

**A JOURNEY THROUGH  
PERSIAN HISTORY AND  
CULTURE**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

IQBAL ACADEMY PAKISTAN

*Muhammad Suheyل Umar, Editor*

ISBN 969-416-302-1

©2000

**Iqbal Academy Pakistan**  
6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Aiwan-i-Iqbal Complex,  
Off Egerton Road, Lahore.  
Tel: [+ 92-42] 6314-510  
Fax: [+ 92-42] 631-4496  
Email: [iqbalacd@ihr.comsats.net.pk](mailto:iqbalacd@ihr.comsats.net.pk)  
Website: [www.allamaiqbal.com](http://www.allamaiqbal.com)

# Contents

*"The Pressing of my soul"*

1-X.

## Notes on the Definition of Persian Culture

1-37

# The First Millennium of Islamic Persia

39-75

**Publisher:**

• •

Director,  
Iqbal Academy Pakistan

## Writers

• •

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

# Editor

• •

**M. Suhey! Umar**

Typesetting &amp;

## Technical Assistance

• •

**Mukhtar Ahmad**

• •

Quantity

• •

500

Price

• •

R.S. 75  
US\$ 3

Printed at

• •

Print Expert, Lahore

**Sales Office:** 116 McLeod Road Lahore. Ph. 7357214

## “THE PRESSING OF MY SOUL”

شراب بکشد زنی را که جز آب  
نموده بکشد زین پیشه بزم

*Sharāb i maykāda i man na yādgār i jam ast*  
*Fushurda i jigar i man ba shisha i ‘Ajām ast*

\*

*No Jamshid's memory, the wine that floweth in this inn of mine*  
*It is the pressing of my soul that sparkleth in the bowl of Persiā*

\*

Thus sang Iqbal in his *Zabūr i ‘Ajām* (Persian Psalms).<sup>1</sup> The multi layered metaphor of ‘*Ajam* was one of the oft-repeated motifs of Iqbal's poetry. He used it, in various contexts, to allude to a particular human collectivity, a specific geographical area, genius of a human race and a mind-set that proved to be one of the most important formative influences that moulded the Islamic civilisation in its present form.<sup>2</sup> In his view the Islamic civilisation was created from the twin elements which he defined in his symbolic manner as ‘*ajām ka husn i tabī‘at*, ‘*arab kā sōz i dardīn*. (finesse and refinement of the Persian genius and inward burning of the Arab soul).<sup>3</sup>

Hence he recognised the importance of the fact that the Persians had a brilliant pre-Islamic civilisation of great spiritual and artistic beauty, and played a major role in the very foundation of Islamic civilisation. They and the Arabs (*al-‘arab wa ‘l-‘ajām* in traditional Islamic sources)

together founded Islamic civilisation and have influenced nearly every phase of its subsequent history. In fact, although Islamic thought and culture succeeded in freeing itself from becoming only 'Arabic' or 'Persian' during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, both of these peoples left their indelible mark upon its historical deployment and development. The Persians on the one hand, played a central role in building Islamic civilisation<sup>4</sup> and, on the other, were able to integrate within the universal perspective of Islam many elements of their pre-Islamic past, which thus became completely Islamicized. They therefore not only became thoroughly Islamic and have remained one of the most productive of Islamic peoples intellectually and artistically, but they were also able to preserve their own identity and remain distinctly Persian, creating a second cultural focus within the unity of Islamic civilisation, which in its classical phase and almost up to modern times could be divided culturally into the Arabic and the Persian zones.

The theme was, moreover, often repeated in Iqbal's prose and poetical works. As early as 1910 we find a note in his personal diary which reads as follows:

*"If you ask me what is the most important event in the history of Islam, I shall say without any hesitation: The Conquest of Persia. The battle of Nehrawand gave the Arabs not only a beautiful country, but also an ancient civilisation: or, more properly, a people who could make a new civilisation with the Semitic and Aryan material. (Our Muslim civilisation is a product of the cross-fertilisation of the Semitic and the Aryan ideas. It is a child who inherits the softness and refinement of his Aryan mother, and the sterling character of his Semitic father. But for the conquest of Persia, the civilisation of Islam would have been one-sided. The conquest of Persia gave us what the conquest of Greece gave to the Romans."*<sup>5</sup>

He expanded on the subject. In the same year, while delivering his seminal address "The Muslim Community—A Sociological Study"<sup>6</sup>, Iqbal made a remark that revealed his views on the subject in more detail. He said, "The Arab Race, the original creation of Islam, was certainly a great factor in its political expansion, but the enormous wealth of literature and thought—manifestation of the higher life of the spirit—has been the work of chiefly non-Arabian races. It seems as if the birth of Islam was only a momentary flash of divine consciousness in the life-history of the Arab race; the working of its spiritual potentialities was due to the genius of people other than the Arabs. ....just as the Muslim Community does not recognize any ethnological differences, and aims at the subsumption of all races under the universal idea of humanity, so our culture is relatively universal, and is not indebted, for its life and growth to the genius of one particular people. Persia is perhaps the principal factor in the making of this culture. If you ask, me what is the most important event in the history of Islam, I shall immediately answer—the conquest of Persia. The battle of Nehrawand gave to the Arabs not only a beautiful country, but also an ancient people who could construct a new civilisation out of the Semitic and the Aryan material. Our Muslim civilisation is a product of the cross-fertilization of the Semitic and the Aryan ideas. It inherits the softness and refinement of its Aryan mother and the sterling character of its Semitic father. The conquest of Persia gave to the Muslims what the Conquest of Greece gave to the Romans, but for Persia our culture would have been absolutely one sided. And the people whose contact transformed the Arabs and the Mughals are not intellectually dead. Persia, whose existence as an independent Political unit is threatened by the aggressive ambition of Russia is still a real centre of Muslim culture.

and I can only hope that she still continues to occupy the position that she has always occupied in the Muslim world. ....the loss of the Persia's political independence would not be a territorial loss. To the Muslim culture such an event would be a blow much more serious than the Tartar invasion of the 10th century. But perhaps I am drifting into politics which it is not my present object to discuss, all that I mean to establish is that in order to become a living member of the Muslim Community the individual besides an unconditional belief in the religious principle, must thoroughly assimilate the culture of Islam. The object of this assimilation is to create a uniform mental outlook, a peculiar way of looking at the world, a definite standpoint from which to judge the value of things which sharply defines our community, and transforms it into a corporate individual giving it a definite purpose and ideal of its own."

When we look at Persia today we see that it is one of the most overwhelmingly Muslim countries in the world. The life of the vast majority of Persians today is dominated and moulded completely by Islam, while, at the same time, the religious and cultural life of the country naturally reflects the long history of the Persian people. Because the Persians became thoroughly Islamicized and yet created a distinctly Persian Islamic culture related on a certain plane with their pre-Islamic past, to understand their role in the formation of the Islamic civilisation, it is necessary to cast a brief glance at the religious history of the people who have lived on the Iranian plateau during the past three thousand years.

Persia has been both a centre from which major religious influences have radiated and a cross roads at which the religious traditions of the Mediterranean world and Asia have met, resulting often in new currents of religious life. Having originally belonged to the same ethnic and linguistic stock as the Aryan conquerors of India, the early Iranians who settled on the plateau possessed a religion

akin to that of the Vedas. From this early background there arose the reform of Zoroaster and the establishment of the specifically Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism. Although the dates of Zoroaster are still much debated, there is no doubt that in the fifth century BC his teachings became the official religion of the Persian empire. The sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta, is the most precious religious document of the early history of Persia as well as a basic source for the study of the Iranian languages. Zoroastrianism, with its firm belief in the angelic world, its accent upon the moral dimension of human existence, its emphasis upon the reality of the after-life and Last Judgment, and its stress upon the purity of the elements and the sacred character of human life, left an imprint both on the later religious life of Western Asia and on the general outlook of the Persians.

The positive qualities that this religion implanted in the souls of the Persians survived and became transmuted into the Islamic mould after Zoroastrianism itself had decayed and lost the spiritual struggle against the new forces of Islam. For example, the care that many devout Persians take in keeping their clothing, food and habitat clean in a ritual sense, sometimes even over-emphasising this elements of religion, is founded upon an old Zoroastrian teaching reinforced by the emphasis of Islam upon cleanliness. Whatever survived of Zoroastrianism in the Persian soul was, however, thoroughly Islamicized and interpreted in the light of the unitary point of view of Islam.

From the matrix of Zoroastrianism, which is the stable and orthodox background of Iranian religions, there grew several religious movements that had worldwide repercussions and also shook the foundations of Zoroastrianism itself. With the fall of the Achaemenian Empire, Hellenistic influences spread throughout the domain of the Persian people. This cultural movement was

combined with a religious one known as Mithraism (considered as a distinct religious movement and not general devotion to Mithra, which ante-dated Zoroastrianism itself) which itself contained important Hellenistic elements. The mystery cult of Mithra, which spread as far West as Germany and Scandinavia, was a synthesis of Zoroastrian, Hellenistic, Babylonian and Anatolian elements, as well as pre-Zoroastrian Persian religious practices. If, for the world at large, this religious movement meant the spread of Iranian religious elements, for Persia itself it implied perhaps more than anything else the establishment of a religious sanction for the syncretic cultural life through which the Persians were now passing as a result of the conquests of Alexander and the establishment of Seleucid rule.

During the Parthian period, Zoroastrianism and the proper Persian cultural tradition began to reassert themselves until, with the advent of the Sassanids, the religion of Zoroaster became once again the official state religion, remaining in this position until the fall of the Sassanid empire. Nevertheless, its authority did not go unchallenged even on the religious plane. In the third century AD, a second world sweeping Iranian mystery religion, Manichaeism, came into being. Its founder, Mani, first found favour with the Sassanid ruler but was finally put to death through the opposition of the Zoroastrian priesthood. His cult nevertheless spread from China to France and in Persia itself gained many adherents. At once a socially revolutionary and a religiously mystical movement, it marked a major protest against established religious institutions. Although some of its cosmogonic and cosmological teachings found a place in certain forms of Islamic philosophy, for Persians of the later period Manichaeism has appeared as a rebellion against religious authority. It has never enjoyed the same status as

Zoroastrianism, from which it came into being and against which it revolted.

The Sassanid period was also witness to other religious movements such as Mazdakism, a 'religious communism' known today mostly through what its enemies, both Zoroastrian and Christian, wrote against it. This movement, which was soon crushed, was again a protest against the Zoroastrian social order and foretold the collapse of this order that occurred with the coming of Islam. Also at this time there developed within Zoroastrianism the philosophico-religious school known as Zurvanism, which indicates a blend of Iranian religious thought with certain Greek philosophical ideas. Finally, it must be remembered that through rivalry with the Byzantines the Sassanids encouraged Oriental Christian sects, especially the Nestorians. These sects were given a free hand to establish schools and missions throughout the Sassanid empire, with the result that notable Christian communities came into existence in Persia and became an important minority religious community in the Islamic period. The Jews also had several centres in Persia from Achaemenian times, and continued to thrive under the both Zoroastrian and Muslim rule. The tolerance toward minority religions shown by Cyrus the Great has with few exceptions the rule in the religious history of Persia.

The major spiritual transformation in Persia came, strangely enough, not from one of the new members of the family of Iranian religions but from a religion of Abrahamic and Semitic background, namely Islam. Although the military defeat of the Sassanids before the Arab armies was a sudden and rapid process, the spiritual struggle between Islam and Zoroastrianism was a gradual one and did not really terminate until the fourth/tenth century. This fact itself indicates that the Persian accepted Islam, not through force, as is claimed by some modern

historians, but because of an inner spiritual need.<sup>7</sup> When the Persians regained their political independence from the caliphate there were still very sizeable Zoroastrian communities in Persia. But instead of showing any inclination to return to this tradition, the newly independent Persian rulers became themselves the champions of the spread of Islam, while insisting on the independence of the literary and cultural life of Persia. Most of the Muslim lands of Asia have, in fact, been Islamicized through the intermediary of the Persian form of Islam. And to this day, when a person belonging to the Persianate world thinks of the domain of 'Persian culture' he sees before him nearly the whole of the Eastern lands of Islam from the Western borders of the Iranian plateau to Western China, with Iraq as an intermediary realm where the Persian, Arabic and, later, Turkish elements met. Thus it should not come as a surprise when we see Iqbal saying, "my religion is from Hijaz but it has reached me through Isphahan, Kabul and Tabriz"<sup>8</sup> or when he sings, "*My heart is from the sanctuary of Hijaz, my song from Shirāz*"<sup>9</sup>.

The two essays form the pen of the world renowned scholar and thinker Seyed Hossein Nasr that are included in this monograph address two aspects of this all important phase of the Islamic civilisation. These essays elucidate how did the "*hush i tabr'aʿ*" of '*Ajam*' manifested itself in Islamic history through making its rich contribution to the deployment of the Islamic civilization and provide a most insightful description of the remarkable intellectual and spiritual activity that unfolded itself through the medium of "*Sāz i 'ajam*" leaving its indelible imprint not only on Islamic history but in the annals of cultural heritage of all mankind.

Editor

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> *Zabūr i 'Ajam* in *Kulliyāt i Iqbal*, (Persian) Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, pp. 398.

<sup>2</sup> In some instances, the word was used, no doubt, with certain negative connotations. But this did not change his essential position on the question of Persian influence on the Islamic civilization. For an excellent discussion of his concept of '*Ajam*' see Muhammad Munawwar, *Mizān i Iqbal*, (Urdu) Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1992, pp. 51.

<sup>3</sup> The complete line reads, " *anāsir is ke hen rūh al-qudus ka dhawq i jāmal / 'ajam ka hush i tabr'aʿ, 'arab ka sōz i dardān*" (Its constituent elements are the taste of Beauty imparted by the Holy Ghost / finesse and refinement of the Persian genius and inward burning of the Arab soul) The verse comes from a small poem entitled "*Madaniyyat i Islam*" (Islamic Culture) in *Zarb i Kalim*, in *Kulliyāt i Iqbal*, (Urdu) Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, pp. 561.

<sup>4</sup> For the contribution of the Persians only to the purely religious sciences of Islam, see S. H. Nasr and M. Mutahhari, "The Religious Sciences", *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. IV, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 464-480; as for Persian contributions to Islamic philosophy and the sciences see S. H. Nasr, "Philosophy and Cosmology", *ibid.*, pp. 419-441 and "Life Sciences, Alchemy and Medicine", *ibid.*, pp. 396-418; see also H. Corbin, *Terre celeste et corps de resurrection*. The most thorough discussion of the mutual influence and interplay of Islam, its civilization, and the Persians is to be found in the Persian work of M. Mutahhari, *Khadamāt-i mutaqabbil-i Islam wa Iran*, Tehran, 1349 AH solar.

<sup>5</sup> "The Conquest of Persia", *Stray Reflections*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1992, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> "The Muslim Community — A Sociological Study", *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1995, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to 'Abbās Arām, an eminent Iranian, written in 1932, (recently discovered and published in *Iqbal Review*, October, 1999) Iqbal wrote, "These days when I was busy setting the question paper for the postgraduate level Persian language and literature, my assistant brought me an article published in the Persian Journal *Irānshahr* or *Kisrā*. Writer of the article was a Persian who held the view that Persia was converted to Islam by force. My assistant thought that we could give it to our postgraduate students for English translation. I, however, rejected the idea and selected an other text. These Persian gentlemen are either totally ignorant of the history of their country or else they play in the hands of European politicians and propagandists whose sole objective is that Muslim countries should lose the sense of unity with one another."

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from his letters.

<sup>9</sup> *Kulliyat i Iqbal*, (Persian) Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, pp. 331.

