

Introduction

The Religion of Love

This is a book about one of the world's great literary voices, one whose name might not be immediately familiar to an English-speaking audience. Those who do know of him often acknowledge him as one of seven or so of the most important poets in Persian literature.¹ If one limits that list of Persian poets to classical Sufi poetry, then he is arguably one of two, along with Rūmī. In terms of the sheer magnitude of what he left behind, this poet's confirmed verse compositions add up to nearly 34,600 double lines, something close to seventy thousand units of verse.² As a point of comparison, Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* combine to a little less than twenty-eight thousand lines. For thematic depth, our poet would rival any premodern or even modern writer in ethical and one might say moral-psychological complexity. Finally, in terms of cultural influence, our poet's legacy spans western, central, and southern Asia, as well as Europe. His impact is especially pronounced in Persian, Turkish, and Urdu literature, where his imagery, stories, and style inspired generations of artists, even to this day. Yet what makes our poet perhaps most extraordinary is the insight he offers in terms of Islam as it has been understood theologically, ritually, and ethically. 'Aṭṭār's (d. 618/1221) works of poetry and his book in prose, as I will describe them, outline an ethical journey of love that he saw as an interpretation of Islam. This pathway to reality might sometimes seem strange when compared to the "Islam" many of us recognize, the "Islam" that emphasizes sobriety and self-restraint. Nevertheless, as we will see, its foundations lie in teachings communicated through Islam's

revealed sources, the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, as well as the lives and teachings of its saints. For this reason, our poet's "religion of love" is the topic of this book.

The three coming chapters will introduce you to the poet, the little we know about his life, the content of his poetry and prose, and the historical circumstances in which he wrote. After these introductory chapters, the book is divided into three sections focusing on three themes that prevail in 'Aṭṭār's writings, namely, religion, love, and union. These sections unite several chapters that study 'Aṭṭār as not just a poet but also a thinker, a person with deeply held views on what I have labeled "The Religion of Love."

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This book is not a biography. Most of the salient available information on 'Aṭṭār's life is offered in chapter 1. It is also not an English-language introduction to his works. For the most part, that can be found in Hellmut Ritter's *The Ocean of the Soul*. Rather, this book introduces 'Aṭṭār as a contributor to Islamic thought, one whose viewpoint, questions, and formulae for a reflective and pious life still have something to offer the contemporary reader. One might say that I will try to imagine 'Aṭṭār as a "philosopher of religion," in the mold of other poets and artists whose work captures and transforms the ideas of their age.

This phrase, "philosopher of religion," comes with the caveat that 'Aṭṭār had a pronounced intellectual aversion to the philosophical approaches of his age. He would have balked at being called a "philosopher" (*faylasūf*), or, even worse, a "Sophist" or *sūfistānī*, a designation 'Aṭṭār used to identify the most egregious case of rationalism and skepticism. Yet he would have probably embraced being called a "thinker" (*mutafakkir*). As a thinker and as one who often developed the ideas of others in poetry, 'Aṭṭār offers his readers insights into the God-human relationship, scripture, divine law, cosmology, ethics, epistemology, the nature of love, and human suffering.

One might, and in fact should, wonder what it means when someone describes an artist as a thinker or a philosopher, since the aims of poetry often differ quite observably from those of

intellectual, prosaic treatises. First of all, the two were not so disparate in ‘Aṭṭār’s cultural milieu. Didactic poetry and homiletic poetry—poetry that teaches and poetry that preaches—were quite common at the time, and much of our poet’s work falls under those categories. In fact, Austin O’Malley has explored the homiletic dimensions of ‘Aṭṭār’s writings in an excellent new book, and, as he points out, many classical Persian poets bore the honorary title “sage” (*ḥakīm*), synonymous with “philosopher.”³ This was because of an interdependent relationship between eloquent speech and wisdom in the Persianate literary tradition. Secondly, many Sufi treatises cannot be placed nicely in the category of “scholarly prose” because of the literary and even metaphorical nature of those Sufi prosaic treatises.⁴

It does, in fact, matter that ‘Aṭṭār was an artist and not a philosopher, theologian, or legal specialist. As an artist, the imaginative worlds that ‘Aṭṭār created relied on his engagement with emerging trends in Persian poetry: the trope of the antiheroic lover, the erotic-spiritual *ghazal* lyric, the frame-tale narrative, and the allegorical journey of the soul. Moreover, the “religion of love” described in this book would not be possible without contradictions, emotive language, personal stories, metaphors, allusions, intertextuality, and personification, among other literary devices. As a poet and hagiographer, ‘Aṭṭār employed the intellectual and saintly contributions of his age just as a poet makes use of these devices. His biographer, Dawlatshāh, describes his efforts as a “compiling” of Sufi writings on more than one occasion, and the poet does not seem to have been driven by a desire to be original in any learned sense. Nor does ‘Aṭṭār express the need to argue or provide much evidence, since his role is to provoke and inspire the sentiments and imaginations of his readers, not to convince them.

