



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* by Sachico Murata, William Chittick, Tu Weiming and Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Source: *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 3/4 (Autumn - Winter 2011), pp. 474-480

Published by: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41932612>

Accessed: 10-05-2019 08:46 UTC

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promulgated by President Bush in December 2001.

The writers have also covered the British and American diasporic Muslims' response to the media ghetto where they are reduced into familiar types. For example, the prominent British 'Muslim comedian' Shazia Mirza attracted popular acclaim due to her onstage performances that she always performs wearing a black hijab. She has a knack for squeezing humour out of the most uncomfortable social situations in which Muslims are often typecast. In performing Muslim femininity, she challenges not only the debasing stereotypes about Muslim women but has also encountered opposition from the more orthodox Muslims for using the veil-as-signifier of Muslim women's freedom of choice. Across the Atlantic, an equivalent of Shazia Mirza comedy performances is found in *Allah Made Me Funny*, a comedy show, by the now well-known trio Azhar Usman (an Indian-American), Muhammad Amer (a Palestinian-American), and Preacher Moses (the African-American Muslim and the founder of the show). It is interesting and heartening that the cultural battle lines are drawn in the realm of the comedy, and not the Huntington clash-thesis.

Inspired by Edward Said's 1981 original study *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Morey and Yaqin have deconstructed the dark power machinations of the western corporate media that stereotype the Muslim community relentlessly since 9/11. Drawing on their diverse backgrounds in English and Urdu literary and cultural studies, the writers examine the reductionist mediations wherein only veiled women, bearded men, and minarets of mosques represent Islam and Muslims, reducing all their heterogeneity and cultural complexity. The book also exposes some of the stereotypes that some self-styled or government-groomed "Muslim leaders" themselves have nourished through self-representations.

Muhammad Safer Awan



Sachiko Murata, William Chittick and Tu Weiming. *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms*, with a foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. 678. ISBN 10: 0674033256. Price: \$ 49.95, Hardbound.

Author of one of the best and most popular introductory English textbooks to Islam written in the past two decades, *The Vision of Islam*, Professor Murata is an expert of Islam and the Sino-Japanese intellectual tradition especially the

contribution Chinese Muslim confucianist writers called *Huiru*. Her interest in studying the family law of Islam took her to Iran where she “began serious study of the sapiential tradition in addition to Juridical tradition” and attended Professor Toshihiko Izutsu’s classes on the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* of Ibn ‘Arabī. As she tells us in the introduction to her book *The Tao of Islam*, “from her earliest contacts with the manifestations of classical Islamic Civilization she felt it held some deep kinship with her own Far-Eastern background” (*Tao of Islam*, 6). In the early eighties when asked to teach a course on *Feminine spirituality in world religions*, she approached the principles of gender relationship in Islam with the help of conceptual apparatus drawn from traditional Chinese cosmology. Successful teaching of that course resulted in the form of her book *The Tao of Islam*. At the end of her introduction, Professor Murata acknowledges that it was Professor Izutsu who gave her the key to understand Islamic cosmogenesis in terms of the *I Ching*. After six years she published a translation of the work of T’ang dynasty Chinese Muslim writer Wang Tai Yu, published as *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai Yu’s “Great Learning of Pure and Real* (Albany: State University of New York, 2000). This work included a translation of a latter Chinese Muslim author Liu Zhi’s translation of Jāmī’s *Lawā’ih, Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm*. In her introduction to this work, Murata makes the following important remarks:

It became clear to me in carrying out the research for the book that the manner in which Islamic intellectuality is portrayed by modern scholarship has at least as much to do with the preconceptions of Western scholars as with the actual texts. If scholars see the Islamic tradition as mired in either/or thinking as antithetical to the Far Eastern concepts of balance and harmony, this is because they have been trained to think in terms of sharp dichotomies... (*Chinese Gleams*, 1).

These remarks are of utmost importance as they point towards the essential conceptual apparatus “balance & harmony” for constructing a meaningful dialogue between spiritual-intellectual Islam and Far-Eastern world view. We shall return to this theme in the context of the argument of the book under review here at the end.

