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A Comparative Study of Religions

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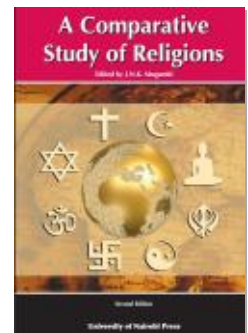
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The Teachings of Zarathustra

D.W. Waruta

The teaching of Zarathustra are found mainly in the Gathas. In later writings in the history of Zoroastrianism, as happens with most religions, there were some changes in the teachings, but all the same Zarathustras teachings have continued as the basis and foundation of the teachings of Zoroastrianism.

Ethical Monotheism

The religion Zarathustra taught was not a completely new religion; it was rather a religion based on the old religion of his people, but which he reformed so radically that it had now important elements and teachings deriving from his prophetic genius.

First and foremost, in opposition to the polytheism and ritualism of the old religion, Zarathustra taught a unique ethical monotheism.¹ He declared Ahura Mazdas the one and only true God. This deity was already known in the old religion and was paid a special allegiance by Zarathustra's own clan; and in comparison to other deities he was regarded as highly ethical. Ahura Mazda seems to be identical with Varuna, a sky god of vedic religion, who was similarly regarded as a very ethical god.

Ahura Mazda then, is the one who called Zarathustra to his presence, who revealed himself to him as the one and only true God, who instructed him on the true religion appointing him his

¹ Noss, J.B., *Man's Religions*, p. 440.

prophet and sending him to teach men that true religion which was “the final and perfect religion”.²

Among his other attributes, Ahura Mazda is the creator and sustainer of all things, he is supreme in all things, he is perfect truth, goodness, justice and wisdom. He is also omniscient, all seeing and most mighty. The Avesta, later writings of Zoroastrian scriptures, describe Ahura Mazda “the creator, radiant, glorious, greatest and best, most beautiful, most firm, wisest, most perfect, the most bounteous spirit.”³

Zarathustra denounced all other gods (*daevas*) of the old religion as devils and deceivers who, in alliance with Angra Mainyu (Evil Spirit) seduce people to do evil and turn them away from the true religion of the worship of Ahura Mazda alone.

Ahura Mazda, later known as Ormazd, is one. But he also has another divine being, very closely associated with him and through whom he expresses and accomplishes his will and purposes. This is Spenta Mainyu (Holy Spirit). Besides Spenta Maninyu, other divine agents of Ahura Mazda are mentioned in Zarathustras teaching as presented in the Gathas. The most important of these are the Amesha Spenta (the immortal holy ones). Six principal ones are mentioned: Vohu Manah (Good thought), Armaiti (Piety) and Ameretat (Immortality). As is clear from the translations, the first two can be regarded as Ahura Mazda’s attributes, while the other four are his gifts to men. But in Zarathustra’s thought, they seem also to be personified and represented as divine forces with the possibility of personal relationship with them. As such they have also been referred to as Ahura Mazda’s archangels. Vahu Manah, for instance, was the archangel who appeared to Zarathustra in his initial revelation and conducted him to Ahura Mazda’s presence.

This doctrine of divine beings who are however not separate and independent of Ahura Mazda but are rather his agents and modes

² Ibid, p. 441.

³ Hume, R.E., *The World’s Living Religions*, p. 209.

of his self-expression, makes Zarathustra's conception of God a monotheism with rich diversity within it. Ahura Mazda is one, but with various and diverse modes of self-expression and activity.

Zarathustra's Dualism

Besides his unique ethical monotheism, Zarathustra taught at the same time a dualism which is seen as a more special characteristic feature of his teaching than his monotheism.

He taught the existence of two powerful rival cosmic spiritual principles right from the beginning of the universe, one good the other evil. These were Spenta Mainyu (Holy Spirit) and Angra Mainyu (Evil Spirit).

They are represented in later Zoroastrian scriptures as having been twin spirits. Zarathustra seems to have regarded them as having originated from Ahura Mazda (perhaps as two sons of one father). Their great opposition of nature and character originated in the exercise of their power of freedom of choice. Spenta Mainyu chose good, truth and right – that is he acted according to the will of Ahura Mazda, who is himself perfect wisdom and goodness. Spenta Mainyu is pictured as having a very close relationship with Ahura Mazda. For this reason, in later tradition we find him identified with Ahura Mazda, also called Ormazd.

