

## THE DEATH OF AHRIMAN

### **CULTURE, IDENTITY AND THEOLOGICAL CHANGE AMONG THE PARSIS OF INDIA by Susan Stiles Maneck**

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#### **A critique by Dr. Kersey H. Antia Orlando Park, Illinois**

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The author is a Bahá'í, who has also written about conversions of Zarathushtis and other minorities to Bahá'ism in Iran. Originally she wanted to study the relations between Parsis and Iranis in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, "the sources (she) required either had not been properly preserved, or proved unavailable in other ways" and she "needed a clear picture of what had preceded it" which is rather surprising in view of the detailed exchanges between Maneckji Hataria, Pandeys and Parsi sethias just a century ago.

### **Hindu/Muslim Influence**

However, these problems become even more acute when she decides to demonstrate that Hindu and Muslim milieu in which the Parsis lived for centuries "have *completely* (all emphases mine) transformed their religion's distinguishing features" and "modernity continued" this process. "Hinduism" she says "primarily affected Parsi practices and social systems," like castes. However, she compromises her thesis: "But caste never defined the Parsis' choice of vocation as it did those of other Indians," an assertion she makes repeatedly. Moreover, her thesis that "like Hindu castes, Parsis refused to inter-dine or intermarry with those outside their community, and prohibited the conversion of outsiders" begs the question whether the caste system of the Hindus left them no other option. Moreover, in Iran itself, Zarathushtis did not inter-dine or intermarry with outsiders, which is common knowledge and is well documented in various Pahlavi books and Rivayats. [*See also Conflict and Cooperation by Jamsheed K. Choksy.*] There goes her claim for Hindu influence, which was mostly confined to external matters only.

Her claim that "the impact of Islam was felt primarily in the area of theology" cannot stand scholarly scrutiny. Harder yet to swallow is: "Periods of economic prosperity created conflicts in which laymen sought to undermine priestly authority by appealing to (Iranian) priests," and when they failed in this task, Parsis "began to turn towards other outsiders as final authorities, at

first Islamic, and later European.” “Eventually (Parsis) adopted the methodologies of higher criticism by which Europeans studied the Zarathushtri religion and accepted their findings,” which is rather misleading as even though Parsis gratefully learned the Avestan grammar and scientific methodologies from Europeans, they rejected the Christian scholars’ tendency to portray the religion of Zarathushtra merely as a forerunner of Christianity from Darmesteter’s to our own times, Rev. Moulton and Haug being outstanding but not the only examples. Recently even Helmut Humbach was forced to revise his Gathic translations that were found untenable by Parsi scholars. Dr. I.J.S. Taraporewala’s rejection of his own teacher Spiegel’s Gathic interpretation is another notable example.

## Theology

Maneck claims: “Theology has *never* been the preeminent concern of Zoroastrians, who historically have placed more emphasis on practice than on doctrine” [p. 2]. This is an utter insult to Prophet Zarathushtra who was the first to present mankind with a very sublime and sophisticated theology in the Gathas which nothing but a revelation by God could have produced. Moreover, his theology itself uniquely endorses action and practice of religion in everyday life.

The knowledge of Zarathushti theology was so pervasive in Achaemenian times that even the Greeks were able to know and represent it well in their writings, and people in far-off Palestine and Asia Minor were even able to adopt many, if not most, of Zarathushtrian eschatology. Sassanian priests knew their theology well enough to argue with Christian fathers as is borne out by the Pahlavi literature and the post-Sassanians, too, had to know their theology very well to argue with their Muslim masters, which too is evident from the Pahlavi texts. Even the early European travelers were able to know what the Zarathushti theology was then. (See my forthcoming work on the influence of Zoroastrianism on the Judeo-Christian tradition.)

One has to understand the very unique nature of Zarathushti practices as Zarathushti theology is so intricately woven into Zarathushti practices that they often become, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Sudreh Kushti is only one such example. [see my article on the *Navjote Ceremony*, *FEZANA Journal*, Winter 1997.] Thus, as long as a Parsi wore Sudreh-Kushti, which everyone invariably did in the past, they well knew its basic theological underpinnings and implications, which have not been hard to follow.

Maneck’s argument that “there has been less continuity in Parsi beliefs than has hitherto been assumed” runs counter to the various findings of Mary Boyce who has spent a lifetime studying Zarathushtis. The truth may perhaps lie in the middle. If Parsism “is a matter of identity rather than of belief or practice”

[p. 8], as she asserts, then how did the Parsis put into practice various Zarathushti ideals and come to be admired for them, even when they were totally unaware of the European research and methodology? A suppressed, subaltern, or subplanted ancient people of course may not find it easy to give top priority to the luxury of indulging in theological discussions, but if it survives over millennia, it is self-evident that it surely has somehow managed to keep its basic belief alive, and succeeded in securing the allegiance of its adherents, which is hard for a foreigner to judge, primarily from written evidence which she admits is often hard to find; and even so, use it subjectively and selectively to prove her biases.

