

Review of Revelation, intellectual intuition and reason in the philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al-Arshiyya, by Zailan Moris

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4030>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Published in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 360-362, September 2005

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

CITATION:

Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra, by Zailan Moris, London, Routledge Curzon, 2003. In Journal of Islamic Studies, vol. (2006), pp. 360-362.

REVIEW:

Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al-'Arshiyya.

By Zailan Moris (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 238 pp. Price PB £18.99 ISBN 0-700-71503-7.

Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (1571–1640)—or ‘Mullā Şadrā’, as he is more commonly known today—is probably the most penetrating and comprehensive thinker in the later Islamic philosophical tradition. Yet the accidents of history have meant that the serious study and teaching of his most original works has subsequently been restricted, for the most part, to Imāmī Shi‘i circles in Iran and immediately neighbouring regions. The fact that this substantial new overview of Şadrā’s central philosophical theses (originally prepared as a 1994 doctoral dissertation at the American University, Washington DC) is the work of a noted female Malaysian intellectual is therefore a hopeful sign that considerably wider Muslim audiences are at last beginning to recognize the potential contemporary significance of the perennial issues and the distinctive guiding insights that are so carefully developed in Şadrā’s pioneering thought.

The title of this volume signals and reflects the contrasting—and most often publicly conflicting—intellectual and religious dimensions of Islamic thought, practice, and authority that provided the distinctive problematic underlying all of Şadrā’s more original works, both popular and more specialized: i.e. the disparate gamut of alternative traditions and interpretive approaches that were often summarized by the shorthand expressions ‘*aql*’ (‘reason’), ‘*naql*’ (‘transmitted’ religious sources), and ‘*kashf*’ (spiritual ‘unveiling’). Thus the first three chapters of this study (pp. 1–83) provide a dense and, for all but the most specialized readers, indispensable historical overview of the wider intellectual and personal contexts and background for Şadrā’s philosophy, focusing on the epistemological categories and assumptions of the Qur’ān, Hadīth, and the subsequent religious and rational sciences in Islam; on the distinctive interpretive approaches of preceding philosophical, illuminationist, and Sufī schools of thought; and a brief survey of Şadrā’s life and major works.

The remaining three chapters (pp. 85–205), forming the philosophical core of this study, are devoted to a careful analytical and theological examination of Şadrā’s distinctive ‘synthesis’ of the three broad interpretive approaches listed in the title, as that synthesis is developed in relation to the ‘four fundamental principles of Mullā Şadrā’s philosophy’ (p. 86): transubstantial motion (*haraka jawhariyya*); the union of knower and known; the posthumous survival of the human imaginative power; and the unity, gradation, and ontic primacy of being. Virtually all students and interpreters of Şadrā’s thought would agree on the central, integrative, and original role of these four familiar theses, which are illustrated in great detail throughout all of the philosopher’s mature

works, most fully in his famous ‘Four Journeys’ (*al-Asfār al-arba‘a*). However, in a step which greatly facilitates the wider accessibility and verification of her exposition, Moris has given the majority of her supporting references in relation to the extremely concise and relatively accessible summary of Ṣadrā’s more original philosophical conclusions provided in his *al-Hikma al-‘arshiyya*, which is readily available in an earlier English translation and commentary (‘The Wisdom of the Throne’). Curious philosophers unfamiliar with Arabic can now also supplement those citations by referring as well to available English and French translations of an equally short companion treatise that focuses more extensively on ontology, Ṣadrā’s *Kitāb al-Mashā‘ir*.

The author’s defining approach to Ṣadrā’s philosophical perspective is clearly summarized in the title of Chapter 4: ‘Does There Exist a Synthesis of the Truth Claims of Revelation, Intellectual Intuition, and Reason in Mullā Ṣadrā’s Philosophy?’ Thus she first outlines (in Chapters 4 and 5) how Ṣadrā has constructed such a synthesis in regard to the four above-mentioned fundamental principles of metaphysics and eschatology/epistemology (a familiar pairing throughout Islamic thought), and then concludes with a preliminary evaluation of the ‘success’ of Ṣadrā’s synthesis with respect to (a) its agreement with the principles of Qur’ānic teaching (and some related metaphysical *ahādīth*; (b) its internal coherence; and—admittedly a somewhat less cogent philosophical criterion—(c) the subsequent impact of Ṣadrā’s system on Islamic thought, primarily in Iran (Sabzavārī) and neighbouring Shi‘i scholarly settings, but also in more widely influential figures in the Sunni Muslim world such as al-Afghānī and Shāh Walīullāh. The author does make it clear that she is well aware that other philosophical criteria and pertinent critiques could have been brought to bear in critiquing or questioning key features of Ṣadrā’s thought—as has of course been the case, both in his own time and through centuries of ensuing polemics. But no doubt because each of those potential debates could easily require a volume of its own, most of those underlying issues remain to be explored more thoroughly by thoughtful and critical readers familiar with the many traditions and issues in question.

Non-specialist readers with some knowledge of cognate traditions in Western philosophy are likely to read Moris’s study at first, with its constant emphasis on Ṣadrā’s complex ‘synthesis’ of earlier conflicting Islamic intellectual (and corresponding sociopolitical) traditions, as an approximate equivalent of that immense body of Catholic philosophico-theological literature which presents the works of Thomas Aquinas as a similarly all-encompassing and successful synthesis of Christian scripture, Church tradition, and the host of once-conflicting philosophical and spiritual traditions drawn together in his thought. And there can be no doubt that for Mullā Ṣadrā, just as for Aquinas, a satisfactory integral correspondence between the metaphysical and epistemological exigencies of scripture and tradition on the one hand, and the corresponding demands of ‘intellectual intuition and reason’ on the other, was a *sine qua non* for the success of his intellectual enterprise. However, students of philosophy and of Islamic intellectual history, in any age, would surely note that such a purportedly successful ‘synthesis’ of theological, spiritual, and intellectual requirements was also claimed and argued for, with great detail and subtlety, by each of the many earlier Muslim thinkers and traditions that are so carefully passed in review in the *Asfār*—and whose intellectual successors, in varied guises, still continue to pursue their own distinctive paths in contemporary Islamic polemics and religio-political controversies.

Within his own truly revolutionary socio-political context (so dramatically illustrated in many key turnings of his own life, and in the heated polemic prologues to almost all of his own writings), Mullā Ṣadrā's own distinctive theological and philosophical 'synthesis'—like those of his forerunners and competitors—was not meant simply as some grand intellectual monument to admire from afar. Above all, it was meant to justify, communicate, and encourage particular forms of both personal and collective action and initiative—while effectively critiquing, discouraging, and demolishing the contrary alternatives. Like so many classical Muslim writers who surely inspired Mullā Ṣadrā's (one thinks especially of Ghazālī's *Ihyā' ulūm al-dīn* and of Avicenna's *Shifā'*), Moris's study carefully takes her readers to the summit of Ṣadrā's monumental synthesis. Then she leaves them to work out their own indispensable conclusions as to how they must understand and apply those principles in their own circumstances today.

James W. Morris

University of Exeter

doi:10.1093/jis/eti155