## NOTES ON THE DEFINITION OF PERSIAN CULTURE

**I**t would be too presumptuous to entitle a single essay "The definition of Persian culture" in light of the vastness of the subject in content, time and space and its diversity of expression. We have therefore chosen a more modest title in recollection of the well-known work of T. S. Eliot, *Notes on the Definition of Culture*. Indeed, our aim is not to provide an exhaustive treatment of Persian culture or all the elements needed to provide a full "definition" of it. Rather, it is to direct attention to some of the most salient features and characteristics of Persian culture which will aid in providing a "definition" of it, or in other words helping to answer the question "what is Persian culture?" Let it be said at the outset that the category of "culture", although the term is of recent origin, plays a central role in the consciousness of contemporary Persians. Since the inception of this term with its present meaning during the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, of course all peoples have become interested in speaking of their culture and are deeply attached to it. Nevertheless, the weight of this term is not the same in all climates. In the West itself, *la culture française* bears a different weight in the consciousness and outlook of the French than does English culture across the Channel. In the Persian world the term possesses particularly great weight and its defence is the rallying point of people with very different political, religious or



social outlooks. Few modern Persians are even aware that the very term culture has had a short history in the West and that the Persian equivalent of it, *farhang* in its present connotation, is itself a late arrival in the Persian language. In fact to speak of Persian culture is itself a response to and acceptance of the categories of an alien worldview whose dominance over the Persian world has done so much to diminish and weaken Persian culture as it has been known until now. Furthermore, this domination has caused those who are champions of all those elements of Persian life, art and thought which together are today called culture, to seek to defend them in the name of Persian culture which in the context of Persia has come to be understood more in its spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic sense than the "material culture" of which anthropologists speak although there is hardly a clear line of demarcation between the two. Turning to the term *farhang*, which is now used universally in Persian as equivalent to the English or French term "culture", it must be remembered that in its present meaning its life begins in the last century. In classical Persian texts the closest term to "culture" was perhaps *hunar* which is now identified with art. When Firdawsi, in his *Shāh-nāmāh* ("The Book of Kings"), claims that Persians alone possess *hunar* (*hunar nazd-i irānīyān ast-u bass*), he means not only art but that reality which we would call culture today. Moreover, when the term culture was first translated into Persian, many authors preferred the use of the term *ma'ārif*, a very rich term which relates culture to knowledge and ultimately divine knowledge connected as it is to the term *ma'ārif* which is usually used in Sufi terminology as realized illuminative knowledge that is combined with the perfection of human character. In Persia the present ministry of culture which is called the ministry of *farhang* today was in fact combined during the earlier part of the Pahlavi era with the ministry of education and together they were called the ministry of *ma'ārif*. Nor

is the more recent term *farhang* devoid of a similar poetic connotation for *farr* from the Pahlavi *Xvarrah* refers to the divine light, which illuminates the mind and soul. Moreover, the term is related to language which is the primary manner for the expression of our intellectual activities and spiritual states. Therefore, to this day *farhang* means also a dictionary while at the same time it connotes education especially in the sense of the training of all aspects of the human being, his body, soul and mind; it is similar in many ways to the Greek idea of *paideia* which some have rendered as "culture" as understood by the Greeks. In any case when a Persian speaks as *farhang-i Irān*, or *farhang-i Tājik* that is, Persian or Tajik culture, he or she places therein all that is positive in the life, thought and art of Persian society and its people and that which identifies Persians as Persians. There are sharp differences of view among contemporary Persians as to what are the most important or least important elements of this *farhang* and historical causes involved in the development of its various strands, but there is little difference as far as its central role and the necessity to guard and preserve it are concerned, at least the parts which are most congenial to the character and mental habits of the particular person in question. One of the remarkable characteristics of Persian culture has been in fact its unity in multiplicity, its preserving an unmistakable unity while providing diverse intellectual, religious, spiritual and artistic possibilities within its fold. Yet, however this culture is viewed, the centrality of what is now known as Persian culture for the understanding of things Persian is undeniable and it is with this truth in mind that we set out to unveil some of the major aspects of that reality which is now called Persian culture. Moreover, our subject is traditional Persian culture which has existed through the long centuries of Persian history and which survives today and not modern manifestations born of the encounter between that

traditional culture and the modern West during the past century or two.

\*\*\*

In contrast to many cultures, such as the American, the French or the Russian which have an origin in historic time, Persian culture covers the whole of recorded history and recedes into those eras of pre-history which melt into the realm of meta-historical myth. Persia is one of the few countries of the world, along with a few others such as Egypt, India, China and Japan, to have had a distinct and continuous historical existence for millennia receding into pre-history. We know that around the 6th century B.C. there is a qualitative break in the flow of historic time, as between the time of Pythagoras and Homer in ancient Greece, when regular recorded history enters the realm of myth. The history of Persia reveals the same qualitative break. Its formal history begins with Cyrus the Great and the establishment of the Persian Empire but its reality extends to a much earlier era which came down to later periods as myths connected with such figures as Jamshīd and Fīrāydūn and such dynasties as the Pushdīdīyān and Kīyānīyān. Modern historians and archaeologists have sought to create a bridge over this historical hiatus and there is now much concrete information about those earlier eras which were seen traditionally through the mythic vision in the most positive sense of this term. But the truth remains that the temporal origin of Persian culture recedes into those times which storytellers still refer to as "once upon a time". As for the historical period, Persia has been on the world stage since the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when Cyrus established the Achaemenian dynasty and created the first world empire. Through vicissitudes, wars, and invasions including those of Alexander, the Arabs, the Turks, the Mongols and more recently the Western powers, Persia has been witness to many ups and downs in its destiny and has

undergone several profound transformations, but its historical continuity has persisted. Major cultural changes have of course occurred during this long period, the most important being the Islamization of Persia. Some would in fact prefer to speak of different Persian cultures such as the Sassanid or Samanid or Safavid and there is some validity to such a perspective. There is enough continuity, however, to speak of Persian culture as a single reality with different phases in which profound transformations occurred, the most radical being between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. However one envisages the subject, there is no doubt that Persian culture with its many phases or Persian cultures wed closely together have possessed a long history during which much has been assimilated from the outside, from both the East and the West, while this culture itself has not only been a dominant element in western and central Asia but has also exerted deep influence in certain fields in lands a far apart as France and China. As for the spatial matrix of Persian culture, its contours are also difficult to determine with exactitude. The borders of Persia itself have wavered over the ages from the vast boundaries of the Achaemenian and Sassanid Empires to that of local dynasties such as the Safavids, Samanids and Buyids, to that of the re-integrated Persia of the Safavids to the much reduced territory of the Qajars and Pahlavis. The heartland of Persia has always included present day Iran and Afghanistan but it also embraces present day Tajikistan, urban centres of Uzbekistan such as Bukhara and Samargand even after the Turkification of much of Central Asia, and included until the last century Aran or what is known today as the Republic of Azerbaijan and Pakistani Baluchistan. Matters are, however, even more complicated than that. When one speaks of Egyptian or German culture one speaks of a culture related to a distinct geographical area and then one can consider the influence of this culture in let us say the Sudan or the Balkan states. The case of

Persia includes not only an area less geographically distinct in its heartland as well as lands influenced than is the case of those of the examples cited, but embraces also areas which can be considered as part of the geographical extension of Persian culture without being either part of Persia proper or simply a territory influenced by Persian culture. Clear examples of such cases can be found in eastern Anatolia during the later Seljuq period and many regions of the Indian Subcontinent from the 13th to the 18th centuries. To speak of the geographical and spatial matrix of Persian culture one must take into consideration three different realities: firstly, one must consider the land of Persia itself whose boundaries have fluctuated over the ages but which embraces essentially the still Persian-speaking areas including of course present day Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan and also the islands of Persian culture that remain in what corresponds to the eastern provinces of the Sassanid Empire stretching to western China, whose character was transformed for the most part by the invasion of the Turkic people about a millennium ago. Secondly, there are the geographical areas outside of the political boundaries of the Persian world but which during certain periods of history were home to Persian culture such as parts of Anatolia and India. Thirdly, there are regions which fell deeply under the influence of Persian culture during different periods of history such as Iraq, what was known traditionally as Bahrayn, Egypt, Spain, Turkey, western China or eastern Turkistan, Southeast Asia and even the Christian kingdoms of Armenia and Georgia, not to speak of Byzantium and the Latin West. It is this complex spatial matrix of Persian culture that has caused so many debates in modern times, debates influenced to a large extent by the type of nationalism imported from Europe into the Islamic world and elsewhere in the 19th century. What constitutes Persian culture and who can be considered a Persian? These are questions much more

difficult to answer in the case of Persian culture than that of many others. Some of the greatest heroes of Persian culture such as Ibn Sina, Bīrūnī, Nizāmī and Rūmī are also claimed by other peoples in modern times who are likewise fired by the ideology of modern nationalism. Ibn Sina is often claimed as an Arab, Bīrūnī as an Uzbek, Nizāmī as an Azerbaijanī and Rūmī as a Turk. Volumes have already been published on such questions leading most often to sterile debates which divide rather than unite and which remain blind to historical realities. In any case when discussing Persian culture, it is important to remain aware of the three different types of areas associated with Persian culture and the complexity of this issue in contrast to the situation one finds in the case of many other cultures ranging from the Japanese to the German. The very fact that Persia entered history as an empire and to this day is comprised of people of different ethnic backgrounds held together by the very idea of "Iran" and its culture and that the various parts of this "empire" which were originally bound within a single political order, but which became separated later politically while remaining culturally united must never be forgotten.

\*\*\*

Before delving into various elements of Persian culture, it is necessary to emphasize that as a result of the impact of the modern world, the interpretation of what constitutes the most important elements and most basic features of Persian culture varies greatly among contemporary Western-educated Persians themselves not to speak of Western interpreters of Persian culture. Among Persians, the vast majority who still breathe in the atmosphere of traditional Persian Islamic culture are conscious of the profound continuity between the pre-Islamic and Islamic phases of their culture while those who, as a result of the advent of modernism and the subsequent

alienation from Islam, tend to substitute a strong cultural nationalism based on the pre-Islamic period, and emphasize the conflict between the two phases of their cultural history. Nor are differences of opinion confined to this question. There are those who see the remarkable power of Persian culture to revive itself over and over again, like a phoenix rising from its own ashes, to be a result of the great malleability and adaptability of this culture which has enabled it to absorb everything that has come its way as a result of the conquest of Persia by various nations and peoples over the ages. Others emphasize how selective Persians have in fact been in their adoption of foreign norms thereby preserving a distinct character over the ages. These debates have been exacerbated by the fact that the historical experience of Persia has been to a large extent dictated by its geographical situation which has placed it at the crossroads of East and West open on the one hand to the Indian, and the middle Asian and the Far Eastern worlds and on the other the eastern Mediterranean and Arab lands, in contrast to a land such as Egypt whose geography made it almost a natural fort over the ages, protected as it was by the sea and vast deserts. The geographical position of Persia has caused many interpretations to be given as to why it has been able to preserve its identity while being the arena of numerous invasions, some such as that of the Mongols which was devastating in its economic, social and political impact. As to what are the most significant features of Persian culture, while all Persians hold this culture to be dear, there are many differences of opinion. There are those for whom the Persian language is the most important and those who consider the plastic arts as being central. Some hold Cyrus and Darius as their greatest heroes and others Hafiz and Sa'di. Some consider the supreme Persian epic, the *Shah-Namah* of Firdawsi as the greatest work of Persian literature and others the mystical masterpiece of the

incomparable Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī known as the *Mathnawī*. Some believe that the social structures and functions are the most important indices for the study of Persian culture, while others believe the religious and philosophical to be the most significant elements to consider. While it is not possible to draw a definitive conclusion concerning such matters in this essay, not only is it necessary to point to the diversity of views, but also to point out that this diversity does not simply stem from scholarly opinion. Rather, it is also the direct consequence of the worldview of the person who sets out to analyse a subject as complex as Persian culture. Without negating the significance of other views, let us say openly that being primarily a philosopher and theologian; our interpretation of Persian culture begins by emphasizing the dominant worldview or *Weltanschauung* of this culture. We believe that, while such major aspects of Persian culture as literature, music and the plastic arts are of vital importance, their meaning and significance cannot be understood save within the *Weltanschauung* of Persian culture which is the framework, at once philosophical and religious, for all the diverse and rich creations and activities of Persian culture.

\*\*\*

In seeking to define the worldview dominating over Persian culture we are immediately confronted with the question of continuity and discontinuity between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. There are in fact not one but two discontinuities, the first between the earliest phases of Persian culture and the appearance of Zoroaster, whether his date is considered to be at the beginning of the Achaemenian period or several centuries earlier. The second is between the Sassanid period, dominated by the later interpretation of Zoroastrianism known as Zurvanism and sent asunder by the revolutionary religious movements of Mani and Mazdak, and the advent of Islam which

destroyed temporarily the political independence of Persia, led to the gradual conversion of the Persians to Islam and to their becoming a major focus of a global civilization. They were thus enabled to write some of the most brilliant chapters in their cultural history within the context of Islamic civilization. The first discontinuity is, however, of secondary importance in comparison with the second whose consequences are still debated among many Persians. But while speaking of such a discontinuity, all Persians also feel a bond of continuity with their ancient past. Which reality dominates over the Persian soul, Rustam or S. 'Alī, Bahman or Gabriel, Jamasp or Ibn Sīnā? Viewed from outside Persian culture, it is easy to point out the radical discontinuity between the two phases of Persian culture. On the one side there is Zoroastrianism and later Iranian religions such as Mithraism, Manichaeism and Mazdakism with their doctrine of good and evil which outsiders have identified as the dualism of Iranian religions. On the other side of the divide is Islam with its uncompromising emphasis upon Divine Unity. The sacred language of Zoroastrianism is an Indo-Iranian language, Avestan, and that of the Qur'ān a Semitic language, Arabic. The dominant pre-Islamic religion of Persia emphasized a hierarchic social structure based upon the religious and civil hierarchies, while Islam denies the priestly caste and makes of all believers priests standing equally before God. During the pre-Islamic period religion had a national character and was identified with the "land of Persia" as was Hinduism with the land of India or Bhārāt, while Islam came as a universal religion not bound to any specific land or people. One could go on to enumerate the many major features which differ across the divide that separates the two phases of Persian history. And yet Persian culture in the Islamic period was able to integrate into its ethos much of its pre-Islamic past so as to create a living continuity which might not be seen by someone who does not belong

to the universe of traditional Persian culture, even if he be a Persian. The hero of Persian nationalists who resuscitated the ancient myths and history of Persia, that is, Firdawsi, was himself a pious Muslim and was seen as a sage or *hakīm* by generations of Persians who came after him. In his home province of Khurasān, to this day the passion play (*ta'ziyah*) concerning the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Imam Husayn and performed at the height of the religious calendar on the 9th and 10th days of the Islamic lunar month of Muḥarram, is often preceded by a re-enacting of the tragic story of the death of Suhrāb at the hands of his father, Rustam, who was the hero of the *Shāh-Nāmah*. The participants in the *ta'ziyah* cry with their deepest religious feelings having been religiously aroused without distinguishing, as would a modernized Persian who has already fallen out of the universe of traditional Persian culture, between the Zoroastrian and Islamic origins of the two tragedies which they observe and in which they participate only externally and not existentially as do their still traditional compatriots. In the intellectual realm, Suhrawardī, the founder of the School of Illumination (*ishraq*), wrote explicitly that he had synthesized the philosophy of the ancient Persians and the Greeks within the framework of Islamic gnosis, and while quoting the Qur'ān profusely spoke extensively of the "imperial wisdom" (*ḥikmat-i-khusravān*) of the ancient Persians. Likewise, in the arts Sassanid musical models became the foundation of classical Persian music which would later accompany the most beautiful chants in praise of Allah. His prophets and saints, while the *javān* and dome structures of the Sassanids became integrated into a major style of mosque architecture. Far from destroying Persia's pre-Islamic past, Islam provided a mirror, to quote Louis Massignon, in which Persians contemplated their pre-Islamic myths and symbols. In searching for an all-embracing worldview of Persian culture the question of the

continuity and discontinuity of Persian culture remains therefore a most intriguing one to consider. While Persia became a major centre of the Islamic world and produced some of its greatest scholars in nearly every field including the purely religious sciences, it remained aware and does so to this day of its ancient past, its myths, symbols, feasts and celebrations, literary and artistic heritage, its philosophical and moral wisdom, all of which it integrated into the Islamic culture of Persia which came into being as a result of the acceptance by the Persians of the message brought by the Prophet . What made this continuity possible between two phases of Persian history, dominated by two distinct worldviews which yet share in a single vision of the world, is first of all certain morphological resemblances between Islam and Zoroastrianism and secondly the great power of integration of Islam coming as it did at the end of the prophetic cycle. And then there is the continuity of the human recipients of the two revelations in question with all that such a reality implies for the continuity of psychological, linguistic and various ethnic traits across the centuries. Also there is the major fact, never to be forgotten, that both phases of Persian culture, the pre-Islamic and Islamic, were deeply imbued with religion and that Persian culture, being a traditional one, has always been thoroughly religious. If someone objects by saying that this fact is insignificant because all ancient cultures were religious, one can point to the fact that in Persia's neighbouring civilization, Greece, religion became weakened, and philosophy and science separated from religion with consequences that were ultimately catastrophic for Greek civilization, this segmentation leading to sophism and scepticism on the one hand and cosmolatry and hedonism on the other resulting finally in the death of Graeco-Roman civilization. Such was never the case in Persia where even political protests took on a religious character as seen in the case of Mazdakism.

