

# The Persian Influence on Western Civilization

## with Jason Reza Jorjani

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(00:23) **JM:** Hello and welcome, I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we are going to be exploring the influence on western civilization of Persian culture. With me is Dr. Jason Reza Jorjani, who is a faculty member of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and also a philosopher. Welcome, Jason.

(00:45) **JRJ:** It's a pleasure to be with you, Jeffrey.

(00:47) **JM:** It's a pleasure to be with you as well. When we think of Persia, or Iran, most Americans are probably both ignorant and also have a sense that this is a hostile country that hasn't really had much of an impact on our culture at all. And yet, I gather from our conversations that it's really not such a hostile country at all, that the Persian people, [are] potentially very friendly to the Western world. And also, it's an ancient civilization that has impacted the West in numerous ways.

(01:28) **JRJ:** Yes, well, the recent depictions of the Persian wars in popular culture have been particularly unfortunate because they gloss over the fact that there was profound intercultural exchange during this same time period. To appreciate the depth of that we have to look at Greek culture before the Persian colonization, in the context of which we had these wars at Marathon and elsewhere. For centuries before the Persian invasion of Greece, you had a culture where the activities of capricious gods were conflated with unpredictable forces of nature.

(02:05) **JM:** You're talking about the Greek culture, now.

(02:07) **JRJ:** Yes, the Homeric culture of Greece, which remained static for many centuries before the contact between the Persians and the Greeks. And so, the Greek felt that he had very little control over his life, that he was essentially a puppet of fate. This also acted to reaffirm traditional customs. There's very little sense of personal conscience in the Homeric ethics. Another thing that we see, in say the *Iliad*, is a horrendous treatment of enemy combatants. The Homeric epics are full of rape and plunder. So, we have a very different Greek culture than the one that we are taught about in our school books.

(02:54) **JM:** Well, Greece is known, I think, primarily in the West as the birthplace of philosophy.

(03:02) **JRJ:** Yes, it's the birthplace of philosophy. What people often don't consider is that philosophy was born in the very century that the Persians colonized Greece. The first generation of Greek philosophers, or scientists - science and philosophy were essentially the same thing in that period - the entire first, well, nearly the entire first generation of Greek scientists were born in the parts of Greece there were under Persian colonization. So, for example, you have Pythagoras of Samos, who spends a decade in the capital of the Persian empire and Heraclitus who is invited to become the court philosopher of the Achaemenid Empire.

(03:44) **JM:** So, you're suggesting that the birth of philosophy is possibly as much a Persian product as a Greek.

(03:56) **JRJ:** Yes, and again we have to look at the contrast between these two cultures before they came in interaction with each other. Another important element that I neglected to mention is the Greek conception of time, which is a cyclical conception. There are world ages, but they are world ages in decline, from a golden age, to a silver age to a bronze age and so forth. There is no notion of progress in Greek culture. On the other hand, the core of the Persian religion was the notion of progress.

(04:27) **JM:** Now when you mention the Persian religion, you're referring to Zoroastrianism.

(04:32) **JRJ:** That's right. Zoroastrianism, which derives from the name Zoroaster, who was otherwise known as Zarathustra. At the heart of Zarathustra's teaching was that there's a conflict between the progressive mentality and the constraining mentality. The progressive mentality characterizes the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda, or the titan of wisdom. Whereas the constraining mentality is associated with the deceptive gods, the devas. And we could see these as equivalent to the Olympian pantheon.

(05:10) **JM:** Essentially, deceiving people in various ways.

(05:12) **JRJ:** Yes, Zarathustra speaks of the mumbling priests and plundering princes, who together have conspired to enslave mankind.

(05:21) **JM:** Well, it seems as if the Christian view of the ancient Greek gods isn't so dissimilar.

(05:30) **JRJ:** Well, we have to remember that the three magi who come to visit Jesus at his birth are three Zoroastrian priests. How they came to be interpreted as three kings, I don't know. But the Greek text is very clear, they are three magoi, they are three Zoroastrian priests.