As we are told many times in the book under review, this ground braking scholarly work was conceived as result of two conferences on Islamic-Confucian dialogue, first at Harvard and then at Kuala Lumpur which were organized by the collaboration of Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Professor Tu Weiming, then the Director of Harvard Yenching Institute and the leading authority on Confucianism. At those seminars Murata made the exciting discovery that the idea that she put to work in her *Tao of Islam*, namely of examining Islamic thought with Far eastern eyes, has already been

familiar to a seventeenth century Muslim thinker of China, Wang Tai-yu, the first Muslim thinker to write in Chinese (See *Chinese Gleams*, 1–2). She decided to make this exciting domain the centre of her research focus.

The Muslim religious literature produced in the Chinese language ever since the times of Wang Tai-yu is called Han-Kitab (*Sage Learning*, 3). Nasr points out in his foreword that this use of Chinese is a unique case in the history of interaction of Muslim civilization with other world civilizations. This is because in other cases, for instance in India, they used Persian and Arabic rather than the local Sanskrit to impart the knowledge about Islam (*Ibid.*, viii). Another point of the significance of this movement, especially of Liu Zhi's work under review, is brought forward by Tu Weiming in his epilogue. As he puts it, speaking about Liu Zhi's construction of an original Islamic theology purely in classical Chinese, "If classical Chinese could also facilitate such a subtle and sophisticated task in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it means that Islam is more than a regional phenomenon in philosophy" (*Ibid.*, 589–590).

Now within this important movement Liu Zhi holds a central place. According to Murata he was "the most profound and subtle author of the whole school" (*Ibid.*, 5). The translator of Liu's *Root Classic* (first part of *The Sage Learning*) into Arabic, Ma Lianyuan (Nur al-Haq) was so impressed with the eloquence of Liu's Chinese that he exclaimed "By God, were Muhammad not the Seal [of Prophethood], Liu would have been a Prophet in China" (*Ibid.*, 82).

Liu Zhi was born around 1670 and studied in Nanjing (*Ibid.*, 4). In his personal narrative with which *The Sage Learning* is inaugurated, Liu tells us that his late father believed that "the Islamic classics elucidate the principles in their furthest sense" and he always lamented that he could not translate them into Chinese "so that they might be shown widely in this land" (*Ibid.*, 93). Like a good filial son and burning with the desire of fulfilling his late father's wish, Liu devoted his life to learning and scholarship. After noting that Liu "used all his financial resources to purchase books," and that "he spent eight years studying Confucianism, six years reading Arabic and Persian texts, three years investigating Buddhism and one year exploring Daoism," Tu Weiming remarks that such devotion to thinking and writing is rare in the Confucian world. Even among Buddhists and Daoists, it is unusual" (*Ibid.*, 587).

Fired with the motive of making public the Islamic classics which he understood to have the same purport as Confucius and Mencius, Liu Zhi composed a trilogy of important works. *Tianfang xingli* (Nature and principles in Islam: *The Sage Learning*) according to Murata, focuses on *Uṣūluddīn* or roots and principles of religion. In this work Liu "addressed the basic articles

of Islamic thought with Confucian terminology and categories" (Ibid., 6). The second one, *Tianfang dianli* (Rules and proprieties of Islam) deals with *furū'*, i.e. "practices that make it possible for people to bring themselves into conformity" with the Islamic worldview (Ibid). Murata has given a brief summary of the contents of this work in her introduction (See *ibid.*, 7–8). The third book that Liu Zhi wrote is biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which he based on a Persian work and in which he "attempts to bring out the heavenly nature of the Utmost Sage" (*ibid.*, 8). We know that the idea of *sage* is central to Confucian learning and Tu Weiming enumerates and discusses few of the apparently Confucian features (Ibid., 593–594). Liu considered these three works to form a unity by advising that they should be "conceived as three integrated and fundamental components of a holistic vision" (Ibid., 591).

