

Mizra Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878)

Akhundzadeh was born to a prosperous family in Qajar dynasty Persia in 1812. He was brought up by his mother's uncle, a Shia clergyman. When he was a child, his hometown, in what is now Azerbaijan, was conquered from Persia by imperial Russia. He spent his life on the borders of the Russian, Turkish and Persian Empires, but always primarily identified as Persian.

IN 1832, at age 20, Akhundzadeh studied with Mirza Shafi Vazeh (1796-1852), a famous poet and calligrapher. (In 1851 an edition of German translations of Vazeh's poetry was published in Germany).

Akhundzadeh wrote:



Akhundzadeh in Russian uniform

One day this venerable man asked me, "Mirza Fath-'Ali, what is your purpose in your studies?" I said that I wanted to become a Mullah. He said, "Do you want to become a deceitful charlatan?" I was astonished and wondered why was he saying these things? Mirza Shafi looked at my bewildered face and continued, "Don't waste your life in the midst of this despicable group. Choose another profession." When I asked why he hated the clergy, he began relating a series of cases that had been hidden from me until then... He revealed so many things that the veil of ignorance was lifted from my eyes, and I began to detest the clergy and subsequently changed my intention.

Fluent in multiple languages, Akhundzadeh made a living as an interpreter for the Russian government, but his main project was reforming Persian society, particularly reducing the influence of religion in general and the clergy in particular. Inspired by Voltaire and Moliere, he believed that satire, particularly theater, was a good way to communicate. He wrote:

Human nature, being averse to sermons and morals... in the experience of European philosophers nothing is more effective in uprooting vices and evils than criticism, derision, and ridicule.

In the 1850s Akhundzadeh wrote six comedies which were published in Turkish and Persian. Persia at the time had no theaters, but Akhundzadeh's plays were nevertheless read, and eventually staged.

In Akhundzadeh's first play, *The Alchemist*, Mullah Ibrahim, a travelling holy man and alchemist, convinces the people of the village of Nakhu that he can turn their copper coins into silver. They bring him all their copper coins and a month later, in the last scene of the play, arrive to receive their silver. Mullah Ibrahim states that they have arrived too early, and that this mistake on their part will break the spell that turns copper into silver. However, there is one thing they can do to save the situation:

Mullah Ibrahim – Well, now that you have once come, the alchemistic rule forbids that you should leave the place in which the Elixir in the crucible is at fluxion. That is, if you would have any regard for your own welfare, and wish not to render abortive all the pains that I have undergone on your behalf. But from now until the time when the Elixir is complete and pours from the crucible – and I have occupied over it for the last hour, and it still requires two hours more to come to term – for this time you must not allow the idea of a monkey to cross your mind, nor must you let the semblance of its image come into your thoughts. The counter-spell depends on this! And otherwise the Elixir, which for the whole of the last month I have been working to prepare, in the twinkling of an eye becomes naught, and goes off into thin air.

The Nakhu people. – All right master! This is a simple matter. Please Heaven to make the perfecting of the Elixir on this alone!

Mullah Ibrahim – Yes it depends simply on this. May Allah be satisfied with what you do, and I shall be so likewise.

Agha Zaman (local quack physician). – Master, is there some other counter-spell than this?

Mullah Ibrahim – No other but what?

Agha Zaman. – No other but with the monkey.

Mullah Ibrahim – You fool! What – what are you saying? What words are you pronouncing? Ah, woe to you!

Agha Zaman. – We, but what can I do? I can't drive the monkey out of my thoughts.

Mullah Ibrahim – (*Very Angrily*) Hold your tongue, you fellows! Whatever comes into your mind, keep it out!

Mullah Salman (local cleric). – There is no help for it! The counter-spell is impossible!

The Nakhu people. – That is true. There is no help for it. It will never be possible.

Mullah Ibrahim – (*Getting in a Rage*) What do you mean by there being no help for it? What is impossible? What are you talking about? What has come to you?

Mullah Salman. – Master, all the animals in the hills have changed themselves into the figures of monkeys and the likenesses of huge apes, and are uncurling their long tails before my eyes, and now are assaulting my head. Ouf! I don't know what to do, or whither to take refuge! Ouf! Heaven give you its malediction, you apes and monkeys!

