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**MODELS OF PHILOSOPHICAL ENCOUNTER:
THE CASE OF ZOROASTRIANISM AND ISLAM¹**

Among the many stories of encounter between different cultures the meeting of Zoroastrianism and Islam may be one of the most dramatic. After many centuries during which it was the dominant religion of the ancient Iranian states and after having achieved the status of official religion in the Sassanid Empire (224—651), Zoroastrian teaching was practically driven from its homeland and replaced by the religion of Muhammad. The number of Zoroastrians in modern Iran today does not exceed forty thousand. Between the eighth and tenth centuries some of the followers of Zoroastrianism left Iran for India, where today there are about one hundred thousand Zoroastrians, known as Parsi. There are small communities of Zoroastrians in other parts of the world (e. g., in Pakistan, Canada, USA, UK and Australia), and the total number worldwide is reckoned to be less than 120,000². It is difficult to describe the fate of Zoroastrianism more precisely than it was done by James Darmesteter in 1879 in his Introduction to the translation of *Zend-Avesta*³: “As the Parsis are the ruins of a people, so are their sacred books the ruin of a religion. There has been no other great belief in the world that ever left such poor and meager monuments of its past splendor”⁴.

What caused this vital “extinction” of Zoroastrianism? It is quite common to put the entire blame on Islam. However, the truth is not so simple, and a one-dimensional explanation is not satisfactory here. There were, in fact, a number of

¹ This is a revised version of the paper presented at the UNESCO meeting «Models of Philosophical Encounters: Conditions for a Fruitful Dialogue», Paris, 9—11 September 1999, and published in the *Philosophy East and West Journal*. Vol. 52. № 2 (2002).

² See: E. Crais (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols. London; New York: Routledge, 1998. Vol. 9. P. 872.

³ The *Avesta*, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, today exists in two redactions. The first is the *Vendidad-sade* (literally, a «pure Vendidad» — i. e. the one without a translation or commentary) in what is called the *Avestan* language, together with the *Visparad* and the *Yasna*. The second, *Zend-Avesta* (meaning «text and its interpretation»), consists of the same three parts arranged in a different order and accompanied by the translations and commentaries in *Pahlavi*, which were attached to the *Avesta* in the Sassanid times.

⁴ *The Zend-Avesta. Part I. The Vendidad*, trans. J. Darmesteter, *The Sacred Books of the East Series* (ed. by Max Muller). Vol. 4. Delhi-Varanasi-Patna. P. XI—XII.

causes, and I would like to point out some that, in my view, are of greatest significance.

The first direct encounter of the two cultures took place soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. The first Caliph, Abu Bakr, who became the head of the Muslim *umma*, initiated the expansion of Islam beyond the borders of the Arab world, in order to include the lands of Sassanid Iran. In 635 the Muslim forces won a decisive victory at al-Qadisiya over the armies of the last Shahinshah, Yazdergerd III. In 637 they seized the capital of the Sassanid state, Ktesiphon. It took about fifteen years to put an end to the independence of Zoroastrian Iran and to incorporate the latter into the Arab Caliphate by 651.

Yet, I would suggest that prior to this devastating (for Zoroastrianism) encounter, an indirect meeting had already taken place that had a quite opposite consequence: the borrowing by Islam of a number of Zoroastrian ideas. A claim for the legitimacy of this statement could perhaps be made if we are willing to question the views of those who, like Richard Zaehner⁵ (referring mainly to Arab sources), affirm that Zoroaster was born in 628 BC (since, allegedly, at the age of forty — that is in 588 BC — he succeeded in converting king Vishtaspa, most likely a king of Chorasmia, and thus brought about a flourishing of the Zoroastrian tradition 258 years before Alexander the Great), and, instead, favour the opinion of Mary Boyce⁶, who dates the origin of the Zoroastrian religion between 1400—1000 BC, at a time when Zoroaster's people were perhaps still dwelling in the northern part Central Asia. In that case, Zoroaster would have been a contemporary of Moses, and it is easier to support the contention that religious influence spread from Iran to the eastern Mediterranean world, and not the reverse.

An Indirect Encounter: Cultural Parallels

In the paper presented at the World Congress on Mulla Sadra (Tehran, 25—27 May, 1999),⁷ Lenore Erickson from Cuesta College, California, summing up her research on the different opinions concerning the problem of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism and Christianity, offered a number of arguments both for and against the view that Iranian ideas had an influence on Islam.