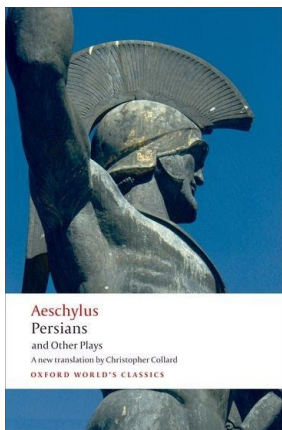
(05:46) **JM:** I see, so there's a real connection between Zoroastrianism and Christianity and I suppose its embodied to some extent in this idea of the struggle between Christ and Satan.

(06:00) **JRJ:** Yes, well there was an entire Persian strain of Christianity known as Manichean Gnosticism, which spread from the heart of the Persian empire all the way to the south of France. But to go back to the Greeks for a moment, you have this conflict between progress and constraint in the teaching of Zarathustra and you also have an emphasis on free choice, personal conscience, inspiration, and meditative reflection, or contemplation. So, that was the essence of the Persian religion before the Persians came into contact with the Greeks. It's also the case that the Persians were extraordinarily humanitarian in the expansion process of their empire. Whole armies were known to surrender because the reputation of the Persians had preceded them. Three of the kings that Cyrus defeated wound up being employed as his advisers. He not only spared their lives but they very willingly worked with him.

(07:10) **JM:** And, I believe slavery was banned in the ancient Persian empire.

(07:15) **JRJ:** It was the only pre-modern empire in which slavery was prohibited and it was believed that every worker should earn a living wage.

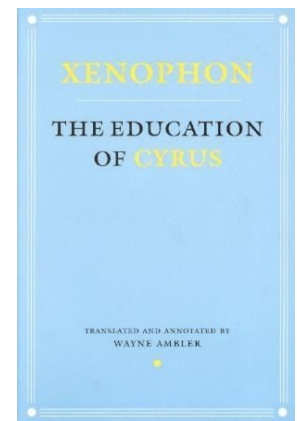
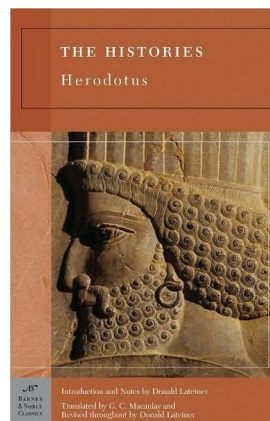
(07:24) **JM:** So, all of this had an impact on the ancient Greeks.



(07:28) **JRJ:** Yes, so within the first century or two of the Persian colonization of Greece we have a 180 degree turn in Greek culture. All of a sudden, we have the rise of a new art form. Aeschylus gives birth to tragedy, and it's not incidental that he's the author of both *The Persians*, in which Xerxes is depicted favorably, sympathetically, but he's also the author of the Prometheus trilogy. Prometheus was there in the Greek pantheon before the Persian invasion, but he was a relatively obscure figure. And in Aeschylus's writings he rises to the status of a primary antagonist of Zeus and almost the antithesis of the Olympian pantheon in the guise of a wisdom god. So, it's almost as if Prometheus is a more anthropomorphic Ahura Mazda.

(08:16) **JM:** I see, a way of integrating Persian ideas within the framework of Greek mythology.

(08:24) **JRJ:** Exactly. Then we have Herodotus's historical writings which show a very critical attitude toward Greek customs and Greek culture, and an openness to learning from the Persians. And also, an emphasis on how open the Persians were to other cultures, as opposed to how xenophobic Herodotus found his fellow Greeks. We have a treatise written by Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, which holds up Cyrus the Great as the ideal statesman.



Again, because he was a very humanitarian conqueror, and really as much a liberator as a conqueror, he's the one who freed the Jews from Babylon...

(09:08) **JM:** Who regarded him quite highly for that.

