

MONOTHEISM OR DUALISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Apr 20, 2019; updated Jan 16, 2020

Mary Boyce and her adherents contend that under the influence of Western ideas the Parsis asserted that they were monotheist and not dualist. While this may well be true in some cases, not only those among them well-versed in their lore, such as B.T. Anklesaria, were able to quote the Pahlavi texts for arguing against dualism, but also laymen such as S.A. Kapadia, a barrister-at-law did so. That was long before Anklesaria, in a manner quite reminiscent of Shaul Shaked almost a century later, except that he sees the two “opposing” spirits as also playing a part in man’s role “as a free agent”. The struggle between the two spirits, he warns is not to be confused with the idea of dualism. The Evil Spirit is not endowed with any of the attributes of the Almighty; neither is he placed in opposition to, or made a rival of, God. I have carefully read the exhaustive comments made by Western scholars on this subject, some in favour, and the majority of them against the theory of dualism.

As a great deal of controversy has been raised on the doctrine of two rival spirits, I think it necessary to quote from the Avesta, and also from the later Pahlavi text, to prove that dualism is not one of the doctrines preached by Zoroaster.

“Ahura-Mazda, through omniscience, knew that Ahriman exists...”

“The Evil Spirit, on account of backward knowledge, was not aware of the existence of Ahura-Mazda....

“He [Ahura-Mazda] sets the vault into which the Evil Spirit fled, in that metal; he brings the land of hell back for the enlargement of the world, the renovation arises in the universe by his will, and the world is immortal for ever and everlasting....

“...So it is declared that Ahura-Mazda is supreme in omniscience and goodness, and UNRIVALLED in splendour.

“Revelation is the explanation of both spirits together: one is he who is independent of unlimited time, because Ahura-Mazda and the region, religion, and time of Ahura-Mazda were and are and ever will be; while Ahriman in darkness, with backward understanding and desire for destruction, was in the abyss, and it is he who *will not be*.”

Kapadia quotes Dr. West to support his stand: “The reader will search in vain for any confirmation of the foreign notion that Mazda-worship is decidedly more dualistic than Christianity is usually shown to be by orthodox writers, or for any allusion to the descent of the good

and evil spirits from a personification of 'boundless time' as asserted by strangers to the faith. (Dr. E. W. West, Introduction to *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 18.)

"The evils (are) employed by Angro Mainyus to retard the progress of, and if possible, destroy mankind. It is quite evident, that the sole aim of Zoroaster's teachings is to raise God's best and fairest work – man – to that level of human perfection by good words, good thoughts and good deeds, so as to enlist the services of the Good Spirit." (*The Teachings of Zoroaster and the Philosophy of the Parsi Religion*, Kessinger Publishing, LLC, The Orient Press, London, 1908, pp. 26-28).

Kapadia does not miss the Gathic message underlying with Pahlavi texts: "A good portion of the Zoroastrian theology is directed towards protecting mankind in his efforts to fight against Angro Mainyus and his wicked accomplices.

"That one wish which Ahura-Mazda, the Lord, contemplates, as regards men, is this, that 'Ye shall fully understand Me; for every one who fully understands Me comes after Me and strives for My satisfaction.'" *Dina-i Mainog-i Khirad* (p. 31).

A proper understanding Of Zoroastrian dualism

As Shaul Shaked has shown, the Sasanians were generally not "self-conscious dualists". He sees "very little by way of dualistic assertion" in Sasanian texts nor is dualism mentioned in any Sasanian inscriptions or in any Christian polemics against Zoroastrians. (*Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran*, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994, p. 5.) After reviewing various accounts about this subject, Shaked reaches a "straightforward" conclusion that there were too many varieties of dualism to figure out which one was the standard or official one. (p. 20). As a result of his study he arrives at the conclusion that ethical dualism cannot allow a symmetry of the two powers as the difference between God and the devil is too great to allow them the same rank (p. 22), as I have noted earlier at length. He also adds that the conflict between the two powers is neither very significant in the Gathas or in much of the later Avesta except in the Vendidad which may be the last text composed in Avesta during the early Parthian or late Achaemenid period.

