The Neoplatonic Roots of Apophatic Theology in Medieval Islam on the Example of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr/Manṭiq aṭ-ṭayr* (The Conference of the Birds) by ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī (ca. 1145–1221)

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Abstract: This study will focus on the metaphysical and theological thought of Farīd ad-dīn ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, i.e. Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (ca. 1145/6–1221). ʿAṭṭār's best known masterpiece, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (Arabic *Manṭiq aṭ-ṭayr*), *The Conference of the Birds*, is seen as the finest example of Sufi love poetry in the Persian language after Rūmī. His thought is distinguished by its provocative and radical theology of love, as well as elements of apophaticism. ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī's vision of God should be analyzed in the context of Neoplatonism, which in a special way contributed to the development of apophatic Muslim thought. This approach challenged classical Islamic theism, whose representatives were convinced that they had sufficient knowledge of God from the Quran and Sunna. Aṭṭār's doctrine focused on God who is a part of the universe. In other words, this author believed that whatever exists is part of God.

Keywords: apophatic theology, Neoplatonism, ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, Sufism, Sufi thought, the One – God, tawḥīd – Sīmurġ, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr*, *Manṭiq aṭ-ṭayr*, *The Conference of the Birds*, Talab, ʿIšq, Maʿrifa, Fuqur, Fanāʾ, medieval Muslim theology, Islamic thought

Negative theological approaches in Medieval Muslim thought flourished in many Sufi circles. They are now considered to be more pluralistic options than any of the other "orthodox" theological trends in the Middle Ages. Apophatic paths as specific techniques of self-negation in Muslim theology and philosophy had diverse and changing applications and manifestations in the writings of various authors, including Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874),[1] Faḫr ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-ʿIrāqī (1213–1289),[2] Awḥad ad-Dīn al-Balyānī (d. 1284 or 1287),[3] Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (1058–1111),[4] Ibrāhīm ibn

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The article adopts the DMG transcription, i.e. the Arabic and Persian transcription based on the German Oriental Society (DMG = Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft) system by Carl Brockelmann and Hans Wehr. The standard for this transcription is the transliteration of the Arabic alphabet for the Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, Urdu and Pashto languages into the Latin alphabet. *Information und Dokumentation – Umschrift*; Brockelmann, *Die Transliteration*.

1   Abdur Rabb, *Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī*.
2   ʿIrāqī, *Divine Flashes*.
3   Balyānī, *Whoso Knoweth Himself*.
4   Ġazālī, *Minhāǧ*.

al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 1162),[5] ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧīlānī (1077–1166),[6] Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kalābāḏī (10th c.),[7] ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad al-Ḫarkūšī (d. 1016),[8] ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qušayrī (986–1073),[9] Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī ar-Rifāʿī (1118–1182),[10] Šihāb ad-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar as-Suhrawardī (1145–1234),[11] Abū ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān As-Sulamī an-Naysabūrī (d. 1021),[12] Sahl ibn ʿAbdallāh at-Tustarī (818–896)[13] and especially the great philosopher and theologian Muhyī ad-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muhammad ibn ʿAlī Ibn ʿArabī (1160–1245).[14] Although some authors (e.g. Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāǧ, d. 988) strenuously demonstrated Sufism's compatibility with mainstream Sunni Islam,[15] according to many Sunni theologians, apophatic visions of God were "unorthodox" or at best highly controversial.[16]

The original apophatic ideas were already held by authors, such as the abovementioned Sahl ibn ʿAbdallāh at-Tustarī, in the early days of the formation of Sufism in the Sunni milieu. Understanding God in this type of metaphysical approach was strongly connected with anthropology. It was a kind of the mystery of union and realization in the center of the Personality (in fact, Holy Personality), called *sirr* ("secret"), or in the heart, where existence unites with the Being.[17] Contemporary researchers, however, not only analyze these apophatic perceptions of the absolute as an expression of tensions between different denominations of Islam, but also identify trans-religious theological and philosophical interactions between them.[18]

This study will focus on the metaphysical and theological thought of Farīd ad-dīn ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, i.e. Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (ca. 1145/6–1221). This Sufi thinker was not chosen by accident. First, ʿAṭṭār was one of the greatest theoreticians of Sufism, hagiographers and philosophers of Medieval Persia, who offered both an apophatic vision and a practical methodology based on Neoplatonic elements. Second, some authors see ʿAṭṭār's works as a type of cognitive poetics, an analogous projection at the intersection of metaphysics and theology.[19]

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5   Ḥāmidī, *Die ismailitische Theologie*.
6   Ǧīlānī, *Al-Fatḥ ar-Rabbānī*.
7   Kalābāḏī, *Kitāb at-Taʿarruf*.
8   Ḫarkūšī, *Kitāb Tahḏīb al-Asrār*.
9   Qušayrī, *Epistle on Sufism*.
10 Rifāʿī, *Ḥālat Ahl*; Rifāʿī, *Kitāb al-Burhān*.
11 Suhrawardī, *Kitāb ʿAwārif*; Suhrawardī, *Rasāʾil Aʿlām al-Hudā*.
12 Sulamī, *Darajāt aṣ-ṣādiqīn*; Sulamī, "Risālat al-Malāmatiyyah," 91–127; Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq at-tafsīr*.
13 Tustarī, *Tafsīr*.
14 Ibn ʿArabī, "Kitāb al-Masāʾil," 303–321; Ibn ʿArabī, "Kitāb at-Taǧalliyāt," 322–354; Ibn ʿArabī, "Kitāb Iṣṭilāḥ," 407–417; Ibn ʿArabī, "Kitāb Manzil al-Quṭb," 250–260; Ibn ʿArabī, *Šarḥ Risālat*; Ibn ʿArabī, *Sufis of Andalusia*.
15 Sarrāǧ, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*.
16 Dāraquṭnī, *Kitāb aṣ-ṣifāt*.
17 Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, 1–320; Böwering, *Mystical Vision*; Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 38–43.
18 Ghomlaghi, "Analytical Comparison," 123–146; Zarrabi-Zadeh, "Sufism," 330–342; Kars, *Unsaying God*, 20–280; ʿOmar, *The Doctrines of the Māturīdīte*; Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*.
19 Sadeghi, "The Function of Macrofiction," 125–147.

