

Chapter 3: Pre-Islamic Iranian Thought

Pre-Islamic Iranian Thought by Alessandro Bausani, Ph.D, Professor of Persian Language and Literature, University of Naples (Italy)

A summary sketch of the philosophical thought of pre-Islamic Iran is both a difficult and an easy task difficult in the sense that the texts on which this study must be based are not philosophical in the proper sense of the word, but rather theological or sometimes even mythological, and we have to abstract from them their philosophical gist, translating their ideas into modern philosophical terminology, through a rather personal work of interpretation; easy in the sense that, in this work of reinterpretation, we have to renounce completely a solution of the extremely complicated historical problems put by Iranic philology.

An attempt at a philosophical reinterpretation of the Mazdaic outlook can be based, in our opinion, exclusively on the only concrete and systematic form of Mazdaism we know: the late Mazdaism of the Pahlavi books of the Sassanian period and the early times of Islam.

The almost insoluble problems raised by the pre-Islamic religion (or, according to others, religions) of Iran depend chiefly on the extreme confusion of different types of religiosity—local religion, religion of the elite, etc.

Concerning the sources of Mazdaism the only comparatively sure points are (a) that the Gathas of the Avesta are very old and probably date back to Zarathustra himself (e. 700–600 B.C.); and (b) that the most systematic and the richest Pahlavi texts were written in the third/ninth century, i.e., two centuries after the Islamic conquest of Iran.

An accurate dating of the materials between these two chronological limits (the seventh century B.C. and the ninth century A.D.) seems still impossible and all the learned conclusions of the scholars (who often change their minds from year to year) appear to be no more than conjectures.

Moreover, the materials chronologically placed between these two dates are sometimes typologically so incongruous that it is very easy to abstract from them a certain type of religion and attribute it to the

founder, making of him, e.g., either on idealistic philosopher or a shaman, and then explain the development of Mazdaism that followed either as the decay or a repaganization of a highly philosophical religion, or as a successive theologization of originally mystical perceptions.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the only comprehensive approach to the enormous and extremely varied religio-philosophical materials contained in the corpus of Mazdaic texts is to consider them synchronistically as a whole. Though one may not agree with many details of Professor Corbin's theories, one cannot but agree with him when he writes:

“A spiritual morphology that attempts a reconstruction and reevaluation of the actually living devotion impels us to consider the canonical Avesta, or at least what we possess of it, its ritual, as preserving at its centre the Psalms (Gathas) of Zarathustra and the middle-Iranic (Pahlavi) and Parsi translations and commentaries as a whole.

Also in this case, it seems that when the believer recites his Bible or when the Liturgy is celebrated, all objections taking historical stratification as a pretext fail to reach their aim. If we always ask: ‘Whence does it come?’ we practically do nothing more than wander here and there, formulating hypotheses vainly following one another. We should rather ask: ‘At what does it aim?’ Then the soul would answer, accounting for what has been its purpose.”¹

We shall, therefore, make as the basis of the present chapter the latest form of pre-Islamic Iranian religiosity, the form represented by the whole corpus of the Avestic and Pahlavi Scriptures possessed and venerated by the Parsecs (not in the sense, of course, that we shall follow necessarily their interpretation of them). For it is safer for a philosopher to interpret an actual and concrete corpus of religious scriptures, than to interpret the ever-changing reinterpretation of them made by the historians.

It will be useful, however, to reproduce, as an introduction; the most widely accepted diachronical explanation of the numerous so-called “contradictions” of the present Mazdaic corpus, even though it does not seem to be completely satisfactory. The difficulty is that much of the materials generally considered being very old are much later or at least they “function” in a much later theological organism.

The branch of the Aryans who in about the eleventh century B. C. detached themselves from their brethren, penetrating afterwards into the jungles of India (a natural place for magic and richest mytho-poetical phantasy) and made the yellow and dry plateau of Iran their country, had obviously brought with them their naturalistic religion, clearly delineated in the Vedas and rather similar to that of old Rome and Greece.

The sacrifices of animals (e. g., the ox) and the ceremonial libation of the fermented juice of a plant, haoma (Skr. soma), were frequent and taken as sacred rites.

