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Journal Title: Reason and inspiration in Islam
:theology, philosophy and mysticism in Muslim
thought : essays in honour of Hermann Landolt

Volume: Issue:
Month/Year: 2005 **Pages:** 274-284

Article Author: William Chittick

Article Title: Chapter 21: The Pertinence of
Islamic Cosmology: Reflections on the Philosophy
of Afdal al-Din Kashani

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The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology: Reflections on the Philosophy of Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī

William C. Chittick

My recollections of Professor Landolt go back to the 1970s when he used to come to Tehran to do research at the Tehran Branch of the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies. At the time I was busy with my Ph.D. dissertation at Tehran University and later teaching at Aryamehr Technical University. Although I remember that Professor Landolt was often present during academic events, I recall specifically only one of his lectures. That was an impressive Persian talk in the Faculty of Letters at Tehran University on the theories of the Sufi 'Alā' al-Dawla al-Simnānī. To my regret, I never had the chance to profit personally from his great erudition, which he reserved mainly for his direct students.

More recently, it was the good fortune of me and my wife to be staying with our old friends Mehdi Mohaghegh and Nushin Ansari in Tehran in May of 1999, right after an international congress on Mullā Ṣadrā. Professor Landolt was also staying with them, though we hardly had time to talk because he was so busy meeting friends. Then, however, a bureaucratic snafu kept him in Tehran three days longer than he had planned, and we had plenty of opportunity to discuss various matters of mutual interest. Among other things, we spoke about my recent work on the philosopher Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, and I was delighted to hear that he had read Kāshānī carefully and that his estimate of Kāshānī's place in the philosophical tradition coincided more or less with my own. Given the interest Professor Landolt expressed in my work, I thought it would be appropriate to offer an article on Afḍal al-Dīn to him in his *Festschrift*.

Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, usually known in Iran as Bābā Afḍal (d. ca. 610/1213–1214), was one of the two or three Muslim philosophers who wrote mainly in Persian rather than Arabic. His collected Persian works include six longish treatises, four

translations from Arabic of works by Greek philosophers, many short essays, seven letters to disciples, and a good number of quatrains and other poems. He was a contemporary of Averroes, al-Suhrawardī and Ibn ‘Arabī, but his philosophical position is perhaps closest to the Neoplatonism of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. He considered himself someone who stood squarely in the Greek tradition and the only philosophers he mentions by name are Aristotle and Hermes.

In contrast to most philosophers, Bābā Afḍal does not beat about the bush. He goes directly to the heart of philosophy as received by the Islamic tradition. This heart can be expressed most succinctly in the Delphic maxim, ‘Know thyself’. Bābā Afḍal writes with the goal of clarifying the nature of the quest for self-knowledge that must animate all philosophy worthy of the name, and he holds that true philosophy remains inaccessible to those who do not know themselves. Those who investigate and study things that do not illuminate their understanding of themselves are wasting their time.

In the later tradition Bābā Afḍal was perhaps better known as a poet than a philosopher. His philosophical works were partly forgotten not because of any lack of originality or profundity, but because Arabic remained the language of serious philosophy in Iran down to the nineteenth century, and any work in Persian appeared peripheral to students of the discipline. No doubt he influenced the later tradition, but his influence has not been studied, so it is difficult to provide concrete evidence for it. However, Mullā Ṣadrā was familiar with his writings and I suspect that a careful comparison of their works will show that he appropriated Bābā Afḍal’s ideas in many places. One proof of this assertion is that Mullā Ṣadrā translated Bābā Afḍal’s *Jāwidān-nāma* into Arabic, making a good number of modifications and additions, but without mentioning the fact that Bābā Afḍal was the original author. He called the new version of the treatise *Iksīr al-‘arīfīn*.¹

Bābā Afḍal’s orientation towards the achievement of self-knowledge and the practice of philosophy as a spiritual discipline throws light on a contemporary issue concerning which most scholars have concluded that pre-modern philosophy has nothing to say. This is the domain of cosmology, or the understanding of the nature of the universe. It appears that modern scholars have paid little attention to this philosophical cosmology because they consider it to have been superseded by science. Nonetheless, many historians and philosophers have recently begun to question the epistemological authority of science, and this should allow us to reconsider the whole question of how philosophical cosmology might speak to us in modern times.