Arguing against Iranian influence, she asserts that (a) the parallels that had been noted are, on the Zoroastrian side, in the Pahlavi texts, which were written in the seventh to ninth centuries — too late to have any effect on Judaism in the period from the sixth B.C. to the second century; (b) the parallels show up in Judaism in the Parthian period (third century B. C.), beginning some two hundred years after initial contact, which points to a period of a hiatus; and (c) the paral-

⁵ See: Zaehner R. C. *The Teachings of the Magi*. London, 1956.

⁶ Boyce M. *History of Zoroastrism*. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1975—1991.

⁷ Erickson L. «The Problem of Zoroastrian Influence on Judaism and Christianity» (paper presented at the World Congress on Mulla Sadra, Tehran, 1999). P. 16.

els that show up in the Parthian period occur at the time when Zoroastrianism was in its eclipse. Besides, evidence from this period does not indicate close contacts with Jews.

After examining the literature on the subject, Erickson came to the conclusion that all the above-mentioned considerations can have been quite satisfactorily dealt with. First, the Pahlavi texts represent an ancient Avestan tradition: at a time and in a culture in which writing was not an automatic, immediate response to thinking, the date of a piece of writing may bear little relevance to its actual date of origin.

Second, the occurrence of the hiatus could have been due to the fact that, although the process of assimilation had begun in Hellenistic times, there were “brakes” on the process caused by the difficulties in accepting new ideas — keeping in mind the “orthodoxy” mindset in Judaism, a natural conservatism that favoured traditional ways of religious expression and was opposed to alien ideas. It is certainly not implausible to suggest that a long period of time elapsed between contact and assimilation.

Finally, the “eclipse” of Zoroastrianism is commonly attributed to Hellenization during the two hundred years previous to the Parthian conquest of Babylon. Nevertheless, some scholars believe that the Hellenization of the Persians and Parthians has been exaggerated, especially by Sassanid propaganda, which was designed to show the Sassanids as the true inheritors of the Achaemenid Empire. The latter was established following the revolt of the Persian ruler Cyrus against the Median dominance in 550 B. C. There are different views concerning the status of the teaching of Zoroaster in the Achaemenid Empire. Some even believe that Darius the Great (521—485 B. C.) made it the state religion. In 333 B. C. Iran was conquered by Alexander the Great. After his death, Iran was ruled by the Seleucids since 312 B. C., and then by the Parthians, whose rule lasted to the third century A. D. In 224 Ardashir I, the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, defeated the last Parthian ruler Artabanus V and assumed control of Iran. There is a strong evidence that at the time of the Achaemenid empire Zoroastrianism was “a major world religion” with a long record of support for the Jews, who, when liberated from exile in Babylon, received Zoroastrian protection⁸.

Consequently, it appears that it is possible that Zoroastrianism could have influenced Judaism from the period of the post-exilic dispersion throughout the Persian Empire, through the centuries of living among Persians during the period of Alexander and the Seleucids, and through the Parthian period.

The influence of Zoroastrian teachings on Judaism ultimately left an imprint on both Christianity and Islam as well, since all three share a number of beliefs. (Zoroastrianism affected Christianity in a more direct way, as it was shown by J. R. Hinnells, who studied the Iranian influence on the New Testament⁹. There is

⁸ See: Hinnells J. R. *Zoroastrians in Britain*. Oxford, 1966. P. 2.

⁹ Hinnells J. R. *Iranian Influence on the New Testament // Acta Iranica* 2 (1974). P. 271—284.

no need to explain that after the Arab conquest of Iran, Zoroastrianism inevitably had an influence on those Muslims who came to share the same land.)

A number of specific parallels prove the existence of Zoroastrian influence. Two are of the greatest importance. First, dualism, which is at the core of Zoroastrianism, either prompted or promoted the development of the idea of Satan and of an array of angels and demons.

Zoroaster preached the existence of two spiritual forces: Good (Spenta Mainyu) and Evil (Angra Mainyu). It is not clear whether these two are “self-created” or they emanated from or were created by the “Lord Wisdom” (Ahura Mazda), who is often identified with the Good Spirit. There is only one place in the Gathas — the chants of Zoroaster (the most ancient part of the Avesta) — where the creation of the two Spirits is stated explicitly:

“Now I will speak of those who desire [to hear], about these Two who are created by Mazda, which [teaching] is indeed for the wise”¹⁰.

This is a disputed passage, whose translation is supported by those who consider the teaching of Zoroaster to be not at all dualistic and who see Ahura Mazda as identical to God the Creator¹¹. The opposite view, the one that prevails among scholars is that “for Zoroastrianism Goodness is prior to God; the standards of Goodness exist outside of God and God’s will. God can and will the good, but God’s willing it has not made it so. God’s will coincides with, or God discovers, a prior Goodness”¹².

