

# DUALISM IN CHRISTIANITY AND ZOROASTRIANISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Nov 29, 2017; updated May 20, 2018

After reviewing major dualistic trends in Christianity, in another work, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991), Jeffrey Burton Russell concludes: “Christianity cannot be flatly defined as a nondualist religion, for several reasons. (1) The differentiation between monism and dualism is seldom clear in any religious tradition. Monist religions are often polytheist and often allow for manifestations of both good and evil in their gods. Sometimes this moral ambivalence is expressed in a struggle between “good” and “evil” gods, both of which proceed from the one divine principle; sometimes it is expressed in the two natures of one deity, such as the Hindu Kali, who is both destroyer and creator. At the opposite end of the spectrum, even an extreme dualist religion such as Mazdaism has some monist elements, the Mazdaists always assumed a predetermined victory of the good spirit over the evil one, and they frequently postulated behind the two principles of good and evil a single ambivalent principle that generated both. Few if any religions are purely monist or purely dualist. (2) Even when terms are redefined so that “dualism means a modified, mitigated dualism, Christianity is not simply a monist religion. Though Christianity has insisted historically upon the unity and omnipotence of God, it has granted great power to the Devil, God's opponent, a power not enormously less in degree than that granted by the Mazdaists to the evil Ahriman; it has held beliefs very similar to the Mazdaist idea that the cosmos was wracked by a struggle between a good spirit and an evil spirit. (3) Anthropological dualism has to be distinguished from cosmic dualism. Anthropological dualism is largely Greek in origin and was most sharply expressed in the Orphic belief in a tension between soul and body. Christianity drew upon this belief. (4) The struggle between Gnostic and less dualist factions in the first two-and-a-half centuries of Christianity cannot be read historically as a struggle between heresy and orthodoxy, since orthodoxy had not yet been defined. To image a struggle between church and antichurch at that time is to impose later theological ideas upon the period—and to take the polemics of some early writers too seriously. Both sides—or to be more accurate, the variety of sides—viewed themselves as Christian. Only gradually did one set of opinions win out over the others and become the accepted, orthodox, “Catholic” position. Early Christianity thus understood included views that were strongly dualist, and many early Christians who were not Gnostic showed strong dualist tendencies. Thus the perennial appearance of

dualist views and dualist “heresies” throughout the history of Christianity was not the intrusion of strange, eternal ideas, but rather the upwelling of dualist views inherent in Christianity from the beginning.” (pp. 159-161).

Nevertheless, after reviewing seven major objections to belief in the Devil, Burton concludes: “I have argued throughout however, that the Christian view seems to meet the question head on and more frankly than other traditions.” (p. 221). As he finds so much commonality between Zoroastrian and Christian dualist beliefs, as seen already, his view here could perhaps apply to both. See my article on Zoroastrian Dualism for more of it dispels the notion of it being an extreme dualism as is wrongly, though uniformly held so far affinity between the two traditions. Moreover, the Zoroastrian dualism may perhaps (and I say perhaps as frankly we do not have all the answers in this matter), or more likely, it may explain natural “evil” better than perhaps most other traditions since Russell holds God quite responsible for natural “evil” as it does not attribute natural “evil” or any evil whatsoever to God nor to Angra Mainyu very explicitly, but implicitly, if not explicitly, linked it with mankind’s mission to bring about “Frashokereti--final renovation (Yasna 30:11) by removing all Angra (evil) elements from the world: “The distinction between moral and natural evil is not all clear as it may first appear. If evil is harm done willingly and knowingly by one sentient being to another, then God may be held responsible for the natural evil he inflicts upon us. We do not hesitate to call a man evil who knowingly inflicts agony and torment on an old lady or a child; but God apparently inflicts agony and torment upon millions of old ladies and children. We evade the problem by defining God as good and then arguing that by definition God must have had a good reason for his actions. In fact we simply do not know. But it is odd that we do not hold God to the basic moral standards to which we hold one another.” (p. 200).

