

The Three Dimensions of Confucian Islam

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Muslims lived in China for almost a thousand years before they felt that they were losing touch with the Persian and Arabic learning that sustained them. One scholar in particular, 胡登洲 Hu Dengzhou, who died around 1597, understood that Islam could not survive among Chinese-speakers unless Muslim scholars could express themselves in the sophisticated language of Neo-Confucian learning. He established a school in Xianyang 咸陽 in Shaanxi with the goal of training students in both the Islamic and the Chinese classics, and soon some of his accomplished students founded schools elsewhere. The first known literary fruit of this new approach to Islamic learning is a book by 王岱輿 Wang Daiyu, 正教真詮 *Zhengjiao zhenquan*, “The Real Commentary on the True Teaching,” published in the year 1642. Before too long, these scholars came to be called the 回儒 Huiru, the Muslim Confucians, and their writings the Han Kitab (漢克塔補 *Han Qitabu*), a Chinese-Arabic hybrid word meaning the Chinese Books.¹

The Huiru flourished well into the nineteenth century and produced a number of significant scholars. The most sophisticated and influential seems to have been 劉智 Liu Zhi, who published a trilogy explaining Islam’s basic teachings over a period of twenty years beginning in 1703. The first word in the title of each volume is 天方 *tianfang*, meaning the Islamic tradition. The three books dealt respectively with theory, practice, and the embodiment of both theory and practice in the person of the prophet Muhammad.

Liu Zhi called the third volume of his trilogy 天方至聖實錄 *Tianfang zhisheng shilu*, “The True Record of the Utmost Sage of Islam.” Early last century the book caught the attention of the American missionary, Isaac Mason, who published a partial translation in Shanghai in 1921 with the title *The Arabian Prophet*.² Mason and others considered it the most important of Liu Zhi’s books, not least because of its relative popularity and its anecdotal recounting of Muhammad’s life.

The second book of the trilogy deals with the practices of the religion and their rationale. Liu Zhi called it 天方典禮 *Tianfang dianli*, “Rules and Proprieties of Islam.” Its significance for the Chinese Muslim community has been studied by James Frankel in *Rectifying God’s Name: Liu Zhi’s Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law*.³ Frankel shows that the book made a positive impression even on members of the Confucian elite, some of whom wrote introductions to it. He argues that it was the most important of the three volumes because of its attention to ritual and social harmony. It helped both Muslims and non-Muslims perceive Islam as a reconfirmation of the wisdom of Confucius and the ancient sage-kings.

The first of the three volumes to appear, 天方性理 *Tianfang xingli*, “Nature and Principle in Islam,” became the focus of my own research about a dozen years ago, after I had published *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, which introduces both Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi and translates two of their short works. With my collaborators, William C. Chittick and Tu Weiming, I spent several years studying and translating *Tianfang xingli*. We were attracted by the manner in which Liu Zhi expresses Islamic teachings without using the Arabic words that are employed in both Islamic and modern European languages. Liu Zhi and other Huiru avoided transliteration and chose words from the current vocabulary of the Chinese intellectual tradition, which was dominated by Neo-Confucian thought. We undertook our study as a collaborative effort because it would have been impossible

for any one of us working alone to decipher the text or to understand the manner in which Liu Zhi draws simultaneously from sources like the Neo-Confucian philosopher 朱熹 Zhu Xi (d. 1200) and his younger contemporary, the great Muslim philosopher-theologian Ibn `Arabī (d. 1240).

Despite Frankel's strong argument for the primary importance of *Tianfang dianli* in the Chinese context, it seemed clear to us that Liu Zhi himself considered *Tianfang xingli* his most important work. This is because the book aims at clarifying the foundational issue of all Islamic thought, which is the very nature of things. Muslim theologians, philosophers, and thinkers took it for granted that one cannot sincerely practice the religion without understanding the theoretical framework that legitimates the practice.

Putting theory before practice is the traditional, time-honored approach to the religion. It is given ritual expression in the first of the five obligatory acts, the so-called Five Pillars of Islam. These are bearing witness, performing the daily prayer, paying the alms-tax, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. "Bearing witness" or Shahadah (*shahāda*) is to pronounce the Arabic formula, "I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's messenger." In other words the most basic ritual act of a Muslim is to acknowledge publicly the reality of God and the prophethood of Muhammad.