ʿAṭṭār was not as famous as Ğalāl ad-dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273) and Ḫwāğe Šams ad-Dīn Moḥammad Ḥāfeẓ-e Šīrāzī (1315–1390). However, although overshadowed by his great successors, nowadays Aṭṭār is still being re-discovered, *inter alia* as a proponent of the apophatic vision of God.[20] He also had a considerable influence on Sufi Muslim thinkers after his works had been rediscovered in the 15th century. In the Middle Ages, however, he was known under his original name Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm, whereas today he is better recognized by his pennames: Farīd al-Dīn (فرید الدین) and ʿAṭṭār (عطار) – "the pharmacist."

ʿAṭṭār's best known masterpiece, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (Arabic *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*), *The Conference of the Birds*, is seen as the finest example of Sufi love poetry in the Persian language after Rūmī. His thought is distinguished by its provocative and radical theology of love, as well as elements of apophaticism. Moreover, nowadays many lines of ʿAṭṭār's epics and lyrics are cited independently of his poems as maxims.

ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī wrote his works in very turbulent times in the Persianate Turkic and Sunni Muslim Khwarazmian empire, which covered large parts of present-day Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran, from 1077 to 1231. It was a period of ongoing disputes over the dominant form of Islam (Sunni-Shiʿite polemics), Islamic cultural pluralism (Arabic, Persian, Turkish elements), and increased activity of alternative ("heterodox") movements in Islam, for example the intellectual venture of the Ismailis.[21] These complex interactions resulted, among other things, in the strong influences and adoption of Neoplatonic elements by the Sufis in Persia. It should also be emphasized that Persian philosophers and theologians – even as they wrote in Persian – adopted many Arabic terms as a medium of expression[22] (therefore, this publication contains many references to both Persian and Arabic terminology).

Thus, ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī's vision of God should be analyzed in the context of Neoplatonism, which in a special way contributed to the development of apophatic Muslim thought. This approach challenged classical Islamic theism, whose representatives were convinced that they had sufficient knowledge of God from the Quran and Sunna.[23] Neoplatonic philosophy has often been described as the final synthesis of the major currents in ancient Greek philosophy, such as Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Platonism and Aristotelianism with oriental religious and mystical elements.[24] From the mid-3rd century to the mid-7th century, Neoplatonism was the dominant philosophical ideology in the Christian Middle East, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe and the place of individual human beings.

It is an open question to what extent the elite of Sufi ascetic theologians – supporters of the apophatic approach – realized that they had borrowed Neoplatonic

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20   Saani – Salrai, "Study and Comparison of Mystical Themes," 285–308.
21   Landolt, "ʿAṭṭār, Sufism and Ismailism," 3–26.
22   Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology*; Meisami, *Structure and Meaning*.
23   Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 25–120; Walker, *The Universal Soul*, 149–166.
24   Lloyd, *Neoplatonism*; Watts, *City and School*.

ideas. In any case, this borrowing of Neoplatonic ideas was possible thanks to the absorption of Hellenistic heritage in the Muslim world in the early Abbasid period.[25] Two hundred years after the Arab conquest of Syria, Iraq and Persia, a new impetus was given to the translation of Greek philosophical texts thanks to the patronage of three early Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, al-Manṣūr (754–775), Hārūn ar-Rašīd (786–809) and his son al-Maʾmūn (813–833). During this period, mainly the works of Plato and Aristotle were translated.[26] However, ca. 840, parts of *Enneads* IV–VI by Plotinus were also translated into Arabic,[27] thanks to which the "concept" of the One, the ideas of emanation and multiplicity, the "true" first principle of Intelligence, as well as the conceptions of love and soul, and so on, became better known and assimilated in the world of Islam. In this context, Neoplatonism, as a radical system of philosophical thought with controversial theological interpretations, was enshrined in the writings of such thinkers as the *Iḫwān aṣ-ṣafāʾ* – "The Brethren of Purity," a secret Arab confraternity in Basra thanks to which the philosophical and religious *Rasāʾil iḫwān aṣ-ṣafāʾ wa ḫillān al-wafāʾ* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity and Loyal Friends) were created on the basis of "orthodox" Neoplatonism.

Nevertheless, over the centuries Neoplatonism has been linked with the theology of the Isma'ili group in Islam, one of the three great branches of Shīʿism.

Certainly, after this period of translations, a kind of Muslim apophaticism developed systematically,[28] as a trend that avoided creating positive descriptions of God's qualities. The introduction of Neoplatonic ideas into the Islamicate world fueled apophatic views in the Muslim understanding of God and strongly influenced the development of Sufism, which can be described as a mystical branch of Islam. However, Neoplatonic ideas that inspired Sufi thinkers did not make them a sect of Islam. Sufis became more of a dimension of Islam, as there were various Sufi orders within both Sunni and Shīʿa communities. Finally, from a methodological point of view, the difficulty arises from the fact that the ideas of both Neoplatonism and Sufism are extremely difficult to isolate and define.[29]

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25 Zarrabi-Zadeh, "Sufism," 334.
26 Badawi, *La transmission de la philosophie*, 15–46; Madkour – van den Bergh, "L'Organon d'Aristote," 47–49; Trego, "*Ce qui se trouve là et ce qui est fait*," 111–131; Peters, "The Greek and Syriac Background," 40–51; Pines, *Studies in Arabic Versions of Greek Texts*; Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, 50–200; Shayegan, "The Transmission of Greek Philosophy," 98–104.
27 Endress, *The Works of Yahya ibn ʿAdi*, 36–37; Lettinck, *Aristotle's "Physics"*, 5–6.
28 Jaichi, *Early Philosophical Ṣūfism*; Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*.
29 Milani, "Mysticism in the Islamicate World," 513; Zarrabi-Zadeh, "Sufism," 330–342. Uždavinys, "From Alexandria to Harran," 119–128.

1. ʿAṭṭār's Life in the Context of the Apophatic Tradition and Multi-ideological Interactions

Reconstructing ʿAṭṭār's biography is not easy because of the lack of reliable information about the author. ʿAṭṭār was rarely mentioned by his contemporaries, e.g. Moḥammad ʿAwfī (d. after 1223) and Ḳᵛāja Naṣīr ad-dīn Ṭūsī (1200–1273).[30] Moreover, ʿAṭṭār himself did not make historians' task easier. He did not say much about himself, and his works contain only isolated allusions to the events from his life. The difficulty of establishing historical facts about ʿAṭṭār is now explained by the nature of his surviving works. These treatises focus on the metaphysical aspects, referring to a more timeless vision of mysticism, in which apophaticism plays a large role.[31] In other words, ʿAṭṭār simply drew the reader's attention to a spiritual topic, without providing any biographical details. There is only one piece of biographical information found in Aṭṭār's writings, i.e. 1177 (573 H.) – the date of the finalisation of his famous work, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (The Conference of the Birds). However, for critical researchers even this date is unclear because it does not appear in any of the surviving manuscripts of this work.

