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Three Christological Themes in Persian Literature

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Abstract

One prominent aspect in Persian literature that distinguishes it from the literatures of other nations is the inclusive religious tone of this literature, especially from the tenth century (C.E.) onward. Divine messages heard from the tongues of the prophets of the Abrahamic religions are featured in Persian poetry. The poets and writers of Persian literature have given a prominent place to a number of themes from the life and message of Jesus Christ ('a). In this paper after giving some information about how Persian language started to bloom, and become a language of science and literature, the status of Jesus in Persian literature, which has its base in the Qur'an and in Islamic narrations, is discussed. Later on, a brief sketch of the development of Sufi literature is reviewed in order to indicate the manner in which references to Jesus ('a) function with particular attention to the works of 'Attar, Rumi, Sa'di and Hafiz. This paper focuses on three major themes related to Jesus ('a) that are of major significance in Persian literature: his breath, his donkey, and Dajjāl (the Antichrist). We show how these themes are employed to develop an Islamic Christology in keeping with the spirituality and the moral and mystical teachings of the mystical traditions in Islam.

Keywords: Persian literature, Jesus, Christology, Sufi literature, the breath of Jesus, Firdausi, Khaqani, Sa'di, 'Attar, Rumi, Hafiz, Dajjal

لا نفرق بين احد من رسله (بقره:285)

“We make no distinction between any of His apostles.” (2:285)¹

Introduction

Like Christians, Muslims honor and revere Jesus (*'a*) as a special envoy from Allah. Jesus is also called a spirit (*rūḥ*) from Allah and his word (*kalimatuhu*) in the Qur'an.¹ Of course, the two world religions differ in their treatments of Christ. Christians consider Jesus Christ to be the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Divine Trinity, the *Logos*; while Muslims consider Jesus the Son of Mary (*'a*) to be one of the five greatest prophets (possessors of steadfastness, *ūl al-'azm*).² The development of theological reflections on the nature and message of Christ is known as *Christology*. In this sense, we may speak of Christian and Islamic Christologies to be found in the texts of Christian and Muslim theologians and exegetes; but since the Qur'an itself addresses issues pertaining to Christology, we may also speak of Qur'anic Christology (Neuwirth, 2014: 364-366) and, by extension, of the Christologies to be found in various collections of hadiths. The themes of this *Christological* literature are not confined to the discussions of the theologians, the interpreters of the Bible and the Qur'an, and those who comment on hadiths. Since the topics of the Qur'an permeate Islamic civilizations, it is only natural that we should find Islamic Christological themes present in the prose and poetry of the cultures in which Islam has taken root. In what follows, I will examine three Christological themes as they occur in the rich treasury of the poetry of the Persian language: the breath of Jesus (*'a*), his donkey, and the Antichrist, known to Muslims as *Dajjāl*.

Just as the Qur'an confirms the essence of what has been revealed in the previous divine religions while correcting deviations and completing the divine message, the Christology of the Qur'an simultaneously confirms various elements of some Christian Christologies while rejecting other

¹ See the Qur'an (4:171).

² See the Qur'an (42:13); (33:7); (46:35). The *ūl al-'azm* are: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, peace and blessings to him and to his household and to all of them.

elements and presenting new ideas and concepts. This phenomenon of confirmation, adjustment and completion is also reflected in Christological themes as they appear in Persian literature.

The magnificent treasure in Persian literature that poets and writers have created by blending their talents with the historical, cultural, theological, philosophical and artistic capacities of their eras and their peoples reflects the rituals, traditions, and myths of the pre- and post-Islamic eras of Iranian history. Although the topics featured in this literature are based on cultural, theological, political and even the scientific affairs of the period, allusions to the stories of the prophets and to other religious characters and heroes, who have always been considered sacred, have a special status in Persian literature.

An important question may be raised here: When did the Persian poets and writers start to bring these stories into their works? According to Purnamdariyan, when Persian literature started to bloom in the 9th century AD, Iranians had already gone through more than three centuries during which course they had become familiar with Islam and the Qur'an. In this period, scholars transmitted the stories of the prophets to the ordinary people and nurtured the developing Islamic culture (Purnamdariyan, 1364/1985: 7).

If we divide Persian poetry into two broad sections—(1) court poetry and (2) religious and mystic poetry as does Purnamdariyan, we see that in the court poetry, which belongs to the late 10th century through the 12th century, when poets refer to the stories of the prophets alongside Iranian myths, they could be confident that their addressees would understand them. The allusions in the court poetry are limited to the outstanding features and miracles of the prophets. The other function of allusions to the prophets is to offer exaggerated praise given by the poets' to their patrons and the kings of their time (Ibid.). The reflection and the use of the prophets' stories in the poetry of the 12th century is prominent in the work of the poet Khaqani, which treats this material with exceptional variety and creativity, as we will see when we turn to his *Ode on Christianity*.

In mystical and religious poetry there are frequent references to the stories of the prophets. Before Rumi, Nasir Khosrow is the representative of religious poetry and Sana'i and 'Attar are representatives of the mystic tradition of Persian poetry (Ibid. 27).

It is notable that in both kinds of poetry the depictions of some of the characters in these stories gradually changes from reports of religious history to myth.

Persian literature is mostly based on the teachings of the Qur'an and hadiths. Persian literature has received not only its spirituality from the Qur'an, but also its literary style, concepts, and much of its vocabulary, so that the Qur'an permeates Persian language and literature, serving as a vehicle to convey the doctrines of Islam to humanity for centuries.