Before I address the issue of Bābā Afḍal’s cosmology, however, I need to say something about his general philosophical perspective, since his cosmology cannot be isolated from his other concerns. Two discussions need to be summarised – ontology and psychology. It is in the relationship between these two domains that the practical orientation of Bābā Afḍal’s philosophy becomes completely clear.

The essence of Bābā Afḍal's position can perhaps be summed up in one sentence: 'The fullness of being is identical with the fullness of self-awareness.' I want to explain very quickly what this sentence means, leaving aside, of course, all the arguments that Bābā Afḍal presents to prove the truth of the assertion.²

Bābā Afḍal does not follow the usual tripartite analysis of *wujūd* (existence or being) into necessary, possible and impossible. His basic position on Ultimate Reality is that it lies outside philosophical investigation. Everything that we can investigate has *wujūd*, but the Ipseity (*huwiyya*) or Essence (*dhāt*) – the Neoplatonic 'God-above-thinking-and-being'³ – cannot enter into philosophical discussion. This leaves us with things that exist in modalities accessible to our experience. When we investigate these things, we find that they can be divided into four primary categories or levels.

In describing the four levels of experienced reality, Bābā Afḍal takes advantage of the Persian language to bring out two basic meanings of the word *wujūd*. Although the term is normally translated into English as 'existence' or 'being', outside philosophical discourse it is just as likely to mean 'finding' or 'being found'. Bābā Afḍal tells us that *wujūd* can be divided into two sorts. One sort is 'being' (*būdan*, *būd*, *hastī*), and the other sort is 'finding' (*yāftan*, *yāft*). It is immediately obvious that finding is a higher level than being, because everything that finds also has being, but everything that has being does not necessarily find. The finder finds existent things, but existent things qua existent things do not find the finder or other existent things. To find is always to be, but to be is not always to find.

Having divided *wujūd* into two levels, Bābā Afḍal subdivides each level into two sorts. The lowest level of *wujūd* is 'potential being' (*būdan-i bi-quwwa*). An example would be the existence of a tree in a seed. The second level is actual being (*būdan-i bi-fi'l*) and is represented by all objects in the external world, like the tree itself. The third level is potential finding. This is the level of the 'soul' (*nafs*), which is identical with the 'self' (*khwud*). The fourth and highest level is actual finding, which is the level of the intellect or intelligence ('*aql*, *khirad*). In Avicennan terms, this fourth level is identical with the 'active' or 'fully actualised' intellect ('*aql-i fa'āl*).

It becomes clear in Bābā Afḍal's very description of *wujūd* that philosophers have a practical goal. In his view, the lover of wisdom sets out to know existence per se and, as a function of knowing existence, to know all things that exist. But, to grasp *wujūd* in its totality is the same as to grasp the knowing self in its totality. 'To be' in the full sense of the word is to have total awareness (*āgahī*). Absolute being is absolute knowledge. The philosopher strives to know *wujūd* qua *wujūd*, but he can only do so by knowing self qua self. In other words, the philosopher is striving to know intellect as the intellecter, or to know his own pure and disengaged (*mujarrad*) intelligence as the only true object of knowledge. This is the stage of the unification of the intellecter, the intellect and the intellected (*ittihād-i 'āqil u 'aql u ma'qūl*), a position supported most vocally among Muslim philosophers by Mullā Ṣadrā.

In short, the practical goal of the philosopher is to know all things. But in order to know all things, the philosopher must know the principle of all things, a principle that is at one and the same time the knower of all things and the fullness of being. This knower is the 'intellect', which is the fully actualised soul, or the self that is totally aware of self, or, as Bābā Afḍal sometimes calls it, the 'radiance of the Ipseity' (*furūgh-i huwiyya*).