It is equally doubtful whether, as some authors would claim, Farīd ad-dīn ʿAṭṭār lived to be about a hundred years old. The dates of his birth in 1119 and death in 1230 are also questioned by modern historians.[32] It seems best to accept that ʿAṭṭār was born, and even this date is unclear, in 1145, in Nīšāpūr[33] (Neyshabur), located 115 km west of Mašhad in Khorasan. Therefore, according to Eastern tradition, he was given the surname *Nīšāpūrī*. In the 12th and 13th centuries, Nīšāpūr was a city not only of political importance but also a flourishing center of arts, crafts, and trade. It was advantageously located on the Silk Road between Syria and China.[34] Cosmopolitan Nīšāpūr was both an important political and economic city and a religious-philosophical center, home to famous Sufis, scholars and religious groups.[35] Although Sufis generally favored apophatic theological approaches, the relationship between apophaticism and Sufism or mysticism in Islam was not clearly defined. For in Muslim thought, various apophatic approaches to theology could have various connections with mysticism, and some Sufis, due to their ambition to acquire empirical or visionary knowledge, tended to undermine radical apophatic approaches,

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30 Reinert, "ʿAṭṭār, Shaykh Farīd al-dīn," 20; Ritter, *ʿAṭṭār*, 752–755; ʿAṭṭār, *Fifty Poems of ʿAṭṭār*, 3.
31 Blois, *Persian Literature*, 233.
32 ʿAṭṭār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, VII.
33 In particular, it is the result of detailed research conducted by Forūzānfar, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl*, 7–16. He calculated that ʿAṭṭār was born in 540 Š., i.e. 1145/1146.
34 Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur*, 4–12; Kröger, *Nishapur Glass*; Wilkinson, *Nishapur*; Jaouiche, *The Histories of Nishapur*.
35 Malamuda, "Sufi Organizations," 427–442; Melchert, "Sufis," 237–247.

which, in their view, exaggerated the unknowability of God.[36] ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī was at the crossroads of certain ideological dilemmas where different views on the nature of God clashed.

The sources agree that ʿAṭṭār spent most of his years in Nišāpur. Persian writer Sadīd ad-Dīn ʿAwfī (12/13th centuries) attested that ʿAṭṭār composed literary masterpieces during the decline of the Great Seljuk Empire (1140–1194).[37] Probably during his lifetime ʿAṭṭār was known only in Nīšāpūr. After his death, his theological heritage was largely forgotten until the 15th century. Some mystics in Persia rediscovered and appreciated his work in the early modern era.[38]

Nevertheless, some details of ʿAṭṭār's life can be gleaned from surviving sources. ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī was educated in the field of theology, medicine, and Arabic in Mašhad. Literally ʿAṭṭār means "a pharmacist," which became his nick-name because he practiced this profession and was said to serve a large number of customers in his pharmacy.[39] He could have inherited a prosperous pharmacy from his father. Dawlatšāh Samarqandī (d. after 1487) noted that ʿAṭṭār's pharmacy was located in Šādyāḫ (a district of Nīšāpūr). Other important Sufi biographers, Dawlatšāh Samarqandī and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ğāmī (d. 1492), recorded a story about ʿAṭṭār's spiritual conversion.[40] According to this tradition, a wandering hideous dervish impetuously entered the pharmacy, asking ʿAṭṭār to prepare a medicine for his departure from this world. Before ʿAṭṭār could say anything or help him, the poor ascetic died. ʿAṭṭār understood that the dervish did not suffer poverty, but because he renounced worldly possessions and dedicated his life, he was poor before God. ʿAṭṭār, impressed by this event, without a moment's hesitation left his job to join the local Sufi Tarikat. Some scholars even claim that ʿAṭṭār wandered a lot in various regions of the Middle East like a poor dervish, visiting many cities and regions such as Turkistan, Arabia (Mecca), Syria (Damascus), and India, learning from influential Sufis[41] the spiritual discipline associated with selfless service and love of all people.[42]

After reaching the appropriate level of spiritual development, ʿAṭṭār reopened his pharmacy in Nīšāpūr and began promoting Sufi thought. Accused of heresy because of his apophatic theology, he might have left Nīšāpūr. Finally, he returned to Nīšāpūr a short time before his death there.

Even in ʿAṭṭār's attitude towards death, a kind of apophatic approach is noticeable, namely, that hope for an imminent mystical union with God is irreducible to human arguments, especially material ones. The Persian tradition provides

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36   Kars, *Unsaying God.*
37   ʿAwfi, *Lubāb al-albāb*, 480–482.
38   Reinert, "ʿAṭṭār, Shaykh Farīd al-dīn," 20.
39   Forūzānfar, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl*, 39.
40   Samarqandī, *Tadhkirat al-šuʿarāʾ*, 145; Ğāmī, *Nafaḥāt*, 599.
41   Bashiri, "Farid al-Din ʿAttar."
42   Bashiri, "Farid al-Din ʿAttar."

an interesting story about ʿAṭṭār's death. During the famous Mongol invasion of Nīšāpūr in 1221, he was taken prisoner by a Mongol who was on the point of killing him. Unexpectedly, another Mongol offered the captor a ransom of one thousand pieces of silver if he saved the old man's life. ʿAṭṭār's captor was ready to accept the offer but the Sufi advised him to wait. ʿAṭṭār presented himself as a man of importance, so the Mongol, assuming that he would acquire an even greater sum of silver, refused to take the amount. Later, another person came, this time offering only a sack of straw to free ʿAṭṭār. So, ʿAṭṭār told the Mongol to sell him for the sack, as that was all he was worth. Outraged at being made a fool, the Mongol cut off Aṭṭār's head.[43] In the context of the story about ʿAṭṭār's death, words from his *The Conference of the Birds* come to mind involuntarily:

