

## Book Review

*Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World.* William C. Chittick. Oxford, Oneworld, 2007. 159 pp.

The book consists of seven chapters that were all, except the fifth, originally written as lectures. This might explain the fact that the book's main arguments are repeated in most of the chapters. William Chittick, however, possesses a special capacity to express the same argument in new and original forms, which renders his book especially readable and his argument even more convincing. As Chittick says in the introduction, the book summarizes the insights that he had gleaned from many years spent studying thinkers in the Islamic intellectual tradition, and brings out the significance of their perspectives in the context of modern thought, of which he is strongly critical. Like his other works, Chittick's book displays a clear, careful, and highly responsible writing style. At the same time, the book is especially daring and in some places is even radical, which renders it all the more fascinating although, as I am going to show, Chittick's radical expressions might give rise to some legitimate calls for clarification. Chittick's argument is based on a distinction between transmitted knowledge, which needs to be passed from generation to generation, and intellectual knowledge, which is found only within oneself through self-discovery. Islamic medieval and premodern thinkers, the Sufis and philosophers in particular, pursued intellectual knowledge. Their intellectual approach, however, has been moribund for over a century and its place has been occupied by the approach of transmitted knowledge. This approach, which renders thinkers dependent upon other thinkers, has disconnected them from their unitary selves and from the Real. In order to re-establish this connection there is a need for a vision of unity (*tawhīd*) based on the pursuit of intellectual knowledge and true knowledge of the soul.

In Chapter One, entitled "A Vanishing Heritage", Chittick indicates that the Islamic intellectual tradition has largely disappeared and that it cannot be resuscitated as long as it is treated

as another form of transmitted knowledge and as long as Muslim and non-Muslim scholars deal with it as a repository of historical information rather than a living tradition (p. 9). Unfortunately, modern university education does not allow for an adequate treatment of the tradition, and the outcome is that, "many Muslims and non-Muslims with PhDs in Islamic Studies cannot read and understand the great books of the intellectual heritage" (p. 10). To *read* according to Islamic traditional learning is to perform an act of unification (*tawhīd*) of meanings contrary to the trend of multiplicity (*takthīr*) characteristic of modernity. Modern thinkers have no unifying principles and the outcome is "an ever-increasing multiplicity of goals and gods" (p. 13). The many gods of modernity are the many ideological points of reference and its dogmatic theologians are those thinkers who keep on toying with and inventing a lot more of them. What is especially frustrating for Chittick is that Muslim thinkers themselves do not question the legitimacy of the modern gods of multiplicity and instead they search for the best ways to serve them. The assumption is that multiplicity is the right way and Islam must find the best means to harmonize itself with the rejection of unification (p. 17). Following Chittick we can say that, with their apologetic attitude, Islamic thinkers are like the blind following the blind, since they are but imitators of imitators of transmitted knowledge.

In Chapter Two Chittick explains that the intellectual quest of Islamic thinkers was not for gathering and accumulating facts or merely contributing to the progress of "science". Rather they were polishing their hearts so that each thinker would realize certain and verified knowledge *for himself* (p. 26). Chittick conducts a sort of thought experiment in which Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* is brought from the past to register his serious reservations against modern thinkers. It seems that Chittick is using *Ḥayy* in order to give even more radical expression to his radical views. For example, he says that for *Ḥayy* "what people call 'science' is strikingly similar to what in his times was called 'sorcery'" (p. 34). This is radical indeed but Chittick explains that the modern learned classes do not use science in order to know things *as they are* but rather in order to control and manipulate their social and natural

environments. Few would disagree with Chittick on this and the disastrous consequences of modern man's abuse of science are evident to all. Another radical expression by Chittick occurs in his statement that Ibn Yaqzān would think that the modern learned classes imagine that they know many things but in fact they know nothing (p. 35). To properly understand his meaning, we must keep in mind that true knowledge for Chittick is realized (*muḥaqqaq*) knowledge, knowledge that one knows for oneself and in oneself. And it seems evident that the modern learned classes cannot account for the method of acquiring (realized) knowledge as described by Chittick.

In Chapter Three, entitled "The Rehabilitation of Thought", Chittick reflects on the modern intellectual situation as an illness caused by scientism or the (false) belief that modern scientific method is the sole criterion for truth. Scientism, explains Chittick, is a belief-system which has become second nature for its believers, who use science to dominate God's creation (p. 48). In contrast to those believers, Islamic religious thinkers, who were educated in the intellectual tradition, were busy with the task of realization (*taḥqīq*) of unity (*tawhīd*): understanding things as they are in relation to the Creator who sustains them moment by moment (p. 50). To rehabilitate the intellectual tradition, thinkers must understand that the approach of multiplicity (*takthīr*) is short-sighted and incomplete and blind adherence to it leads to disharmony and disequilibrium (p. 54). This approach must, therefore, be subordinated to *tawhīd*, since only then can intellectual balance and equilibrium be restored.

