Equilibrium and Realization:
William Chittick on Self and Cosmos

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ABSTRACT

The cosmos is a vast configuration of words telling a coherent story (for those who understand), and hence it is a book. So also the human being is a book, but human beings, by and large, have forgotten the story line.[1] – William Chittick

William Chittick, currently Professor of Religious Studies at the State University of New York (Stony Brook), is an internationally renowned expert on Islamic thought. His contributions to the fields of Sufism and Islamic philosophy have helped paint a clearer picture of the intellectual and spiritual landscape of Islamic civilization from the 7th Century A.H. onwards. Yet Chittick is not simply concerned with discussions in Islamic thought as artifacts of premodern intellectual history. His vast knowledge of the Islamic intellectual tradition serves as the platform from which he seeks to address a broad range of contemporary issues. In this short essay, Chittick's writings on the self are outlined within the context of his treatment of cosmology. Rather than being outdated ways of looking at the universe and our relationship to it, Chittick argues, the traditional Islamic cosmological teachings are just as pertinent to the question of the self today as they were yesterday.

Introduction

Every student of Islamic thought is familiar with William Chittick's work in one way or another. His numerous studies and translations in the fields of Sufism and Islamic philosophy have paved the way for a better understanding of the ideas of some of the most difficult and profound writers of the pre-modern Islamic civilization.[2] Yet Chittick has of late also been actively involved in bringing his knowledge of the Islamic intellectual tradition to bear on a host of contemporary issues. Muslim (and non-Muslim) thinkers often wonder how figures like al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) or Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 638/1240) would go about addressing today's intellectual concerns. In fact, a good deal of literature has begun to appear which seeks to do just this.[3] But Chittick does not proceed along the same lines. He is more likely to view the current issues through the lens of the pre-modern Islamic intellectual tradition itself. Chittick's writings on today's questions, therefore, draw on the general perspectives of the Islamic intellectual tradition to seek to get at roots of the problems themselves. It is with this in mind that his writings on cosmology and its relationship to the self should be understood. And this is why his work is particularly important today: it is a genuinely Islamic intellectual approach to a problem which has, by and large, not registered on the radar screen of the twenty-first century Islamic thought.[4] A proper understanding of the self and its relationship to the cosmos, Chittick maintains, is the most important question at present, since it is the failure to understand both of these realities that have resulted in our current human predicament.

Scientism and Cosmology

Chittick takes it for granted that by and large, most peoples' perspectives are colored by something called 'scientism'. Scientism is the view which gives primacy to the methods of science in any and all epistemological issues. Since scientism lies at the core of contemporary culture– from disciplines in the academy to technology and finance– it permeates the way humans think. From its perspective, things must be isolated, objectified, distanced from the observer, and subjected to rigorous scientific analysis in order to get at their true nature. Scientism, therefore, restricts to a large degree the possibility of there being a harmonious relationship

between the human self and the cosmos. Objects are 'out there' and therefore distinct from us. Because of this rift between subject and object, the scientistic worldview can only conceive of the cosmos along quantitative lines, rendering its content a mere conglomeration of facts and events which are shorn of any symbolic content. As Chittick puts it about those who have thoroughly imbibed the scientistic worldview:

> [They] look at things, and they cannot see them as anything but things– never as signs or markers or pointers or symbols. From grade school they are taught to believe that things are real in themselves, and that this reality can only be expressed scientifically, which means mathematically and quantitatively. If some qualities, such as colors, can be expressed in numbers, they are real, but those qualities that cannot be expressed quantitatively– and most cannot– are unreal.[5]

Taken to its logical conclusion, a reified and "objective" vision of the cosmos and its furniture results in a worldview in which the cosmic order gradually loses its spiritual significance.[6] This then leads to abstraction, which makes the cosmos before us impersonal, thus rendering human interaction with it an utterly detached enterprise.[7] Once there exists a gulf between self and cosmos, it becomes all the more easier to manipulate the cosmos and its contents according to the specifications of its inhabitants.[8]

Readers familiar with the startling findings of modern physics will undoubtedly aver that the universe is not actually bifurcated, being one unit of sorts from which the observer can never be separate.[9] Yet even if the new physics has something profound to say about the cosmos, the bifurcated conception of the universe continues to be most pervasive. For one thing, since it is still what is 'officially' taught in schools,[10] we learn very quickly that it is the most efficient way of controlling our natural surroundings in order to produce 'results'. Thus technology, material progress, and the purely instrumental nature of science dominate our perspective, since it is through scientism that we can manipulate the cosmos in accordance with our needs and specifications.

