Book Review – The Tao of Islam

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A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought by Sachiko Murata - Muhammad Legenhausen

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Book Review – The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought by Sachiko Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

Reviewed by Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen

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This work is a true masterpiece, not only of translation and exposition, but of Islamic propagation, as well. The work as a whole provides the best rejoinder yet given to the attack made on Islam from various feminist quarters both in the West and in the Muslim world. In brief, the answer is that the critics fail to see past the surface of Islam, a surface which is then judged by modern Western standards, while an adequate understanding of the feminine in Islam is impossible without an immersion in the ocean of

Islamic spirituality, an ocean whose depths are expertly gauged with translations from no less than forty–eight Muslim sages, including narrations attributed to the Shi`i Imams, Peace be upon them, philosophical pieces from authors such as Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra, poetry from Hafiz, `Attar, and Rumi, and various `irfani or Sufi works including selections from Ibn `Arabi and those of his school as well as selections from other writers such as Najm al–Din Kubra, Khwajah `Abdullah Ansari and `Ayn al–Qudat Hamadani, to mention but a few.

The translations range over a number of different topics from theology, cosmology and spiritual psychology, stitched together by the gender imagery used by the authors. The result is a demonstration that the gender concepts to be found in Islamic thought stem from its fundamental orientation toward Reality.

The feminist critique of Islam is exposed as simply the continuation of the negatively masculine proselytizing which has dominated Western attitudes toward Islam, and toward non–Western cultures generally, at least since the colonial period. Instead of using Western models to frame her discussion, the author breaks new ground in comparative studies by explaining gender dualities in Islamic thought in terms of the Taoist polarity between yin and yang. The Tao of Islam is truly a sourcebook of Islamic thought which is destined to become a classic.

At the same time, the work is also bound to be controversial and misunderstood. At issue is the treatment of women in Islamic law. By focusing on the symbolic dimension of gender, Murata is sure to be misunderstood by two factions: legalists who do not care to see beyond the letter of the law, and those who are opposed to Islamic law. Members of both groups are sure to misinterpret Murata's thesis as the claim that the law can be jettisoned in favour of vague statements of symbolic value. The key to the misinterpretation is the idea that when it is claimed that a term has a certain symbolic or metaphorical reading, nothing else can remain.

If `woman' is read as a code for `the base soul,' and if this reading is used to derive the statutes of Islamic law, the result will be either nonsense or the denial of the civil code of Islamic law altogether, for to claim that a man is to inherit twice the share of a woman cannot mean that the intellect is to have twice the inheritance of the base soul. So, the jurists will complain that Murata has abandoned the law, and the opponents of Islamic law will celebrate the alleged abandonment. However, for the attentive eye, even a quick browse through the book will be enough to show that there is no attempt here to replace the law by a set of symbolic relations.

Murata repeatedly stresses the great respect for the sacred law of Islam, the shari`ah, which pervades the mainstream of the mystic tradition of Islam. The figurative is introduced not to replace the literal, but to illuminate it.

The traditional differences in gender roles which are canonized in Islamic law are not to be justified by sexist claims of a natural inferiority of women to men, but by showing how these differences fit into a

more comprehensive hierarchical understanding of reality. This is not to say that Islamic values have never been invoked to do injustice to women–they most certainly have; nor is this to say that women do not have rights similar to men according to Islam–they most certainly do, as it is stated in the Noble Qur'an itself (2:228); and no one should deny the importance of scholarly investigations into these areas. But Murata's work is not a sociology of Islam, nor is it a work in Islamic law.

It is not the place of this work to clear up the misunderstandings among Muslims as well as non–Muslims about Islamic law on the issue of women; rather the aim is to show how gender concepts which are politically very incorrect in the West today, function in the Islamic spiritual tradition along lines in no way congruent with the politics of oppression, subjugation, and individual rights, which dominate so much of Western intellectual discussion of gender today. The book provides us with a different way of thinking about gender altogether.

The author, Sachiko Murata, wrote her M.A. thesis on the topic of temporary marriage and its social relevance at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Tehran, after having obtained a Ph.D. at that university in Persian literature. While studying in Iran, the author also translated a tenth/sixteenth century classic on usul al–fiqh (theoretical jurisprudence) into Japanese.

