

Why Study the Worldview of the Huiru? (2)¹

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Dr. Murata addressed the question of how Chinese Muslims can benefit from studying the worldview of the Huiru. I want to address the question of why anyone else would want to study this worldview. Does Huiru thought offer something of value to non-Muslim Chinese, or to non-Chinese Muslims, or to people who are neither Muslim nor Chinese? In other words, what is the significance of the Huiru worldview for the human situation in the twenty-first century?

I will draw from the most outstanding of the Chinese Muslims philosophers, Liu Zhi. His Tianfang xingli sets down the Huiru worldview in a systematic and meticulous manner. The book allows us to see the basic principles briefly and succinctly, and it also explains the detailed implications of these principles. The brilliant manner in which Liu Zhi expressed his philosophical vision seems to be unparalleled among Huiru authors. In fact, I doubt if any text in any Islamic language can rival Tianfang xingli in portraying the various dimensions of Islamic thought and practice in such a systematic, succinct, and all-comprehensive manner.

What then is the Huiru worldview? In brief, it is identical with the worldview discussed by countless books written in Arabic, Persian, and other languages by great Muslim teachers, people who were known as theologians, Sufis, or philosophers, and sometimes as all three. In theoretical terms this worldview is expressed most briefly as the three principles of Islamic thought: unity, prophecy, and return.

As you all know, the word for unity in Arabic is tawhīd, which means literally to say one or to assert one. Liu Zhi, like all other Muslim philosophers and theologians, understands tawhīd as the first principle of thought. Even though Liu Zhi does not use the word itself, tawhīd is the foundation of Tianfang xingli, the general theme of the book, and also its conclusion.

According to the principle of tawhīd, all reality is one at its core, even though it is diverse in its manifestations. Everything in the universe comes into being from the Supreme Reality and returns to It. All things are utterly and absolutely dependent on this reality here and now, always and forever, in every time and in every place.

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Tawhīd demands constant movement and change in all things. Nothing other than the Supreme Reality stays the same for one instant, since only the Supreme Reality is unchanging. At the same time, the Supreme Reality is both the origin and the goal of all movement. Everything comes from the One and returns to It. Analysis of the patterns that appear in both the cosmos and the human self shows that the movement is circular. Both the universe and the human self begin at one point, move away from that point with a circular motion, and eventually return to the same point.

This one point is the origin and goal of the universe and the human self. Thus it is called the origin (mabda') and it is also called, from another point of view, the place of return (ma`ād). Everything comes from the origin, and everything returns to the point from which it originated.

In the schools of Islamic thought that influenced the Huiyu, the relationship between the One Point, the universe as a whole, and the human individual was commonly described in terms of “the circle of existence” (dā'irat al-wujūd). At any given moment, everything other than the Original Being is located somewhere on the circle. Things that are close to the One Point dwell in unity, invisibility, luminosity, subtlety, animation, and awareness. As they move away from the One Point, they gradually enter into multiplicity, visibility, darkness, denseness, inanimateness, and unawareness.

When things enter the visible realm—that is, the realm that we call the universe—they continue moving around the circle. Their destination is invisibility, luminosity, awareness, wakefulness, and re-union with the One Point. Given that the circle of existence descends from the One Point and then ascends back to the One Point, the movement has two basic directions, commonly called the two arcs of the circle of existence. Liu Zhi calls them the Former Heaven and the Latter Heaven.

The topic of Liu Zhi's Tianfang xingli is nothing other than the principle of unity and its significance for human life, explained in terms of the circle of existence. Throughout the book, Liu Zhi speaks as a philosopher, not as a Muslim theologian. By this I mean that he is speaking to human beings generally, not to Muslims specifically. He is explaining the anthropocosmic nature of reality, something that everyone needs to understand in order to situate themselves correctly in the midst of heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things. Liu Zhi, however, is not telling people what to believe—that is what theologians and preachers do. Rather, he is asking his readers to meditate on the universe and on their own selves. He wants them to understand the nature of reality for themselves and in themselves.