In this regard, ‘Aṭṭār might be thought of as a philosophical artist similar to others who have been recognized as such and studied for their contributions to intellectual history. As an example, Benjamin Boysen’s *The Ethics of Love: An Essay on James Joyce* unravels the theme of humanist love in the face of the erasure of metaphysical meaning within James Joyce’s (d. 1941) fiction.⁵ Joyce’s representations of life in early twentieth-century Dublin embrace our temporality as individuals and highlight our dependence on the world we encounter for our ego identities. We have the oppor-

tunity to go beyond our sense of selfhood by loving entities other than ourselves—loving other human beings. This message and this philosophy rely on the novel and the short story. It needs fiction to exist. Through Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness style, something comes to life that would not otherwise have life: the profusion of actions and reactions within human thought. Through narratives, those thoughts surround and describe the phenomenon of human-to-human love as a tapestry of images and ideas.

So, too, do ‘Aṭṭār’s reflections on love rely on the sort of cognitive superabundance that poetry can create. There is a sense that the reader can join the poet in the pits of Hell or soar to the majestic Mount Qāf in the course of one narrative. And, in all this, the poet helps the reader interpret the meanings of such multiplicity. The ultimate meaning is quite the opposite of what Boysen sees in Joyce, even though it is also a philosophy of love. We embrace the eternal within ourselves by transcending the temporal, including the temporal self. Yet, again, love liberates. Love cures us from selfishness. Love speaks to us from beyond everything we see, hear, and know. Amazingly, Joyce and ‘Aṭṭār, separated by so much more than just time, share such themes. This coincidence might tell us something about the venture of great literature. Perhaps their mutual concern with liberation from egocentricity is no accident and might help us have a sense of how literature elevates us from certain norms.

There is another caveat to the phrase “philosopher of religion,” as well. Because the world has changed so much since ‘Aṭṭār’s time, one cannot simply reach into ‘Aṭṭār’s writings and extract translatable ideas. The word “religion” reflects that problem more vividly than most other terms. “Religion,” as I will discuss, carries baggage in modern English that the word *dīn* did not in ‘Aṭṭār’s Persian. That baggage includes the modern state and its concomitants, namely, nationalism, popular culture, and codified laws. “Religion” also carries something that we collectively imagine: a secular domain in which myth and magic have no place. This too would have been strange to our poet. Much of what we designate as “secular” had, in the time of ‘Aṭṭār, been intertwined with what we designate as “religious,” that is, notions of God, scripture, and pious authority, whether one called oneself Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.

Neither “religion” nor ‘Aṭṭār can ever appear to us fully unveiled by modern prejudices. Yet, with some amount of work, a reader can perhaps begin to lift the veil. Historians lift that veil

by trying to uncover the context of a poet's writings. The coming pages will offer some of that context. We can also, however, read 'Aṭṭār and explore "religion" in an imaginative way that teaches us something about our own veils of prejudice, thereby shifting our perspective about the world around us. This is the central goal of this book. Reading and analyzing 'Aṭṭār may expand (1) the way we locate devotion in public life, especially when faced with expressions of rationalism that create doubt; (2) the way we draw the borders between belief and disbelief, especially in the complications and perplexities that come with loving God; and (3) the meaning of religious experience, especially in the context of the limitations of human knowledge.

With these matters in mind, three major themes in 'Aṭṭār's thought will provide structure to the coming parts and our exploration of 'Aṭṭār's worldview: (1) religion, (2) love and infidelity (which are, from a certain perspective, two sides of the same coin), and (3) union. Part 1, on religion, will consider the ways in which 'Aṭṭār defines ideal modes of life and piety. In reacting to the rationalisms of his time, he offers those of us who live in the predominance of scientific standards of truth much to consider. Part 2, on love and infidelity, delves into that which has made Persian Sufi poetry so appealing. I explore here the ecstasy of finding God in the world around us, as well as the symbols of that ecstasy. Part 3, on union, ponders what it means to become "one" with the divine. Union resolves human suffering and caps the universal quest to become whole. In the chapters of each of these three parts, I will touch on the views of contemporary theorists of religion, philosophers, and historians. This is not done to make matters more complicated or as mere comparative dressing. Rather, it is done in the spirit of bringing to light the social and intellectual realities in which we read 'Aṭṭār. In this way, perhaps ongoing conversations—at our universities, among our intellectuals, and in our social communities—can include 'Aṭṭār's contributions. Such comparisons can breathe new life into the ways we think, or, at least, expand our views to include what had been untranslated and uninterpreted. But first let us discover the life, circumstances, and saintly legacy of 'Aṭṭār.