

Hamid Parsania: *Existence and the Fall: Spiritual Anthropology of Islam*, translated and annotated by **Shuja Ali Mirza**

London: ICAS Press, 2006, x+198 pp., PB, ISBN 1-904063-23-3

Far from the chaotic modernity of big cities, certain small, ancient centers of Islamic learning keep functioning as they have over the centuries. Qum is one such place. On any given morning one can see students rushing toward the mosques at dawn, where they sit with their teachers after the prayer and do what their ancestors have done for centuries: learn the mysteries of the cosmos and existence from scholars who have themselves received these sciences from their teachers in similar fashion. This transmission takes place in an intimate but informal environment. There is no enrollment, no registration, no fees to be paid. After the class, students sit in small groups to further explore the intricacies of the topics, some follow the revered teacher for a more exclusive class in a more private setting; others retire to meditate.

After spending a few years with one teacher, the student receives his blessings to move on to a higher level of experience or learning and the hierarchical structure eventually leads one to a level of competence where the student can guide others. At times, books are produced through an intricate and involved process wherein a student compiles class notes, shows them to the teacher, and, after receiving permission, prepares a manuscript which then goes through several readings and changes before publication. In other cases, the teacher prepares the text and the students become part of the process of its editing and publication. In yet another scenario, as is the case with regard to *Existence and the Fall: Spiritual Anthropology of Islam*, a student undertakes to translate the book of his teacher for a wider readership. Originally from Canada, Shuja Ali Mirza has spent many years in Qum, studying the intellectual sciences at the heart of one of the oldest centres of learning in Islam. His faithful translation of his teacher's Fārsī work, *Hastī wa Habūt: Insān dar Islām*, brings to the English-speaking readership a wealth of wisdom, insights, and a systematic exposition of spiritual anthropology in Islam, by which term the translator distinguishes religious anthropology from so-called "scientific anthropology." This scientific anthropology can conceive existence, but not the Fall; it can study man from a humanistic perspective, but cannot entertain the existence of anything higher.

As opposed to this modern caricature, spiritual anthropology relies on revelation and intellect as two sources of its cognitive content; the former furnishes the basic premises on which the latter constructs a veritable science of existence. Revelation provides authentic data concerning the

visible and the unseen worlds, the creation, the fall, the Creator-created relationship, the hierarchy of existence and existents, and the Intellect attempts to fathom the mysteries of existence through a systematic process. The result is a systematic body of knowledge, placing humanity within a hierarchy of existent things. These and related topics form the core of *Existence and the Fall*, which presents a rich flavor of Islamic intellectual tradition. The book is a valuable addition to the scant resources available to English-speaking readers on traditional Islamic cosmology.

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William C. Chittick: *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World*

Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007, xi+159 pp., PB, ISBN 978-1-85168-495-3

In the short introduction to this work, William Chittick states that after almost forty years of sitting back and letting sages such as Rūmī, Ibn ‘Arabī, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, Afḥal al-Dīn Kāshānī, Shams-i Tabrīzī, and Mullā Ṣadrā speak through his translations, he has finally felt at ease in applying their wisdom to the complex problems of the contemporary world. At the heart of this book consisting of seven chapters, all but one of which were originally written as lectures for conferences, is the question: “how do we know what we know?”

Religious traditions clearly distinction two modes of knowing and hence the two kinds of knowledge: transmitted (*naqlī*) and intellectual (*‘aqlī*). The former is passed from generation to generation, the latter is learned by training the mind and polishing the heart. Transmitted knowledge is revealed knowledge. God wants the believers to fast during the month of Ramaḍān; He reveals this to the Prophet who transmits it to the believers and those who hear him say so, pass it on those who are not present—and so on down the generations. Intellectual knowledge, on the other hand, is acquired by the knowing subject. Even though it may require teachers, it does not ultimately depend on the authority of the teacher for its verification and existence; it resides in the heart and mind of the knower. That two plus two equals four does not rely on an authority once it has been comprehended.