Persian Sufi literature has been described as "a literature which reflects of the deepest longings and yearnings of the human soul for God and communicates the ecstasy of union with the Beloved and nostalgia of separation from that Reality which is the source of all that is beautiful and all that can be loved," (Nasr,1992: 3). In Sufi literature we hear messages from the tongues of Abraham ('a), Moses ('a), Jesus ('a), and Muhammad (s) that are addressed not only to the people contemporary with them, but also to us and to all the peoples of the future. They ask us to preserve the purity of our human nature, and to develop the divinely given talents we have for excellence.

Two important points should be noted here: first is that the Qur'an emphasizes to faithful people that they should have faith in Allah, His angles, His scriptures and His Apostles. Muslims are asked to believe in all the prophets and their Books: "O you who have faith! Have faith in Allah and His Apostle and the Book that He sent down to His Apostle and the Book He had sent earlier." (4: 136). "We make no distinction between any of His apostles," (2: 285). The unity of the prophets, the unity of their aims, messages and functions, are all matters that should be taken seriously by Muslims. The prophets all want to lead people to light and take them out from darkness: "O people of the Book! Certainly Our Apostle has come to

you... and brings them out from darkness into light by His Will, and guides them to a straight path.” (5: 15-16).

The second point is that the Qur’an delivers very important lessons through stories, among which are the stories of the prophets.

These two facts about the Qur’an were chosen by Persian poets and writers to transmit a sense and knowledge of the divine to ordinary people, for it is ordinary people who are most often addressed by God.

Four significant elements of any literary work are: (1) the intended audience; (2) the social and political background of the work; (3) the literary traditions into which the work falls; and (4) the writer’s personality (Purnamdariyan, 1380/2001: 32). In Persian literature, the poets and writers were expected to understand and recognize their addressees’ states and conditions. For example, the *Qabus Nama* is one of the major works of Persian literature whose author was a prince named ‘Unsur al-Ma’ali Kaykavus ibn Iskandar ibn Qabus (11th century); and in a section of this work entitled “The Poetic Custom” the author writes: “If you are a poet try to speak easy but difficult. Avoid abstruse speech and saying what you yourself know but which needs explanations for others, because the poem is said for people not for yourself.” (‘Unsur al-Ma’ali, 1382/2003: 189). Despite this advice, there are a number of Persian poets and writers whose works are very difficult to understand, and this obscurity even became fashionable in some periods. However, for a poet like Rumi, who was also a respected Islamic jurist (*faqih*), there is much poetry aimed at communicating the divine message to ordinary people. While this work is easily understood, his poetry becomes more difficult when he forgets his audience and becomes drunk with divine love. Here we find the invitation to understand secrets by the transformation of one’s entire being, for it is only by purification of the soul that such meanings are to be grasped. His *Mathnavi* contains more easily understood lessons given through stories; while his *Kulliyat-e Shams* is a collection of mystical and often difficult poems the major theme of which is divine love.

There are many branches and genres in Persian literature, such as epics, folk literature, fiction, and descriptive literature; but Persian didactic

literature contains more works than any other genre. Didactic literature is an addressee oriented genre. The poet or writer tries to influence the addressee's mind and feelings. As Purnamdariyan remarks, didactic poetry is a kind of poetry that delivers the ethical, religious and mystic thought of a poet to the ordinary people, which is significant because the poetic rule of language in didactic poetry attracts the reader and encourages him or her to accept the message (1380/2001: 256-257). We specifically see the reflection of the ethical characteristics of Persian literature in the masterpieces of the Sufi poets and writers such as Sana'i, 'Attar, Rumi and Sa'di. Sa'di goes beyond the audience of ordinary people, at times even offering advice to the kings. The result is that the people to whom the poem's message is addressed, a message which in turn is based on the Qur'an, are asked to create an ideal society and to respect the people of all religions as members of God's family. As mentioned above, the Qur'anic lesson that requires belief in all the prophets is reflected in Persian literature. In the preface of the Persian translation of her *Jesus und Maria in der Islamischen Mystik* [*Jesus and Mary in Islamic Mysticism*], Annemarie Schimmel significantly notes that she wrote this book to show her fellow countrymen what a strong bridge there is between Islam and Christianity, because she hoped the respect that Muslims have for Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, and the love that they have for the Virgin Mary can connect Muslims and Christians together (Schimmel, 1387/1998: 7). Unfortunately, the sayings of the Qur'an and Persian literature based on the Qur'an are problematically absent in the ears and eyes of the world. She mentions that it is a pity that so few people know that Jesus Christ ('a) is considered a harbinger of Muhammad (s) and has a very high status among the Muslims, while Westerners have made a negative image of Muhammad (s) (Ibid., 17-18). On the other hand, the teachings of the Qur'an are not simply an affirmation of what Christians believe about Jesus ('a); there is confirmation, adjustment, and completion.

Background

A considerable number of works have been written on the topic of the image of Christ and Christianity in Persian literature in German, English,

French and Persian, among which are the valuable contributions of Annemarie Schimmel:

1) *Jesus und Maria in der Islamischen Mystic* (1996), which is translated into Persian as *'Isa va Maryam dar 'Irfan- e Islami* (1998).

2) "Jesus and Mary as poetical images in Rumi's verse", in Y. Y. Haddad und Wadi Zaidan. Haddad, eds., *Christian Muslim Encounter*, University of Florida Press. (1995).

Important works in Persian about Jesus include Qamar Aryan's *Chehreh-ye Masih dar Adabiyat-e Farsi* [*The Image of Jesus in Persian Literature*]. In this book Aryan explores the image of Jesus not only in the Qur'an and hadith, but also reviews the circumstances under which Christianity thrived in the Parthian (247 BC-224 AD) and Sasanian (224 CE -651 CE) periods. She continues with the early Islamic era and the Qajar period (1785-1925), and sketches the notable features of allusions to Jesus in these periods. The final part of her book contains a vast number of symbols, allusions, allegories and stories in Persian literature related to Jesus ('a).