At a certain moment, not yet determined with sufficient clearness, though the majority of scholars seem now to fix it at the sixth century B.C., the remarkable personality of a religious reformer, Zarathustra,

appeared in the oriental zone of the Iranian plateau.

His name still resists all attempts at etymological interpretation. "The man with the old camels" seems to be the most accepted one. Zarathustra, possibly utilizing a pre-existing naturalistic sky-god (Varuna), created a new monotheism, so strong that the name of the old gods (devas) came to signify "demons."

This was, up to some time ago, a "classical" theory of the historians of Mazdaism, but now it seems to cede to new hypotheses maintaining that the demonization of the devas was prior to Zarathustra. Henning even asserted that Zarathustra's reform was a "protest against monotheism." The seventeen hymns (Gathas), written in a rather archaic language and forming the central part of the Avesta are generally considered to be the work of Zarathustra himself.

The Gathas uphold veneration for a single supreme God, Ahura Mazda, the "Wise Lord" (according to some like Pagliaro, "the Thinking Lord"). He is accompanied by a cortege of abstract quasi-personified powers or attributes, the six Amesha Spentas (Holy Immortals): Asha (the Cosmic Law or Righteousness), Vohu Manah (Good Thought or Benevolence), Khshathra (Sovereignty), Armaiti (Piety, Docility), Haurvatat (Integrity), Ameretat (Immortality).

The Gathas reject rites and sacrifices, especially the ritual killing of cattle and the Haoma cult, preach a very high personal ethic, and enforce wise social laws, foremost of which is the fostering of agriculture against nomadism.

In order to explain evil in the world, the idea of the influence of the Evil Spirit (Angra Mainyu) is introduced; in front of it stands Spenta Mainyu (the Holy Spirit), not identical (at least in this oldest stage) with the Wise Lord (Ahura Mazda). This monotheism, tendentially dualistic but, in any case, clearly prophetic and anti-naturalistic, "crossed the spiritual sky of Iran as a meteor" (Duchensne Guillemin).

The religion which will be now called Mazdaic-mazdayasna means "one who worships the Wise (Lord)" reabsorbed in course of time some of the older "heathen" rites and cults, e. g., Haoma's cult, and also accepted the naturalistic gods of the ancient pantheon, some of them like Mithra, the god of sunlight and, then, of the Covenant and Oath being just adopted, while others being inescapably transformed into deva's. According to some scholars, however, the religion of Mithra existed as a distinct creed in old Iran.

At the same time dualism, not so strong and systematized in the beginning, was becoming deeper: it became a cosmologico-metaphysical contrast between a good God, Ahura Mazda, and an evil God, Angra Mainyu, both having their own "creations," the former being accompanied by his Amesha Spentas (ever more clearly personified in course of time) and Yazatas (Venerable Beings, "gods," like Mithra, the goddess Anahita probably introduced from Babylon, etc.), and the latter by the band of the devils and druj (literally "lies"). Lying seems to have been the worst sin for Zarathustra.

This religion was at a certain moment monopolized by the Magi. Who the Magi were, is another crux of

the historians of Mazdaism. Herodotus speaks of the Magi as a tribe of Media and attributes to them a religion rather different from that of the old Persians. Father G. Messina tried to demonstrate that they formed a closed caste with such characteristic features as those of a "tribe." According to him, their name (magavan) means "bearers of the gift" of Zarathustra's doctrine.

Their power increased rapidly and it seems that already during the Achaemenid period (558–330 B.C.) the education of the future kings was entrusted to them. They succeeded in spreading among the people certain ethical principles and rites of their founder's religion.

But this success was not complete, and this is one of the many possible explanations of the discrepancies between the visible and popular religion of the Persians and the quasi-esoteric religion of the Magi. According to the same view, the Magi became afterwards the "philosophers" of their doctrine, and tried to develop it especially to explain its dualism.

Christian sources of the fourth century A.D. (Theodore of Mopsuestia) speak of the birth, in the milieu of the Magi, of the doctrine or heresy called Zurvanism that explained away dualism through the acceptance of a supreme god Zurvan (time) as father of both Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu. But some scholars now speak of Zurvanism as an actually autonomous religion; and others, turning the preceding theory upside down, consider the Magi to be the bearers of the less philosophical, most magical, and punctiliously ritualistic aspect of Zoroastrianism.