He therefore declares that "the assertion that dualism is the only satisfactory form of religion, may have come about at the end of a long period of contacts and polemics with Jews and later with Christians"

and Manicheans who rivaled with Zoroastrians in propagating dualism. He quotes W.B. Henning as maintaining that “the dualism of Zoroaster as the only logical answer to the problems of the universe, more satisfying to the thinking mind than the one given by the author of the Book of Job.” (Henning 1951, p. 46). He adds Henning himself held that “dualism is by no means a conception of a symmetrical opposition of two powers.” His investigations leads Shaked to uphold that dualism can provide different modes of solution to the problem of evil. (Indeed, Shaked found many different dualistic versions prevalent in Sasanian Iran). His conclusion is worth noting and it seems to support my views expressed as a Magian in my paper on this subject: “Typologically, dualism cannot be considered a separate category of religion. Its kinship with monotheism is so close as to make it necessary to assume that dualism comes into existence only as an intensification of a trait inherent in every monotheism. Monotheism, by its concentration of the cosmic power in the figure of a single divine entity, has to grapple with the problem of evil much more acutely than a polytheistic system, and it must provide an answer which places evil somewhere along the line that leads from God to the cosmos. Every monotheism is, in this sense, a dualism. Every dualism, by the fact that it tends to place evil on a somewhat lower level than God, is, in reality, a monotheism. The difference between them is one of degree, of intensity, of emphasis, not of substance.

“Dualism in its historical manifestation appears to be a complex phenomenon, not merely a juxtaposition of two powers set in opposition to each other. It may come as a disappointment to notice that it contains some ambiguities, but on the other hand it may give us satisfaction to understand it not as an abstract philosophical system, but as a three dimensional historical reality, with all the inconsistencies and uncertainties that this may be expected to entail.” (p. 26).

Since I noted these very same views prior to reading Shaked’s, I was very much gratified to read them as any views countering dualism only invited rejection in view of the firmly entrenched position of the proponents of dualism in our time.

Further evidence supporting Shaked’s thesis on dualism

What Touraj Daryaei notes also supports Shaked’s contention that there were different Zoroastrian sects in Iran such as the sect of Gayomartiya. As Daryaei shows that in the debates between Muslim and Zoroastrians during the Abbasid period “there were several Zoroastrian groups confronting the Muslim religious leaders” and “not

among the non-Zoroastrians and that of a single Zoroastrian “sect”. As Daryaee points out, “the first members of the quddariya were mostly of Mawali descent ----- were directly influenced by Zoroastrian doctrine.” He adds: “the founders of the Basra school of Mu'tazila ----- were all familiar with Zoroastrian doctrine and may have been influenced by it,” for which he refers to H.A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Howard University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p.66 and p.632. Daryaee finds that even “the Gayomartiya were only one of the many sects which are mentioned”. He concludes: “we cannot categorize the Zoroastrian religion in late antiquity or the early medieval period into one or two groups. They may not be real “sects” but certainly they had different views of Zoroastrianism. The religion was not monolithic.” At the same time, as seen above, he provides evidence for some Muslim sects which were influenced by Zoroastrian doctrines, especially the Mu'tazila, which may well reflect the trend of the day on both sides. (See *Atas-e Dorun: The Fire Within*, Volume II, edited by Carlo G. Cereti and Farrokh Vajifdar, 2003, pp. 131-137).

In this very article Vajifdar, irked by Mary Boyce’s “capricious remarks” that Zarathushtra “was a prophet, not a philosopher” (in the 1992 publication of her 1985 Columbia Lectures), assiduously and exhaustively establishes Zarathushtra not only as a philosopher but also as someone who contributed substantially to the development of Platonic and western thought, which leads him to denounce any attempt at describing Zarathushtra’s own teaching as Dualism and rather holds it as “a lofty monotheism which oversaw an ethical dualism based on free will and choice, the prerogatives of all humanity.”

The true nature of dualism in Zoroastrianism

An average Zoroastrian today or in the past has been quite unaware to the nature of dualism in Zoroastrianism, much less about it as expounded in the Gathas *vis-a-vis* in the Pahlavi texts, even though he or she is consciously or unconsciously following religious practices, beliefs and long standing conventions emanating from them which govern most of his or her religious life for millennia.