In short, Bābā Afḍal discusses psychology and ontology in terms of a progression of both being and awareness that culminates in the perfection of self and existence. In the fullness of their actualisation, self and existence are identical. In both, there is a clear unfolding from the lowest inanimate level to the highest level of self-awareness, which is the fully actualised intellect, where existence and awareness are one. It follows that the disciplines of psychology and ontology both focus on the ascent from potentiality to actuality. Hence, we also need an explanation of how things come to exist in a state of potentiality in the first place, and this is the basic role of cosmology.

The philosophers commonly discuss coming into existence and the subsequent ascent to the final goal as *mabda' wa-ma'ād*, 'the origin and the return'. In discussing the return, they elaborate upon a basic human intuition. People know innately that they have 'come up' and can go up further. An adult has come up from childhood, a child from the womb and a knowing person from ignorance. People can assist their upward climb by their own efforts. They can climb up through their aptitudes and talents, and they can set their goals as high as they wish. All concepts of education, learning, improvement, progress, evolution and directed development are based on this fundamental understanding that things can be changed in an 'upward' direction. The idea is so basic to human life that people rarely bother to reflect upon it, but simply take it for granted. In the mythic terms of the Western monotheisms, amongst others, the goal towards which the upward movement is oriented correlates with the celestial, starry realms as well as with paradise, or the happy domain after death. Refusal to undertake the upward movement is correlated with the lower reaches of existence and with hell.

The philosophers discuss the upward, returning movement in terms of both ontology and psychology, but they discuss the downward, originating movement mainly in terms of cosmology. The question is this: Where did this world come from and how do we happen to be here? In answering the question, the philosophers elaborate upon an intuition that is as basic to pre-modern humanity as the perception of upward movement. This is that nothing can go up that has not come down in the first place. As Bābā Afḍal puts it in passing, 'Whatever does not fall down from heaven does not rise up from earth'.⁴

We are now down. The proof is that we aspire to higher things, and we often achieve them. But if we are down, our aspiration must correspond to something

within us that knows what it means to be up. True knowledge of 'upness' presupposes some mode of previous awareness of what 'upness' is, and that in turn means that something of the 'up' must have come down to us.

Mythic formulations of the precedent 'upness' are practically universal. The scientific myths of evolution and progress may be the only examples of myths that speak of the upward movement while denying the primal descent. In modern myths, we situate ourselves at the top and look back at the bottom. The alpha is one thing, far behind and below us, and we are the omega, or at least the current omega. In the pre-modern myths, people saw themselves as if situated on a trajectory that began on high, with God or the gods. Then human beings came to be low, and now they are in the process of going back in the direction from which they came. The alpha and the omega are ultimately one.

Some versions of the modern myth suggest that the process has its own necessity – we have been forced up because of the impersonal laws of evolution, and we will keep on going up as we evolve further. The pre-modern myths offer no guarantee of ascent, not at least in any meaningful future. If there is to be an ascent, people must strive to achieve it. We can as easily move further away from the Ultimate Reality as we can move closer to it. We can be left in dispersion and multiplicity indefinitely. Even versions of the pre-modern myths that speak of an inevitable return to the personal and loving God, as does the Islamic, insist that human beings must exert their own efforts if they are to return by a route that will leave them happy with the journey. If they are not ready for the climb, they will go back under constraint, and they will suffer because of the lack of congenity and harmony with what they meet on the way and at the destination. Bāb Afḍal and others explain suffering in the afterlife along these lines.

The underlying rationale for the pre-modern myths is the perception of invisible qualities in the world and the self, that is, the understanding that there is more to existence than meets the eye, not in terms of physical inaccessibility, but in terms of spiritual distance. The myths all acknowledge a realm of superior, intelligible and intelligent things that we can glimpse through the beauty and goodness that we find in ourselves and in the world. We must reach up for this realm if we are to make contact with it, and those who reach with sincerity, love and devotion achieve it more fully than those who go through the motions perfunctorily, or those who make no attempt to undertake the journey. In short, the world is perceived as bathed in the supernal qualities, and a whole and healthy human self is understood to be one that is drawn in the direction of those qualities, which are the source of all awareness and everything that is good, beautiful, desirable and lovable.