### **Parsis leave Iran for commerce**

Moreover, her assertions that Parsis migrated to India for commercial purposes and “economic factors could still have predominated” and because they settled in Hormuz they must be merchants [p. 16] fail to take into account the fact that the Parsis’ ancestors hailed from Kuhistan where they fiercely fought the Arabs for a hundred years, even after the rest of Iran was subjugated by the Arabs, who spared no cruel means to suppress them. If commercial gain was what they were seeking, they would have found it more profitable to convert to Islam than risk their lives in such large numbers by venturing out to the sea in those days. Nor does any available evidence suggest that all of them were merchants, and many of them settled near villages that were not known for any trade.

Maneck thinks, what was a god to the Hindus was a demon to others, which is untrue and rather simplistic – only the words are switched around, but often both faiths have the same deities, like Mitra, Agni, Nasatya, Apam Napat, Vayu, Hwar, Varuna, and many more.

### **Criticism of the Parsi Priesthood**

She maintains that the initial perceptions of Iranian priests about Parsi priests “depended upon information provided by Parsi laymen” [p. 36]. However, this is utterly impossible, as it was only the priests who did all the writing in those days, including even the correspondence between one Parsi and another. She also maintains that the first Rivayat (referring to questions sent by Parsi priests and laymen to Iranian priests for their learned opinion and guidance in religious and ritual matters and replies received from them) did not come from priests, but from a layman, Changa Asa, simply because the Iranians address him first before addressing the priests, which is mainly due to the enormous esteem in which Navsari priests themselves held him for helping them out in their hour of need, and has nothing to do whatsoever, with priestly power. As a matter of fact, priests and laity always join forces in times of

crises, and as she herself admits, “Later Rivayats typically address the priesthood first” [p. 35]. Her assertion that “The Iranian priests appeared to have been quite shocked by the general ignorance of the Parsi priests” [p. 36] is an overkill, and she admits in the same sentence that the high priests knew the religion well. What the Iranians perhaps were shocked by, is the different, perhaps more liberal, practices adopted by Parsis because of their different milieu, and not by “the deficiencies in (their) learning” [p. 36]. Moreover, few know that Parsis’ ancestors in Kuhistan were rather notorious for being self-willed, and not submitting to the dictates of even the Sassanian prelates. There are thus utmost hazards in interpreting history without knowing all its antecedents.

“When priests became the predominant economic force within the Parsi community, correspondence between the priesthood of Iran and India themselves became more the rule” [p. 37], she says. No such rule really existed, because priests never could become a predominant economic force in view of the limitations inherent in their profession, though a priest could leave the priesthood and engage in trade, like Rustom Maneck did, and get prosperous. But that does not make the entire priesthood predominant economically, any more than priests like the Tatas and Godrej in our times make the entire priesthood predominant economically.

And to imply that a pious, pro-Mobed layman like Changa Asa would have less goodwill for the priests than Rustom Maneck, is to misinterpret or rewrite Parsi history. Such was Asa’s benevolence to the priests, and such was his allegiance to them, that the priests regarded him as one of their own, even better. She adds to such misinterpretations too: “(Dastur) Kotwal possesses a Harvard education and is generally regarded as a moderate” [p. 46] whereas Dastur Mirza, who, unlike Kotwal, advocated post-funerary prayers for J.R.D. Tata, a Navjotee and a son of an Ervad, as conservative.

## Zurvanism

Although she admits: “Less is known about non-Muslim Iranians who embraced Ishraqui beliefs,” which she nevertheless claims “underpinned the emperor (Akbar’s) cult of Din Ilahi,” [p. 57-58], she claims “the Parsi success at the court would have been, as the *Mahyar Nameh* suggests, directly related to the Parsis’ ability to utilize the terminology of the Ishraquiyan,” which is hard to understand as Parsis were too far away from Delhi and too busy eking out a living to be even aware to it.

To add to this confusion, she relies on *Dabistan*, a text of dubious validity, which has little to do with the religion of Zarathushtra. She herself quotes Denkart as opposing Zurvanism. And yet she writes: “If the *Dabistan* correctly represented the teachings presented by the Parsis in Akbar’s court, it would

seem that the Dastur accepted the teachings associated with Zurvanism” [p. 59]. This is all based on ‘if’ and ‘would.’ Just because Zurvan (time) is mentioned in some Zarathushti texts, she feels Zurvanism found its way into the religion of Zarathushtra, which is hard to understand as Zurvan is not mentioned there in any Zurvanite terms. Moreover, Richard Frye has long ago upheld that Zurvanism was never a dominant Zarathushti belief.

## Islamic Influence

More startling is Maneck’s assertion: “Islam, by the time of the composition of the Qissa-yi Sanjan, had affected the very heart of Zoroastrian beliefs” [p. 61]. She reaches this conclusion even after conceding that some “terms might only indicate an adoption of Islamic style, not necessarily the content of Islamic theology.” She sees Islamic influence in the statement of the priest who accompanied Sir Thomas Roe, that Parsis were enjoined not to believe in any other religion; this can be deduced from many an Avestan statement and Rivayat, rather than from Islamic influences. Even though she cannot determine who wrote Dabistan, she does not hesitate to rely on it for drawing unwarranted conclusions.

