

Traces of Zoroastrian ideas in Islam consequent to the Arab conquest of Iran

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Marietta Stepaniants also asserts that even though “the elimination of Zoroastrianism as a religious institution did take place, as a cultural entity it has never completely been eradicated. Its ideas were incorporated into the new Islamic culture and have continued up to the present to play such an important role that we are quite justified in saying that the encounter of two cultures has brought about a synthesis. Not only the ideas of Zoroastrianism but some of its customs and practices have become an organic part of life in Islamic Iran, “such as the astral character of the Iranian calendar and the names of the months in it and continued observance of the Zoroastrian New Year festivities. (*The Encounter of Zoroastrianism with Islam Philosophy East and West*, Volume 52, Number 2, April 2002, 159-172, University of Hawaii Press). However, such a cultural continuity is hardly possible if Iranians embraced Islam willingly as she tries to portray as some sign of religious continuity lurks behind it or even leaves the impression of defiantly hanging on to whatever religious traditions they could, as a protest against the invaders, a defiance that even Ayatollah Khomeini could not overcome for the celebration of Noruz even in the late twentieth century despite his utter contempt of it as not in consonance with Islam. In most cases when people enthusiastically change their very ancient religious traditions, if they at all do, they have nothing to do with them at all, unlike the Iranians.

Stepaniants sees considerable Zoroastrian impact on two of the four classical schools of Islamic thought, namely, mystical Sufism-Irfan in Persia and the illuminationist Val-Ishraq, the other two schools being Kalam (theological) and Falsafa (Peripatetic). Such an impact on Sufism is all the more glaring as its dualistic belief had no place in strict, uncompromising monotheism of Islam. As Stepaniants states, Sufis “explained why, although God is omnipotent, both good and evil still exist, employing much of the reasoning and metaphor used by the Zoroastrians.” She quotes Jalal al-Din Rumi’s (1207-1273) Mathnawi (6:378) to substantiate it:

“Nothing can be shown without a contrary to that incomparable King. Therefore....., He made two banners, white and black: one (was) Adam, the other (was) the Iblis (Devil) of the way (to Him). Between these two mighty camps (there was combat and strife and there came to pass

what came to pass.”

What she further notes reflects quintessentially Zoroastrian theology: Sufis believed that “God manifests Himself in contrasting forms, since the dazzling Divine light needs an opposing darkness in order to be fully contemplated. Still, human beings are free and in fact should make their own choice in order to participate on the side of the good in the struggle between good and evil.” While emphasizing the importance of free will (see my various essays on it) in Zoroastrian theology, she notes that “Islam is known for its strong fatalistic tendency. Very much in contrast to the general Islamic attitude toward free will, Sufism praises a person who chooses freely,” praising him as someone with capital who knows how to invest it profitably, but ascribing punishment on doomsday to all those who do not use their free will or misuse it, as per Mathnawi 4:85. This can also be a direct quotation from the Gathas which are based on free will, which leads Stepaniants to assert: “Sufis' explanation as to why the almighty of His own will limits His own power and gives to human beings freedom of will is so reminiscent of Zoroastrian teaching that the former appears to have been borrowed from the latter. She quotes Mathnawi (4:185) which explains how free will is essential for someone with a sword to decide whether he wants to become either “a holy warrior or a brigand” and “when all paths are the right paths, knowledge and wisdom are void of meaning” (6.356).

In the field of ontology Stepaniants finds the influence of Zoroastrian most notable in Ishraqism and in the teachings of its founder, Suhrawardi (1155-1191) and whom, following Arnold Toynbee, she regards as the resurrector of the doctrines of the sages of Persia. She cites Suhrawardi's *Hikmat al-Ishraq-II.1* (“The Wisdom of Illumination”) the Light of lights is “the cause of existence of all beings----It is One, everything is in need of it and carries from It its existence.”

Suhrawardi admits he is following the wisdom of the ancient sages and ranks Zoroaster among Plato and Pythagoras who, as we have seen, were influenced by Zoroastrianism. He “not only utilizes a number of Zoroastrian ideas but uses names borrowed directly from the teachings of Zoroastrianism such as Bahmen as (Good Mind) as nearest to the Light of lights (God), which indeed corresponds exactly to his place in the Zoroastrian hierarchy. She also finds the impact of Zoroastrian dualism, in the *Hikmat al-Ishraq* which describes all existing beings as divided into pairs representing light or darkness (II.2) and either light or lightlessness (II.1). He makes the most vivid and direct reference to Zoroastrianism when he regards fire as “the

most similar to the primary beings” and calls it “the brother of the human light Isfahbad.” It is because of this, he claims, that the Iranians of ancient times appealed to the sacred fire and worshiped it (II.4).”

