

# Mysticism and Traditional Philosophy in Persia, Pre-Islamic and Islamic

by

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Autumn, 1971). © World Wisdom, Inc.  
[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

TO speak of philosophy (in its traditional sense) and mysticism and gnosis in their original sense which in Arabic and Persian is (*taṣawwuf* and *ʿirfan*) during the long span of Persian history, is to speak of tradition, of continuity, of transcendent principles and of forms of wisdom of celestial origin. It is also to speak of two distinct spiritual worlds, the Mazdean and the Islamic, governed by different spiritual principles yet related in many ways because they issue from the same Divine origin and also because of certain profound morphological resemblances between them. The question of the relation between the sapiential doctrines and methods of spiritual realization during these two phases of Persian history cannot be solved solely in the light of an historicism blind to the genius of both Mazdaism and Islam and of necessity impervious to the transcendent dimensions wherein resides the most profound relationship between them. To deny the transcendent and archetypal world as the origin of certain doctrines, forms, images and symbols which are manifested in both these worlds, is to overlook the main causal nexus between them. It is to search in the shadows, in the historical and purely horizontal relationships in time, for a reality which resides in the luminous world of the spirit above time, although it has manifested itself in different times and places.

The study of the religion, philosophy and mysticism of the different epochs of Persian history is synonymous with the study of the traditions<sup>[2]</sup> mainly Zoroastrian and Islamic, which have dominated various phases of that history. Although these traditions are of different nature and structure, they are related most of all by the fact that they are authentic traditions and not something else, that is, they are messages from the world of the spirit differing in their outward form but united in their inner essence.<sup>[3]</sup> The emphasis upon the inner unity of traditions has in fact been one of the characteristics of the world view of the religious elite throughout Persian history and as every student of comparative religion knows some of the most sublime and beautiful expressions of the "transcendent unity of religions" are to be found in Persian Sufi poetry from 'Aṭṭâr and Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Dîn Rumî to Hâtif Işpahânî.

The result of this traditional character of the different epochs of Persian history, which distinguishes all of it from the anti-traditional character of modern civilization, is an emphasis upon the spiritual world, the orientation of human life towards the life beyond, a sensitivity to earthly beauty as an image of the beauty of paradise, and so many other spiritual attitudes which run throughout the periods of Persian history. Besides elements of historical borrowing and the ethnic continuity which certainly exists along with all that such a continuity implies, the main stream of continuity that is observed in Persian history in the domain of religion, mysticism and philosophy is due more to the similarity between the "vertical" causes of the traditions in question than just to the continuation of a series of "horizontal" and historical factors. It is as if a series of flashes of lightening were to illuminate the earth continuously in such a way that were one to neglect the source of the light, one would simply observe a continuous lighting of the earth one moment after another.

\* \* \*

With this image in mind and also considering certain elements of purely historical borrowing and continuity that have certainly existed on the side, we now turn to a few basic doctrines and themes which have appeared in one form or another in the religion, mysticism and philosophy of Persia throughout its history and which characterize the intellectual and spiritual life of the Persians in their totality.

Let us begin with the concept of the Divinity itself. In both Zoroastrianism and Islam, despite the difference in accent in the two cases and the dualism of the one that can be contrasted with the unitary emphasis of the other, there is a definite similarity in the concept of the Divinity as a transcendent principle that stands above creation and is distinct from it. The subservience of the material order to a spiritual principle and the created nature (in the theological sense) of this order which sets limits to it in both time and space is shared in Mazdaism and Islam, in contrast, let us say, to the Greek cosmologies where an indefinite repetition of cycles beyond a limited boundary is

emphasized, at least in the general philosophical interpretations of these cosmologies as they have reached us. For the Persians, throughout their history, the material universe has been conceived as bound in both time and space, as having an alpha and an omega, both of which are themselves above the created order and belong to the realm of divinity.

Closely connected to the theological conception of creation is the belief in its goodness which has been emphasized by Zoroastrianism and Islam, although not of course by Manichaeism. In Zoroastrian cosmogony the material order was created by Ahura-Mazda but Ahriman did not create a corresponding material world of his own in the way that he created the order of demons. Likewise in Islam creation is considered as a domain of reality which plays a definitely positive role in human life, for, in referring to the world, the Qur'an says, "Verily we did not create this vain" (*mâ khâlaqnâ hâdhâ bâtilan*). The Persian joy for life and appreciation of the beauties of the created order in both the sensuous and the spiritual sense is closely related to the emphasis placed upon the positive role of the created or natural order in man's religious life by the two major religious traditions that have dominated Persian history, namely the Mazdean and the Islamic.