Angra Mainyu (also called Ahr Fiman later) on the other hand chose evil, untruth and falsehood, that is, acted in complete opposition to Ahura Mazda and his will. There is thus right from the beginning of the universe a cosmic, spiritual – ethical struggle between Ahura Mazda (or Ormazd) with his Holy Spirit, Spenta Mainyu (and these two came to be identified later as already noted), on the one hand, and Angra Mainyu (who also has aliens in the *daevas* or evil spirits), on the other.

This cosmic conflict between good and evil, truth and untruth light and darkness and order and chaos which originated in the spiritual realm is characteristic of nature and existence, and is especially significant in man's soul. However, there is no idea of

the fall or corrupted human nature as in Christianity. Rather, the greatest emphasis is laid on freedom of choice both in the spiritual realm and in the human realm. It is true that Angra Mainyu and his allied evil spirits (*daevas*) are always busy seducing men and persuading them to depart from the true religion of Ahura Mazda and the moral life and to follow false religion and evil ways of life and conduct. Yet man still has complete freedom of choice. Again Ahura Mazda through his Holy Spirit (Spenta Mainyu) and his other divine agents, especially Vohu Manah (Good thought), always shows and guides them to know what is right, good and true. The wise choose what is right and thus ally themselves with Ahura Mazda in this spiritual-ethical cosmic conflict which will go on until the end of time, when Ahura Mazda will completely overcome Angra Mainyu (Shaintam or Satan) according to some later traditions) and his allied evil forces.

It should be noted here that Zoroastrian dualism is unique, especially when we examine it in contrast with the other major form of dualism, Manichaeism. This was a dualistic system or religion founded by a Babylonian named Mani (or Manes) 216-276 AD. It taught that matter or the material world is inherently evil and the seat and source of evil, the realm of Satan as opposed to the spiritual realm. There is an eternal cosmic struggle between the two. Realism original text undeaf and salvation of the human soul or spirit is seen in terms of liberation and escape from entanglement with and domination by the material physical aspect of reality. Asceticism is one of the main ways of achieving such liberation and salvation.

In the Zoroastrian dualism, on the other hand, the spiritual realm is not wholly good just by virtue of being spiritual. Indeed, it was in the spiritual moral choice of the original spiritual beings, Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, that evil originated, as already noted, as also did the dualism and the cosmoic spiritual ethical conflict.

Thus in Zarathustra's teaching the material or physical world (as well as the spiritual world) is inherently good, being Ahura Mazda's creation. The material aspect of reality therefore is not despised and evil, as is the case in Manichaesim, and there is no asceticism. Rather, as Ahura Mazda's creation, the material aspect of reality is regarded with reverence and respect and is to be used and enjoyed wisely and responsibly.

Ethics in Zoroastrianism

It should be clear by now that Zarathustra's teachings constituted a highly ethical religious system. The underlying principle of Zoroastrian ethics (which are elaborately worked out later after Zarathustra's death) is the teaching that in the spiritual-moral struggle between good and evil, true and lie, light and darkness, a struggle which extends into man's heart, man has complete freedom of choice. The wise person will choose good and not evil; he will thus side with the forces of good and with Ahura Mazda against the forces of evil and Angra Mainyu. It is in this way that every person should play his part in this cosmic struggle, by always thinking good thoughts, speaking good words, and doing good actions. Accordingly the highest virtue in Zoroastrianism is purity of thought, words and deeds, as well as ceremonial purity. The latter was important particularly in relation to the ceremonial of the adoration of the sacred fire (Zarathustra had done away with most of the ceremonial aspects of the old religion). It was a gift of Ahura Mazda to mankind and symbol of him as god of light, as well as a symbol of purity and grateful warmth. The sacred fire had to be kept burning and should not go out. Nothing polluted or impure was to come close to it.

“At every offering to thy fire, I will bethink me of right so long as I have power.”⁴

⁴ Noss, J.B., *Man's Religions*, p. 445.

Another point stressed in Zarathustra's ethics is that the good man (of good thoughts, good speech and good deeds) also recognizes and accepts the good and true religion which the prophet Zarathustra preached. In addition the good are willingly engaged in practical activities which promoted the welfare and progress of the people, for example in good progressive agricultural activities.