The Nakhu people. – (*Throwing up their heads*) Malediction to you, you monkeys! What a pass is this we have go into!

Mullah Ibrahim – (*Screaming at the Nakhu people*) Heaven ruin your homes! What is this you have done! Heaven ruin your homes, and close the doors of your houses on you!

The Nakhu people. – Sit down, master! Be calm! What was decreed has come to pass. There is no help for it. But now what ought we to do?

Mullah Ibrahim – (*In great vexation*) What ought you to do? Why, what you must do is, now, before the sun sets, to get yourselves to that village, nearby there, and remain quiet for all the time that the next Elixir is in preparation. You can come back here again after the thirty-one days have elapsed. You may then receive the silver that is yours in exchange for the five thousand pounds-eight of your copper coin ... Go your ways and wait for my summons.

The villagers leave and Mullah Ibrahim retires to his tent and says to himself (and the audience):

Yes wait until I send you a summons! But please, Heaven, before that time comes I shall find means of dispensing with seeing your faces again.

(Curtain)

Mullah Ibrahim has taken all the villagers' copper in exchange for nothing and convinced them that this is their fault. They end up poor and feeling guilty. Ibrahim moves on to his next targets.

That was an example of Akhundzadeh's public writing. It is clearly critical of superstition but not so openly hostile to religion as to necessarily invite censorship. Akhundzadeh's plays succeeded in reaching a large audience.

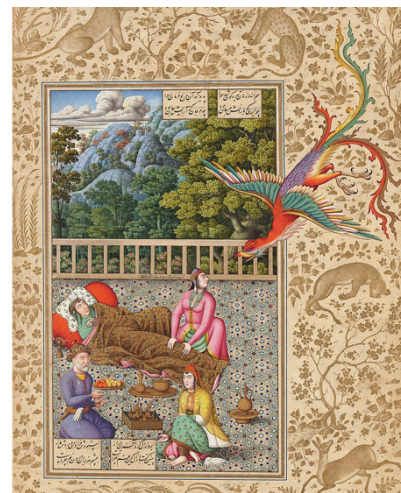
In his writings for fellow intellectuals, Akhundzadeh was more openly hostile to religion, particularly Shia Islam, which he believed had ruined Iran. In his time, as today, a major holiday in Iran is Ashura, mourning the death of Shia leader Husayn, killed by his Sunni enemies in 680 AD. Akhundzadeh thought it ridiculous that contemporary Iranians would "hit their chests and pull their hair" because "a thousand and two hundred and something years before, ten or fifteen Arabs killed ten or fifteen other Arabs in the Kufa desert."

Akhundzadeh invoked the writings of the Iranian national poet Ferdowsi to support his belief that Iran was a great nation in the distant past, but had been ruined by the Islamic religion brought by invading Arabs.

Ferdowsi's great epic poem, the Shahnameh or Book of Kings, has been loved by Persians since it was finished in 1020. Most of the book consists of stories of mythical kings from pre-Islamic times. Nevertheless, Ferdowsi explicitly states that he is a Muslim. Enemies of Islam like Akhundzadeh claim that Ferdowsi was really Zoroastrian and only pretended to be Islamic so he could get government funding. Let's look at what Ferdowsi wrote:

At the opening of the poem Ferdowsi proclaims his devotion to God: (All subsequent quotes of from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh.)

Now in the name of God whose power controls
Wisdom, and has created human souls,
Exalted beyond all that thought or speech
Is able to encompass or to reach,
The lord of Saturn and the stars at night,
Who gives the sun and moon and Venus light,
Above all name and thought, exceeding all
Of his creation, and unknowable . . .



Shahnameh's magic bird

That is pro-God, although the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God isn't known for spending time with Saturn. But on the subject of rule by Islamic clerics Ferdowsi is quite clear. He clearly thinks the Iranian people were better off when ruled by kings. (The "house of Sasan" refers to the Sassanid dynasty, the last non-Islamic rulers of Iran, who had been conquered by Arabs 400 years before Ferdowsi wrote this. Abu Baker and Omar were early Islamic leaders.)

But for the Persians I will weep, and for
The House of Sasan ruined by this war:
Alas for their great crown and throne, for all
The royal splendor destined now to fall,
To be fragmented by the Arabs' might;
The stars decree for us defeat and flight.