One aspect of dualism which seems to be have remained constant is God is the author of all good and is not responsible in any way for an evil in the world. This has been true except perhaps during the Zurvanite heresy, that is, if it ever came to be integrated in Zoroastrianism and Zuvan was really accepted as the father of both good and evil, a highly debatable subject indeed.

All the Abrahmanic faiths preach strict monotheism which takes Satan or devil as the instrument of God and working under his sway. Living under the milieu of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam for

centuries, Zoroastrians have at times come to be either influenced by their concept of God or came to regard it as their own in the absence of real knowledge about their own beliefs. So when a German orientalist, Dr. Martin Haug interpreted the Gathic religion as a highly monotheistic system during his visit to Bombay in the 1860s, the Parsi intelligentsia and reformists welcomed it uncritically. Haug was the first scholar to point out that the Gathic dialect was the oldest form of the Avesta and the Gathas were Zarathushtra's own composition. However, while recognizing that the two primeval principles or spirits, Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu were both poles apart from each other he posited that they nevertheless worked under Ahuramazda's supremacy. Those Parsi scholars, especially theosophists, who were guided by the monotheism of Hinduism, also missed out on realizing that the monotheism of the Gathic theology did not lend itself to the absolute monotheism of the Abrahamic faiths. The confusion got more confounded when some Parsis began to believe the since Ahuramazda being all good had no role or responsibility for evil and therefore could not have possibly created an evil spirit, there must have existed two Gods or Spirits – one all-good, the other all-evil, which however cannot be attested from the evidence of the Gathas or the Pahlavi books already reviewed. The Pahlavi texts maintain that Ahriman is uncreated, he is ignorant, he has not material existence of his own he has no substance in reality, he does not create anything, he has no existence but tries to thrive by establishing parasitic existence in man, he has no permanent existence but will be destroyed with his entire evil retinue in the end, etc. In keeping with the Gathic theology, the Pahlavi texts are ever so reticent about who created evil nature, even as they say the evil action of Ahriman is from the evil nature. But then who created evil nature and how has it come from and why? All that the Pahlavi texts can at best assert is: God had no part in creating or sustaining evil as evil came forth from an origin totally other than God. In this regard the Pahlavi texts are quite in accord with the Gathas, which however, never state or even imply that Ahuramazda and Angra Mainyu could ever be on the same plane or be equal as the Pahlavi texts depict them during the *Gumezishn* (Mixture of Good and Evil) period. Pahlavi texts do not mention the choice made by the two spirits between good and evil at the beginning of creation. The opposition in the Gathas is not between Ahuramazda and Angra Mainyu but only between Spenta Mainyu (Beneficent Spirit) and Angra Mainyu (Destructive Spirit), Ahuramazda remaining above the fray, which is quite evident in the Younger Avesta (Yasht 19.146) also but the *Vendidad* (1.1) pits Angra Mainyu verily against Ahuramazda. How did the Pahlavi writers or even Sasanian writers equate Angra Mainyu with Ahuramazda is a puzzlement but some ardent supporters of the type of cosmic dualism manifested in the Pahlavi texts even justify it by arguing that there is hardly any

difference between Ahuramazda and Spenta Mainyu, which is stretching the point too far. If this was really true, why would the Gathas, which are so uniquely logical, never say so or even imply so, but instead differentiate between them distinctly apparently in order to emphasize the ethical dualism (versus the cosmic dualism of the later Pahlavi texts)? These are the main points of departure between the Gathic and Pahlavi texts, though the latter did preserve much of the Gathic version despite being heavily influenced by the Greek, Bablonia, Zurvanite, Agnostic and other influences a millennium later.

Alan V. Williams has translated one such text – The Pahlavi Rivayat Accompanying the *Dadestaan I Dinig* (The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen, H.C. Andersens, 1990). Williams stresses the principle of the absolute dualism of good and evil as central to Zoroastrianism and he describes the Zoroastrian ways of combating evil, which ranges from piously adhering to purity laws which may be implicit but not overemphasized in the Gathas, to practicing righteousness, spiritual wisdom and eschatology which generally fall in line with the the prophet's own Gathic teachings. As I have stated in my humble comments on the *Bundahishn*, when it is all said and done, despite their later vintage which may naturally bear alien influences, the Pahlavi texts are trying in their own medieval way and in their own peculiar concrete thinking and language so distant from the abstract Gathic thought and diction, to mirror the latter as best as they could as they never ever question the significance of the Gathas. Now that we have fortunately come to learn more about the Gathas and Gathic language than was possible for the Pahlavi writers, we could understand them better if we too place the importance of the Gathic precepts of the prophet over everything else if we claim to follow the prophet.

