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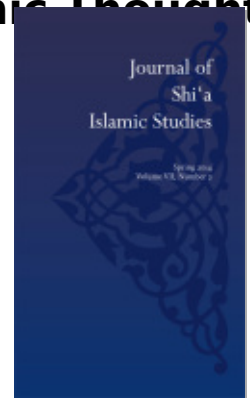
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## **In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought by William K. Chittick (review)**

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*In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought* by William K. Chittick, 2012. Albany: State University of New York Press, xiv + 397 pp., \$95.00. ISBN: 978-1-43843-935-8.

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Over the course of four decades, William Chittick has done more than anyone to elucidate for an Anglophone audience's benefit the theosophical side of Sufi literature and later Islamic philosophy. Chittick's many books, articles, and translation works – the latter often accompanied by copious commentary – manage the tremendous feat of wedding accessibility and fluid prose to an uncompromising fidelity to the complexities of the tradition being conveyed. Besides giants such as Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 638/1240) and Rumi (d. 672/1273), Chittick has introduced to an English readership a host of lesser-known voices from across later Islamic speculative writing. The result has been a seemingly endless series of interlocking and overlapping studies, all of which cohere to form a rich tapestry presenting a fabulously many-hued religious and intellectual tradition.

In all this, Chittick's authorial voice has proved an uncommonly effective vessel and teaching tool. Chittick is almost uniquely capable of immersing readers in a complex topic within the space of just a few short paragraphs or pages; the expressiveness and conviction of his prose style have no peer that I know of in the English language. It is therefore an especial delight to have collected a large selection of Chittick's shorter essays, many of which will entice a general reading audience and equally many of which will prove useful in a classroom setting to Islamic studies teachers of various stripes. (I for one would have loved to have something like Chapter 3, on weeping, available to me when teaching the ritual aspects of Islam last year.) Overall, Part I, with its series of short studies on aspects of later Sufism, serves as an effective introduction to Chittick's themes.

This is not to say that there would not be plentiful scholarly insights hidden within the folds of these highly literary essays as well. In

particular, Chittick has provided long, loving glimpses into how God, cosmos, and soul are realigned within later Islamic speculation and spirituality, so that ‘human beings have the unique role of coordinating and harmonizing all of creation’ (45). This notion of the human being as microcosm and fulcrum for relating God to cosmos and vice versa is of course a primary theme in Ibn al-‘Arabi; Part II of this collection is accordingly given over to the *shaykh al-akbar* and his influence. Scholars and students of Shi‘a thought will find much that is useful here, as also in Part III, which bears the title ‘Islamic Philosophy’. The line separating Parts II and III seems to me fluid: noteworthy is the fact that Chapter 11 (‘Qūnawī, Neoplatonism, and the Circle of Ascent’), possibly the most philosophically minded of the Akbarian chapters, and Chapters 19 and 20 from the philosophy portion of the book (on ‘Mulla Ṣadrā on Perception’ and ‘Eschatology in Islamic Thought’), are by far the most heavily annotated. These are all theory-laden expositions of technical matters, and they show that Chittick can switch to a scholarly mode of exposition when the situation warrants.

The collection is rounded out by four looser pieces providing ‘Reflections on Contemporary Issues’ (Part IV). These meditations take on the airs of sketching out a living Islamic thinker’s – truthfully, a practicing neo-Sufi’s or metaphysically minded modernizing Muslim’s – response to questions of war and peace, the environment, religious pluralism, and esoteric Islam’s compatibility with Confucianism. Such occasional writing can easily feel dated and even facile; Chittick’s saving grace is his firm grounding in the Qur’an even when his thinking is at its most impressionistic.

The editors have focused on those of Chittick’s essays not readily available online. Assuredly this is prudent; it does mean, though, that the book is not quite the one-stop destination for Chittick’s shorter studies that it could be. Several of Chittick’s seminal essays remain behind a corporate paywall, where only academic audiences ensconced within deep-pocketed institutions have access to them. Given Chittick’s standing among a broader readership interested in all things Islamic, this seems a shame. Then again, the book is already more than 400 oversized pages in size; adding any more materials might have made it into an unwieldy brick instead of the substantial yet inviting tome we have now.

The indices and appendices are unusually comprehensive for this sort of book and greatly add to the usefulness of the collection. Besides

offering a very thorough name and subject index – the latter goes by Arabic and Persian technical terminology, a sound choice – the editors have collated indices of Qur'anic citations and Prophetic traditions. These assist the reader in finding out whether Chittick's essays include Sufi or Akbarian resources on a particular piece of Islamic revelation. (It would have helped even further to have all the *abadith* identified in the index – some of the original essays' footnotes do this, but not all.) The appendices, meanwhile, provide (I) a chronology of those Islamic thinkers whose words Chittick cites in the book; (II) a listing of the original sources from which the essays have been culled; and (III) an impressive listing of Chittick's major publications. The latter comprise 16 authored books, 14 translations, two edited collections, and two critical editions (plus the indices to a third) – enough to occupy for years any reader who becomes enchanted by the perspectives offered by Chittick in this volume.