In the Avesta, whenever he addresses Ahura Mazda, Zoroaster exclaims: “O Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! “ Sometimes he calls Ahura “the most beneficent Spirit”, thus acknowledging that the latter is not the sole force in the universe, where another Spirit, Angra Mainyu, also exists. While the former is the “Creator of Life” and the “Maker of all good things,” the latter is the “Creator of Death” and the “Maker of the evil world”. Hence, there are two ultimate Beings which together are involved in the creation of all that exists. They are engaged in a constant struggle with each other — and this is the struggle between Good and Evil. In the long run Ahura Mazda will win: the triumph of Goodness is certain. Here comes the second “focus” of the Zoroastrian religion, namely its eschatology, and it is in this second domain that the teaching of Zoroaster has had a profound influence upon Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Ahura Mazda is powerful, yet he will succeed in defeating the hostile Spirit Angra Mainyu only at the end of time. According to the traditional Zoroastrian cosmology, a twelve-thousand-year period marks out a finite time span of teleological events, that is in turn divided into four periods of three thousand years each. In the first period, the two Spirits create two opposing realities, and the hostile Spirit of Angra Mainyu attacks Ahura Mazda in different ways. In the second

¹⁰ Yasna, XXX, 1.

¹¹ See: Taraporewala I. J. S. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. Tehran, 1980. P. 25.

¹² Erickson. *Zoroastrian Influence*. P. 16.

period, in order to combat his adversary effectively, Ahura Mazda creates agents like the six Ameshaspentas or Blessed Immortals¹³ and the fravashis or volitional creatures. At the end of the second three thousand years' period a war is initiated by Angra Mainyu. In the third three thousand years' period the latter holds the upper hand over the entirety of a corrupted creation. Then Zoroaster is born, and salvation enters history. He calls upon all people to fight on the side of Ahura Mazda. During the last three thousand years comes Sayoshant ("one who brings benefit"), who acts as an agent of salvation for Ahura Mazda. He raises all the dead from Heaven, Hell, and *Hamestan* (an intermediate state). Fire melts the earth, and the resultant molten river purifies all souls. Finally, Angra Mainyu and his "army" are destroyed, and all people come together in a new body, created by Ahura Mazda. They will live in eternity — in the *Frasho-kereti* ("Renovation"), in a state of existence that is outside time and space.

It is evident from what has been said above that Zoroastrianism lacks the concept of an eternal Heaven or an eternal Hell. After leaving the dead body, souls travel to the other world. To enter the latter, they must cross the Chivant Bridge, at which a weighting and judging of deeds take place: "The Law which Mazda has ordained of happiness and misery — long suffering to the followers of Druj (Falsehood) and happiness to the Righteous"¹⁴. For the unrighteous, there is Hell; for the righteous, Paradise; and for the "balanced" ones, whose good deeds are exactly matched by their evil deeds, there is *Hamestan*. Yet, all three are temporary places of abode for the souls until the end of time.

There is no need to deal here with the way in which Zoroastrian dualism and eschatology may have influenced Judaism and Christianity since much has been written on the subject. Keeping in mind the theme of this essay, I shall attempt, instead, to show how some Zoroastrian ideas were incorporated in the teachings of Islam.

The *Direct* Encounter of Islam with Zoroastrianism: The Causes of the Tragic Consequences

There are two opposing versions of the events surrounding the first encounter. One says that the Zoroastrians were converted by the Arabs at the point of the sword: "All that was Iran's, whether spiritual or material, was swept away by the Arabs — a sacrifice of their fanaticism. The religion, the language, the orthography, and the manners and customs of Iran took quite a different complexion or got entirely abolished"¹⁵. But an extreme opposite view finds the explanation of why

¹³ These are Asha (representing Truth, Righteousness and Divine Law and Order), Volumanah (the Good Mind), Khshathra (Kingdom or Sovereignty or Power), Armaiti (Patience, Humility, Devotion and Love), Haurvatst (Perfection, Health and Well-being) and Ameretst (Deathlessness or Immortality).

¹⁴ Yasna, XXX, 11.

¹⁵ Davoud P. Introduction to the Holy Gathas / Trans. D. J. Irani. Bombay, 1927. P. 7.

“at the very first shock with fresh and vigorous Islam the power of old Iran simply melted away”¹⁶ in “the indifference of the Umayyads and the conscientious observance, by the Abbasids, of the tolerance prescribed towards non-Muslims who were ‘Peoples of the Book’”¹⁷.