> Accept my love or kill me now – your breath
> Revives me or consigns me here to death.[44]

2. Towards Apophaticism. The Evolution of Ideas in ʿAṭṭār's Works

We have fragments of information about the Sufi masters who influenced ʿAṭṭār's intellectual formation. Some researchers believe that ʿAṭṭār was relatively well-versed in the literature, philosophy, astronomy, medical and pharmaceutical sciences related to his profession.[45] Others share a different opinion, claiming that it is difficult to find in ʿAṭṭār's works unequivocal evidence that would show us the extent of his education. What is admirable, however, is the exceptional creativity of ʿAṭṭār and his stylistic finesse, which made him an outstanding poet of early Muslim mysticism. It is significant that he began with writing *Moṣībat-Nāma* and the *Elāhī-Nāma* while working in the pharmacy.[46]

There is also a problem in determining a complete list of ʿAṭṭār's works and whether he is the author of all the texts that are attributed to him. This question has so far not been conclusively resolved. Scholars disagree on both the number of works he is said to have created and the number of distichs he is alleged to have authored. For example, Rezā Ġoli ḫān Hedāyat's conclusions sound quite peculiar, as he estimates ʿAṭṭār's writings at 190 works comprising 100,000 distichs (the glorious classic work of Persian literature, *Šāhnāmeh* by Firdawsi, contains only 60,000 distichs). In turn, other authors adopt numerical-esoteric explications, stating that the sum of

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43   ʿAṭṭār, *Wisdom of the East*, 16.
44   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 1303–1325.
45   ʿAṭṭār, *Fifty Poems*, 4.
46   Ritter, "Philologika X," 148.

ʿAṭṭār's works is equivalent to the number of suras of the Qurʿan, i.e. 114.[47] The most reliable research on the subject indicates that the number of ʿAṭṭār's texts ranges from 9 to 12 volumes. [48]

Stylistic differences observed between ʿAṭṭār's mystical (apophatic) works lead researchers to analyze the evolution of his thought. This also concerns divergent influences of individual denominations of Islam (Suunism, Shīʿism) on ʿAṭṭār's works. Hellmut Ritter (1892–1971) explains these different levels of literary and thematic forms in ʿAṭṭār's texts by the evolution of ʿAṭṭār's spirituality.[49] He distinguishes three phases of ʿAṭṭār's creativity, which can be schematically presented as follows:
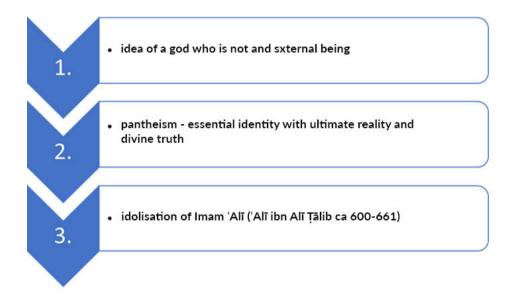

1. • idea of a god who is not and sxternal being

2. • pantheism - essential identity with ultimate reality and divine truth

3. • idolisation of Imam ʿAlī (ʿAlī ibn Alī Ṭālib ca 600-661)

Fig. 1. The evolution of Aṭṭār's thought

Modern research has further shown that ʿAṭṭār's authorship was falsely attributed to works such as *Maẓhar al-ʿaǧā'ib* (The Executor of Wonders) and *Lisān al-ġayb* (Voice from the Outer World).[50]

The theological and philosophical evolution of ʿAṭṭār's thought is situated in the context of the polarisation of the Islamic denominations in medieval Islam.

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47 Bashiri, "Farid al-Din ʿAttar."
48 In the introductions to *Moḫtār-Nāma* and *Ḫosrow-Nāma*, ʿAṭṭār lists the titles of his later works: *Dīvān, Asrār-Nāma, Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (= *Manṭiq aṭ-ṭayr*), *Moṣībat-Nāma, Elāhī-Nāma, Ǧawāher-Nāma, Šarḥ al-Qalb.*
49 Ritter, "Philologika X," 134–173, especially 143–144.
50 Šerani, "'Taṣnīfāt i šaiḫ," 1–97; Ritter, "Philologika X," 134–173; Ritter, "Philologika XIV," 1–76; Ritter, "Philologika XV," 1–88; Ritter, "Philologika XVI," 194–239.

The thought of the Muslim Sufi mystics increasingly contrasted with the interpretations of the Sunni ulema. Sufism and the official Islamic law were incompatible because Sunni theologians concentrated on the development and implementation of Islamic law (*fiqh*, *šarīʿa*). In contrast, Sufis focused on the phenomena whose existence cannot be detected by sensory perception. During their mystical experiences, Sufis perceived extrasensory phenomena through the soul, the mind, the imagination, or some other faculty. The conceptualisation of these experiences was very controversial in Islam. Sufis, disregarding Sharia in their pursuit of knowledge of God (*maʿrifa*, "interior knowledge"), became more and more entangled in apophatic views of the Absolute. However, the theologically distinct groups od Sunni, Shīʿa and Sufis were forced to function in one society, while Sufism had an increasing influence on a large part of Muslims. For this reason, some Muslim thinkers tried to reconcile Sufism with Sunniism, for example, such concepts were proposed by al-Ġazālī (1058–1111).

The relative "reconciliation" between the Sunni and Shīʿa circles enabled the spread of Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭaraqa*) in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. As late as the 11th century, Sufis had formed loose groups without institutional structures. However, already during the life of ʿAṭṭār, these groups appeared as autonomous Sufi institutions.[51] Thus, in the 13th century, the Sufis blended into the mosaic of the Islamic world with their original "heretical" (in terms of Sunni) idea of an all-encompassing God.

3. The Apophatic Vision of God in *The Conference of the Birds*

Before starting the analysis of *The Conference of the Birds*, it is worth noting that the essential philosophical and theological terms in Persian (except for a few cases) are Arabic loanwords. Usually, they have not lost their original meanings, and sometimes they have been enriched with new ones. These loanwords are written exactly as in Arabic (the pronunciation of these words is another matter)[52]. Although *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* was written in Persian even after the rise of New Persian literature in the 10th century, Arabic remained the main language of scholarship in Persia. Moreover, after the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, the Arabic language was increasingly confined to purely philosophical and theological works, where it continued to be used for centuries to come. Interestingly, much of the Arabic literature produced in Persia originated in Aṭṭār's home region – i.e., in Khorasan.[53] In this analysis, therefore,

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51   Malamuda, "Sufi Organizations," 427–442.
52   Lazard, "Les emprunts arabes," 53–67; Sadeghi, "L'influence de l'arabe," 145–152.
53   Danner, "Arabic Literature in Iran," 566–594.