There are some modernized Persians fired by the passion of rationalism and at the same time rebellious against their religion which is Islam, who wish to take refuge in the culture of ancient Persia against religion. But they do not realize that the culture in which they take refuge from religion was itself imbued in the deepest sense with religious significance. Its heroes such as Rustam and Zāl were not secular figures nor were its myths such as that of Simurgh and Mt. Qāf "harmless" tales devoid of religious significance. This was a truth which was fully understood by generations of Persian Muslims, especially the philosophers and poets as we see in the treatment of the Sūmurg by authors as different as Suhrawardī and 'Attār. The religious character of both phases of the history of Persian culture itself could not but contribute to the continuity in Persian culture despite the obvious differences between the Iranian religions, chief among them Zoroastrianism, and Islam. Persia thereby became a major centre of Islamic civilization and yet a distinct cultural entity which in turn cast its powerful influence upon Islamic civilization and especially the whole eastern region of Islamic civilization which is often referred to as the Persianate zone of that civilization.

\*\*\*

Let us then turn to the most salient features of the general vision of the world which provides the matrix and frame of reference for Persian culture, this vision itself having been provided by the religions which have dominated over Persian history, the Iranian religions from the time of Zoroaster to the end of Sassanid period, and then, after a short period of transition, Islam. The most obvious and also important feature of this vision that is its central axis is the belief in and awareness of a transcendent and immutable Reality utterly beyond the world of change and becoming or God as understood in the most general

sense of the term without any theological restrictions. It is true that theological details concerning Ahura Mazda and Allah, as perceived in Zoroastrianism and Islam respectively, are not the same especially as Ahura Mazda came to be interpreted in many circles as the light to which was opposed darkness, with an implication of an ontological equivalence between the two realities, an interpretation that is opposed by modern Zoroastrians. For Muslims there is no ambiguity in this question whatsoever. Nothing can oppose Allah on the same level of reality and He transcends the duality of light and darkness as well as all other cosmic and moral dualities. Yet, Ahura Mazda as understood by Zoroastrians and Allah by Muslims, like God as understood by traditional Jews and Christians, refer to a Reality that is transcendent and eternal as well as being the origin and end of the cosmos. One can safely say that during no period of recorded history have Persians lived, in contrast to let us say the Greeks and Romans, without an awareness of the reality of the Transcendent and outside of a climate which could be called monotheistic, despite the dualistic interpretations of Zoroastrian theology on the cosmic level. Zoroastrianism may in fact be considered, along with the Abrahamic religions, as monotheism. Furthermore, in the dominant vision of the world of Persian culture, this transcendent and ultimate Reality has always been seen to have an inalienable link to the life of the cosmos and of man, not like the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle but as God as described in the Bible and the Qur'an. The Iranian religions, like Islam, saw the Transcendent Reality as the causal origin of the universe, as its creator to whom also all would return, this reality being the alpha and omega of all existence, human and cosmic. Also, putting aside Manichaeism, which appeared as a major revolt against Zoroastrianism and was seen by both that religion and Islam as a theological heresy, the religions of pre-Islamic Persia, especially Zoroastrianism, and Islam

have emphasized that God's creation is good and has a positive aspect even in the religious life. The celebration of the earth and its bounties, which characterizes traditional Persian culture, is deeply related to this positive religious attitude held towards creation or nature by both Zoroastrianism and Islam, in contrast to certain other religions which have emphasized the other face of earthly existence which is transience, illusion, unreality, suffering, impermanence and death. Needless to say, Zoroastrianism and Islam have also been fully aware of this truth and the Qur'an warns mankind over and over again against relying too excessively upon this world. But the fact that creation is good and must be appreciated as such is central to both religions and is the philosophical and religious reason for the *joie de vivre* of Persians noticed by so many outsiders yesterday and today. The purely spiritual and transcendent conception of the Divinity presented in Zoroastrianism and Islam was also to result in the refusal of these two religions to permit an iconic representation of the Divinity. The aniconic nature of Islamic art is well known but less has been said about Zoroastrian sacred art as far as this feature is concerned. It is true that there have been Zoroastrian symbols for the Divinity such as the wings associated with Ahura-Mazda but these have not been of an iconic nature. Nowhere in the pre-Islamic art of Persia do we encounter an icon of the Divinity as one finds in Christianity or Hinduism unless one goes back to the pre-Zoroastrian and also pre-historic period. It is quite remarkable that while Persia has always been a great centre of art, it never developed an iconic art which reached the heights of perfection found in the two neighboring civilizations of Persia, namely Byzantium to the west and India to the east. It is said that Mani attracted people to his faith through the beauty of his paintings, and the influence of Manichaean art upon the Byzantine icon and later upon the Persian miniatures has been mentioned by a number of art

historians. While this may be true, the fact remains that there is nothing in Achaemenian, Sassanid or Islamic art of Persia to correspond in its central significance to the Buddha image, the statue of Shiva, or the icon of the Virgin and Child in the Far East, India, the Christian West, or the Christian East. The aniconic nature of the sacred art of both Zoroastrianism and Islam and the refusal in both cases to present an anthropomorphic image of the Divinity has had the deepest consequences not only for Persian art, but also for the worldview of Persian culture itself. This feature was also without doubt instrumental in the facility with which Persians embraced Islam during the early centuries of Islamic history. Another feature of the all-embracing and dominant vision of the world of Persian culture, again closely related to belief in a transcendent and ultimate Reality, is belief in the immortality of the soul and the eschatological realities. Of course all religions believe in the "immortality" of the soul in one way or another, but the meaning of immortality and what it is that is immortal differs from one religious world to another as can be seen in the case of the Indian and Abrahamic religions. Zoroastrianism is the first religion to have expressed clearly the relation of heaven, purgatory and hell, the end of the present history of humanity and final judgement at the end of historical time. Its teachings in this domain were so influential in western Asia and the Mediterranean world that many scholars speak of the influence of Zoroastrianism upon later formulations of Jewish and Christian eschatology. In any case there are such profound resemblances between the teachings of Zoroastrianism and the Noble Qur'an about the posthumous states, final judgement, paradise, purgatory and hell, that they constitute an abiding reality for Persians and have always determined the contours of the horizon of the world within which they have lived and functioned. This is also true of eschatological events terminating human history.

Zoroastrians expect, at the end of time, the coming of the Saoshyant, which many identified with the coming of Islam into Persia at the end of the Sassanid period. Some scholars hold in fact that this belief was instrumental in the Persians' wholehearted embrace of Islam. As for Muslims, they expect the coming of the Mahdi preceding the second coming of Christ. Furthermore, in Shi'ite Persia where the Mahdi is identified with the Twelfth Imam, now in occultation, there is the continuous waiting and expectation (*intizār*) of the appearance of the Mahdi and the coming of the millennium, a religious attitude similar to what one finds in ancient Persia associated with the disappearance of the sage-king Fīraydūn and the expectation of his return. It is true that the rites of burial in Zoroastrianism and Islam are completely different, but the eschatological realities are of enough similarity to have created a constant religious attitude towards life and death which affects the life of Persians in many ways including their manner of mourning and the religious piety which is related to the celebration of martyrdom and death. Traditional patterns of Persian life have also been dominated by the presence of angels and it might be said that angelology has been a constantly present element of thought in Persia from the Zoroastrian classics to Sabziwārī. Angels have, moreover, played a major role in art and literature as well as in daily activities. Many have called the Mazdaean religion a religion based upon angels rather than God. Even if this view is exaggerated, it points to their central importance in pre-Islamic Persia. From the Zoroastrian period onward Persians had a completely spiritual and "abstract" conception of angels which were therefore represented in a manner very different from the gods of the Greek and from the Hindu pantheons who corresponded to them. Zoroastrian cosmology was dominated by hierarchies of angels from the supreme order called Amshaspands to lesser angels governing various elements of nature, the species, domains of life, days and



months of the calendar and the human soul. Many believe that Jewish, Christian and Islamic angelology were influenced, at least in their elaborations, by the vast angelology of Zoroastrianism. Islam likewise emphasizes the central importance of angels as instruments of God's Will in the universe and there are hierarchies ranging from the archangels to the guardian angels mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith, among whom of special significance is the angel of revelation, Jibrā'il (Gabriel), who brought the Qur'ānic revelation to the Prophet of Islam. Persian Muslims naturally lived and continue to live in that Islamic cosmos in which the angels are vivid realities appearing in visions and dreams, objects of artistic treatment in miniatures and poetry, and experienced realities in one's every day religious life. Although the Islamic angels have replaced the Zoroastrian ones in the religious consciousness of Persians, the reality of the angelic world has remained a constant presence. In a sense the angels of the Zoroastrian cosmos have gained a new life in the Persian Islamic universe through the use of the names of some of them in the Persian calendar, the religious significance of some ancient angelic names in modern Persian such as *surūsh* or *yazata-yazdān*, and the philosophical and theosophical interpretation of Mazdaean angelology by Suhrawardī and other masters of the School of Illumination (*ishraq*) who sought deliberately to integrate the ancient wisdom of Persia and especially its angelology into the new intellectual edifice of Islamic philosophy created by them. One can hardly read the Persian treatises of Suhrawardī or his *Hikmat al-ishraq* without being aware of the new life gained by Bahman and other major angels of the Mazdaean world in the thoroughly Islamic intellectual edifice of *ishraq*. The presence of awareness of the angelic world is one of the major characteristics of Persian culture and manifests itself in numerous ways in poetry, painting, folklore and everyday religious practice. It is also

responsible for certain more subtle traits of the character of Persians such as their love of light which is so evident in traditional Persian architecture as well as the sense of colour and indirectly also their fascination with black colour expressing the reality of life supported by the angelic presence of light, and blackness expressing death. But black is not simply the symbol of non-existence, the *nihil*, death and perdition and, on another level, of evil characteristics of the demonic forces of the cosmos. Black is also symbol of the supreme Reality, the Divine Essence which is dark because of the intensity of its luminosity to which the Persian Sufi poets refer as "the illuminated night amidst the day of darkness" (*shab-i rawshan miyān-i ruz-i tārīk*) to quote from the *Gulshan-i rāz* ("The Secret Garden of Divine Mysteries") of Shabistari. One might say that the Persian appreciation of light, aversion to darkness, love of vivid colours and yet attraction to the colour black worn by so many Persian women, even if not in mourning, as well as by the religious scholars of Persia or the 'ulamā, is related in a profound way to the role and significance of angelology in traditional Persian culture as well as of course the association of black with the standard of the Prophet of Islam. This nexus is also to be found in the attitude toward forms and their spiritual significance to which we shall turn later. And of course it is the ubiquitous presence of angels in the Persian world that allowed Persian philosophers as different as Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī to develop such an elaborate philosophical angelology. Throughout its intellectual history in fact Persian thinkers have been concerned with the reality of an illuminative knowledge in which the instrument of illumination is the angel, a knowledge which Suhrawardī identified specifically with the ancient sages of Persia and which he call *hikmat-i khusravānī*. The battle between the angelic and demonic forces in the Zoroastrian world manifested itself on the human plane in the battle between

good and evil. All human actions participate in this battle, the side chosen being dependent upon the intention, quality and significance of the action in question. Moreover, human action in this world has something ultimate about it, not in itself but in its effect upon the soul which thereby determines man's posthumous state without denial of the imponderables of Divine Goodness and Mercy. Now, all of these beliefs are confirmed in the Abrahamic religions in general and Islam in particular. As a result, in the matrix of Persian culture throughout its long history, the reality of the struggle between good and evil and the ultimate significance of our actions for our soul's journey beyond the grave have been emphasized. Not only was the world created in goodness, as confirmed by both Zoroastrianism and Islam, but also the acts of human beings in this world are of ultimate significance for their souls. The fact that certain seers and especially the Sufis were to see the world as veil, beyond which the Divine Reality is hidden, the veil at once hiding and revealing that Reality, does not detract from the religious significance accorded throughout the history of Persia to human action in an ultimate sense and in relation to eschatological realities. This religious principle is also instrumental in the view of history itself as cultivated by Zoroastrianism and Islam. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism, takes seriously the movement of the arrow of time and sees in it an ultimate religious significance. Islam is by and large more a-historical than Judaism and Christianity, but it too has a strong sense of sacred history and accords to history a role in the unfolding of God's Will without identifying historical reality with the meta-historical truths and principles which manifest themselves in the historical dimension. In any case the view of history in Persian culture stands somewhere between the Indian and the Jewish/Christian, confirming the significance of history in the religious sense without identifying God and the Divine Order with any of God's manifestations in the

temporal order. As for the battle between the good and evil in relation to Divine Unity, there is a definite theological tension which one can also observe in other religious climates. By emphasizing the reality of good and evil as two independent and contending realities, it is easy to solve the question of theodicy and the origin of evil but one is left with an unsatisfactory metaphysical position that must of necessity be based on the unity of Ultimate Reality. In contrast, by emphasizing the unity of God one is rooted in a solid metaphysical foundation but then one has problems in explaining the origin of evil as is so evident in the history of Christian theology and much of Western philosophy. Needless to say, Islam and the pre-Islamic religions of Persia were to provide different answers to this basic theological problem, but the difference is primarily one of emphasis. Throughout most of its recorded history, Persian culture has accentuated the worship of the One God while also emphasizing to the degree possible the ethical nature of human life and the battle between good and evil in which human beings are forced to participate by virtue of being born into the human state. There is another dualism which has been of much significance in the history of Western civilization particularly in modern times and that is the dualism of body and mind or spirit which as the principle of bifurcation was made the basis of Cartesian philosophy and of all of modern science. There is of course an "opposition" between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, and on another level between this world and the next in every religion including both Zoroastrianism and Islam. But what is of significance in Persian culture is the awareness of the complementarity of these two poles in the alchemical sense and as found in the Far Eastern yin-yang. There is a spiritualization of the body as there is a corporalization of the spirit in the climate of Persian culture which is most observable in the Persian art of the Islamic period. How many people have written that the

poetry of Ḥāfiẓ is sensuous as is classical Persian music, the miniature and the garden! But how can the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ be sensuous in the ordinary sense of the term when it deals with the most subtle aspects of the spiritual world. The lock of the hair of the Beloved, Her mole and slender figure far from being simply sensuous descriptions of an earthly being are the coalescences in forms of realities which are by nature too "ethereal" to belong to the formal world. One observes definitely in such arts the fruit of the alchemical process of solve et coagula and there is an alchemy in much of the traditional art of Persia which is evident for those capable of understanding the inner message of Persian traditional art. Now, there is no doubt that not all Persians understand the philosophical principles underlying this corporalization of the spiritual and the spiritualization of the corporeal. But it is remarkable to what extent this way of regarding things is shared even by those who do not fully understand its principles. The joy which is so much a part of traditional Persian life is not simply a form of worldliness although through secularisation and modernization such has become the case in many circles as one can also see in the current parodies of classical Persian music and miniatures. These are, however, recent phenomena whereas the wedding between the corporeal and the spiritual and the refusal to accept a thorough dualism which would separate one radically from the other, as one observes in the history of the West since the Renaissance, is a perennial feature of traditional Persian culture.