When we look at the Shahadah in terms of the meaning of its two component statements—"There is no god but God" and "Muhammad is God's messenger"—we can see why Islamic scholarship understands these two as the foundation of all Islamic thought. Keep in mind that Islam has no clergy. What qualifies a person to speak about matters of the religion is knowledge alone. The qualified are called ulama (Arabic *ulamā'*), a word that means literally knowers or scholars. There is no institution that can vouch for their qualification, so that is decided by other scholars and the community at large. Muslim scholars developed a number of fields of learning and addressed three basic issues: right practice, correct understanding, and self-cultivation. Right practice became the specialty of jurists, that is, lawyers whose expertise lies in the interpretation of the revealed law (the Shariah). Correct understanding was addressed by several schools of thought, including theology, philosophy, and Sufism (mystical wisdom). Self-cultivation was the specialty of teachers whom the community recognized as having achieved nearness to God.⁴

Islamic thought typically speaks of three basic principles, all of which can be derived from the two formulae of the Shahadah. The first is the unity of God (*tawhīd*), the second prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and the third the return to God (*ma`ād*). These are topics that need to be understood if someone is trying to grasp the nature of things. Scholars who dedicated themselves to these three topics wrote voluminously in fields of learning that might be called metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology. Their basic standpoint, as Tu Weiming has said about the Confucian tradition, was an anthropocosmic vision. In other words, Muslim thinkers saw the universe and the human being as two parallel realms of being, often called macrocosm and microcosm. They understood each as a complete transcription of the other, and they saw both as reflecting the Supreme Reality, which theologians called God and philosophers called the Necessary Being or the First Real.

These topics may sound “abstract” to the uninitiated, but this is because the principles of any worldview necessarily address issues of ultimate reality, cosmology, epistemology, psychology, and so on. Neither the Neo-Confucian nor the Islamic manner of dealing with ultimate questions is any more abstract than the theories that underlie our modern-day, scientific worldview, with its appeal to complicated mathematical formulae and abstruse scientific theories that only a tiny fraction of scientific experts begin to understand.

Any historical overview of the Islamic tradition will show that issues of metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology were the preoccupation of the greatest scholars of every generation. These topics were studied because they were aids to self-cultivation, the discipline of the soul that could lead to the final goal of human existence. Liu Zhi, along with Confucian scholarship going back to the Yijing, sometimes called this final goal “achieving one body with heaven and earth” or “becoming a sage.”⁵

In short, Liu Zhi’s *Tianfang xingli* is a remarkable summary and analysis of the Islamic worldview expressed in the language of Neo-Confucian scholarship. He alerts us to this fact with the very title of the book: *xingli* alludes to 性理學 *xingli xue*, “the learning of nature and principle,” one of the names by which Neo-Confucian scholars designated their own school of thought.

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To provide even a brief summary of the manner in which Liu Zhi harmonizes the Islamic and Confucian worldviews would be impossible in a few short pages. Instead I would like to look at one relatively small issue that he discusses while addressing the issue of self-cultivation. In order to do so, I need to explain something about the context of the Islamic works from which he is drawing.

Much of *Tianfang xingli* is based on four Persian works, all of which were widely read in the Persianate lands of Islam, which means the Muslim lands extending from Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia into the Indian sub-continent and points farther east, not least China. In these regions, the Persian language played a role equal to or greater than Arabic in the spread of Islamic learning. Of these four Persian books, two were written by a famous and extremely influential scholar of the fifteenth century, `Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī from Herat (d. 1492), one of the primary conduits by which the teachings of Ibn `Arabī spread throughout the Persianate lands. The other two were written by thirteenth-century scholars. The book Liu Zhi makes the most use of is called “The Path of the Servants from the Origin to the Return” (*Mirsād al-`ibād min al-mabda’ ila’l-ma`ād*) and was written by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256). This book was widely studied in all Persianate lands, not least because of the comprehensive way in which it explains Islamic theory and practice. It is the first known book on the religion to be translated into Chinese (by 伍子先 Wu Zixian in the year 1670), and it became a standard teaching text among Chinese Muslims. The second thirteenth-century book that Liu Zhi used is “The Furthest Goal” (*Maqsad-i aqsā*) by `Azīz Nasafī (d. ca. 1295), author of several concise and relatively simple expositions of Islamic metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology.

In the introductions to their books both Rāzī and Nasafī provide an outline of the Islamic tradition with a scheme that had become commonplace in attempts to present the its global teachings. According to this way of looking at Islam, it has three constituent factors. One is called the Shariah (*sharī`a*), literally the avenue. It is the broad path of

ritual and social obligations that all Muslims must observe, beginning with the already mentioned Five Pillars.

The second constituent factor is called the Tariqah (*tarīqa*), literally, the narrow path. It is the way of self-cultivation established by the inner life of the prophet Muhammad. The broad outline of the Tariqah is provided by the Prophet's ascent (*mi`rāj*) into the presence of God and his return to the community, an event that plays an extremely important role in the Islamic universe. This event provides in concrete, mythic language the reason for the revelation of the Koran. God sent the Koran to mankind so that mankind could rise up to God, as is proven by the Prophet's own ascent to God. Generally, the religion talks about ascending to God posthumously, but a vast literature also addresses the Tariqah as the path of ascension already in this life.