Life on this earth has also been considered to possess an ultimate meaning beyond this world in all of the religions that have dominated Persia. Of course one might say that all religions in general emphasize the importance of human actions in view of man's final end. But the Iranian religions have a conception of human action, morality, final judgement and eschatology as related to man's life on earth that is more akin to the teachings of the Semitic religions than to what is found in the religions of India and the Far East. Not only the concept of the created order but also that of man's life in this world and its relation to the worlds above presents a constancy and permanence throughout Persian history made possible by the repetition of certain teachings of the different religions that have ruled over this land. In Islam, no less than in Zoroastrianism, the effect of both good and evil upon the soul of man and their role in moulding the soul in such a way as to influence its posthumous life is very much emphasized, and constitutes one of its central teachings.

Naturally, this conception of human life in which actions have an ultimate value in the eyes of God is closely related to the belief in the Day of Judgement emphasized so majestically in the Quran and mentioned also in Zoroastrian sources. Even details of the "landscape" of the other world presents certain similarities in the two religions, especially in the image of the bridge over hell, without there being the least question of historical borrowing. Likewise, the belief in a saviour before the Final Judgement is common to Islam and Zoroastrianism as it is of course to other religions as well.<sup>[4]</sup> Especially in Shi'ite Islam belief in the coming of the Mahdi, who is the Twelfth Imam, and the effect of this belief upon daily religious life can be closely compared with the Zoroastrian belief in Saoshyant and the idea of "expectation" which is contained in certain Zoroastrian teachings. Other elements of eschatology and concepts of hell and paradise (which in both European languages and in Arabic in the form "*firdaws*" is derived from Avestan) present striking similarities and reveal the common origin of all these teachings in the single luminous source of all revelation.

As far as the *imago mundi* is concerned, again there are profound morphological resemblances and sometimes historical borrowings as in the case of the seven *keshvars* of the ancient Persians which found their way into the *Shâhnâmah*, the writings of Bîrûnî, Yâqût and other Muslim sources.<sup>[5]</sup> In cosmology also there are similarities that derive most of all from the traditional view of the cosmos based upon the notion of hierarchy and grades of being. Throughout his history, the Persian has always seen himself in a universe composed of multiple states in which he stands at the bottom of a scale leading in an ascending and sacred order (therefore a true hierarchy) to the Divinity. This hierarchic conception of reality with all its artistic as well as social and practical implications is one of the most profound features of the very structure of the soul of the Persian as it has been moulded over the ages by the religious and cultural forces at play in his life.

This hierarchic order is of course inseparable from the angelic order that stands between man and God. Of the older religions, none has emphasized the angelic world and its purely spiritual character as much as Zoroastrianism, which could in fact be called in a sense a "religion of angels" rather than directly of God. Islam also places a great deal of emphasis upon angels and belief in the angels is a part of the definition of *imân* or faith. As a result of this correlation in emphasis upon the angelic world, the Persian has lived throughout his history in a world always dominated, ordered and controlled by spiritual or angelic substances belonging to the higher levels of being. He has always been aware that this world and man's life in it are the shadow of the angelic world, that they are transient and ephemeral yet reflect the abiding beauty of paradise. In art as well as in philosophy and theosophy—where in the *ishrâqî* school Suhrawardî even incorporated Mazdean angelology into his Islamic scheme<sup>[6]</sup> the dominion and power of the angelic world is so great that it can hardly fail to be noticed by any perceptive student of things Persian.

