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Review: 'The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā'

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The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā, Mohammed Rustom,
Albany: Suny Press, 2012, ISBN: 978-1-4384-1-6, xii + 243 pp.

Due to the fact that for Muslims the Qur'ān provides not only practical guidelines for a righteous life, but the framework of a theoretical worldview, Islamic philosophers have made direct and indirect scriptural allusions that go far beyond rhetorical ornamentation and theological persuasion. For the most part, they have resorted to the Qur'ān in order to reinforce their philosophical position. On the other hand, there is a long tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis ranging from technical linguistic analysis to rational and esoteric hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*). With regard to the relationship between the Qur'ān and philosophy, the Persian philosopher of the Ṣafavid Period, Mullā Ṣadrā (1571-1636), is a special case as the only philosopher who has dedicated several treatises to Qur'ānic commentaries. Furthermore, as Rustom notes in the Introduction to the book under review, not only is Mullā Ṣadrā's exegetical approach philosophical, but also his philosophy has a Qur'ānic base (p. 3-4). It is against this background that *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* links Qur'ānic exegesis to philosophy.

Originally a PhD dissertation, the book enjoys both academic rigour and an accessible narrative. The author, Muhammad Rustom, has a brilliant track record as a scholar and professor in the field of Islamic studies, which is reflected in his well-informed study. Moreover, he has had the opportunity of working with noted scholars of Islam such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Todd Lawson, William Chittick, and the late Michael Marmura.

The Introduction of the book briefly explains the place of Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic commentaries both within the larger tradition of exegesis (*tafsīr*) particularly in the works of Sufi writers, and among Ṣadrā's large body of writings. From the very beginning, the reader realizes that the

book's concern is not only Ṣadrā's theoretical hermeneutics, but also its practical aspect as exemplified by his several commentaries on chapters and verses from the Qur'ān. Although the book is focused on Ṣadrā's *Tafsīr Sūrat al-fātiḥa*, which is a commentary on the opening chapter of the Qur'ān, there are many references to and citations from other commentaries written by him. Particularly, the first chapter relies on Ṣadrā's *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb (Keys to the Invisible)* in order to explain his "hermeneutical perspective"[.] (p. 14) which can be categorized under esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*). It is with regard to this approach that Rustom gives priority to the Sufi master, Ibn 'Arabi, as the main source of Ṣadrā's understanding of the Qur'ān.

Since esoteric interpretation is meant to transcend the exoteric layer of the scripture in search of higher truths hidden behind symbolic imagery, spiritual cleansing is mentioned in this book as a necessary prerequisite for those who choose to embark on this task. In agreement with the Sufis, Ṣadrā is said to have given priority to intuitive knowledge over speculative reasoning in his philosophy, and this is primarily true about his hermeneutical approach. Apart from this, we should not expect to discover a systematic body of exegetical rules and techniques. As [the writer] Rustom notes, "we cannot even say that Ṣadrā's *tafsīr* compositions are guided by any kind of formal rules of interpretation" (p. 17). This is a correct assessment of Ṣadrā's exegetical enterprise, but it could be more clarified in comparison to other cases of the esoteric approach among Shi'īs, most prominently those of Isma'īlis, Ḥurūfīs, and Nuḡṭawīs who similarly ignored the traditional systemacity and technicality in favour of finding a spontaneous and intuitive gateway behind the literal meaning of the text. Ṣadrā is not alone in considering the Qur'ān as "the first instantiation of the Command "Be!.. [that] contains the forms of all things within it" (p. 30). Rustom regards this approach as generally "gnostic" in the sense of seeing everything as a "trace of God's Command" (p. 31). In this regard chapter two that includes several exegetes and

Sufis would have benefited greatly from an independent section on *ta'wīl* among other Shi'i philosophers.

The philosophical ground of Ṣadrā's commentaries must be the reason why two chapters of the book under review are devoted to metaphysics and cosmology. The author of this book is also led by the thematic structure of *Sūrat al-fātiḥa* that Ṣadrā has interpreted as "the three days of man's life" consisting of the origin, life on earth, and afterlife (p. 56). While Ṣadrā's philosophy revolves around being (*wujūd*) as the only true reality in contrast to essence as a mere delimitation of it, Rustom's chapter on metaphysics is focused on Divine Essence. Though originally a theological concept, Essence is interpreted in accordance with Ibn 'Arabi's mystical picture of creation in terms of Divine Names and their manifestations. The second phase of human life corresponds to the fourth chapter which is on cosmology. In line with Ṣadrā's commentary on God's praise of himself in *Sūrat al-fātiḥa* as the act of bringing the world into existence (p. 67), the book highlights the influence of Ibn 'Arabi's interrelated doctrines of Perfect Human and Muhammadan Reality (pp. 68-72). This is followed by the chapter on theology which includes Ṣadrā's all-important view of the Qur'ān as "the prototype of being" (p. 76) in the sense of revealing the light of God's being. By highlighting the existential reality of the Qur'ān from Ṣadrā's philosophical point of view, Rustom helps his readers have a better understanding of why the philosopher dismisses literal reading as an act of one's imagination in accordance with personal whims that the latter identifies with worshipping "idols of belief" (p. 76).

