

The Place of T'ien-fang hsing-li in the Islamic Tradition¹

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Liu Chih's T'ien-fang hsing-li was one of the most widely read books among Chinese Muslims during the 18th and 19th centuries, but it gradually came to be criticized by some Muslim scholars, who thought that it had deviated from true Islam.¹ Today also, those who read the book, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, will be struck by the fact that it is not at all similar to what is usually presented as the teachings of Islam. How is this book, they are likely to ask, about "Islam"? Where are the markers through which Muslim texts are recognized, such as quotations from the Koran, Muhammad, and the great authorities? Where are the ritual instructions, the rules and regulations, and the dogmatic statements of Muslim belief? Why is there so much Neo-Confucian terminology?

For my own part, such questions have not arisen. Quite the contrary, the more I study T'ien-fang hsing-li in English translation, the more I see its intimate connection with the Arabic and Persian texts that I have been reading for the past forty years. I suspect that if many people fail to see that Liu Chih is addressing basic Islamic principles, it is because they are unfamiliar with the diversity of forms in which these principles have been expressed over Islamic history. They recognize Islamic ideas only when they are dressed in Arabic clothing. Moreover—and this is especially true today on the political scene—when they see the Arabic clothing, they think that it must be Islam, regardless of what is actually being said. In the case of Liu Chih's book, people see the Neo-Confucian robes, but they do not see the Islamic meaning.

In order to understand how T'ien-fang hsing-li fits into the Islamic tradition, we need to remember that Islam has produced many scholarly disciplines, each of which was divided into several schools. These disciplines address three basic realms of human existence: activity, understanding, and intentionality, but all three realms are not always discussed in any given discipline or scholarly. For example, jurisprudence, which is the science of the Shariah (Islamic law), deals only with activity. Its role is set down the rules and regulations that govern proper ritual forms and social interaction. Kalam (dogmatic theology) addresses only the realm of understanding. Its goal is to establish the proper manner of talking about the articles of belief that are mentioned in the Koran—that is, God, the angels, the prophets, scripture, the Last Day, and so on. Sufism focuses on questions of intentionality, interiority, and spirituality, and it offers practices in order to actualize sincerity, love for God, and the awakening of the heart.

Most Muslims have some acquaintance with jurisprudence, Kalam, and the practical side of Sufism. This is because they know various rules about correct ritual and social activity (jurisprudence), they are familiar with basic Islamic dogma (Kalam), and they are acquainted with rituals that characterize Sufism. Relatively few Muslims, however, know anything about the specific Islamic science for which Liu Chih is speaking in T'ien-fang hsing-li. This science is not jurisprudence, nor is it Kalam, nor is it practical Sufism. What is it then?

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One could answer by saying that Liu Chih's book is about philosophy (falsafa) or the theoretical side of Sufism ('irfān). But this does not explain anything to those who are not thoroughly familiar with the different approaches to Islamic learning. What needs to be understood is not the name of the science, but what makes this science different from the more familiar Islamic sciences, such as jurisprudence and theology. What are the characteristics of this specific approach to Islamic learning that allow it to adopt Neo-Confucian concepts and terminology? In order to explain this, I need to provide some background about the search for knowledge in Islam, a search that is required of all Muslims ("even unto China," as the famous saying of Muhammad tells us).

Human beings acquire knowledge in two basic ways, which are called by a variety of names in different religious and philosophical traditions. Muslims commonly distinguished between the two by calling one of them "transmitted" (naqlī) and the other "intellectual" ('aqlī). Transmitted learning depends totally on what has been received from the past. Examples include language, grammar, history, law, Koran, and Hadith. In contrast, intellectual learning—in the strict sense of the word 'aqlī—cannot be transmitted, it can only be recovered from within the intellect ('aql), which is also called the "heart" (qalb, dil). A common example of an intellectual science is arithmetic, because all of its principles and details are latent in the human mind, waiting to be understood. We know that two plus two equals four because it is self-evident to our intelligence. At first we may need to be reminded of this, but once we are reminded, we know that our heart has always known it.

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The distinction between intellectual and transmitted knowledge is implied in the two Shahadahs ("testimonies") that are the foundation of Islamic faith. These are the statements "There is no god but God" and "Muhammad is God's messenger."

The Koran presents the first Shahadah, commonly called "the words declaring [God's] Unity" (kalimat al-tawhīd), as a universal and ahistorical truth, pertaining to all times and all places. It was known to Adam and was taught by every prophet and sage. Moreover, it is accessible to human intelligence without the necessity for prophetic intervention, because man is made in God's image, with a primordial nature (fitra) that recognizes things as they are.² The function of the prophets is not to teach Unity, it is to "remind" (dhikr, tadhkira) people that they already know Unity.