Another reason the bifurcated worldview remains most pervasive is that despite what we know about the cosmos today, contemporary cosmology remains meaningless to most people. Even though such books as Stephen Hawkings' *A Brief History of Time* (and his even more accessible *A Briefer History of Time*)[11] have been written to make the findings of contemporary physics accessible to the wider public, we may justifiably ask after reading them through as to what practical benefit this information has for our lives. Indeed, the facts

presented by contemporary physics can be totally divorced from everyday human experience. Theoretical physics remains for the educated masses– and that is to say nothing about the vast majority of people who would not bother reading a popular book on physics that is just an amazing set of findings for them with no real relevance to their lives. After all, how many contemporary physicists themselves see any practical relevance between the kind of work that they do and the lives that they lead?

Perhaps the most significant reason as to why a bifurcated conception of the cosmos reigns supreme is because contemporary cosmology qua discipline is itself confined to scientism; for while it conceives of a cosmic picture in which subject and object are not separated, it must eventually fall back on the mathematical and the quantitative in its formulations. In other words, modern physics knows very well that the cosmos is a much more complicated place than previously believed. But when it comes to making sense of the cosmic picture arrived at through scientistic methods, it can only give scientistic answers. This rootedness in scientism ensures that contemporary cosmological theories will always be confined to the mathematical and the quantitative. As Chittick cautions:

> As long as the truncated worldview of scientism remains the arbiter, no opening to the Infinite is possible. At best, people will devise an ersatz cosmology that hardly lets them see beyond the horizons of popular culture. [12]

In other words, contemporary scientific cosmologies do not possess the means to say anything more than what they say with scientism as their 'arbiter'.

Only when scientism is cast aside can cosmology become a symbology and speak to humans on a level beyond the mathematical and the quantitative. With a science of the soul that is mirrored in a science of the cosmos, as escape from what Henry Corbin (d. 1978) calls the 'cosmic crypt',[13] becomes a possibility. In such a formulation, one transcends himself in order to transcend the cosmos. But without a sacred conception of the cosmos, there will be no accompanying science of the soul, and humans will therefore be trapped in the cosmic crypt without a means of escape. Without means of escape, the *need* for an escape recedes to the background.

The Anthropocosmic Vision

Turning our attention to the Islamic intellectual tradition, we find that in theoretical Sufism and in some strands of Islamic philosophy, the cosmos is created in the image of God. Human beings, also created in the image of God, are therefore nothing but the cosmos.

They are, as Chittick poetically remarks, "two sides of the same coin, a coin that was minted in the image of God."[14] Thus, there is an intimate connection between the ways in which a subject experiences the world and the cosmic picture in which the experiencing subject lives:

> The Islamic philosophical tradition can only understand human beings in terms of the unity of the human world and the natural world. There is no place in this tradition to drive a wedge between humans and the cosmos. In the final analysis the natural world is the externalization of the human substance, and the human soul is the internalization of the realm of nature. Human beings and the whole universe are intimately intertwined, facing each other like two mirrors. The quest for wisdom can only succeed if the natural world is recognized as equivalent to one's own self, just as one must see the whole human race as the external manifestation of the potencies and possibilities of the human soul.[15]

Following Mircea Eliade (d. 1986) and Tu Weiming, Chittick calls this intimate relationship shared between self and cosmos the 'anthropocosmic vision'. Since the anthropocosmic vision entails a view of self and cosmos as being 'a single, organismic whole',[16] knowledge of one entails that of the other. In keeping with traditional Islamic doctrines, the human soul is a microcosm (*al-'alam al-saghir*) and the cosmos proper is a macrocosm (*al-'alam al-kabir*). According to Quran, God's signs (*ayaat*) are to be found in both the macrocosm and the microcosm:

> We will show them our signs in the cosmos (*afaq*) and in their souls (*anfus*), until they know that He is the Real. (41:53)

Since there is no absolute contrast between subject and object, the more humans study the signs within themselves, the more they will understand the signs in the cosmos. That is, the more we learn about the microcosm, the more we will come to know about the macrocosm.

