Political and Epistemological Theories in Pre-modern and Modern Shīʿī Thought

GIOVANNI CARRERA
McGill University, Canada (giocarrera@fas.harvard.edu)

Sayeh Meisami. *Knowledge and Power in the Philosophies of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī and Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 227, USD 93.59.

Over the last few decades the study of Shīʿī Islam has witnessed a growing interest in specific aspects and perspectives of Shīʿī philosophers and theologians. The monograph authored by Sayeh Meisami focuses on the views of two of the most influential thinkers in Shīʿī, namely the eleventh century Ismāʿīlī thinker Ḥāmid al-Kirmānī and the Twelver mystic and thinker Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, better known as Mullā Ṣadrā. Throughout the five chapters, the textual comparative analysis of their thought shows how multifaceted epistemological and cosmological keys are transmitted from al-Kirmānī to Mullā Ṣadra, and ultimately become interwoven with their respective theories about the legitimacy of the Imām. Epistemology, cosmology, and political theory thus become, in the author's analysis, the fil rouge *that characterize the development of Shīʿī mystical and political philosophies up to the advent of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

Key words: Ismāʿīlī epistemology; Shīʿī cosmology; Shīʿī political theory; Abū Ḥāmid al-Kirmānī; Mullā Ṣadrā

This book explores the formation of epistemic and political authority in the Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī intellectual tradition through the works of the eleventh-century Ismāʿīlī thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Kirmānī and the seventeenth-century Shīʿī philosopher-jurist-theologian Mullā Ṣadrā. Sayeh Meisami's project is to present a "critical investigation of shared discursive ground between epistemology/psychology and religio-political theories" by highlighting what she describes as four major themes: 1) al-Kirmānī and Mullā Ṣadrā'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-ʿAql*, where he attempts to align Shīʿī-Ismāʿīlī 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 (*taʾwīl*) of the Quran to al-Kirmānī's effort

to embed Quranic cosmological themes of creation as "transcendent innovation" (*ibdāʿ*) 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" (*taʿlīm*) by those souls who possess a certain divine inspiration (*al-muʾayyadīn*). 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-muʾayyadūn*), such as prophets, imams, and Isma'ili *daʿwā*, 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 Shīʿī political philosophy, from al-Fārābī to the Ismāʿīlī tradition (80-4), Meisami presents al-Kirmānī's theory of the imamate as it is exposed in *al-Maṣābīḥ fī Ithbāt al-Imāma,* which displays a synthetic discourse of the Neoplatonic narratives of light, emanation, inspiration, and spiritual evolution with the Ismāʿīlī doctrine of the imam's infallibility (*ʿiṣma*), inspiration (*taʾyyid*), 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 Ismāʿīlī-Shīʿī 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, Ismāʿīlī, and Sufi discourses, exemplifies a smooth transition of a discursive path between the Ismāʿīlī and Twelver Shīʿī philosophies. Reading al-Ṭūsī's Ismāʿīlī treatises, which present the figure of the imam and the Ismāʿīlī *daʿwā* 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 *daʿwā*'s instruction, namely 1) the Neoplatonic narrative of unification (*ittiḥād*) 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-kāmil*), and 3) the elements of Isma'ili imamology. Meisami singles out the Shīʿī/Ismāʿīlī-Sufi narrative of the perfect human as a central element of Mullā Ṣadrā's epistemology and Shīʿī-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 Shīʿī narratives on knowledge formation, for which Meisami emphasizes the notion of *walī/wilāya*—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 ʿArabī) with the Shīʿī 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 Ṣadrā's imamology as the achievement of the fundamental identification of knowledge with power (143-54).

This identification is crucial to understanding how other Ṣadrian sources indicate that imams' legal-political and epistemic authority is extended also to jurists (*mujtahidūn*) and religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) 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 Ṣadrā's view the epistemic authority of the "*mujtahid of the age*" or the "*shaykh al-Islam*" (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 Ṣadrā'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-muṭlaqa li-l-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 Ṣadrā's synthetic discourse on knowledge and authority of the imam and its representatives on the modern Shīʿī political discourse on authority encapsulated in the notion of "guardianship of the jurist" (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). Here, Meisami focuses on the works of Mullā Ṣadrā'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 *wilāyat al-faqīh* and the Akbarā-Shīʿī notion of "perfect human" represented by the Shīʿī imam.

Meisami identifies the Qajar era and the works of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826) and Mullā Hādī Sabzivārī (d. 1878 or 1881) as a key moment in the development of the Shīʿī narrative of absolute authority, when the elaboration of the narrative of *wilāyat al-faqīh,* and its conflation with the notion of "source of emulation" (*marjaʿ al-taqlīd*), 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 Ṣadrā's narrative on absolute authority with those of Khomeini's notion of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, 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 Shiʾi 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 Ṣadrā. More interesting is Meisami's attempt to make a case for the more recent repercussions of Mullā Ṣadrā'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 Shīʿī political philosophy and philosophy of knowledge. However, despite her successful effort in outlining the continuity of the discourses between theory of the imamate and Shīʿī 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 Ṣadrā'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 (*iḍāfa*) that appear in a range of often incorrect variants.

Giovanni Carrera is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, where he specializes in Islamic philosophy, theology, and Islamic intellectual history, with focus on the theories of philosophy of language and semantics that emerge from logical, juridical, and rhetorical works of Muslim scholars from the fourteenth up to the twentieth century. His dissertation analyzes the emergence and further development of the theory of semantics and philosophy of language in the literature of *ʿilm al-waḍʿ* (translatable as science of the linguistic positing) initiated by pre-modern Muslim thinkers from the fourteenth up to the twentieth century. This linguistic science, which has no counterpart in the western scholarly traditions, investigates how simple terms used in everyday language are posited for and convey their concepts, and how these concepts relate to entities in real-world experiences by both speakers and listeners.