

Syed Abbas Shah

Ph.D Scholar (NET/JRF)

Centre of Central Asian Studies (CCAS)

University of Kashmir

Religious Beliefs of Ancient Persia before Islam

The Arab contact with Persian culture started long before Islam. With the conquest of Persia by the Muslims the Interaction of Arab and Persian cultures embraced a vast and fascinating field. The second generation of the Persians, after the Muslim conquest, wrote and spoke Arabic as fluently as any Arab. But they retained their own distinct culture. While the subtle, speculative genius of the Persian left an indelible mark on the simple monotheistic religion of Islam, the imaginative mind of the Persian did not fail to influence the language and literature of the Arabs.

It is by no means our intention to attempt any detailed analysis of the many and varied aspects of this problem. The Persian influences which later crystallized into movements of mysticism and scholasticism are best understood in the background of the three significant religions before Islam. We propose briefly to refer to them, for this will help the reader later to establish a connection between the Persian dualism and the Muslim school

of scholasticism which emerged in response to the presence of many sects and creeds against the onslaught of which Islam had to defend itself.

The Persians who were largely Aryans shared with their Indian cousins the traditions of nature-worship. All the manifestations of Nature- a clear blue sky, the life giving light of the sun, fire, winds, and water pouring from the sky were worshipped as divinities. The sun was called God's eye and light was worshipped as the son of God. All the divinities were, however, not good. There were some which were evil, like darkness and barrenness. The Persians had known since antiquity the worship of the God of goodness to whom sacrifices were offered. They had also found the God of goodness in constant conflict with the God of Evil. The good acts of man helped the God of Goodness to fight the God of Evil. Fire was considered a symbol of light which was a divinity manifesting goodness. It was kindled in their temples and was not allowed to be put out, the implication of this ceremony being to refuse an opportunity to the God of Darkness to creep in their temples.

These beliefs were common in ancient Persia until the advent of Zoroaster, the founder of the national religion of Iran. He accepted the fabric of beliefs existing before him, and made them a working basis for his faith which was an Infinite improvement. Although Zoroaster is a historical personality yet the material about him is so scant that it has the effect of presenting him as a

legendary figure endowed with superhuman powers. His period of appearance is so uncertain that various authorities put him between 6000 B.C. and 600 B.C. Professor Jackson, in his excellent study, *Life of Zoroaster*, advances the theory that the prophet appeared in the middle of the seventh century B.C. and died about 583 B.C. at the age of seventy-seven years. According to him, the native country of Zoroaster was Azerbaijan, but the first success he achieved in his mission was in Balkh where he succeeded in converting the King Vishtaspa. In him he found a powerful protector and a faithful disciple. His religion spread from Balkh and later covered the whole of Persia.

Zoroaster taught a new religion based on the Old Iranian or Aryan folk religion which was Polytheistic. He based his religion on two principles, viz, that the world had a special law and natural phenomena and that there was a conflict between opposing forces like light and darkness, fertility and barrenness, etc. Before the appearance of Zoroaster popular divinities such as the war-god and the dragon-slayer and natural elements like fire were worshipped. People prostrated themselves before both the good and the evil divinities. They invoked help from the good gods and offered sacrifices to the evil ones in order to ward off their wrath. Zoroaster subsumed all the evil divinities under a divinity called Ahriman and the good ones under Ahura Mazda. According to him, the two spirits representing good and evil existed since eternity. The Wise Lord, Ahura Mazda Mazda, was,

however, existing even before the world arose, it was from him that the world originated and its course is governed by his foreseeing eye. His guiding spirit is the Holy Spirit which has a will; yet it is not free, but restricted, in this temporal epoch, by its antagonist and own twin brother the Evil Spirit, who, in the beginning, was banished by the Good Spirit by means of the famous ban contained in Yasna and since then has eked out his existence in the darkness of Hell as the principal of ill.