\*\*\*

Having dealt with some general characteristics of Persian culture, it is now necessary to turn to some of its more specific manifestations among which language and literature play a central role. No element of Persian culture is more celebrated than Persian literature at whose peak

stands Persian Sufi poetry. That is why no aspect of Persian culture has been treated as much in detail in modern times as Persian literature by both Western and Persian scholars. The history of Persian literature has been dealt with amply in Persian as well as in English and other major European languages, and nearly all the major figures of Persian literary history from Firdawsi to Bahār have had numerous monographic studies devoted to them. There is no need here, therefore, to turn to this subject in any detail especially since others more qualified than ourselves will be dealing with it in this volume. Our aim is to mention a number of aspects of this subject as it is related to Persian culture in general. Let us remember at the outset that on the one hand Persian literature, by which we mean neither Old or Middle Persian of which only a few literary works remain, but modern Persian (known as *fārsī*, *dari* or *tajik* today), has been and remains the most important vehicle for the expression of the yearnings, ideals, aspirations, thought and experiences of the Persian people. There is no other facet of Persian culture which is as revealing and as accessible a means for the understanding of the soul of the Persian people as the literature written in the Persian language (often called erroneously *Fārsī* in English), a literature belonging to not only present day Iranians, Afghans and Tajiks who speak the same Persian language with three names, but also to the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent and Turkey at least until the beginning of this century. And yet during the Islamic period the Persians have written perhaps over half a million works in Arabic in nearly every domain, some of them, such as the poetry of Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr Ḥallāj, being considered masterpieces of the Arabic language. Also many regions of Persia speak either Iranian languages and dialects such as Kurdish and Baluchi or in Turkic languages and dialects such as *Āzārī* and have produced an oral or both an oral and a written literary tradition over the centuries. To fully appreciate the

literature of the Persian people, it would be necessary to deal also with these other languages and not only with Persian. Even the greatest literary figures of Persian such as Rūmī, Sa'dī, Ḥafīz and Jāmī have written in both Arabic and Persian while one of the greatest contemporary poets of Persia, Shariyār wrote in both Persian and Azarī. Modern nationalism has prevented some scholars from considering these other languages including even Arabic as a vehicle for expression of Persian culture, and yet these languages are a reality that must be considered in any attempt to comprehend fully the dimensions of Persian culture. The great paradox of this situation is that on the one hand Persian literature is central and perhaps after the dominating worldview the most central aspect of Persian culture, and on the other it is not the only literature of Persian culture. To make the situation even more complicated, Persian literature does not belong to Persia alone but is major form of Islamic literature shared by people as far away as those of Eastern Turkistan or Sinkiang and Bengal in the East and Albania in the West. For almost a millennium Persian was the lingua franca of Asia and also the major literary language of the Ottoman elite who took it to south-eastern Europe. This situation created a great deal of non-Persian Persian literature, itself complicating the relation between Persian literature and Persian culture. Born in the Islamic period from the wedding of Sassanid middle Persian and the Arabic of the Noble Qur'ān, possessing the structure of Indo-Iranian languages, but using the Arabic alphabet to which Persians added four letters creating the alphabet which should in fact be called Arabico-Persian, and impregnated especially in religious domains with Qur'ānic vocabulary, Persian came to possess a malleability and power of absorption and diversification which soon made it a vehicle for the expression of not only administrative edicts but also poetry, and soon for the intellectual sciences such as philosophy

and mathematics as seen in the Persian works of Ibn Sīnā and Bīrūnī already in the 4th/10th century. During the past century Persian prose literature, especially the philosophical and the scientific, have not receive as much attention as poetry and it is only during the past few decades that the Persian philosophical works of Ibn Sīnā, Nāṣir-i Khusrāw, Suhrawardī, Afdāl al-Dīn, Kashānī, Nāṣir al-Dīn Tūsī and others have become publicly accessible. But even now the general Persian-speaking public as well as Western students of classical Persian literature are much more interested in Persian poetry than in prose literature which remains the reserve of scholars. The reason for this phenomenon is not difficult to discern. Persian poetry is one of the richest and most diversified in the world. The Persians are in general poetically inclined people and this quality became accentuated by their adoption of Islam and the Qur'ānic revelation whose language is the highest poetry, without this term being used by Muslims for their Sacred Text. At first the poetic elements in the Persian soul expressed themselves in Arabic, and some of the greatest early poets of that language, especially those devoted to Sufism such as Nūrī and Ḥallāj, were Persians not to speak of those like Sarrāj and Anṣārī who wrote in poetic Arabic prose. Then Persian poetry itself began to develop using at first the prosody of Arabic but with a greater degree of freedom and the possibility of drawing from the vocabulary of Arabic origin as well as the Iranian languages. With Rūdakī in the 4th/10th century Persian poetry was established as a powerful new poetic medium. Soon it was to develop several poetic forms such as the *qasīdah*, *ghazal* and *rubā'ī* and types of poetry ranging from the epic, which received its foremost treatment in the hands of the national poet of Persia, Firdawsī, to the most delicate love poems as well as to didactic poetry. Various facets and characteristics of Persian culture can be discerned clearly in the writings of different masters of the Persian poetic tradition.

Firdawsi, the revivor of Persian national consciousness and its ancient history in the context of the Persians' acceptance of Islam, represents the tradition of chivalry (*jawānnardī*), so important in traditional Persian culture, intermingled with the virtues of the epic heroes. Nāṣir-i Khusrāw, at once philosopher and theologian, was the moral poet par excellence and reflects the concern of Persian society with an ethics which always has its roots in religion. Nizāmi is the great master of romance poetry with a sense of drama rarely encountered in other poets. Sa'di is the most perfect guide for the understanding of the morals and attitudes of Persians in private and social life. Rūmī is the foremost of mystical poets and teachers, a veritable ladder to the world of the Spirit. Ḥāfiẓ, the greatest of the troubadours who have sung of God's love in Persian and the supreme poet of the Persian languages far as the wedding between form and meaning is concerned, is the revealer of the most intimate centre of the Persian soul and the unparalleled painter of scenes of man's inner life in its encounter with the joys and sorrows of this world. Jāmī is the poet of divine knowledge and pure metaphysics and at the same time the transformer of human romances to that ultimate romance which is the one between the soul and God, the eternal Beloved. There are numerous other poets of note such as Khayyām whose certitude of the Absolute is combined with profound awareness of the relativity of all that is other than the Absolute and 'Ubayd-i Zākānī the great satirist and social critic. One could go on and speak of many other poets and also the other aspects of the poets mentioned here. Suffice it to say that these great masters reveal, each in his own way, a major dimension of the Persian soul which contains elements ranging from the certitude found in Rūmī to the relativization of the world and an outward skepticism concerning the relative but rootedness in the Absolute found in the quatrains of Khayyām, from the sobriety of a Nāṣir-i Khusrāw to the spiritual drunkenness of an 'Attār,

or from the satirical verses of 'Ubayd-i Zākānī to the expression of pure metaphysics in Jāmī and Shams-i Maghribī. Every one of the famous poets of the Persian languages opens a window into the soul of the Persian people, but it is especially the Sufi poets who provide the deepest glimpse into the nature of not only the Persian soul but the soul of human beings as such. And because of their universality it is they who are most widely known today outside of Persia to the extent that the poetic works of Rumi have been the best-selling of all works of poetry in English in recent years in America.

\*\*\*

The phenomenon of Persian Sufi poetry is unique not only in Persian culture and Islamic civilization as a whole but even globally and there are those scholarly authorities in the West who consider Persian poetry to be the richest mystical poetry in the whole world. Some have also said that Persians have a propensity toward mysticism. It is difficult, however, to assert in which traditional ambience have there been a larger number of friends, lovers and knowers of God. What is certain is that throughout its history Persia has been known as a great centre of mystical speculation and practice much like its neighbour India. In days of old the Magi, seen in the ancient world as the very epitome of the wisdom of the East, practiced methods of spiritual realization similar to Yoga and Zoroaster himself was known in the ancient world not only as a prophet but also as a mystical philosopher. In the Islamic period Sufism, the mystical and esoteric dimension of Islam whose origin resides in the Noble Qur'an and the initiative power (*wilāyah*) transmitted by the Blessed Prophet of Islam to certain of his companions especially 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, spread rapidly in Persia where it found one of its most fertile grounds. The first Persian to embrace Islam, Salmān-i Fārisī, who was a "member of the Household"

(*ahl al-bayt*) of the Prophet and a companion of 'Alī, was also one of pillars of early Sufism and many of the greatest early figures of Sufism such as Dā'ud 'Ajāmi, Junayd, Shibli, Nūrī and Bāyazīd Basīmī were Persians as were most of the authors of the early Sufi doctrinal and ethical works such as Abū Ṭalīb al-Makkī, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, Hujwīrī and Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī. The first major hagiographic work of Sufism, the *Hilyat al-awliyā'* was written by the Isfahānī Sufi Abū Nu'aym, and the most influential of all Sufis among the theologians and jurists of Islam, Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ghazzālī, hailed from Khurasan like so many other early saints of Islam. The founders of many of the most famous Sufi orders, such as the Qadiriyyah, Suhrawardiyyah and Khalwatiyyah, some of which are spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans have been Persians, not to speak of the Mawlawiyyah founded by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, the most universal figure of Sufi poetry. Sufism in its Persian manifestation in fact changed much of the cultural and religious history of Asia. It played a major role in the spread of Islam among the Turks, the people of the Indian subcontinent, the Chinese and the Malays of Southeast Asia, and it continues to be a very important element in the spiritual life of many nations outside of Persia's borders. As for within Persia itself, it is impossible to understand the deeper aspects of Persian culture from calligraphy and architecture to music and poetry without the consideration of Sufism. Nor is it possible to gauge the profoundest emotions and thoughts of Persians without recourse to the mystical vision of reality which came to permeate so much of Persian culture thanks to Sufism, while the serious practice of Sufism always remained and continues to remain for the few who have such yearning for Divine Knowledge and such love for God as to be willing to sacrifice the world for Him. It is especially Persian Sufi poetry through which the deepest esoteric doctrines, stages of the spiritual journey and states

and stations which the soul must traverse in its journey to the Divine Abode, the individual drama of the soul in its search for its Centre, the virtues with which the soul is to be adorned, visions of the angelic worlds and many other aspects of Sufism, have been expressed in language of great beauty. In Persian Sufi poetry a perfect wedding has taken place between poetic form and supra-formal essence to produce a vast treasury of mystical poetry of dazzling richness and diversity. To be sure, there have been major prose works on Sufism in Persian, some of much beauty and elegance, works by such masters as Hujwīrī, Khwājah 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī, Ahmad Ghazzālī, 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī, Shihāb al-Dīn Sam'ānī, Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, Najm al-Dīn Dāyah, 'Abd al-Rahman Jāmī and others. Some of these works such as the *Munāẓāt* of Anṣārī, *Sawānīh* of Ghazzālī, the *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* of Sam'ānī and the *Lawā'ih* of Jāmī are in fact masterpieces from a literary point of view and such works need to be known by the general Persian public much more than they are now. It is poetry, however, that has been and remains the chief vehicle for the expression of Sufism in the Persian world. Sufism began to influence Persian poetry while this poetry was in the process of formation. It was, therefore, much less "formed" and more malleable than classical Arabic whose poetic forms were already defined by pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and of course from a more inward point of view the majesty of the Qur'an itself as God's Word revealed in Arabic. Persian was in fact able to receive the imprint of the inner message of the Qur'ānic revelation more easily than the early Arabic poetry of the Islamic period with the result that a great deal more Sufi poetry was produced in Persian than in Arabic during the early period, most of the great Arabic Sufi poetry coming in later centuries. Furthermore, some of the Sufis who did compose excellent Arabic Sufi poetry in the early centuries were, as has already been mentioned, Persian, Ḥallāj and

Nūrī being perhaps the foremost among them. In any case, Persian Sufi poetry began to appear profusely mostly in Khurāsān but also elsewhere in Persia from the 4th/10th century onward and has continued unabated for the past millennium. Various forms of poetry were chosen as vehicles for Sufi poetry including the *rubāʿī* (or *dō baytī*), which seems to be a Persian invention, to the mathnawī and ghazal forms adopted from Arabic. At first Sufi poetry was mostly composed in the form of the quatrain as seen in the poems attributed to Abū Saʿīd Abī ʿl-Khayr and Bābā Ṭāhir. With Sanāʾī other forms became fully employed for the purpose of expressing various aspects of Sufism ranging from didactic expositions of metaphysics, cosmology and ethics to the description of the most intimate yearnings of the soul for God. With Sanāʾī, ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī this poetry reached a plateau of perfection whose streams have continued to nurture Sufi poetry over the centuries not only in Persia itself but also in the Indian and Ottoman worlds and to some extent even China and southeast Asia. And yet the perfection of this poetry, as far as the wedding between form and essence is concerned, was to come somewhat later with the two great masters of Shirāz: Saʿdī and especially Ḥāfiẓ. The creative impulse within Persian Sufi poetry continued even later with Jāmī and Bahāʾ al-Dīn ʿAmīlī and lasted into modern times with such 13th/19th century figures as Ḥatīfī, Isfahānī and survives to this day as one sees for example in certain of the verses of Shariyār and Amīrī Firuzkahī and even some of the verses of Suhrah Sipihrī, who chose to break away from the classical prosody of Persian poetry. No single phenomenon is as significant for the understanding of the spiritual dimension of Persian culture as Persian Sufi poetry which not only contains the most precious treasures of Sufism reserved for the spiritual elite but has also made these treasures available on a more popular level to the larger public which is able to enjoy this poetry, the

comprehension depending, however, upon who one is and at what stage one stands on that long journey back to the Divine Centre from which all beings have issued and to which they all must return.

\*\*\*

Although not known generally as well as Persian poetry, philosophy and abstract thought in general ranging from theology to mathematics, have also had a long and illustrious history in Persia especially during the Islamic period. But even in the pre-Islamic period Persia was known as a land for philosophical speculation. Plato was influenced by certain Zoroastrian theses, Plotinus joined the Roman army in order to be able to travel to Persia to study philosophy, the members of the Platonic Academy took refuge in Persia when the Academy was closed in Athens and Zoroaster himself was known in the ancient world as a philosopher and even mathematician as well as a prophet. During the pre-Islamic period, however, philosophical thought was complete intertwined with religion as one also observes in other Oriental Traditions. We must seek the philosophical dimensions of ancient Persian culture in Zoroastrian and Zurvanite religious texts some of which were in fact put into writing only after the beginning of the process of the Islamization of Persia. We must also look to Mithraic and Manichaean cosmologies, to the political philosophy embedded in the *tāj-nāmah* literature of the Pahlavi period some of which was translated into Arabic, to philosophical aphorisms similar in a certain sense to the dicta of the Greek pre-Socratics and also even to the Avesta itself. Although very few texts of a philosophical nature survive from the pre-Islamic period, enough has reached us to confirm the reputation of ancient Persia especially among the Greek philosophers as centre for philosophical discourse in the ancient world. It was, however, especially during the Islamic period that as a result of the spirit and

form of the Noble Qur'ān, which encourages an "abstract" rather than mythological mode of thought and extols the use and function of the intellect, abstract thought reached its zenith of activity in Persia. During just four centuries, from the 3rd/9th through the 7th/13th, Persia produced more major mathematicians than during all of its long precious history, including such figures as Bīrūnī, Khayyām and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī who are of great significance to the history of mathematics seen on a global scale. The same truth holds for other mathematical sciences such as astronomy and optics and in fact the mathematical and natural sciences in general. As for philosophy itself, from the beginning of the formation of Islamic philosophy in the 3rd/9th century, Persia played a major role in its cultivation both in Baghdad itself and in Khurasan which replaced Baghdad as the centre of Islamic philosophy in the 4th/10th century. Most of the early Islamic philosophers were either Persian or educated and belonged to the Persianate zone of Islamic civilization. One needs only remember Farābī, Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Āmirī, Ibn Sīnā and Bahmanyār to realize the verity of this assertion. Also the attack against the early school of Islamic philosophy by the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) was led by Persian figures such as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ghazzālī, Shahrastānī and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī. As for Ismā'īlī philosophy of the Fātimid period, although the centre of this school was in Cairo, its most celebrated figures hailed from Persia. One need only recall in this context the names of Abū Ḥatām Rāzī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī and Naṣīr-i Khusrāw. As for the famous treatises (*Rasā'īd*) of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, it can be said that they were produced in Iraq in an ambience containing both Arabic and Persian elements. Islamic philosophy is in fact a unity and cannot be divided according to modern nationalism into Arabic, Persian, Turkish, etc. but there is no doubt that Persia was a major centre of this philosophy during the early centuries of

Islamic history and that after the 6th/12th century became its main centre from which its influence was to spread to India and the Ottoman world. With the rise of Suhrawardī and the School of Illumination (*ishraq*), which drew consciously from ancient Persian wisdom and considered itself to be explicitly heir to this philosophy, the main arena of activity of Islamic philosophy became Persia. It was there that Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī revived Ibn Sīnā's teachings, and there that Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi metaphysics was provided with a philosophical formulation. It was in Shiraz and its environs that the lamp of Islamic philosophy was kept burning during the chaos that followed the Mongol Invasion and from there that Islamic philosophy travelled to India. It was in Isfahan that the last major school of Islamic philosophy was established by Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā in the 11th/17th century. It was in this city and Tehran that Islamic philosophy continued to be cultivated into the 13th/19th and 14th/20th centuries. And it is in Persia alone, along with a few centres in Iraq, Pakistan and India which had been in contact with centres of Islamic philosophy in Persia over the centuries, that Islamic philosophy continues as a living tradition to this day. Even the introduction of modern philosophy into the Islamic world has received its most critical and vital encounter with traditional Islamic philosophy in Persia. When one ponders over the different facets of Persian culture, one must always remember the domain of abstract thought, especially philosophy, which provides as much richness as the better known fields of art and poetry. The philosophical heritage of Persia provides a bewildering wealth ranging from the rigorous logical writings of a Farābī to the visionary recitals of an Ibn Sīnā or Suhrawardī, from the Peripatetic metaphysics of an 'Āmirī, Ibn Sīnā or Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī to the illuminationist metaphysics of a Suhrawardī or Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī to the grand metaphysical synthesis of Mullā Ṣadrā. There is hardly an aspect of philosophy from epistemology to ethics



and from political philosophy to metaphysics with which some Persian philosopher had not concerned himself over the centuries. Moreover, Persia is one of the few countries in the world whose major philosophers expressed themselves in not one but two fully developed philosophical languages. Most Persian philosophers wrote in Arabic and this tradition has continued to this day. But from the 4th/10th century onward Persian also became developed as a language of philosophical discourse and from that time onward most of the great philosophers of the land such as Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī, Mir Dāmād, Sabziwārī and in our own times 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī wrote in both languages. Certain other major figures such as Nasir-i Khusrāw and Afdal al-Dīn Kashānī wrote only in Persian which contains a philosophical corpus of great beauty and variety ranging like texts in Arabic from the purely logical to the metaphysical and mystical. One should never ponder over the nature and manifestations of Persian culture without recalling the strong philosophical dimension of the Persian mind which has revealed itself not only in philosophically inclined poetry, but also in rigorous texts of philosophy encompassing its different branches and also including several different philosophical perspectives.