The anthropocosmic vision can only be attained by paying attention to the divine qualities found throughout the cosmic order. As the Islamic tradition tells us, the divine qualities are mediated by God's names. Since God's names are to be found everywhere we look, that is in the cosmos, they are also latent within our souls, in their totality. God taught Adam all of His names, which means that it is the goal of the children of Adam to actualize the divine names contained within themselves. Thus, by knowing God's names, humans can understand the primary qualities which underly the cosmos.[17] What is needed in order to actualize the divine names is divine guidance, since it establishes for humans how they are

supposed to understand the names and what they are expected to do in order to act in conformity with them. Chittick argues:

> The governing insight of Islamic thinking, after the assertion of the unity and ultimacy of the Real, is that the true nature of the world is inaccessible to human beings without help. This insight is made explicitly in the second half of the Shahadah, though it is also implicit in the first. Without messengers from the Real, no one can come to know God and the theomorphic roots of human nature.[18]

If people do not follow divine guidance, they will be left to their own devices. If left to their own devices, they will fail to understand the names in the cosmos and within themselves. Since it is a part of human nature to name, they will therefore create their own names. But these names will not be able to take them beyond themselves:

> If people fail to name things under the wing of divine guidance, they will name them as they see fit. There is no possible way, however, for them to know the real names of things without assistance from the divine Namer, because the real names are the realities of things in the divine mind. God gives existence to the things according to their names, and understanding their real names is the key to understanding cosmos and soul.[19]

People name things according to the realities they assign to them only when the cosmos they inhabit is desacralized. When human beings become the measure and their theomorphic nature is forgotten, the sacred content of the cosmos is slowly stripped away. In other words, rather than signifying their divine roots, things in the cosmos simply become facts. They no longer point to the divine names because the sacred has been cancelled out of the equation. As discrete, quantifiable entities, they thus become subject to the human system of naming:

> A worldview that leaves out the divine dimension will necessarily deal with inadequate names, if not misnomers. The net result of misguided naming will be disaster for those who employ the names, if not for humanity as a whole– a "disaster" that is understood in terms of the full extension of the human realm, not just the world this side of death.[20]

Our own system of naming does not take us back to the divine roots of the cosmos since they produce 'inadequate' names. Rather, they take us back to our all-too-human attempts at knowing the universe. Although there is great instrumentality in such naming, knowledge of these man-made names do not allow human beings to actualize their human potential, which is to realize the divine names which were taught to their father Adam.

Human naming tends to lead us to abstract, quantified, and hence impersonal denotations of reality. Once we become solely concerned with naming those things in the cosmos which are quantifiable and 'real', the names of qualities lose their significance and consequently are relegated to the subjective. This is why, for example, today's typical cosmologist can say that specific mathematical principles underlie the cosmos, but he cannot say that love and mercy do, since they are not quantifiable.[21] This is, from Chittick's perspective, not only because love and mercy are not quantifiable but also because the inquiring subject is so detached from the cosmos that he cannot see the qualities which he shares with his object of inquiry:

> When the universe is named by names that apply primarily to dead things or to machines or to impersonal processes, we will understand it in terms of death and mechanism and impersonal process. We will necessarily miss the significance of the life, mercy, and awareness that suffuse its every atom.[22]
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> Those who live in an abstract universe will deal with things and others as abstractions. Those who live in a mechanistic universe will treat everything as a machine. Those who find the universe cold and uncaring will reciprocate.[23]

As seen above, the names in the cosmos are not impersonal and abstract. Rather, they are anthropomorphic and therefore intelligible to humans. And the reason they are anthropomorphic is because man is theomorphic.[24] Since our understanding of the cosmos is nothing but a projection of our understanding of ourselves, an impersonal view of the universe is ultimately symptomatic of a greater, spiritual problem.[25] This problem is the loss of self-knowledge.