The question of holding God to the basic moral standards we apply to one another does not arise in the Zoroastrian theology on dualism in view of its concept of Frashokereti--Yasna 30.9, 34.15, 46.19 and 51.6.

Many Zoroastrian writers have expressed similar views. For instance, Sir Rustom Masani posits that “man is a coworker and a fellow combatant on the side of Spenta Mainyu, the Beneficent Spirit.” What he adds can be found in the writings of many other Zoroastrians, including mine on this subject, but also in their deeds: Not only men but the entire creation has to rise from the abyss of imperfection to the summit of perfection. During this process social wrongs have to be adjusted; social justice has to be rendered; society

as a whole has to be regenerated; the world has to be redeemed.” (*Zoroastrianism – The Religion of the Good Life*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, India, 2003, pp. 97-8). Masani asserts that Zoroastrian Dualism, far from inducing a belief in cosmic dualism, served to reinforce the belief in uncompromising monotheism, which was the keynote of his creed.” It is God's wish that (wo)man on earth “should purify, renovate and restore to its pristine purity what is spoiled in creation by the Evil Spirits.” (p. 101). What he notes in the Preface vividly brings out the notion of Frashokereti despite his not explicitly mentioning it not unlike other Zoroastrians of his time, as it had become deeply embedded in the Zoroastrian psyche throughout the ages: “Constant endeavor to conquer evil builds character; during the incessant struggle against the forces of evil are developed traits of character such as strenuous effort, industry courage, justice, truthfulness, self-improvement, and self-sacrifice. To cultivate these qualities is, therefore, a duty enjoined by the Prophet on all his followers, and no religious ideal or injunction could invest life with greater dignity or help a man in getting nearer God more than this battle-cry to resist evil and to fortify one's self with an armour knit with those virtues which are essential to secure the salvation not only of one's own self, but of mankind generally. (p. 13).

Since Mazda has created this world for the very purpose of making (wo)man perfect like Him, (Yasna 34.1) by bringing about Frashokereti moral and physical evils in the world, He cannot be held responsible for natural evil. It is up to mankind to find ways to counter and remove all evils in the world and modern science is doing it. Masani also hints at how these beliefs have been translated into actual practice by the modern Zoroastrians. (p. 14).

Creation has no beginning, which means Mazda and Spenta Mainyu are primeval but destructiveness (Angra Mainyu) comes into existence only when human beings enter the stage of creation and therefore cannot be primeval. Thus, the two Mainyus are not equal to start with. Since the Gathas address only the moral evil and not natural evil, Angra Mainyu's connection with the world could only begin with human existence on the earth and not prior to it, unlike in the case of Spenta Mainyu. The Gathic Yasna 44.5 makes it so clear that Mazda creates both light and darkness that some scholars even posit that it may have inspired Isaiah's assertion of Yahweh's supremacy as I have shown elsewhere. Due to alien influences and lack or loss of knowledge about the Gathic Avesta, Spenta Mainyu, as we have seen was identified with Ahuramazda, as common man mostly knew God, Spenta Mainyu being such a unique concept then as now. Thus, Gathic dualism comes close to representing Christian dualism reviewed here and bears a remarkable resemblance to it.

