

The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra

Mohammed Rustom

New York: State University of New York Press, 2012. 243 pages.

Muhammad Rustom's outstanding *The Triumph of Mercy* is a beautifully written study on the celebrated Islamic philosopher Mulla Sadra (d. 1050/1640). The author presents the essence of Sadra's thought in the context of *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, his commentary on the Qur'an's opening chapter, and discusses his methodology, influences, and spiritual outlook. From the myriad discussions in each chapter, which display the author's depth and breadth of scholarship, the work is not only a study of Mulla Sadra's thought but also a précis of the Islamic spiritual tradition itself. This should come as no surprise since the point of departure is *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, which embraces the entirety of the Qur'anic message within its seven verses.

Each chapter is a pithy and fascinating window into the Sadrian synthesis between the "transmitted" and "intellectual" sciences, the Qur'an and *burhān* (reason), and philosophy and mysticism. It covers Qur'anic hermeneutics, metaphysics, cosmology, theology, and soteriology, respectively. The work further sheds light on Sadra's profound attachment to the great master of Sufism, Ibn 'Arabi, including, in the appendix, passages from the latter's *Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* reworked in the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*. In my view, the success of this work lies in, among other things, the author's exceptional ability to convey complex ideas with a clear and cogent vision, thereby widening the readership far beyond the scholar and expert.

The book immediately commands our attention in the introduction, where the author provides critical background on the Qur'anic hermeneutical tradi-

tion, particularly that of Mulla Sadra's contribution and his sixteen tomes related to the Qur'an. Rustom writes: "By the time Sadra wrote *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, he had already penned over ten independent *tafsīrs*. Thus, in *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, we encounter a Mulla Sadra whose thinking on scripture had crystallized" (p. 5). The first chapter outlines his hermeneutics, whereas the second revolves around some formal considerations or practical hermeneutics. In each successive chapter, the author begins to unravel the main elements of Sadra's teaching as they pertain to metaphysics, cosmology, theology, eschatology, and so forth.

In the first chapter, Rustom outlines one key element of Sadra's esoteric hermeneutical vision: The impulse to write a Qur'anic commentary is based in spiritual experience, the purpose of which is to make the soul ascend, as opposed to approaching the Qur'an through exoteric lenses and devoting one's attention to matters of grammar, language, law, and so on. He provides evidence in Sadra's statement:

A command issued from the Lord of my heart, and a spiritual allusion has come forth from my innermost recesses. God's judgment and decision has come to pass and He has decreed that some of the divine symbols become manifest, and that the matters related to the Qur'anic sciences, Prophetic allusions, secrets of faith...be brought forth." (p. 12)

Sadra outlines the esoteric principles underlying these commentaries in his *Mafatīḥ al-Ghayb*, in which he enumerates some of the conditions necessary for the Qur'an's symbols and alludes to its merciful purposes and divine intentions. In particular we learn that the Qur'an is concerned with three things (viz., the Origin, the Return, and the Path) and thus elevates the human being by its very nature.

Rustom then describes Sadra's ontological stance toward the Qur'an: "Although the Qur'an is one reality, it has many levels in its descent [*nuzūl*] and many names in accordance with these levels" (p. 23). Here he describes in detail Sadra's view on the nature of the Qur'an being the Word of God emanating from His Command. Finally, he discusses Sadra's view concerning the relationship between the Qur'an and humanity, which again is to be found in his *Mafatīḥ al-Ghayb*. Toward the end of this chapter we encounter perhaps one of the book's most profound statements, one that resonates with spiritual insight: "In order to penetrate the Qur'an's deepest levels, man must therefore penetrate his own deepest levels. This can only be done when he engages in a *ta'wīl* of his soul, that is, when he causes his soul to return to its true Origin" (p. 29).

In the second chapter, the author turns his attention to Sadra's last formal exegesis of the Qur'an: *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*. The ensuing discussion of its sources and influences is very helpful, not only for the purpose of contextualizing the *tafsīr*, but also for gaining insight into Mulla Sadra's frames of reference. This chapter includes the *tafsīr*'s structure and content, along with a summary of its contents.