Skjaervo's critique of Zoroastrian dualism

Profs Oktor Skjaervo in his paper "Zoroastrian Dualism," quotes Maradenfarrokch's well-known defense of Zoroastrian dualism to represent the Zoroastrian view point. But he notes: "Nevertheless, the Zoroastrian theologians still had to face that, although the dualist position exculpated god from having permitted sin and evil to come into being, it did not of course, explain why he allowed it to enter his own perfect creation, nor why he let it persist without immediately doing something to get rid of it. The Zoroastrian theologians had answers to it, but hardly that did not restrict god's omnipotence. Thus, in *Bundahishn* (1.57) we find the statement that "Ohrmazd does not think something that he cannot do, while the Foul Spirit thinks what he CANNOT do and even insists on doing it. This limitedness, however, applies to god's essential nature. Thus, it is not possible for a being that is all goodness to preform evil; but this is a limitedness that it would be ridiculous to

regard as an impairment of the deity -Menasce, *Shkand-Gumanik Vichary* 39". (p.75).

As regards Skjaervo's above observation why Ohrmazd allowed evil to enter his creation, I again refer to the Gathic-like response of *Bundahishn* (3:23-24) in which Ohrmazd offers the choice to the Fravashis to either remain imperfect and continue to reside in their protected status in heaven without really learning to fight the temptations and evils of the corporeal world or choose to come down to it and try to be perfect like God by removing all the evil from them and the world, the Fravashis forthright choosing the latter. Unfortunately, however, as this explanation is hardly ever quoted or pro-offered on this subject, myself having arrived at it by chance, it is one of the best answers I could find to explain why the God Lord allowed evil to enter his creation. It was also an act of God's love for the mankind for it involved compromising his own omnipotence until we mortals become perfect like Him, which is quite in harmony with the Gathic goal mentioned in Yasna 34.1, 47.1 and 50.4 and 8.

Skjaervo notes on the same page that "after having been exposed to both Muslim and Christian propaganda some Zoroastrians, especially among the Parsis in India went to far as to deny dualism" which "remains the pillar of the religion". As I have already explained my views on this subject in my thesis on Dualism in Zoroastrianism, I need not dilate on it here, but I once again need to point out that the Parsis seems to have settled on the western coast of India for the silk trade via Ceylon (Sri Lanka) long before the conquest of Iran by the Arabs after which they may have found it safer to stay there, which can be confirmed by the fact that hardly any other Zoroastrian group is known to have settled at least on the western coast of India, though they would have hurried to do so if only they knew about it to escape persecution. There is some evidence of a group of Zoroastrians settled in northern India and ultimately getting absorbed among the Hindus, as I have noted elsewhere. Even if one disagrees with it, there remains the question of when exactly did the ancestors of the Parsis migrate to India after the Arab conquest and whether they had any knowledge at all about the Pahlavi texts and debates about dualism and if they did, how was that possible for a migrating group supposedly on the run all the way from Khorasan to Port Hormazd and then to Div and Sanjan? The Parsi wedding ceremony to this day implicates Nishapur as their origin (which is not the case with other Zoroastrians) which is known for its inhabitants dealing in the silk trade through Sri Lanka (Ceylon and Sogdia) which may explain why Zoroastrian groups are not found on the west coast of India. As J.K. Choksy and others have pointed out already, the Pahlavi writers somewhat overemphasized the dualistic viewpoint as they had long ceased to be aware of the Gathic language teachings

and yet they were suddenly called upon to defend their beliefs *vis-a-vis* the belief in the absolute monotheism of their conquerors and had to do their best in preparing their case even though it meant over-emphasizing their case, as Choksy and others believe, as noted by me already in my thesis on Dualism.