Islamic thought holds that despite the human immersion in multiplicity, there is a single point of awareness and intelligence deep in the human self that does not change and is not affected by multiplicity. This single point of intelligence is identical with the One Point of Reality that is the source of the universe. Liu Zhi calls this hidden center “the Nature of Continuity” (*jixing* 繼性). This word is a translation of the Arabic expression, *al-rūh al-idāfi*, “the Ascribed Spirit.” It refers to the divine spirit that lies at the core of the human self. The Koran mentions it in a verse concerning Adam: “I blew into him of My spirit” (15:29). Here God says that the spirit belongs to Himself. Hence it is called “the ascribed spirit,” that is, ascribed by God to God Himself.

Scholars called this Ascribed Spirit by many other names, including the First Intellect and the Muhammadan Spirit. In several passages and diagrams, Liu Zhi translates the expression Muhammadan Spirit as “the nature of the utmost sage” (*zhishengxing* 至聖性) and he explains it as being identical with the Ascribed Spirit. This Ascribed or Muhammadan Spirit is the root of human consciousness and selfhood in the same way that the sun is the source of all light in the world. The goal of human life is to gain awareness of the Ascribed Spirit, which is hidden deep within every human self. The Muslim philosophers called the attainment of this awareness “conjunction” (*ittisāl*) with the First Intellect. According to Liu Zhi, this is what the Chinese philosophers mean when they speak of becoming one body with heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things.

What then is Liu Zhi’s message to his readers? It is simply that they should put aside the illusions of everyday life and strive to become true human beings by following in the footsteps of the sages. As Mencius said, the only way to find our own true humanity is to recover the lost heart, which, in the Huiru understanding, is the Ascribed Spirit deep inside the self. True human nature is found inside the self, not outside it. It follows that the essential task of human beings is to cultivate their humanity, and all other tasks should be servants of this task.

Tu Weiming explains this point clearly when speaking about the goal of the Confucian tradition. He writes, “Character-building rather than social utility is the priority of self-realization, which requires a conscientious effort to animate the past in order to revitalize the present” (*Sage Learning*, p. 612).

Liu Zhi and the Islamic philosophical tradition generally would qualify this statement by making clear that the way to “animate the past and revitalize the present” is for people to re-connect not simply with the sages of ancient times, but also with the intelligence that is giving rise to our own existence at the present moment in the Former Heaven. This Former Heaven is behind us, in our “past” so to speak. It connects the human self directly to the Ascribed Spirit that was blown

into Adam and every human being. This Spirit can only be recovered in the present moment, where we dwell under the Latter Heaven, in the process of ascending back to the Origin.

In other words, according to the worldview of the Huiru as expressed by Liu Zhi, the characteristic of human beings generally is the quest for knowledge and understanding. True knowledge and understanding can only come by way of self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-realization. By the very fact of existing in the world and possessing a certain freedom of choice, people have been given the task of learning how to be human. The individual and social models for this learning were established by the sages, who are none other than what the Koran calls the prophets who were sent to every people.

The message of the Huiru worldview for today is simply that we live in a world that has forgotten the goal of learning. Nowadays, people go to school for utilitarian reasons—to get a job, to find a comfortable life, to achieve success, to become an important person. The goal of learning in both Islam and Confucianism is to become wise, compassionate, and humane.

Modern educational institutions teach us that we should acquire knowledge in order to control our environment and our world. Manipulation of the external world and society has become the policy driving human life. Knowledge is looked upon simply for its utility, its usefulness for getting things done. In contrast, for Liu Zhi as for Islamic thought generally, the only knowledge that counts is the knowledge whose truth I realize in myself. Knowing the outside world must serve as an aid to knowing the inside world. Only knowledge of oneself can re-establish the link with the Ascribed Spirit, the innate intelligence blown into Adam, the heart that we have lost. Only by this means is it possible “to animate the past in order to revitalize the present.”