In the meanwhile ritual and cult, with complicated precepts of legal purity, were gradually prevailing and when, after a dark period of incubation under the Arsacid Dynasty (250 B. C. 224 A. D.) the caste of the Magi obtained unparalleled power, with the advent of the Sassanians (224–651 A.D.), Mazdaism, now a State religion, became an intolerant faith, persecutor of every form of heresy.

Heresy (as it happened first with Manichaeism supported at its beginnings by King Shahpur, 241–272 A. D., and then with communistic Mazdakism, favoured by King Kavat, 488–531) was sometimes a useful pretext for the warrior caste of the kings—a caste that seemed to possess its own religious tradition different from that of the priestly caste—to escape the excessive power of the Magi.

The discontentment hidden under the outwardly uniform orthodoxy, the unbearable poverty of the peasants, never totally imbued with the religion of the elite, and no doubt possessing their own religious customs and traditions practically unknown to us, and the struggle between Throne and Altar, were some of the causes that rendered the conquest of Iran by the Arabs so astonishingly easy.

The Mazdaic religion is commonly defined as "the religion of dualism." A deeper analysis shows that dualism is not the only basic feature of Mazdaism.

The account of Mazdaic philosophy that follows is divided in a rather unorthodox way, necessitated by the fact that Mazdaism is not a philosophy, into the following four sections: (1) The Concept of Myth, (2) Mazdaic Angelism, (3) the Double Dualism, (4) the Idea of Time.

1. The Concept of Myth

One of the most interesting features of Mazdaic thought is its being at the same time mythical and theologico-philosophical. The Mazdaic texts are very rich in myths, but these are never narrated *ex professo*; they are rather hinted at in the texts the chief purpose of which is not that of telling myths. Sufficient attention has not been paid to this “style” of Mazdaic Scriptures.

This is true not only of the later Pahlavi books but also of Avesta itself. In it myths are inlaid in liturgical hymns or legal and canonical texts in the form of explanations and comments. Avesta shows thus a rather “recent” type of mythtelling. The myth has never in Avesta—even in the case of myths having a naturalistic origin—the freshness of the Vedic myth; it is always in a phase of rational or theological explanation, and is used as a hint or example in texts that remain fundamentally theological.

We have just mentioned “myths having an ancient naturalistic origin.” A sufficiently clear instance of a Mazdaic myth of this type is that of the killed dragon. In the Aban Yasht² a hymn to the angel of Waters, Ardvi Sura Anahita, containing a list of all those who in ancient times made sacrifices to that angel-goddess, we read among other stories this passage, clearly explaining and confirming the efficacy of prayer and sacrifice to that angel:

“To her did Thraetaona, the heir of the valiant Athwya clan, offer up a sacrifice in the four-cornered Varena, with a hundred male horses, a thousand oxen, and ten thousand lambs.

He begged of her a boon; saying: ‘Grant me this, O Good, most beneficent Ardvi Sura Anahita! that I may overcome Azhi Dahaka, the three-mouthed, the three-headed, the six-eyed one who has a thousand senses, that most powerful, fiendish Druj, that demon, baleful to the world, the strongest Druj that Angra Mainyu created against the material world, to destroy the world of the good principle; and that I may deliver his two wives, Savanghavach and Erenavach, who are the fairest of body amongst women, and the most wonderful creatures in the world.’ Ardi Sura Anahita granted him that boon, as he was offering libations, giving gifts, sacrificing, and entreating that she would grant him that boon.”

Comparison with other cultures allows us to reconstruct an ancient myth originally connected with the New Year Feast and with the rites aiming at defeating drought. A divine, Thraetaona (the Faridun of Firdausi’s Shahnameh), conquers the fortress of the Dragon and defeats and kills him. The Waters that were prisoners in his castle are now freed and so are the women held by the monster as slaves in his harem.

Now rain falls fertilizing the earth and the young hero-liberator celebrates the hieres gamos with the liberated women. But this is simply a reconstruction and the readers or hearers of the Avesta probably had no idea of the original, authentically mythico-ritual, meaning of this tale; it probably sounded to them simply as a nice example of pietas towards the angel and of national heroism by Thraetaona.