In other words, in the traditional Islamic understanding, a normal, healthy intelligence recognizes that the universe and everything within it is governed by the One Supreme Principle, just as it recognizes that two plus two equals four. The truth of the first Shahadah is not a transmitted truth, it is an intellectual truth. It is present in every human heart, waiting to be recalled.

In contrast, the second Shahadah declares the importance of historical, transmitted knowledge. To say "Muhammad is God's messenger" means to acknowledge that Muhammad and his message (the Koran) allow people to learn what the Supreme Principle wants from them. The only possible way to gain this knowledge is by way of transmission from the Prophet. You cannot discover the details of the message in your own heart. Koran, Hadith, Islamic dogma, ritual, rules, and regulations can only be known only through transmission.

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These two sorts of learning demand two different methodologies. The method of acquiring transmitted knowledge is called “imitation” (taqlid), that is, learning from others. All knowledge about the historical tradition of Islam, whether it is known by Muslims or non-Muslims, is acquired by way of imitation.

Intellectual knowledge, however, cannot be acquired by imitation—by studying books or by memorizing the words of others. It must be discovered by the seeker in his or her own heart. The methodology of discovering knowledge in the heart is called “realization,” tahqîq. The word derives from the same root as haqq (truth) and haqîqa (reality). In the path of realization, imitation is necessary at the beginning, but it cannot provide true understanding, it can only prepare the way. The goal is to know for oneself, directly and without intermediary.

In transmitted learning, one needs to follow the opinions of others. This is why Islam asks Muslims to follow the Shariah as taught to them by the ulama (the scholars who have mastered the law). But the ulama in turn have received their knowledge from their teachers, and eventually the chain of transmission goes back to the Koran and the Prophet. Most Islamic sciences are precisely of the transmitted sort, but the road to intellectual knowledge has always been open. Those who made progress on the path were usually known as experts in the sciences of philosophy or Sufism.

There has always been a tension between the experts in transmitted knowledge and the seekers of intellectual knowledge. Most Muslims thought that “learning” meant Koran and the Hadith, theological dogma, and the rules of the Shariah. Those who followed the intellectual path held that all of this is elementary learning. It needs to be studied, but its purpose is to prepare the way for the awakening of the heart. In Chinese terms, transmitted knowledge is “small learning” (hsiao-hsüeh), and intellectual knowledge is “great learning” (ta-hsüeh).

The arguments and debates that took place between the experts in transmitted knowledge and the seekers of intellectual knowledge can be compared to the relationship between Confucianists and Taoists. Confucianists advocated acquiring the transmitted knowledge of the Classics, but Taoists felt that transmitted knowledge can become a barrier to true understanding. Like Taoists, Sufis and philosophers knew that the real purpose of learning is to achieve transformation—what they called “realization.” True awakening grows up when the heart is purified of knowledge coming from the outside.

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In order to appreciate the contrasting natures of intellectual and transmitted knowledge, we need to pay attention to what seekers of intellectual knowledge were trying to understand. Despite many differences in approach and expression, philosophers and Sufis agreed that three sorts of knowledge can and should be sought within the heart. These are metaphysics, meaning knowledge of the Ultimate Reality known theologically as “God”; cosmology, meaning knowledge of the world out there, which is defined as “everything other than God” (mâ siwa’ llâh); and psychology (or autology), meaning knowledge of the knowing self (nafs).

Of course, these three sorts of knowledge can also be studied as transmitted learning. The Koran and the Hadith have a great deal to say about them, as do books written by theologians, philosophers, and Sufis. Nonetheless, neither philosophy nor Sufism ever forgot that the purpose of learning is to transcend hearsay and to come to know God, the world, and the self for oneself and in oneself. True knowledge can only

be found by awakening to things as they actually are, not by quoting the words and opinions of others.

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One way to understand the role of the intellectual path is say that it provided forms of learning and praxis that could lead to the achievement of “wisdom” (hikma). The Koran often calls the knowledge that God gave to the prophets by this name, and it refers to God Himself as Wise (hakim). Philosophy, of course, was defined as “love of wisdom.” In both philosophy and Sufism, wisdom was understood to mean knowing things as they truly are and acting appropriately. This is to say that the goal of searching for wisdom was to become a wise man, a sage (hakim). The seeker of wisdom was attempting to live in perfect conformity with the Supreme Principle.

People are able to achieve conformity with the Supreme Principle because God created them in His own image. Nonetheless, most people do not live up to the requirements of their own divine image. Rather, they live in ignorance and forgetfulness of God and their own true nature. The sage is the person who has awoken to the presence of God in his own heart and who lives appropriately in the world.

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Throughout the Islamic tradition, but especially in philosophy and Sufism, God was called by the Koranic name al-haqq, which means Truth, Reality, Right, Real. The principle of Unity, “There is no god but God,” means that “There is no haqq but al-Haqq.” Only God, the Supreme Principle, is truly real, right, and appropriate. As for heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things, they fall short of the absolute reality of the Real.

