The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani by William C. Chittick
Review by: Kiki Kennedy-Day
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of regressions finally retorts, “I suppose [the first Buddha] fell from the sky or else he sprang up out of the earth.”1 I think Faure would agree that it must be one or the other, or perhaps a combination of the two.

Note


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Are you tired of feeling that the scientifically quantifiable world is not all there is, but that most books about philosophy are airy-fairy or pie-in-the-sky? Then The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani by William C. Chittick has something to say to you. Chittick succinctly analyzes the limitations of scientism in his preview of the ends of Islamic philosophy (especially pp. 34–37). One could not make a better argument for exploring the Real beyond appearances than Chittick does.

As we look around ourselves in the wreckage of the world—abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, “ghost” prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, tens of thousands of refugees at Darfur—we may feel that the world could use more philosophy. Since traveling in our current direction is leading to spiritual bankruptcy in our souls, perhaps a solid spiritual understanding of the universe would help.

The author’s stated goals are to introduce the major themes of Islamic philosophy and to introduce the Persian philosopher Afdal al-Din Kashani in English translation. The book consists of two parts: part 1 an overview of Islamic philosophy and part 2 the writings of Baba Afdal. In part 1 Chittick moves from the particular to the general, here from Afdal al-Din Muhammad ibn Hasan Kashani (d. A.H. 610 / A.D. 1213–1214) to the perspective of Islamic philosophy and the perspectives of philosophy in general. Chittick sketches al-Kashani’s life, moving from his tomb in Maraq, Iran, to recalling highlights of the philosopher’s life. When one considers the near-contemporaries of al-Kashani they are so illustrious as to make one’s head spin: Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Arabi, and Nasir al-Din Tusi. More than any other details, these scholars place al-Kashani in the intellectual major leagues. Chittick also mentions that al-Kashani believes in philosophy as a praxis, a way of life to be implemented as well as an exercise of reasoning. He sees philosophy as training the soul with the knowledge of the mind.

Chapter 2 forms an excellent introduction to Islamic philosophy for the curious reader. He begins by nailing some of the current problems in studying Islamic thought. He mentions everything from considering the dogmas of religion beneath
study to the refusal to accept what philosophers say at face value. Basically it is our own prejudices and views that prevent us from being able to understand their perspectives. The specific issues of Islamic philosophers that Chittick discusses are understanding God, the meaning of prophecy, and the “Origin and Return”—how the world came to be and our return to God after death.

Chittick also provides a much-needed antidote to the tendency of many modern scholars to over-Hellenize Islamic philosophy, while at the same time, failing to refer to either the Qur’an or Islamic civil society. He locates the problem with modern thought in an inability to grasp any notion that refers to quality rather than quantity. (This can be seen even more vividly in recent attempts by American economists to give a dollar value to happiness on the success chart.) While quantification is necessary in analytic science, it stifles thought in symbolic, metaphorical, or religious discovery.

In part 2, the Writings section actually begins with relevant background texts, including Aristotle, pseudo-Aristotle (The Treatise on the Apple), Hermes, and Ghazzali (The Alchemy of Felicity). Then we move on to the Baba Afdal’s own writings, including quatrains, essays, letters, and others. These writings show the range of Afdal al-Din Kashani’s interests: moving from the practical (chapter 5) to the theoretical (chapter 6). Among the writings in chapter 5 we find his letter to Majd al-Din. It shows al-Kashani’s clear-sighted understanding of human nature when he says, “The fact that most people these days get along badly with each other is precisely because they are fed up with seeing each other’s doing and talking” (p. 139). Then he continues with the sad advice that the more dishonorable person achieves a greater reputation and more respect. Those who find solace in the unwavering pettiness of human behavior will be encouraged to see that human nature has not changed.

In the theoretical section, Chittick includes al-Kashani’s advice to kings in the treatise entitled “The Makings and Ornaments of Well-Provisioned Kings.” In his earlier Mirror for Princes, Nizam al-Mulk briefly describes that the metaphysical position of the king is higher than that of his subjects. He then describes various obligations of justice that the ruler owes subjects and how to fulfill them, with advice on everything from avoiding conflicts of interest in appointing officials to choosing boon companions in what was a standard format. In contrast, al-Kashani’s analysis, “The Makings and Ornaments of Well-Provisioned Kings,” is more abstract, and differs in that it discusses the perfection of the soul as well as that of the king. Al-Kashani also tells the king to compare the functions of the government with the functioning of his body. The king is instructed to nurture his subjects so that they may achieve perfection and avoid blight.

Chittick, who is perhaps best known for his translations of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works (from the Arabic), continues to expand our knowledge of Islamic philosophy here with a Neoplatonic philosopher. While acknowledging the debt al-Kashani owes to Hellenic thinking, particularly Plotinus, he constantly emphasizes that Islamic philosophy has its own place separate from Greek philosophy.

In conclusion I cannot overstate the importance of Chittick’s contribution to the understanding of Islamic philosophy. The introductory chapters of his book form a
brilliant analysis of philosophy and particularly Islamic philosophy. Since it also includes a bibliography of al-Kashani’s known works, this book will be an invaluable addition to our knowledge of Islamic philosophers. Another translation of a Persian work into English is very welcome, particularly by a translator with such a proven track record. The inquisitive reader will also be rewarded with the derivation of anniyya and its putative origins (p. 317 n. 18). This reviewer was delighted to come upon a reasonable analysis of anniyya beyond an abstruse journal article in three languages (Greek, Syriac, and Arabic) from the 1950s, discussing its derivation from the Syriac—one of those articles that everyone is required to quote but no one understands. May Chittick’s perspicacious note replace it.


Reviewed by Will S. Rasmussen  King’s College London

*The Shape of Ancient Thought*, Thomas McEvilley’s magnum opus of over thirty years’ preparation, draws together an encyclopedic array of texts and archaeological evidence from Greece and India, which he employs in clearly written arguments toward an answer to a volatile question: just how indebted to each other are India and Greece for their philosophical ideas and techniques? The subject is volatile in that it often arouses the rancor of challenged claims to intellectual property or cultural superiority, and the author shows admirable sensitivity by arguing to his conclusions in a way that explicitly eschews the lesser motives of rivalry and self-aggrandizement; instead he promotes the appreciation of a passion and genius for philosophy that is shared equally in the East and the West. McEvilley has collected for his purposes a treasury of key passages from Greek and Indian philosophy, and this review will seek to give some idea of the vast scope of his work and to assess its contribution to our understanding of philosophy.

In his Foreword McEvilley says that his book will challenge a dichotomy, which prevails in Western thinking, that divides the ancient world of thought into Greek and non-Greek. Greek thought is characterized as that which is rational, and non-Greek thought as that which is irrational, antirational, or at least nonrational. He faults E. R. Dodds’ *The Greek and the Irrational* for supporting this dichotomy, by which Orphism and even certain elements of Plato become assigned, solely by virtue of their nonrational character, to Oriental provenance. He condemns as “deeply and glaringly false” W.K.C. Guthrie’s *History of Greek Philosophy* for disparaging the comparison of Indian and Greek philosophy on the grounds that their motives, methods, and background of thought are so utterly different. In such a spirit he undertakes to prove by argumentation and a “sea of evidence” the invalidity of so brusque a dismissal of Indian philosophy.

The rest of the Foreword explores how the post-Enlightenment “Oriental Renaissance,” that is, the discovery by nineteenth-century Europe of India as “the primal