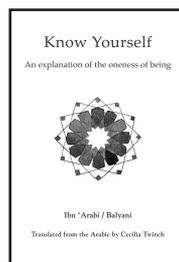


Know Yourself: An Explanation of the Oneness of Being

By Ibn 'Arabi/Balyani

Translated from Arabic by Cecilia Twinch
Cheltenham, UK: Besbara Publications, 2014

Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos



When propositioned with the question “If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only have one book with you, which would it be?” it is books like *Know Yourself* which come to mind. Why? The short answer is that it is a crystallization of transcendent wisdom that speaks across the religions and directs the reader to their innermost center. The book is proof that it is the Divine alone that makes the Divine known to the human individual and not the human ‘per se’ who can deign to know the Divine. It is not the human individual as a separate ego identity that comes to know the Divine, but the Divine in the human individual that comes to know Itself. From the purely human perspective, Divine’s grace and intercession are required.

The interesting way in which this work was introduced to the contemporary West is outlined in the introduction to the book under review. The first English translation was undertaken by Thomas Hunter Weir (1865-1928) and published in 1901 by the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* under the heading “Translation of an Arabic Manuscript in the Hunterian Collection, Glasgow University”. In 1976 it appeared

under the title “*Whoso Knoweth Himself...*” from the Treatise on Being (*Risale-t-ul-wujdiyyah*), and it was reissued in 1988 under the same title. *Know Yourself* is a new translation completed by using several Arabic manuscripts from libraries in the United Kingdom, Turkey and Syria. Cecilia Twinch, Senior Research Fellow of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society and translator of this volume explains why this revised translation is significant, “*Know Yourself* is intended to be as accessible as possible to people with no knowledge of Arabic and who do not necessarily have much knowledge of the cultural context of the book.” (p. 3)

Another curious phenomenon concerning this work is that while it is often attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi and undoubtedly was created under his spiritual influence, it was likely penned by Awhad al-Din Balyani (d. 686/1288). Balyani, a Persian Sufi master from Shiraz, was thought to have been a student of the Andalusian poet Shushtari (1212-1269), who in turn was an exemplary student of the Sufi philosopher Ibn Sab’in (1217-1268), a close contemporary of Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), the Spanish-born mystic known as “the greatest master” (*ash-shaykh al-akbar*). In fact, both Ibn Sab’in and Ibn ‘Arabi were from Murcia. The magnitude of Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence within the Islamic world is immense, he has produced what some estimate to be three hundred books, yet only ninety-three or so survive today. Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), pre-eminent Islamic philosopher and renowned scholar of comparative religion, speaks to Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence: “[I]t would not be an exaggeration to say that Ibn ‘Arabi is the most influential intellectual figure in the Islamic world during the past seven centuries, if the whole world is considered.”¹

The mystery that surrounds the authorship of this book has captivated Western *intelligentsia* and scholars alike:

Abdul Hadi—otherwise known as the Swedish painter and author Ivan Aguéli [1869-1917], who initiated the well-known French scholar René Guénon [1886-1951] into Sufism² and founded the secret Sufi society Al-Akbariyya in

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islamic Philosophy,” in *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006), p. 135.

² “Guénon was initiated [in 1912] by Aguéli into the Sufi *tariqab*, by receiving the *barakab* or blessing at his hands.” (Robin Waterfield, “Finding,” in *René Guénon and the Future of the West: The Life and Writings of a 20th-Century Metaphysician* [Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2002], p. 29). It is worth mentioning that it was the Egyptian Sufi Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman Ilaysh al-Kabir (1840-1921), who initiated Aguéli into Sufism in 1902 through the *Shadbiliyyah-Arabiyyah Tariqab* and to whom Guénon dedicated his book *Le Symbolisme de la Croix* [The Symbolism of the Cross] (1931).

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