It is possible that the true story lies in between these two diametrically opposed views. Many parts of Iran were indeed destroyed, their inhabitants assaulted, robbed, and killed. However, those Zoroastrians who willingly accepted the authority of the new rulers were allowed to continue following their religious beliefs. The general spirit of the conquerors may be seen in a passage from a treaty made between one Arab conqueror and the people of a Zoroastrian town: “Ye are secure and it is incumbent upon us to observe this treaty as long as ye observe it and pay the poll-tax and the land-tax”¹⁸.

I do not wish to idealize the Arabs in this early period of Islamic expansion. There were undoubtedly many cases of violence and conversion by force. That is phenomena common to all wars. Nevertheless, the violent episodes in this historical period must not be exaggerated, and it should be recognized that there are certain grounds for asserting the relative tolerance of the Muslim invaders. Tolerance is rooted in Islamic teaching itself. For example, although the critics of Islam often point to the Koranic justification for vengeance [given in the verse] “O ye who believe! The law of equality is prescribed to you in case of murder: the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman” (2: 178),¹⁹ this injunction could also be understood in another light. In fact, many Muslim interpreters insist on a quite different reading of this prescription. Ibn `Arabi in his *Bezels of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam)*²⁰ explains the Koranic injunction to seek vengeance to be the proof of God’s condemnation of killing as such and His wish to defend humanity from violence by prescribing strong punishment for the latter. The Koran says: “The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto (in degree): but if a person forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from God; for (God) loveth not those who do wrong” (42: 40).

The critics of Islam also see the practice of *jihād* or Muslim holy war as a proof of the aggressive character of Muhammad’s teaching. However, one should approach such interpretation with great caution.

First of all, it should be pointed out that the Koran strongly condemns the killing of a believer: “If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is hell, to abide therein (for ever): and the wrath and the curse of God are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him” (4: 93). If the killing of a believer happens

¹⁶ Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. P. 72.

¹⁷ Toynbee A. J. *A Study of History*. 2 vols. (abridgment of volumes I—VI by D. C. Somervell). New York, 1965. Vol. II. P. 28.

¹⁸ See: Browne E. G. *A Literary History of Persia*. 4 vols. Cambridge, 1924. Vol. I. P. 200ff.

¹⁹ All quotations from the Koran are from «The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’an». 2 vols. / Trans. and comment. by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Cairo-Beirut, n. d.

²⁰ Ibn al `Arabi. *The Bezels of Wisdom* / Trans. R. W. J. Austin. New York, 1980. Ch. 18.

by mistake, it is also condemned and a certain kind of compensation is to be paid to the family of the deceased.

“Believers” include not only the Muslims but all other who follow a scriptural teaching as well: “Those who believe (in the Koran), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, — any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, — on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (5: 69). During the first three centuries of Islamic rule in Iran the Zoroastrians were considered to be among the peoples who followed scripture and were treated as *dhimmis*.

The Koran warns its adherents not to follow the advice of any who would have urge them to take a punitive action without proper considerations: “Yet they ask thee to hasten on the Punishment! But God will not fail in His promise. Verily, a Day in the sight of thy Lord is like a thousand years of your reckoning” (22: 47). God expects a believer to observe restraint and to avoid aggression. In fact, *jihād* is prescribed as a defensive act: “But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith” (2: 191), and “Let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression” (2: 193). All the Koranic verses which call for the Holy War could be misinterpreted if taken out of the general context of the circumstances of the first years of the Muslim community. It is always important to remember in what particular historical situation the prophet Muhammad gave his pronouncement.

In the event that hostility and fighting become inevitable, the Koran calls upon Muslims to follow a set of rules of warfare concerning prisoners, women and children, the elderly people, and so forth. It is said in a number of ayats: “Fight to the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loves not transgressors” (2: 190). It is quite significant that Islamic teaching prescribes peacemaking as an honourable art and duty: “And if they incline to peace, incline thou also to it, and trust in Allah” (7: 62).

Among the names of Allah the most important are the Just and the Merciful. Hence, the Koran too calls upon all the believers: “Be foremost in seeking forgiveness” (57: 21); “Race towards forgiveness from your Lord” (3: 133); “Restrain anger and pardon men” (3: 134); “Forgive, even when angry” (42: 37); “Let evil be rewarded with evil. But he that forgives and seeks reconciliation shall be rewarded by God. He does not love wrongdoers” (42: 40).