In Chapter Four Chittick draws an interesting parallel between the dogmatists in Islam – the jurists and the theologians – and the dogmatists in modern society, who consist of believers in every sort of god: science, democracy, progress, etc. The difference, however, is that the dogmatism of the theologians was confined to the sphere of transmitted knowledge whereas Islamic philosophers and mystics persevered in the quest for metaphysical wisdom. The situation is different in the modern context. With the rise of modernity's scientism and secularism, the rejection of the metaphysical has become a foundational belief to be followed and imitated (p. 62). The scientism of the Enlightenment

diminished the cognitive significance of myth and symbol. Consequently, the delicate balance that the Islamic intellectual tradition had established between mythic imagination and rational inquiry was shaken. It is here that Chittick sees the significance of Ibn 'Arabī as the one Islamic thinker who provided the subtlest analysis of this balance, especially in his depiction of the complementarity between the transcendence and the immanence of the Real in relation to the universe (pp. 70–73).

In Chapter Five Chittick reflects on the philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and insists against Nasr's critics that his views have Islamic support, notwithstanding the fact that Nasr extends his perspective to other religious traditions. Chittick seems to be in full agreement with Nasr on the question of the relevance of Sufism (or its disappearance) to the contemporary situation together with his critique of scientism and technology as "rooted in the understanding that science, standing on its own, cannot conceive of what it means to be human" (p. 83). Like Nasr, Chittick insists that we cannot disengage the soul from cosmology and that we should not succumb to the "social engineering" that looks upon things and people as mere objects (p. 99).

In Chapter Six Chittick expresses what I consider to be one of his most important philosophical ideas. In an important passage in this chapter, Chittick explains to us why the Islamic intellectual tradition did not and need not acquire the viewpoint of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was the outcome of the fact that the transmitted nature of the knowledge of Western religious thinkers was not able to withstand the skeptical questioning of non-dogmatic thinkers. The situation of Islamic religious thinkers who belonged to the intellectual tradition was different, since they "did not depend on revelation and transmission for their understanding of *tawhīd*, so theological squabbles and historical uncertainties could not touch their basic vision of reality" (p. 118).

Chapter Seven can be considered as a summary of the main themes of the book. Like religious knowledge, modern non-religious knowledge is transmitted knowledge. Whatever scientists deem as discovery lies in the outside world, not in the inner world of the discovering self and, as such, it does not qualify as

real discovery (p. 135). The dualism of subject-object, which is so characteristic of the Western view of knowledge, precludes a unified vision of the cosmos and the soul. This dualism is a serious obstacle in learning how to be human, which learning is based on the unitary awareness of the intelligent reality that is beyond the rational faculty and the cosmos on which it reflects (p. 149).

On the back of Chittick's book, Ravi Ravindra wrote that his argument "has the power of a complete re-evaluation of the Islamic intellectual tradition." The truth is that if his readers find his argument reliable, then Chittick's work has the potential to re-evaluate the human intellectual situation as a whole and not only the Islamic intellectual tradition. Of course, the fact that Chittick speaks for an Islamic religious point of view might seem inconsistent with this statement. Once we understand what he means by "Islamic" and "religious" however, the inconsistency disappears. As Chittick makes clear, the most important message in this book – namely, the message of *tawhīd* – is related to a reality that transcends history and transmission (p. 112). The advantage which thinkers in the Islamic intellectual tradition have over thinkers in the modern intellectual tradition, is that the former succeeded in rendering this feature of transcendence immanent in their intellectual tradition. And this is what saved them from becoming religious in the dogmatic sense in which thinkers in the modern intellectual tradition are.

I find myself in agreement with the general thrust of Chittick's argument. I have the feeling, though, that the radical expression that he gives to his reflections on modern science betrays some sense of exaggeration. For example, he states that to reach their goals, scientists "take the received knowledge as given" (p. 135) and that the "metaphysical and methodological presuppositions of physics specifically and science generally allow for no access to the invisible realm of pure intelligence" (p. 104). After all, he himself acknowledges that *good* scientists are *aware* that they establish their scientific findings on the basis of transmitted knowledge and that, at times, they *question* the authorities that provide them with given knowledge (p. 135). Good scientists (especially among physicists) acknowledge also that the presuppositions of modern

science are limited and some of them even indicate that there is an intelligent dimension to nature that science does not seem to be able to reach. The fact remains that many scientists are not aware that "everything bodily is permeated with spirit" (p. 141). But then this will be the task of the science of the intellectual tradition to promote this awareness, and also to warn against the tendency of modern thought to worship science and use it to control and manipulate nature. The problem then is more with the so-called philosophies of science, which possess an overwhelming influence on all branches of the humanities and most of which are based on old-fashioned scientific presuppositions, than with science as such. I think that this is the sense in which Chittick offers the religion of Islam as an alternative to modernity (p. 40), since I do not believe that Chittick is critical of *science as such*, only of the modern tendency to manipulate science and control nature. I leave it to careful readers to examine his fascinating book and find out the truth for themselves. Finally, I hope that this work will be followed by others of its sort, not only for its intellectual worth but also for the noble moral message that it embodies.

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