

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 youngster 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."

Averroes's colour changed.



The Greek connection: Aristotle and Plato from *The School of Athens*

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 Farin 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 recluse 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-

Seeing the world's beauty depends on seeing things as God sees them



School of Athens by Raphael

lage about 25 miles from Kashan in central Iran. His philosophical prose is often considered the best in the Persian language. What strikes the reader is his stark focus on one issue: How does one actualise the divine gift of intelligence that is innate to the soul?

Baba Afzal, like Averroes, had a fondness for Aristotle, the only philosopher whom he mentions by name (with the sole exception 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 series 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 accessible to sense perception.

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

Once we realise this, we need to focus our efforts on strengthening 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 disclosure of the names and qualities of God, who, according to Muhammad, "is beautiful, and loves beauty". As the Koran tells us: "He made everything that He created beautiful" (32:7).

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 experience the self-disclosure of God in themselves and in the world.

They agree with the philosophers and jurists that a great deal of effort must be exerted if we are to climb back up the ladder 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 jurists speak of the necessity of struggling on the path to God by observing the ritual and ethical commandments of the Koran 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 epiphanies of the divine beauty.

William C. Chittick's most recent book is The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani (Oxford University Press, 2001).