(09:11) **JRJ:** Yes, he's the only person referred to as Mashiach her Messiah in the Old Testament. This relationship between the ancient Persians and the Jews is fairly extensive. Xerxes had a Jewish wife and during his reign he foiled a plot to persecute the Jews, and protected them.

(09:31) **JM:** Now, you're referring to the story of...

(09:35) **JRJ:** ...the story of Queen Esther.

(09:37) **JM:** Yes. OK. What you're telling me is you take that story to be historically accurate.

(09:43) **JRJ:** Oh yes, Queen Esther was the Persian Emperor Xerxes' wife.

(09:46) **JM:** All right, I was never sure about the accuracy of...

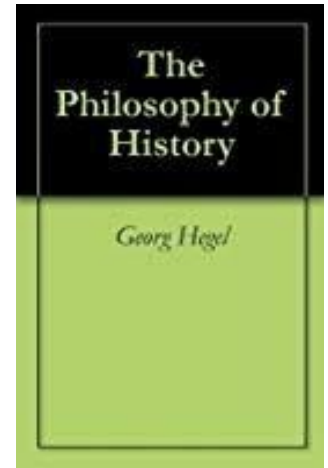
(09:50) **JRJ:** Well, there are independent near eastern accounts of this. Not at any great lengths, but, yes.

(09:57) **JM:** Well, while we're discussing religion it's probably useful to mention that Buddhism was born essentially in an area of northern India that was then part of the Persian empire.

(10:12) **JRJ:** That's right, and we have to remember that Zoroastrianism, like Buddhism, has its roots in the ancient Vedic religion. The ancient Persian language, or rather it's an Iranian language related to Persian that was spoken by Zarathustra, is almost identical to Sanskrit. So, both Zarathustra and Gautama Buddha are emerging from the same religious heritage. But Zarathustra's break with that, his revolutionary turn in that tradition, comes hundreds of years before Gautama's. And, one has to wonder whether there is a connection there, in so far as Siddhartha would have had extensive contact with Persians in that very northern part of India. Insofar as there are some doctrinal similarities between Zoroastrianism and Buddhism in terms of how they both reforms of the Vedic tradition. Later on, of course, during the Parthian dynasty, there is definitely evidence that Mahayana Buddhism took shape under Zoroastrian influence and was an attempt to synthesize Greek and Indian thought.

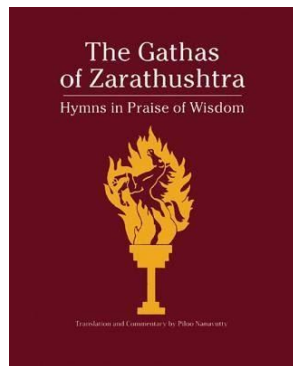
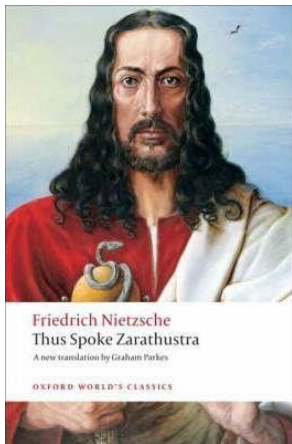
(11:22) **JM:** Now, one of the important ideas that you have mentioned to me previously with regard to Persian thought is the notion of progress. That, unlike the Greeks who saw cycles of ongoing decline, the Persians had a different ideal.

(11:39) **JRJ:** That's right, and this was taken up much later in history by Hegel on the one hand, and through Hegel, Marx, and on the other hand Nietzsche. The first translations of the ancient Persian scriptures, the Avesta, into European languages were taking place in the sixteen, seventeen hundreds by Darmesteter and Kleuker, and Hegel read these. In fact, Hegel writes so extensively on Iran that within the field of Iranian studies, he's regarded as the founder. So, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Philosophy of History*, [and] various other writings, Hegel develops this notion of progressively developing epochs of history, which goes right back to Zoroastrian theology. And there's also an apocalyptic, messianic sense in Hegel's writings, that history is not simply progressive but goal oriented, that we're moving towards an end of history which is going to fundamentally transform the human condition. We can't find any earlier instances of this conception than Zoroastrianism.