In addition to her studies of fiqh and usul, the author also studied the Islamic sapiential tradition with such notable authorities as Toshiko Izutsu and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and has had the benefit of years of collaboration with her husband, the eminent scholar William C. Chittick. She is currently Professor of Religious Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

The book includes an Introduction, followed by four parts, the first of which introduces the three central realities to be discussed in the succeeding parts: God, the cosmos, and the human being. There is also a postscript which addresses the feminist critique of Islam, two appendices giving a chronological list of and notes on the authors cited, a bibliography, an index of ayat of the Qur' an, an index of hadith and sayings, and a general index.

The Introduction begins by pointing out the importance of cultural differences and the way that presumptions rooted in Western culture may prevent the Western student from properly understanding the role of women in Islamic societies. In order to remedy such misunderstanding, it is necessary to become acquainted with the intellectual tradition in Islam. Ignorance of or a dismissive attitude toward this tradition characterizes the feminist critique of Islam.

The author then discusses her own preparations and motivations for writing this book, and explains the central comparison between the feminine and masculine principles of Taoism, yin and yang, respectively, and the gender symbolism to be found in Islamic thought. It is explained that in Islam, everything is to be understood in terms of its relation with God, and the Islamic understanding of God Himself is to be found between the two poles of negative and positive theology, tanzih and tashbih, compared to the yang and yin elements of Taoist thought.

Likewise, the attributes of God, the so-called ninety-nine names of God, are often divided by Muslim authors into the attributes of majesty (jalal) and the attributes of beauty (jamal), which Murata refers to as the yang Names and the yin Names. Various symbols of the Qur'an, such as the Tablet and the Pen, may also be interpreted in terms of feminine/masculine duality.

Part One consists of a single chapter called “The Three Realities,” in which the author shows that what she calls the Tao of Islam is made up of three great realities, God, the cosmos, and the human being, and that in the sapiential tradition of Islamic thought these realities are viewed as inseparable from each other. “Each can be seen as a replica of the Tao, with the two fundamental principles, yin and yang, harmoniously present” (p. 18). Both the macrocosm and the microcosm are signs of Allah.

Part Two, “Theology,” consists of two chapters. In the first, “Divine Duality,” it is initially made clear that in so speaking one must not in any way deny the absolute unity of Allah, tawhid. Duality pertains to the nature of human discourse and thought about the Divine. Likewise, in Chinese thought a distinction is made between the unnamable Tao and a Tao which can be named and spoken about and polarized into the principles of yin and yang.

This is elaborated in terms of the difference between the Oneness of Being and the Manyness of Knowledge as discussed by Muslim authors, and the division of the Divine attributes into those of majesty and beauty. Finally, the social implications of the Divine duality are explained: man's first duty is to obey God's law, the shari'ah, for it is only through awe of the attributes of majesty that the way to the attributes of beauty are to be found. In the third chapter, “The Two Hands of God,” we find a more detailed discussion of the relationships among the Divine attributes.

The imagery of the right and left hands is explained with reference to theologians, mystics and interpreters of the Qur'an. God is not only said to have two hands, but to have two feet as well, and there is an extensive explanation of the. significance of the symbolism involved here in the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, and others of this school of thought.

Part Three, “Cosmology,” has four chapters. In the first of these, “Heaven and Earth,” there are discussions of the creation of the world, the relations of similarity and difference between heaven and earth, the seven heavens, and the four earthly elements. In the next chapter, “Macrocosmic Marriage,” the relation between heaven and earth is compared to that of husband and wife. Heaven is said to have married the earth because of her beauty and virtue; and Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of a universal marriage which pervades all existence is explained, especially in terms of the Qur'anic symbols of the Pen and the Tablet; then the reflection of these elements as the.

First Intellect and the Universal Soul is introduced, illustrated by Sohrawardi's discussion of the two wings of the angel Gabriel. The human significance of all this is presented in the next chapter, “Human Marriage,” which focuses on a few key ayat of the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny, and their interpretations by Ibn 'Arabi and others.