But there are also other myths, utilized exactly like this and in similar contexts, of a purely theologico-symbolical origin. For instance, there is the myth of Vishtaspa who frees the enchained Daena, told always with the same emblematical conciseness in the Farvardin Yasht.³ This Yasht is chiefly a list of fravashis (see below) or holy men, to whom the believer offers sacrifices. The enterprises of some of these holy men are narrated here in order to encourage the worshipper to offer sacrifice to their respective fravashi. Concerning the fravashi of Vishtaspa, the king who protected Zarathustra, accepted his religion (Daena), and spread it, the hymn says:

“We worship the fravashi of the holy king Vishtaspa; the gallant one, who was the incarnate Word, the mighty-speared and lordly one; who, driving the Druj before him, sought wide room for the holy Daena . . . ; who made himself the arm and support of this law of Ahura, the law of Zarathustra. We took her (i. e., the Daena, or Religion) standing bound from the hands of the Hunus, and established her to sit in the middle (of the world), high ruling, never falling back, holy, nourished with plenty of cattle and pastures, blessed with plenty of cattle and pastures.”

Here we see, contrary to the former instance, a myth germinating from history. The process of mythicization has reached a very advanced stage, but not so advanced as to render it impossible to recognize the historical materials that lie at the basis of a myth. First of all, a Daena means “Religion,” in a quasi-personified sense; secondly, the fact-myth is connected with the work of the Prophet Zarathustra and that of the holy King Vishtaspa.

But it is highly interesting to note that the attributes attached to his name are the same as those of the angel Saraosha⁴ of which Vishtaspa is, in a sense, the terrestrial emblem; in the same way as Zarathustra is the terrestrial symbol of Ahura Mazda. We notice here an important moment of the passage from history to myth in Mazdaism and also, at the same time, an important aspect of the Mazdaic approach to myth and reality.

Mazdaic thought, while denaturalizing and ethicizing naturalistic myths, embodies historical events, in semi-mythical persons, and in so doing “angelizes” history. We are in the presence of a “visionary” theology-philosophy, in which intellectual entities assume personal forms, moving in an intermediate world of vision (probably a heritage of the mystical experiences of the Founder) so organized as to give a characteristic Unitarian savour to the whole Mazdaic thought.

2. Angelism

Once the mythical logic of Mazdaism has been understood, we can proceed to the study of some of the most significant details of the Mazdaic Weltanschauung. The first key to open its shrines is that, in Mazdaic thought, the Absolute is a personal God, the Wise Lord Ahura Mazda, a God that reminds us of the Biblical and Qur'anic God.

But His attributes are not (be they eternal or created) intelligible concepts; rather they are themselves

“persons” or angels.” Professor Corbin⁵ rightly remarks that the Mazdean, instead of putting to himself the questions: “What is Time? What is Earth? What is Water?”, asks: “Who is Time? Who is Earth? Who is Water?”

And so we find in Mazdaic texts that Time is a Youth of fifteen, Earth is the Archangel Spenta Armaiti (the Holy Piety), Water is the beautiful goddess–angel Ardivi Sura Anahita. The problem lies in rightly interpreting the verb is: in which sense are these images of vision what they represent? Certainly they are not angels in the Biblical and the Qur'anic sense of mere messengers or servants of God; Corbin compares them rightly with the *dii–angeli* of Proclus.

The Zamyad Yasht, speaking of the six Amesha Spentas, sings thus:⁶ “..the Amesha Spentas, the bright ones, whose looks perform their wish, tall, quickly coming to do, strong, and lordly, who are undecaying and holy; who are all seven (their seventh is Ahura Mazda himself) of one thought; who are all seven of one speech, who are all seven of one deed; whose thought is the same, whose speech is the same, whose father and commander is the same, namely the Maker, Ahura Mazda; who see one another's soul thinking of good thoughts, thinking of good words, thinking of good deeds, thinking of Garonmana (the supreme paradise, ‘house of the hymns’), and whose ways are shining as they go down to the libations; who are the makers and governors, the shapers and overseers, the keepers and preservers of these creations of Ahura Mazda.