\*\*\*

Persian culture has been known throughout the ages by Persia's neighbours as well as by people of lands farther away who are acquainted with this culture as possessing the quality of refinement so conspicuously demonstrated in Persian poetry, miniatures, carpets and architecture. This quality is in fact related to the high aesthetic sensibility of Persian culture and especially what is called "high culture". Whether it is plastic art and poetry, religious rites or the serving of traditional Persian cuisine, one can always detect the presence of this aesthetic sense and the love for beauty and refinement that in periods of artistic decadence has

even become excessive. But this quality has been in the overwhelming number of cases and periods positive and has contributed to making Persia, in both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, a major centre of art. The expression of this aesthetic sensibility is to be found even in places that one would not suspect. For example, such fields as logic and medicine were often taught in the form of poetry. Scientific instruments such as the astrolabe and quadrants were often notable works of art. The religious practice of serving a meal combined with prayers for the fulfilment of some petition to God, called *sufrah* in Persian, is marked to this day by a notable sense of the beauty of the design of the food set on the table cloth on the floor. And such objects of daily usage as bowls and towels taken to the public bath have traditionally possessed beautiful patterns. Of course the beauty of objects of daily use is characteristic of all traditional civilizations where art is life itself and cannot be considered to be confined to Persia. But traditional Persian culture displayed an especially strong love for the refined, for the integration of multiplicity into unity, and for attention to details and their integration into the whole all of which made it stand out as a major centre of art whose products were sought avidly near and far. The Asian culture with which the Persian can be best compared in this domain is the Japanese despite major differences in aesthetic principles between them and diverse interpretations of such major components of art as symmetry and asymmetry, colour and colourlessness. In any case in seeking to define Persian culture one cannot overlook this important characteristic whose indelible mark is to be seen in nearly every domain of traditional Persian life.

\*\*\*

In conclusion it is necessary to mention also some of the tensions which have existed and continue to within

Persian culture. There is first of all the polarity between universalism and particularism. Ancient Persia was marked by the experience of vast empires and Persians saw themselves at the centre of a universal order rather than as members of a small ethnic or national unit. During the Islamic period, Persia embraced a faith which considers its message to be universal and they became part of a vast civilization stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic and based on universal brotherhood. Meanwhile Persia's poets and philosophers possessed a deep sense of universality to the extent that some consider Rūmī as the most universal of all poets. And yet Persia's ancient religion Zoroastrianism was confined to Persia and did not claim for itself a universal following despite the universal import of the teachings of its founder. Even in the Islamic period, Persia's national poet Firdawsi was to emphasize Persia's particularistic national character rather than universal norms and precepts belonging to the whole of humanity. In modern times also with the rise of nationalism the force of particularism has become strengthened while Persians have continued to emphasize at the same time the universal import of the teachings of her greatest poets and seers and keep repeating the words of Sa'di, Rūmī and others addressed to the whole of humanity. Universalism and particularism, in tension, complementary or opposition, have in fact manifested themselves throughout Persian history and are to be found in various modes of relationship in diverse periods and aspects of Persian culture. These traits are also related to the qualities of inclusivism and exclusivism both of which are again to be seen in Persian culture. Placed geographically at the crossroads between eastern, central and southern Asia and the Mediterranean worlds, Persia has been invaded, as already mentioned numerous times, by outside forces ranging from the Greeks, the Arabs, the Turks and the Mongols to the very different type of invasion of Western culture since the 13th/19th

century. And yet, Persia has preserved its distinct cultural character. This very reality implies both inclusivism and exclusivism. Persian culture has been on the one hand inclusive in the sense that it has absorbed and embraced numerous foreign influences which it has integrated into its ethos and worldview. And yet it has also possessed a strong sense of exclusivity by rejecting those elements whose absorption would have implied the obliteration of the distinct identity of Persian culture. The tension between these two traits is very much present within the mind and soul of Persians today, caught as they are in the middle of the most far-reaching and challenging invasion of their culture by a foreign culture based upon secularism, anthropomorphism and worldly humanism all of which are diametrically opposed to the foundations of Persia's traditional culture. This invasion has not only caused tension between Persia's Islamic culture and modernism, but also through the rise of modern nationalism brought about a new tension between Persia's pre-Islamic past and its living Islamic culture which had integrated its pre-Islamic past into a synthesis that is now threatened by the onslaught of the modern West. These tensions define in fact many of the trends of Persian culture during the past century in nearly every field. But despite these trends, traditional Persian culture has survived and the characteristics mentioned in this study continue to be living realities for all those who breathe in the ambience of the world created by this culture both within Persia itself and in the mind and soul of Persians, who inhabit physically distant lands but who still live inwardly in the climate of Persian culture, in that Persia which possesses a reality beyond the confines of time and space.

## THE FIRST MILLENNIUM OF ISLAMIC IRAN

### THE BACKGROUND

The period 600-1600 coincides almost exactly with the first millennium of Islamic history as well as of the history of Islamic Persia.\* The Persian Empire, ruled at the beginning of the 7th century by the Sassanids, was defeated in the battles of Qadisiyyah (637) and Nahāvand (642) preparing the ground for the spread of Islam into the Sassanid realm reaching from Iraq to the boundaries of China. The process of the Islamization of Iran, far from being rapid or by simple force of arms, was a gradual one and took several centuries during which at the same time the culture of pre-Islamic Persia became transformed and in turn coloured the Persian culture of the Islamic period. While the message of the Qur'an transformed the intellectual and cultural landscape of Persia, on the cultural level - as well as of course the ritual and the judicial - there also occurred a process which some have called the Persianization of Islamic thought and culture. In any case a

---

\* Throughout this essay we have used both Iran and Persia and the adjectives derived from them, usually using Iran for the name of the country (except when speaking of the Persian Empire) and Persian for not only the language but also the culture and the people.

Persianate zone was created within the vast domain of Islamic civilization as distinct from the Arabic, a zone which had its centre in the Persian lands itself but which stretched to all of Central Asia and later the Indian subcontinent and even present day Western China.

### *The Creation of Persian Islamic Culture*

The cultural and intellectual life of the late Sassanid period preceding the rise of Islam has been already treated by many other authors and will therefore not be dealt with here. The rise of Islam itself led to the creation of a major global civilization in which Persian zone was and has remained over the centuries as one of its major centres. The Persians not only accepted the revelation of the Qur'ān, but were also instrumental to a large extent in the elaboration of the Islamic world-view based upon the Qur'ān and *Hadith*. They were among the first collectors of *Hadith*, the most famous collection of *Hadith* in the Sunni world being that of Bukhari from the city of Bukhara which was a major centre of Persian culture in early Islamic history. They were also among the first commentators of the Qur'ān as the names of Baydāwī, Zamakhsharī and Ṭabarī, all from Persia, demonstrate. Persian thinkers also helped to formulate Islamic cosmology, theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, mysticism and many other disciplines which created a total world-view, intellectual framework and social and ethical norm for themselves as well as for other Muslims. This early period of the history of Islamic Persia was also marked by the major contribution of Persians to the elaboration of Arabic grammar and the development of Arabic prose to which the names of Sibawayh (Sibuyah) and Ibn Muqaffa testify amply. But of course the most important linguistic achievement of Persian culture in the period from the 8th to the 10th centuries is the creation of the Persian language on the basis of Pahlavi, Dari and the influences of Qur'ānic vocabulary. A language was born

from this synthesis which became, after Arabic, the most important language of Islamic civilization, spoken by Iranians, Afghans and Tajiks to this day and understood by numerous generations of Turks, Indians and even Chinese Muslims.

### *The Transformations of Iranian State and Society*

Sassanid Persian society was a hierarchic one in which the two classes of Zoroastrian priests (*mūbad*s) and the military and political aristocracy dominated with the Persian king having at once a royal and a sacerdotal function. Society was held together by the teachings of a religion of Iranian origin and was ethnically fairly homogeneous. The stratification of society, however, became rather excessive and heavy during the Sassanid period and was one of the causes of the religious rebellions associated with Mani and Mazdak. During the late Sassanid period, Persians were in fact awaiting a religious deliverer and many of them embraced Islam, which promised equality of all Muslims before God, heartily in hope of release from excessively oppressive social stratification. The conversion of the people of the Iranian Plateau to Islam was, however, a gradual one and even three hundred years after the downfall of the Sassanids there were sizeable Zoroastrian communities in Persia; even Manichaeism survived into early Islamic history. With the process of Islamization, the old class structures began to change as Islam spread gradually from urban centres into the countryside. There was also a notable migration of Arabs into Iran and many Persians became the *mawālī* (non-Arabs attached to Arabs) of this or that Arab tribe while they were being directly ruled by the Arab Umayyads. But the domination of Arabs during the Umayyad period (41-132/661-750) also caused a deep resentment among Persians who considered themselves culturally superior to their Arab conquerors. Therefore, while the majority of

Persians embraced Islam, an anti-Arabic political and cultural sentiment set in. Certain religious movements such as that of Babak-i Khurram Din in the 9th century were crystallizations of Persian sentiments of freedom against Arab domination expressing themselves in religious terms. But they did not sink their roots and disappeared fairly rapidly. Of more enduring significance was the actual revolt of the Persian garrison of Khurasan led by a charismatic religious leader Abū Muslim, who arose in the name of Islam and the family of the Prophet against the Umayyads who had emphasized the Arabic element in favour of the universal perspective of Islam. The result of this uprising was the defeat of the Umayyads and the establishment of the Abbasids who built Baghdad as their capital near the old Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon. This event in turn marked not only a greater influence of Persian elements in the Abbasid government to the extent that much of the administration and bureaucratic structures were copied from Sassanid models, but also greater local autonomy within Persia itself, leading in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries to the establishment of local Persian dynasties such as the Saffarids, Samanids and Buyids. There also developed at this time, in the context of the rivalry between Arab and Persian elements in the caliphate, the Shu'ubiyah movement which openly espoused the cause of Persian culture and expressed a resentment against the Arab domination over Persian society. All this was taking place while not only the viziers of the Abbasid caliphate and much of the central administration consisted of Persian elements but also Persians were making the most fundamental contributions to the institutions, religious thought, art, science and other major aspects of the new Islamic civilization. In the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Turkic tribes, descending south from the Aral mountains, conquered much of the northern areas of the Iran of that time and transformed it ethnically in a permanent fashion.

Gradually, they gained political power with such dynasties as the Ghaznavids in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century and the Seljuqs in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries. The latter, staunchly Sunni, in contrast to some of the earlier dynasties which had Shi'ite tendencies or were formally Shi'ite, supported the Abbasid caliphate fully but were culturally completely Persianized. Many of their rulers were in fact among the greatest patrons of Persian literature. The migration of the Turkic tribes led them gradually into present day Iran which most of them traversed into Western Iran. From there they pushed their way into Anatolia, Turkified the region and established the Osmanli rule which finally led in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the foundation of the Ottoman Empire. In Iran itself, this major event transformed the area of Azerbaijan, whose people to this day speak Āzari, a Turkic language, while also using Persian almost exclusively for literary discourse. This migration also brought a number of Turkic tribes to Iran such as the Qashqā'i, tribes which were to play an important role in the later history of Iran and which have survived to this day. The Turkic migration into Persia marks the penetration of a second foreign element into Persia within a few centuries, the first being the Arabs. But in the second case as in the first Persian culture absorbed the new element which in fact brought new energy into society. The most devastating and shocking invasion of Persia, however, was still to come. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Mongols descended upon Transoxiana, then Khurasan, then the rest of Persia, laying waste some of its greatest cities such as Naysapur and destroying much of its irrigation and agriculture. Millions of people were killed as a result of this devastation and many of the basic institutions of society were destroyed. Although the economic and social impact of this invasion was catastrophic, the Mongols did, however, respect learning to some extent and intellectual activity far from dying out saw a renaissance in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> centuries due to a

large extent to the foresight of the Persian astronomer and philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī who had gained the confidence of the Mongol ruler Hēlēgē and was therefore able to salvage certain schools, libraries, etc. and preserve the lives of a number of men of learning. It is interesting to note, however, that while Helegū had marched upon Baghdad and killed the last Abbasid caliph, the symbol of the political unity of Islam, his grandson Ujiaitū embraced Islam and took on the name Sultan Muḥammad Khudābandah. The Shamanic and Buddhist Mongols were soon absorbed into the Islamic world. Furthermore, because of their rule over China and the facility they provided for exchange between China and Persia, they were instrumental in the remarkable revival of the arts especially painting which reached such a peak of perfection with the Timurids, the descendants of Tamerlane, many of whom were great patrons of the arts and sciences. On the social and political plane, however, the havoc brought about by the Mongol invasion, followed by the conquest of Persia by Tamerlane at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century, led to a period of turmoil and local rule often accompanied by disorder and rapid change. Meanwhile, partly as a result of the destruction of the Sunni caliphate and partly because of the spread of certain Sufi orders which acted as a bridge between Sunnism and Shi'ism, the latter continued to spread in Persia until at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century the Safavids re-united Persia under the banner of Shi'ism and established a national Iranian state.

## RELIGION, THEOLOGY AND SUFISM

### *Religion*

At the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century Iran was still predominantly Zoroastrian but with a number of Manichaeans and at least remnants of the religious revolt of Mazdak. There were also notable Christian communities

not only in such lands as Armenia which were more or less under the protection of the Sassanids, but also within Iran proper. Some of the oldest Jewish communities also lived in Iran in such areas as Hamadan and Isfahan. As already mentioned, the advent of Islam gradually transformed Iran into a predominantly Islamic country but the pre-Islamic minorities continued except for Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism itself became a minority religion, most of its adherents having converted to Islam during a period of over three centuries, while a number among them migrated to India forming the Parsi community which is prominent in that country to this day. The Jewish community survived and was active in many domains including medicine, pharmacology and music while the Christian community, at the beginning, guardians of much of the Graeco-Alexandrian heritage particularly in medicine, increased in number during the Safavid period with the migration under Shah 'Abbas of many Armenians to Persia and the establishment of a community which was influential in the domain of the crafts and also trade. As for Islam, at the beginning, that is, in the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> centuries, Persia was pre-dominantly Sunni in contrast to the prevalent view. But Shi'ism also found a home for itself from the beginning in that land. The love of Persians for 'Alī and the "Household of the Prophet" (*aḥl al-bayt*) caused many descendants of the Prophet of Islam to take refuge in Iran from Umayyad and later Abbasid persecution and the country is dotted to this day with the mausoleums of the family of the Prophet called *imām-zādahs* which are places of pilgrimage and religious devotion the most famous being those of Mashhad and Qum.

### *Theology*

Up to the Mongol invasion in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, however, Persia remained mostly Sunni of the Shāfi'i, Ḥanafī and to some extent Ḥanbalī schools. It produced

numerous Sunni Qur'anic commentators, collectors and scholars of *Hadith*, doctors of law and theologians (*mutakallimūn*). It is sufficient to review the main texts used in Sunni religious universities (*madrāsahs*) such as al-Azhar University in Cairo to this day to realize the share of Persians in the development of classical Sunni learning. Especially in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries when much of the Abbasid caliphate was run over by various Shi'ite forces from the Buyids in Persia to the Hamdanid in Syria to the Fatimids in Egypt and much of the rest of North Africa, Khurasan became the bastion for the defence of Sunnism and such figures as Imām al-Haramayn Juwayni (d. 478/1085) and Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) played a leading role in the intellectual defence of Sunni Islam. The Persian theologian, jurist and Sufi Ghazzālī is in fact perhaps the most influential scholar of Sunnism after the period of establishment of Islam. Even during later centuries the Persian contribution to Sunni theology continued as seen in the works of such 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century figures as Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Mir Sayyid Sharif Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), 'Aḍud al-Dīn Īlī (d. 756/1355) and Sa'd al-Dīn Taftāzānī (d. 793/1389), figures whose works are still taught in Sunni schools. It is interesting to note that Shi'ite theology also had its centre in Persia. While most of the earlier Ismā'īlī thinkers, such as Abū Ya'qub Sijistānī (d. 361/971), Abū Ḥātam Rāzī (d. 320/933), Ḥamid al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. circa, 412/1021) and Nāsir-i Khusraw (d. circa, 471/1075), who were both theologians and philosophers in the technical sense, were Persians, Twelve-Imam Shi'ite thought also developed primarily there. The authors of the four definitive collections of Shi'ite *Hadith* Muḥammad ibn Ya'qub Kulaynī (d. 329/940), Ibn Bābūyah (d.381/991) and Muḥammad Tūsī (d. 465/1068) were from the central area of Iran and Khurasan as was the seminal early Shi'ite theologian Shaykh-i Muḥīd (d. 1022/1614). As for

systematic Shi'ite theology, it came into being with another Persian figure Khwajah Nāsir al-Dīn Tūsī (d. 671/1273) whose *Tajrīd al-i'tiqād* ("Catharsis of Doctrine") is the most important work on Twelve-Imam Shi'ite theology.