Zoroaster had a holy book, Avesta. The origin of this book as also of the prophet who brought it, is a matter of great controversy. According to the Parsis, the disciples of Zoroaster, Avesta contained twenty-one chapters during the Sasanian period. Only one chapter and some verses have, however, reached us. This is obviously but a fragment of what Zoroaster taught. The Muslims treated the Zoroastrians on the same footing as the people of the Book, i.e. Christians and Jews. The doctrine may be summarized as follows: There are two principal forces of life which have existed since the beginning of creation. One creates all that is pure and good. The other is darkness, filth, death, and produces all that is evil in the world. The permanent conflict between the two spirits begins as soon as they encounter one another. The final victory will, however, be scored by the spirit representing good. Man was created with a free will so that he had a choice either to follow the God of Light or the God of Darkness. It was for him, therefore, to carve out his path. If he

identified himself with the God of Goodness by his good deeds, he would become a force for good or else he would be helping the forces of evil. Man will be rewarded for his good deeds and punished for his evil ones in the next world. The life of man falls into two parts: the earthly portion and that which is lived after death. The lot of man after death will be determined by the mode of his life on earth. On the Day of Reckoning the soul shall walk on a path on the verge of Hell--a path which is wide and easy for the believer but is narrower than a hair for the unbeliever. Those who believe in truth and are responsible for righteous actions will peacefully walk over the path and meet Ahura Mazda, the God of Good, from whom they will receive the reward of eternal happiness, those who do not believe and have done evil deeds will fall into Hell and become the slaves of Ahriman, the God of Evil. If, however, the good deeds of man were equal to his evil deeds, he would meet neither Ahura Mazda, God of Good, nor would he fall a slave to Ahriman, the God of Evil, but his soul would go to the Heights until the Day of Judgment. Man is ignorant of what is waiting for him in the next life. He is incapable of discriminating the good from the evil in this life. It is, therefore, necessary that a prophet should be sent to guide people. According to Zoroastrian mythology, the message of God was first revealed to the Persian King Jamshid, but he being unable to bear the burden, the mission was entrusted to Zoroaster. The Day of Resurrection, according to him, is near and the end of life

is not very far. On that day Ahura Mazda will deliver a decisive blow to Ahriman and throw, him and his followers into Hell where they will be tortured till eternity.

For most people the teachings of Zoroaster were too abstract. In the later Avesta we, therefore, find a number of popular divinities emerging in a religion which originally prescribed no ceremonial. We see the angel of victory, gods of water and other heavenly bodies together with a widespread priesthood which arose from the new teachings. Elaborate laws were laid down for worship and sacrifice. The centre of worship was the holy fire on the altars which later developed into fire temples. The priests became a privileged class and functioned as the keepers of consciences and the teachers of religion for the people. In fact, they became so powerful that the head of the church, who had his seat at Rayy, ranked next only to the king.

The metaphysics of Zoroastrianism developed in this period. Unlike Greek metaphysics it was mixed with religion. The theory was advanced that the human soul was created by God out of nothingness. It could win eternity through fighting evil in this world. The soul had unfettered freedom of will and could, therefore, freely choose between the good and the evil. It had different powers like conscience or intuition, power of living, power of discriminate thinking, the spiritual protective powers etc.

In Zoroastrianism a dualist doctrine preaching two Gods

commanding separately the forces of good and evil, or is it a monotheistic doctrine believing in the rule of one God whose functions are divided into two separate and conflicting forces of good and evil which are finally resolved in his person? There is no agreement on this issue. Many believe that Zoroastrianism was a dualist doctrine as is clear from its teachings. There are others who contend that it was a monotheistic doctrine. There are yet others who think that Zoroaster was theologically a monotheist but philosophically a dualist.

Zoroastrianism remained the main Persian religion until the Islamic conquest when the majority of the Persian population embraced Islam. Some Zoroastrian fled to the Persian Gulf Islands and others to the Indo-Pak subcontinent where their descendants live to this day in Bombay and Karachi and are known as Parsis. Some Zoroastrians chose to remain in Persia after the Muslim conquests and during the first three centuries after the Muslim conquest their fire temples flourished in Iran.