(12:48) **JM:** So, the idea that humanity is engaged in a process of self-perfection.

(12:54) **JRJ:** Exactly, and not only self-perfection, but in the *Gathas* and the Hymns of Zarathustra, the oldest part of the Avesta, there's also the notion that its humanity's task to perfect nature and to be the custodian and caretaker of nature, to improve upon nature. So, Hegel is one person who adopted and adapted Zoroastrian notions of progress in the modern period, and Nietzsche is another, with his idea of the superman. He puts the gospel of the superman in the mouth of a returned Zarathustra.



(13:33) **JM:** Well, do you see any of these ideas earlier? Did the Greek philosophers pick up on this?

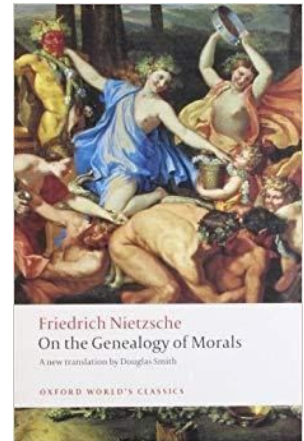
(13:39) **JRJ:** I think that there is a Promethean strain in Greek thought which definitely presages this. But again, that was shaped under Persian influence. We have to remember that Plato was a member of the Pythagorean order and Pythagoras spent a decade in the capital of the Persian Empire. The other most significant influence on Plato, according to Aristotle who was his student, was Heraclitus. Plato was reputed to be a Heraclidean in his youth and Heraclitus has all kinds of symbolic references to Zoroastrianism in the fragments of his writing on nature that survive. Everything from the idea of cosmic fire, the undying cosmic fire, to affirmations of obscure Zoroastrian mortuary rituals, in preference to customary Greek ones.

(14:30) **JM:** Well, as I understand it, one of the really central ideas of ancient Persian thought, which carried over into Greek philosophy, is the notion of truth and the pursuit of truth.

(14:43) **JRJ:** That's right, and this becomes especially significant to Nietzsche. He believed that the value on truth in Zoroastrianism was so high, that Zarathustra placed such a premium on truthfulness, that in fact it was possible to overturn conventional morality by means of an ethic of truthfulness. The conventional ideas concerning good and evil would be able to be turned inside out on account of the tremendous honesty of Zarathustra. That he was the only thinker honest enough, really, to examine conventional morality and allow us the opportunity to reshape it.

(15:28) **JM:** Well, if one looks at Nietzsche's writing, such as his book, *The Genealogy of Morals*, you get a sense that he is setting himself up as, in contrast to conventional Christian morality of his day, 19th century Christian morality, he regarded as something of a slave morality. He was arguing for less weakness and more strength.

(15:57) **JRJ:** Yes, Nietzsche was a great admirer of the Alexandrian culture of the late Roman Empire. So, the philosophical and scientific spirit of classical Greece culminated eventually in an aristocratic rather than a democratic system in Alexandria, the Greek colony in Egypt. And this was a system whereby an aristocracy became ardent patrons of the sciences. Once the Christians burned down the Library of Alexandria and persecuted Hypatia and brought that scientific culture to an end, the surviving academicians fled to Iran in around 500 AD. By the time the last academies were closed down by the Catholic Church and what was left of the Roman Empire, all of the surviving academicians had sought refuge in the court of the Sassanian Dynasty, the last Persian dynasty before the Islamic conquest. In particular, Khosrow Anushirvan was held by them as an ideal Platonic philosopher king. He began an extensive project of translating Greek texts into the languages of the Persian empire. This was severely disrupted by the Islamic conquest, but it was resumed again within about 150 years. Except that this time, because the patrons of the translation project were Arabs, the Persian scientists who were engaged in these endeavors, often had to pen their works in Arabic, which was not their native language.