Further discussions of this topic can be found in the works of Wyham, Sharik, Nurbakhsh and Kazzazi.

Jesus ('a) in Islam

The status of Jesus in Persian literature has its base in the Qur'an and in Islamic narrations. Neither in the Hebrew nor in the Christian holy books are all the prophets, and particularly Jesus ('a), exalted in the manner of the Qur'an. Whoever compares the narration of Jesus' life as it is reported in Christian texts with the portraits drawn of him in the Qur'an cannot but be filled with admiration. Besides the speech of Jesus (3: 46), miraculously delivered the very day of his birth in defense of his mother (19:29-30), Jesus healed the leper and the blind during his prophetic mission (5:110). He even picked up some mud and molded a bird out of it, which, by the will of God, came to life and flew away when Jesus blew on it (3:49). By the will of God, Jesus could even bring the dead back to life (5:110). He knew what men used to amass and hide in their houses. At the request of Jesus, God

permitted food to descend for him from heaven (5:112-115). The Qur'an also depicts Mary as having been chosen by God: "O Mary, Allah has chosen you and purified you, and He has chosen you above the world's women" (3: 42). Some of these Islamic teachings about Jesus ('a) are shared with Christians. Christians and Muslims alike believe that Jesus performed miracles. However, some of the miracles attributed to Jesus ('a) in the Qur'an correspond to reports in ancient sources that Christians believe are apocryphal. The Qur'an also places emphasis on the point that Jesus ('a) did not perform his miracles by his own power, but always by the permission of Allah.

This affirmation of the miracles of Jesus ('a) is one of the reasons why, when the Islamic religion was announced, so many of Jesus' most sincere followers who believed in his second coming embraced Islam and placed their trust in Muhammad (s). By means of the Qur'an, they could come to know Jesus and Mary better. In fact, Muslims consider Jesus the son of Mary as exempt from sin, blessed by the Almighty, sincere, upright, kind, pious, virtuous, modest, and a worshiper of the True God.

Jesus ('a) in Persian Literature

Muslims believe in all of God's prophets without distinction. All of them were sent by the One True God only in order to guide mankind. One of the prophets who delivers this message in Persian literature is Jesus ('a). So, one of the important motifs in Persian literature is that of the narrations about the life, words and character of the Messiah ('a). Because of this, one can extract from Persian literature a detailed series of lessons on Christology about the birth, teachings, morals, and resurrection of Jesus ('a). Of course, it should be noted that after Islam, the religious views expressed in Persian literature are mainly based on the Qur'an and hadiths, and so the face of Jesus ('a) that is portrayed in Persian literature is one drawn from these sources.² Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that Iran has always been the residence of various ethnic and religious groups: Mongols, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Armenians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Throughout the ages of Iranian history, in spite of all the

challenges that the monarchy and the kings of Iran made for the different religious groups of Iran for their own political, social and ideological benefits, not to mention the inevitable conflicts between people even in the same religious group, these peoples lived together in peace. What is more, Iranian writers and poets who arose from the ordinary people have announced their solidarity with all people of the future. As a result, it is only natural for these groups to have had an influence on classical and even contemporary Persian literature.

Jesus Christ ('*a*) has a special place in Persian literature, a place that is especially prominent in Persian Sufi literature, where Jesus is the manifestation of spirituality and of human perfection. He is considered the soul of the world, a master or elder (*pīr*), and a spiritual guide. He has the ability, by God's permission, to give flight to birds made from clay, and more so, to the souls of the longing ones. One of the major features of Persian poetry about the miracles of Jesus ('*a*) is that they are treated allegorically, although their literal truth is never denied.

Few Sufi poets have been left intact by the various dimensions of Jesus's life, and few have failed to portray some aspects of it. Since Persian literature, especially Sufi literature, is based on the Qur'an, it similarly deals with diverse elements from the life of Christ ('*a*), with special emphasis of its own, including periods before and upon his birth, ascension, and resurrection. His supplications, miracles, sayings, and stories as related to him in the Qur'an are reflected in all the genres of Persian literature: in lyrics, epics, and narratives, and especially in didactic literature. Among the Persian literati we find that they display a distinct interest in Jesus ('*a*) as reflected in Islamic teachings, and also in Christianity and pertinent theological debates. Occasionally we find Muslim poets who lived in areas with a significant Christian population whose portrayals of the life of Jesus ('*a*) are influenced by their close relations with Christian communities. Shafi'i Kadkani points out that the reason why Christian rituals and customs are mentioned in the works of poets like Qatran from Tabriz (11th century) and Khaqani from Shirvan (12th century) might be due to the influence of

Christians in Azerbaijan who had closer relations with Rome than most other Eastern branches of Christianity (1383/2004: 544-545).

Most poets make use of themes current about Jesus ('*a*) or Christianity which had become standard in Persian poetry without appearing to be acquainted with their sources. Some poets made use of the themes and expressions related to Jesus ('*a*) and Christianity through symbols and metaphors in order to draw the attention of their readers to subtle points of ethics or mysticism as well as the the truth of being; while others made use of such words and subject matters so as to give expression to the feelings and conditions of the poet.

Although Persian literature sometimes takes an unfavorable view of Christians, it consistently treats Jesus ('*a*) himself with the highest respect. The generally positive attitude toward the Christians found in the Qur'an is also reflected in Persian literature; as well as the theological differences between Christianity and Islam. The unfavorable view of Christians occasionally found in Persian literature stems from three sources: first, rejection of Christian teachings on the Trinity and Incarnation found in the Qur'an; second, the pre-Islamic enmity between the Zoroastrian Sasanian empire and the Roman Empire;³ and third, the Crusades (Aryan, 1378/1999: 298). Christians were praised as followers of Jesus, but faulted for deifying him, for being followers of Rome, and because of their political enmity and hostilities against the Muslims.