Manichaeism:

At about the age of twenty-five or thirty years Mani proclaimed his new religion at the Court of the Persian King, Shahpur I, on the day of his coronation, so the story goes, in AD. 241-42. Mani, however, did not confine his activities to Persia. He went as far as Transoxiana, Western China, and southwards as far as India. His teachings were a mixture of Christianity and Zoroastrianism. According to Professor Browne, Manichaeism was more of a

Christianised Zoroastrianism than Zoroastrianised Christianity. We have it on the authority of Encyclopedia Britannica that the most important sources for a history of Manichaeism are Muslim sources which are distinguished by the excellent manner in which they have been transmitted to us as well as by their impartiality. At the head of these sources stands En-Nedim, author of Fihrist or catalogue'.

Mani claimed to be the last of the highest prophets. In him all the previous divine revelations were surpassed and he was to set up the perfect religion. He preached fervently from land to land and returned to the Persian capital towards the close of the reign of Shahpur I (C.A.D. 270). He gained adherents at the royal court but the dominant priestly class of the Zoroastrians and the Magians was naturally hostile to him. They made Mani a prisoner and obliged him to flee from the capital. The successor of Shahpur, Hormuzd (A.D. 272-73), appears to have been favorably disposed towards him, but Bahrām abandoned him and caused him to be executed in the capital in the year A.D. 276-77. A determined effort was made to exterminate the new religion but it remained alive till about the thirteenth century.

Mani's system is based on a philosophy of Nature which manifests uncompromising dualism. There is no distinction between the physical and the ethical, the natural and the spiritual. When Mani talks of the good being associated with Light and the Evil with Darkness, he does not use these words as mere figures

of speech. Light is actually good and Darkness evil. From the contradictory character of the world he argues about the existence of two beings, original and separate from each--Light and Darkness. Light is the good primal spirit. Out of Light was created good and out of Darkness evil was created. Light cannot produce evil nor can Darkness produce good. Man had to account for his good deeds to the God of Good and for his evil deeds to the God of Evil. If man did good he was motivated by the spirit of goodness. The earth of light has five tokens: the mild zephyr, the cooling wind, the bright light, the quickening fire, and the clear water. The earth of darkness has also five tokens: mist, heat, sirocco, darkness, and vapour. Satan with his demons was born from the kingdom of Darkness. The kingdoms of Light and Darkness stand opposed to each other from eternity, touching each other on one side, but remaining unmingled. Then Satan made an incursion into the kingdom of Light. At this the God of Light begot the primal man, and sent him equipped with the five pure elements to fight against Satan, but Satan proved himself the stronger and the primal man was vanquished for a while. The God of Light himself entered the field at this stage and inflicted a total defeat upon Satan. The primal man was set free but he had already been robbed of part of his light by darkness and the five dark elements had already mingled themselves with the elements of Light. This mixing between good and evil is itself an evil which had to be got rid-of. Herein lies the great contradiction of

Manichaeism. According to Zoroaster, there are overwhelming chances of the victory of good over evil in the world. He, therefore, preached a natural life where man should marry and produce children. He is asked to take care of his cultivation and look after the cattle. Zoroaster went to the extent of forbidding fasting so that men did not become weak and were able to use their physical strength for producing food. Mani, on the contrary, was a thorough pessimist. He did not see any chances of the victory of good over evil. In fact, both are so inextricably mixed up that the only way to save humanity is to end it. He forbade marriage, ordered a week's fasting every month. The whole trend of his teachings is strongly ascetic. Mani, however, preaches a twofold morality. While the elect had to submit themselves to the vigor's of ascetic practices, the stringency of the precepts was relaxed for the common man who had to avoid idolatry, sorcery, avarice, falsehood, fornication, and, above all, killing any living being. They had to free themselves as much as possible from the world. Mani declared himself the 'Ambassador of Light,' 'the Leader,' the last and the greatest prophet who took up the work of Jesus.