### *The Spread of Shi'ism*

As mentioned already, it was during the two centuries following the advent of the Mongol invasion that Shi'ism of the *Ithnā-'ashari* or Twelve-Imam School spread in Iran as a result of many religious, social and political factors including the destruction of the Abbasid Sunni caliphate, the conversion of some of the most influential descendants of Heclegū who wielded political power and even ruled in Iran to Shi'ism and the spread of certain Sufi orders with a messianic or mahdīst message which played some role in the spread of Shi'ism. But it was the conquest and unification of Iran by the Safavids, aided by the Turkic Gīzīlbash, that caused Iran to become pre-dominantly Shi'ite as it is today and to inaugurate a period of flowering of Shi'ite theology and thought in general.

### *Sufism*

Sufism contains the esoteric teachings of Islam and has its origin in the esoteric meaning of the Qur'ān and the inner teachings and practices of the Prophet of Islam. It can be called Islamic mysticism if this term is understood in its original sense of dealing with the Divine Mysteries. Sufism was later to adopt many different languages for the expressions of its teachings and employ symbolism drawn from a multitude of sources ranging from the Neoplatonic to the Christian to the Zoroastrian to the Hindu and Buddhist. The inner teachings and practices of Sufism do not originate from those sources, however, but from the Islamic revelations itself. It was in fact the universality of the teachings of Sufism, as the esotericism of the last planar

revelation whose finality has given it such a great power of synthesis, that permitted it to make use of so many symbols and forms for the exposition of its teachings based on the doctrine of the Oneness of Ultimate Reality (*al-tawhīd*) and the practice of means of attaining Oneness and reaching the One. Sufism spread from the companions of the Prophet especially 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb to such early patriarchs of Sufism as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) from whom it spread in turn in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century to the rest of Iraq and later Khurasan. In the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century the schools of Baghdad and Khurasan became well known, each emphasizing a type of Sufi spirituality. It is interesting to note that many of the most illustrious members of the school of Baghdad such as Abū 'l-Qāsim Junayd (298/902) were of Persian origin while the school of Khurasan with such major figures as Ibrāhīm Adham (d. circa, 165/782), Bāyazīd Basāmī (d. 261/874), Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (d. circa 285/898) and Abū 'l-Ḥasan Kharraqānī (d. 425/1033) were of course all Persians. It is interesting to note that the great works of Sufism in Arabic written by Arabs themselves were to come in later Islamic history while in early centuries, from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup>, most of the Sufi authors including those writing in Arabic were Persian. One need only recall the earliest classics of Sufi ethics such as the *Qūt al-qulūb* ("The Nourishment of Hearts") by Abū Ṭalīb Makki (d. 380/990) *Kiṭāb al-luma'* ("The Treatise of Illumination") by Abū Nāsr Sarraj (d. 378/988), the *Risālat al-qushayrīyah* ("The Qushayri Treatise") of Imām Abū 'l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and the *Kiṭāb al-ta'arruf* ("The Book of Introduction") of Kalābādhi (d. 385/994) all written in Arabic and the Persian *Kashf al-mahjūb* of Hujwīrī (d. circa 468/1071), the patron saint of Lahore, written by Persians. Nor can one forget in this context Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad Ghazzālī's (d. 505/1111) *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* ("The Revivification of the Sciences of Religions") which is the most extensive and influential work of ethics

in Islamic history. Khurasan remained the great centre of Sufi activity during the early centuries of Islam and produced in additions to men named already, the brother of Abū Ḥamid, Aḥmad Ghazzālī, and many great Sufi poets to whom we shall turn soon. But other Iranian cities were also centres of Sufi activity. The most famous of the early Sufis Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) hailed from near Shiraz as did the great master of the exposition of Sufi lore Ruzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209). The most extensive early work on Sufi hagiography was written by Abū Nu'aym Isfahānī (d. 430/1038) while Isfahan was also known in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries for Hanbalite Sufis such as Abū Mansūr Isfahānī (d. 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> cent.). Hamadan produced one of the earliest Sufi poets Bābā Ṭāhir (d. early 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> cent.) and two centuries later one of the greatest intellectual figures of Sufism 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131). One can point to almost all other areas of Persian and discover that major Sufi figures hailed from there: Khwājah 'Abdallah Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) from Herat, Abū Sahl Tustarī (d. 283/896) from Shushtar in Khuzistan, Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 636/1238) from Kirman, Aḥdāl al-Dīn Kashānī (d. 610/1213-14) and 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730/1330) from Kashan, Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d. 719/1320) from Azarbaijan, etc. It is also important to mention that many of the major Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyyah, Suhrawardiyyah, Mawlawiyyah, Chishtiyyah and Naqshbandiyyah, which exercised the deepest influence upon lands ranging from the Philippines and China to Albania and Morocco, originated either in Persia proper or in the sphere of Persian culture. One cannot understand the religious and cultural history of much of Asia and Africa without taking into consideration these Sufi orders. With the rise of the Safavids, themselves driving their origin from a Sufi order founded by Safī al-Dīn Ardabili (d. 735/1334), confrontation began to set in between the state and some of the Sufi orders especially the



Ni'matullahi which was the most powerful Sufi order in Iran at the time of the rise of the Safavids. As a result, by 1600 the Ni'matullahis had already become mostly decimated and took refuge in Daccan in India from which they returned to Iran in the 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century but the Qadiriyyah and Naqshbandiyyah orders survived among Iran's Sunni population in Kurdistan and Baluchistan while some of the other orders such as the Dhanabi and Khaksar continued to function in Shi'ite areas.

### Literature

As already mentioned, during the early centuries of Islam, Persians wrote in Arabic but gradually by the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century Persian literature began to see the light of day as seen in occasional verses of poetry belonging to this period. Most poets, however, remained satisfied at this time in emulating the great Arab poets and the meters and prosody of Arabic poetry. In the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century full-fledged Persian poetry was born with Abū 'Abdallāh Ja'far Rūdākī (d. 329/940) who hailed from the vicinity of Samargand. He is said to have composed some one hundred thousand verses transforming the classical forms of Arabic poetry into Persian ones. Only a few thousand verses of his poetry have survived but he remains nevertheless the father and one of the most eloquent pillars of Persian poetry. He was followed in the 4<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century by such celebrated poets as Ahmad Manūchihī (d. ca. 431/1040) who was attached to the Ghaznavid court. A man deeply versed in the religious sciences of his day and also medicine as well as Arabic poetry many of whose models he followed, he devoted much of his poetry to the description of nature. Another Khurasani poet of note of the same period Abū 'l-Qasim 'Unsurī (d. 441/1049-1050 or 430/1039) likewise belonged to the Ghaznavid court and became famous for such works as the romance *Wāmiq wa Adhrā*. Khurasan remained the centre for the birth and growth of early Persian poetry and

it was there that the classical forms such as the *qasīdah*, *ghazal*, *mathnawī* and *rubā'ī* (quatrain), some adopted from Arabic and others created by Persian poets themselves, were developed already by the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. And it was in Khurasan where the greatest epic poet of the Persian language, Hakim Abū 'l-Qasim Firdawsi, was born, flourished and died in 411/1020. His *Shāh-nāmah* ("Book of Kings") written in the rhyming couplet or *mathnawī* form is the most important document of Persia's ancient past and the history of Iranians as a distinct nation. This "Homer of the Persian language" resuscitated the sense of identity of Persia's pre-Islamic past in a work written during the Islamic period by a pious person who, while opposed to the dominion by the Arabs over Persia, was profoundly Muslim and in fact entitled *hakim* or sage by his compatriots. In the *Shāh-nāmah* ("The Book of Kings") the ancient Persian heroes, both historical and mythical, from Jamshīd and Farīdūn to Zāl and Rustam, from Isfandiār to the Sassanid kings, are brought back to life in such a way that they remain alive to this day in the consciousness of Persians and in fact other Persian speakers such as the Tajiks and inhabitants of the Persianate zone of Islamic culture in general. The literary masterpiece of Firdawsi is a key for the understanding of the national consciousness of Persians and a mirror in which Muslim Persians have, over the ages, reflected upon the myths of their ancient past. After Firdawsi the mainstream of Persian poetry became influenced to an ever greater degree by the ethos of Sufism resulting in the treasury of Sufi poetry to which we shall turn shortly. But there were also major poets who were not specifically Sufis although Sufism had influenced them to some extent or other. Among the most eloquent of these poets was Ibrāhīm Khāqānī Shīrwānī (d. 596/1199) who served in the court of the rulers of Shirwan but also travelled extensively in the rest of the Islamic world including Iraq where at the cite of the ruins of the

ancient capital of Ctesiphon, he composed one of the most eloquent *qasīdahs* of the Persian language on the lessons that history teaches us about the transience of the world. Khāqānī, one of the most difficult poets of the Persian language, is the author of a famous *Diwān* as well as a well-known collection of poems called *Tuḥfat al-irāqāyan* ('The Gift of the Two 'Iraqs'). A major poet whom Khāqānī befriended was Nizāmī Ganjawi (d. 606/1209). Nizāmī, who was to compose an elegy for his poet friend, was the author of a number of celebrated romances which possess great dramatic power and have become subjects for numerous miniature paintings, romances contained in his *Quintet* or *Khamsah* such as *Layli wa majnun*, *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Bodies) and *Shirin wa Khusrav*. These works are among the greatest masterpieces of the Persian language and besides their dramatic quality, are replete with wisdom and philosophical insight. Nizāmī was a highly educated and philosophical poet and his works are of great interest for their cosmological symbolism as well as colour, image and power of story-telling. Like his great poet-philosopher predecessor Nāsir-i Khusrav who was essentially a moralist poet, Nizāmī was also concerned with ethical questions while dealing with the deepest aspects of human love. Many consider Nizāmī to have kneaded the body into which Rūmī was later to breathe the spirit of Sufism. He was also the source for many a later poet such as Amīr Khusrav who lived and died in Delhi and Jāmī to whom we shall turn shortly. While the later scene of Persian poetry became dominated by Sufi poets, other genres of poetry also continued to appear. With the advent of Shi'ism a number of poets appeared known especially for their composition of elegies for the Imams and depictions of the tragedies of Shi'ite history, the foremost among them being perhaps Muḥtasham Kāshānī (d. 996/1587). Also gradually a more complicated and ornate style of poetry developed known as the "Indian style"

(*sabk-i hindī*) among whose greatest masters was Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alī Tabrizī known as Sā'ib (d. 1088/1677-8) who belongs to the period beyond the bounds of this essay. Before turning to Sufi poetry, a word must also be said about Persian prose of a literary quality. Persian prose itself began to develop in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries and several treatises or philosophy and the sciences were written in Persian by Ismā'īlī philosophers and such notable figures as Ibn Sīnā and Bīrūnī at this time. In the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century the philosophical writings of Nāsir-i Khusrav, all in Persian, are especially significant from a literary point of view. But as works of literary art, it is especially the prose works of the Sufis and Illuminationist and mystical philosophers that are significant. One needs to mention in this context the *Munājāt* of Khwājāh 'Abdallāh Anṣārī of Herat and the *Sawānīh* (Inspiration from the World of Pure Spirits) of Ahmad Ghazzālī (d. 520/1126), which is among the greatest literary masterpieces of the Persian language, engendering a whole literary genre to be seen later in the *Lama'at* (Divine Flashes) of Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī ('Arāqī) (d. 688/1289) and the *Ashi'at al-lama'at* (Rays of Divine Flashes) and *Lamaḥāt* (Gleamings) of Jāmī (d. 898/1492). As for philosophical prose, the works of 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), Shaykh al-ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Afdal al-Dīn Kāshānī are of exceptional importance from the point of view of literary beauty.

#### SUFI POETRY

In many ways Persian Sufi poetry is the crown jewel of Persian literature and culture, containing the deepest ethos of Islam in general and the spiritual aspect of Persian culture in particular in some of the most beautiful poetry to be found in any language. There is in fact no language richer than Persian in mystical poetry. The universal

message of this poetry changed the literary and even religious landscape of many lands outside Persia and helped to give birth to literatures ranging from Malay to Turkish. It even influenced numerous figures from outside the Islamic world, ranging from the Bengali poet Tagore to Goethe and Emerson. Today, the English translations of Rumi into English vie in popularity in America with the most famous poets of the English language. The earliest Sufi poems of which we have knowledge are the moving and intimate quatrains of Bābā Ṭāhir 'Uryān from Hamadān and those attributed to the celebrated Khurasani Shaykh Abū Sa'īd Abi 'l-Khayr (d. 440/1048). It is, however, in the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century that Persian Sufi poetry reached the fullness of its development with Abū 'l-Majd Sanā'i (d. 525/1131), Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 627/1230) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) who followed each other in a progression that culminates with at the supreme troubadour of the Spirit, Rūmī. Sanā'i the first of this celebrated trinuminate hailed from Khurasan as did 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī. He was at first a scholar of religious sciences who then turned to Sufism and developed the *mathnawī* form for the expression of Sufi teachings, dealing with both Divine Knowledge and Divine Love. His *Hadiqat al-haqā'iq* (The Enclosed Garden of the Truth) reveals many of the inner mysteries of the Qur'an and demonstrates his mastery of Islamic esotericism and the conditions of the spiritual path. His successor 'Aṭṭār from Naysapur was also a man of great learning and at the same time a lover of God who had burned his ego in the fire of Divine Love in a state of ecstasy which caused him to pour forth his spiritual vision in a large number of poetic works such as the *Asrār-nāmah* (Treatise of Divine Mysteries), *Ilāhī-nāmah* ("The Book of God"), and *Musībat-nāmah* ("Book of Afflictions"). His greatest poetic work is, however, *Maniq al-fayr* known in the West, since S. De Sacy's translation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century into French. There are

also numerous translations of this work under the title *The Confence of the Birds*, which is among the foremost poetical masterpieces of the Persian language. 'Aṭṭār was also a master of Persian prose and his *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'* ("Memorial of Saints") dealing with the lives of Sufi saints in a unique literary masterpiece in this *genre*. The heritage of 'Aṭṭār was to pass to Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī or Balkhī whose father took him to Naysapur to visit the venerable 'Aṭṭār when Jalāl al-Dīn was a young boy. Born in Balkh and driven away by the Mongol invasion, Rūmī was brought by his father to Anatolia where they settled. After studying the religious sciences and becoming a well-known teacher in this field, Rūmī's life was transformed by his meeting with the almost mythical wandering dervish, Shams al-Dīn Tabrizī. This spiritual encounter caused the ocean of spiritual reality within Rūmī's being to erupt in gigantic waves which produced the incomparable *Mathnawī* and *Diwān-i Shams-i Tabrizī*. The *Mathnawī*, called by Jāmī the Qur'an of the Persian language, is in reality a commentary upon the inner meanings of the Qur'an and without doubt the greatest mystical poetry of a didactic nature in Persian. As for the *Diwān*, it is composed of some 30,000 verses in *ghazal* form with many different meters which are so rich in their variety as to make the work not only a treasury of ecstatic poetic utterance but also a treasury of Persian prosody. There is hardly any aspect of the mystery of human existence and man's quest for his Origin as well as the nature of that Origin in rapport to the manifested order that is not treated in the greatest depth by Rūmī. An outstanding spiritual master who founded the Mawlawiyyah Sufi order which wielded such influence in the Ottoman empire, Rūmī is deeply revered by both Persians and Turks, as well as by other Persian speaking peoples. His main translator into English R. A. Nicholson considered him the greatest mystical poet who ever lived. In any case, Rūmī marks the peak of Persian Sufi poetry