Arabic terminology and its transcription dominate, especially since Sufi thought was intensively developed in the Arab world. Sufi Arabic terminology has been established throughout the Muslim world, e.g. thanks to the contemporary Aṭṭār, the most eminent Sufi theologian of the Muslim late Middle Ages Muḥyī ad-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. ʿArabī al-Ḥātimī aṭ-Ṭāʾī or Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240).[54] Therefore, Aṭṭār's key theological terms can be paradoxically treated as Arabicisms in the Persian language of *The Conference of the Birds*, and at the same time as Arabic terms used by him to express his Sufi thought.

Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī presented an original, expanded spiritual vision of God, which inspired successive generations of Sufis. We find this vision in several of his works, including *Asrār-Nāma* (Book of Secrets), and *Elāhī-Nāma* (Divine Book)[55] about *zuhd* (asceticism). Without any doubt, among Aṭṭār's books, *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* (or *Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr*) – *The Conference of the Birds*,[56] is a masterpiece of apophatic theology. The use of the image of birds traveling to their pantheistic king is not itself a purely original contribution by ʿAṭṭār. The author made special use of al-Ġazālī's text on birds (*Risālat aṭ-ṭayr*),[57] as well some analogies to the aforementioned Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafā[58] – "the Brothers of Serenity or the Brethren of Purity."

Mantiq aṭ-ṭayr or *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* is most often translated as *The Conference of the Birds*, but the title of this work can also be rendered as "The Logic of the Birds." The Arabic term *mantiq* has many meanings, including "speaking" and "logic." This wonderful and metaphorically rich philosophical religious poem consists of many spiritual, instructive stories in the great context of apophatic theology. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has had exceptionally numerous translation into both Western and Oriental languages (for example, there are several English translations).[59]

The center of gravity of the metaphorical-apophatic interpretation of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* regarding God is found in the extremely ingenious pun between the Persian words *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) and *sī murġ* (سی مرغ). *Sīmurġ* refers to the mythological bird present in Persian thought from antiquity, somewhat reminiscent of the phoenix bird, and the expression *sī murġ* literally means "thirty birds." Before presenting the points of convergence of these two terms with completely different connotations on the basis of Aṭṭār's apophatic interpretation, it is worth signalling the roots of the term *Sīmurġ* in Persian culture.

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54 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*; Buana, "Nature Symbols," 434–456.
55 ʿAṭṭār, *The Ilahi-Nama*.
56 This masterpiece has had many editions: ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Masani); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Nott); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds. A Sufi Allegory*; ʿAṭṭār, *The Allegorical 'Conference of the Birds'*.
57 Ġazālī, *Al-Ǧawāhir al-ġawālī*, 147–151.
58 Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ, *Ar-Risāla*, 157–163.
59 See, e.g. ʿAṭṭār, *Conference* (Masani); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Nott); ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference of the Birds. A Sufi Allegory*; ʿAṭṭār, *The Allegorical 'Conference of the Birds'*.

The medieval term *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ), also spelled *simorğ*, *simorg*, *simurg*, *simoorg*, *simorq* or *simourv*, is derived from the Middle Persian terms *sēnmuruy* and *sēnmurw*. In Pazend, i.e. the writing systems used for the Middle Persian language, the equivalent of *Sīmurġ* was the form of *sīna-mrū*. The primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism, composed in the Avestan language, contained the term *mərəyō Saēnō* – "bird of Saēn," a bird of prey, possibly an eagle, falcon or sparrowhawk, as can be inferred from the etymological cognate of the Sanskrit *śyenaḥ* (श्येन:), "eagle, bird of prey," which also appears as a divine being.[60] *Sīmurġ* is sometimes identified with other mythological birds, such as *Quqnūs* (ققنوس) – "the phoenix" and *Humā* (هما). It should be remembered, however, that *Sīmurġ* is a distinctly separate mythological entity, which, thanks to its popularity, somehow "absorbed" other similar mythological entities.[61]

Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr depicts the adventures of a group of birds who wanted to meet their king, the great *Sīmurġ*. These restless bird-travelers embarked on a spiritually perilous journey under the leadership of *Hu-hud* (هدهد; Persian and Arabic) i.e. the Hoopoe.[62] Unfortunately, one by one, the birds gave up on the journey, finding various excuses not to continue the tiring expedition. In his rich description of the birds' migration, Aṭṭār cleverly presented much didactic wisdom with deep apophatic theological allusions in a captivating poetic style.

The Conference of the Birds starts with an image of a great gathering of birds. They came from all over the world, debating why they did not have a king. Among the birds, the hoopoe appeared to be the best leader because it was a messenger from the transcendental world. He had knowledge about the Creator and the mysteries of all beings.[63] Such a belief stems from the Qurʾān. Although the hoopoe is mentioned only once[64] in the Qurʾān (ٱلنَّمْل *an-Naml*: 27:20–29[65]), it still occupies a unique position in Muslim folklore and tradition to this day.[66] The Qurʾān presents the Hoopoe (here capitalized) as intelligent and clever. He recognized and worshiped God as his Lord and effectively communicated with Solomon, the prophet and king. The very first statements of the hoopoe show an allegorical description of the Sufi concept of the knowledge of God:

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60 Schmidt, "The Sēmurw," 1–85; Mayrhofer, *Etymologisches*, 662.
61 Cirlot, *A Dictionary*, 253.
62 It is about the bird *Upupa epops*.
63 ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 613–636; 673–692.
64 Kościelniak, *Tematyczna konkordancja*, 95.
65 See: 27:20 وَتَفَقَّدَوَتَفَقَّدَ الطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِيَ لَا أَرَى الْهُدْهُدَ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ
    "Then he [Solomon] inspected the birds, and said, "Why do I not see the hoopoe? Or is he among the absentees?"
    27:29 اذْهَبْ بِكِتَابِي هَٰذَا
    "Go [Hoopoe] with this letter of mine [Solomon]."
66 Lassner, "Islamizing the Story of the Hoopoe," 97–101; Dupree, "An Interpretation," 173–193.

