

The Continuity of Zoroastrian Thought in Iran

as Evident in Hafez

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Hafez (1325-1390 AD) is arguably the most popular poet of Iran as far as it concerns common people and poetry that is recited in day to day life, and is certainly one of Iran's greatest poets. Hafez lived in the 1300s AD. He was made known in the West largely through the works of Goethe in Germany, plus other scholars and translators like Gertrude Bell. Hafez acquired the honorific we know him by after his research over a period of his life into Islam, whereupon he came to memorize the Qur'an, and be known as *Hafez*, literally meaning he who does *hefz*, he who memorizes. His own name¹ has been overlooked as a result over the course of the centuries.

Like many an inquisitive mind who enter adulthood, Hafez sought answers to the burning questions in his mind. For this he turned to the study of Islam and Qur'an. After a time, not having found the answers there, he waded his way through the remains of Iran of pre-Islam, spent time among the Zoroastrians, then composed his odes. His legacy today is almost entirely based on those odes, not his prior studies. Throughout the odes he refers quite often to his mentor, *Pir-e Moghan*, meaning *the Elder of the Magi*. The Magi were priests of Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Iran, who as Matthew reports came bearing gifts seeking the king of the Jews being born. Sometimes where it better fits the meter and rhyme, Hafez refers to him by a dozen variants, usually in the second part of that term, such as *Pir-e Kharabat*, meaning *the elder of the tavern*. Hafez would meet his Zoroastrian friends at their

tavern, or at the temple. In doing so he was in the good company of many, including Omar Khayyam two centuries before his time.

Hafez repeatedly refers to his mentor, the Pir ("elder", "sage"). The pervasive presence of the Magi in Hafez's odes is a prominent feature of his poetry. Often the concepts expressed in the odes of Hafez can be seen to relate or derive from pre-Islamic Iran. While for Ferdowsy the sources in composing the *Shahnameh* were *Khoday-Nameh*, a history commissioned by the Sasanian kings of Iran prior to Islam, and the lore in the oral tradition remaining in his time, the chief source for Hafez for his odes was his inspiration from this Zoroastrian sage.

In contrast to the sixty thousand couplets each, that Ferdowsy and Rumi composed, the odes of Hafez are very small in number, in my estimation under two thousand distichs, which in terms of the music of poetry, meter and rhyme, may not quite reach the standard of Ferdowsy and Rumi. Comparatively, they feel a bit closer to prose. Yet, their appeal to the common Iranian is such that they are frequently recited by people of all walks of life. Partly, this is due to the fact that they are self-contained terse pieces, unlike Ferdowsy's long poems. But whereas that quality is also found in Rumi's odes, the odes of Hafez have a ready appeal, feel more accessible to the common people, and can be recited and appreciated in a shorter period of time. Recitation of Hafez as with most of Persian poetry is often to remind friends, family or others they are dealing with of the value system they share and as an encouragement from an authority they both believe in, to act fairly and righteously. Such is true in general of Persian poetry and its influence in society. It performs the same function as verses quoted from the Bible do for Jews and Christians. Sometimes the poetry could be cited just for the aesthetics in describing a particular situation. The moral of the particular verses cited match the situation at hand.

What follows are a few examples of the frequently-occurring references of Pir-e Moghan, Elder of the Magi, in Hafez. Prior to translating and interpreting them, it should be noted that there exist other interpretations of Hafez that are close to the hearts and minds of his readers and need to be respected. The interpretation here is based on what is supported by the underlying text and correlated and supported by other odes in his *Divan*. While a number of secular-based interpretations as noted exist, there are also those with a religious bias. Examples of the latter, which bring Hafez more in line with what religious leaders may prefer their followers to believe, are that wine as not physical wine, but spiritual, and Pir-e Moghan

not a real human but virtual or fictional. It is left here to the critical reader to decide for himself/herself.

An exhaustive listing of the references to Pir-e Moghan in the *Divan* of Hafez would be long. But the following will suffice to illustrate the point.