In general, the Sufis showed more tolerance for Christians than other poets. Sana'i (d. 1156), 'Attar (d. 1220), and Rumi (d. 1273), who are the most outstanding of the Sufi poets, all take a positive attitude toward Christians (Ibid. 303-304). According to Schimmel, the three great poets from the eastern part of Iran (Khorasan) have recognized a special place for Jesus Christ ('*a*) (1998: 32). However, even those poets who are most friendly to Christianity do not endorse aspects of the faith that are contrary to Islamic teachings. Furthermore, one of the standard devices of the Sufi poets was to point out instances of hypocrisy among Muslims who confined their outlook to the exoteric dimension of religion by finding Islamic truths

at an esoteric level in other religions, especially Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

In contrast to the classical period, modern Persian poetry, as well as modern Arabic poetry sometimes presents a negative view of Christianity. As Schimmel remarks, following the colonial period, we sometimes find in the poetry of the Muslim world a new and hostile view in Arabic and Persian works, so that in Iqbal (1877-1938), we even find criticism of Jesus who is taken as a kind of representative of Western civilization (1998: 146-155).

...[F]or him [Iqbal] and for many modernists in a colonial age Christianity was associated with the colonial powers, and the poets in Turkey and India wondered why the behavior of modern Christians had so little similarity with the lofty ideas of the Gospels and why they betrayed Christ's noble spirit for economic and political purposes." (Schimmel, 2011).

In what follows, I will be considering the course of Persian literature after the rise of Islam, and discuss how Sufi literature took shape knowing that it is in the Sufi tradition that we find various subtle points about the life of Christ ('a) not found in other works of Persian literature. I shall focus on just three of the many themes associated with what might be called a Sufi Christology: the breath of Jesus ('a), his donkey, and the Antichrist.

Persian Language and Sufi Literature

Persian language emerged in the ninth century C.E. with the establishment of the Saffariyan government by Ya'qub Layth-e Saffari, who would not accept panegyrics written for him in Arabic, and made Dari Farsi the official language of the court. The poetry of this period is simpler than that which followed it with regard to vocabulary and meaning. There is little or no use of ambiguity, symbol or metaphor.

Persian became a language of science and literature from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Nasrullah Purjavadi points out that the composition of the *Shahnameh* of Firdausi was the greatest event in the Persian language of

this period, and that Firdausi was able to forge a connection between Islam and the Iranian people and their language. According to him, the *Shahnameh* should be considered the definitive link between the religiosity of Islam and the cultural spirituality of the Iranians. From this point onward, discussions about dogmas, philosophy, theology and mysticism are written in Persian. This linguistic development provided a framework within which it would be possible for a particular sort of experience to take place that would issue in a certain style of thought or wisdom (*hikmat*) based on Islam. This kind of thinking took shape among those whom we call the Sufis (Purjavadi, 1372/1993: 8, 11- 12).

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, when Persian poets and writers composed their works with inspiration from the divine revelation given to Muhammad (*s*) we find that the ability to convey meaning increases in the Persian language; and especially the mystics draw on the Qur'an and hadiths to express their inner and spiritual experiences to the extent that Persian becomes a sacred language. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

The reason why Persian Sufi literature is so rich is that its language was molded at a time when it was fluid and malleable. It did not have to start with extremely strict forms and laws of prosody which pre-Islamic Arabic poetry already possessed. This very malleability of the Persian poetic medium provided Sufism with the possibility to develop its forms with great variety and perfection, which still characterizes Persian Sufi poetry to this very day (Nasr, 1992: 8).

Persian literature treats various topics: history, philosophy, eschatology, astronomy, metaphysics, and especially ethics. Making use of these sciences, writers were able to express their own ideas. One of the ways in which writers, especially Sufis, expressed their ideas was in the form of stories related to the prophets. Some of these poets and writers made use of such stories in order to praise their beloved or to describe their own states and emotions. For example, the story of Adam (*'a*) in the poetry of Farrukhi (eleventh century) is used as a simile by which to compare the Fall of Adam with the exclusion of the poet from the court of the sultan (Purnamdariyan, 1364/1985: 80). Other writers, known as mystics or Sufis, made use of such

stories to describe the nature of being. For example, in contrast to Farrukhi, Rumi takes the same story of the Fall of Adam ('*a*) in order to draw a lesson about the way in which envy and lust draw one to what is worldly and darken the light of the divine trust given to humanity (Ibid., 41).

Both of these approaches to the prophets are found with regard to Jesus Christ ('*a*) to such an extent that an extensive course in Christology could be extracted from Persian literature. Among the classical poets, Rudaki (10th century), Nasir Khosrow (11th century), Nizami of Ganja (12th century), and especially Khaqani (12th century) are the most noteworthy; and among the Sufi poets we should mention Sana'i (12th century), 'Attar (12th-13th centuries), Rumi (13th century), Sa'di (13th century) and Hafiz (14th century). For the image they presented in their works of Jesus Christ ('*a*), all of these poets drew upon their knowledge of the Qur'an and hadiths, current beliefs about the *Injil* (Gospel), and discussions and debates with Christians. With regard to most of the Sufi poets, although there are many expressions in their poetry related to Christ ('*a*), their knowledge about Jesus ('*a*) does not appear to be based on any direct research into Christianity. There are some exceptions, in which references are made to Christian teachings, e.g., in the works of Rumi, that might reflect a direct acquaintance with the Bible. According to Schimmel the imagery of Jesus in the works of most poets is the same if conveyed in different words, although there are poets who have a better knowledge of Christian traditions, and are not as firmly bound to the dominant forms of expression. She mentions Rumi as one, because until the 13th century a large number of Christians lived in Konya (where Rumi lived, close to Cappadocia home to some Christian monks [Schimmel, 1998: 34]).