> I know our king – but how can I alone
> Endure the journey to His distant throne?
> Join me, and when at last we end our quest
> Our king will greet you as His honoured guest.
> How long will you persist in blasphemy?
> Escape your self-hood's vicious tyranny –
> Whoever can evade the Self transcends
> This world and as a lover he ascends.
> Set free your soul; impatient of delay,
> Step out along our sovereign's royal Way:
> We have a king; beyond Kafs mountain peak
> The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
> And He is always near to us, though we
> Live far from His transcendent majesty.
> A hundred thousand veils of dark and light
> Withdraw His presence from our mortal sight,
> And in both worlds no being shares the throne
> That marks the Simorgh's power and His alone.[67]

The birds flocked after the hoopoe in search of *Sīmurġ*. However, they had to fly through seven valleys that were treacherous to their spirituality. During their long and wearisome journey, the birds repeatedly asked existential and deep questions, expecting answers from the hoopoe. Their leader answered with unshakable certainty to various doubts, illustrating his arguments with short anecdotes.

The very first valley of *Ṭalab* (Arabic loanword in Persian: طلب,[68] i.e. the valley of the quest), through which the birds flew, brought dilemmas. The winged travelers experienced a hundred hardships and trials. All this ultimately led to the rejection of all dogma, faith and unbelief:

> Must purify itself and move apart
> From everything that is – when this is done,
> The Lord's light blazes brighter than the sun.[69]

After flying through the valley of initial trials, the birds reached the second valley of ʿ*Išq* (Arabic loanword in Persian: عشق [Persian modern pronunciation: ʿ*ešq*]), i.e. the valley of love. It was in this valley that the birds understood that reason and love were separate realities. This typical Sufi mystical idea refers to the boundless "divine

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67   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 673–692.
68   Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 817.
69   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conferenc* (Darbandi), ll. 3234–3250.

love" or "the love of a creature for its creator," where worldly knowledge becomes utterly useless:

> Love here is fire; its thick smoke clouds the head –
> When love has come the intellect has fled;
> It cannot tutor love, and all its care
> Supplies no remedy for love's despair.[70]

In the third valley of *Al-Maʿrifa* (Arabic loanword in Persian: المعرفة,[71] [Persian modern pronunciation: *ma'refat*]), i.e. the valley of understanding), the birds discovered that knowledge was temporary, but understanding higher things endured everything. Overcoming flaws and weaknesses brought the seeker closer to the goal:

> Till one shall draw aside the secrets' veil –
> Perfected, of rare courage he must be
> To dive through that immense, uncharted sea.[72]

Maʿrifa literally means "knowledge," but it is the mystical knowledge of God or "higher realities," which is the ultimate goal of Sufism. Sufis have used the term since the Middle Ages to conceptualize the intuitive (mystical) knowledge needed to discover the eternal truth. This reality is only accessible through ecstatic experiences. In this way, the Maʿrifa corresponds to the Neoplatonic "gnosis" (γνῶσις).[73] It is worth remembering that *Maʿrifa* is one of the "four doors," that is, one of "the four stages" of Sufism (next to *šarīʿa* [شريعة] – "legal path," *ṭarīqah* [طريقة] "methodico – esoteric path," and *ḥaqīqa* [حقيقة] – "mystical truth/verity").

In the fourth valley of *Istiġnā* (إستغناء [*Istiġna'*] Arabic loanword in Persian[74] in the form استغنا, [*Istiġnā*, contemporary Persian pronunciation: *esteğnā*]) the birds learned about the necessity of independence or detachment. The term *Istiġnā* itself means "freedom from care" or "lack of concern or care." In the context of the fifth valley, ʿAṭṭār meant by it the separation from the desire to possess and the desire to discover. The birds discovered that they had become part of the universe, that they were separated from the physical, material reality:

> All claims, all lust for meaning disappear.[75]

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70   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3331–3348.
71   Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 1271.
72   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference (Darbandi),* ll. 3486–3505.
73   Ebstein, "Classifications of Knowledge," 33–64.
74   Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 53.
75   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3581–3599.

They experienced relativism and a different order of the mystical world, where planets were as small as grains of dust and elephants were indistinguishable from ants.[76]

While staying in the fifth valley of *Tawḥīd* (Arabic loanword in Persian: توحید),[77] i.e. the valley of the "Unity of God," the birds realized that one reality includes unity and multiplicity. The Hoopoe even stated that while we had perceptions of many entities, there was actually only one divine reality that was complete in its unity. According to this apophatic approach, the birds were transformed into beings in the void – without a sense of endlessness (eternity). The birds discovered the fundamental metaphysical principle that God is above all, i.e. beyond unity, plurality, and endlessness:

> The many here are merged in one; one form
> Involves the multifarious, thick swarm
> (This is the oneness of diversity,
> Not oneness locked in singularity);
> Unit and number here have passed away;
> Forget for-ever and Creation's day –
> That day is gone; eternity is gone.[78]

It is clear that the Sunni understating of *tawḥīd* as the Oneness of Allah, and describing him as one with no partners,[79] has come into conflict with the monistic understanding held by ʿAṭṭār in *The Conference of the Birds*. ʿAṭṭār's thought was the culmination of the Sufi approach to *tawḥīd*, which began with the classical Islamic understanding of this term. The apophatic view of the Sufis reached the point of sensing and perceiving the Oneness of God beyond reason, with the heart and conscience.[80]

After achieving unity, forgetting all things and oneself, the birds entered into the sixth valley of Ḥayrat (Arabic loanword in Persian: حیرت,[81] Persian modern pronunciation: *heyrat*), i.e. the valley of astonishment and bewilderment. There, in utmost amazement, the birds experience the extraordinary beauty of the Beloved being. This experience, however, did not overshadow the sadness and depression. The winged travelers realized that they had a problem with both their existing knowledge and the process of cognition itself. They were not even conscious of themselves.

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76 ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3581–3599.
77 Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 334.
78 ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3692–3707.
79 Shapoo, "The Understanding of Tawhīd," 214–240; Düzgün, "Kur'an'ın Tevhîd Felsefesi," 3–21.
80 Şeker, "Sufi Attitudes and Approaches," 31–44.
81 Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 435.