In the next two chapters, "Metaphysics" and "Cosmology," respectively, the author demonstrates in greater depth the profound influence of Ibn 'Arabi on Sadra's thought. He does an excellent job of summarizing the latter's view on the divine Essence, the names and their loci, and the place of the all-comprehensive name (*Allāh*), the Muhammadan Reality, and the Perfect Man — all of which are important doctrinal issues in Ibn 'Arabi's school. But more than simply recasting the Andalusian mystic's doctrine in Sadrian terms, the author explains the complex web of terminology and concepts in a way that one who has never encountered Ibn 'Arabi's writings can understand. Moreover, he weaves that metaphysical picture into the main theme of this work: an elucidation of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*. Clearly the names of Allah, *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, are of prime importance, as well as the reality of *al-ḥamd*, which Rustom ties to the nature of divine speech and manifestation. As Sadra says: "The reality of praise, according to the verifying gnostics is the act of making God's attributes of perfection manifest. This could be either through words or it could be in act" (p. 66), whereas the Muhammadan Reality is the "most exalted and tremendous level of praise" (p. 69). As a corollary, he ends "Cosmology" by describing the Perfect Man as a particular manifestation of the Muhammadan Reality and ties this key Sufi concept to the relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm. Quoting Sadra, he writes: "And just as the Perfect Man is a succinct book and an abridged transcription within whom is found all that is in the All-Gathering book... so too is the 'opener of the book'" (p. 72).

The final two topics on theology and soteriology continue the main theses presented in the previous chapters, which further elucidate Sadra's final and most mature commentary on the Qur'an. Since his views concerning the ultimate fate of human beings are highly developed and complex, Rustom devotes the last two chapters to soteriology. Here, he brings to light the unique features of Sadra's doctrine of salvation within the purview of the long-standing Islamic theological tradition. The author then traces Sadra's eschatological views, namely, the problem of eternal punishment in hell, throughout his career citing works such as *Al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ād* (*The Origin and the Return*), *Tafsīr Āyat al-Kursī*, and *Asfār*, and compares his view with that of Ibn 'Arabi and

his commentator Qaysari, upholding the view that “[b]oth hell and heaven will be inhabited by people in conformity with their natures” (p. 90), and borrowing Qaysari’s idea that “the existence of something as chastisement in one respect does not negate its being mercy in another respect” (p. 91). He states that Sadra’s key position on the nature of hell is found in the following passage:

There is no doubt that the entry [into Hell of] the creature whose end is that he should enter Hell – in accordance with the divine lordly decree – will be agreeable to his nature and will be a perfection of his existence. (p. 91)

By the end of the final chapter, we come away with the understanding that Sadra’s approach to the Qur’an is not simply that of a philosopher, but that of one whose insight is based on a certain spiritual awareness inexorably grounded in the mystical teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi. Furthermore, we can conclude that Sadra wished to incorporate his key doctrines and perhaps the corpus of Islamic teachings in what is considered to be the quintessence of the Qur’an. Thus, in this work he addresses every important doctrinal issue from Being, Divinity, the nature of Man, the soul and its salvation — in short, the Origin, the Path, and the Return.

Unfortunately, this review does not do justice to the profundity of this book. The appendices alone are worthy of a lifetime of contemplation. Nevertheless, my purpose here is to point out some of the salient features of this text and assess whether the author has made an important and original contribution to the field. I firmly believe that Muhammad Rustom has succeeded on all accounts. The translations are flawless and the discussions, rich with intellectual history, are lucid and meaningful. I would suggest this volume as a teaching text for courses on Islamic philosophy, mysticism, Qur’anic studies, comparative religion, Islamic intellectual history of the early modern period, Ibn ‘Arabi studies, and Shi‘ism. It is straightforward, well written, and vast in scope.

To properly understand Sadra’s encyclopedic output, one must be well versed in the entire Islamic tradition, namely, the Qur’an and the Hadith literature, theology, law, philosophy, mysticism, history, and so on. To that end one must congratulate Rustom for undertaking this study with such proficiency and depth, particularly on the subject of the Qur’an, or rather “the mother of the Qur’an,” *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*. This work is indeed, as the title suggests, a triumph of mercy.

Mukhtar H. Ali
Thousand Oaks, CA