

Sufi Teachings in Neo-Confucian Islam

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It is an honor for me to be invited to participate in a lecture series named for Professor Victor Danner, for whom I had great respect and affection. The first time I met him was in 1973, at a conference on contemplation and action in world religions. Among the distinguished scholars from all over the world, I remember him as being especially young and handsome. When he spoke, however, he was like a general in the army, very precise and forceful. As a graduate student myself, I thought that his students must be intimidated by him. Two or three years later he appeared in Tehran where I was continuing my studies at Tehran University. He came with Huston Smith and a large number of undergraduates, who were traveling around the world studying various religions on the ground. One evening Victor and Huston came to our house for dinner. I can remember that Victor entertained us the whole time with marvelous stories about their adventures in Japan, China, and India. His dry sense of humor kept us laughing all evening, and I had to revise my opinion of how he would get along with graduate students.

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My topic is rather specialized, but I think it is of general interest to anyone concerned with the sorts of issues that Victor Danner held so dear—such as the profound, inner relationships among religious civilizations. Many people are willing to acknowledge that there

may be such relationships, but few are likely to suspect that Islam and Confucianism provide a good example. This, at least, would have been the opinion of a whole series of Chinese Muslim scholars who started writing about their own religion in the Chinese language in the middle of the seventeenth century.

China had been a significant homeland for Muslims since the early centuries of Islam. There is hard evidence for the presence of Muslim communities from about the tenth century, and today everyone agrees that, at the very minimum, the Muslim population is twenty million. The Chinese Muslim communities were never isolated from Persia or other regions farther west. They kept up knowledge of their own languages and were able to stay abreast with many developments in Islamic learning, and eventually they began to write in Chinese. The first known book was published in 1642 by Wang Tai-yü, who is often called the father of Chinese-language Islam. He was a scholar who lived in Nanjing and eventually moved to Beijing, where he died in about 1658. His book is called Chen-chiao chen-ch'üan, “The Real Commentary on the True Teaching.” In forty chapters, it explains basic Islamic teachings about God, the universe, and the human soul.

In the introduction to The Real Commentary, Wang tells us that the Islamic languages were still the main vehicle for the transmission of learning among Chinese Muslims. But, he says, fewer and fewer people had sufficient knowledge of these languages to grasp the theoretical teachings of their own religion. This is why he felt it necessary to explain Islam to them in a language that they could understand, that is, the literary Chinese of the day. Given that the content of his book is theological and philosophical, Wang had no choice but to employ the concepts and categories of Chinese thinking, which were defined largely by Neo-Confucianism.

What we have in his book is the first example of an extraordinary synthesis that was taking place between Islamic and Chinese learning.

Wang was not writing for non-Muslims, though of course he was also not ignoring their presence. To a certain degree, he would have been responding to the Chinese writings of the famous Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, who had flourished in Nanjing only a few decades earlier. Nonetheless, Wang's writings and those of later authors did not have the primary intention of converting non-Muslims or defending the faith against outside criticism. Rather, they wanted to preserve the essential teachings of the Islamic tradition for the Muslim community itself. All of these authors were very much aware of the enormous power of assimilation possessed by Chinese civilization, and they wanted to fend off the danger of the loss of Islamic teachings and practices.

It is worth mentioning that, although the authors of such writings were convinced of Islam's superiority over other religions, they showed little hostility toward the so-called "Three Teachings"—that is, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. They did not react defensively toward other belief systems in the manner of modern apologists. Instead, they embraced the language and many of the perspectives of the Three Teachings in order to clarify the specific viewpoints that set Islam apart and made it uniquely adequate—in their view—to guide people to the achievement of perfection and fulfillment. In other words, they were fully confident that Islam was the best teaching, but they also acknowledged, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, that the Three Teachings were legitimate ways to achieve human perfection.

By saying that Chinese Muslims used the language of the Three Teachings, I do not mean to suggest that they saw all three schools of thought as equally valid. In fact, for the most part, they allied themselves with Neo-Confucianism, which had been the predominant teaching of

China from the twelfth century. Neo-Confucianism elaborated upon the early Confucian teachings with great philosophical sophistication. Part of the goal of its major authors was to respond to issues raised by Taoism and Buddhism. Great scholars like Chu Hsi (d. 1200) integrated a good deal of Taoist and Buddhist wisdom into the Neo-Confucian perspective, even though they continued to criticize both these schools of thought.

