

JEFFREY BURTON RUSSELL'S VIEWS ON DUALISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jul 7, 2020

I find Jeffrey Burton Russell's treatment of the history of dualism so profound and legendary that I thought it helpful to quote it extensively here for the reader to get a good overview of this subject, although I often find myself not agreeing with him:¹ "A revolution in the history of concepts occurred in Iran" when Zarathushtra laid the foundation for the first thoroughly dualist religion. He did not perceive evil as a manifestation of the divine at all the same time but rather as a wholly separate principle at the same time switching from polytheism to monotheism. The latter was not a necessary consequence of his discovery of dualism, for it is possible to posit a pantheon of good deities emanating from one principle and a pantheon of evil gods arising from the other. Indeed, the later Zoroastrians took this position. But although Zarathushtra was certainly monolatrous, insisting that worship could be offered only to Mazda, his monotheism seems to have been shaky. Monotheism is not incompatible with a modified form of dualism that posits a spiritual ruler of evil who is inferior to the spirit of good – such is the Christian tradition. Yet Zarathushtra's spirit of evil, however inferior, has many of the characteristics of a god," (p. 98) which is however true of any concept of devil and in this case it may be true of a much later period. However Russell concludes: "Whether or not Zarathushtra was a monotheist, he was a dualist. Religious dualism posits the existence of two principles. These two principles are not necessarily both divine, or equally divine, or equal in anything. They need not be (though they usually are) antipathetic. They do have to be entirely independent and are usually of separate origin (or of no determinable origin). Thus not everything that exists is created or caused by one principle (what we are accustomed to call the God). Some things are derived from another principle. Each of the principles is absolute in itself, but neither has absolute or omnipotent power," (pp. 98-99), which collides with the insistence even in much later works that Ahriman has no existence or the like. Dualism may vary from the absolute of Zoroastrianism to Zervanism, Gnosticism and Manicheism to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, where dualism almost ceases to exist. "In a footnote Russell adds: "Orthodox Islamic teaching is so monotheistic that it is almost a distortion to place Islam in this category. Nonetheless the ideas of Iblis or Shaitan exist in popular

1 *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1977.

Muslim thought, and Islam is clearly remote from the monism of Hinduism or of Egyptian religion.

All these religions, however different from one another, stand together in their distance from monism. All posit a God who is independent, powerful and good, but whose power is to a degree limited by another principle, force or void. The dualism of Zoroastrianism or of Manicheism is vert; that of Judaism and Christianity is much owing to Iranian influence. The dualism of Christianity and that of Iran differ in one essential respect. The latter is a division between two spiritual principles, one good and the other evil; Christianity borrowed from the Greeks the idea that spirit itself is considered good, as opposed to matter, which is considered evil. But the dualism introduced by Zarathushtra was a revolutionary step in the development of the Devil, for it posited, for the first time, an absolute principle of evil, whose personification, Angra Maiyu or Ahriman, is the first clearly defined Devil.

I find it hard to agree with Russell when he posits that “dualism wrenches from the unity of the God a portion of his power in order to preserve his perfect goodness. Zarathushtra's teaching was a radically new theodicy, and one that is still arguable. As to whether dualism was or is preferable to monism there can be two opinions. On the one hand, if the unity of the God, and therefore of the cosmos and of the psyche, is broken it becomes more difficult for nature and for the psyche, to come to terms with itself.”

Such a possibility had rarely existed at least in the case of dualism in Zoroastrianism as Ahura Mazda's emanations or aspects, Amesha Spentas represent natural elements and benevolent mind and just rules. By insisting upon the struggle of two hostile principles warring for the mind, and by calling for war upon the evil principle, dualism abets repression, rather than healthy acceptance and conscious suppression of violence. This encourages the growth of the psychic shadow, the projection of hostilities, and the increase of destructive behaviour. Dualism may arise from, or at least reinforce, a paranoid schizophrenic experience of the world as divided into good guys (or spirits) and bad guys (or spirits). As a psychologist I find it hard to agree here, and see the need for validating data to give enough credence to it, plus it is not supported by the history of Zoroastrianism and their exceptional tolerance of this subjects as already related by me.

On the other hand, continues Russell, “it offers some advantages. Christianity has always found it difficult to reconcile the God's goodness with his omnipotence; Zoroastrianism preserves the absolute goodness

of the God by sacrificing his omnipotence. In addition, dualism does seem to offer an explanation of the world as we really observe it, a world in which the mixing of impulses to good and impulses to evil is not readily explicable. Much would in fact become understandable if there were a force drawing us to evil as well as one beckoning us to good. Finally, some have argued that the idea in monistic religions of transcending good and evil is both fallacious and immoral. The evils of the world are so many, so great, and so piercingly immediate that they demand not mystical acceptance but the will to take arms against them." But Russell finds it hard to answer the question whether dualistic theodicy really works. The Zervanites maintained that the two entities originated from one ur-principle, which was itself imperfect. But how can such an absolute principle be imperfect? In Zoroastrianism the two principles are totally independent, yet they meet and clash and the good one will inevitably prevail over the evil one. While this is true of much later Zoroastrianism, in Zarathustra's own words, which are preserved in the Gathas humans are called for choosing rightly between good and evil behaviour.

As Russell himself notes while he tries to distinguish between Zarathushtra's dualism and the later Sasanian dualism, perhaps 1000 or 1500 year later: "The conflict between truth and the lie was one of the main sources of Zarathustra's dualism: the prophet perceived Angra Mainyu as the lord of evil, (p. 102) and the Magis later on "modified" his teachings (p. 105). personification of lie." He acknowledges that the modern day theologians highly respect this concept and quotes C. S. Lewis as maintaining that "lie is the worst of sins because it attacks the structure of meaning itself and renders the cosmos unintelligible." Quoting Martin Buber, he holds that lie is possibly, "only after a creature, man, was capable of conceiving the being of truth. ---- In a lie the spirit practices treason against itself." (p. 102). One has to read the Gathas to witness how Zarathushtra has elevated the role of truth versus lie. No wonder Russell upholds Zarathushtra as "the first theologian, the first individual to create a rational system of religion." (p. 104). Compare this with what late Professor Kaikhosrov Irani has maintained in his lecture series of K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Scholarship project.

Russell points out an important fact many writers on the subject have ignored: "The Gathas seem to imply one God, Ahura Mazda, who generates *TWINS* (italics mine for emphasis), Angra Mainyu, the evil spirit, and Spenta Mainyu, the holy spirit.

This notion is a coincidence of opposites resolved in the one" (p. 107), a notion which I have tried to deal with later.

But Russell asks why does he not do it right away if so, instead of allowing its existence for long. Why does he allow it to emerge at all in

the world? The answer lies in the *Bundahishn* (3:23-24) as already seen; indeed, Russell himself explains it. (pp. 108-9).