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HAFIZ AND THE PLACE OF IRANIAN CULTURE IN THE WORLD

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By H.H. the Aga Khan

I must thank His Excellency the Iranian Minister, Lord Lamington and the members of the Society for having done me the honour of inviting me tonight to bring before you the importance to the whole world of those spiritual forces that the ancient land of Iran has cherished in her modern history. Before I go further I want to define clearly what I mean by "spiritual forces"—I do not use this term in any question-begging sense. I do not wish to limit it merely to religious or such ideas, or to give it any other-worldly interpretation, but I do mean anything that deals with man's life of the spirit here and now on this earth and in this life. Whatever may or may not be the soul's future, there is one impregnable central fact in existence: that here and now, in this world, we have a soul which has a life of its own in its appreciation of truth, beauty, harmony and good against evil. Has modern Iran greatly contributed to the perfectioning of the soul of man thus understood? Modern Iran I define as the ancient race of that high plateau, influenced by the faith of Islam and the imaginative poetry and declamation of Arabia, welded into one by a process of slow intermarriage and movement of many races from north, west, east and south. What has this Iran done for the satisfaction of man's highest aspirations?

Just as in ancient Egypt, so in ancient and pre-Islamic Persia, philosophical, spiritual, poetical thought and effort (or such parts as still remain) are singularly arid and (at least to us modern men) rather repetitions of vainglorious titles or somewhat unconvincing and worldly-wise prayers. It may be that man at that stage had all the great powers of execution and enterprise, the fruits of which we see in the vast monuments of ancient Egypt, and the remains of similar monuments in Western Asia and Iran. But till the impact with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, man in Western Asia had not yet learned the full value of the greatest treasure in his possession—his own entity and being.

Whatever the cause, after Islam had for three or four centuries taken deep root in Iran the genius of the race blossomed out, and for all the centuries right down to our own times that garden, in spite of the terrible visitations that so often submerged it, has never ceased to bring forth roses of rare fragrance.

Anwari, Nizami, Maulana Roumi, Saadi, Qa'ani and a host of others—names that will be well known to Oriental scholars, but which will perhaps convey little to the general public here—each in his own way gave a message to mankind. But the fundamental point of each message if carefully studied is that man's greatest of all treasures, the greatest of all his possessions, was the inherent, ineffaceable, everlasting nobility of his own soul. In it there was for ever a spark of true divinity which could conquer all the antagonistic and debasing elements in nature. And let me once more stress that this faith in the soul of man expressed in a great variety of ways—in prose and verse, in art and architecture—was not simply a religious or mystic faith but an all-embracing and immediate contact with a fact which, in every human being, is the central fact of existence.

Then came Hafiz—by far the greatest singer of the soul of man. In him we can find all the strivings, all the sorrow, all the victories and joys, all the hopes and disappointments of each and every one of us. In him we find contact, direct and immediate, with the outer universe interpreted as an infinite reality of matter, as a mirror of an eternal spirit, or indeed (as Spinoza later said) an absolute existence of which matter and spirit alike are but two of infinite modes and facets. It is not for nothing that his "Divan" has become, throughout the East, the supreme *fal nama* (book of divination) of millions and millions far beyond the confines of Iran. In perplexity and sorrow, whatever the cause, whatever the standard of intellect or emotion, men throughout the Near East and India turn to Hafiz—from the Ganges to the Nile, from the Caspian to the Bay of Bengal—for comfort and solace. Incredible as it may seem to us, even in his lifetime his influence had reached Bengal, Central Asia, Kashmir, Arabia and Egypt.

Any attempt at translation of Hafiz has always led to immense

disappointment. The explanation is simple; he was not merely the Hafiz of the Koran, but well acquainted with the whole field of philosophy, history, poetry and literature, with the highest thought then known to his countrymen. In each verse, with the intense concentration of thought and wisdom so singularly his own, he has produced in amazing variety facets of truth and beauty, of meaning and wisdom. I have myself tried my hand at seeing in how many ways, and with how many totally different meanings, verses of his could be translated into either English or French. I think it is no figure of speech to say that far too many versions and explanations of each word could be given, and that each verse could be interpreted according to the intelligence that one wished to reach.

This, perhaps, will explain why Hafiz has always been (as no other great poet can claim to be) the national poet, the national hero, of Iran. Pushkin, Goethe and Shakespeare in the West; Al Mutannabi, Abu Nawas and Firdausi in the East—all of them great, indeed supreme, kings in the realm of poetry—could never reach their humblest subjects. The uncultured peasants of the West, or the equally humble intelligences of the East, could never absorb their full meaning or beauty. Hafiz is different. Not only in his own Persia but in India, in Afghanistan, in Central Asia and even amongst Turkish and Arabic-speaking peoples, the moment his verses are understood you will always find an interpretation of most of them that could appeal to the humblest as well as the highest of intelligences. No wonder the muleteers call him their friend and companion! No wonder the cobbler and the water-carrier find in him—as do the keenest intellects of Asia—solace and satisfaction!

One of the greatest of living Hindu statesmen, Sir Taj Bahadur Sapru, once told me that in all difficult moments of his life he turns to Hafiz. I think there is no one of Iranian race alive today who has not at some time or other—in difficulty, sorrow and misery, or in joy and triumph—turned to his national hero for comfort or further elation. Incredible as it may sound to English ears, it is a fact that there is hardly a Muslim bourgeois family in the whole of India in whose home a copy of Hafiz's "Divan" is

not found. I think, too, that we can be fairly certain that the book is as popular in Afghanistan and Central Asia and over a great part of what I may call Western Muslim countries as it is in India.