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Two obvious examples of the Neo-Confucian leanings of Chinese Muslims are found in the titles of books by their two greatest scholars. I have already mentioned the first of these scholars, Wang Tai-yü. In addition to “The Real Commentary,” he wrote a treatise called Ch’ing-chen ta-hsüeh, “The Great Learning of the Pure and Real,” which analyzes the concept of tawhīd, or the unity of God, and then develops some of its theoretical implications. The title is an explicit acknowledgement of Wang’s debt to Neo-Confucianism. “Great Learning” is the title of one of the Confucian classics, a short text compiled by a chief disciple of Confucius and given special prominence by Chu Hsi and other Neo-Confucian scholars. By naming his own book after The Great Learning, Wang was asserting that Islamic teachings have a close kinship with the Neo-Confucian tradition.

An even more explicit assertion of the kinship between Islam and Neo-Confucianism is found in the title of the most important book of Chinese Islam, T’ien-fang hsing-li, first published in 1704 and known to have been reprinted at least twenty-five times by the early twentieth century. Its author is Liu Chih, whose exact dates are unknown. He lived in Nanjing and taught at the same mosque where Wang Tai-yü had taught. He has also left us with several other noteworthy Chinese books on Islamic teachings, including a well-known biography of Muhammad.

The title of Liu Chih's book, T'ien-fang hsing-li, has usually been translated as "The Philosophy of Islam." The expression t'ien-fang means "heavenly square" or "heavenly direction." It was used by Chinese Muslims to refer to Mecca and also to designate the Islamic perspective in general, so it is not strange to translate it as "Islam." But, hsing-li cannot mean "philosophy" in the manner in which this word is used in Islamic studies. There are reasons for translating it this way, but by doing so we lose the connection with Neo-Confucianism that is obvious to the Chinese reader.

The expression hsing-li has a precise technical meaning. Literally, it means "nature and principle." These are two key terms in Neo-Confucian thought. So important are they that Neo-Confucian scholars often call their own perspective hsing-li hsüeh, that is, "The Learning about Nature and Principle." Hence, when Liu Chih called his book T'ien-fang hsing-li, he was suggesting that the book presents Islamic teachings in Neo-Confucian terms. Not only that, but any reader of the book will immediately see that it is full of terminology and concepts drawn from Neo-Confucian thought. Perhaps the most accurate way to translate the title into English is "The Neo-Confucian Teachings of Islam" or simply "Islamic Neo-Confucianism."

Tu Weiming, the director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the best-known scholar of Neo-Confucianism in North America, has been working with me and my husband on a translation of Liu Chih's book into English. He is not doing so simply because he believes that Chinese Islam deserves to be better known in the West, but also because he believes that Liu Chih is an important Neo-Confucian thinker. He sees him as genuinely Chinese and true to the Confucian tradition. At the same time, Tu acknowledges that Liu Chih has opened up new directions in Neo-Confucian thought that have not been explored by the Neo-Confucian scholars

themselves. In his view, Liu Chih's work can be an important source of inspiration for the future development of Neo-Confucian philosophy.¹

I do not want to leave the impression, however, that Liu Chih was writing a book that departs from the mainstream of Islamic thinking or from Islamic "philosophy" in the general sense of the term. In fact, his "Islamic Neo-Confucianism" is perfectly consonant with a major stream of Islamic thought. After all, we need to ask the question, "Did Liu Chih have in view any specific Arabic and Persian texts in his presentation of Islam to Chinese readers?" When we look for the answer to this question, it becomes clear that Liu Chih did indeed have specific texts in view. He is being faithful to the strand of Islamic thinking that can be called "theoretical Sufism." In modern-day Persian, this school of thought is known as irfān or "gnosis," and it is clearly distinguished from falsafa or "philosophy." The most important representative of this school is Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), called by the Sufis al-shaykh al-akbar, "the greatest teacher" or "the greatest master."

When we look at Liu Chih's T'ien-fang hsing-li from the standpoint of the Neo-Confucian tradition and ignore the Islamic context, there is little in the text that would lead us to suspect that it is based on Islamic sources. Liu Chih mentions only sixteen Arabic names and terms, and only one of these would suggest that he is drawing from the school of Ibn 'Arabī. Nine of the words are geographical and cosmological terms used commonly in many sorts of writings. The other seven are names of individuals—Jesus; 'Umar, the third caliph; 'Alī, the fourth caliph; Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī, the famous Sufi; and two others whom I have not yet been able to identify. The final name is 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, from whom Liu Chih quotes on a few occasions. It is this mention of Jāmī, an outstanding scholar and Persian poet who died in 1492, that might alert us to his connection with Ibn 'Arabī's school of thought. Jāmī wrote a great deal

of prose and poetry that was extremely influential in propagating Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings, not only in Persia, but also throughout the Turkish and Indian worlds.

