Meisami points cosmology within an Aristotelian and Neoplatonic framework dynamics between knowledge and power. relationship between applying Foucault’s notion contemporary and modern Shīʿī narratives about the origin and scope of human knowledge, 3) Mull āṢadrā’s shared narratives in their epistemic discourses, 2) the Shīʿī framework of their shared narratives about the origin and scope of human knowledge, 3) their shared narratives on absolute authority of the Shīʿī imam, and 4) their discourse on knowledge-power dynamics and its influence on contemporary and modern Shīʿī religious-political discourses. The author plans to do so by applying Foucault’s notions of discourse—as a body of concepts and narratives that govern the relationship between speculative products—and the concept of “discursive formation” to the dynamics between knowledge and power.

Having laid down the theoretical and methodological background of her project (chapter 1), Meisami begins her comparative analysis by delving into al-Kirmānī’s theories of knowledge and the soul discussed in his Rāḥat al-ʿAwlī, where he attempts to align Shīʿī-Ismaʿīlī philosophy and cosmology within an Aristotelian and Neoplatonic framework (chapter 2).

Before discussing al-Kirmānī’s philosophy of knowledge, in the first pages of chapter 2, Meisami points to the relevance of the allegorical exegesis (taʿwil) of the Quran to al-Kirmānī’s effort
to embed Quranic cosmological themes of creation as “transcendent innovation” (ibdā’i) within his own modified Neoplatonic cosmology and Isma’ili doctrine of divine transcendence. Al-Kirmānī’s theory of epistemology and psychology emerges as a synthesis of Quranic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic cosmological-emanationist narratives with the Isma’ili discourse on the imamate and instruction, in which human souls’ ultimate actualization, or “second perfection,” is possible only through “instruction” (ta’lim) by those souls who possess a certain divine inspiration (al-mu‘ayyadīn). In a partial departure from al-Fārābī and Avicenna’s commitment to the Aristotelian Active Intellect (which is understood as the lowest of the ten intellects associated with the ten celestial spheres and responsible for the human intellect’s change from its passive to active state), Meisami shows how al-Kirmānī’s epistemology expands the function and role of divine emanation (fayḍ) responsible for bestowing universal and particular intelligibles, including sensible and imaginative forms, to the intellect. She then moves to highlight the imagery of light as emanation of certain, infallible knowledge to inspired souls (al-mu‘ayyadīn), such as prophets, imams, and Isma’ili da’wā, who become the epistemic medium to true knowledge by means of instructing ordinary human souls. This aspect of the philosophical system is, in Meisami’s view, particularly significative for al-Kirmānī’s doctrine of the imam’s infallibility and authority (chapter 3).

Building on the main sources of Shi‘i political philosophy, from al-Fārābī to the Isma’ili tradition (80-4), Meisami presents al-Kirmānī’s theory of the imamate as it is exposed in al-Maṣābīḥ fi Ithbāt al-Imāmā, which displays a synthetic discourse of the Neoplatonic narratives of light, emanation, inspiration, and spiritual evolution with the Ismā‘ili doctrine of the imam’s infallibility (‘isma), inspiration (ta‘yyid), and necessity of teaching. These features are essential to al-Kirmānī’s proof for the necessity of the imam who, by virtue of his epistemic infallibility and divine inspiration, is apt to fulfill his intellectual, moral, and political responsibilities, becoming the only guide, or instrument, for the salvation of the Muslim community; Meisami thus analogizes the imam’s role to that of the Active Intellect. The Ismā‘ili-Shī‘i narrative of instruction and epistemic elitism seem to bridge al-Kirmānī to Mullā Ṣadrā’s epistemology and imamology. The author contends that Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī’s synthetic narrative on the knowledge and perfection of the human soul, based on Peripatetic, Illuminationist, Ismā‘ili, and Sufi discourses, exemplifies a smooth transition of a discursive path between the Ismā‘ili and Twelver Shi‘i philosophies. Reading al-Ṭūsī’s Ismā‘ili treatises, which present the figure of the imam and the Ismā‘ili da’wā as categories of souls likened to the Active Intellect, Meisami points to three main narratives in his synthetic view on the necessity of the imam and the da’wā’s instruction, namely 1) the Neoplatonic narrative of unification (ittihād) between the human soul and that of the imam, 2) the Sufi narratives of the master-disciple spiritual connection as well as the identification of the imam and his representatives with the perfect human (al-insān al-kāmi‘ī), and 3) the elements of Isma‘ili imamology. Meisami singles out the Shī‘ī/Ismā‘ili-Sufi narrative of the perfect human as a central element of Mullā Ṣadrā’s epistemology and Shī‘ī-Sufi theory of the imamate (chapter 4).