The religion of Mani gained a firm footing despite the persecution it had to endure. Even after the conquest of Islam, the Manichaean church continued to maintain itself. It gained secret adherence. Nadim, the celebrated authority on the subject, says: 'While the Arab influence became strong Mani's followers came

back to Iraq where they were well treated by the Umayyad Prefect, Khalid ibn 'Abd Allah al-Qasri. They did not leave Iraq till the days of the Abbasid Caliph al-Maqtadir. It was then that they went to Khurasan. Those who remained behind in Iraq remained in hiding. In Baghdad I came to know of three hundred followers of Mani in the days of Mu'izzal-Dawlah.' Al-Nadim then talks of the chiefs who appeared as Muslims but were really followers of Mani. Among them he mentions al-Ja'd Ibn Dirham who was the tutor of the last Umayyad Caliph, Marwān ibn Muhammad, Khālid ibn Abd Allah al-Qasri (the Umayyad prefect of Iraq), Sālih ibn Abd al-Quddus, Bashshar ibn Burd, and Salm" al-Khasir. Al-Nadim' also points out that the Barmaki family, except for Muhammad ibn Khālid ibn Barmak, was suspected to have leaning towards Mani's doctrine. Manichaeism also spread in Europe. St. Augustine was the auditor of a member of the elect community for nine years before he embraced Christianity, while Faustus was the most esteemed Manichaean teacher in the West.

The story goes that the judge who tried Mani during the reign of Bahrām I asked him whether he preached that people should not marry so that the end of the world may be hastened. Mani pleaded guilty to this preaching and stated that it was necessary so that light should be helped and rescued by stopping the increase of human beings. The judge took Mani at his word and demanded that as the prophet of this religion he should set an

example by eliminating himself. Mani was taken aback at this argument. He was ordered to be killed.

But why was Manichaeism persecuted both before and after Islam? The answer is simple. Zoroaster accepted the dignity of labour and his teachings were based on the utility of man to man and on the ultimate possibility of his achieving salvation within the framework of society. His religion was, therefore, consistent with the spirit of contemporary nationalism and was no hindrance to the prosecution of wars by the country in which the religion was born. Mani's teachings, on the contrary, were grossly ascetic. If followed strictly, they would mean a complete retirement from life which would hasten the end of the world. Such teachings could not be accepted by the ruling class which flourished on wars and military campaigns. Bahram significantly remarked: This man has called for the destruction of the world. It is our duty, then, to destroy him before he can achieve his end.

Mazdakism :

We have briefly dealt with two Persian religions. The third was founded by Mazdak who appeared in Persia in about A.D. 487. According to al-Tabari, he belonged to Nishapur. Mazdak also believed in Light and Darkness but he preached a new kind of dualism. The doctrine which startled the world was his theory of complete equality. He believed that all human beings were born equal and had, therefore, the right to live in complete equality.

According to Mazdak, property was the basic cause of all hatred and strife, and in property he included land, wealth, and women. According to al-Tabari, Mazdak, and his companions used to say that God had created the means of living on earth in order that they may be distributed equally among his slaves. People were, however, unjust to each other. It was, therefore, necessary that property should be taken from the rich and given to the poor so that those who had surplus land, wealth, or women had to part with the surplus in order to share it with the needy. This doctrine fired the imagination of the people, particularly the have-nots. It was not seldom that the poor walked into a wealthy house and freely took away their wealth and women. The followers of Mazdak became so powerful that they threatened dethronement to the Persian King Kubath if he failed to fall in line with the rising tide that was Mazdakism. Before long arose a state of confusion. A father did not know his son and a man did not know whether he was sleeping with his own daughter. All property was public and no individual was the owner of anything in his own right. Complete equality was enjoined on the people as a command from God who loved equality and would suitably reward those who parted with their wealth in order to share it with the needy.

Mazdak, it will be seen, was the first communist in the world. His communism was, however, different from the modern brand in as much as it claimed to be spiritual. Mazdak discouraged worldly

pleasure, enjoined contentment, and forbade the killing of animals. This religion which attracted thousands to its fold was persecuted by the ruling class headed by the king. In A.D. 523 the king massacred the followers of Mazdak on a large scale and was happy with the result which meant the extinction of religion. The great killing notwithstanding, the religion persisted until after Islam came to Persia. According to some authorities, inhabitants of a few villages in Kirman were staunch followers of Mazdak throughout the Umayyad dynasty.

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