Soon after the death of Hafiz the worst periods of political and social anarchy, of invasion and disruption, broke up the high civilization already reached in Iran. Bismarck and other statesmen and historians have said that Germany as the battle-ground of Europe could never bring about—except at a terrible sacrifice—the peace, civilization and unity characteristic of England and France. Persia was the battle-ground of Asia. But the genius of Hafiz was never submerged. Whenever peace came, in howsoever limited a form, the eternal tree bore fruit. Hafiz taught the appreciation of beauty, love, gentleness and kindliness; the value of all human beings; the constant glory and splendour and joy of the universe in which we live; the wonder of communion with nature. These undying, eternal truths were so immortally impressed by him on his countrymen that whenever opportunity arose in any period of peace the striving after them and the expression of those eternal values became, in Iran at least, a motive force and power.

Critics of Iranian civilization and culture have said that after Hafiz the light was not only dimmed but burned out. Nothing could be more false and unjust. No doubt Hafiz was the supreme genius of his race, and in that sense if we try to measure his successors by his standard we will find an immediate and sudden decline. But that surely is not the right way to search for his influence. Did the Persian race after him strive for expression in art and literature, in poetry and prose—for the wealth and splendour inherent in the human soul? I have no hesitation in saying "yes." Take the art of the Safavi period—poor in literature, but so rich in architecture and in textiles, in beautiful metal and glass work, in its lovely brocades and carpets. Can we deny that there is here immense search for expression of the highest aspirations of man's soul?

Whenever Iran had any breathing space from war and invasion and misery, in one form or another a national character has

formed and, by the spiritual influences of its poetry, immediately turned towards the expression of appreciation and enjoyment of the eternal light within us. And during the nineteenth century one of the very greatest poets that the Iranian race has ever produced, Qa'ani, interpreted nature with a wealth of variety, a strength and beauty, which I doubt can ever be surpassed. Let the admirers of Wordsworth and the French nature poets compare in beauty, simplicity or grandeur the finest verses of the Western masters with Qa'ani's constant descriptions and references to rain, thunder, the sky and earth, the flowers and mountains, night and day, the sun, moon and stars. If the odes had mercenary motives, if the human praise and blame which he bestowed as he went along were nearly always insincere—let us not forget the fundamental honesty of his outlook on life and the universe, the sincerity of his belief in the beauty and goodness of nature.

Modern Persian critics, unconsciously influenced, perhaps, by the puritanical standards of European literature during the last century, have taken Qa'ani to task for his praise of sexual perversities. But when all is said these are but drops in the ocean of his work and, compared with similar extravagancies of many great writers of the West, they are neither prominent nor obtrusive. No one need, unless he searches in the "Divan," come across these particular passages. The music and joy of his verses, the sincerity of his conviction that life is a great, noble and splendid experience—every minute of which is to be treasured as the greatest of God's gifts—these surely are the qualities we will find in page after page and verse after verse of his work.

But is this immense wealth of Iran to remain only a treasure of the Islamic East and its fringe in India? Is Europe, is America, is the West so rich in the joys of the spirit, in its immediate satisfaction with life, that it can afford to close its doors to what Iran has to offer in the highest spiritual satisfaction to mankind? In these days of intensive nationalism—nationalism of a kind that wishes to turn even art, beauty and goodness into national possessions—is this immense lesson of Iran to be forgotten? Iran in its language, in its culture, in its highest soul expression, has taken to its bosom

and freely accepted the contributions of Greece and India, the immense stream from Islam, Arabia and the Turkish race. It has assimilated the best of each in order better to express its yearning after truth and beauty. Is this fundamental influence not to be brought into the service of the highest culture of the West?

In the economic field we find today the ideal of one great source of wealth, the earth, to be enjoyed by humanity as a whole through free trade and competition, looked upon almost as an expression worthy only of a lunatic asylum. Peace, and the League of Nations co-operating to conquer disease, malnutrition and the vast waste areas of the world; to raise the poor and humble irrespective of race and religion to the standard of the highest; to feed the famine-stricken and the starving; a competition for construction between various races and countries—all this would today, as a practical suggestion, be considered only worthy of idiots and half-wits. The work of destruction has a totally different standard of appreciation applied to it. Yet, truly understood, and from the lowest material point of view, what good could come from efforts to conquer the waste areas of the world by co-operation, to bring about a standard of living in China and India that would enable people there to buy some of the luxuries of life from Europe and America, to apply the tropical lands that are impossible for European and American settlement for the benefit of the millions of the brown and yellow races and thus open up new and vast markets for the white races for healthy exchange and welcome competition. All these things would lead through prosperity to spiritual awakening and artistic creation. Such work today is not in the realm of practical politics.

Surely now there is room for us to turn to the spirit of Hafiz's teaching. For if ever there was a time when we needed the universality of Hafiz as a guiding light it is today when there are forces that threaten the roots of humanity. Class and race competition threaten to submerge the highest joy of life and living—namely, the search for, and conquest of, true beauty and goodness which, could we but know it, are ever within our grasp.

In that spirit I appeal to the intellectual classes in this country to

come and join up with the Iran Society, to help forward similar associations, to study and understand Islamic, Hindu and Far Eastern philosophy, culture, literature and art. Thus the spiritual and emotional inheritance of Great Britain, Europe and America (North and South) should not be merely derived from Greece and Judaism, but from the world as a whole, for I am certain that Asiatic culture in its widest sense can bring as much to man's common heritage as either Greece or Palestine.

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