(17:32) **JM:** In other words, we're talking now about the great Renaissance of western culture which was triggered largely by the reawakening of ancient Greek ideas, as you say ancient Persian ideas, that were transmitted by the Arabs. At least it's thought it was the Arabs by Islamic scholars who preserved these teachings. What you're saying is these particular Islamic scholars were actually Persians.

(18:05) **JRJ:** Yes, the vast majority of them. Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, or Avicenna as he's known in the west, Al Farabi or Al Farabius, Omar Khayyam... These are all Persians who had to write in a language other than their native tongue because Iran was under Arab occupation. So, the so-called Islamic golden age that is a bridge between classical antiquity and the scientific culture of the Renaissance is actually a Persian cultural bridge between the classical Greco-Roman culture and the

European Renaissance culture. The texts that the Medici's were able to collect through their mercantile activities were the texts of Persian scientists.

(18:52) **JM:** Well, there is a sense in which Persia has suffered two great tragedies. They were conquered once by the Greeks and then again by the Arabs.

(19:03) **JRJ:** And then there was an even greater tragedy, they were conquered by the Mongols who adopted a very orthodox form of Islam as their state religion. The Mongols are Mahayana Buddhists, but when they came to Iran they believed that they needed a more authoritarian ideology to govern this territory and so they actually adopted a very conservative form of Islam at exactly the time that there was a Persian cultural renaissance on the way. So, this was a third catastrophe for Iran.

(19:35) **JM:** It gives me pause to wonder if there was a Persian influence on Western literature because we associate tragedy with the great Renaissance playwrights like Shakespeare. Perhaps he was also influenced by Persian culture to some degree.

(19:55) **JRJ:** Well, some literary scholars have believed that many Persian literary works, from let's say the 1000's until the 1400's influenced later works of Western literature. It's believed that some of Nizami Ganjavi's writing, like *Haft Peykar*, are models for *The Faerie Queen*, that *Tristan and Iseult* is modeled on *Vis and Ramin*, that... Well, we know that Goethe wrote the *East-West Divan* as a sort of dialog with Hafez e Shiraz.

(20:28) **JM:** Now... divan. What is divan?

(20:32) **JRJ:** It's a certain collection of poems.

(20:34) **JM:** I see.



(20:36) **JRJ:** And, so Goethe had read Hafez extensively and emulated elements of his style but also wanted to kind of dialog with him across time. Nietzsche was introduced to Hafez through Goethe and came to believe that Hafez was the greatest poet that had ever written in any language.

(20:56) **JM:** How did Nietzsche become so inspired by the figure of Zarathustra?

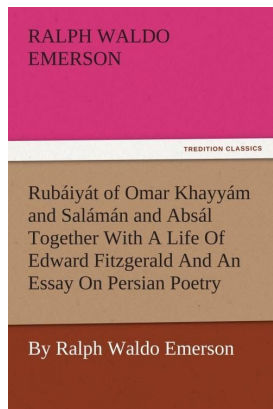
(21:03) **JRJ:** Well, Nietzsche was a philologist, he was not a philosopher by profession. So, his specialty was the study of classical culture. In pouring over documents from the high point of ancient Greek history, he recognized the deep impact of the Persians.

(21:26) **JM:** It strikes me...

(21:26) **JRJ**: In fact, he says at one point, this is an extremely striking comment. He says that the Persians ought to have become the masters of the Greeks, rather than the Romans, of all people. In other words, instead of the Roman assimilation of Greek culture and its continuation under the Roman empire, he had wished that the ancient Persian empire had successfully colonized and held Greece and that Greek culture would have spread rather through a Persian imperium, through a Pax Persica rather than a Pax Romana.

(22:02) **JM**: Well, you describe the ancient Persian culture as very humanizing, very humanistic. I suppose to some degree that's been carried forward in the Islamic Sufi tradition, the mysticism of Islam.

