

# Hafiz and Da Vinci: Two Non-Parallel Trajectories

*By Rana Shieb<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Comparative studies of religion, philosophy, literature and art have become very significant fields of research in recent decades. As far as Islam and the West are concerned, such scholarship has produced numerous works in several European languages, works usually devoted to the comparison of the same type of schools of thought such as Ash'arite and Thomistic theology or Islamic and Western Hermeticism as well as individual figures belonging to the same field of knowledge such as Ibn Sina and St. Thomas, al-Ghazzali and Descartes or even Mulla Sadra and Heidegger. Rarely, however, have comparisons been made between figures from Islam and the West belonging to two different fields of creativity and endeavor. In the present essay we have decided to journey upon this seldom traveled road.

We have chosen two men each of whom is among the most significant figures of his respective civilization, one a poet, Muḥammad Shams al-Din Hafiz of Shiraz and the other a painter, Leonardo Da Vinci. One is among the most celebrated cultural heroes of Persia and Afghanistan as well as the Persianate world that includes Central Asia, the Muslim parts of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent including Bengal, and to a large extent the Ottoman world. The other plays the same heroic role in his native Italy as well as in much of the rest of the Western world. But this is where similarities give way to a major difference. Hafiz lived in traditional Islamic society but Leonardo in Renaissance Italy which had

<sup>1</sup> [Author's Note] I would like to thank my teacher Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr who has helped me to understand the spiritual meaning of art and who has guided me during the research of this paper.

already turned its back to its traditional past and had begun to follow the path of modernism. Our goal in this comparative study is to cast some light upon the rupture of modernism from tradition seen not through the comparison of philosophical or theological ideas, but through the language of art which in its own way reveals in the case of Leonardo the radical change of worldview in the West from the Middle Ages to the modern period, despite Leonardo's continued interest in what had been lost, and in contrast in the case of Hafiz the universality and continuity of the traditional world view in the Muslim East.

### Hafiz

Although among the most famous figures of Persian history, Muḥammad Shams al-Din Hafiz of Shiraz is not well known as far as the details of his life are concerned. We know that he was born in Shiraz in 727/1325-26 and that he was brought up in that city where he also studied and lived the rest of his life and where he died in 792/1389-90. His tomb is still extant in Shiraz in an area called Hafiziyyah and is visited by thousands of people every day. The people who visit his grave do not do so as the grave of a famous cultural figure but as a tomb of a saint, as a sanctuary. They pray at the site, speak inwardly to the saint/poet and open their hearts to him. His grave is not only a historical site, but a holy one where the sanctity of this peerless poet is palpable.

Hafiz had received a classical Islamic education and knew the Qur'an by heart, hence his name Hafiz which means one who can recite and knows the whole text of the Qur'an from memory. He was also well acquainted with the earlier tradition of Persian literature, especially Sufi poetry to which he was particularly attracted, having embraced the Sufi tradition himself. The most important work of Hafiz is his *Diwan* of several hundred *ghazals*, a collection of lyric poems which many consider to be the greatest single poetic work of the Persian language, a book that is still very popular wherever Persian is read and understood.

Much has been written on the poetic language of Hafiz, the themes dealt with in his *ghazals*, influences upon him and his influence upon others, but not much scholarship has been devoted to his philosophical and metaphysical world view. In this essay it is, therefore, especially important to say a few words about it, although a short discussion cannot do justice to such a central subject of his poetry. The Presence of God,

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



# SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

[www.sacredweb.com](http://www.sacredweb.com)