Another reason for the relative tolerance demonstrated by the Arab invaders in the early period of Islamic rule in Iran was that it made sound economic sense. As the Arab Caliphate extended its boundaries, it became vitally important to the state to include a large number of non-Islamic subjects who could contribute to its upkeep. For some time this acted as a restraint on their zeal for proselytizing²¹.

Some historians claim that “the masses” willingly embraced the religion of Islam. One explanation for this state of affairs in the Sassanid Empire on the eve

²¹ Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. P. 73.

of the Muslim invasion is that “hidden underneath the outward splendour and the vast military achievements of the Sassanids there lurked the germs of decay”.²² The emerge of a number of heretical movements foreshadowed the eventual downfall of Zoroastrianism in Iran.

During the Sassanid dynasty Zoroastrianism was transformed into an instrument of politics. Arnold Toynbee believes that “Zoroastrianism had in the end to pay as heavily as Jewry for having lent itself to a political enterprise”²³. Under Ardashir (226—242) the Sassanid state became a full-fledged theocracy. Ardashir was himself a priest who had inherited his profession from a long line of ancestors. His “testament” for his son Shapur I was as follows:

“When monarchs honour
The Faith, then it and royalty are brothers,
For they are mingled so that thou wouldst say: —
‘They wear one clock’. The Faith endureth not
Without the throne nor can kingship stand
Without the faith; two pieces of brocade
Are they, all intertwined, set up
Before the wise...
Each needeth other, and we see the pair
United in beneficence”²⁴.

The great role of strengthening the power of clergy was assumed by the chief priest Kartir, who acquired the title of “the saviour of the soul of the Shahinshah”. His carrier began during the rule of Shapur I (241—272), and, under Hormizd, Kartir was made magapat of Ormazd, that is the “chief of the magicians of Ahura Mazda”. Bahram II gave him additional titles: “judge of the empire”, “master of rites”, and “ruler of the fire” in the main temple.

The Zoroastrian clergy acquired a degree of power second only to that possessed by the shah himself. The third force in the state was the landed aristocracy. All three greatly abused their authority, and the masses were ground down relentlessly, sinking to the depths of poverty and misery. The unsuccessful wars waged by Firuz I (459—483) against the Huns added to the prevailing suffering. The high level of social discontent can be seen in the emergence of Mazdak in 488, whose preaching is sometimes compared with that of the Bolsheviks in Russia²⁵.

In short, the victory of the Muslim invaders over Zoroastrian Iran was primarily the triumph of a stronger state, with its superior military power, over a weaker one.

²² Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. P. 72.

²³ Toynbee A. *A Study of History*. Vol. I. P. 445.

²⁴ Firdousi. *The Shahnameh* / Trans. L. Warner. London, 1912. Vol. VI. P. 286—287.

²⁵ See: Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. P. 171.

Yet, there might also be factor of ideological nature that might have tended in favour of Islam. I would suggest that in at least four ways the teaching of Muhammad would have looked more attractive than that of Zoroaster. First, the former was addressed to all peoples regardless of such factors as race, ethnicity, and language. Zoroastrianism, on the other hand, was a “provincially confined truth”²⁶. Similarly to Judaism, all Iranians were supposed to follow the teaching of Zoroaster, but no foreigners were allowed into the faith community (although on occasion, for example at the time of Kartir at the end of the third century, certain groups of non-Zoroastrians were converted by force). Even in modern times, when the prominent Iranian scholar Pour Davoud desired to become a convert, Zoroastrian communities, in both Iran and India rejected his request despite his contribution to the study of Zoroastrianism. Furthermore, after Zoroastrianism had become the state religion of Iran, it demonstrated its intolerance to the followers of other religious beliefs by persecuting Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, Nestoreans, Eastern Christians, Manichaeans and Mazdean heretics.

Second, Islam preached brotherhood and, at least in its early period, disapproved of social discrimination, whereas Zoroastrianism, particularly during the Sassanid period, differentiated its community into four groups (very much like four varnas or castes in Hinduism). In the *Dadestan i menogi xrad* (“Judgments of the Spirit of Wisdom”), a Pahlavi text probably composed in the sixth century, the Spirit of Wisdom (or Goodness) in response to the questions about these four social groups, describes in detail the duties of their members (XXVII, 33—34)²⁷. It is well known that in India many people from among the lower castes and outcasts (untouchables) freely and willingly converted to Islam, hoping in this way to overcome caste discrimination. The same motivation might conceivably have been behind the mass conversion in Iran.