(22:19) **JRJ**: Yes, that's right. If you look at the historical accounts of the first couple of centuries of Arab occupation in Iran you see that there were all kinds of inquisitorial trials of esoteric groups and over time these groups decided that it was expedient to don the cloak of Islam. Even then they were charged with being Mazdakites, or followers of Mazda, in other words crypto Zoroastrians. And, so, they had to adopt more and more of an Islamic guise in order to survive. They did that and successfully preserved the very ancient stream of Persian mysticism and Neoplatonic thought in the process, one which influenced even the American counterculture, through Emerson for example, who wrote extensively about the Persian poets.

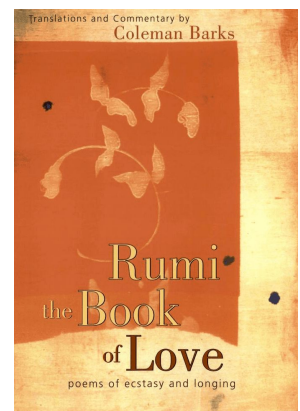


(23:16) **JM**: Well, surely Sufism has had a big influence these days on the American counterculture.

(23:25) **JRJ**: I believe in the 90's some people were citing Jalal ad-Din Rumi as the most widely read poet in America.

(23:30) **JM**: And Rumi was Persian I believe.

(23:32) **JRJ**: Yes, Rumi came from eastern Iran. In Iran he's not referred to as Rumi, he's referred to as Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, as he came from Balkh, and he migrated fleeing from the Mongol invasions, he migrated to what was known as Rom, which is a kind of Persianized "Rome", meaning Byzantium, the eastern part of Turkey in present day geography.

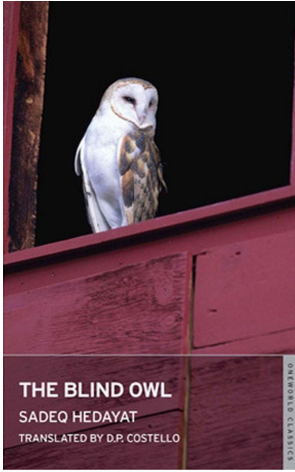


(23:57) **JM**: Because I know the Turks revere him as...

(24:00) **JRJ**: Yes, well his tomb is in what is now Turkey, but of course the Turks arrived in that region much later in history. The Turkic tribes emigrated from central Asia and arrived in what was Byzantium, only in around 1000, or from 800 to 1000 AD.



(24:21) **JM:** Well, you've given us a very complex picture of a culture that most Americans in particular, and probably Westerners in general, are relatively unfamiliar with. I get the impression from our discussions, Jason, that there could be much more mingling, much more positive interaction, between Persian culture and Western culture, the potential for that exists.



(24:49) **JRJ:** Yes, one only need to look at the fact that the most widely read, or if not read, at least the most widely revered modern Persian literary figure is Sadeq Hedayat, who spent nearly half his life in Paris, was accused of being a conduit of West toxification on account of that by the mullahs, but who also spent a lot of time in India and penned his greatest work, *The Blind Owl*, in Bombay. He was someone who wanted to restore Iran's role as a crossroads, cultural crossroads, and so that Hedayat is widely revered by the younger generation today portends great things in terms of Iran's relationship with the West.

(25:37) **JM:** I understand he's a writer somewhat in the tradition of Chekov.

(25:41) **JRJ:** And Kafka. He was Kafka's Persian translator.

(25:45) **JM:** I see. Well, Jason Reza Jorjani, it's been a pleasure being with you discussing the beauty and the tragedy of a culture that seemed once so very wise and at the same time vulnerable to these attacks from outsiders. Thank you so much for being with me.

(26:10) **JRJ:** Thank you so much for inviting me Jeffrey.

(26:11) **JM:** It's been a pleasure. And thank you for being with us.

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