In a similar vein, she observes: “Most Parsis ... remained largely ignorant of Ishraqi philosophy or of the quasi-Zoroastrian texts and cults that were associated with it. Nonetheless, Gujarati Parsis (as if there were non-Gujarati Parsis, too!) honored those who were able to converse within these circles. Court patronage legitimized local leadership within the eyes of the Parsi community” [p. 69]. How can Parsis honor anyone if they are ignorant about what they are really honoring?

The author’s interpretation of Ashem Vohu as a prayer “invoking the aid of Asha Vahishta, the angel of righteousness” [p. 80] betrays her ignorance about this most basic Zarathushti prayer. She also misinterprets a Zarathushti reference to ‘kibla’ (a consecrated fire) as ‘kaaba’ in Mecca, misrepresenting it as an Islamic influence.

Maneck relies significantly on the book *Dasatir* that a Surti priest brought with him from Iran but “had since (seventeenth century) disappeared” [p. 145], not explaining how a popular work on which her thesis relies could possibly disappear and still continued to influence Parsi Theology.

## Kadmis

Equally unqualified is her portrayal of “the Kadami sect as a lay challenge to the religious oligarchy of the Parsi priests” [p. 149]. She bases this judgment on a questionable assumption that money for printing controversial literature on the calendar issue “could only have been generated from the merchant classes. Unlike the situation in Surat, Bombay merchants were not

predominantly of priestly lineage” [p. 149], which is not true at all, as the Seth family had by then settled in Bombay along with many Ervads such as Tata, Dadabhai Naoroji, Godrej, and other Ervads and Athomanzadehs, not Behdins (lay persons), who were the first to prosper by opting for English education.

There was not a single Athorman merchant left in Surat when the Kadmi controversy appeared in the press. Yes, there were three baronets in Bombay, but each baronet respected the priesthood, and established their own fire temples and religious trusts for priestly performances. They still firmly depended on priestly intervention for their safe passage to heaven, and would have simply regard it a blasphemy to distrust priests.

Moreover, just because the laymen were the first to establish Kadmi fire temples [p. 149], there is no reason to set them against the priests, as without them no fire-temples, nor any ecclesiastical Kadmi observances were ever possible. Besides, only the laymen built almost all of the fire-temples. What she refers to as “the tensions that had existed prior to this between the priesthood and the rising merchant class” [p. 149] is hardly supported by history. Rather, the rise of the merchant class alone led to the proliferation of religious institutions on a scale unknown before, and this promoted the priestly profession.

Since the whole Kadmi matter arrived only as a result of an Irani priest, Jamsheed Velayati visiting priests in 1736 in Surat, and telling them about the Irani calendar for the first time ever, the Kadmis naturally could only depend on Irani priests for guidance, before they changed over to the Kadmi system in 1745, which in no way suggests a distrust of local priests, who only knew the older Shahanshai system, and knew nothing about the Kadmi customs.

Unfortunately, the whole book is replete with such logic masquerading as facts. At best, she sees whatever she wants to see in the Parsi phenomena, even though they often run counter to facts, and even to common sense. Such twisting of facts often becomes so obvious and constant, that even an objective reader is compelled to wonder about the motive of the author, especially as it has never been stated in the text.

One also muses whether by so dexterously and persistently heralding “the Death of Ahriman,” the author who on her own admission in the text, has no previous or genuine interest in the Zarathushti religion, except in the conversion of Zoroastrians to Bahá’ism, is subtly and subliminally sounding the death knell of the Zarathushti religion, by deftly but ever so gently, affably, and suavely stripping it of its core beliefs and features. She uses sophistry, subterfuge, over-large claims, pseudologic skillfully treaded on ‘ifs,’ ‘buts,’ ‘woulds,’ ‘coulds,’ ‘if-then,’ ‘maybes,’ and the like, subjective selection, and biased evidence, and preconceived notions, if not designs, artfully, graciously, and befriendingly passed off as objective evidence based on empirical research,

to the gullible Parsi reader, even while inventing Parsi history and masquerading fiction as fact.

I deeply regret being forced out by limitation of space, to expose further fallacies of Maneck's logic and the tendentious nature of her conclusions. But this review has impressed on me the need to write in greater details, time and funding permitting, about how this book could mislead our youth, and make them easy targets for conversion to other faiths, sans a sound theology, sans a healthy respect for priesthood (which, by the way, Bahá'ís have completely done away with), sans anything that they can call their own, except an ethnic identity, sans adherence at least to their basic traditional practices, rituals, and beliefs in good and evil, and sans a basic knowledge and understanding of their own religion.

Beware of Greeks (or Bahá'ís) bearing gifts.