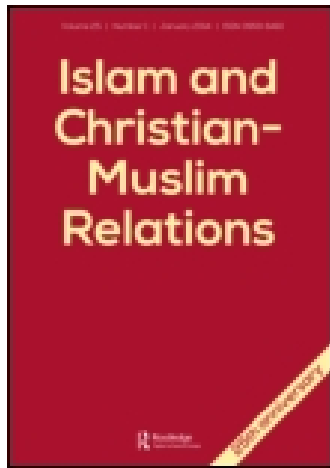


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### In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought

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**In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought**, by William C. Chittick/edited by Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil and Kazuyo Murata, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2012, 397 pp., \$29.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-4384-3936-5

The task of explicating the classical Islamic worldview to a contemporary readership is a difficult one. This challenge is complicated even further when one comes to consider the relevance of ancient spiritual traditions to modern problems such as conflict resolution or the global ecological crisis. *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, a collection of previously unavailable essays by the prominent American scholar of Islam William Chittick, undertakes both these tasks. The essays are drawn from the period 1975–2011, and thus give a snapshot of the intellectual trajectory of Chittick’s career. The editors have organized the essays into four sections: “Sufism and the Islamic Tradition,” “Ibn al-‘Arabī and His Influence,” “Islamic Philosophy,” and “Reflections on Contemporary Issues.” The first three of these sections are intended to give an overview of pre-modern Islamic thought, while the fourth is intended to provide reflection upon several important issues relevant to the contemporary world from a classical Islamic perspective.

What unites all the essays contained in this collection is the classical Islamic concern for knowledge, and its value, role and function in human affairs. This is a conception of knowledge inseparable from medieval Islamic theology and the role of humankind as God’s vicegerent (*khalīfa*) in the created order (Chapter 1), and therefore distinct from any post-Enlightenment epistemology. For Chittick, as for most if not all the authors cited in this book, knowledge at its highest, while in no way fundamentally conflicting with reason (*‘aql*), is not something acquired for exclusively material benefit, but rather something innate and essentially spiritual, whose function is to help us become more compassionate, fully developed human beings.

It is clear from the first essay, “Islam in Three Dimensions,” that the author is sensitive to the differences between the worldview of classical Muslim mystics, philosophers and scholars, and that of the contemporary scholar or general reader. It is a welcome aspect of this collection that Chittick from the outset acknowledges this basic difficulty. How might a modern Western reader interpret, say, the poetry of Rūmī, unless he or she is sufficiently aware of the work’s original context and worldview informing it? Indeed, as he observes: “Given our own assumptions about reality, it is not easy to grasp how premodern Muslim authors looked upon their religion” (3).

In the first section, Chittick therefore gives a definition of Islam that is both holistic in its breadth, yet readily comprehensible to the modern reader. Drawing upon the well-known “Hadith of Gabriel,” he cites Muhammad’s tripartite division of the religion (*al-Dīn*) into *islām* (submission), *īmān* (faith) and *ihsān* (virtue). Chittick then proceeds to explore the deeper meanings of these terms by reference to the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith). Subjects also include religious pluralism in Persian poetry (Chapter 5), the biography of Shams-i Tabrīsī, the Sufi shaykh and companion of Rūmī (Chapter 6), and the paired symbols of weeping and laughter in Sufi teachings (Chapter 3).

The second section gives an account of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought. Chittick is perhaps most famous for his scholarship on this vastly influential and prolific Andalusian mystic and author. Ibn al-‘Arabī is of interest not only because of his classical standing as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“the greatest Shaykh”), but also because of his subsequent influence on mysticism and intellectuality in both the Muslim and Christian worlds (in the latter he became known by the title “Doctor Maximus” during the Middle Ages). Chittick is a pre-eminent authority

on Ibn al-ʿArabī, and there is no better resource in English than Chittick's major works devoted to his thought. The concept most frequently ascribed to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the "Unity of Being," is discussed in "A History of the Term *Waḥdat al-wujūd*" (Chapter 8). Chittick gives not simply a summary account of the concept but a history of its interpretation by a number of important classical Islamic scholars and mystics.

It may surprise some to discover that the essay which opens the third section, on the history and principles of Islamic philosophy, is devoted to Rūmī, specifically his attitude to reason (*ʿaql*). In spite of Rūmī's popular reputation, largely constructed through loose and generally dubious popular English-language renderings of his poetry, as some kind of quasi-New Age, ecstatic universalist, Rūmī was in fact as well informed and engaged in the intellectual life of his time as was any Islamic metaphysician. Chittick refers to Rūmī's image of reason as a "wooden leg," implying that, while reason functions adequately as a support, on its own it is an inferior substitute for those gnostic modes of understanding derived not from the material world, the senses and their associated modes of discursive thought (the "partial intellect"), but from the Universal Intellect. This article on its own makes the book worth reading, dispelling as it does so many erroneous conceptions about Rūmī in the public mind.

The fourth section opens with an article on the metaphysical roots of war and peace. Chittick examines the meaning of peace (*salām*) in the context of the theology of God as absolute peace, and the manifested world understood as a combination of relative peace and relative war (Chapter 23). In "Harmony with the Cosmos," Chittick considers what the Qur'an might offer in relation to the present global ecological crisis. The final essay in this collection, "In Search of the Lost Heart," deals with learning, through examining the similarities between Confucianism and Islam. Citing the Confucian sage Mencius, he says: "The way of learning is nothing other than to seek for the lost heart" (315). The "lost heart" (*xin*) in question is the faculty of intuitive knowing, which transcends rational analysis and which is potentially inherent in all human beings. It is that innate faculty which grasps not the parts of a problem in isolation from one another, but the whole, leading to what the Chinese call *ren*, or "a luminous spiritual clarity, an ultimate spiritual goodness which needs to be pursued and actualized" (315). Such was the goal of traditional Confucian education, and Chittick compares this to parallel ideas in Sufism.

Today there are numerous books in English on the subject of Sufism. What makes Chittick's work, and this collection of essays, stand out, is the author's unequalled scholarship and knowledge of the primary sources in their original languages (of which he is a master translator), combined with an acute awareness of the possible pitfalls of studying traditional materials from a modern scholarly point of view. Writing in a style that is accessible to a broad readership, yet without over-simplifying the rich subject matter in any way, Chittick does not take it as axiomatic that medieval wisdom is a matter only for the specialist, or merely an artefact of history irrelevant to present concerns. In a world in which unprecedented crises emerge on a regular basis, reflection upon spiritual philosophies drawn from a worldview and epoch outside the sometimes insular world of contemporary academic discourse is surely welcome.

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