The rationale for the modern myths seems to be the inability to see quality beyond quantity. All so-called 'qualities', if real in any way, are explained away in reductionist, quantitative terms. By indefinite division and analysis – by taking things back to genes or social conditioning or atomic particles – we can explain away

all the echoes of the divine that were seen by 'primitive' and 'backward' peoples. We ourselves then stand in a privileged position at the peak of the evolutionary upsurge. We alone are finally able to understand the truth behind the cosmos – or, what is more likely nowadays, that there is no truth behind the cosmos. Holy mother science has allowed us to see clearly that pre-modern peoples were labouring under primitive illusions and living in self-serving dreams, inventing all sorts of myths to act as psychological crutches. We do not reflect on the psychological crutches that we put to use with our own myths of science and superiority.

In short, perception of quality allows people to see things as diaphanous screens within which the signs of God are displayed, but inability to see anything but quantity breeds a sort of thinking that understands only in terms of reduction to the least common denominator.

For Islamic thinking in general, knowing the qualitative domain towards which we are aspiring demands knowing the qualitative domain from which our aspirations have descended. Those who want beauty aspire to it because they have a sense of what it means, and that sense drinks from the same well as beauty itself. But, in order to find the goal, one has to know the route by which aspiration came to us in the first place. Bābā Afḍal explains this in a letter to a student:

You must know that searching out and exploring things and investigating the origin and return of the self does not rise up from bodily individuals. If searching and yearning for the meanings and for the road of reality rose up from human individuals inasmuch as they are individuals, this wanting would be found in every particular individual, but that is not the case. This is because the wish to encompass both worlds is fitting for someone for whom it is possible to encompass them. But it is impossible for any particular individual in respect of individuality to encompass another individual – not to speak of both worlds. Hence this wish does not rise up from the individual. Rather, it rises up from the soul that is radiant with the divine light.⁵

The philosophers investigated the Origin in order to understand the Return. Origin and Return represent the two basic movements demanded by *tawḥīd*, the assertion of God's unity. Asserting that the Ultimate Reality is one demands recognition that it is both First (*awwal*) and Last (*ākhir*). Everything comes from the Real and everything returns to it. In order to understand how we will return to the First, we need to discover how we came to be separated from the First. To do so, we must grasp the true nature of our faculties and powers, including the senses and intelligence. We also need to ask if the compulsory return to the First that is now driving us towards death is sufficient for the achievement of true humanity, or if – what seems to be much more likely if not self-evident – we need to employ our cognitive and practical powers to achieve that humanity, just as we employ these powers to achieve everything else that we achieve.

The Muslim philosophers thought that the study of the human soul was fundamental to the 'quest for wisdom', which is the very definition of philosophy. And they looked for the roots of the soul in the First. They considered ethics an important science, because ethics is nothing if not a discussion of how the soul achieves harmony with the First in keeping with the manner in which it came out from the First at the beginning. The soul appeared in the world because of a compulsory descent (*nuzūl-i idtirārī*), in the sense that none of us were asked if we wanted to come. Or, in the light of a certain Neoplatonic approach, human freedom (*ikhtiyār*) was already manifest in the choice of the human self to come into this world. Whether or not we chose to come, we have come, and now we must go back where we came from. We have sufficient freedom to make some choices, and what freedom we have must be put to good use if there is to be any possibility of achieving ultimate happiness.

According to the philosophers, human beings in their present situation are in the process of going up, which is to say that they are moving from the potency of the fertilised egg towards the pure actuality of the disengaged intellect (*'aql-i mujarrad*). Because of the compulsory return, they have gathered together the stages of inanimate nature, the plant soul and the animal soul, and they possess the powers and faculties of all these stages. Now they stand at the level of the human soul, so they are free to direct their own ascent. No one is forcing them to continue the upward movement. If they prefer to do so, people can stay where they are and go about actualising the animal traits to a degree undreamed of by any non-human animal.