As far as I have been able to tell, only four books on Islamic theoretical (as opposed to legal) teachings were translated into Chinese before the twentieth century. All four of these are famous Persian Sufi texts, and two of them are by Jāmī. Liu Chih himself, some years after he wrote Islamic Neo-Confucianism, translated what is probably Jāmī’s most famous prose work, Lawā’ih, into Chinese.ⁱⁱ In the late seventeenth century another Muslim scholar had already translated Jāmī’s commentary on Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī’s Persian classic, Lama’āt.

The mere mention of Jāmī’s name and a few quotations from him would not, of course, be convincing evidence for the presence of Sufi teachings in Liu Chih’s work. When we look at the actual contents of his Islamic Neo-Confucianism and ask ourselves which sort of Islamic thought could have inspired it, then we come to the conclusion that theoretical Sufism is the only real candidate. Instead of explaining here why this is so, however, I want to turn to the actual contents of the book. Those familiar with theoretical Sufism will see that there are many well-known themes.ⁱⁱⁱ

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T’ien-fang hsing-li is divided into six sections. The twenty-page first section is called the “root classic” (pen-ching), by which Liu Chih means that it is based on important Persian and Arabic writings, mainly the four Sufi texts I alluded to. He is not, however, translating passages from these books. Rather, he is rewriting basic concepts and themes in Neo-Confucian terms.

In the Root Classic, Liu Chih outlines the guiding principles of Islamic metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, and prophetology in five short chapters and then illustrates these principles with ten diagrams. In the next five sections of the book, he analyzes each of the five

chapters of the Root Classic with twelve diagrams, for a total of sixty more diagrams. Each of the diagrams has an accompanying text of two or three pages. Thus he provides a total of seventy diagrams and about 150 pages of text.

The structure of the Root Classic and of Liu Chih's whole book can best be understood in terms of the doctrine of "Origin and Return" (mabda' wa ma'ād). This expression comes generally from Islamic philosophy, though the two words can be traced back to the Koran. When Ibn 'Arabī and his followers talk about Origin and Return, they commonly discuss it in terms of "the circle of existence" (dā'irat al-wujūd), which is divided into two "arcs" (qaws), the descending arc and the ascending arc. For Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, these "two arcs," mentioned in Koran 53:9, refer to the two basic movements that animate the entire cosmos: the descending, creative movement through which all things appear from God; and the ascending, re-integrative movement, through which everything goes back to God.

In short, in the school of Ibn 'Arabī, as in much of Islamic philosophy, the basic structure of the cosmos is understood in terms of two grand movements, which the philosophers commonly call "Origin and Return" and the Sufis often call "the two arcs." It is highly significant that the only Koranic verse that Liu Chih mentions in the entire text of his book is precisely the verse that mentions the Two Arcs.

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Let me now provide a few examples of Liu Chih's diagrams and suggest how he uses them to synthesize Islamic and Neo-Confucian thinking.

The first chapter of the Root Classic begins by talking about the "nondesignation" of the utmost origin of all things (Diagram 0.1). This first level corresponds to the Taoist and Neo-Confucian concept of wu chi, the "Ultimate of Non-Being," which is mentioned in the famous

first line of the Tao-Te Ching as the “name that cannot be named.” In Islamic terms, this is the “Essence” (dhāt) or, in terminology often used by Jami and other members of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, it is “nonentification” (lā ta‘ayyun). Liu Chih refers to it right at the beginning of the Root Classic with these words: “The Very Beginning has no designation, the Real Substance has no attachment. Only this is True Being, holding the One, containing the ten thousand.”