Not knowing the true self leads to disequilibrium on both the human and cosmic planes.[26] In order to regain our equilibrium, Chittick argues, we must actualize the names and realize our theomorphic nature. This can be done by living a life in harmony with the names, which means living in accordance with virtue by giving each thing its right (*haqq*) and putting everything in its proper place, just as God does. The anthropocosmic vision is, therefore, fundamentally concerned with self-knowledge. This is why Chittick devotes a good deal of time in his writings to the question of realization (*tahqiq*) and imitation (*taqlid*).[27] He contends that it is only the process of realization which can allow one to know the true nature of things, since knowledge gained through imitation– the kind of knowledge most people have– is ultimately based on other peoples' opinions.[28] In short, it is only by realizing

our true selfhood that we will be able to see ourselves and the cosmos as a unified totality. As Chittick puts it, anything short of self-knowedge is actually the antipode of knowledge, and can only worsen the human condition:

> [To] be human is to seek after knowledge that will increase one's humanity. Humanity's defining characteristic is the self-aware intelligence and knowing that intelligence intelligently demands focusing one's energies on self-knowledge. Any knowledge that does not aid in the quest for self-knowledge is in fact ignorance, and its fruit can only be the dissolution and destruction of human nature.[29]

NOTES AND REFERENCE

[1] William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998, xxxiv).

[2] Chittick is also an important figure in the wider fields of religious studies and philosophy, and his writings are not infrequently the basis of comparative projects. See, in particular, Reza Shah Kazemi's *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), and the problematic study by Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[3] The most recent of which are Ebrahim Moosa's *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and Mohamed Haj Yousef's *Ibn 'Arabi: Time and Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 2008), the seventh chapter in particular.

[4] Take for example, *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, edited by Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (Malden: Blackwell, 2006). Among its several lacunae is the absence of an article devoted to the topic. Some interesting contributions to the question of science, cosmology, and ethics in contemporary Islamic thought can be found in *God, Life, and the Cosmos: Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, edited by Ted Peters, Muzaffar Iqbal, and Syed Nomanul Haq (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[5] Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Writings of Afdal al-Din Kashani* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.36.

[6] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), p.83.

[7] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, pp.86-87, 93-97.

[8] Indeed, it is precisely such an objectification of nature that has wrought so many of today's major crises, such as the ecological problem. For the roots of the ecological crisis, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also Chittick, 'God Surrounds All Things: An Islamic Perspective on the Environment', *The World and I*, 1/6 (June 1986), pp.671-678.

[9] See Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, rev. ed. (Boston: Shambala, 1991), p.81.

[10] See Caner Dagli, 'The Time of Science and the Sufi Science of Time', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 41 (2007), p.78. See also Chittick's remarks cited above concerning the role of scientism in education.

[11] Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam, 1998); Hawking with Leonard Mlodinow, *A Briefer History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 2005).

[12] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.83.

[13] For Corbin's treatment of the cosmic crypt, see his *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, translated by Willard Trask (Irving: Spring Publications, 1980), pp.16-28.

[14] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.132.

[15] Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, p.66.

[16] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.109.

[17] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, pp.84-85. For an important discussion of the function of "words" in Islamic cosmology, see Chittick, 'The Words of the All-Merciful' in Chittick (ed.), *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2007), pp.121-129.

[18] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.97.

[19] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, pp.85-86.

[20] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.86.

[21] Chittick asks: "What happens when the important names are quasars, quarks, muons, black holes, and big bangs? What is the psychological and spiritual fruit of naming ultimate things with mathematical formulae?" (*Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.86).

[22] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.92.

[23] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.87.

[24] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.87.

[25] Chittick remarks, "An impoverished and flattened universe is the mirror image of an impoverished and flattened soul." (*Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, pp.131-132). At the same time, there are those who do not see God's qualities throughout the cosmos, but this is the result of viewing the cosmos through the lenses of God's transcendence and otherness (*tanzih*). Such a perspective, although very much a part of the Islamic tradition, is, in its extreme form, also liable to viewing nature as a pure object devoid of any sacred content. Nowhere is this more evident than in some of today's industrialized Muslim countries, where the unnatural exploitation of natural resources seems to be a corollary of a radical (and uncorrigible) theology of God's transcendence. Of course, such a theology also has the tendency to manifest itself violently. See Tim Winter, 'Bombing without Moonlight: The Origins of Suicidal Terrorism', *Encounters*, 10/1-2 (2004), pp.93-126.

[26] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.131.

[27] See, for example, Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, pp.45-47, 118-121.

[28] Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, p.119.

[29.] Chittick, 'The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology' in Todd Lawson (ed.), *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy, and Mysticism in Muslim Thought* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p.283.