and has remained an immense spiritual and cultural influence in Iran to this day. Before proceeding any further with later Sufi poets a word must be said about the most famous Oriental poet in the West who preceded 'Aṭṭār and who also hailed from Nayshapur, namely Omar Khayyām (d.circa 526/1132). Known to the West through the masterly but inaccurate rendition of these *Quatrains* into English by E. Fitzgerald, Khayyām became an almost cult like figure in Victorian England and has been associated by some with a hedonist and Epicurean philosophy. The real Khayyām, however, is much closer to the Sufi tradition, especially if his well-known *Rubā'iyāt* or *Quatrains* are studied in conjunction with his few surviving philosophical works in which he extols Sufism and expounds the gnosis or *ma'rifaḥ* of the Sufis. Even his verses, if read carefully, are a basic reassertion of the absoluteness of the Absolute and the transience of all else especially the many relativities which human beings take to be eternal and absolute but which being relative soon wither away. One would think that Persian Sufi poetry would have exhausted its possibility with 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī, but such was not the case. The century after Rūmī was witness to the two great poets of Shiraz, Sa'dī and Ḥāfiẓ who brought the Persian language to the peak of its literary perfection. Muṣliḥ al-Dīn Sa'dī (d. 691/1292) was a Sufi of the Suhrawardiyah Order but his work is not concerned with Sufism alone although both of his celebrated masterpieces, the *Būstān* (The Garden) and the *Gulistan* ("The Rose Garden") contain some of the most beautiful verses of Persian Sufi poetry. Rather, Sa'dī was a moralist poet and an astute observer of the human condition. His long life and extended journeys allowed him to study the immense complexities of the human state. His works became a mirror which reflects the realities he observed and studied and for that reason he remains the best source for the understanding of the norms, values and ethos of Persian

society to this day. His eloquence also became the ideal by which all later literature was judged and every generation of educated Persians has studied his *Gulistan* and many have sought to emulate its language. If Sa'dī was the poet of terrestrial human existence, Shams al-Dīn Ḥāfiẓ (d. 791/1389) is the poet of the celestial realities. The greatest lyric poet of the Persian language, this troubadour of the world of the Spirit was a Sufi who transformed the most sensuous of human experiences into spiritual realities and described the most exalted divine mysteries in the language of human love and the vivid experiences of the world of the senses. In Ḥāfiẓ the process of the spiritualization of the corporal and the corporealization of the spiritual, a major trait of Persian culture, reaches its peak, and his words possess an alchemical power upon the soul which only grows with familiarity. Like a ladder stretched from earth to heaven, Ḥāfiẓ attracts people of all inclinations from the most worldly to the most spiritual and the universality of his poetry is unique. There is hardly any household in Iran in which his *Divān*, the only work he left behind, does not lie in a place of honour next to the Qur'ān. But at the deepest level Ḥāfiẓ is the messenger of the invisible world, in the Qur'ānic sense of the term, and his title *Lisān al-ghayb* (Tongue of the Invisible) is a most apt description of his basic function and role. Masterpieces of Persian Sufi poetry continued after Ḥāfiẓ, perhaps the most remarkable being the *Gulshan-i rāz* ("The Garden of Divine Mysteries") of Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistari (d. circa 720/1321). Already in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī were influencing Persian Sufi literature as can be seen in the works of Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d.738/1338) and Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī (d. 689/1289). This type of sapiential poetry reached its peak with the short and inspired masterpiece of Shabistari. Written in the space of a few days by a Sufi who did not compose poetry otherwise, the *Gulshan-i rāz* is one of the best summaries of Sufi

teachings presented in exquisite verse. No wonder that it became one of the most famous and authoritative works of Sufism in later centuries and many commentaries were written upon it. Among other notable Sufi poets of the period following Shabistari, one can mention Shah Nī'matallah Walī (d. 834/1431), the author of a major *Diwān* and the founder of the Nī'matullāhī Order, the most widespread Sufi order in Persia today. There were also a number of figures in India who wrote Persian Sufi poetry following the example of Amir Khusrāw. But the most important figure in later Sufi poetry was 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, a Naqshbandī Sufi from Herat who has been given the title of "Seal of poets" meaning classical poets of the Persian language. Influenced at once by Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī as well as 'Aṭṭār and Nizāmī, Jāmī composed some of the most beautiful romances concerning human and divine love such as *Yusuf wa Zulaykha*, emulating the form of Nizāmī's romances in the *Khamsah* but being more directly concerned with Sufi teachings. Jāmī was also a major expositor of Ibn 'Arabī, composing commentaries upon the Andalusian master's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* ("Bezels of Wisdom") as well as independent works of highly literary quality such as the *Lawā'ih* ("Flashes of Light") which was translated even into Chinese. Altogether Jāmī was very popular in Asia, not only in India and China but also in the Malay world where he played an important role in the formation of Malay literature. During the Safavid period Sufi poetry continued although not at the same level as during the Il-Khanid and Timurid periods. Among the most notable of the Sufi poets of this period was Shaykh Baha' al-Dīn 'Āmilī (d. 1031/1621) at once religious scholar and authority, mathematician and astronomer. His simply worded *mathnawīs* such as *Nān wa ḥalwā* ("Bread and Sweetmeat") have remained popular to this day. While new poets appeared on the horizon, the great masters of the classical period mentioned above continued and still

continue to exercise the greatest spiritual and cultural influence in Iran. And it was the translation of their works from the late 12<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century onward by such figures as Sir William Jones that not only made Persian Sufi poetry famous in the West but also caused it to exercise influence upon many major figures of European and American literature such as Goethe, Rückert, Emerson and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

## PHILOSOPHY

Iran has always been a land known for philosophy as seen in the testimony of the Pythagoreans, the influence of certain Mazdaean theme upon Plato, the desire of Plotinus to enter the Roman army so as to be able to go to Persia to study philosophy and the fame of Zoroaster in the Hellenistic world as well as the medieval and Renaissance West as a philosopher as well as prophet. In the pre-Islamic period, however, philosophical thought remained within the context of religion, as one finds in other major Oriental civilizations, and one must turn to such works as the *Denkart*, *Škand gumānik vicar* and the *Bundahishn* to discover the philosophical dimension of the Mazdaean world-view. It is only in the Islamic period that philosophy becomes a distinct discipline and on the basis of translations of Greek philosophical sources as well as Indian and pre-Islamic Persian thought and in the framework established by the Qur'ānic revelation, Islamic philosophy emerges as a major new intellectual perspective or even sets of perspectives. During the Islamic period, Islamic philosophy was of course still closely related to religion, but it was now a discipline distinct from such religious subjects as theology and law. Islamic philosophy is an integral intellectual tradition and cannot be divided along ethnic lines to satisfy various forms of modern nationalism. It certainly is not Arabic philosophy, as the

term Arabic is understood in the contemporary context any more than it is Iranian philosophy. Although most works of Islamic philosophy are in Arabic, many are in Persian, and although some of the greatest Islamic philosophers such as al-Kindī and Ibn Rushd were Arabs, most were in fact Persians and it was in Persia and the Iranian zone of Islamic civilization such as Muslim India that Islamic philosophy was to survive as an active intellectual tradition after the demise of Islamic philosophical activity in the Arab world including the Maghrib and especially Andalusia in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century.

#### EARLY PERIPATETIC (*mashshāʾī*) PHILOSOPHY

Although the first Islamic philosopher of that synthesis between Islam, Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism which came to be known in Arabic as *mashshāʾī* or Peripatetic philosophy was the Arab Abū Yaʿqub al-Kindī who flourished in Baghdad, some of his most famous students such as Abū Zayd Balkhī (d. 322/934) and Ahmad ibn Tayyib Sarakhshī (d. 286/899) were from Khurasan and after the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century Khurasan became a major centre of Islamic philosophy. Abū Nasr Fārābī (d. 339/950), the father of Islamic political philosophy whose *Ārāʾ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍiyyah* ("The Opinion of the People of the Virtuous City") is the fundamental text of this subject and who was also the great commentator upon Aristotle and father of formal logic in Islamic thought, hailed from Fārāb in the greater Khurasan and spent the first half of his life in that land before visiting Baghdad and finally settling in Damascus. Fārābī completed the formation of Arabic philosophical vocabulary and established the main theses of the *mashshāʾī* school. His imprint is to be found in all later Islamic philosophy. After Fārābī the philosophical school of Baghdad became eclipsed by that of Khurasan where Abū ʿl-Ḥasan ʿĀmirī (d. 383/992) wrote a number of works such as *al-ʾAmad ʾala ʾl-abad* ("Time Within Eternity") and

*al-ʾIḥām bi-manāqib al-islam* ("Declaration of the Virtues of Islam") in which elements of Persian political thought of the pre-Islamic period were integrated into the tents of the *mashshāʾī* school. He also dealt with the basic issue of the relation between reason and revelation which had also concerned Fārābī before him and also nearly all the philosophers in Iran who were to follow. ʿĀmirī was eclipsed to a large extent by the greatest of all *mashshāʾī* philosophers and the most outstanding and influential philosopher-scientist of Islam, Abū ʿAlī Sīnā (d. 429/1037) who remains a cultural and almost mythical hero not only for Persians but also for several other nations. An exceptional genius who was already a celebrated philosophers and physician by the age of eighteen, Ibn Sīnā travelled from his city of birth in Bukhara to Jurjāniyyah and from there wondered in Iran from one city to another such as Rayy, Isfahān and Hamadān the rest of his life. And yet he wrote over two hundred works, including the *Canon of Medicine* (*al-Qānūn fī ʾl-ṭibb*), the most famous single work in the history of medicine, and the monumental encyclopedia of *mashshāʾī* philosophy and science, the *Kiṭāb al-shifāʾ* ("Book of Healing"). Ibn Sīnā is also the author of the first work of *mashshāʾī* philosophy in the Persian language, the *Dānish nāma-yi ʾalāʾī* ("The Book of Science dedicated to ʾAlāʾ al-Dawlah"), which is of great linguistic significance and marks the beginning of the tradition of writing systematic Islamic philosophy in the Persian language, a practice that became much more prevalent later as we see in the works of Naṣir-i Khusrāw, Suhrawardī, Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī, Tūsī and others. With Ibn Sīnā *mashshāʾī* philosophy reached its apogee and he was able to create a vast synthesis which has influenced all later Islamic thought. In Iran itself his influence can be seen throughout all later centuries of Iranian history despite the criticism brought against him and his school by Ashʿarite theologians, especially Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī in

the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ibn Sīnā's students such as Bahmanyār ibn Marzbān (d. 458/1067) and Ḥusayn ibn Zaylah (d. 440/1048) continued his teachings through the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, but with the criticism wielded by the theologians, *mashshāʾī* philosophy became eclipsed in Iran or a century and a half while it flourished in Andalusia. In Iran itself the only notable philosophical figure in the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century is Khayyām who translated one of Ibn Sīnā's orations from Arabic into Persian. But he is much more known as a mathematician and a poet despite his philosophical importance. This eclipse of Ibn Sīnā's teachings was, however, temporary. In the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century his thought was to be revived by one of Iran's greatest philosophers and scientists, Khwājāh Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī whose commentary upon Ibn Sīnā's last masterpiece *al-Ishārāt wa'l-Iʿtibāhāt* ("The Book of Directives and Remarks") resuscitated the work of the master and re-established the *mashshāʾī* school as a living current of thought which has survived in Iran to this day.

#### THE INDEPENDENT PHILOSOPHERS

Although in Islamic philosophy schools dominate over individual interpretations of philosophy, there are a number of philosophers of note during this period who are of significance yet cannot be fully identified with any single school such as the *mashshāʾī* or Ismāʾīlī. Chief among them are Muḥammad ibn Zakariyya' Rāzī (d. /circa 313/925-932) and Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī (d. circa 440/1048). Rāzī, who was celebrated as a physician and known in the West as Rhazes, was also a philosopher who considered himself the equal of Plato and Aristotle. He denied the necessity of prophecy for those who could reach the truth through philosophy, a thesis obviously totally rejected by Islam. As a result most of his philosophical works have been lost and he has been praised and remembered mostly as a physician. But some

of his works such as *al-Sīrat al-falsafīyyah* ("Philosophical Life") are extant and bear witness to his peculiar philosophical position. In contrast to Rāzī, Bīrūnī was firm in confirming of revelation and its necessity, and yet like Rāzī he was an outstanding scientist who was in fact attracted to Rāzī's works of which he wrote a catalogue. One of the greatest of all scientists, Bīrūnī did not write independent philosophical works but did criticize many theses of *mashshāʾī* natural philosophy in a series of questions and answers exchanged with Ibn Sīnā. Also in his *India*, which is considered as the first work in comparative religion, he not only described the beliefs of the Hindus, but also discussed many issues of general philosophical interest. One must also mention the *Rasāʾil* ("Epistles") of the Ikhwān al-Safā, composed in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century in Basra in a milieu comprised of both Arabic and Persian elements. Although later incorporated into Ismāʾīlism, the *Rasāʾil* are the product of a more general Shiʿite climate. In any case, whether considered as part of the Ismāʾīlī school or as an independent philosophical composition, they contain an elaborate philosophical discourse with a strong Hermetico-Pythagorean colour which was widely read in different circles. If not outrightly of Ismāʾīlī origin, the *Rasāʾil* represent definitely the philosophical aspect of the thought of Shiʿite circles in Iraq and Iran during the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century.

#### THE SCHOOL OF ILLUMINATION (*ishraq*)

In the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century a major new school of Islamic philosophy known as the School of Illumination or *ishraq* was established by the "Master of Illumination", Shaykh al-ishraq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, born in Western Iran, educated in Isfahan and martyred in Aleppo. This incredible metaphysician integrated the angelology and cosmology of Mazdaean Iran with earlier Islamic philosophy in the framework of Islamic gnosis (*maʾrifah*,

'*irfān*) and created a new philosophical school which should properly be called theosophical if this term is understood in its original and not current deviated sense and which, besides being one of the most important currents of thought in Iran itself since his death eight centuries ago, has exercised the profoundest influence upon Islamic thought in India and also has had many followers in Ottoman Turkey. Suhrawardī wrote not only Arabic works of remarkable literary quality, especially his chief masterpiece *Hikmat al-ishraq* which his foremost student in the West, Henry Corbin, had translated as *The Theosophy of the Orient of Light*, he also composed some of the most beautiful works of philosophical prose in the Persian language. After a short hiatus due to his violent death, Suhrawardī's thought were revived in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century by Muḥammad Shahrāzūrī (d. circa 688/1288) and Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 710/1311), both commentators of *Hikmat al-ishraq*. Henceforth numerous philosophers appeared who identified themselves with the teachings of the Master of Illumination such as Jalāl al-Dīn Dawwānī (d. 908/1501 or 1502) and Mīr Dāmād. The School of Illumination was also a major element in the new synthesis of various currents of Islamic thought established by Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640) at the end of period under discussion in this essay.

#### Islamic Philosophy in Iran from the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Through the 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> Century and the School of Isfahan

Iran became the arena in which different currents of Islamic thought that had remained distinct in earlier Islamic history began to approach each other between the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The philosophy of Ibn Sīnā, resuscitated by Tūsī, the School of Illumination, the doctrines of Islamic gnosis associated with Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī (d. 673/1274), and various schools of Sunni and Shi'ite *kalam* became gradually intertwined. Some philosophers such as Qutb al-

Dīn Shīrāzī sought to combine *mashshā'i* and *ishraqi* doctrines; others such as Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī Suḥṣm and *mashshā'i* teachings; and yet other such as Dawwānī, *kalam* and *falsafah*. There were also those such as Ibn Turkab (d. circa 835/1432) who attempted to unify '*irfān*, *mashshā'i* and *ishraqi* teachings into a whole, thereby preparing the ground for the major synthesis associated with the School of Isfahan. Before the establishment of this school, the centre of philosophy was Shiraz and it was here that such figures as Ghiyāth al-Dīn Mansūr Dāshṭakī, Ṣadr al-Dīn Dāshṭakī, Shams al-Dīn Khafri and many others, many of whom were scientists as well as philosophers, flourished. One can in fact speak of the School of Shiraz which preceded and set the background for the rise of the School of Isfahan. In the 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century the grand master of later Islamic philosophy Mīr Dāmād who was himself an *ishraqi* interpreter of Ibn Sīnā as well as a celebrated Shi'ite religious scholar re-established the study of philosophy in Isfahan, beginning a new school which has come to be known as the School of Isfahan. It was, however, his student Mullā Ṣadrā who brought about the great synthesis of the schools mentioned above in what he called "the Transcendent Theosophy" (*al-hikmat al-mulla'aliyah*) concerning which he wrote a number of well known works, chief among them *al-Aṣfār al-arba'ah* which ranks with the *Shifā'*, the *Ishārāt* with its commentary by Tūsī and the *Hikmat al-ishraq* as the most significant works of Islamic philosophy in Iran. Mullā Ṣadrā was also to have a major influence in India and has dominated the philosophical scene in Iran itself during the past three centuries. Like Suhrawardī and unlike Ibn Sīnā, who was so influential in the medieval West, Mullā Ṣadrā did not become known in the West until the present century and it is only now that the significance of his philosophy *per se* and its role, within the philosophical tradition of Islam in



general and of Iran in particular is becoming widely recognized.