It is they who shall restore the world, which will thenceforth never grow old and never die, will become never decaying, never rotting, ever living, ever increasing, and master of its wish, when the dead will rise, when life and immortality will come, and the world will be restored at its wish”

Here it seems that the Amesha Spentas play a role not very dissimilar to that of the “persons” of the Christian Trinity. It is remarkable that they are six, but are called seven, Ahura Mazda himself being the seventh. This concept of Ahura Mazda adding himself as the last to every hierarchical series of beings is often found in Mazdaic books. In order to understand it we must remember a sentence in the first chapter of Bundahishn:⁷

“For Ohrmazd is both spiritual and material,” or, according to other translations: “For Ohrmazd both creations are celestial”; in other words, everything is, for him, in transcendent, celestial stage. God can descend into all the stages of Being, eternally First and Last of every embodied or disembodied hierarchy, because, *sub specie Dei*, everything is transcendent and celestial and this descent can in no way “contaminate” Him.

But these six Amesha Spentas are also the archangelic emblem–personification of the primordial elements: Earth (Spenta Armaiti), Cattle (Vohu Manah), Fire (Asha), Metals (Khshathra), Water (Haurvatat), Plants (Ameretat).

They are the elements not as allegories of them, but as living personal symbols, as “Lords of the Species.” The concept of Ratu, Lord of the Species, is present everywhere in Mazdaic books. The Lord

of the Species “Woman” is, for instance, the mythico-historical Daena, “religion”; the Lord of the Species “Bird” is the mythical bird Saena meregha, or in modern Persian simurgh.

The theological abstractions that presented themselves to the philosophico-ecstatic mind of the Prophet Zarathustra in a period in which a transformation of the mythico-theological concepts into pure philosophy was premature, assumed the plastic life of the gods of the former naturalistic pantheon.

Holy Piousness, for example, came to be the Earth instead of remaining an abstractly pure intellectual form. Or, better, it did not come to be in the historical sense of the expression, but was probably already so double-faced in the mind of the Prophet, the historical Zarathustra or some other prophet, whose personal mystical experience is fundamental to the understanding of this as of all other concepts.

The connection of the Amesha Spentas with their natural kingdoms is already retraceable in the Gathas. In Yt. 31.9 Armaiti is seen as specially favouring the earth's tiller. A verse after, the thrifty toiler in the fields is called one “who nourisheth Vohu Manah (“the Good Thought” the Cattle), while in v. 21 Ahura Mazda will give “the fat of Good Thought (Cattle)” to him who is His friend.

But in the same Gathas we often hear that Ahura Mazda created the world through Good Thought, which in these contexts seems to have nothing to do with cattle. Whatever the historical origins of these angelico-symbolical identifications may have been, the fact remains that they had the highly important function of transfiguring the elements of nature into ethical values.

Or, to put it better, there is an exchange of functions: natural elements are coloured with ethos, and ethical values live a cosmic life. This is one of the most typical features of Mazdaism.

The Supreme God of Mazdaism has further interesting aspects that make him rather different from the God of classical monotheisms. He is, for instance, situated in a sort of transcendent Time and Space,⁸ Boundless Time and Space-Light, or Uncreated Light (but the word for Space, gas, could be also mythologically interpreted as “throne”).

There is, in other words, a time-tension in God. But the student of Mazdaism becomes even more astonished when he comes to know that Ahura Mazda has got a soul, or better a fravashi. As the idea of soul is a specially interesting aspect of Mazdaic thought, we shall treat it here as a particular case of Mazdaic “angelism.”

In Mazdaic anthropology, according to Bundahishn,⁹ man was “fashioned in five parts-body (tan), soul (jan), spirit (ruvan), prototype (adhvenak) and fravashi.

Body is the material part; soul, that which is connected with the wind-the inhaling and exhaling of breath; spirit, that which with consciousness in the body hears, sees, speaks and knows; the prototype is that which is situated in the station of the Sun; the fravashi is that which is in the presence of Ohrmazd, the Lord.

He was created in this fashion because, during the period of the assault of the Aggressor, men die, their bodies rejoin the earth, their souls the wind, their prototypes the Sun, their spirits the fravashi, so that the demons could not destroy the spirit.”