کیمیایست عجب بندگی پیر مغان خاک او گشتم و چندین درجاتم دادند

O what alchemy it is, the service of Pir-e Moghan,
For I became prostrate to him and was raised high in esteem

در خرابات مغان نور خدا میبینم این عجب بین که چه نوری زکجا میبینم

In the tavern of the magi the Divine Light I see
Behold this phenomenon, what light and whence

حلقه پیر مغانم ز ازل در گوش است ما همانیم که بودیم و همان خواهد بود

The slave-ring of Pir-e Moghan I wear since eternity
We are who were, and ever shall remain so

دلم ز صومعه بگرفت و خرقه سالوس کجاست دیر مغان و شراب ناب

I am heartsick of the abbey and sect of hypocrites
I long for the abode of the magi and vintage wine

In the following Hafez makes reference to the sacred fire at Yazd, whose light serves as the symbol of *Ahura Mazda*, the Wise Lord, in Zoroastrianism. The city of Yazd has one of the Zoroastrian communities that have survived in Iran itself. In spite of major changes of religion, as Hafez describes, the principles of Zoroastrianism remain dear to the hearts and minds of Iranians. Mary Boyce of the University of London describes the actual fires, which were once separate but are now integrated: "These two fires (now conjoined) are the oldest surviving Zoroastrian sacred fires, and have probably been burning continually for well over 2000 years."²

از آن به دیر مغانم عزیز میدارند که آتشی که نمیرد همیشه در دل ماست

For this they hold me dear at the temple of the magi
That the warmth of the Everlasting Fire remains in our heart

ای صبا با ساکنان شهر یزد از ما بگو

که ای سر حق ناشناسان گوی چوگان شما

O Morning Breeze, take our message to the people of Yazd
May the heads of the un-righteous be as balls unto polo sticks

In the following verse Nimrod is a metaphor for Zoroaster, for both were associated with reverence for ³fire⁴

به باغ تازه کن آیین دین زردشتی

کنون که لاله برافروخت آتش نمرود

Renew in your garden the religion of Zoroaster
Now that tulips glow with the fire of Nimrod

While the above were excerpts, the following is a complete ode. In this ode, no 143 in many editions, Hafez, having sought truths in his prior studies and not found them, takes his inquiries to the Elder of the Magi. Hafez characterizes and equates the questions in his mind with a burning desire to own the *Cup of Jam*, a legendary crystal vessel in which the legendary kings of Iran, as Ferdowsy had reported before Hafez, could see what was going on in other lands, a forerunner of the Holy Grail.

سال ها دل طلب جام جم از ما می کرد	وان چه خود داشت ز بیگانه تمنا می کرد
گوهری کز صدف کون و مکان بیرون است	طلب از گمشدگان لب دریا می کرد
مشکل خویش بر پیر مغان بردم دوش	کو به تایید نظر حل معما می کرد
دیدمش خرم و خندان قدح باده به دست	و اندر آن آینه صد گونه تماشا می کرد
گفتم این جام جهان بین به تو کی داد حکیم	گفت آن روز که این گنبد مینا می کرد
بی دلی در همه احوال خدا با او بود	او نمی دیدش و از دور خدایا می کرد
این همه شعبده خویش که می کرد این جا	سامری پیش عصا و ید بیضا می کرد
گفت آن یار کز او گشت سر دار بلند	جرمش این بود که اسرار هویدا می کرد
فیض روح القدس از باز مدد فرماید	دیگران هم بکنند آن چه مسیحا می کرد
گفتمش سلسله زلف بتان از پی چیست	گفت حافظ گله ای از دل شیدا می کرد

Rendition into English

For years my heart's desire sought the Holy Grail
What itself possessed, it was begging from strangers

A *jewel* that resides outside the *cosmos*
Was asking the lost shells by the sea

I took the problem to the Elder of the Magi
Who effortlessly would solve such riddles

I met him smiling, with a glass of wine in hand
And in that mirror he would look a hundredfold

I asked: "when did He endow you with the Holy Grail"?
He replied "the day He was creating this Azure Dome"

He was imbued with love in the affairs of God
He could not see Him, but sensed Him from afar

All this seeming magic he performed
Was like the miracles associated with Moses

He said the Companion who was hanged high
His charge was that he disseminated the truth

When the Holy Spirit should grant aid again
Others shall be empowered to do what Jesus did

I then asked "what purpose are locks of hair of idol-like beauties"?
He replied "Hafez came but complaining of desires of a wild heart"

In the second distich by the jewel outside the cosmos, Hafez means the soul, that is outside the totality of the material universe and originates from Heaven. He often uses the phrase *kown o makaan*, in his odes, which corresponds closely to the phrase Ferdowsy uses frequently in the Shahnameh, *saraay-e sepanj*, both meaning the totality of the physical universe.

As has been stated in this series, the identity of the human being is, first, his soul. In the account of creation in the *Greater Bundahishn*⁵, part of the pre-Islamic scriptures of Iran, human beings exist as soul in timeless heaven before coming down to be embodied in material form on Earth.

For years, Hafez says, his heart's desire was to have the Holy Grail. When he took the problem to the Elder of the Magi, he realized he himself possessed the quality he was seeking within. He met his mentor gazing in the cup of wine.

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