## JEWES AND ZOROASTRIANS – JACOB NEUSNER'S FINDINGS

The legendary Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner also states that “no two religions have more in common” than Judaism and Zoroastrianism and even though he too has written a book on comparing these two traditions, he admits it is a “rather restricted comparison” and “stands only at the threshold of a much more sustained and systematic comparison.” (p. 5). (*Judaism and Zoroastrianism At The Dusk of Late Antiquity: How Two Ancient Faiths Wrote Down Their Great Traditions*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1993). He notes that these two traditions lived side by side for at least a thousand years “in the same country - Zoroastrian Babylonia -” and “under an enduring political arrangement: the Zoroastrians running the state, the Jews their own affairs, the one seldom interfering with the other, the other seldom troubling the one.” (p.4). However, he explicitly states that he is not drawn to this work to “undertake a common literary task” but for “providing a hitherto unseen perspective on the Bavli,” that is, by comparing it with the Pahlavi works of the ninth century that tried to accomplish the same goal the Bavli tried to do by offering “the acute detail of concrete situations and everyday problems.” Both try “to summarize and restate theology and law in the here and now of what the faithful are to do this morning. The concreteness of the two writings, their focus upon specific problems and disinterest in vast abstractions—these, too, show us different people trying to solve the same sort of problem, each group in its own context” (p. 7). Neusner rests his case there and does not evince any need to analyze his data further and try to seek any possible inter-relations between them as more recent Jewish scholars have done, as already reviewed.

It is worth noting that the sheer volume of all the Zoroastrian writings “vastly exceed the Judaic counterpart.” (p. 24). Neusner as usual accomplished what he has set out to do splendidly. However, as it does not pertain to what we are set out to do here, there is little scope for including it here. It is rather disappointing that even when Neusner finds a similarity with the Rivayat's ruling in the Talmud's explanation for the Mishnah's rule assigning equal rights to daughters for certain inheritances vis-a-vis to sons, Neusner's objective ends there and then (p. 97), unlike what other, more recent scholars more familiar with the Pahlavi language have attempted, as already seen, by screening it further and discovering possible underlying connections between the two.

## SIMILARITY IN CHRISTIAN AND ZOROASTRIANS READILY RECOGNIZED EVEN IN THE EIGHTEEN CENTURY AT THE VERY FIRST ACQUAINTANCE

Inspired by Voltaire's ardent assumption of finding a rebuttal of Christian beliefs in Zoroastrianism, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805) traveled through India for five years (1755-6). He landed in Calcutta on the east coast of India and proceeded all the way to Surat on the western coast, despite being robbed and harassed on his way there. In Surat he learnt from the Parsi *dasturs* what they knew of the Avesta, procured from them a number of manuscripts, and attempted a rough translation of the Avesta. On returning to Paris, he deposited in the Bibliotheque du Roi the manuscripts he had brought back with him. He also published his translation of the Avesta as well as several essays on the religion of the Parsee. However, as per Encyclopedia Iranica (Volume 10, 2001, p. 163), "His refusal to find anything anti-Christian in the Avesta disappointed the Encyclopedists, including Voltaire and Diderot who, have been eager to exploit his work as a polemical weapon against Christianity, gave it a poor reception," per Schwab, *Vie d'Anquetil-Duperron*, Paris, 1934, p. 96. However, Voltaire praised Anquetil-Duperron for his courage to speak the truth as he found it. Such a stand by Anquetil-Duperron is remarkable even when he was not privy to all what we know about Zoroastrianism today and yet he may have been able to detect and sense much commonality between the two faiths, as his work later on paved the way for studying Zoroastrian elements in many Christian beliefs. It speaks volumes for the affinity between the two traditions.

## GAHANBAR

Gahanbar, erroneously called Gahambar by the Parsis, is the Pahlavi word for the celebrations of the six seasons in the Zoroastrian calendar. The Avesta calls them *yairyā ratavo* (yearly times), meaning, "(appointed) time" (MacKenzie, 1970, pp. 264-66). They are referred with their names in Yasna 2.2 and Visperad 2.9): 1. Maidyoī.zaremayā (midspring); 2. Maidyoī sham (midsummer); 3. Paitin.shahyam, (bringing in the corn); 4. Ayathrima (homecoming); 5. Maidyairyā (midyear); 6. Hamaspathmaedaya which has no generally accepted meaning but is often translated as two middle paths rendered same or equal. The first, the third and the fourth pertain to those engaged in farming whereas the second and fifth represent the solstices which were important for reckoning time by the sun. As the winter solstice is called "midyear" it suggests that

originally the new year coincided with the summer solstice.

