A school that drew from ancient Greece

The mystical poets were steeped in a rich philosophical tradition, writes William C. Chittick

The current popularity of Jalaloddin Rumi's poetry in the West owes much to the fact that translators pay little regard to his cultural context. He can easily be presented as the proponent of a fuzzy mystical love that celebrates creation while making no intellectual or spiritual demands on the reader.

The fact is, however, that the Persian mystical poets were steeped in their own intellectual tradition and called their readers to undertake strenuous effort on the path to God. Their view of the human role in the world fits squarely into that expressed by the founding texts of the Islamic tradition and elaborated upon by generations of scholars and sages.

One of the best ways of grasping what the mystical poets are trying to say is to look at the writings of the philosophers who were their contemporaries. In the Islamic languages, the word "philosophy" (falsafa) is used to designate various approaches to reality that were deeply indebted to the Greek tradition.

The philosophers found the Neoplatonic school of thought established by Plotinus especially congenial with the Koran. Avicenna (died 1037), the greatest of the Peripatetics or followers of Aristotle, presents us with a highly original Neoplatonic interpretation of Aristotle.

Perhaps the one exception to the rule of Neoplatonic leanings among the great philosophers is Averroes (died 1198), the judge of Cordova. He tried to resuscitate a pure Aristotelianism, devoid of the Neoplatonic overtones favoured by his predecessors. Once translated into Latin, his works became the basis for a new appreciation of Aristotle and were eventually put to use in Western philosophy's break from theological constraints.

Averroes's dates make him an ideal candidate for helping us to grasp the philosophical world-view at the turn of the 13th century. He was not, however, successful in his efforts to put Aristotelian rationalism at the centre of the philosophical tradition.

Despite his fame in the West, he was largely ignored in the Islamic world. An anecdote told about him by Islam's greatest mystical theologian, Ibn Arabi (died 1240) has often been cited as symbolising the parting of the ways between Islamic and Western thought.

As a younger of perhaps 13, Ibn Arabi underwent a mystical "unveiling" which transformed his understanding of the world. His father told his friend Averroes about the miraculous change in the boy and the old philosopher expressed the wish to see him. When Ibn Arabi was taken to him, Averroes gazed at him for a few moments and then said: "Yes." The boy replied: "Yes." Then, however, he saw that the philosopher had misunderstood and said: "No.

Regaining his composure, he asked: "Does divine unveiling yield the same as rational investigation?" Ibn Arabi replied: "Yes and no. Between the yes and the no, spirits fly from their matter, and heads are taken from their bodies."

Most later Islamic philosophy represents a subtle dialectic between the yes and the no, between rational investigation and an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of human reason.

At the time Averroes was writing in Spain, Suhrawardi (died 1191) was already offering a profound critique of Aristotelian logic, devising a complex metaphysics of light in answer to Aristotelianism and showing the way to bridge the gap between unveiling and rationality. He wrote mostly in Arabic, but in Persian treatises employed poetic imagery and storytelling in a manner reminiscent of his contemporary, the great mystical poet Farid al-Din Attar.

Everyone mentioned so far has been the object of numerous studies in Western languages. Yet, at the turn of the 13th century, the clearest philosophical exposition of the mature Islamic world-view was being provided by a little-known Persian reissue Afdaluddin Kashani or, in Persian, Baba Afzal (died 1210). Like Omar Khayyam (died c. 1131), he has been better known as an author of Persian quatrains than as a philosopher.

He lived in a mountain vil-
lage about 25 miles from Kasha
han in central Iran. His phi
sophical prose is often consid
ered the best in the Persian lan
guage. What strikes the reader
is his stark focus on one issue:
How does one actualise the di
vine gift of intelligence that is in
nate to the soul?

Baba Afsal, like Averroes, had a
fondness for Aristotle, the
only philosopher whom he men
tions by name (with the sole ex
ception of the legendary Hermes). The world-view he
lays down is the same that is
present in the poetry of Attar,
Rumi and many other Persian
poets. The basic picture is this:
The One God, who is absolute
being, light, and awareness,
gives rise to the universe as a se
ries of stages.

Reality descends by way of
the intelligent and self-aware
light that is called “angels” and
“spirits” until it appears in the
visible realm as the material
world. Having come down by
an invisible route from the One,
the qualities and characteristics
of reality now make themselves
manifest in the complexities of
the physical realm, the world ac
cessible to sense perception.

As humans we observe the
qualities of the One first in the
outside world, where we see
that plants display more quali
ties than inanimate objects, and
animals actualise an even fuller
range. Our reflection on the
world leads us to understand
that our own reflecting self pos
sesses in itself all the qualities
made manifest in external
objects.

Once we realise this, we need
to focus our efforts on strengthen
ing the reflective power until
eventually it may re-establish
contact with the divine light
from which it arose.

The Persian mystical poets
celebrate the world in as much
as it is the descent and disclo
sure of the names and qualities
of God, who, according to Mu
hammad, “is beautiful, and loves
beauty”. As the Koran tells us:
“He made everything that He
created beautiful” (327).

However, seeing the world’s
beauty depends upon seeing
things as God sees them, and
in order to do so we need to return
to the Origin of all things. The
poets call their readers to expe
rience the self-disclosure of God
in themselves and in the world.

They agree with the philoso
phers and jurists that a great
deal of effort must be exerted if
we are to climb back up the lad
er by which we came down in the
first place.

The philosophers speak of
training the intellect in rational
techniques and actualising the
fullness of intelligence. The ju
rists speak of the necessity of
struggling on the path to God
by observing the ritual and ethi
cal commandments of the Ko
ran and Muhammad. The poets
tell us we must sacrifice the soul
to the divine Beloved. We must
undergo the pain of dying to
everything we love in the world.
Only then can we be reborn in
God and see all things as epipha
nies of the divine beauty.

William C. Chittick’s most recent book is
The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The
Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teach
ings of Afdal al-Din Kashani (Oxford