Diagram 0.2 pictures the Original One and the descending arc of its manifestation. Here the One is called “substance” (t’i). When Liu Chih calls the One by this name, he is differentiating it from “function” (yung). In Neo-Confucian thought, the relationship between substance and function is similar to that between essence (dhāt) and attributes (sifāt) in Islamic theology. The diagram specifies that the “function” of the One Being is knowledge and power, or omniscience and omnipotence. Throughout the text, these two terms—knowledge and power—are Liu Chih’s shorthand for the divine attributes. The usual approach of Muslim scholars is to speak of the basic attributes as four or seven, but speaking of them as two is also not uncommon—as, for example, in discussion of the “two hands” of God, namely beauty and majesty, or mercy and wrath.^{iv}

Substance and function give rise to the level of Act, in which four attributes appear—transforming, producing, granting, and depriving. At the fourth level, the heavenly Mandate represents divine activity in terms of nature and wisdom; the term that corresponds to Mandate in Arabic is amr, “command,” which is used in Islamic thought with the same sort of nuances that Mandate has in Confucian thought. In the fifth level, the World of Principle appears, and it embraces both the principle of all things and the principle of human nature, that is, the principles of both macrocosm and microcosm. This world of principles is what Muslim cosmologists call the World of the Sovereignty (‘ālam al-malakūt), or the World of the Spirits (‘ālam al-arwāḥ).

Finally, manifestation reaches the lowest point on the circle of existence, which Liu Chih calls “the Vast Sediment.” This represents a primordial “chaos” that now starts becoming organized into a “cosmos” during the continued unfoldment of the circle of existence as it moves back toward the unity of the Root Substance. It corresponds to what Ibn ‘Arabī calls the Dust (habā’), that is, Prime Matter, or Hylé (hayūlā).

As can be seen from the title of Diagram 0.2, Liu Chih calls the arc of descent from Substance down to the Vast Sediment “the former heaven.” Here he employs a standard Neo-Confucian term for the invisible principles that are present before the earth becomes manifest. When we turn to Diagram 0.3, we see that he calls the arc of ascent back to the Original Substance “the latter heaven,” a term that in Chinese thought is commonly used to refer to heaven as it stands in relation to earth. This is this ascending arc of the circle, which begins with the Vast Sediment, which is now called the original “Vital Energy” (ch’i). As Vital Energy begins to manifest itself, it becomes differentiated first into yin and yang. These two then give rise to the four elements, and the four elements produce heaven and earth.

As the two diagrams make clear, the first four stages of the Latter Heaven correspond to the first four stages of the Former Heaven. Hence, the World of Principle in the Former Heaven corresponds to the World of Images in the Latter Heaven. Just as the World of Principle gives rise to the Vast Sediment, which is the Vital Energy that turns back toward the Origin, so the World of Images embraces inanimate things and plants, and this leads to the appearance of the life of animals and humans, and ultimately to the return to original Unity.

Diagrams 0.2 and 0.3 outline the structure of the macrocosm. They are elaborated upon in the twelve diagrams pertaining to the first chapter. One of the more complicated of these is number 1.6, which shows that the World of Principle in the Former Heaven embraces the basic

divisions of things and of human nature. Here we see a detailed parallelism between the microcosmic domain of individuals and the macrocosmic domain of the heavens and the four elements.

At the top of the diagram, Nature and Principle are identical at the level of the ‘arsh or divine Throne, which is the nature of the Utmost Sage, a designation reserved for the Prophet Muhammad. Thus the topmost circle represents what the Sufi tradition commonly calls “the Muhammadan Reality” (al-haqīqat al-Muhammadiyya), depicted as the principle of both macrocosm and microcosm. The descending levels of the circle and the correspondences with the types of human beings and other creatures are all derived directly from Maqṣad-i aqṣā of ‘Azīz Nasafī (d. ca. 1300), one of Liu Chih’s main sources.

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Chapter Two of the Root Classic explains how the divine attributes give rise to both the microcosm, or the human individual, and the macrocosm, or the cosmos as a whole. The overall scheme of the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm is represented in Diagrams 0.6 and 0.7 from the Root Classic. Diagram 0.6 shows how the macrocosm appears from Substance and returns to Substance by way of the human being. Diagram 0.7 illustrates how the microcosm traverses corresponding levels in the process of development and the achievement of human perfection.

Chapter Three deals with the manner in which human beings undergo spiritual development from the embryo to the encounter with God. The contents of the chapter are summarized in Diagrams 0.4 and 0.5. Diagram 0.4 represents the development of the embryo from the father’s seed to the appearance of the living spirit. Diagram 0.5 shows the embryo’s developmental stages, which begin as soon as the body has been formed in the womb. These

stages extend to the point of “continuity,” which is the union of the human spirit with the Real Being. The six levels represent those of inanimate things, plants, animals, ordinary human beings, spiritually accomplished human beings, and sages.