Third, Islam attracted people through the simplicity of its rituals. In the Sassanid period, the faith of Zoroaster “had become so overlaid with outward ceremonial and mere bodily purifications and baths and penances for all occasions, possible and impossible, that people ceased to care for such mere outer forms of purity, which neither inspired them nor satisfied spiritual thirst”²⁸.

Fourth, early Islam demonstrated a great capacity for cultural assimilation by incorporating into its teachings and practices ideas, values, and institutions borrowed from others. Such policy was justified by the most important doctrine of Islam, which affirms: “There is no god but God [Allah], and Muhammad is His Prophet”.

According to Islam, Muhammad is the “seal of prophecy,” meaning that he is the last among the prophets to be sent to the people. This notion has differ-

²⁶ The Cambridge History of Islam. Vol. 2B. P. 476.

²⁷ Зороастрийские тексты (Zoroastrian Texts) / Trans. O. Chunakova. Moscow: Vostochnaya literature, 1997. P. 103.

²⁸ Taraporewala. The Religion of Zarathushtra. P. 19—20.

ent connotations, and it can be used to justify and promote both tolerance and fanaticism. The latter may occur when the claim is made that since Muhammad is the last of the prophets, then his message is the most perfect. However, the very fact that prior professions of faith were recognized by the Muslim authorities indicates a degree of respect toward other sacred literatures and teachings. This could have served to justify the borrowing of ideas, values, and customs of other cultures, on the one hand, and, on the other, it could have allowed the adherents of other religious beliefs to adopt Islam, seeing it as a continuation of the prophetic tradition.

The real persecution of Zoroastrians, who by the middle of the ninth century continued to be an influential minority in Iran, began under the Abbasids (752—804), under whose rule the temples and sacred-fire shrines of the Zoroastrians were destroyed. The status of *dhimmis* was taken from the Zoroastrians, and they were called now *kāfirs* (nonbelievers). The Islamic clergy, who were themselves of Iranian origin, played a considerable role in the persecution. Later on, the Mogul hordes of Chingiz and Timur passed over Iran like a devastating flood, destroying whatever had not yet been destroyed. From the tenth century on, Zoroastrians immigrated to India, where they acquired a new name — the Parsis.

Zoroastrianism as a Living Tradition

Does all that has been said above mean that the encounter of Zoroastrianism with Islam has resulted ultimately in the elimination of one culture by the other? I believe that, although the elimination of Zoroastrianism as a religious institution did take place, as a cultural entity it had 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 the two cultures has brought about a synthesis.

Not only the ideas of Zoroastrianism but some customs and practices have become an organic part of life in Islamic Iran. One might mention, for example, that the principal calendar used by Iranian Muslims is astral, and the names of months are almost the same as in the Iranian calendar of pre-Islamic times. And Iranians continue to observe the Zoroastrian Nowruz (New Year)'s festivities.

The impact of Zoroastrian ideas on Islam can be seen most vividly in two of four classical schools of Islamic thought: mystical Sufism — called *taṣawwuf* in Arabic and *irfān* in Persian — and the Illuminationism (called *ishrāq*). (The other two schools are the theological or *kalām*, and the Peripatetic or *falsafa*).

Zoroastrian dualism had a considerable impact on Sufism²⁹. Of course, being a mystical trend within a strictly monotheistic religion, Sufism could not accept

²⁹ It is worth mentioning that some of the most prominent among early Sufis were descendants of the Zoroastrians. Aby Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874) — was the son of a Zoroastrian. Al-Halladj (d. 922) — was the grand-son of a Zoroastrian priest.

dualism in the ontological sense of the primordial existence of two Beings — the good and the evil. However, facing the problem of theodicy, Muslim mystics explained why, although God is omnipotent, both good and evil still exist, employing much of the reasoning and metaphors used by the Zoroastrians. Thus, in the *Mathnawi*, by the most celebrated Persian Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207—1273) there are the following lines:

“Since eternity it was the will and decree of God, the Forgiver, to reveal and manifest Himself, (This involves contrariety, for) 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”³⁰.

Sufis believed that, objectively, both good and evil exist: in order to be known, 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 in the side of the good in the struggle between good and evil.

It is commonly acknowledged that “Zoroaster’s anthropology, or doctrine of human being, establishes, supports, and takes pride in a vigorous ethical individualism”³¹. All volitional beings have free will, and it is their duty to use the free will in choosing which side they will support in the fight between righteousness and wickedness. Islam is known for its strong fatalistic tendency. Very much in contrast to the general Islamic attitude to free will, Sufism praises a person who chooses freely, comparing the actions of such a person with capital (*sarmāya*) that brings profit to the one who knows how to invest it, while one who holds it and does not know how to use it — or misuses it — will be punished on Doomsday:

“In the world this praise and ‘well done!’ and ‘bravo!’ are (bestowed) in virtue of free will and watchful attention...