This is what happens during the period of the “Assault” or of the Mixture (gumeshishn) of the good and evil creations. At the end of this world, however, a real resurrection of the body will take place: the dead will be “reconstructed” (rist virast). The Saviour (born from Zarathustra's miraculously preserved sperm) will perform a sacrifice (yazishn) in which the bull Hatayosh will be killed, and from his fat and the white Haoma the ambrosia (anosh) will be prepared. All men will drink it and become immortal.

A pure concept of the “immortality of the soul,” in the Greek sense of the term, seems extraneous to Mazdaic thought. Every (good) man is already an angel, fravashi, eternally in the presense of Ahura Mazda; resurrection of the body too is not exactly identical with the same idea in Christian and Muslim tradition, for it happens in a moment which is not, properly speaking, a historical moment; but the epoch of frasho_kereti (Phl. frashkart) which is no more in Finite Time but in Boundless Time.

The metaphysical peculiarity of this epoch is also clearly shown by the immolation of the Bull, otherwise in “normal time, a horrible sin for Mazdaism.”

While the first three parts of the human compound do not need any explanation, we have to consider here the two concepts of prototype (adhvenak) and fravashi. The former_is the heritage of an older astro_biological idea, common also in India, according to which the prototypical soul of the different categories of beings is preserved in the heavenly bodies. The race_type of Cattle is preserved, for instance, in the moon (gaochithra, “having the form of Kine,” is an Avestic name for the moon), and that of Plants in the stars. [10](#)

Deeper and more easily interpretable in an ethical and philosophical way is the concept of fravashi. This term does not appear in the Gathas (which also ignore adhvenak, Mazdaicized afterwards), but in the so-called “more recent” parts of the Avesta it has already become the aspect that will remain fixed in the Pahlavi tradition. It is clearly kept distinct from “soul” in passages like Yt. 26. 7, and it seems that, at least in the beginning, only heroes had been considered to be having a fravashi.

Bailey's researches have demonstrated that the idea of fravashi is associated with “the defensive power emanating from a hero, even after his death.” This originally aristocratic idea suffered a process of democratization in the course of time: every (righteous) man thus got his fravashi, whose protective and defensive force is exerted not only in his favour, but in favour of all those who invoke her.

The “fravashis of the Righteous” are seen as protectors of specially sacred places, of the mythical lake or sea (Vouru_kasha, of the white Haoma, which we saw as an important ingredient of future ambrosia, of Zarathustra's semen from which the future Saviours will be born, etc. In their function as welcomers of the righteous souls after death they remind us of the Germanic Valkyrs.

But the fravashis are also something more. In a passage of Avesta¹¹ we read: “And these we present hereby to the fravashi of Zarathustra Spitama, the saint, for sacrifice, propitiation, and praise, and to those of the people who love Righteousness, with all the holy fravashis of the saints who are dead and who are living, and to those of men who are as yet unborn, and to those of the prophets who will serve us, and will labour to complete the progress and renovation of the world.”

Fravashis are, already now, real angelic doublets of the pious and good men, past, present, and future. Also the living seem to have already a fravashi in a sense slightly similar to but not at all identical with the “Guardian Angel” of the Christian tradition. But there is even more: we saw that Zarathustra, the Prophet, the “terrestrial God” as he is called in some parts of Avesta, has his fravashi, and this is obvious. However, it may seem strange to a rationalistic mind that the Archangels and even Ahura Mazda Himself have their fravashis.

In Vendidad 19, 46–48 Zarathustra is invited to invoke the fravashi of Ahura Mazda. This fascinating idea seems to assume a doublet of God Himself in a further hyper-transcendent dimension of Being; but, as is often the case with many original and highly interesting Mazdaic terms and concepts, this idea is mentioned as if by chance and is soon dropped, without any interpretation or comment.

These angelic doublets of the Good are also symbols of Free Choice (see also below). According to a typically Mazdaic myth-theologoumenon preserved in Bundahishn,¹² at the beginning of the millennia of the period of “Mixture” (gumehishn), Ahura Mazda asked the fravashis whether they preferred to remain untouched by and protected from every danger in the invisible, transcendent world or whether they were ready to descend and incarnate themselves in the visible material world in order to struggle with Evil.

