

The Continuity of Zoroastrian Thought in Iran as Evident in Khayyam

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Omar Khayyam (1048-1131 AD) is the chief Persian poet of whom there exists a long-standing inspired translation in English. This was done faithfully by Edward Fitzgerald in the mid 1800s with the aid of his mentor and teacher in Persian at the University of Cambridge, Edward Cowell. Omar Khayyam in Fitzgerald's rendition was popular in Europe and America then, his various decorated editions being given as gifts. There was an Omar Khayyam Club of America, based in Boston around 1920. An amusing point is that entrepreneuring poet adapted his *Rubaiyat*, or quatrains, to produce the *Rubaiyat of a Persian Cat*.

Khayyam was a polymath. Besides poetry he was an astronomer, a mathematician, and a historian. His poems are concise. The first three verses in the quatrain serves as but a preface, whereby he states his real message in the fourth.

In his short work on history of the Persian New Year, *Norooz-Nameh*, he recounts a similar knowledge that Ferdowsy has displayed regarding Indo-European society that must have been alive and carried through the oral tradition in Iran. Khayyam states that the monarchs of Iran and Rome were of the same lineage, the same origin.

We now turn to his representative quatrains, which display the continuity of thought from before the days of Islam. It should be noted that Khayyam did not subscribe to all

Zoroastrian doctrines, just the ones that by fact and reason he could demonstrate the validity of to himself. Case in point is heaven and hell. But contrary to the impression of others (including our admirable poet Fitzgerald), it would seem he did believe in the immortality of the soul.

Prior to quoting from Khayyam, the reader should be informed that due to his tendency to state his thoughts in just two distiches, the linguistic devices protecting and effectively locking the verses of other poets were weaker. Since some admirers did not have his stature and renown and were afraid to utter the same thoughts, they tried to pass their utterings under his name. Thus over the years scholars have weighed in on what is and is not attributable to Khayyam. By contrast in Christendom Fitzgerald was free and had to need to hide. Thus Persian editions have been produced with the initials of each scholar under each quatrain of Khayyam, indicating his verdict. The following are deemed by myself and a number of others scholars to be authentic Khayyam.

In the following *zonnar* refers to a belt that the Zoroastrians used to wear in ceremonies, which today it has given way to *Kusti*.

تا چند کنم عرضه نادانی خویش	ببزار شدم از این پریشانی خویش
زنار مغان که بر میان خواهم بست	دانی ز چه از ننگ مسلمانی خویش

For how long must I profess ignorance
Heartsick am I of this distress

The Magi's *zonnar* that I shall don,
Do you know why ? Of the shame in being Moslem

The following demonstrates Khayyam's belief in the immortality of the soul, a major doctrine of Zoroastrianism as indicated in the sacred literature and attested in the will and deathbed address of Cyrus the Great ca. 530 BC recorded by Xenophon, a millennium afterwards in the address of Khosrow Anushirvan or the king "of Immortal Soul" in the mid 500s AD, and in other primary sources. Like similar statements in classical Persian literature, reference is made to the soul as pre-existing and preceding the body, as stated in the greater Bundahishn, the Zoroastrian account of creation. It is clear in Khayyam's

verse that he meant the embodiment is effected through the intermediary of nature and physical laws. He does not address in this quatrain or indeed any quatrain the primal cause behind nature and physical laws but is content without an explanation much as a scientist in our own day. His reference to the four elements, clearly, is fire, water, earth and air, as stated in the prolegomena in Ferdowsy's *Shahnameh*, and as attested frequently in other works in Persian literature.

کردند نیازمندت این چهار انباز آنی که نبودت به خور و خواب نیاز
تا باز چنان شوی که بودی ز آغاز هر یک ز تو آنچه داد بستاند باز

The time when you had no need of eating or sleeping
These Four Elements made you needy of it

Yet each shall take what they have given you
That you will become what you were in the beginning

In the following, Khayyam criticizes the abuse of God to advance political and material agenda.

آنرا که به صحای علل تاخته اند بی او همه کارها بیرداخته اند
امروز بهانه ای در اداخته اند فردا همه آن بود که خود ساخته اند

He whom they have run out to the chasm of logic
It is without Him that they have carried out their goals

To-day they have but excused they have made up
Tomorrow it shall all be clear what they themselves have made

In the following the term *gabr* denotes a Zoroastrian. It was a derogative term in Islam, descriptive of Zoroastrians. The Magi were the priests of Zoroastrianism, and astrologers, a number of whom Matthew reports carried gifts to the baby Jesus.

گر من ز می مغانه مستم هستم گر کافر و گبر و بت پرستم هستم
هر طایفه ای به من گمانی دارد من زان خودم چنانکه هستم هستم

If I am made out to be drunk in the manner of the Magi, it is as well
If I am made out to be an infidel, *gabr* or idolater, it is as well

Every sect suspects me for something or another
I am what I am, let me be what I am

In the following Khayyam talks to what is the higher being, and makes the case that he trusts Him to be rational and just. The word *mehrab* refers to the altar in a place of worship. It is quite clear that he means a Moslem prayer house or mosque.

با تو به خرابات اگر گویم راز به زانکه کنم بی تو به محراب نماز
ای اول ای آخر خلقان همه تو خواهی تو مرا بسوز و خواهی بنواز

Communion with you at the abode of the Magi
Is preferable to me to praying at the *mehrab* devoid of your presence

O thou, who author the first to the last of Creation
Whether you shall have me burn [in hell] or praise me

The following is a polemic with the other side's position assumed, against Sunni doctrine. Because of his first name, Omar, Khayyam is believed to have been born in a family that was Sunni. Sunni doctrine, generally holds that the actions of man are predestined, he has no control over them. At least three of the four major branches of Sunnism, as well as all fundamentalist sects, hold to this. The consequence of such doctrine is that man is absolved of moral responsibility toward fellow man. Here Khayyam voices his opposition, in that if there is no free will, and if he has no part to play in his judgment, then how could there be a Judgment Day?

بر من قلم قضا چو بی من رانند پس نیک و بدش چرا ز من می دانند
دی بی من و امروز چو دی بی من و تو فردا بچه حجتم به داور خوانند

If I have no part in the judgment rendered on me
Then why ascribe the rights and wrongs to me ?

Yesterday without me and alike, today without me or you
Tomorrow for what just reason shall they call me to be judged?

Based on research done in the 1980s
Translations by the Author
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