“Whatever the objectives of the conqueror in its persecution of the adherents of the other culture,” observes Stepaniants, “some sort of cultural synthesis is objectively inescapable. No culture can really be extinguished by external force (although it may be badly damaged). ---It is obvious that despite the “physical” destruction (That is, the expulsion of its institutions, clergy, believers, etc.) of Zoroastrianism, it continues to exist culturally, since many of its notions have become an organic part of some of the most influential trends of Islamic thought. Equally great, if not even more significant, is its impact on Iranian culture in general, and particularly on poetry.”

In conclusion, Stepaniants quotes I.J.S. Taraporewala's concluding remarks in his book, *The Religion of Zarathushtra*, first published in India in 1926 and subsequently in Tehran, Iran in 1965: the Iranians then saw in Zarathushtra “one of the greatest of mankind and the greatest Iranian; and they are beginning to realize that His message, reinterpreted in modern tongue, is to be Iran's gift to humanity.” Even long after the 1979 Iranian revolution, I heard similar tributes expressed by an Iranian Ayatollah while addressing a Zoroastrian audience in Tehran. As regards Iran's claim for a special role in the world, Stepaniants observes that “in order to solidify this claim it must continually return to its ancient past.” She aptly sees “another reason for reaffirming the validity of the Zoroastrian tradition,” as it may provide “ideological or ethical justification in responding to the challenges that Iran will face when it is ready to emerge from its present isolation.” She contends that the socio-economic success of the Parsis in India “proves that, to a greater extent than with others Eastern religions, the teachings of Zoroaster hold certain ideas (such as ethical individuals and the value of material prosperity) that enable its followers to adjust with much greater ease to the realities of a free market economy.” While Zoroastrianism offers much more than this as already shown by various authors such as Kulke, Duchesne-Guillemin, Whitehead and others whom I have often quoted, Iran's ancestral Zoroastrian heritage offers the promise and potential of impacting and contributing even further to Iran's progress in future. This is all the more significant as agreeing with James Darmesteter, she holds the Parsis as “the ruins of a people” and “their sacred books the ruin of a religion” following the Arab invasion of Iran: “There has been no other great belief in the world that ever left such poor and meager monuments of its past splendor.” (*The Zend-Avesta*, Part 1, Vol. 4 of *Sacred Books of the East*).

Stepanians reviews opposing views about the conversion of Iranians to Islam by the Arab conquerors – one by an Iranian Muslim scholar, Aga Poure Dawood and another by a Parsi scholar, I.J.S. Taraporewala – the former maintaining that Iranians were converted by force and the latter refuting it, relying on “the indifference of the Ummayyads and the conscience observance, by the Abbasids, of the tolerance prescribed towards non-Muslims who were “Peoples of the Book,” (p, 163). It is surprising why she relies in this regard so often on Taraporewala who was an eminent Gathic scholar but hardly an acknowledged historian basing his opinion in this particular regard on well researched facts and/or providing references for it. He was a former principle of my school and later I came to know him fairly well. He was extremely gentle and mild mannered who saw only the positive side of the world and a firm believer in the school of Theosophy, then so much in vogue among the Parsis, which, like another Parsi theosophist, G.K. Nariman, led him to respect and see all religions in positive light only. He simply could not bring himself to desert his Theosophic tenets. However, it is not clear to me if and when Zoroastrians were accepted as “People of the Book” and even in our own times the Ayatollahs are deriding them in various ways. Moreover, Stepanians herself contradicts Taraporewala’s claim when she observes: “the real persecution of Zoroastrians ... began under the Abbasids (752-804) under whose rule the temples and sacred-fire shrines of the Zoroastrians were destroyed. The status of Zimmi was taken from the Zoroastrians and they were now called KAFIRS (non-believers). The Islamic clergy who were themselves of Iranian origin played a considerable role in this persecution.” (p. 166). My extensive research on this subject confirms her views but the Zoroastrians did not fare any better under the Umayyads either, or for that matter alas, under any Muslim rulers.

It is gratifying to find that Marshall G.S. Hodgson, a historian so sympathetic to Islam, also concurs with Stepanians when he notes that “a civilization—and a given society carrying a given complex of cultural traditions—is rarely so well definable an entity that it can be said to have 'fallen' in the same sense in which a temple may collapse or a human being die. The civilization of the Sasanians died a slow death at the hands of the Muslims, but at the same time may be said to have been transmuted, re-invigorated, and extended at precisely the same hands.” (*The Venture of Islam*, Volume Three, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1974, p. 412).