A notable point about Khaqani of Shirvan, whom we mentioned earlier, is that he was fully acquainted with the knowledge of his day about the sciences and the history of religions and sects. Three reasons may be given for the fact that Khaqani alludes to the beliefs and practices of Christians in his poetry more than other poets: (1) his mother was a Nestorian Christian from Georgia who converted to Islam after marriage; (2) he was born and grew up in Shirvan, where there was a significant Christian population; and

(3) he himself was interested in the topic and studied Christian theology. Khaqani has a famous ode (*qasida*) known as the “Ode of Christianity” (*Qasida Tarsa’iya*)⁴ which displays his knowledge of Christianity, and which requires a familiarity with Christianity on the part of the reader. He wrote the poem in prison while a Byzantine prince was visiting Shirvan, hoping that that the prince would request that the local Muslim king release him; for this reason, the poem is also known as the “Prison Ode” (*Qasida Habsiya*).

Reference to Jesus (*‘a*) in classical Sufi literature in Persian is usually not for the sake of appealing to Christians, but to make points about prophet hood, divine guidance and virtue in the context of Muslim religious culture. By looking at references to Jesus (*‘a*) in Persian poetry we become acquainted with the role given to him in the development of Muslim spirituality as it takes shape in Iran. In this development, the Christological themes are used to present ideas about the interior religious life that begin with a spiritual reflection on its outward appearances. Likewise, Sufi poetry reflects the outward teachings of Islam about Jesus (*‘a*) found in the Qur’an and hadiths as well as popular legends to expound the inner core of an Islamic mystical view in which Jesus (*‘a*) is a *perfected human being*, one who is absorbed in God and finds union with Him, and one who transcends the outward dimensions of denominations.

Going beyond the outward aspects of religion is itself an important topic of Sufi literature that is expressed in countless ways. Often times, the Sufi is described as flouting the outward precepts of Islam: staining the prayer rug with wine, following the Zoroastrian elder, wearing the Christian cincture, frequenting taverns, and much more. Many of these images have become clichés, and modern poets have sought new ways to direct attention past the outward elements of Islam by the apparent flouting of its orthodoxy. It is in the light of this tradition, and not in opposition to it, that the emergence of the cross as a symbol of modern Persian poetry should be understood, although we are yet have a sufficient body of literature in which the theme of the cross is developed to come to any definitive statements about general trends, except to say that Christological themes will

undoubtedly continue to play an important role in the future development of Persian literature.⁵

The Breath of Jesus ('a)

There are several topics associated with Christianity that are found repeatedly in Persian poetry. One of these topics is the miracle working of Jesus ('a), especially the raising to life of the dead, which is associated with various phrases in Persian that allude to the breath of Jesus. The breath of Jesus is also mentioned in the Qur'an, in which Jesus is reported to say: "*I will create for you out of clay the form of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will become a bird by Allah's leave. And I heal the blind and the leper and I revive the dead by Allah's leave.*" (3:49). In Sufi literature, this breath is used as a metaphor for gaining a new life, or spiritual rebirth. Because of this characteristic, Rumi uses Jesus ('a) as a symbol for the Sufi concept of the *perfect man*, the divine guide who leads one to God and who is, at the same time, the human goal of self-purification. The following is a representative poem from the *Divan-e Shams* in which Rumi describes the process by which Jesus ('a) raises the dead.

Once again, that physician went to the house of his patient;
He placed his caring hand on the head of the forsaken one.

Once again, the friend went to the stranger
Until his liver was relieved by his abundant potions.

His potion, when taken, annihilated him from existence;

The cup-bearer of unity remained at the observed and observer of himself.

His drink has no sting, but if it had I would be content;

The honey drinker cannot do without his bees.

I will tell you why this night of separation is so long:

"The sun is a trial when it hides its face."

Whenever those who take your heart away disregard their face, it is mercy,

For otherwise they would veil their remarkable face.

You are the lover of your own beauty, but you are hidden from yourself;

Put the wedding dress on the body of your nakedness.

Give thanks that the sun of love has gone to the constellation of Aries;

My heart is sore with pretense and hiding the obvious;
 It would be better for me to put a flag atop the tavern.
 Come! Those who know the value of the moment would sell both this life
 and the next
 For one goblet of pure wine and discourse with an idol.
 The manner of love is not constancy of love and blessing;
 If you would be my companion, taste the sting of sorrow.
 I am not complaining, but the rain-cloud of mercy from the Friend
 Has not shed a drop on the thirsty land of my heart.
 Why will they not spend a stick of sugarcane for someone?
 Who has poured so much sweetness from the stick of his reed pen?
 O King! Hafez cannot fathom your worth and value
 Except when praying in the night and pleading at the moment of dawn.
 (Hafiz, 1380/2001, 641-642)

In this poem, Hafiz expresses a state of waiting for the process of curing described by Rumi. The ordinary physician cannot heal him, but his dead heart needs to be revived by one with the breath of Jesus ('a). What is sought is not everlasting life or felicity, but the evanescent moment that transforms one, the drop of rain that gives life to the dry field, the single breath of Jesus ('a). The search for eternity is associated with the Pharisaical affectation of the outward signs of formal religion, while the search for rebirth is associated with sincere yearning in the heart for the goblet of the wine of divine love, for the breath of Jesus ('a).

