

Javanan

Exclusive Interview with Jamil Kharrazi

Founder/Director of Toos Foundation

[Translated excerpts]



The front cover of the Javanan

The Toos Foundation had organised an event in London on the 20th November 2012 under the title of "Love Came and Set the World on Fire". Our readers have always been kept informed about the activities of this foundation. In a recent exclusive interview with Jamil Kharrazi we tried to find out the reasons for this choice of subject.



Q: Considering your previous programs which were all aimed at introducing an aspect of Iranian cultural history, what was your motive in choosing to Mysticism (erfan) and its difference with Sufism as a subject for a Toos event?

A: Because of the Rumi centenary celebrations there have been a number of events about Molavi's ideas and poetry in many different countries. Frankly, we did not believe any of them treated this important subject adequately. The ones which were more academic were mostly based on Western Orientalist "experts! and the ones which concentrated on the artistic and cultural aspects were in reality nothing more than the usual concerts with the repetitions of the so-called mystic poems and songs and did not really attempt at explaining the ideas behind them. As we do not consider ourselves an Iranian entertainment institution but one devoted to spreading and preserving Iran's rich culture we decided to make a contribution, however small, to a better understanding of what Iranian mysticism is about.

Q: During the program itself a lot of explanations were offered on the roots of Iranian mysticism and its difference with Sufism. Could you please summarise these points for our readers.

A: We felt one the major problems in understanding Iranian mysticism is precisely the lack of differentiation between Erfan and Sufism. Iranian mystics themselves have helped to further this confusion. Many mystics have called themselves Sufis and many Sufis consider their believes to be of a mystical nature. We tried to show not only the distinction between the two but also explain the historical reasons behind this confusion. What history of Iranian mysticism proves is that not every Mystic has also been a Sufi nor have all Sufis been mystical. he former seeks truth whilkst the latter the path to a truth already known.

We tried to show that defining mysticism is not an ontological question. In other word people with different understanding of the whole question of being can still have mystical beliefs and/or enjoy and share the same views in others. Anyone with any type of belief or religion and in any walk of life can also be a mystic. Human beings have always, alongside the currently held views have also held mystical views. It is a kind of cognition based on esoteric and inward looking methods. With the evolution of human civilization, religious, political and practical beliefs have gradually replaced esoteric knowledge. But even today whenever reason and custom do not answer our problems we turn inward for an answer.



Q: So what is the relationship between religious beliefs and esoteric knowledge?

A: If we look at mysticism the way I explained above we can immediately remove the controversy about this relationship. Right now inside Iran a lot of people are trying to prove mysticism has no contradiction with Islam whilst others are trying to prove the opposite and show that it is all anti-Islamic. But if you look at history it is simple to see that mysticism is older than religion. Almost all of the current world religions have themselves been influenced at their birth by mystical beliefs before them. It is therefore not the duty of Iranian mysticism to justify its relationship with Islam but the Islamic theologians to explain what are the roots of these religious beliefs in the older mystical views.

Q: What is specific about Iranian mysticism?

A: We tried to show that Iranian mysticism is not a one-dimensional phenomena which can be attributed to some single root. The history of mystical thought in Iran proves that this way of thinking existed in Iran not only before Islam but also before Zoroastrianism. Its roots are neither simply Aryan nor Semitic, Hindu or Greek. It has been influenced by all of these and more resulting in a unique composite. But there is a common thread running through its history and dating back to antiquity which is the unique way the early Persians viewed the world, or more specifically the question of the relationship between The Creator and the created. The ancient Persians believed the creator is itself part of what has been created. The creator was not something above and separate from the universe but had transformed itself into the universe. Thus the early Persians believed in the presence of the divine essence in all creatures. A concept which has been called "the unity of existence". The obvious potential of the Iranian psychology in mystical thinking throughout its history has its roots in this fundamental belief. Even Mithraism and Zoroastrianism which come later carried this belief in the unity of existence in some form or another.



Q: During the event you talked about Iranian mysticism as a social movement , could you please explain this a bit further.

A: The first social movement in Iran which be said to have been influenced by mystical beliefs was indeed against Zoroastrianism (its Sassanid version). Following the defeat of the Mazdaki movement against the social and class privileges introduced during the Sassanid rule, people's aspiration for freedom and equality takes on an increasingly religious characteristic and appears as a movement against the Zoroastrian religious hierarchy closely tied up with the state. Mani's religion which was the first truly trans-national religion was closer to the ancient mystical beliefs than other religions. Some of the core concepts of Manichaeism are in fact the links which relate ancient beliefs to later mystical thinking with admixtures of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism.

Q: So what is the distinction between mysticism and Sufism in Iran?

A: At first Sufism had no direct relationship to Iranian mysticism. It was in fact a reaction against the religious corruption of the Islamic caliphate and a movement for return to the purity of the original Islam. We have witnessed similar movement in many other countries and against many other established religions. In fact Islamic Sufis themselves were very much influenced by the Christian monasteries living in areas near what is now Baghdad. The word Sufi (woollen) was the term first used to refer to those Christian monks living a simple life of worship and devotion and wearing rough woollen robes. The ideas behind these Sufis had nothing to do with mysticism in general or Iranian mysticism in particular.



Q: So how should one distinguish Islamic from Iranian Sufism?

The early Islamic Sufism which has been called devotional Sufism continues in one form or another to the present. What we call Iranian Sufism developed later, almost 2 centuries after the early Sufism, and had roots in Iranian ancient beliefs. It was in fact a reaction against the religious dogmatism and pan-Arabic racism of the Islamic rulers. From the 9-10th century onwards we witness a social movement mostly fed by urban middle classes which although calling itself Islamic for obvious reasons was in fact a return to pre-Islamic thinking. This is a period called the period of rebellious Sufism.

Q: What was the cultural impact of this movement?

One cannot exaggerate about the influence of this period on Iranian arts and culture in the entire post-Islamic period. In fact we owe what we call today Iranian poetry and Iranian music to Sufis of this period. The revival of Persian language is also greatly indebted to Sufi thinkers and poets.

Dear Mrs Kharrazi we are grateful for your time and wish your foundation which has always tried to highlight the rich Iranian culture every success.