The power (of free action) is thy profit-earning capital. Mark, watch over the moment of power and observe (it well)!”³²

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. By giving human beings a free choice God submits them to a test. As Rumi says:

³⁰ Rumi. *The Mathnavi*. 6 vols. / Trans. R. Nicholson. London: Luzac: 1933. 6: 378.

³¹ Erickson. *Zoroastrian Influence*. P. 6.

³² Rumi. *Mathnawi*. 4:85.

Put a sword in his hand; pull him away from weakness (incapacity to choose), so that he may become (either) a holy warrior or a brigand³³. How could there be steadfast and sincere and bountiful men without a brigand and an accursed Devil, Rustam and Hamsa and a (cowardly) catamite would be (all) one; knowledge and wisdom be annulled and utterly demolished.

Knowledge and wisdom exist for the purpose of (distinguishing between) the right path and the wrong path; when all paths are the right paths, knowledge and wisdom are void of meaning³⁴.

As to the impact of Zoroastrianism in the field of ontology, it is most striking in the case of Ishraqism and especially of the teaching of *Shaykh al-Ishrāq* Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (1155—1191), the founder of the school. The very name of the latter prompts one to speculate on the nature of the impact of Light. Light embodies such great significance, since it is synonymous with being (*wujūd*), therefore Suhrawardi could be considered to be “résurrecteur des doctrines des Sages de la Perse concernant les principes de la Lumière et des Tenebres”³⁵.

In his famous treatise *Hikmat al-ishrāq* (translated as “The Theosophy of the Orient of Light” or “The Wisdom of Illumination”) Suhrawardi calls the Light of the Lights to be “the cause of the existence of all beings ... It is One, everything is in need of It and carries from It its existence. Nothing is either equal, or similar to It. It is all triumphant, nothing is able to conquer It or to escape submitting to It”³⁶.

Suhrawardi admits that his treatise is based on the wisdom of those “who followed the Divine Way”. Along with the names of Empedocles, Pythagoras and Plato, he mentions Zoroaster. In fact, a number of times he refers to the authority of the wise men from the Orient — and from Iran in particular. Suhrawardi not only utilizes a number of Zoroastrian ideas but directly uses names borrowed directly from the teachings of Zoroaster. Thus, speaking on the gradation of lights from the All Comprehending, Divine Light to the lowest one and pointing out that in the hierarchy or order of the lights the nearest to the Light of the lights is the First Light or the Great Light, Suhrawardi indicates that “the ancient Persians called it *Bahman*”. (*Bahman* or *Vohu Mana* in the later Zoroastrian theology occupies the first place among the Blessed Immortals, he signifies Good Mind).

One can also find the traces of Zoroastrian dualism in the *Hikmat al-ishrāq*. For example, Suhrawardi affirms that all beings in existence can be divided into pairs: some carry light, the other darkness (II, 2). All things, in his words, by their true nature are either light or lightlessness (II, 1).

³³ Rumi. *Mathnawi*. 4: 185.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 6: 356.

³⁵ Corbin H. *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986. P. 288.

³⁶ Sohrawardi. *Œuvres Philosophiques et mystiques*. T. II (Bibliothèque Iranienne. Vol. 2). Teheran; Paris: Maisonneuve, 1952. P. 278 (II: 2).

The most vivid apology to Zoroastrian teachings is demonstrated in a passage from the treatise where Suhrawardi speaks of 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, the Iranians of the ancient times appealed to the sacred fire and worshipped it (II, 4).

In conclusion, I shall offer some general remarks.

Whatever the objectives of the conqueror in its persecution of the adherents of the other culture, some sort of cultural synthesis is objectively inescapable. No culture can really be extinguished by external force (although it may be badly damaged). Culture ceases to exist as a result of its inability to respond to the challenges of time, when its world outlook and, consequently, its ideals and values, become outdated.

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 in Islamic thought. Equally great, if not more significant, is its impact on Iranian culture in general, and particularly on poetry.