The pilgrim will confess: "I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge any more;
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure.[82]

Finally, only thirty birds reached the kingdom of *Sīmurġ*, the seventh valley of *Fuqur* (فُقْر, Arabic loanword in Persian[83]) and *Fanā* (Arabic loanword from فناء [*Fanāʾ*], in Persian in the form: فنا [*Fanā*]),[84] i.e. the valley of the Selflessness and Forgetting in God. However, it turned out that it was impossible for the birds to meet the king. A high-ranking official of the birds' king ordered them to wait for *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) long enough, and the birds finally realized that they were *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) themselves because it was a group of thirty birds *sī* (سی "thirty") *murġ* (مرغ; "birds").[85] In this way, the similarity in the pronunciation of the words *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) and *sī* (سی "thirty") *murġ* (مرغ; "birds") became an apophatic image of the monistic nature of God. This is the ultimate meaning of ʿAṭṭār's apophatic vision of God, the specific attempt to describe God with transcendent ideas, images, and sensory impressions:

With God both Self and evil disappear.
When I escape the Self I will arise
And be as God; the yearning pilgrim flies
From this dark province of mortality
To Nothingness and to Eternity.[86]

As a result, the seventh valley presents an apophatic vision of the human and divine condition, i.e. the disappearance of the self in the universe. The Wanderer becomes timeless, existing in both the past and the future. The last valley is, therefore, the culmination of a certain process of development of Sufi adepts, making them aware of the present and future existence of the thirty successful birds, which become only shadows chased by the celestial Sun – the *Sīmurġ*. More, they themselves, lost in the Sea of His existence, are the *Sīmurġ*.[87]

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82   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3792–3811.
83   Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 935.
84   Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, 939.
85   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3931–3948.
86   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 3967–3986.
87   Kościelniak, "Aspects of Divinization," 97.

4. The Neoplatonic Genesis of Aṭṭār's Apophaticism

The philosophical-theological apophasis in the medieval Islamic lands focused on the problem of God's transcendence versus imminence.[88] *The Conference of the Birds* stresses that as long as a human being is separate, good and evil will arise; but when a person loses himself in the divine essence, he will be transcended by love.

When analyzing Aṭṭār's thought, it is by all means right to take into account the impact of Neoplatonism. It is worth stressing that the Ismaili State (1090–1256) existed in Persia during Aṭṭār's life (ca. 1145–1221). This Shīʿa Nizari Ismaili state, also called the Alamut state, was founded by Ḥasan aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ (1050–1224), and was dominated by Neoplatonic influences. The guiding idea of unity was present in Ismaili cosmological principles under the overwhelming influence of the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation, but in a specific context of Shīʿa adaptation. At the heart of the Ismaili cosmology, there is the Neoplatonic principle of a harmonious totality.[89]

Numerology was an integral part of the medieval mindset in the Muslim Ismailis' thought. Ismailis believed that numbers had religious meanings, and this was also influenced by Neoplatonism. The number "seven" plays a fundamental role in the Ismailis' speculations about seven heavens, seven continents, seven orifices in the skull, seven days in the week, seven prophets, and so forth.[90] Consequently, ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī also used the Ismailis' symbol of seven, that is the seven valleys that the birds had to cross in order to find their king.

The final message of *The Conference of the Birds* is the apophatic statement that birds, despite their diversity of species, are only shadows of the eternal pantheistic *Sīmurġ*. The deepest message of this mystical masterpiece is that, admittedly, the birds will not be God when they reach the goal of their difficult journey but they will most certainly be immersed in God. Looking inside, the thirty birds discovered the divine image within themselves. In fact, their forms and activities are only a shadow of *Sīmurġ*. God, however, is not an empty idea. The true love for the Creator is concretized in self-sacrificing love that leaves aside life and desires. The thirty birds presented in *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr* with understanding of the ultimate reality, their various doubts and fears during the journey, the explanations and wisdom of the hoopoe, and above all the discovery of the phenomenon of Sīmurġ, were an allegory for ʿAṭṭār. It was an allegory of the spiritual development of a particular Sufi who is exposed to many dangers.[91]

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88   Kars, "Two Modes of Unsaying," 261–278.
89   Halm, *Kosmologie*, 53–65; Daftary, "Ismailism and Gnosis," 337–348; Mattila, *Philosophy as a Path to Happiness*, 64–65.
90   Hillenbrand, "A Neglected Source," 3–10.
91   Johan, "Bird Symbolism," 699–706; Kościelniak, "Aspects of Divinization," 98.

7. Valley of Poverty and Annihilation = the disappearance of the self in the universe, the Wanderer becomes timeless, existing both in the past and the future

6. Valley of Wonderment = enchanting the Wanderer with the beauty of the Beloved and stating that he never knew or understood anything

5. Valley of Unity = the discovery that everything is connected and that the Beloved is beyond multiplicity and eternity

4. Valley of Detachment = abandoning all desires and attachment to the world

3. Valley of Knowledge = complete abandonment of useless worldly knowledge

2. Valley of Love = abandoning reason for the sake of love

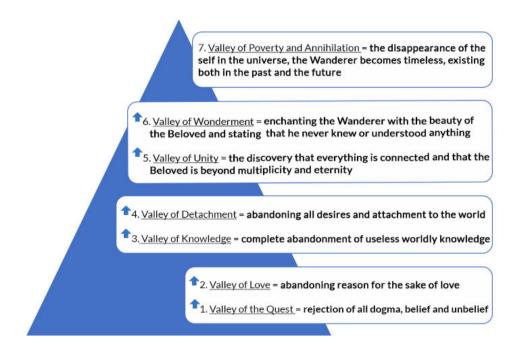**1. Valley of the Quest** = rejection of all dogma, belief and unbelief

Fig. 2. Aṭṭār's apophatic view of God's unity with the universe expressed through the idea of the "seven valleys"

In his apophatic approach, Aṭṭār expressed the necessity of breaking down the individual ego, and recognizing the fundamental unity of God, creation and the individual self. According to *The Conference of the Birds*, a human being, having entered the enlightened state, obtained an awareness of the intrinsic unity (*tawḥīd*) between God and all that exists, including the individual's mind. This typical Sufi interpretation has been condemned as heretical by "orthodox" Sunni Islam.[92]