\* \* \*

Despite the presence of these and many other themes, doctrines and symbols that are common between the Mazdean and Islamic traditions, there is a contrast observable in the relation between religion, philosophy and mysticism during the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods of Persian history. During the pre-Islamic period, philosophy, in its traditional sense, was contained completely within the bosom of religion. If we search for the sources of

the *sophia* or *khîrad* of the ancient Persians which in fact the Greek philosophers and sages sought, we would be mistaken to expect to find works like the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle or even the *Dialogues* of Plato, that is, works similar to those belonging to a period of Greek history when religion, philosophy and science had become separated from each other. In ancient Persia, as in all other Oriental civilizations, the separation between religion and philosophy that one observes in ancient Greece and Rome and again in post-medieval Europe never took place except in rare cases which remain of secondary importance. If we search for the "philosophy" of the ancient Persians or for what Suhrawardî called the *khusrâwânî* theosophy (*hikmat-i khusrâwânî*) we must delve into such religious works as the *Bundâhishn* and the *Shkand gumânîk vichâr* and be aware of the oral teachings which must certainly have existed along with the written texts. We should not search for works similar to the books of the Greek philosophers and then, when we are not able to find them, consider such works as having existed but having later been destroyed.

During the Islamic period the situation is certainly different. Islamic philosophy, although definitely of an Islamic character despite its having taken over elements of older traditions,<sup>[2]</sup> developed as an independent discipline and school within Islamic civilisation and was not contained, especially during the early centuries, within any of the theological or mystical schools. It is only later, after the attacks of Ghazzâlî against the Peripatetic school and the rise of the school of Illumination or *ishrâq*, that philosophy or theosophy becomes wed to the theological and mystical schools to a certain extent. But even in the case of Mullâ Sadrâ, the great Safavid sage of Shiraz who achieved the final synthesis of philosophy, mysticism, theology and religious law, a clear distinction remains between the different schools within Islam. The school of *Hikmat* has remained throughout the Islamic period a distinct discipline within the Islamic intellectual universe. The relation of philosophy to religion during the Islamic period, therefore, presents a contrast with what one finds in the pre-Islamic period despite certain profound morphological resemblances alluded to above.

The case of mysticism is the opposite of that of philosophy. During the pre-Islamic period, the distinctly mystical schools and disciplines such as the religion of the Magi or the "mysteries" of Mithra were distinct from Zoroastrianism although of course even within Zoroastrianism there must have existed an esoteric teaching. In the Islamic period, however, mysticism is nearly identical with the inner dimension of Islam known as Sufism,<sup>[3]</sup> and also exists within Shi'ism. There has never been during the Islamic period a genuine mystical school in Persia outside of the matrix of Islam and mysticism in all its forms has been connected in one way or another with the inner and esoteric dimension of Islam. There is, therefore, again a reversal of relationship between mysticism and religion during the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods in comparison with the situation of philosophy. Yet, many of the profoundest themes concerning man's quest after the Divine are repeated throughout the history of this land with almost the same language in such a manner as to remind man of the eternal nature of both the mystical quest and its goal.

Because it was destined to be the last religion and the seal of the prophetic cycle, Islam possesses a unique power of assimilation and synthesis. This characteristic enabled Islam to remain fully itself and yet allow the Persians not only to participate in its life and to contribute fully to its elaboration but also to enable them to contemplate in its vast firmament the shining stars of the most profound elements of their ancient religious and spiritual past, a past which far from dying out gained a new interpretation and became in a sense partly resurrected in the new spiritual universe brought into being by the Islamic revelation.

---

## NOTES

[1] The substance of this article was presented at a conference in the International Congress of Iranology held in Shiraz, 13th-15th October 1971, in conjunction with the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. The theme of the Congress was the continuity of Persian Culture.

[2] By tradition we do not mean custom or habit but principles of celestial origin and their applications in time and space along with the sacred forms, rites and doctrines which make the realization of these principles possible. Tradition, therefore, corresponds to religion understood in its most universal sense. See the numerous writings of A. K. Coomaraswamy, R. Guènon, F. Schuon and T. Burckhardt.

[3] See F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1948; and S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London 1972.

[4] See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. I, Paris, 1971.

[5] See H. Corbin, *La Terre céleste et corps de résurrection*, Paris 1961, pp. 40ff; and S. H. Nasr, "La Cosmographie en Iran pré-islamique et islamique" *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, Leiden, 1965, pp. 507-524.

[6] See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. II, Paris, 1971; and S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapter II.

[7] We have discussed this matter extensively in many of our writings; see *Three Muslim Sages*, introduction and chapter I; also S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1964, Introduction.

[8] See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963, chapter IV; S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London 1966, chapter V, and S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*.