

Science of the cosmos, science of the soul: the pertinence of Islamic cosmology in the modern world

William C. Chittick. Oxford: Oneworld, 2007, xi, 159 pp.
ISBN 978-1-8568-495-3

Daniel Martin Varisco

© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2008

Consider the following questions: ‘Is it possible to be both a scientist in the modern sense and a Muslim who understands the cosmos and the soul as the Qur’an and the Sunnah explain them?’ (p. 9); ‘is there anything about traditional Islamic thought that makes it more than an historical curiosity’ (p. 39); ‘What is the difference between prophetic knowledge and merely human knowledge?’ (p. 66); ‘What is the psychological and spiritual fruit of naming ultimate things with mathematical formulae?’ (p. 86); ‘Why should historical oddities such as the ideological presuppositions of modernity be the yardstick for civilization?’ (p. 117); ‘But what exactly is the limit of the soul’s potential? What can it know? What should it strive to know?’ (p. 127); ‘Can we know the meaning of the universe or of any object within it without knowing the meaning of the Real?’ (p. 145). If any of these questions peak your interest, and most of them should, then Chittick’s extended set of essays is well worth reading.

It is trite to repeat the oft-quoted phrase that ‘history repeats itself,’ but worth pondering the need to apply intellectual activity relegated to the status of past history to coping with the exigencies of modern life. Having spent four decades in the study of Islam, especially the Sufi and philosophical traditions, Chittick has written a text that gives voice to his intellectual mentors (including Rumi, Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra, Avicenna and al-Ghazali) for their insights relevant to modernity, especially ‘the role played by science in the contemporary *Zeitgeist*’ (p. viii). The beauty of his book is that it is not another book by a Western scholar about Islam, but a passionate extension of the intellectual creativity he has shown in depth for many years. In a sense, the author might be accused of channeling, a metaphor he follows in his portrayal of a time-machine Ibn Yaqzan (pp. 33–38), but it is nevertheless a stimulating example of what is styled ‘*aqli* thinking in Islamic teaching, a vehicle for self-realization rather than mere acceptance of authoritative dogma.

D. M. Varisco (✉)
Anthropology, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA
e-mail: Daniel.M.Varisco@hofstra.edu

The basic premise of Chittick's text is the center that holds Islam together as a religious faith: the focus on *tawhid* or unity, expressed most distinctly in the first part of the *shahada* that there is no god but Allah. It is this concern with *tawhid* that unifies the message in the book and that validates the distinctively Islamic approach taken here. Chittick observes that Islamic intellectual activism, as found in the classic texts of the past, has been moribund, but his aim is not to add another 'what went wrong' alibi. 'Instead,' he writes, 'I want to assume that the intellectual tradition is not what it used to be, and that it still has something to offer' (pp. 8–9). His first task is to identify the two trajectories of Islamic knowledge distinguishable as 'transmitted' (*taqlid*) and 'intellectual' (*tahqiq*). In sum, *taqlid* refers to imitation or following an authority. Certain forms of knowledge are accessed by Muslims because of the authority of the Qur'an and Sunnah; these texts must obviously be interpreted, but they remain the central core for all behavior as Muslims. Chittick argues that *taqlid* is often dismissed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as unchanging dogma from a modern worldview in which 'the only universally accepted dogma in the modern world is the rejection of tradition' (p. 19). The point is not that tradition, including centuries of Muslim theology and philosophy, are outdated, but that transmitted knowledge must go hand in hand with intellectual knowledge.

The thrust of Chittick's argument is the need to resuscitate intellectual knowledge as practiced in the past by Muslim scholars. This is not the same as 'scientific' knowledge or the simple gathering of facts about the world. He explains:

'Rather, its purpose was to refine human understanding. In other words, seekers of knowledge were trying to train their minds and polish their hearts so that they could understand everything that can properly be understood by the human mind, everything about which it is possible to have certain, sure, and verified knowledge. Each seeker of knowledge was trying to realize his knowledge for himself. He wanted to know his subject firsthand, with unmediated knowledge' (p. 26).

The unified goal of such knowledge was knowledge of self (*nafs*), which ultimately is the only way to know God and the cosmos. In this sense the intellect is the soul that 'has come to know and realize its full potential' (p. 29). Realization is not reduced to some esoteric quest, but rather works on four domains: metaphysics (God as the final reality), cosmology (the appearance and disappearance of the universe), psychology (what it means to be human) and ethics (practical wisdom and interpersonal relations).

Islam can be defined in a word: *tawhid*. Much of the book addresses this all important concept. As Chittick observes,

'Tawhid is the acknowledgment of a universal truth that expresses the actual situation of all things for all time and all eternity, since everything submits to God's unity by the very fact of its existence. Only human beings among all creatures have the peculiar status of being able, in a certain respect, to accept or reject this truth... In the Islamic perspective, tawhid stands outside history and outside transmission. It is a universal truth that does not depend on revelation' (p. 112).