The final chapter of this part, “The Womb,” discusses the primordial feminine relationship of submission which all creatures bear toward God, and God's infinite mercy. The womb is a symbol of the Divine mercy inherent in nature through which the individual is nurtured toward completeness and nearness to God.

Part Four of the book, “Spiritual Psychology,” consists of three chapters. In the first of these, “Static Hierarchy,” the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm is discussed, and how this correspondence evidences a deeper correspondence with the Divine Reality, in accordance with the ayah of the Qur'an:

“We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.” (***41:53***)

Murata explains that this correspondence is especially important to a certain sort of esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an, ta'wil. The correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm allows a ta'wil to be formulated according to which ayat which appear to describe the cosmos are interpreted as pertaining to the human person, so that heaven and earth are taken as symbols for the spirit and soul, for example.

From this exposition of the nature of ta'wil, a more detailed discussion of the intellect, the spirit, and the soul is presented, according to a saying attributed to Imam Sadiq (ʾa), which is compared with the views expressed on this topic by Ghazali.

In Chapter 9, “Dynamics of the Soul,” the jihad or struggle on the path to God is described. It is explained that the hierarchy presented in the previous chapter is not merely descriptive, but normative, and as such it marks stages on the way of spiritual progress.

There follows an intriguing discussion of the relation between the descriptive and the normative which goes far beyond the mere denial of the sort of absolute dichotomy to be found in Western ethics after Hume, for the discussion turns to the question of how harmony between the descriptive and normative poles is to be achieved.

The answer is to be found in a spiritual psychology which juxtaposes certain groups of qualities, in God, in the cosmos, and in the human being, attention to which allows people to come to recognize the forces within themselves in the context of the Divine prescriptions. This is followed by a discussion of the story of the fall of man and the way of purification of the soul.

In the final chapter of the book, “The Heart,” we find a great wealth of material about matters of the heart drawn from the Islamic tradition pertaining to the spiritual hierarchy and dynamics discussed in the previous two chapters.

For example, `Abd al-Razzaq Kashani uses the term heart to refer to that which makes a human being

human. He interprets the Qur'anic verse, “We said, `Adam, dwell with your wife in the Garden,' “with the claim that the heart's wife is the soul. The sufi, Najm al-Din Raze, also compares the heart and soul to masculine and feminine elements, claiming that the heart and the soul are the children of the body and spirit.

The soul is the daughter and is similar to its mother the body; the heart is the son and is similar to its father, the spirit. RM goes on to claim that the soul has two inherent attributes that it inherits from its mother, the body, and that these are caprice and anger, and Murata explains that here, too, caprice is itself the feminine or yin element and anger the masculine or yang element of the soul. Just as the Taoists hold that in everything yin there must be a bit of yang, and vice versa; we find that the feminine soul must contain a masculine anger.

The sought for harmony is to be achieved through the work of Islamic law, the shari'ah. The shari'ah requires the loyalty of the wife to her husband, that is, it orients the soul toward the heart: “The function of the Sharia is to turn all the forces of the soul in directions that will help the soul reach felicity” (p. 286).

Kashani, commenting on the Qur'an, explains that God sends down with the Qur'an the differentiations of the discerning intellect, and that this differentiation “will then be a healing for the illnesses of the hearts” (p. .302).

The illnesses to be healed are things like ignorance, doubt, hypocrisy, blindness of heart, rancour and envy. The analytic distinctions set out by Islamic law between the pure (tahir) and impure (najis), the correct (sahib) and incorrect (bath), and the fivefold classification of acts into those which are obligatory (wajib), recommended (mustahabb), neutral (mubah), disapproved (makruh) and prohibited (haram), all are needed for the proper harmonious synthesis of the elements of the soul, which in turn is required for the health of the heart.

The final stages of the perfection of the heart are annihilation (fana) and subsistence (baqa); the former takes place through the manifestation of God's left hand, the yang attributes of majesty, while the latter takes place through the manifestation of God's right hand, the yin attributes of beauty.