Teachers who taught self-cultivation typically did so in terms of a "ladder," which is the literal meaning of the Arabic word *mi`rāj*. Each rung of the ladder was given the name of a virtue or a beautiful character trait. Each succeeding rung built upon the previous rungs and prepared the way for the next. The highest rung was then the actualization of the divine presence in the heart, or, in Chinese terms, the achievement of one body with heaven and earth. In a typical account of the ladder, the rungs would be enumerated with an archetypal number, like seven, forty, or one hundred, and each rung would be described in detail.⁶

The third constituent factor of the Islamic tradition is the Haqiqah, literally, the reality. The reality is God understood as both the source and the goal of the Shariah and the Tariqah. God is their source because He revealed the Koran and sent Muhammad as the guide for the community. God is the goal because both Shariah and Tariqah are part of the Straight Path (*al-sirāt al-mustaqīm*), which all practicing Muslims ask to be guided upon in their daily prayers. It is this straight path, which embraces both Shariah and Tariqah, that leads ultimately to the encounter with God.

Talking about the Islamic tradition in terms of these three constituent elements provides a concise outline of three interrelated topics that are discussed in countless Arabic and Persian books. From their earliest writings about Islam in the Chinese language, Muslims employed this same scheme, so it became a standard discussion among the Huiru. The three characters used to translate the three Arabic words—禮 *li*, 道 *dao*, and 真 *zhen*—are sometimes given a calligraphic design in traditional Chinese mosques, which harmoniously blend the Confucian and Islamic artistic traditions.

These three characters have long histories in Chinese thought. I hardly need to say that *dao* is one of the most important single words in the vocabulary of each of the Three Teachings, for each Teaching speaks of a "path" that must be followed if one is to reach the goal, even if the goal is described differently. As for propriety, this term embraces ritual activity in the broadest sense and is utterly basic to Confucian thought. It is also the theme of Liu Zhi's *Tianfang dianli*.

As for the word *zhen*, it suggests attention to Daoist and Buddhist texts, since both employ the word with reverence. In Buddhism, for example, the "Real I" is the self that dwells in Nirvana, and the "Real Principle" designates the ultimate suchness. Daoists speak of the Dao in itself as the "Real One" and talk about the "Real Realm" as that of the heavenly immortals. Muslim thinkers would have no difficulty understanding the purport of the following passage from Zhuangzi, which tells us that Confucius consulted with a Daoist sage, who spoke to him about *zhen*:

Confucius looked shamefaced and said, "Please, may I ask what you mean by 'the Real'?"

The visitor said, "By 'the Real' I mean refinement and sincerity in their highest degree. He who lacks refinement and sincerity cannot move others . . . When a man has the Real within himself, his spirit may move externally. That is why the Real is to be considered noble! . . . Propriety is what is made by the common people of the world; the Real is what is received from Heaven. By nature it is self-so, and it cannot be changed. Therefore the sage rules himself by heaven, considers the Real noble, and does not adhere to the common. The stupid man does the opposite of this. (Book 31)

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Liu Zhi composed *Tianfang xingli* in six parts. The first part is called the Root Classic (本經 *benjing*) and consists of 394 lines of 4 characters each. Liu Zhi called it a "classic" because he composed it from sixty short passages translated from well-known and authoritative Islamic texts, mainly the four books by the three mentioned authors. The Root Classic is divided into five chapters dealing respectively with the creative flow from the Ultimate Reality, the development of the cosmos, the place of human beings in the cosmos, the path of self-cultivation, and the final goal, which is the achievement of one body with heaven and earth. Each of the five subsequent parts of the book explains one of the five chapters in detail, in each case with the help of twelve diagrams.

One of the diagrams in the section on self-cultivation summarizes the interrelationship of propriety, the way, and the Real in a manner that ties together much of what Liu Zhi has already discussed in the book. The diagram is labeled "The True Practice of Sage Endeavor" and is composed of four concentric circles. The middle circle is designated "Root Suchness" (本然 *benran*), by which Liu Zhi has in mind what Islamic thought calls the Divine Essence (*dhāt*), that is, God in Himself without regard to anything else. In contrast, the Haqiqah or the Real (*zhen*) is God inasmuch as He is the source and goal of the creative transformation, which drives the cosmos from its creation until its return to Him.