Four hundred years will pass in which our name
Will be forgotten and devoid of fame.

And what was the new, Islamic government like?

But when the pulpit's equal to the throne

And Abu Bakr's and Omar's names are known,

Our long travails will be as naught, and all

The glory we have known will fade and fall.

The stars are with the Arabs, and you'll see

No crown or throne, no royal sovereignty:

Long days will pass, until a worthless fool

Will lead his followers and presume to rule:

They'll dress in black, their headdress will be made

Of twisted lengths of silk or black brocade.

There'll be no golden boots or banners then,

Our crowns and thrones will not be seen again.

Some will rejoice, while others live in fear,

Justice and charity will disappear,

Ferdowsi is clear that rule by clerics not only means injustice, but also a society which is culturally sterile and devoid of pleasure

Men will pretend they're holy, or they're wise,

To make a livelihood by telling lies.

Sorrow and anguish, bitterness and pain

Will be as happiness was in the reign

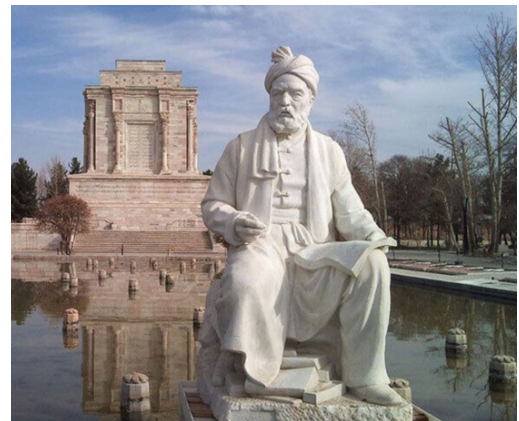
Of Bahram Gur—mankind's accustomed fate:

There'll be no feasts, no festivals of state,

No pleasures, no musicians, none of these:

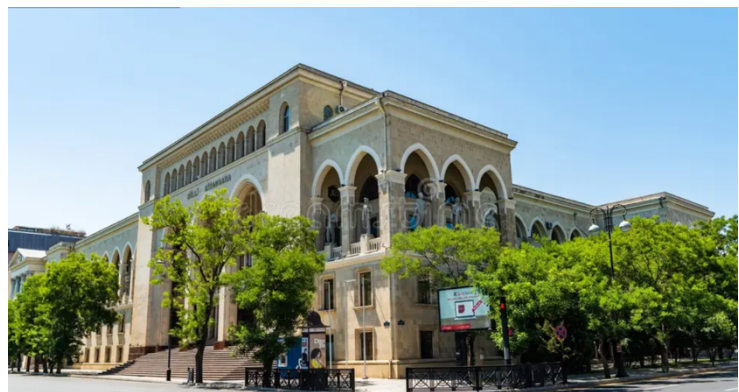
But there'll be lies, and traps, and treacheries.
Sour milk will be our food, coarse cloth our dress,
And greed for money will breed bitterness
Between the generations: men will cheat
Each other while they calmly counterfeit
Religious faith. The winter and the spring
Will pass mankind unmarked, no one will bring
The wine to celebrate such moments then;
Instead they'll spill the blood of fellow men.

The fact that Iran today has the sort of clerical rule so directly denounced by Iran's most loved national poet is a real contradiction. One could argue that Ferdowsi didn't necessarily hate all religion, as Akhundzadeh did, but it is hard to deny his hostility towards clerical rule. In 1935, Reza Shah, ruler of Iran and father of the Shah who was overthrown in 1979, built a spectacular tomb for Ferdowsi. The Shahs shared Ferdowsi's enthusiasm for the Sassanian monarchy and wanted to reproduce it. When the Mullahs came to power in 1979 they reportedly considered tearing down the tomb. They didn't. Ferdowsi was too popular.



Ferdowsi's tomb in Tus, Iran

Today, Akhundzadeh continues to be controversial in Persian society. Many Persians support Islamic governance. Many believe that while the Islamic Republic is too extreme, there is still value in Islam. Others agree with Akhundzadeh that the whole thing stinks. In Azerbaijan, which is governed by a secular dictatorship, Akhundzadeh is a national hero.



Akhundzadeh National Library in Baku, Azerbaijan