The fravashis accepted the second alternative. In this way a sort of de-doubling happened: now, in this material world the real man is his fravashi, his angelic ego, that is at the same time his destiny and his true transcendental self; the moral responsibility of man is, in a sense, “transcendentalized.”

Sin becomes equivalent to the treason of an angel. Metaphysically, every discussion on the existence of soul, etc., is rendered useless by this acceptance of the experienced fact of apriority of angel over man.

We said that the Gathas do not mention the term fravashi. But they contain another idea that certainly contributed to give a new and ethical meaning to the (probably pre-Zarathustrian) heroic myth of the Valkyr-fravashi.

We mean the idea of Daena (Phl. den). This term has been etymologically analyzed in the most discordant ways by philologists, looking for a semantic explanation which may give reason for the double meaning of the word: “religion” and “deep soul,” or better angelic personification of human deeds. Here are some interesting Gathic passages containing the term Daena:

“He who renders the Saint deceived, for him shall later be destruction: long life shall be his lot in the

darkness; foul shall be his foods his speech shall be of the lowest. This is the life, O ye vile! to which your deeds and your Daena will bring you!"[13](#)

"Yea, I will declare the world's two first spirits, of whom the more bountiful thus spake to the harmful: Neither our thoughts, nor our commands, nor our understandings, nor our beliefs, nor our deeds, nor our Daēnas, nor our souls are at one."[14](#)

"But their (of the Evil ones) souls and their daenas will groan when they will approach the Chinvat Bridge "[15](#)

"Declare to me, O Ahura, that path of the Good Thought where the Daena of the Saviours, i. e., their good works (ya hukereta), will taste the joys of Righteousness"[16](#)

A later text of Avesta, the Hadekht Nask[17](#) tells of the righteous soul meeting, after death, his Daena in the form of a beautiful girl of fifteen; here we see again the mytho-poetic tendency of Mazdaic thought, making of every intelligible entity an angel.

If we examine the above-quoted passages we shall see that in all of them we could freely translate Daena as "religious works," ethical acts metaphysically considered. The fact that these acts "groan"[18](#) is not at all astonishing, if we remember the easiness with which Mazdeans personify ideas. This explains also how a fravashi has been attributed to Ahura Mazda himself. Ahura Mazda has indeed a Daena in the Gathas; in Bundahishun[19](#) "omniscience and goodness," i. e., supreme religious actions, are called. Ahura Mazda's den (Daena, "religion").

The primary sense of Daena seems to be ethico-religious. It is "religious acting" that (as is the case in quite a different mental environment with the Hindu karma) creates a body, is representable visibly, and for Ahura Mazda is His light[20](#) and for man his angel of light. As pointed out by Pagliano, it was this Zarathustrian Daena that modified the warrior fravashis (Dumezil) into ethical angels.

And it is in our opinion especially the myth of choice that gave also Ahura Mazda a fravashi. In which sense is Ahura Mazda so similar to the righteous man as to have Himself a fravashi? Chiefly in the sense that Ahura Mazda also made a choice of the two primordial Spirits—say the Gathas—"the most holy Spirit chose the Truth."[21](#)

This sense of angelic ethos has thus produced one of the deepest ideas of Mazdaism, the image of the "soul-angel-valkyr-religious work."

3. The Double Dualism

Choice, the central ethical concept of Mazdaism, is a choice between two. This leads us to examine the radical dualism that, according to many, is the basic idea of this religious philosophy. According to a Gathic passage,[22](#) "the two primordial Spirits that, in deep sleep, were heard as Twins, are the Excellent and the Evil, in thoughts, words, and deeds; and between these two the wise, not the foolish, have made

their choice

And when these two Spirits met, they first established Life and Non-Life and (they decided) that, at the end, the worst existence would be that of the followers of Lie, and the best spiritual force (Manah) would be that of the followers of Truth. Between these two Spirits the followers of the Druj chose the acting of the Worst One, but the Most Holy Spirit, who covers himself with the firm stones of heaven as his robes, chose the Truth, and those who desired to satisfy Ahura Mazda through righteous actions did the same.”