Nonetheless, the Koran and many hadiths tell us that haqq is an attribute of created things as well as of the Creator. This is to say that everything has a truth, a reality, a rightness, an appropriateness. The Prophet mentioned many different things as having haqq “against us,” by which he meant that we must respond to their rightness and appropriateness in the proper way. Hence the word haqq in Arabic also means both “right” (as in “human rights”) and “responsibility.” The fact that created things have rights means that our human responsibility is to observe and respect these rights. As the Prophet commanded, “Give to everything that has a haqq its haqq.”³

Some authors take this prophetic commandment as a nutshell definition of realization, tahqiq, which means literally to actualize haqq. Thus, realization is understood to mean knowing the reality, truth, and right of God, of the cosmos, and of the human self. At the same time, realization is to act rightly and appropriately in respect to what one knows—it means to give God, the cosmos, and the soul what is due to them, their “rights” (haqq). Only by doing so can people live up to their “responsibility” (haqq).

In short, the “intellectual” knowledge that is sought in philosophy and Sufism calls for realization, which means the actualization of wisdom and the transformation of the soul. The goal is to achieve perfection, which is defined in terms of the Supreme Reality, the cosmos (the macrocosmic manifestation of the Supreme Reality), and the awakened heart (the microcosmic manifestation of the Supreme Reality). Only an awakened heart can grasp the truth and reality (haqq) of God, the cosmos, and itself.

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Let me now come back to T'ien-fang hsing-li. My basic point here is that this book speaks on behalf of the intellectual tradition, not the transmitted tradition. Although Liu Chih acknowledges the importance of following the learning that has been transmitted from the sages, especially the Utmost Sage (Muhammad), he is not trying to repeat the teachings of the Koran, Hadith, and Islamic law, nor is he providing information about the Supreme Principle and the cosmos. Rather, he is setting down a map of reality in order to guide people on the path of realization. That path leads from ignorance to wisdom and from forgetfulness to awakening.

Liu Chih is not telling people what to think. Rather, he is trying to help them learn how to think. He wants to clarify that each of us needs to know reality for ourselves and in ourselves, not by imitating others. We cannot understand God, the cosmos, and the self by quoting the Koran and the Prophet, much less by studying the books of scholars. We have to know for ourselves. Only then can we achieve the perfection that is the goal of human life.

For Liu Chih, the transmitted knowledge that Muslims hear from their ulama is the small learning. It is a necessary foundation for the great learning. But the great learning itself, once actualized, does not depend upon the small learning for its expression. The intellect—the heart—once it is awakened through the great learning, does not belong to the realm of forms and images, but rather to the realm of reality and principle. The heart is the master of forms, it is not mastered by forms, so it can express itself in any form appropriate to the audience. Perhaps Liu Chih came to be criticized by some of the Chinese ulama because they knew only the small learning of Islam and they could not recognize his intention. As a result, they thought that he was deviating from the path of true Islam, when in fact he was pointing to the purpose and goal of all Islamic learning.

¹ On Liu Chih and the importance of this book, see Sachiko Murata, Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

² Some Muslims object to the statement “Man is made in God’s image,” given its obvious Biblical source and its association with the Jewish and Christian traditions. But this would be to forget that the Koran came not as a completely new teaching, but as a confirmation of the previous prophetic revelations. Moreover, Bukhârî, Muslim, and other authorities tell us that the Prophet said, “God created Adam in His form (sûra).” The word sûra is often translated as “image,” though “form” preserves the nuances of the Arabic better in English. The Koran tells us that God is the Form-Giver (musawwir) and that He formed human beings and made their forms beautiful (40:64, 64:3). There is much discussion of the meaning of this hadith of the form in the texts. Many theologians think it simply means that God created Adam in Adam’s own form, that is, as a fully-formed adult. But many others understand it to be a clarification of Koran 2:30, “He taught Adam the names, all of them.” For further explanation, see Sachiko Murata and W. C. Chittick, The Vision of Islam (New York: Paulist, 1994).

³ This hadith is found in most of the standard sources, such as Bukhârî, Muslim, Tirmidhî, Ibn Mâja, and Dârimî (see A. J. Wensinck, J. P. Mensing, and J. Brugman, Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936-1969], vol. I, p. 486). This sentence is introduced by another sentence that shows a good deal of variation in the sources. A typical version reads, “Surely your soul [nafs] has a haqq against you, your

Lord has a haqq against you, your guest has a haqq against you, and your spouse has a haqq against you, so give to each that has a haqq its haqq.” Although the hadith mentions a limited number of things as possessing haqqs, it has never been understood as providing a definitive list, especially because of the Koranic statements that God created heaven, earth, and everything in between with haqq (15:85, 30:8, 46:3). The whole enterprise of jurisprudence is concerned with discerning the haqqs of things in terms of the instructions of the Shariah.