

With Titus Burckhardt at the Tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī

by

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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In the fall of 1966, the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the American University of Beirut provided the possibility for me to meet Titus Burckhardt, not on the soil of Europe as had happened often before, but for the first time within the boundaries of the Arab world. Hearing the *adhan*, despite the din and noise of the modern and Westernized city of Beirut, caused him to remark that the presence of Islam was to be felt even in this corner of the Islamic world which had been earmarked as the beach head for the spread of modernization and Westernization. It was possible to visit the few old mosques nearby together and to read and contemplate before the azure expanses of the Mediterranean and the clear light of the Middle Eastern sky certain Maryamian litanies and to meditate over the role of the Virgin in the religious life of the whole Mediterranean world. Moreover, we were able to visit together the saintly Yashruti Sufi woman Sayyidah Fātimah who recounted to us how it was impossible for her to choose a title for her famous Arabic work on Sufism, *al-Rihlah ila’l-Haqq*, until she had seen Ibn ‘Arabī in a dream and received the title from him. The daughter of the founder of the Yashrutiyyah Order was in fact so impressed by Titus Burckhardt’s spiritual presence and radiating character that she devoted a most beautiful page to this encounter and to him in her autobiography, *Masirati ila’l-Haqq*.

Titus Burckhardt was, however, anxious to visit the more traditional Islamic sites of the Arab Near East which provided more of traditional Islamic life and art than it was possible to encounter in Beirut. Therefore, after some consultation, we decided to visit Damascus together. During the two-hour drive across the beautiful mountains and valleys, which at that time conveyed a wonderful sense of peace and tranquility, he commented upon many aspects of Islamic culture and tradition in general, upon such subjects as the ecological and geographical resemblance of the region to Andalusia and the Maghreb which he knew so well and the complementarity between the mountains and the deserts which surround so many Islamic cities such as Damascus and Marrakesh. His comments brought a joy and freshness to the experience of a scenery which I had seen so often, and brought about an interiorization of the experience of the countryside which could result only from the spiritual effect of the companionship of a sage.

Upon arriving in Damascus we decided to spend the day visiting the tomb or “place of residence” (*maqām*)¹ of the granddaughter of the Blessed Prophet, Sayyidah Zaynab, the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī and of course the Umayyad Mosque in that order, for Titus Burckhardt said that traditional courtesy or *adab* required that we pay our respects first to the daughter of ‘Ali and the granddaughter of the founder of Islam. Usually “*Sit Zaynab*”, as Damascenes call it, is full of pilgrims, but on that morning strangely enough we were the only pilgrims present. The only other people there were a number of Persian craftsmen from Isfahan who were reconstructing the dome and placing tiles upon the walls of the edifice. After prayers and a long period of quiet meditation, we turned to the craftsmen whose activity obviously attracted the author of the most outstanding works on Islamic art to appear in the contemporary world. Burckhardt commented upon the deep piety of the craftsmen and their humility before their work. We reminisced about Fez and discussed further plans we had made together for him to write a book on Isfahan in the collection of “*Cities of the Spirit*” which he was then editing for Urs Graf Verlag. It was my intense wish to have a book like *Fes-Stadt des Islam* written on the beautiful city of Isfahan which he also wanted to visit. What a tragedy that this work was never realized and the world could not benefit from seeing the delicate and almost ethereal edifices of the Safavid capital through the eyes of the master interpreter of Islamic art that Burckhardt was.

It was after this pilgrimage and brief encounter with Persian art in the persons and art of the Persian craftsmen working at Sayyidah Zaynab, that Titus Burckhardt and I set out from the southern fields where her *maqām* is located for the slopes of the mountains north of Damascus where Ibn ‘Arabī lies buried. We entered the sanctuary reverentially and after offering prayers, sat down by the tomb of the great metaphysician and saint which was surrounded by an atmosphere of contemplative tranquility and calm. The peace and serenity of this atmosphere were accentuated by the fact that at the moment Titus Burckhardt and I again happened to be alone in that sacred space which like every veritable sacred space is the echo of the Center and a reflection of Eternity upon the moving image of peripheral existence.