### THE SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY- BACKGROUND

During its several thousand years of history Iran has been a centre of some of the most important scientific discoveries and technological inventions going back to the smelting of iron on the Iranian Plateau some eight thousand years ago. From the Achaemenian Period onward, the Persian Empire also dominated over much of the land of the Greeks and was in contact with India and through the Silk Route with China. Achaemenian kings had Greek physicians and Sanskrit texts of medicine and astronomy, were taught in Sassanid Persia. As for the Islamic period, it marks the apogee of scientific activity in Iran and much of Islamic science was cultivated by Persians.

### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN ISLAMIC PERSIA

As in the case of philosophy, so in the case of science, it is difficult to impose modern nationalistic divisions upon Islamic science whose cultivators often crossed what are considered as national borders today. We have to limit our remarks, therefore, to those elements of Islamic science, that is an undeniable unity, which were cultivated by Persians and in the context of Persian and Persianate culture. Islamic science integrated the sciences of pre-Islamic civilization from the Graeco-Alexandrian, to the Indian and Persian in the context of the Islamic worldview and at the beginning exclusively in the Arabic language although later Persian also became a significant scientific language. Persian scientists wrote, therefore, in both Arabic and Persian and made the greatest contribution to the formation of Arabic as a language of science. The Islamic religion seems to have inspired a greater degree of activity in "abstract" and scientific and philosophical thought

among Persians as reflected in the sudden rise of scientific activity in Persia from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century onward.

### ASTRONOMY AND THE MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

In the traditional Islamic classification of the sciences, as in the Pythagorean *Quadrivium*, astronomy constituted a branch of the mathematical sciences which for Muslims included in addition to arithmetic, geometry and music, several other disciplines such as algebra and optics. Islamic astronomy in Iran began on the basis of Sassanid astronomy and the *Zīj-i shahriyār* as well as the *Kitāb al-uluf* ("The Book of Thousands") which were translated into Arabic. Later the Indian *Siddhantas* became of central importance to be followed by the *Almagest* of Ptolemy. Many Persian astronomers participated in the astronomical activities at al-Ma'mūn's court in Baghdad in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. During this century also Abū Ma'shar Balkhī (d. 274/886) was spreading knowledge of Persian astronomy as well as astrology while Muḥammad ibn Mūsā Khwārazmī (d. circa 233/847) was composing *zīj*es. To this period also belongs Abū 'l-'Abbās Farghānī (d. circa 247/861) whose *Kitāb fi'l-ḥarakat al-samāwīyah wa jāwāmi'* 'ilm al-nujūm known as *Principles of Astronomy* marked a new chapter in the history of astronomy and was also very influential in the West. His contemporary Abū 'l-'Abbās Nayrizī (d. circa 309/922) composed one of the first commentaries upon the *Almagest*. The 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century was a particularly active one for the Islamic sciences in Iran. This century was witness to much new observation and the composition of the major work on star configurations in Islam the *Suwar al-kawākib* of 'Abd al-Rahmān Šūfī (d. 376/986) while Abū 'l-Wafā' Buzjānī (d. 388/998) and Abū Mahmūd al-Khujandī (d. 390/1000), both leading mathematicians, also did important astronomical work concerning the movement of the moon and the sun

respectively. The greatest astronomical work of the period, however, was *al-Qānun al-mas'ūdī* ("The Mas'ūdī Canon") of Bīrūnī which summarized both the mathematical and observational astronomy of the day and its history. Bīrūnī, who must be considered as one of the greatest Islamic scientists, also composed the first work on astronomy and astrology in the Persian language, entitled *Kitāb al-taḥfīm* ("The Book of Astrology"), a work whose significance for the development of Persian as a scientific language can hardly be overemphasized. Somewhat eclipsed during the Seljuq period, astronomy was revived during the Il-Khanid period by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī whose *al-Tadhkirah* ("Memorial of Astronomy"), the *Il-Khanid zij* ("The Il-Khanid Astronomical Tables") and the works of his contemporary Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī such as *Nihāyat al-idrāk* ("The Limits of Comprehension") mark in many ways the peak of Islamic astronomy. These works included the criticism of Ptolemaic planetary theory and new models for planetary motion. Later Persian works in astronomy up to the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century, such as those of 'Alī ibn Muḥammad Qushchī (d. 879/1474) and the *Zij* of Ulugh Beg (d. 853/1449) follow the school of Naṣīr al-Dīn founded in Marāghah. Astronomy in Iran during the Islamic period was also marked by great interest in new observations which characterized Islamic astronomy in general. This led on the one hand to the development of new instruments such as the astrolabe, quadrants, sextants, etc., and on the other to the foundation of the observatory as a scientific institution. Astronomical instruments developed over the centuries from both a practical and artistic point of view especially the astrolabe some of whose finest examples made in Timurid and Safavid Iran are among great artistic masterpieces. As for the observatory, the one established in Marāghah by Ṭūsī during the rule of Helegū was the first full-fledged observatory in history, one in which a group of scientists collaborated together in both observation of the

heavens and mathematical analysis of planetary motion. It served as the model for the observatories of Samarcand and Istanbul and ultimately the observatories of Renaissance Europe such as that of Tycho Brahe. As for mathematics properly speaking, almost all branches of it witnessed remarkable developments during the period under consideration. As in astronomy so in mathematics, the Greek, Indian and Iranian traditions were brought together and synthesized into a unity from which Islamic mathematics, properly speaking, grew. The so-called Arabic numerals themselves were adopted from Indian sources in Iran and appeared for the first time in Khwārazmī's *al-Jam' wa 'l-tafrīq bi ḥisāb al-hind* ("Addition and Subtraction in Indian Arithmetic"). It is this book which brought Arabic numerals to the West. That is why the name of the Persian author of the work has survived in European language to this day as words having to do with arithmetic or number theory, such terms as *algorismo* in Spanish and algorithm in English. During later centuries Persian mathematicians continued to show much interest in numerical theory and numerical series as we see in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, Abū Bakr Karajī (d. circa 411/1020), Bīrūnī and especially Ghiyāth al-Dīn Jamshīd Kāshānī (d. circa 839/1436) with whom computation techniques reached their peak in Islam. He invented decimal fractions and is also credited with the invention of a computing machine. Later works in mathematics such as Shaykh Bahā' al-Dīn 'Āmilī's *Miftāḥ al-ḥisāb* ("Key to Arithmetic") are more or less summaries of Kāshānī's works. In geometry, Muslims followed Greek mathematics which they developed extensively. In the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century the Banū Mūsā in Baghdad wrote on areas of geometric figures and a recession of the *Conic* of Apollonios. In the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century Nayrizī and Abū 'Abdallāh Mahānī (d. circa 268/880) wrote notable commentaries upon Ptolemy while Abū Sahl Kūhī (d. circa 377/988) turned to problems which

had been posed by Archimedes and Apollonios. In the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century the famous Persian poet Khayyām added a new chapter to the history of geometry when the re-examined the fifth postulate of Euclid concerning the parallel line theorem, a line of investigation that was followed later by Tūsī. But neither scientist pursued his research to its ultimate conclusion which would have led him to non-Euclidian geometry. Persian mathematics also had a major role to play in the development of plane and spherical trigonometry. The science of trigonometry as known today was established by Islamic mathematicians. One of the most important among them was the Persian Abū 'l-Wafā' Buzjāni (d. 388/998) who wrote a work called *Almagest* dealing mostly with trigonometry. He was also the first person to give a demonstration of the sine theorem for a spherical triangle. In his *Maqālid 'ilm al-hay'ah* ("Keys to the Science of Astronomy") Bīrūnī treated all the trigonometric functions for the first time as a separate field of mathematics. In the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century Tūsī's *Kiṭāb shikl al-qita'* ("Book of the Figure of the Sector") established trigonometry once and for all as a major distinct branch of the mathematical sciences. As for algebra, it is a science that has its origin in Islamic mathematics and even its name is derived from the title of the famous book of Khwārazmī known usually as *Kiṭāb al-jabr wa 'l-muqābalaḥ* ("The Book of Compulsion and Equation"). On the basis of this seminal work later mathematicians such as Khujandī and Karajī developed algebra extensively and prepared the ground for the works of Khayyām and Sharaf al-Dīn Tūsī (d. second half of the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century) in algebraic geometry and algebra itself. The *Algebra* of Khayyām is the most complete work of its kind in Arabic, a work whose translation brought this important branch of mathematics to the West. As far as physics and optics are concerned, one can only mention in the short space allotted here the study of weights and measures following the

works of Archimedes by Bīrūnī and 'Abd al-Rahmān Khazini (d. circa 492/1100) and commentaries upon Ibn al-Haytham's masterpiece in optics, the *Kiṭāb al-manāẓir* ("Optics") by Kamāl al-Dīn Fārsī (d. circa 720/1320) in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century as well as intense interest by his teacher Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī in optics and the study of light in general. Moreover, from Ibn Sīnā onward Persian natural philosophers were to provide an important criticism of the Aristotelian theory of motion and proposed certain concepts which played a major role in the later development of mechanics and dynamics in the West.

## MEDICINE

As already mentioned, around 600 A.D. Jundishapur was the most important centre of medical studies in Western Asia and the Mediterranean world, one in which the Greek, Indian and Persian traditions met and this centre was the immediate source of the great medical centre in Baghdad in the early Abbasid period and the background for the tradition of Islamic medicine. By the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century this earlier tradition had become completely transformed into Islamic medicine and the first major works in the field began to appear in Arabic starting with 'Alī ibn Rabḥān Tabarī's (d. 450/1058) *Firdaws al-ḥikmah* ("Paradise of Wisdom"), the first systematic work of Islamic medicine characterized by its synthesis of Greek and Indian medicine. It is interesting to note that not only Tabarī, but also the other three major figures who wrote systematic works of medicine in the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> centuries, namely Rāzī, Majūsī and Ibn Sīnā were Persians. Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā' Rāzī, the Latin Rhazes, was the greatest clinical physician of Islam and the author of the well-known medical encyclopaedia, *al-ḥāwī* ("Continens") along with another major opus, the *Kiṭāb al-malūk* ("Royal Book") and was the director of the famous 'Adud al-

Dawlah hospital in Baghdad. These works in turn found their culmination in Ibn Sīnā's *al-Qānūn* ("The Canon") which is without doubt the most famous single work in the history of medicine in both East and West. Known as Avicenna in the Latin world where he was entitled the "Prince of Physicians", Ibn Sīnā created a synthesis which dominated over Western medicine well into the Renaissance and continues to be followed in the Indian Subcontinent where it is referred to as *yūnānī* medicine. The early masters synthesized not only Greek, Indian and pre-Islamic Persian medicine, but also the Hippocratic and Galenic traditions within Greek medicine itself. They made many clinical observations, diagnosed for the first time several important diseases such as small pox and expanded the pharmacopoeia to include not only what was known to Dioscorides, but also the vast pharmacological knowledge of the ancient Persians and Indians. They studied the link between diet and health and the relation between psychological and physical health. They also paid much attention to public hygiene and the building of hospitals and dispensaries and extended the art of surgery which reached its peak in Islamic medicine in Spain. After Ibn Sīnā the trunk of the tree of Islamic medicine branched out in several directions including Andalusia and the Maghrib, the Arab East, and later Turkey and the Indian Subcontinent. While the influence of Persian physicians is to be seen in all these branches, it is especially later Islamic medicine in India that was inalienably linked to the development of medicine in Iran itself and in fact many of its most famous practitioners until two centuries ago were of Persian origin. In Iran nearly all later medical works were influenced deeply by Ibn Sīnā. In the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century the theologian Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī devoted a section in his scientific encyclopaedia the *Kiṭāb al-sittīn* ("Book of Sixty Sciences") to medicine following Ibn Sīnā closely. Also during this century the first major medical work in Persian

entitled *Dhakhira-yi khwārazmshāhī* ("Treasury dedicated to the King of Khwarazm") by Zayn al-Dīn Ismā'īl Jujānī (d. 531/1135-36) was modelled upon the *Canon*. This work is also perhaps after the *Canon* the most influential book in the later history of medicine in Iran and India. It also marks the beginning of a long series of works written on medicine in Persian in both Iran and India up to modern times. In fact most of the works on Islamic medicine and pharmacology in the Indian Subcontinent are in the Persian language. Medicine continued to flourish in Iran even after the Mongol invasion. During the Il-Khanid period, Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī wrote his *al-Tuḥfat al-sa'diyyah* ("The Gift Presented to Sa'd") which is considered as perhaps the most profound commentary upon the *Canon* ever written. The Il-Khanid vizier, Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍlallāh (d. 718/1318) created a whole university city in Tabriz, the *Rab'-i rashīdī* in which the teaching and study of medicine was especially emphasized. Not only did he write a medical encyclopaedia himself, but he commissioned a work on Chinese medicine in Persian, a treatise which still survives. Likewise, in the Timurid period, that is, in the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> centuries, medical activity continued in many Persian cities while some Persian physicians such as Ghīyāth al-Dīn Iṣfahānī wrote treatises for Ottoman sultans and even taught medicine in the Ottoman world. During the Safavid period much of the activity of the Timurid period continued. In fact the life of the most famous of all Safavid physicians, Bahā' al-Dawlah, who was the first person to describe clearly hay fever and whooping cough, spanned the later Timurid and early Safavid periods. His *Khulāṣat al-tajārīb* ("Quintessence of Experience"), based upon the model of Rāzī's *al-Hawī*, is perhaps the most important medical work of the Safavid era. During this time there was also much interest in surgery as seen in the *Dhakhira-yi kamīlah* ("The Perfect Treasury") of Ḥakīm Muḥammad (d. in the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century) devoted solely to surgery. The classical

medical tradition continued to flourish to the end of the Safavid period and in fact into the Afshar, Zand and Qajar eras when in Iran as in most of the other Islamic lands Western medicine began to replace the long Islamic medical tradition if not completely at least to a large extent, the only notable exception being the Indian Subcontinent.

#### THE APPLIED SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY

Many other sciences were developed in Iran during the period under discussion such as various branches of natural history and geography which we will not treat here in this short survey. But a word must be said about some of the applied sciences and technology. Islamic science paid much attention to alchemy, which is both an art and a science of the soul and the cosmos and not simply a prelude to chemistry. But those who sought to master the alchemical art did also both develop instruments that are the ancestors of instruments of present day chemistry laboratories and dealt with the science of materials. Among the Islamic alchemists the most famous is Jabir ibn Hayyān (2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century) who is said to have hailed from Khurasan. He was followed by Muḥammad ibn Zakariyya' Rāzi who was the first person to transform alchemy into chemistry and who is credited with the discovery of many substances including alcohol as a substance to be used for medical purposes. The acid-base theory of chemistry has its origin in the sulphur-mercury theory of these and other alchemists. Persians also developed the technology of building at this time. Although practically no written sources have survived concerning this field, the results over the centuries in the form of various architectural edifices, are stunning. This is also true of many other technologies such as the making of dyes that have produced the brilliant colours of carpets, textiles and tiles that have survived over the centuries to our own day. Likewise, Persians continued and expanded upon Sassanid

techniques of metallurgy and irrigation including the *ganāt* system, canals, dams etc. many of which survive to this day. From metallurgy to glass making, from brick laying to the dyeing of wool, numerous technologies were developed during the millennium in question in this essay, technologies which not only facilitated life for the people of the Iranian plateau but also made possible the numerous works of Persian art, some of which are among the greatest masterpieces of world art. Moreover, it was from Persia that many technologies of Chinese origin reached the Arab world and the West, chief among them the production of paper.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Persian culture, while being open to many influences from both East and West, itself developed in nearly every aspect during the Islamic period. The Islamic culture of Persia made possible the flowering of philosophy, the sciences, literature and the arts in such a manner as to mark permanently those regions of Islamic civilization called Persia and by diverse historians as well as Islamic civilization as a whole. Its influence also journeyed even beyond the confines of Islamic civilization, of which it was one of the main architects, to India, China and Southeast Asia in the East and both Byzantium and Latin Europe in the West. Classical Persian culture also remains the heart and soul of contemporary Iranian culture and is still very much alive. Far from being of simple historical interest, it remains to this day what binds the people of Iran together, links them to their ancient past as well as to the rest of the Islamic world and even beyond the Islamic world to humanity at large thanks to the universal values espoused by its most perceptive and profound representatives.