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Suyūṭī: Abū al-Faḍl ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī

Alnoor Dhanani

Born Cairo, (Egypt), 1445

Died 1505

Suyūṭī wrote an important work on “religious” astronomy, whose sources derived from the traditions of the Prophet. Born into a family engaged in religious scholarship and holding administrative offices, he became the most prolific authors in all of Islamic literature. His father was a preacher, taught Shāfi‘ī religious law, and acted as a deputy judge (*qāḍī*). He died prematurely when his son was only 5 years old, but he had made financial arrangements that allowed Suyūṭī to pursue a path of scholarship through the guardianship and aid of his father's friends and students. Suyūṭī commenced his studies at an early age, with the study of Islamic religious sciences under various teachers. This included the study of *ḥadīth* (statements and actions of the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions as recorded by his contemporaries and collated into collections by later authors), some rudimentary arithmetic for the solution of problems of inheritance, and probably the study of rudimentary timekeeping (*mīqāt*) and traditional medicine. At the young age of 18, he assumed his father's former position of teaching religious law at the Shaykhū mosque and provided juridical consultative opinions. Soon afterward in 1467, Suyūṭī reinitiated the study of *ḥadīth* at the mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn. He was appointed to teach *ḥadīth* at the prestigious Shaykhūniyya *madrasa* (religious college) in 1472 and then was given a royal appointment by the Mamlūk Sultan Qā'it Bāy (reigned: 1468-1495) to the directorship of the Baybarsiyya *khānqāh* (Sūfi lodge) in 1486. Suyūṭī's personality and convictions resulted in controversy and polemics with contemporary scholars as well as officials among the ruling Mamluks. He withdrew from public life in 1501, following a conflict over the finances of the Baybarsiyya *khānqāh* and spent the rest of his days editing and revising his works.

Suyūṭī wrote over 500 works that primarily focus on topics and issues in the Islamic religious and the Arabic linguistic disciplines. Two of his works deal with astronomy and medicine. His interest in astronomy, however, was not in what we or his contemporaries would call scientific, *i. e.*, related to the pre-Islamic astronomical heritage that had been transmitted in the 8th and 9th centuries. Rather his interest in astronomy lay in the discussion of celestial objects and phenomena as found in the corpus of literature and activity, which comprises *ḥadīth*. As such, his *al-Hay'a al-saniyya fī al-hay'a al-sunniyya* (*The radiant cosmology: On sunnī cosmology*) is a religiously oriented account of “cosmology,” that is to say, celestial and terrestrial entities from the perspective of *ḥadīth*, or more precisely the *ḥadīth* corpus which, in Suyūṭī's view, reflects the position of the Sunnī community as laid out by Sunnī religious scholars. In the introduction of the *Radiant Cosmology*, Suyūṭī states,

“This is a book on cosmology (*‘ilm al-hay’a*), which I have compiled from the traditions (*al-athār*) and have appended it with reports [by earlier narrators] (*akhbār*) so that those with intelligence may find delight and those with vision may reflect. I have titled it *The Radiant Cosmology: On Sunnī Cosmology*.”

On the one hand, Suyūṭī wanted to inform his readers about Sunnī cosmology, as it was discussed in traditions and reports of earlier narrators. On the other hand, Suyūṭī's choice of the term cosmology (*hay’a*) for his religious enterprise was novel. The astronomers had utilized the term *hay’a* since the 9th century to signify the configuration of the celestial orbs. Thus the term *‘ilm al-hay’a* was used to signify the discipline of “astronomy.” Suyūṭī's appropriation of the terms *hay’a* and *‘ilm al-hay’a* for his enterprise indicates a conscious attempt to present an alternative religious cosmology, that is to say an “Islamic cosmology,” to replace the “scientific” cosmology of the astronomers. In his *Autobiography*, Suyūṭī is quite explicit regarding his views on science:

I do not occupy myself [with] logic and the philosophical disciplines (*‘ulūm al-falsafa*) because they are forbidden, and even if they were permissible, I would not prefer them to the religious disciplines.

During this period, astronomy, and other sciences, certainly fell under the classification of “philosophical disciplines.” Suyūṭī and other religious scholars regarded them with suspicion for, in their view, these disciplines ultimately derived from pre-Islamic sources. Suyūṭī regarded his sources, in contrast, to be the unimpeachable views of religious scholars from earlier generations. Just as they had provided the material for the sound formulation of Islamic Law that governed all aspects of life, including the proper practice of rituals, the sound understanding of the text of the Qur’ān, and so forth, only they could provide the basis for a sound “Islamic” cosmology, that is to say the cosmology for Muslims who follow the path of tradition and orthodoxy (*i. e.*, the Sunnīs). He held similar views regarding medicine.

The subjects that Suyūṭī treats in the *Radiant Cosmology* comprise the Divine Throne (*‘arsh*), the Divine Footstool (*kursī*), the Tablet (*lawḥ*), and the Pen (*qalam*), which are entities mentioned in the Qur’ān, as well as the seven heavens and seven Earths, Sun, Moon, stars, night, day, hours, water and winds, clouds and rain, thunder, lightning, thunderbolt, Milky Way, rainbow, earthquakes, mountains, seas, and River Nile. Suyūṭī's approach to these subjects is apparent in his chapter headings, which refer to reports of the views of selected earlier authorities regarding these “cosmological” entities. As such, the *Radiant Cosmology* preserves the views of these earlier religious authorities whose works are lost to us.

Selected References

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