The analysis of ʿAṭṭār's texts and Neoplatonic thought leads to the conclusion that the Sufi master of Nišāpur depended on revealing close similarities to Neoplatonism. However, some topics raised in *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr,* i.e. the nature of God, the understanding of the soul and body, and the definition of terms such as "good," "evil," "beauty," "death," "life" and creation were dependent both on the complex spiritual cosmology of Plotinus as well on Neoplatonism in the version of Iamblichus (c. 245 – c. 325) and Proclus Lycius (412–485). Moreover, Aṭṭār modified his concept of the mystical union, which seems to have been also impacted to some

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92   Anṣārī, "Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism," 1–12.

extent by Buddhist influences (Buddhism had its influence in Nišāpur, as evidenced by the architecture).[93]

Neoplatonic elements in *The Conference of the Birds* were revealed in the concept according to which God is the total unity, at the same time the source and the main goal of all beings. Everything that comes from the Creator must return to Him because God is alpha and omega. Total immersion in God is basically the only legitimate goal of all human activities. According to ʿAṭṭār, the main goal of all human beings is to experience the divine reality that is completely beyond the realm of ordinary perception.

Aṭṭār's apophaticism expresses itself in the Neoplatonic idea that God is not separate from the universe as an "External Being" but that He is the totality of existence. In fact, it echoes Plotinus' *Enneads*: "We must turn our power of apprehension inwards, and make it attend to what is there."[94]

The thirty birds on their way to Sīmurġ finally discover that their king is also their transcendent fullness. In this respect, *The Conference of the Birds* comes close to Neoplatonic pantheism.[95] The original wordplay used by Aṭṭār, i.e. *Sīmurġ* (سیمرغ) and *sī* (سی "thirty") *murġ* (مرغ; "birds"), was in his apophatic theology and philosophy purely symbolic. In principle, regardless of the number of birds that arrived in *Sīmurġ*'s kingdom, the same reality would be revealed – the infinite Unity.

According to Aṭṭār, God can be only discovered beyond all human knowledge and earthly experience. In principle, the soul will be freed from its erroneous ideas only when bodily perceptions are cast aside. For this reason, Sufis must "die to the world" for the love of God in order to attain spiritual knowledge:

> O God, this is your servant's last request –
> I love, and those who die for love die blest,
> And though for him I bid the world farewell,
> Love cannot make love's slave an infidel.
> How many countless prayers you grant, dear Lord –
> Grant mine; grant my life's vigil its reward![96]

Both Aṭṭār's apophatic thought and Neoplatonic concepts treat the relationship between body and soul similarly. According to Neoplatonism, there is no way to present the body as divine. It is only a harsh mortal and temporary reality. Entangled in matter, the body does not strive for beauty and good, but for ugliness and evil. Everything that is beautiful, valuable and divine is contained in the soul, but by

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93   Shafieifar, "A Study on the Influence," 17–28.
94   Plotinus, *Enn.* V.1 [10], 12. 8–13.
95   Taefi, "Aspects of Practical Mysticism," 81–100.
96   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 4061–4079.

no means in the body. The body is only entangled in temporary desires and wishes, being in fact a cage for the soul.[97] These Neoplatonic ideas are all too evident in Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī, who asks rhetorically at the beginning of his work:

> Turn to what truly lives, reject what seems –
> Which matters more, the body or the soul?[98]

According to Attar, as in Neoplatonism, beauty goes beyond symmetry. Beauty is related to the ideal reality of God revealed in the hearts of human beings:

> If you would glimpse the beauty we revere
> Look in your heart – its image will appear.[99]

For Aṭṭār, beauty is the appearance of divine light in the face of a human, similarly to the Neoplatonic identification of beauty with divine essence:

> How long then will you seek for beauty here?
> Seek the unseen, and beauty will appear.[100]

ʿAṭṭār's language is mysterious and symbolic,[101] and it is very difficult to translate all its mystic terms or metaphors.[102] This language is more understandable with the knowledge of Neoplatonic terminology. Regarding the ways in which Neoplatonism entered the Muslim environment, scholars point first to Anatolia and then to Persia. This is evidenced by certain Neoplatonic mystical elements already appearing in ancient Anatolian beliefs, e.g. regarding the sun. Some traces of this can be found in *The Conference of the Birds*.[103]

Conclusions

Aṭṭār Nīšāpūrī presents God in the framework of apophatic theology and philosophy quite differently from the Sunni Islamic dogmatists. It seems that in *The Conference of the Birds* apophatic and cataphatic theology meet in an original,

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97   Godelek, "The Neoplatonist Roots," 57–60; Kościelniak, "Aspects of Divinization," 98–99.
98   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 833–853.
99   ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 833–853.
100 ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 2230–2247.
101 Rafi, "Spirituality and Persian Literature," 25–38.
102 Khosroshahi – Sedighi, "Translation of Persian Mystic," 552–557.
103 Uždavinys, "From Alexandria to Harran," 119–128; Godelek, "The Neoplatonist Roots," 57–60.

complementary contemplative reality. The apophatic approach refers to fragments referring to the manifestation of the world from the One, while the cataphatic approach refers to the need to return to the One.

The negative approach is a kind of warping of *Maqāmāt aṭ-ṭuyūr*. Aṭṭār's allegory of the birds flying through the seven valleys expresses the idea that ultimately everything leads to silence and the abandonment of all intellectual considerations and speculations in favor of contemplation and divine unity. *The Conference of the Birds* abandons the idea of "duality" and separation between God and the universe. The absolute oneness of God is unknowable, beyond the impenetrable oneness of the divine world.[104]
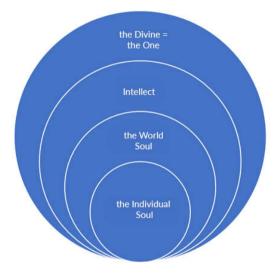
Fig. 3. Neoplatonism and ʿAṭṭār Nīšāpūrī:
nothing is separated or cut off from that which is before it

In this concept of the unity of God-universe-people, the Neoplatonic view of the soul is also revealed. The soul as the divine essence is the realm of true freedom. The body, on the other hand, is the prison of the soul, which can be released when the body dies. The soul as a divine essence is the source of perfection and exaltation:

Search for this king [God] within your heart; His soul
Reveals itself in atoms of the Whole.[105]

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104 Zargar, "Sober in Mecca," 272–297.
105 ʿAṭṭār, *The Conference* (Darbandi), ll. 1111–1129.

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