That Zoroastrianism is still “alive” can be confirmed as well by the “resurrection” it undergoes from time to time. In the *Sanjan*, a Persian poem composed by the Parsis who settled in Sanjan in southern Gujarat, India, it is said that Zoroaster prophesied that his will be overthrown three times and restored three times: the first time, it was to be overthrown by Iskander (Alexander the Great³⁷) and restored by Ardashir; overthrown again, it was to be restored by Shapur II and Adarba Mahraspand (a holy man under Shapur II); and, lastly, it was to be overthrown by the Arabs and restored in time by Sayoshant³⁸. In fact, after the collapse of Achaemenid power in 330 B. C., a new era in the history of the Zoroastrian religion did not begin until Ardashir (226—240), from the family of Sassan in the province of Pars, who overthrew the last Parthian (Arsacid) ruler. (It is true, that under the Arsacids the scattered remnants of the Zoroastrian scriptures came to be gathered together. However, dissatisfaction with the Arsacids was so great that Ardashir mounted a national movement against them.) Ardashir, himself a Zoroastrian priest, called for the genuine restoration of the faith of Zoroaster, and he succeeded in establishing a theocracy in Iran.

All through the four centuries of Sassanid rule (which ended in 642), Zoroastrianism was virtually the official state religion. However, even then the authority of Zoroastrian teachings was once again undermined, this time by the appearance of Mani (the promulgation of the new faith of Manichaeism was made on March 20, 242, the day of the coronation of Shapur I), whose preaching instigated a strong heretical movement. Mani’s ideas could be characterized as an attempt to

³⁷ By the way, in Iran nobody calls Alexander «the Great». Zoroastrian tradition calls him «guzastag» («accursed») — an epithet that he alone shares with Ahriman, or Satan.

³⁸ See: Darmesteter J. Introduction / The Zend-Avesta. Part I. The Vendidad. P. XXXVII.

“overthrow” the religion of Zoroaster in the sense that his teaching (which contained considerable elements of Buddhism and Christianity) for a short time supplanted Zoroastrianism, being well received by Hormizd I (272—273). Under the rule of Shapur II (309—379), however, occurred what has been called the second restoration of Zoroastrianism. Thanks to Shapur II and his dasturs, the work of re-compiling the Avest texts was finally completed.

In the 1960-s, during the rule of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, there was a drastic change in the attitude of the state, personified by the Shah, toward Zoroastrianism and its adherents. This change in state policy expressed itself, for example, in the opening of all military appointments to the Zoroastrians, thus putting them on terms of almost complete equality with Muslims. Reza Shah looked for support from wealthy and influential Zoroastrians among bankers, businessmen, intellectuals, among others. Above all the Shah appealed to the teaching of Zoroaster as an integral and very important part of the Iranian cultural heritage. He claimed that the influence of the ancient Zoroastrian civilization on Iran was no less significant than that of Islam. It is significant that during the reign of Reza Shah books by authors like I. J. S. Taraporewala came to be published in Iran. Taraporewala, a highly educated Indian Parsi, first published his “The Religion of Zarathushtra” in India in 1926. Due to the changes that were taking place in the 1960-s, the second edition of his book was issued in Tehran in 1965.

The concluding chapter of Taraporewala’s book emphasizes how radically the attitude toward Zoroastrianism had changed in Iran by that time. The author claims to have seen a “hopeful sign” in “the renaissance” of the teachings of Zoroaster in Iran that, in his words, “infused [into Islam] a fresh vigour and vitality, and Islamic culture is [today] very largely Iranian in spirit”³⁹. He believes that “Iran is rapidly waking up from her age-long sleep.... [All] Iranians are looking back to their past — the pre-Islamic past — to the great Rulers of the ages gone by, to Anushirvan and Shapur and Ardashir, to Darius and to Kurush, as living ideals to inspire them with zeal and fervour. Above all, they see 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”⁴⁰.

Although hopes for the realization of a genuine Zoroastrian renaissance were lost after the 1979 anti-shah revolution led by Imam Khomeini, still one cannot exclude the possibility of a revival in the future. Iran does not give up its claim to a special role — not only in the Muslim world but in the larger world community as well. But, in order to solidify this claim, it must continually return to its ancient past.

There is another reason for reaffirming the vitality of the Zoroastrian tradition. It can be appealed to in the search for ideological or ethical justification in

³⁹ Taraporewala. *The Religion of Zarathushtra*. P. 77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* P. 78.

responding to the challenges that Iran will face when it is ready to emerge from its present isolation. The success of the Parsi community in India, which, in spite of its small numbers, has accomplished much since British rule introduced a capitalist economy to India, proves that, to a greater extent than with other Eastern religions, the teachings of Zoroaster hold certain ideas (such as ethical individualism, and the value of material prosperity) that enable its followers to adjust with much greater ease to the realities of a free market economy.