In this tradition, the breath of Jesus ('a) is divine, not because Jesus ('a) is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, but because God bestowed this grace upon him. Whoever is blessed in this way will also have this divine breath. Implicit in both Rumi and Hafiz is the Islamic theological doctrine that the wonders of Jesus ('a) are not unique, but are gifts bestowed on him and others by God. God first bestowed His divine breath on Adam ('a) to bring him to life. In the Qur'an, Adam and Jesus are compared: "*Indeed the case of Jesus with Allah is like the case of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be,' and he was*" (3: 59). It is the same breath by which God created Adam that the angel breathed on the Virgin

Mary so that she became pregnant with Jesus; and it is that breath by which Jesus raises the dead. Iraqi (13th century) imagines God to say:

The breath of Christ that brought the dead to life
Was but one breath of My divine breath,
The nurturer of spirits.

(Iraqi, 70)

‘Attar (12th-13th century) frequently uses the image of the breath of Jesus (‘*a*) in his poetry, and is bold enough to compare his own words to the breath of Jesus:

As ‘Attar’s words give life to the soul,
Clearly he is of the same breath as Jesus.

(‘Attar, 250)

And Hafiz states:

By grace of the Holy Spirit, if aided,
Others too, would do what the Messiah did.

(Hafiz, 193)

In Rumi there is not only a denial that the breath of Jesus (‘*a*) is unique, this breath is universalized as belonging to all humans in their pure original state:

Souls in their original nature have the breath of Jesus,
At one time they are the wound, and at another the plaster.
The speech of every soul would be like Christ’s (breath).

(Rumi 1373/1994, I: 1598-99)

The divine grace that makes possible the effectiveness of the breath of Jesus (‘*a*) applies to both the one who transmits and the one who receives the divine breath.

How can a rock become covered with verdure in spring?
Become earth, that you may display flowers of many hues.

(Rumi 1373/1994, I: 1910)

When the rock becomes earth it can take on the new life of Spring, just as Adam (‘*a*) took on life when he was formed of mud and God breathed into him. When one humbles oneself before God one becomes capable of

receiving new life from Him. Rumi tells the story of a parrot that played dead so that its master would release it, and he comments:

The meaning of dying by the parrot was pleading.
In pleading and (spiritual) poverty make yourself dead
So that the breath of Jesus may make you alive
And like him, good and felicitous.
(Rumi 1373/1994, I: 1908-09)

The great 13th century Kobravi Sufi, Najm al-Din Razi describes the breath of Jesus as follows:

Be aware that all [that] is in the realm of form is a reflection of that which is in the realm of spirit, and all that is in the realms of form and spirit is represented in man.

Hence, 'Jesus-ness' in you is your spirit, as of Jesus it is said: "*We breathed of Our spirit into it [Mary's womb]*" (Qur'an (66:12)) while of you it is said: "*when I have... breathed into him of My spirit*" (Qur'an (15: 29)). Jesus brings the dead to life, as the spirit brings life to the lifeless frame. Jesus had a mother, whereas the Divine Breath served in place of a father for him; likewise, the spirit (of each person) is mothered by the elements and fathered by the Breath. Jesus is sublime, and the spirit is sublime; Jesus is the Word, and the spirit is the Word, as indicated by the expression, "*the spirit is of the command of my Lord*" (Qur'an (17: 85)); Jesus rode a donkey, as the spirit rides the body. (Razi, 140; Nurbakhsh, 1983: 62).

All the miracles that are attributed to Jesus have their origins in the Spirit of God, which was appointed for him and associated with the divine breath (Zarinkub, 1373/1994:73).

Jesus ('a) is portrayed as a miracle worker and healer in both Christianity and in Islam. For Christian theologians, the life-giving qualities of the breath of Jesus ('a) proves that he was in some sense divine. Muslim theologians reject the attributions of divinity to Jesus ('a) as blasphemous, but see the miracles as proofs for the authority of the prophets granted by God. In Persian poetry, however, the miracles are not performed to provide testimony to divine appointment, whether as Incarnation or as prophet. It is

not their function as testimony that is important to the poets, but their function as transformative and life-giving. The purity of Jesus ('*a*') heals us because it shows us the essential healing power at the core of all humanity when it shrugs off hypocrisy and in so doing becomes the recipient of divine grace.

Jesus ('*a*') and his Donkey

In Christian theology, Jesus ('*a*') is said to have two natures, divine and human. In Persian literature, Jesus ('*a*') is considered emblematic for the universal original humanity, which itself has two natures or aspects, one divine and one corporeal. The divine aspect of human nature is depicted as the breath of Jesus ('*a*'), while the corporeal element is depicted as his donkey. This is consistent with the common device among Persian poets to use different animals to show different human attributes. According to Schimmel the animal which Rumi uses more than any other in his poetic imagery is the donkey. She explains that the image of the donkey in relation to Jesus found in Rumi's work is taken from Sana'i (1375/1996:151).

In Sufi literature generally, discussions of Jesus ('*a*') and his donkey are typically used to symbolize the relation between the divine and animal aspects of the human being, as indicated in the quote above from Najm al-Din Razi. Likewise, Rumi uses the donkey as a symbol for the body, nature, and lower self in contrast to the soul, spirit and heart, which represent Jesus ('*a*').

Forsaking Jesus, you have fostered the donkey.
Inevitably, like the donkey, you are outside the curtain.
Knowledge and gnosis are the fortune of Jesus,
Not the fortune of the donkey, O you asinine one!
(Rumi 1373/1994, II: 1840-41)

One who nurtures only his donkey nature cuts himself off from the precincts of the divine secrets, just as the donkey is kept outside the tent. On the other hand, the view of physical nature as base in comparison to the divine aspect is not to be interpreted in a Manichean way that would deny or repress the

physical in favor of the spiritual. What is sought is that each should be given its own appropriate position in the cosmic hierarchy. So, Jesus is reported to have displayed kindness to his donkey, as in the following story from Awhadi (14th century):

Jesus had a grey donkey which never went more than two leagues a day. Such was Jesus' pity that one night he made two hundred trips to bring the beast water, so much did he attend to the animal. When the obstinate creature refused to drink, Jesus, out of concern, stayed up all night.