While meditating upon the verities of that *Haqiqah* at the heart of Sufism, I occasionally glanced at the contemplative face of my companion whose closed eyes seemed to gaze inwardly upon the heart and whose face reflected the light of the Intellect before which his mind and soul were so transparent. I thought at that time about Burckhardt’s significance in making Ibn ‘Arabī known to the Western world. I recalled his *La Sagesse des prophètes, Vom Sufitum* written also in French as *Introduction aux doctrines ésotériques de l’Islam, Clé spirituelle de l’astrologie musulmane* and *De l’homme universel* with its incomparable introduction, all of which I had read

1. There is some debate between scholars as to whether Sayyidah Zaynab is buried outside of Damascus or in Cairo. There are in fact two tombs, both of which are sites of pilgrimage by vast multitudes from near and far, one in Damascus and the other in Cairo, and both are identified with her. Whatever the historical reality, they are both her *maqams* where she resided and are *loci* of the emanation of great *barakah* associated with the saint.

as a graduate student at Harvard. How *essential* were these writings in the sense of expounding the essence of the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school in a metaphysical language of great power and clarity formulated first by Guénon, perfected in an amazing way by Schuon and applied in an ingenious manner to the teachings of Shaykh al-Akbar by Burckhardt.

During the years as I plunged into reading the texts of Ibn ‘Arabī with numerous Arabic and Persian commentaries while studying these texts with traditional masters in Persia as well as discussing them extensively with H. Corbin and T. Izutsu, whose study of Ibn ‘Arabī was deeply appreciated by Burckhardt, I realized fully the significance of Burckhardt’s achievement. He had succeeded in reaching the heart of and making known in a contemporary language Akbarian metaphysics without divorcing it from the *barakah* of Sufism or the rest of the Sufi tradition. His translations and commentaries which are at once traditional and full of living wisdom and light differ so markedly from those pedantic and dry translations of certain claimants to the traditionalist school who would reduce the whole of Sufism to Ibn ‘Arabī alone, and Ibn ‘Arabī himself to a cerebral presentation of theoretical metaphysics which is far removed from the living presence emanating from his teachings as seen both in the writings of Burckhardt and the traditional masters of his school whom I had the privilege to meet in Persia.

Later experiences with the school of Ibn ‘Arabī have brought back often the memory of those moments when I sat with Titus Burckhardt at the tomb of the great master in Damascus. To have beheld Burckhardt there lost in the contemplation of that Truth which lies at the heart of all traditional metaphysics and of course of Sufism, to have witnessed his humility before the Divine Presence and transparency before the Truth which manifests Itself in a mysterious fashion in certain *loci* determined by sacred geography and usually identified with tombs or *maqāms* of great saints, was to realize the incredible chasm which separates the theoretical understanding of wisdom or *al-hikmah* from its realization. In contrast to many who write of Ibn ‘Arabī and claim strict traditional orthodoxy without however having realized the truth of Sufism, Burckhardt lived the truth of which he wrote. The exceptional light of intelligence which emanated from him pierced to the heart of the texts he studied and illuminated their meaning in a manner which is possible only by a person in whom the truth has descended from the plane of the mind to the center of the heart and become fully realized. At the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī, Burckhardt manifested his qualities of a saintly man possessing a penetrating intelligence of extraordinary lucidity combined with virtue and a luminous soul transmuted by the presence of the Truth whose doctrinal aspects he studied with such depth and understanding.

We left the tomb of the saint feeling a special proximity to the quintessential metaphysics of Sufism which Ibn ‘Arabī had been destined to formulate intertwined with many less central teachings in a vast tapestry which remains unique in the history of Sufism. Titus Burckhardt departed for Jerusalem with the aim of visiting not only the site of the Nocturnal Ascent (*al-mi‘raj*) of the Blessed Prophet of which Ibn ‘Arabī had written so eloquently, but also in Hebron the tomb of the patriarch of monotheism, Abraham, after whom Burckhardt himself was

named. He asked me to accompany him on this leg of the journey but unfortunately other demands forced me to return to Tehran. Little did we know that in a few months the status of both Jerusalem and al-Khalil or Hebron would be changed so drastically. Later, he wrote me of the exceptional blessings of this pilgrimage and how this blessing was a continuation of what we had received from Heaven during that incredible day in Damascus at the tombs of Sayyidah Zaynab and Ibn ‘Arabī. And years later, as we circumambulated the Ka‘bah, again the reality of the nexus between the *barakah* of the Center and the secondary centers which reflect and echo the Center was discussed and the blessedness of the visit to the tomb of the author of the *Mekkan Revelations* evoked. Titus Burckhardt has now left this plane of ephemerality for the empyrean of the Spirit, but his works which are the fruit of realized knowledge continue to illuminate in a unique fashion the path of those seriously interested in Sufism in general and the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī in particular. May God shower His choicest blessing upon him. *Rahimahu Allah.*

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Human birth, the desire for salvation and the company of holy men are rare things on this earth. Those who are blessed with all three are the most favored of men.

Sri Sankarāchārya.