Along with Nowruz the Gahanbars were the holiest days of the Zoroastrian year and their observance alone was obligatory. This holiness was conferred on them through each being associated with one of Ahura Mada's seven creations, in the order in which these were brought into existence. Following the Zoroastrian cosmology the first festival celebrates the creation of the sky, the second of water, the third of earth, the fourth of plants, the fifth of beneficent animals, the sixth of mankind and the seventh (Nowruz) of fire. Only Nowruz has real doctrinal justification as the "new day" was celebrated at the spring equinox, when the sun, the most powerful representative of the creation of fire starts giving renewed warmth and life to the world. Moreover, Nowruz is the only one among the festivals which has liturgical observances associated with its creation. (Boyce, 1969, pp. 201-12). More, Boyce posits that because of its profound theological significance the festival of Nowruz was established by Zoroaster himself, and his successors adopted the celebration of Gahanbar into Zoroastrianism by associating them to the seven creations (Boyce, 1992, p.105). Hamaspathmaedaya seems to have been a new festival added to make up the number six and to provide a wholly Zoroastrian make-up for what was formerly a pagan feast for the dead observed during the last day of the year. At first all these seven festivals seem to have been one day observances. But problems arose when the Achaemenids adopted a 365-day calendar on the Egyptian model by adding five days before Nowruz. As is often the case people clinged on to the old days of festival based on a 360-day year as well as observing the new ones according to the new 365-day year. Hamaspathmaedaya fell on the last day of the year during its daylight hours and the Fravashis arrive at sunset and were bidden a ritual farewell at the dawn of Nowruz. But the addition of five added days at the end of the year led the faithful to presume they were at their residence for all the five added days which came to be designated *rozan fravadigan*, in Pahlavi the days of the Fravashis or Faraohars.

While the *Afrinagan I Gahanbar* assigns one day to each of the Gahanbar's calendar the *Iranian Bundaheshn* (Ia. 16-22) mentions both days, but regards the first day of Hamaspathmaedaya as the more important because it celebrates completion of an act of creation by Ohrmazd after which He rested for the following five days of *gahanbar*. The duplicated feast days had thus been joined by the time this part of the *Zand* was composed into single six-day observances.

However, the *Sad dar-e-Bondahesh* (I.3-9) states that the Gahanbar festivities lasted only five days, each losing its very first day. Since a tenth century work (25.3) also states the same it shows that

this change had occurred before the 10<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Very likely it may have taken place as a result of a Sasanian calendar reform in circa 500 C.E., when Nowruz was moved from 1 Fravardin to 1 Adar to make it coincide again with the spring equinox. The gahanbar days were also changed forward in order to synchronize them with the proper seasons. This resulted in Hamaspthmaedaya being cut off from its traditional day, 30 Spendarmad and it very likely became totally identified with the five “days of the *fravashis*” or the Gatha days. In the current Iranian tradition it is called simply “the *ga'ambar-e panjivak*, the *gahanbar* of the pentad.” The additional four days were regarded at their introduction with general distrust as “stolen” days and therefore at this juncture the Zoroastrian Persian priests tried to sanctify these days by naming them as the days of the Gathas. The sixth gahanbar was also linked with the Gathas and both were celebrated on the same days. The *Afrinagan I Gathabyo* was compiled for reciting during these five days.

The Visperad, an extension of the Yasna service seems to have been composed essentially for these feasts. The *Afrinagan I Gahanbar* (vv. 3-6) declares that all have the duty to take part in gahanbars by bringing some offering, cattle, or even a stick of dry wood, or, if anyone is destitute, just by their attendance and a prayer in honor of Ahura Mazda. Following the religious service, Gahanbars were celebrated by communal banquets at which the consecrated food was shared, along with wine and merrymaking. These banquets brought rich and poor together, and promoted fellowship, forgiveness and charity to the poor. The Sasanian kings gave lavish banquets for their subjects (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, pp. 436-39; translated by B. Dhabhar, p. 325). Down to our own times Zoroastrians have regularly endowed *gahanbars*, even when they settled in the U.S.A., England, etc.