Chapter Four describes the virtues that need to be achieved in order to reach human perfection. By following the path of spiritual cultivation described in Chapter Three, human beings achieve what Liu Chih calls “circling back to the Origin.” Along the way, the virtues are actualized in the heart. The heart, in the Chinese as well as the Islamic tradition, is the seat of the spirit and the locus of union with the One Being. Diagram 4.2 shows that the heart has seven ascending levels, each of which actualizes a specific virtue. Liu Chih calls the innermost and highest level of the heart, within which the Real Lord becomes manifest, the “first heart” or the “real’s appearance.” This is the heart that embraces God, frequently discussed in Sufism. These seven levels are derived from Liu Chih’s main source, Mirṣād al-‘ibād of Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256).

Liu Chih explains that the Former Heaven appears from this first heart, which is to say that the descending levels of cosmic manifestation derive from it. In the same way, the Latter Heaven is arranged such that all levels of its manifestation culminate in the return to the first heart. Diagram 4.3 is Liu’s most complete representation of the whole scheme of his book. It illustrates the circle of descent from the Lord Ruler, who is identical with the real heart, down to the seed, and then back again through the levels of human accomplishment until the achievement of continuity. In the text that explains this diagram, he quotes the Koranic verse that refers to two arcs, the arc of descent and the arc of ascent. Then he explains the meaning of the two arcs as follows:

The two arcs are the coming and descent, which make one arc, and the going back and ascent, which make the other arc. When the descent and ascent have been completed, the worlds of the two arcs are united. He who goes back to the utmost nearness surpasses and goes beyond the world of names and guises and stands in the Not-Even-Anything Village. The Complete Substance is undifferentiatedly transformed and deeply united with the Root Suchness. This is the realm of the practice of the Utmost Sage alone.

The fifth and final chapter of the Root Classic is a summation of the whole text in terms of a metaphysics of unity. In this scheme, Liu Chih presents us with three modalities of unity in terms of which the universe comes into existence and all things return to God.^v As shown by Diagrams 0.8 and 0.9, the first level of unity is called the “Real One.” It represents the undivided nature of the substance and function of the One Being. The second level is the “Numerical One,” and it is the function of the One Substance that gives rise to the universe. The third level is the “Embodied One,” which is the function that brings things back to the One through human perfection. All three ones are essentially the same One Being. As Liu Chih writes, “The three ones are not three; they are one, yet they are three meanings.”

Liu Chih goes on to explain that each of the three ones has three levels of manifestation. Diagrams 5.1 through 5.3 illustrate the three levels of each of the three Ones, culminating in a fourth level that represents the manifestation of the One in the universe. It is not too difficult to see in this representation of the three ones the three principles of Islamic thought—tawhīd, prophecy, and the Return to God.

Diagram 5.1 shows the unity of substance, function, act, and things—a scheme that is similar to the Islamic differentiation of Essence, attribute, act, and creation. In Diagram 5.2, we

see that the Numerical One becomes manifest as the sages and their teachings. Thus the Numerical One is the principle of prophecy in God himself. Diagram 5.3 shows the Embodied One, whose levels represent various degrees of advancement on the path of the Return to God until the final station of “continuity” or union.

The final diagram of the book, number 5.12, is identical with Number 0.10, the last diagram pertaining to the Root Classic. However, Number 0.10 is labeled “The Undifferentiated Transformation of Heaven and Human” and Number 5.12 is given a label more fitting for the detailed discussion of the nature of unity in Chapter Five: “The Circling Back to the Real of the Real One.”

The very end of the Root Classic, which this diagram illustrates, reads as follows:

The [three] Ones come home to the Root Suchness,
 and heaven and humans are undifferentiatedly transformed.
 The things and the I’s come home to the Real,
 and the Real One circles back to the Real.
 The things are not obstructed by the guises,
 and humans are not burdened by desire.
 The subtle meaning of each is disclosed
 and thereby the Root Suchness is seen.
 In the beginning was the True Principle
 and now is the True Guise.
 When the True Being is seen as Guise,
 the seed and fruit are complete.

ⁱ See Sachiko Murata, William C. Chittick, and Tu Weiming, The Sagely Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming.

ⁱⁱ I have translated his version of the Lawā'ih into English in my Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). It is printed with a translation of the original Persian text by W. C. Chittick on the facing pages.

ⁱⁱⁱ For detailed explanation of the text in both Confucian and Islamic terms along with reference to Liu Chih's sources, see Murata et al., The Sagely Learning.

^{iv} See Murata, The Tao of Islam (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), Chapter 3.

^v These same three levels of unity are discussed in detail in Wang Tai-yü's treatise "The Great Learning of the Pure and the Real," translated in Chinese Gleams.