Were this simply a theological tract, there would be little new here. But Chittick is interested in seeing what relevance this fundamental principle, when understood on

valid Islamic terms, maintains in the modern world. Modernity, he argues, is the opposite of *tawhid*, a form of *shirk* (associating others or other things with God) that leads to an operating principle of *tathkir*, making things or gods many (p. 12). These figurative ‘gods’ include ‘the defining myths and ideologies of our times’, including freedom, equality, evolution, progress, science, medicine, nationalism, socialism, democracy, Marxism (p. 14). It is not that these gods are evil, but that each ‘turns something indefinable into a limitless ideal and awakens endless needs’ (p. 15) rather than leading the intellect to realize the essential unity of all things. What troubles Chittick most is that Muslims by and large seem to acquiesce to this process, both those who are willing to sacrifice the concept of *tawhid* in order to appear modern and those who fall back blindly on transmission.

A short review cannot do justice to the author’s argument, which is presented in eight chapters. The first four chapters define what the ‘intellectual’ form of knowledge has been in Islam, especially in relation to the transmitted sciences in philosophical and Sufi texts. The obstacles to a return to such intellectual activity are examined, including the spell cast by ideologies. A chapter is devoted to the philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who shares the author’s concern with the loss of the traditional Islamic worldview. Other scholars discussed include Allama Iqbal and Mohamed Arkoun, in addition to classical Muslim scholars. The final two chapters outline the author’s suggestions for an Islamic approach to modern science and ways in which aspiring intellectuals can realize the meaning of *tawhid* in themselves. He closes with phrasing that conjures up the hidden men of Sufis past:

‘True meaning can never be grasped by dogma, doctrine, theories, theorems, or any other mental construct. It can only be found by going beyond the operations of the mind, actualizing the unitary awareness of primordial intelligence that lies beneath the mind and behind the world, and integrating the human self back into its transcendent Origin’ (p. 149).

If the doctrine of *tawhid* makes sense to you as the ultimate explanation of reality, then this will be a refreshing read. But, whether you subscribe to traditional Islamic theology or not, the distinction made between an intellectual quest for unity as opposed to one that accentuates diversity is worth considering. I agree with Chittick that the notion of choosing some Muslim writings as ‘scientific’ or at least proto-scientific in the modern sense and rejecting other aspects of their writings as superstitious is misleading and whiggish (pp. 48–49). But I disagree with the ascription of a unified approach in the modern sciences. On the one hand, modern scientists are dismissed as working with transmitted knowledge, building on the work of others and thus not pursuing genuine ‘intellectual’ activity as Chittick sees it; on the other they are viewed as incapable of ‘understanding the true nature of the universe, because the true nature of the universe cannot be understood without reference to the transcendent, intelligent, unseen principles that govern the universe’ (p. 49). It is true that the scientific method works from the seen and is thus verifiable in a sensory way to potential causes, but this is hardly a problem in the pragmatic world in which technology and medicine are needed to combat problems that an assumed merciful and loving God allows to flourish.

The main problem I have is with the notion of ‘omniscience.’ Chittick argues that both Muslim intellectuals (a rather vague category hard to pinpoint in the real world)

and modern scientists share a common goal of ‘trying to know everything’ (p. 128). The idea of everything should be left open as there is no definition that could do justice to something we cannot measure or may never be able to grasp sensually as humans. But surely it is simplistic to assume that only the Muslim intellectuals are ‘looking at roots, principles and noumena... striving to synthesize all knowledge to unify the knowing subject with its object’ (p. 129). If those roots are confined to what has in fact been transmitted through the religious texts, such as the specific doctrine of *tawhid*, then they would not be of interest to scientists who treat the observable universe as the primary ‘text’ to be deciphered through intellectual rigor. Scientists do indeed ‘spin out theories’ because no one overriding cosmological explanation has yet to emerge as true. As Chittick notes, scientists assume a unity to nature that parallels the spiritual sense of *tawhid*, but the main distinction is that the scientific method does not accept self-realization by an individual as sufficient proof for the reality of a phenomenon. The danger inherent in accentuating the value of self knowledge is that the human self, as modern psychology does not need to verify, is often deluded. If indeed human beings were uniformly born believing in one transcendent God who sometimes intervenes and more often than not ignores events in their own lives, then there might be a case for seeking a common ground in the teachings of all religions.

My criticism here is not of the argument itself, which strikes me as the logical conclusion for anyone seriously defining himself or herself as a traditional Muslim, but of the relevance of self-awareness as the fundamental criterion for the advancement of knowledge. Cumulative, transmitted knowledge allows for recognition of errors and continual proofing just as it can equally be misused by individuals to ignore new evidence and adhere blindly to cherished dogma. The key issue in science is verifiability. We can theoretically reduce all of matter to an elemental object or energy itself, but the world assumed to be the result of a divine creative act is infinitely diverse as far as human understanding is concerned. It may be that ‘God alone is Truth’ but if anything is certain from the history of our species, there is no uniform understanding of what, let alone who, that ‘God’ might be.