Unquestionably, human beings possess the power of intelligence. To deny this in any sort of meaningful way would be to contradict oneself. Given that people have this power, they can use it as they see fit. But this is not to say that how they use it is indifferent and that all will necessarily be for the good. Just as they need discipline and guidance to become pianists or soccer players, so also they need discipline and guidance to become fully intelligent, which is to say, fully human, since intelligence alone is their uniquely *human* characteristic.

I do not wish to suggest that intelligence is their only human characteristic. Rather, it is the highest human trait and the pinnacle of human possibility, because the fullness of intelligence is identical with the fullness of being. It perhaps needs to be stressed, however, that the soul has two perfections, the theoretical and the practical, and both need to be actualised. Practical perfection demands the fullness of ethical and moral being, or the actualisation of all the virtues (*faḍā'il*). Neither theoretical nor practical perfection can be achieved in isolation. Perfection of intelligence cannot be achieved without perfecting all the soul's aptitudes, and most of these are named by the names of the virtues – love, compassion, justice, forgiveness. Ethical activity and beautiful character traits are inseparable from striving for human status.

In order to move from potential intellect to actual intellect, people need to know what they are striving for. In general, the religious tradition looks for knowledge of the final goal in the Qur'an and the *ḥadīth*, and it looks for knowledge of the praxis that allows the goal to be reached in the Sunna and the *sharī'a*. But the philosophers maintain that knowledge of the final goal and of the praxis needed to achieve it require thought (*andīsha*) and reflection (*tafakkur*). To the extent that people put the power of their own intelligence to work by coming to understand the nature of things, they will actualise intelligence, and gradually they will move from potential intellect to fully actualised intellect.

Philosophical discussions of the Return focus on the two basic ways of going back to the First – the road that people will be compelled to follow and the road that they are free to follow if they choose to do so. Discussions of the Origin focus on how they arrived at their starting place. If they can go up to intelligence, they must have come down from intelligence. If they can go up to intelligence by ascending through the stages of soul, they must have come down into this world by descending through the stages of soul. The Return is the mirror image of the Origin. In later texts, Origin and Return are often discussed as the two arcs of a circle, the 'descending arc' (*qaws-i nuzūli*) and the 'ascending arc' (*qaws-i šu'ūdī*).

The descending route of the Origin is well known. The basic outline is the same as that already present in the *Theology* of Plotinus – intellect, soul, heavenly spheres, four elements. Bābā Afḍal sticks to this simplest of schemes, though some philosophers had developed it into several degrees, as for instance al-Fārābī and Avicenna.

One should not be thrown off track by the language of these discussions and think that, for example, the philosophers are reifying the concepts of intellect and soul, much as people today reify the concept of God; or that they are describing the planets and celestial spheres with anything like the concerns of modern astronomy. Discussion of intellect and soul has to do with what we can retrace in our own selves, and discussion of the spheres has to do with what we can discern with the naked eye. By studying the heavens, the philosophers want to know what we can learn about what is 'up' by looking in that direction. The 'upness' of the physical domain is an analogue of the 'upness' of the spiritual domain, which is to say that what is 'up' in terms of our sense perception is a marker of realities that are 'up' in respect of our intelligence and understanding. If we look up in the outside world, we see the planets and stars, and if we look up in the inside world, we see soul and intelligence. The key is looking, gazing, thinking, reflecting, pondering, meditating and contemplating.

In short, discussion of the heavens pertains to the investigation of the qualities and characteristics that are 'higher' than we are in our corporeal – though not our intellectual – nature. Inasmuch as the heavens pertain to the Origin, they represent descending stages through which the self, in coming down from intellect and

entering the womb, becomes more and more differentiated from other selves and immersed in multiplicity. Inasmuch as the heavens pertain to the Return, they represent stages that the self must pass through in order to actualise its potentiality, harmonise its diverse powers, unify its multiple aptitudes and finally rejoin the intellect from which it arose. The mythic model for this Return is provided by the accounts of the Prophet's *mi'rāj*.