The work under review, *The Sage Learning*, is result of more than six years of collaborative efforts by Murata, William Chittick and Weiming. The translation from Chinese into English was made first by Murata and was latter polished by Chittick. Weiming, whose own interpretation of the work of Liu Zhi appears in the book as epilogue (pages 581–617), "provided explanation, clarification and advice at every stage" (Ibid., 90). In addition to the English translation, the Arabic rendering mentioned above by Nur al-Haq is also provided parallel to the Chinese text in this book. The English translation contains references to the numbers of corresponding diagram and to the Arabic and Persian sources of specific statement, wherever it had been possible to find them out. The annotations to English translation of each part clarify the meaning of what Liu says by referring back to Islamic sources or by highlighting some references to the Chinese Classics. Likewise the meaning of some technical terms is explained. These annotations add great value to the book and are a real aid for the readers. In addition to these detailed annotations, the book contains Murata's extended introduction, divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces Han Kitab movement, the life and works of Liu Zhi, his Persian and Arabic sources and Nur al-Haq's Arabic translation of the first part of Sage Learning (Ibid., 3–19).

The second chapter which is titled *The Islamic Background* is a valuable discourse on central concepts of Mystical cosmologies and epistemologies. It discusses, realization (*taḥqīq*), Ṣūfī cosmology in terms of five divine presences, eschatology and spiritual anthropology. In our opinion this chapter is an important introduction to the underpinnings, purpose and means of Muslim spirituality in its own right. It is of course related to an interpretation of Liu Zhi since in the beginning Murata raises the important question, that since Liu Zhi's present work is devoid of usual references to the verses of Qur'ān,

traditions of the Prophet or sayings of great Muslim authorities, how it could be considered an "Islamic text" (Ibid., 20). Her own answer to this question is that Liu derived his inspiration from the works on theoretical Sufism in which it is normal to go beyond the "formal elements of the tradition" (ibid.). The chapter is therefore a discussion of dominant themes and issues of theoretical Sufism an acquaintance with which enables one to understand *The Sage Learning* in its proper intellectual context.

The third introductory chapter *Liu Zhi's Adaptations of Islamic Thought* purports to "look at some specific Chinese terms that Liu Zhi used and how he structured his argument" in order to "clarify the manner in which he assimilated the Islamic worldview into the Chinese context" (ibid., 49). It starts by explaining that the words *xing li* in the title do not precisely mean "philosophy" or "metaphysics" but "nature and principles" (Ibid., 50). We are then told that "nature" is not to be understood in its post-enlightenment sense as something pitched against and separated from the "super-natural" but as "a creative and controlling agent, force or principle operating in something..." (Ibid., 51). A small section tries to clarify the difference in the shades of the meanings of some basic psychological terms, *spirit, soul, heart* and *intellect*. Here Murata explains another modern misinterpretation of traditional Chinese thought especially the work of Liu Zhi. Modern sinologists take it for granted that heart is the seat of sentiments while mind is a purely rationalistic faculty and consequently they translate the Chinese word *xin* as "mind."

It seems however that out of the four psychological terms, this fascinating discourse has not sufficiently clarified the meaning of the *nafs* (soul) in relation to other three terms. This is perhaps due to the fact, acknowledged by Murata that this term is the most ambiguous of four terms. Other terms discussed in this chapter are *mandate, former and latter heavens, complete Substance and Great function* and *Prophethood* and *Sagehood*.

The fourth introductory chapter gives an overview of the structure and argument of *The Sage Learning*. The book contains a head volume called *the Root Classic* and five volumes each of which contains 12 diagrams. According to Murata, the book's argument was developed by its author in three stages.

Stage I: Chapters 1 of the *Root Classic*: Summary of the whole book

Stage II: chapters 2 to 5 of the *Root Classic*: Expansion upon the first chapter

Stage III: The Five volumes with 12 diagrams each: Explanation of the stages I & II

This fourth introductory chapter also gives a chapter by chapter summary of the contents of *The Sage Learning*. It is noteworthy that according to Murata the message of the whole work is summarized in diagram 0.6 given at the end of the *The Root Classic*. This diagram, titled *The Macrocosm's*

Following in the Circle of Creation and Transformation, is in line with Ibn 'Arabī's Ṣūfī cosmology which conceives the cosmos to be of circular in shape, a circle composed of two arcs, one ascending and the other descending (Ibid., 82–83). The fifth and final introductory chapter relates the story of meticulous research that was undertaken by three scholars in preparation of this seminal work.