The relation between the soul and the spirit is often described as one of conflict, with the soul pulling the individual away from the light of guidance (as in Taoism the yin is portrayed as a dark force), while the spirit pulls the individual toward God. Through the submission of the soul to the spirit, harmony and balance are realized, which is compared to a marriage between the First Intellect and the Universal Soul.

The issue of this happy union is taken to be the human heart, a child in the image and likeness of God. In line with this view of the heart, the perfect man is frequently described as one who possesses a heart. Mawlawi Jalal al-Din Rumi explains that the spirit is simply awareness, and that therefore, whoever has greater awareness has greater spirit.

The human spirit is greater than the animal spirit because of its superior awareness. “Then the spirit of

God's friends, the Possessors of Hearts, is even greater ...That is why the angels prostrated themselves to Adam: His spirit was greater than their existence." (p. 305)

Commenting on the cosmic marriage of soul and spirit, Murata writes, "If the perfected rational soul is to be actualized, its parents–spirit and soul–must marry, give birth to it, and nurture it." (p. 306) In this passage Murata refers to the heart as the `perfected rational soul.'

This term is noteworthy because in the modern Western view, rationality and the heart are seen as being at odds with one another. In Western literature, the heart symbolizes the emotional side of man and the head stands for the calculative rational dimension. This dichotomy is completely alien to the Islamic spiritual tradition, in which the heart is identified with the rational, and rationality is understood as transcending the merely calculative.

Instead of seeing the soul as containing two warring parts, reason and passion, with art and religion being confined to the emotional, and reason left with nothing to do but juggle numbers, it might be salutary to submit to the more radical procedure of looking at the human being in a way suggested by the tradition of Islam. According to this tradition it is not the soul which contains the heart and intellect, but rather the soul and reason in proper harmony give rise to the heart.

Prof Murata continues her presentation of the subject with a passage from one of the earliest writers to discuss the marriage of the soul and intellect and the birth of the heart, Shihab al–Din `Umar Suhrawardi. He describes the soul as the animal spirit in man. This soul and the spirit are attracted to one another like Adam and Eve, and love each other so much that each tastes death in absence from its mate.

The product of the union of soul and intellect or spirit is the heart not the lump of flesh, but the subtle heart. Among the hearts of men, – some are inclined toward the soul and some toward the spirit. At this point in his explanation, Suhrawardi cites a hadith attributed to the Prophet of Islam ('s) according to which there are four kinds of hearts: the heart of the person of faith within which is a shining lamp, the black and inverted heart of the infidel, the hypocrite's heart which is bound by attachments, and the layered heart within which are both faith and hypocrisy.

Suhrawardi explains these types of heart in terms of their relation to their parents. To the extent that the heart inclines toward the intellect, it will gain felicity, and to the extent that it inclines toward the animal spirit, the earthly soul, the heart is. wretched. It is noteworthy that Imam Khomeini comments on a similar hadith attributed to Imam Baqir ('a) and draws out its ethical implications in his Chehel hadith.

The chapter concludes with several insightful remarks on what it means to be a true man and a true woman. A true man is someone whose intellect or spirit dominates over his or her soul, whatever the person's physical gender. Thus, the term `man' is used evaluatively, and likewise, `woman' is often used to refer to the base elements of the soul which commands to evil. It is in this sense that a woman may be called a man, as Rumi states that sometimes "a hero like Rustam is hidden in a woman's body, as in

the case of Mary.'

Both men and women reach perfection through exemplification of the attributes of God, men exemplify the attributes of majesty more directly and the attributes of beauty secondarily, while with women it is generally the reverse. “Only when she is fully herself by being fully one with God can she be fully human and fully female.” (p. 318)

For the Western reader, this book presents a real challenge and an opportunity to question the prevailing values of liberal culture. For the Muslim, the book also presents a challenge, for it allows us to become reacquainted with an aspect of Islamic culture from which many have become alienated, for Western cultural values are often unconsciously assimilated.

At the same time, the work offers a sound basis from which to defend the penetrating insights which are a hallmark of the Islamic intellectual tradition of which Murata writes, a tradition to which Muslim intellectuals today would do well to aspire.

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