Zoroastrian Scriptures

Zoroastrian scriptures are known as the Avesta (perhaps meaning knowledge). The many different writings which make up the Avesta, four important parts are still extant. These are described below:

- (a) The Yasna: a collection of liturgical writings. The Gathas are the most important and perhaps the oldest of the Yasna collection. They are hymns and poems, written in the first person, in an ancient dialect. They are believed to have been spoken by Zarathustra himself. Besides other things, they contain his prophetic call, and his revelation from Ahura Mazda. They are the most important source of information on Zarathustra's life and thought.
- (b) The Visparad: invocations to the various Lords, used at festivals.
- (c) The Yasts or Yashs: a collection of sacrificial hymns of praise to specific spirits or divinities.
- (d) The Vendidad: law of ritual purification.

Zoroastrian Ideas of Death

At first Zarathustra seems to have entertained a hope of the final history of the forces of good over evil and the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness here on earth. But later he saw this final triumph of good over evil as taking place in the next world, beyond death and at the end of the present world order.

Three saviours are mentioned, who would come before the end, at intervals of 1000 years. These are Aushedar, then Aushedar-Mah, and finally Saoshyant. Each would be a supernatural descendant of Zarathustra and would, like him, have miraculous births with a 15-year-old virgin mother. The last of the saviours, Saoshyant, would prepare for the final victory over forces of evil, and for the resurrection of the dead which would then take place.

Judgement of the individual takes place not long after death, and one's fate is then fixed until the general resurrection at the end of the present world order. The judgement takes place at Bridge of the Separator (the Chinvat Bridge) which crosses over the abyss of Hell to Ahura Mazda's paradise. Hence at this bridge, the soul's record is read and one's deeds weighed, the good deeds against the bad. If the good deeds outweigh the bad, the soul, guided by Zarathustra, crosses the bridge without difficulty to Ahura Mazda's paradise, a place of eternal spiritual bliss, joyous companionship and songs.

The soul whose evil outweighs the good is not able to cross the bridge and falls over into hell below, a most foul-smelling place, without light, with frightful noises, yet terrible loneliness and other types of punishments.

These ideas were not fully formulated until after Zarathustra's death. However, their roots and basic thrust were contained in Zarathustra's teachings.

These and related Zoroastrian teachings had an important influence on corresponding ideas in Judaism, especially when the Jews were under the rule of Persians and Greeks, and when Zoroastrianism (or the Religion of the Magi as it was also called) was the dominant religion in the Persian Empire. Mainly through Judaism, Zoroastrian influence later found its way into Christianity and later still into Islam.

Modern Zoroastrinism: The Parsis

As a result of Muslim conquest of Persia and neighbouring areas, Zoroastrinism was weakened although it continued to be tolerated as one of the religions of 'a Book' (along with Christianity and Judaism). Later, problems seem to have increased, probably from Muslim pressures and many Zoroastrians migrated from Persia. They finally got to India, where other emigrants joined them later. They settled in Bombay and western India, where the greater percentage of preent-day Zoroastrians called the Parsis (earlier spelt Parsees) are still to be found.

Their total number is about 150,000. About 30,000 remain in Iran, known also as Gabars. In Kenya, there were about 270 Parsis in 1972.⁵

The Parsi religion is no longer missionary, and does not allow non-Parsi visitors into their places of worship.

The places of worship are called doors of Mithra, or fire temples. The sacred fire is always kept alight in the inner chamber of the temple. Worshippers bring offerings and receive ashes from the sacred fire. Prayers are also made at home, early in the morning and at night.

The Parsis have a unique way of disposing of their dead. The corpses are not buried or cremated as this would desecrate the earth which is holy. Corpses are therefore placed on slabs high up in tall circular towers (towers of silence); where vultures lick them clean; the birds then drop the bones on the lime below.

The Parsis are known for their industriousness, a high ethical sense and social concern. The religion is showing signs of seeking to introduce some reform to keep up with modern changes.

⁵ *Kenya Churches Handbook*, p. 314.

Activity

1. Describe the nature of God in Zarathustra's thought.
2. Discuss the notion of divine agents and their relation with Ahura Mazda.
3. Give the main differences between Zarathustra's dualism and that of manichaeism.
4. Comment on what you understand to be two cardinal principles of Zoroastrian ethics.
5. Comment on the characteristic and significance of the Gathas.
6. Discuss the salient features of Zoroastrian eschatology.
7. Give some illustrations to show that Zarathustra's religion was not a complete innovation on his part.
8. What do you understand by the *daevas*?
9. Explain the meaning and significance of Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu in Zarathustra's thought.
10. Explain the role of man in the cosmic struggle between Good and Evil in Zoroastrian ethics.
11. What do you understand by Saoshyant?