Mullā Ṣadrā’s synthetic discourse on knowledge formation, grounded on the ontological hierarchy of souls, entails an epistemic elitism in which unification with the Active Intellect is restricted to a limited number of souls, such as the imams’ (133-42). Meisami contends that Mullā Ṣadrā’s so-called epistemic elitism supports and informs the imam’s unquestionable authority, echoing al-Kirmānī via al-Ṭūsī. Mullā Ṣadrā’s imamology emerges also from philosophical, Sufi, Quranic, and Shī‘ī narratives on knowledge formation, for which Meisami emphasizes the notion of wali (wiliyā)—as instances of the Prophet’s heirs—that incorporates the Akbarī notion of perfect
human (namely a notion developed in Sufi metaphysics based on the thought of the famous Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi) with the Shi‘i narrative of the necessity of a ḥujja, namely the imam, as the only source of epistemic authority accessible by instruction alone. As such, Meisami points to Mullā Šadrā’s imamology as the achievement of the fundamental identification of knowledge with power (143-54).

This identification is crucial to understanding how other Šadrian sources indicate that imams’ legal-political and epistemic authority is extended also to jurists (mujtahidān) and religious scholars (‘ulamā‘) during the imam’s Occultation, namely the belief in the disappearance of the twelfth imam Muḥammad al-Mahdī in the middle of the 10th century AD and his future return as the Messiah. Nevertheless, Meisami presents textual proofs suggesting that in Mullā Šadrā’s view the epistemic authority of the “mujtahid of the age” or the “shaykh al-‘Ilām” (which are both honorific titles for high-ranking scholars, mainly jurists and theologians, regarded as authorities among the learned community) does equate that of prophets or imams as being the product of the unification of the scholars’ rational soul with the Active Intellect. Mullā Šadrā’s apparent intention to extend epistemic authority to jurists and religious scholars marks, in Meisami’s view, a crucial though perhaps unintentional contribution to the formation of the later discourse on the absolute authority of the jurist (al-wilāya al-mutlaqa li-faqīh) that will come to dominate the socio-political framework on modern and contemporary Iran (155-61). Accordingly, Meisami concludes her analysis (chapter 5) by expatiating on the influence of Mullā Šadrā’s synthetic discourse on knowledge and authority of the imam and its representatives on the modern Shi‘ī political discourse on authority encapsulated in the notion of “guardianship of the jurist” (wilāya al-faqih). Here, Meisami focuses on the works of Mullā Šadrā’s immediate successors to show the continuity and the consolidation of this discourse on absolute epistemic-political authority as reflected in the synthetic narratives of wilāya al-faqih and the Akbarā-Shi‘ī notion of “perfect human” represented by the Shi‘ī imam.

Meisami identifies the Qajar era and the works of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā‘ī (d. 1826) and Mullā Hādī Sabzivārī (d. 1878 or 1881) as a key moment in the development of the Shi‘ī narrative of absolute authority, when the elaboration of the narrative of wilāya al-faqih, and its conflation with the notion of “source of emulation” (marja‘ al-taqlid), establishes absolute authority to jurists and religious scholars who, similarly to prophets, saints and imams, are now the heirs of true, divinely inspired knowledge (pp. 185-94). As such, Qajar-era religious elites and jurists come to play a primary role during the clash between state and judicial authority throughout the Pahlavi era, paving the way to Ayatollah Khomeini’s political discourse on absolute authority. Finally, Meisami points to the shared key Sufi and philosophical narratives that make up Mullā Šadrā’s narrative on absolute authority with those of Khomeini’s notion of wilāya al-faqih, making the latter a recent example of how religious and political power are still expressed by the philosophical-Sufi synthetic narrative of “perfect human” and Shi‘ī absolute authority.

Overall, the book has the merit of bringing to light the evolution and continuity of the narratives on political and epistemic authority that link together the philosophical systems of al-Kirmānī and Mullā Šadrā. More interesting is Meisami’s attempt to make a case for the more recent repercussions of Mullā Šadrā’s theory of the absolute authority of the imam within the socio-political framework of contemporary Iran, adding a relevant perspective to the crosspollination between Shi‘ī political philosophy and philosophy of knowledge. However, despite her successful effort in outlining the continuity of the discourses between theory of the imamate and Shi‘ī epistemology, the reader, especially one proficient in Islamic philosophy and theology, might find Meisami’s presentation of philosophical notions and trends, such as Neoplatonic, Avicennian, Aristotelian, Platonic etc., insufficiently detailed for understanding their role in al-Kirmānī’s and Mullā Šadrā’s
philosophies. A more thorough presentation of the epistemological theories of both al-Fārābī and Avicenna, most notably their diverse interpretation of the Aristotelian psychology and its role in their metaphysics and Neoplatonic cosmologies, would have clarified the development of crucial aspects of al-Kirmānī and Mullā Ṣadrā’s “synthetic discourses,” and ultimately elucidated in which respect these discourses can be properly labeled as Peripatetic, Neoplatonic, Farabian, and Avicennian. Finally, the author would have benefited from a substantial review and correction of the numerous instances of faulty Arabic transliteration, in particular those of the annexation construction (ʾidāfa) that appear in a range of often incorrect variants.

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