Beginning from the outside, the three surrounding circles of the diagram are labeled Propriety, Way, and Real. Each also has a second label designating one segment of the human microcosm. In keeping with much of Islamic spiritual psychology, Liu Zhi analyzes the human being in terms of three fundamental components. Islamic texts typically call them body (*jism*), soul or self (*nafs*), and spirit (*rūh*). According to the Koran's account of Adam's creation, God first molded Adam's body from clay, then He blew into him of His spirit. Hence Adam was made from spirit and body, but he was not the individual self (*nafs*) of Adam until he came to life at the conjunction of body and spirit. Thus the living soul is the bridge that connects the divine spirit with the physical body.

The soul is often called the heart (*qalb*). As a verb, the Arabic word for heart means to fluctuate, alternate, and change. It is said that the soul is called a heart because it is being pulled in two directions at once—toward the heavenly spirit and the earthly body—so the heart fluctuates between the two pulls. The notion of the soul as an

intermediary, ambiguous reality hanging between heaven and the earth has numerous implications that are thoroughly developed by Muslim thought.⁷

To translate the Islamic notions of body, soul, and spirit, Liu Zhi uses the words body (*shen* 身), heart (*xin* 心), and nature (*xing* 性). Again, each of these words plays important roles in Chinese thought. As already mentioned, nature along with principle is especially prominent in Neo-Confucianism. Modern interpreters of the Confucian tradition, most of whom have focused on its ethical and social sides, have tended to understand nature in “naturalistic” terms, ignoring the supernatural overtones of the word, which were obvious to Muslim Chinese. In any case, Liu Zhi consistently translates the word spirit (*rūh*) as *xing*. In the early chapters of the book, he provides a detailed metaphysics and cosmology, at the center of which stands nature/spirit as the manifestation of Heaven’s mandate (命 *ming*), which in Arabic is known as God’s command (*amr*). The role that Liu Zhi gives to nature is exactly the same as that given to spirit in Islamic metaphysics. At the same time, Liu’s exposition of nature, heart, and mandate follows Neo-Confucian teachings and accords nicely with the saying of Mencius: “He who fully realizes his heart knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven.”

To come back to the diagram called “The True Practice of Sage Endeavor,” Liu explains that only the sages have reached the goal of human life, for they alone have become one body with heaven and earth. This means that they alone have true practice. They have achieved unity with the Root Suchness and live on the three levels of body, heart, and nature in conformity with It. Hence only they can provide the guidance for others to reach the goal. The sages make the Root Suchness manifest through their very existence in the world. Spontaneously their bodies exhibit Propriety, their hearts accord with the Way, and their natures are one with the Real. Liu Zhi’s explanation here can be taken as a highly sophisticated manner of explaining a famous saying that is attributed to the Prophet: “The Shariah is my words, the Tariqah my acts, and the Haqiqah my states.”

Under this diagram of Sage Endeavor Liu Zhi defines propriety as “the rules of behavior for daily interaction” and explains that it is the true practice of the body. The Way is “the tendency to resist things and to circle back to the Real,” and it is the true practice of the heart. The Real itself is then “deep unification with the Root Suchness,” and this is the true practice of nature.

In the first part of the book, the Root Classic, Liu Zhi epitomizes Islamic self-cultivation in the following words. Despite the fact that space does not allow me to explain the technical terms and allusions here, enough has already been said to give readers a sense of the manner in which Liu and others among the Huiru saw the Islamic path of encountering God as nothing really different from the Confucian path of becoming a sage:

惟法聖功
修身以禮
明心以道
盡性復命
全體歸真
本然獨湛
大用全明

是謂人極
乃復初心

Only by emulating the Sage's endeavors,
cultivating the body with Propriety,
clarifying the heart with the Way,
and fully realizing nature and going back to the Mandate,
does the complete substance [of the human reality] come home to the Real.
The Root Suchness becomes uniquely transparent,
the Great Function completely clear.
This is called the Human Ultimate
and going back to the first heart.⁸

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- ¹ For an historical overview of this school of thought, see Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005).
- ² Isaac Mason, *The Arabian Prophet: A Life of Mohammed from Chinese and Arabic Sources, a Chinese-Moslem Work by Liu Chia-lien*. (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1921).
- ³ James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).
- ⁴ On the three basic dimensions of Islamic learning, see Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon, 1994).
- ⁵ On some of the diverse ways in which Islamic thought expresses parallel ideas in terms of metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology, see Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- ⁶ The most famous version of the ladder in English is provided by the Persian poet Farīd a-Dīn `Attār in his book *The Conference of the Birds*, which has been translated several times.
- ⁷ See Murata, *Tao of Islam*, especially Chapters 8-10.
- ⁸ Murata, Chittick, and Tu Weiming, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 140-43.