The following day, the disciples became curious about their master's mysterious vigil.

Jesus told them, "He has no tongue with which to voice his needs. When he is thirsty, it is hardly my place to sleep. He has carried me around all day; if he does not drink, I have the Almighty to answer to for my shame. How can I sleep with my thirst quenched, while he has not drunk and has no way of telling me?"

Nobility is no more than humble service to the Creator and kindness to all creatures.

(Nurbakhsh, 1983: 106-107)⁷

While all of nature has a right to human kindness, this does not mean that one should put the base in the place of the noble, or, as Sa'di says, that one should exchange the gospel of Jesus for his donkey:

Your Jesus is dying of hunger
While you are busy feeding the donkey.
O wretch! Do not sell your religion for the world!
Do not sell the gospel of Jesus for the donkey!
(Sa'di, 1381/2002: 591)

Schimmel claims that the contrast between Jesus and the donkey remains alive in the works of Rumi where human beings are permanently warned: "Come up to the sky like Jesus the son of Mary and put the donkey of Jesus the son of Mary in the ground." (Rumi, 1363/1984, sonnet 289; quoted in: Schimmel, 1998: 98).

Jesus ('a) and the Antichrist

Jesus ('a) is contrasted in one way with his donkey, but in a completely different way with the Antichrist. The term used for the Antichrist in Islamic narrations is *Dajjal*, which means "the deceiver." While Jesus ('a) guides to the truth, Dajjal guides to falsehood. While Jesus ('a) is the Word of God, Dajjal is a satanic tempter. Dajjal is described as having a blind right eye (or one whose lid is sealed shut) and a bright left one in his forehead. In Persian literature, being one eyed is a symbol for seeing only worldly affairs and being blind to matters pertaining to the hereafter. The Sufis take Dajjal to be a symbol for the *commanding self* (*nafs al-ammarah*), which is the aspect of the self that commands one to seek to sensual pleasures and lusts, pulling the heart downwards. "Thus it is the abode of evil, the fountainhead of reprehensible morals and wicked deeds. God says: 'The self commands what is evil.'" (Qur'an [12:53]; Kashani, 1991).

Dajjal is the deceiver because he appears like Christ, but is an Antichrist since all the Christ-like attributes in Dajjal are perverted. Najm al-Din Razi writes about the contrast in a manner that warrants the long quotation here:

Now, in exposition of the truth about Jesus and the Antichrist and the respective similarity and contrast between them, it may be said that the similarity is superficial and the contrast fundamental. From the point of view of appearance, they are both called the 'Messiah', and both have a donkey, and they are both alive, and they both bring the dead to life.

Now, Jesus is called the 'Messiah' through traveling the heavens, while the Antichrist is called the 'Messiah' by traveling through the earth from east to west. Jesus is heavenly and the Antichrist is earthly. Jesus has vision and confers vision on others; visionary because in his infancy he said, "Indeed, I am the devotee of God," and conferring vision by virtue of healing "the blind and the leper, while the Antichrist is blind and a blinder of others, for he presents the Truth as falsehood and falsehood as the Truth. Now, Jesus brings the dead to life as a miracle to provide grounds for faith, while the Antichrist

quickens the dead as a demonstration of powers to lure one into denying faith. And the emergence of the Antichrist out of the earth serves to bring about a reign of oppression and corruption on earth, while the descent of Jesus from heaven is to bring about a reign of equity and justice.

Be aware that all in the realm of form is a reflection of that which is in the realm of spirit, and all that is in the realms of form and spirit is represented in man....

The Antichrist is represented in you as your 'demanding ego'. The Antichrist is one-eyed, just like your ego, seeing only the world and being blind to the hereafter. Whatever the Antichrist presents as heaven is actually hell, and what he presents as hell is really heaven; by the same token, the ego presents carnal passions and pleasures as paradisiacal, though they are actually infernal, and it presents one's spiritual devotion and worship as hellish, though they are really heavenly in nature.

The Antichrist mounts a donkey, and your ego possesses bestial qualities. The mystery of it all is that, though Jesus was in the world, as was the Antichrist, Jesus was carried up to heaven for a while, while the Antichrist was locked up in the bowels of the earth. Then, the Antichrist will first be brought out to rampage over the earth and create havoc and wreak corruption, claiming divinity. Next, Jesus will be brought down and given dominion, claiming to be the devotee of God. He will succeed in slaying the Antichrist, then set about establishing a reign of prosperity, justice and equity. After a time, he will pass from this world, and the Day of Judgment will be at hand.

In the same way, spirit and ego are brought together in the world of humanity. However, the spirit is taken up to the heaven of the heart, while the Antichrist of the ego is confined in the earth of the human state. It takes several years for humanity to develop its full potential and for the constituents of the body to properly mature. First, the Antichrist of the ego emerges from the confines of infancy, mounted on the ass of animal qualities, launching forth on its program of

wreaking havoc in the world, claiming divinity in the manner of “have you seen the one who makes his desire his god...?” [*Qur’an*, 45:23], and exhorting one towards the hell of greed and lust as the heavenly goal, while decrying the heaven of devotion and worship as hell. He slays the believers of praiseworthy, angelic qualities with the unbelievers’ hands of satanic and condemnable qualities, raising the dead powers in human nature, until, all of a sudden, a grace unimaginable bears from on high the Jesus of spirituality, mounted on the regal wings of the Gabriel of the Law, taking flight from the lofty heaven of the heart to descend into the world of humanity.