The work *the Sage Learning* itself, deals, in neo-Confucian terms, with the issues of Ṣūfī cosmology, the way the world sprang forth from its Source, qualities and characteristic that become manifest in human beings and non-human realm, physical and spiritual makeup of the human microcosm and specific characteristics of microcosm that enable people to engage in self-Cultivation. The final chapter of *The Sage Learning* reiterates the holistic anthropo-cosmic vision.

The text and its Arabic and English translation are followed by an Epilogue by Tu Weiming, a brilliant piece in which Tu presents his interpretation of Liu Zhi's work, raises and answers a number of important questions. Being a first rate philosopher and recognized to be the most important contemporary interpreter of Confucianism and Neo-confucianism, Tu's piece can be read to have a glimpse of his original ideas and the way he applies them in his work. (a very interesting idea that one finds here is what he calls "embodied knowing." 596).

Now, he considers the approach adopted by the Liu in contrast with that of famous Jesuit Missionary Matteo Ricci. Ricci, who is known, and sometimes blamed by the Christians, for presenting a sort of accomodationist Christianity and who accepted a number of native Chinese rites and customs, was using the Confucian ideas merely as tools, to be disposed of later on. He never really believed that they had any intrinsic value. As Tu repeatedly explains, Ricci intentionally undermined the whole neo-Confucian tradition of reading and understanding Confucius and called the Chinese people to return to pre-Confucian ideas. With reference to Ricci's Latin epistles to the Vatican, Tu tells us that "he deliberately undermined the Confucian discourse prevalent at the time in order to create a new ethos in which Catholicism could readily be accepted by committed Confucians" (Ibid., 582). Liu Zhi, on the contrary was honestly convinced of the uniformity between Confucian cosmology and the *ʿIrfān* tradition and wholeheartedly accepted the Neo-Confucian legacy as his own. He was not a pragmatist like Ricci. Tu hastens to argue, however, that Liu's system is neither eclectic nor synthetic and that he must have been aware of the "tensions, conflicts and contradictions" between neo-Confucianism and Islam (Ibid., 591).

Tu also addresses the same question that was raised by Murata in her introduction about the Islamicity of Liu's work in view of the absence of

“Islamic markers” and gives a similar response by saying that in Liu’s present work “revelation and devotional spirituality are veiled ... whereas self-realization ... is accentuated” (Ibid., 592). He, however, brings out a key concept which would have convinced Liu of the Islamic-Confucian uniformity and made the task of explaining it to his readers very easy: the concept of “immanent transcendence” rather than “radical transcendence.” The readers familiar with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī can understand that this immanent transcendence is nothing other than *tanzīh ma’ al-tashbīh* (transcendence alongwith immanence) emphasized by him. A Muslim cosmology based on this concept which synthesizes the identity and difference in the relationship of God, humanity and the universe squares nicely with the anthropocosmic vision based on the idea of *tianrenheyi* i.e., the unity of Heaven and humanity.

In addition to being an indispensable resource for those doing research in the history of Chinese Islam and Islamic Confucian dialogue, there are numerous reasons for making it commendable to readers interested in Islam in a general way. The life and present work of Liu Zhi reveal a very interesting and important possibility of relating normative Islam to any socio-intellectual context in which it happens to find itself. This work demonstrates that to find place into the hearts and minds of a people, it is not always necessary or beneficial for Islam to do so by condemning indigenous traditions of those people in a puritanical way. There is always a room for being genuinely accommodative, without being syncretic or eclectic, of appreciating the uniformity of metaphysical principles underlying those traditions. Liu Zhi’s contribution also demonstrates that the talk of an essential metaphysical and spiritual unity underlying theological and formal differences is not just empty talk but it can be put to use in bring into dialogue traditions as diverse and mutually removed, for a number of reasons, as Islam and Confucianism.

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M. A. Sherif. *Brave Hearts Pickthall and Philby: Two English Muslims in a Changing World*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011. Pp. iii+66. Paperback. ISBN 978-967-5062-74-2.

M. A. Sherif, a system analyst and an unusually versatile writer, has excellent number of biographies to his credit. He is currently exploring history of London-based Muslims and their social and political activism coupled with