These essays, in short, contain immense riches for anyone interested in the esoteric side of Islam – the way in which its more spiritualist authors, especially those writing in the tradition of Ibn al-'Arabi and the school of Isfahan, have conceived of the inner dimensions of Muslim doctrine and practice. Because the essays are ordered thematically and not chronologically, and because the annotations and transliterations have been extensively revised and reworked, we are not invited to view Chittick's scholarship as an evolving process but as so many facets of a single, coherent worldview. This is in keeping with Chittick's own view of his subject field, which is essentially perennialist; Chittick presents his many research subjects as so many participants in a single project. Indicative is the following passage, offered as a partial explanation for why later Sufism took a turn for the theoretical:

What had been the living reality of sincerity and God-wariness was turning into a topic for academic discussion or a means to deceive the simple-minded. Given that the essentials of Islam were becoming more and more inaccessible with the passage of time, Sufi authors found it necessary to go into greater detail than before. They felt that people needed more detailed explanation in order to understand what was at issue in being human. (20)

Perennialist inflections and a moralizing view of history aside, this is a curiously essentialist picture to paint when it comes to Islam's origins and development. On the presented view, all the Sufi authors had to do – all that they desired to do – was to recreate for a more secular age the symbolically rich and existentially nourishing life of the earliest community of believers. Al-Ghazali would probably have approved of this depiction, and I imagine it will prove deeply attractive for many Muslims the world over. Yet from a secular point of view, what is remarkable is how Chittick sidesteps the issue of how regimes of knowledge can hold a fascination and power all their own – how ever more sophisticated theoretical elaborations can prove their own reward, besides which they confer authority on those who present them. Chittick asks us to accept the self-image of the Muslim mystical authors as fellow voyagers mapping out the heavens as well as the recesses of the soul, where the latter are treated as transcendent realities rather than poetic creations conjured by their chroniclers.

This relates to a larger worry having to do with the elevation of such a theosophical and perfectionist view of Islamic thought and practice into its true core. It is no secret that Chittick's whole scholarly career has been animated by an unmistakable affection, even love, for his field of study. But where does scholarship end and advocacy begin? In the collection under review the question is foregrounded more in the first and last sections than in the middle parts, which are more strictly historical in nature. For instance, when in the very first essay ('Islam in Three Dimensions'), in a discussion of the place of Sufism within the ambit of Islam, Chittick confidently proclaims that '*everyone knows* that the worth of activity is intimately bound up with the intention that animates it, while verbal definitions are useless without understanding. *All those* who take religion seriously *must* ask how to go below the surface and enter into the depths' (6, emphasis mine), this proclamation plainly issues from a deeply held conviction concerning what religion – true religion and authentic religiosity – is and is not, and what counts as morally praiseworthy activity.

Many will undoubtedly agree with the perspectives offered by Chittick, and there is nothing whatsoever wrong with this. Still, it is worth asking what Chittick leaves out by presenting such truths as self-evident. Surely one must acknowledge that Muslim thinkers, too – perhaps Muslim thinkers especially – have given serious consideration to

the opposing notion, *viz.* the idea that faced with an utterly unknowable and transcendent God, verbal definitions about items of faith may have to suffice. Similarly with the idea that insofar as the divine will is utterly inscrutable and people's intentions also remain hidden from us, we can only judge people by their actions in this life: there are strong traditions of deontological and divine command ethics in Islamic thought as a whole in addition to the virtue ethics of the Sufis, on which Chittick understandably focuses his attentions. All in all, a principled suspicion of 'the depths', to use Chittick's phrase, has formed as recognizable a strand in Muslim intellectualism as has its opposite number, esotericism; and to refuse the former a hearing runs the risk of delegitimizing it as a genuine strain within Islamic religiosity. Yet is there *prima facie* reason to think that its adherents would be any less heartfelt in their convictions?

Let me be clear about what I mean by this criticism and what I do not. Nobody should expect of Chittick that he devote equal time or even an essay's worth of his energies to those *kalamī* or legal thinkers who assumed a more minimalist stance regarding our ability to plumb the depths of either faith or works within Islam. Chittick has his own field to mine and to till; he has done so altogether admirably; and besides, we already have excellent academic studies from scholars such as Richard M. Frank to make up the difference. Nevertheless, when Chittick confidently posits that '[m]ost Muslim thinkers hold that human beings will ultimately be differentiated in accordance with the extent to which they live up to the standard of perfection in works and faith', this not only privileges perfectionism as the theoretical framework from which the Islamic tradition is to be approached; taken in its intended context, it also normalizes the view that Sufism necessarily and quite naturally constitutes the crowning glory of Islam, if not its 'lost heart'.

These are sweeping claims to be making under the guise and presumed authority of scholarship, yet Chittick is unapologetic about all this. He says, for instance, that he speaks for, and with, 'a large body of Muslims' when he likens the overall Islamic tradition to a walnut:

Sufism is like the walnut's kernel, and the ritual, legal, and social teachings of Islam are like its husk. The kernel is the living essence, and the husk functions to protect and preserve the kernel. Without the kernel, *the husk is hollow and worthless,*

and without the husk, the kernel cannot develop and mature [...]. (44, emphasis mine)

This habit of privileging Sufism as the ‘real’ Islam, its heart, or indeed its original intent, is a political move as well as being a perennialist one. Chittick might not dispute this, of course (I imagine he perceives himself simply as countering the anti-Sufi polemics of previous generations); I, for my part, do not think that advocacy and scholarship could or should always be kept rigidly apart. But it should be recognized, at least, that presenting certain myths regarding Islamic origins, and certain evaluative judgements regarding its relative components, as if these were plain historical facts runs the risk of disenfranchising those who come at their tradition from another place. Not all those who live their lives ‘on the husk’ of Islam would assent to being portrayed as somehow subservient or second-class when compared with intrepid explorers of the core, this is to say. And to present such a picture to an outside audience – Western Sufi sympathizers, say, or those advocating for a spiritualist, apolitical, and interiorized interpretation of the monotheist religions – may serve to deepen some divisions, even when the intent is to heal. It is a caution to keep in mind when approaching an otherwise lovely and profound set of essays.