*Reason, left behind, gazes at his departing stirrup,
While Love surges ahead, mounted by his side.*

Jesus slays the Antichrist of the ego, by severing his head of material nature, and establishes the dominion of the justice and equity of spirituality in the world of humanity, destroying the swine of greed, shattering the cross of fleshly nature, and slashing the bonds of passion. (Razi, 140, quoted in Nurbakhsh, 61-64).

It is in light of such teachings that couplets such as the following from Rumi are to be understood:

Dajjal spreads sorrow like a carpet of fire.

Where is Jesus to stab the evil doer Dajjal with a dagger?

(Rumi [1363/1984] 1:20, Purnamdariyan, 1364/1985: 414)

The believer is engaged with an inner struggle, sometimes called the *greatest jihad*, against the temptations of Satan and the commanding self’s lusts for pleasure, wealth and power. The final victory in this struggle comes when Jesus slays Dajjal in the human heart, and, according to Shi‘ite tradition, is joined by the Twelfth Imam in establishing peace and justice.

Rumi also contrasts the breath of Jesus with the breath of Dajjal’s oppression:

Open your mouth and call on the figure of Jesus!

For they have died by the breath of Dajjal’s oppression.

(Rumi, 1363/1984, 2:257; Purnamdariyan, 1364/1985: 414)

Here those who have succumbed to the deadening breath of Dajjal are compared to the dead trees of winter that are brought to life in spring just as the heart that has become the victim of Dajjal may be brought back to life by the sanctifying breath of Jesus.

Beware of the coming of Dajjal—open the way for Christ!

Beware, for the Resurrection Day has come—sound the trumpet!

(Rumi (1363/1984) 4:4, Purnamdariyan, 1364/1985, 414)

Just as there is a spiritualization of the war between Dajjal and Christ in Sufi literature, the Resurrection Day is also spiritualized in the above couplet. The resurrection comes when the true breath of spring overcomes the winter wind, when Christ ('*a*) with his divine spirit defeats Dajjal with his perversion of spirit. The fundamental conflict in the view of the Sufis is, thus, not the battle between matter and spirit as was the case for the ancient Gnostics, but between spirit dominating in divine service and spirit dominated by base motives.

Conclusion

Many more quotes could be given from Persian literature about the three themes mentioned: the breath, donkey of Jesus ('*a*), and Dajjal—not to mention the many other themes pertaining to Jesus ('*a*) that can be found in these writings. This gives some indication of the importance of Jesus ('*a*) in Persian literature. The Christology that is found in this literature reflects the teachings of Islam about Jesus ('*a*) found in the Qur'an and narrations attributed to the Prophet (*s*). He is seen as one of the greatest prophets of God, called *kalimat Allah*, word of God, an ascetic, a man of perfect humility, a miracle worker, a healer, one who suffers for God's sake, is tempted by the devil, one who by God's permission raises the dead to life, and one destined to come again at the end of the world to defeat the Antichrist and usher in an age of peace and justice. In Sufi literature, all of these themes are internalized or spiritualized. The examples given about Islamic beliefs about Jesus ('*a*) are not used to provide the reader with historical information or in order to conduct apologetic disputation, but to guide the reader in his or her own spiritual quest. We are advised to seek the

breath of Jesus ('a) by seeking the awakening of the inner divine spark through the love of God and abandonment of the self. The abandonment of the self requires plain living so that the body remains in the control of the spirit, but asceticism should never be so extreme as to hurt the body, as we are led to understand from the verses about kindness to the donkey. Finally, we must be prepared for a great struggle within ourselves between the true Jesus spirit and the Antichrist that uses deception to lead us into subjugation by the vices of lust, greed, pride, jealousy, and ignorance, as the one-eyed base inclinations within us pose as the one who is divinely authorized to lead us.

This spiritual message is one that is told in Sufi prose and poetry in a thousand ways, one of the most noble of which reveals the face of Jesus ('a) in Persian literature.³

Notes:

1. Translations from the Qur'an are from *The Qur'an with an English Paraphrase*.
2. For a comprehensive selection of the *ayat* (signs) of Noble Qur'an and narrations pertaining to Jesus ('a) said to have been reported by the Shi'i Imams see Muntazir Qa'im.
3. This is very limited; the clearest example is to be found in Firdausi's *Shahnameh* where he describes the attitude of the Zoroastrian priests. According to the standards for epic poetry, the poet is to faithfully report events rather than express his own feelings on the topic. See Mo'in, 207.
4. The term *Tarsa'iyā* for Christianity is derived from *tars* (meaning *fear*) and translates an appellation in Syriac used by Christians who called themselves those who fear the Lord. (Aryan, 244).
5. For a discussion of Christological themes in classical and modern Persian literature, see Leirvik 81-101; 163-165, respectively. Leirvik also notes a rather unusual (in Sufi literature) use of the image of the cross of Jesus

³ .I would like to thank professor Muhammad Legenhausen for his help with the preparation of this article.

- (‘a) by Awhadi: “Whoever turns his countenance to God/ He must press his back against the cross.” Leirvik, 101, citing Arberry, 307-308.
6. A general practitioner who sat by the side of a road where he visits patients was called a “road-sitting physician” (*tabib-e rah neshin*).
 7. Awhadi is also famous for a *manzumeh* (poetic collection) called *Jam-e jam* which is said to be a comprehensive summary of practical Sufism comparable to the way in which Shabistari’s *Golshan-e Raz* is a comprehensive poetical summary of theoretical Sufism.

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