The last two chapters correspond to the final phase of human drama as understood by Ṣadrā from *Sūrat al-fātiḥa*. While chapter six deals with Ṣadrā's soteriology in his philosophical works such as his magnum opus *al-Asfār*, chapter seven focuses on the same subject as expressed in

his commentary on *Sūrat al-fātiḥa*. As suggested by the author, one urgent soteriological issue for Ṣadrā is to reconcile divine mercy with the Qur'ān's reference to eternal suffering for the sinners. As Rustom explains, following Ibn 'Arabi, Ṣadrā identifies being (*wujūd*) with mercy (*rahma*), hence his attempts to justify the existence of Hell and suffering. According to Ṣadrā, while Hell "must necessarily manifest God's qualities of wrath", (p. 96) it still originates in His mercy. As in the case of other chapters, here again Rustom brings to the fore the influence of Ibn 'Arabi and includes those passages from the latter's *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* that Ṣadrā incorporated into his texts. Yet, as pointed out in the book, through some alterations, Ṣadrā diverged from Ibn 'Arabi in concluding that finally God "will remove the attribute of chastisement in the cosmos" (p. 97). In addition, the soteriology in Ṣadrā's commentary on *Sūrat al-fātiḥa* is more focused and detailed. Rustom quotes several passages to show that here Ṣadrā employs *al-Asfār*'s philosophical distinction of essential/accidental in order to prove that in comparison to God's mercy which is the source of existence, His wrath is only derivative or accidental (p. 100). It is not a coincidence that the main body of the book ends in soteriology. In addition to the fact that *Sūrat al-fātiḥa* is interpreted by Ṣadrā as the story of human life from the origin to the end, the structure and emphasis of the book implicitly reflects what the writer must consider as the ultimate purpose of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical and exegetical endeavours. The importance of Ṣadrā's soteriological doctrines to Rustom is obvious from the title of the book that suggests the supremacy of divine mercy in the world. Rustom's emphasis on the primacy of mercy in the context of Qur'ānic hermeneutics is significant since it is shared by all other moderate Muslims today. They diverge from both puritanical and apologetic Muslims by revealing the merciful nature of Islam as discovered and pictured by the past masters of intellectual and spiritual Islam such as Mullā Ṣadrā.

Quite a few books and articles have been written on different aspects of Mullā Ṣadrā's thought since he was introduced into Anglo-American academia during 1960's and 70's. Yet, this volume is the only published monograph on the hermeneutical dimension of Ṣadrā's work. The overall approach of the writer towards Mullā Ṣadrā reflects that of the advocates of prophetic philosophy such as Nasr and Corbin, by focusing on the legacy of mysticism in Ṣadrā's works. Nevertheless, Rustom has managed to keep his individual voice by incorporating original examples from Mullā Ṣadrā's texts as well as abundant examples with regard to the influence of Ibn 'Arabi. Though Ibn 'Arabi has been frequently mentioned in association with Ṣadrā in almost every monograph on the latter, none of the previous books have offered such an extended comparison between the two thinkers on a particular topic and based on parallel textual analysis.

As for the translation of Arabic texts that comprise a large part of the book, Rustom's rendering is remarkably successful. Translation of classical Islamic philosophers can easily become too pedantic and inaccessible because of faithfulness to the original text; the passages that have been translated here are not only of utmost accuracy, but enjoy a free-floating readability for the modern English speakers while reflecting the original tone. This quality is reinforced by the generous inclusion of technical terms in accurately rendered transliteration and explanatory notes that help communicate the message within the general context of Ṣadrā's philosophy and hermeneutics. In many cases, endnotes elaborate on Islamic terms and concepts by referring to the *ḥadīth* tradition and quoting from various sources of it. Moreover, abundant citations from a variety of secondary sources by both Western and Iranian commentators, provide the opportunity of looking at the subject through different lenses at different times.

All in all, *The Triumph of Mercy* is successful in demonstrating the Qur'ānic core of mystical philosophy in general and that of Mullā Ṣadrā's system in particular. By way of theory and practice, the book's main agenda is to prove that Ṣadrā "is able to successfully recast his sophisticated ontology of the fundamentality of being into a theological and scripture-based framework" (p. 118). Nevertheless, there is still room for examples of Ṣadrā's recourse to the Qur'ān in his philosophical works to support his arguments in areas beyond ontology. A comparison between the methodology of *ta'wil* in Ṣadrā's Qur'ānic commentaries and his interpretation of Qur'ānic verses in his philosophical works would throw more light on the status of the Qur'ān in Ṣadrian philosophy. It is clear from the content and the rich bibliography of the book that the writer is quite familiar with Ṣadrā's philosophical texts and may hopefully decide to expand the future edition of his book by writing a chapter on this methodological comparison. With regard to the hermeneutical approach, the book would have benefited from looking into Ṣadrā's exegetical methodology in handling the distance between the exoteric and the esoteric interpretations. While Rustom has mentioned Ṣadrā's preference for the latter (p. 27-28), he has explained it mainly in terms of a spiritual experience and not looked into the technical means by which he, as a Muslim philosopher, must have tried to keep a balance between the two.

The Triumph of Mercy is both a contribution to Mullā Ṣadrā scholarship and a worthwhile addition to exegetical literature. It has been published with total care in a tidy volume that is free from formal errors and editorial slips. The book is intended for a wide readership of different levels ranging from students of Islamic philosophy and Qur'ānic studies to professional scholars and academics in related fields.

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