

### Mohammed Rustom

*The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012. xii + 243 pages, appendices, bibliography, index of Qur'anic passages, index of hadiths and sayings, index of names and terms. Paperback. ISBN 978-14-3844340-9. US \$24.95.

It is now well-known that the great Safavid thinker Mullā Ṣadrā was, alongside being a revolutionary philosophical genius, a thoroughly-committed scriptural exegete. He left behind lengthy commentaries upon a number of individual chapters and verses of the Qur'an, as well as a vast, unfinished commentary on al-Kulaynī's *Uṣūl al-kāfi* (the most important collection of Shī'ī *aḥādīth*). Mohammed Rustom's erudite study focuses on Ṣadrā's Qur'anic hermeneutics in general, and his most important *tafsīr* composition, the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-fātiḥa* (henceforth abbreviated as *TSF*), in particular. The author convincingly demonstrates how one of Islam's foremost philosophers was able to bring about novel philosophical and mystical interpretations of its primary sacred text.

Contrary to what has been written about Ṣadrā's hermeneutics, Rustom begins his inquiry by arguing that Ṣadrā, like so many other scriptural exegetes before him, never presents an actual, consistent "hermeneutical methodology" for interpreting scripture (17) (this explains why Ṣadrā's various commentaries on parts of the Qur'an are so variegated in scope and content). Instead, Ṣadrā opts for a series of spiritual prerequisites for how to approach the Qur'an, and in doing so he largely follows the lead of Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī. These "prerequisites" include, *inter alia*, spiritual discipline, detachment from the world, spending time in spiritual retreat, the cultivation of vigilance or presence of mind, pondering over (*tadabbur*) what is being recited, and ascending in degrees (in terms of existential awareness) until one hears the recitation of the Word as coming from God, and not from one's lower self (13–16). In short, Ṣadrā argues that the Qur'an will reveal its inner realities to the reciter according to his/her given spiritual states (*ḥāl*) and stations (*maqām*). Thus, Ṣadrā's approach to the Qur'an is inextricably linked to the science of the soul.

In the following chapter (chapter 2), Rustom draws our attention to the sources of the *TSF* by placing it in context vis-à-vis the Sunni and Shī'ī *tafsīr* traditions on the one hand, and the Sufi tradition on the other (particularly the school of Ibn 'Arabī). This chapter shows to what extent Ṣadrā's *tafsīr* is informed by several diverse trends and sources in the Islamic intellectual tradition. This chapter also prepares us for the detailed analysis of the *TSF* to follow throughout the remainder of the book.

In chapter 3, Rustom shows how Ṣadrā, in contrast to the usual metaphysics (*mā ba'da al-ṭabī'a*) of the philosophers, formulates an alternative metaphysics

based on the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers (I do, however, have one quibble in this regard: it would have made things clearer to have had the section on Ṣadrā’s ontology in chapter 1 placed at the outset of chapter 3). This alternative metaphysics squarely underscores God who is the reality of being (*ḥaqīqat al-wujūd*) as the primary subject-matter of metaphysics. The alternative metaphysics outlined in the *TSF* focuses upon the nature of the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*) and how it manifests Itself in accordance with the rules of manifestation (*aḥkām al-ẓuhūr*). This then segues into an exposition of the divine names, attributes, and acts. In somewhat condensed language, Rustom explicates all of these intricate issues and shows how Ṣadrā is able to switch between his ontology and the *TSF* since his ontology is fundamentally in harmony with scripture.

In chapter 4, Rustom goes on to expound upon some of the most important cosmological ideas treated by Ṣadrā in the *TSF*, such as the immutable entities (*al-a’yān al-thābita*), the Muhammadan Reality, and the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Through his lucid prose, Rustom delineates how the Perfect Man embraces existence at all levels as it is the locus for the manifestation of the All-Encompassing Name of God, Allah. In chapter five, Rustom elaborates on the theologically problematic issue of the “God of one’s belief” and “the religion of the Perfect Man” (both of which were, again, largely indebted to the legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī). The author shows that, for Ṣadrā, common believers merely “worship the objects of their beliefs” and thus “carve idols out of the “stuff” of their soul (78).” According to Ṣadrā, therefore, the gods of these people are their own whims and vain ideas.

Rustom dedicates the remainder of the last two chapters of the book to the theme of soteriology, which, he argues, is a seriously under-appreciated aspect of Ṣadrā’s thought. Chapter 6 charts Ṣadrā’s soteriology in his other philosophical and non-philosophical writings, while chapter 7 delves into a full-fledged presentation of the notion as it figures in the *TSF*. The issue at stake here is this: does God’s mercy embrace everyone in the afterlife? If so, how are we to reconcile apparent contradictory verses in the Qur’ān which state that some human beings will remain in Hell forever? Ṣadrā presents several views in response to this problem, some of which are rather equivocal (111–13).

What is engaging about this matter is the manner in which Ṣadrā is able to recast and make use of the language of his ontology (the principality and oneness of being in particular) to solve the puzzle of God’s mercy for all. His fundamental argument here is that since all things come from God and return to God, they surely must return to their origin, which is nothing but God. In more philosophical jargon, this would be tantamount to saying that since God is the source of all being and all things are merely modes and conditioning of being,

they must return to their source, which is “being” itself. Since Ṣadrā identifies being with mercy, his line of reasoning becomes clear: all things come from mercy and return to mercy. Ṣadrā also draws on Ibn ‘Arabī in his presentation, being careful to not do away with the reality of Hell (as did Ibn Taymiyya<sup>1</sup>), but to see even Hell as, ultimately, being a locus of manifestation for God’s mercy.

It can be argued that, given the dense nature of the presentation of Ṣadrā’s ideas throughout this book, a glossary of the key technical terms would have made it even more accessible to a lay audience. Nevertheless, the success of *The Triumph of Mercy* lies in demonstrating how Ṣadrā was, through his detailed exegesis of the opening chapter of the Qur’an, able to utilize his philosophical doctrines, such as the principality and gradation of being, trans-substantial motion, and the temporal origination of the soul, in order to cast new light on the interpretation of the Qur’an. This book is therefore a path-breaking study which will usher in new ways of envisioning the relationship between philosophy, mysticism, and the Qur’an. As such, it is an excellent contribution to the burgeoning fields of post-Avicennian Islamic intellectual history, Sufi and non-Sufi *tafsīr*, and Mullā Ṣadrā studies.

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1 See the excellent presentation of Ibn Taymiyya’s position on this issue (as well as the position of his student Ibn Qayyim) in Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3.