few footnotes, not that this is what Chodkiewicz was trying to do. But it appears as though he could have referred to some of the instances where he does agree with Corbin, or offered some explanations as to why it is that he and Corbin are coming up with such different readings of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work.

*Seal of the Saints* appears to be a rather un-intimidating book. But it is certainly a very “heavy” read: each of its almost two hundred pages requires the utmost attention. This is undoubtedly due to the complexity of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s ideas on Sainthood, but part of it also has to do with the fact that Chodkiewicz does not “waste” any of his words. Because of his range of scholarship and his gifted ability to synthesize and explain the Shaykh’s ideas, one must read each page several times in order to follow his arguments. A missed point on one page may cost the reader two chapters later. Thus, while the book is a very enjoyable read, it is also quite tedious work getting through a single chapter, especially since the discussions in the footnotes for each chapter are often just as dense as the text itself. Some may feel that the absence of diagrams in the book make understanding Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrine of sainthood an even harder task. But it can be argued that this also forces readers to think about Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrine of Sainthood in non-pictorial and thus relatively unsystematic terms. And this is precisely where the “unity” in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s doctrine of Sainthood paradoxically lies: it is, like *Wujud* (Being) itself, formless and traceless, placeless and nameless.

Mohammed Rustom  
*University of Toronto*