The philosophers were able to read spiritual significance into what they saw of the celestial spheres because they were reflecting upon themselves. They saw that they themselves, beginning in the womb, had risen up from mineral, to plant, to animal, to human, and that they were now striving to rise to the fullness of self-knowledge, the intellect that knows itself and all things. In their view, the way to achieve a truly useful knowledge of the spheres – that is, useful in the quest to become human – is to investigate how the celestial realms display the qualities and characteristics of our own intellective nature. To study the heavens is to study realities that bring together many other realities and embrace and encompass the evanescent world below. The heavens reflect much more directly than the sublunar realm the nature of the intelligent self, which is incorruptible and everlasting.

When reading historical discussions of Islamic cosmology, we are sometimes left with the impression that the (First) Intellect and the (Universal) Soul – that is, the initial stages of descent from the Origin – were concepts lifted from Neoplatonic sources without much reflection on the part of those who did the lifting. The two can appear as rather odd suppositions that have nothing to do with the real world – though it is understandable, we may be led to believe, that the 'unimaginative Muslims', relying as usual on the Greeks, should borrow this notion as an easy and ostensibly 'rational' explanation for the origin of the universe. But there is no reason to think that these ideas were taken over without critical assimilation on the part of those who took them over. Philosophy is nothing if not the sober consideration of what we can know, the sifting of supposition from real knowledge. It is a certain breed of historian that has seen the history of ideas as an unreflective collecting of ideas from the past as if they were precious artifacts.

If we are to make any sense of the Intellect and the Soul as the dual progenitors of the cosmos, we have to stop and reflect on what the philosophers were trying to say. As human beings, we know innately that all things have been born from the Soul, because our own souls embrace nature along with the plant, animal and human faculties. We know innately that the Intellect is the all-embracing origin, because it is precisely our own intelligence that knows all this, arranges all this, becomes all this and embraces all this. If our microcosmic intelligence is able to conceive of the whole world, it can do so only because it is already, at some level, of itself an intelligence that conceives of the whole universe. What goes up must have come down in the first place.

Once we re-evaluate Islamic cosmological teachings in such terms, it will be obvious that it is premature to abandon its perspective because it does not coincide with modern theoretical constructs. Rather, we should ask ourselves: What is the goal of studying the universe? What are the self-imposed limits of those who study? The modern study of the universe and the accompanying theories all stop short at the surface of reality. Islamic cosmology was always focused on the depths of reality, and the depths of reality are inseparable from the human self.

In effect, modern science and the modern disciplines have abandoned the study of the human self. Instead, people study subjects that allow them to go out and get things done, or at least to make money. For Islamic philosophy, to abandon study of the self is to abandon humanity, to give up any claim to human status. Knowledge that does not help us understand who we are is not, in fact, knowledge. Theories that purport to give knowledge divorced from the knowing subject are simply systematic ignorance. Such theories can be enormously useful for manipulating the world and establishing power relationships, but they do not and cannot aid in the quest for wisdom.

In short, in the view of Islamic philosophy in general and Bābā Afḍal in particular, to be human is to seek after knowledge that will increase one's humanity. Humanity's defining characteristic is the self-aware intelligence and knowing that intelligence intelligently demands focusing one's energies on self-knowledge. Any knowledge that does not aid in the quest for self-knowledge is in fact ignorance, and its fruit can only be the dissolution and destruction of human nature.

Notes

1. William C. Chittick, *Mulla Sadra, the Elixir of the Gnostics: A Parallel English-Arabic text* (Provo, UT, 2003).
2. Details can be found in my study of Bābā Afḍal's writings: *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-knowledge in the Teachings of Afḍal al-Din Kashani* (Oxford, 2001).
3. I take the expression from Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague, 1963), pp. 20–21.
4. Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, *Muṣannafāt*, ed. M. Minuwī and Y. Mahdawī (Tehran, 1331–1337 Sh./1952–1958), p. 325.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 688.