Good and evil are thus connected with an ethical choice, even if it seems that in the most ancient parts of Avesta, the Holy Spirit is not exactly identical with Ahura Mazda but is probably Ahura Mazda in His choosing, “acting” aspect. Another point that shows the typical ethicism of Zoroastrian dualism is the name, “Lie,” attributed to the evil principle. But in Gathic thought the evil beings and the Evil Spirit are not “fallen creatures” of God, as in the classical monotheism.

They are beings of a purely negative and destructive nature, which it would be absurd to think of as having been created by a good God and the final destiny of which seems to be that of being reduced to nothing. Ahriman, in a later Pahlavi catechism (Pandnamak-i Zartusht), is—if the translation is correct—“a being who does not exist, who received nothing in himself,” and the same is endowed in Bundahishn with the strange quality pas-bavishnih (“post-existence,” as opposed to the positive “pre-existence” of Ahura Mazda).

This ethos is, however—and here is again the typical feature of Mazdaic thought—strongly “cosmicized”: Goodness means, above all, promotion of Being, Life, and agriculture. It means “growth” (a word often used in the Mazdaic texts) of good material existence too. “Righteousness, the Bundahishn says openly, obeys the same rules as (cosmic) Creation.”²³ Ethos means also material positivity. The evil people (we often hear, in Mazdaic texts, curses against the nomads, the non-producers, and the killers of cattle) are, above all, the destroyers of existence.

We can now better understand the second type of dualism, a dualism now not of choice but of transcendence between the invisible (or celestial) menok, and the visible (or terrestrial) getik; for God creates the terrestrial world to protect, foster, or help (adhyarih) the celestial world, which is, in a way, its prototype, its root (bun).

This dualism is, however, radically different from the Platonic dualism. A very instructive passage of one of the most philosophical treatises of Mazdaism, the Shikand Gumanik Vichar written in the third/ninth century,²⁴ will show this difference in a very clear way.

“The getik is the fruit (bar) of menok; menok is its root (bun) The fact that getik is the fruit and menok its root becomes clear when one thinks that every visible and tangible thing passes from invisibility to visibility.

It is already well known that man and the other visible and tangible creatures come from the invisible and intangible menok; in the same way, the form, the species, and the height and the breadth of a being are the same as those of the being that generated it; the body of man and other creatures, which is now manifested, was hidden and invisible in the semen that came from his parents; the semen itself, that was in the loins of the parents, passed to the stage of manifestation, visibility, and tangibility.

We can therefore know by certainty that this visible and tangible getik has been created from an invisible and intangible menok, and there is no doubt that it will come back from visibility and tangibility to the invisibility and intangibility of the same menok”.

We see from this passage that this Mazdaic dualism differs from the Platonic and Gnostic dualism chiefly in the sense that for it matter and the world are in no way an “inferior” stage of Being. On the contrary, Matter is, in a sense, the most mature and perfect aspect (the fruit) of Spirit. It differs, however, also from the views implied by too simple a creationistic monotheism inasmuch as it seems to admit not only “one” personal God and His immediate creation, but various stages of Being.

Regarding the first point we refer the reader to a [text²⁵](#) in which it is clearly stated that the terrestrial world (getik) is higher in dignity than paradise (vahisht), because it is in this terrestrial, embodied, visible, and tangible world only that the battle against the powers of Evil can be fought and won—a struggle that makes it possible for the soul “to strive with his thought (ahang—menishn) towards Beatitude.”

One of the most important miraculous deeds accomplished by the Prophet Zarathustra was that of breaking the bodily forms (shikastan—i kalput) of the Devils. Without their bodies the Devils are less perfect and less dangerous in their struggle. And here we find again the fundamentally ethical or rather cosmo—ethical function of the getik—menok dualism. Matter is useful in the struggle against Evil.

Regarding the second point, let us remember that in the first chapter of Bundahishn, which contains one of the most detailed accounts of the double creation of the world, the Mazdaic vision seems to involve various stages of creation, the highest of which are prototypical, emblematical. Even from some passages of the Gathas it may appear that God created first the prototypes of things, the Primordial Ox, the Protoanthropos, the Plant, etc.

Coming back to the last sentence of the above—quoted passages of Shikand Gumanik Vichar, we see how this life of positive struggle in the material world blossomed forth from the celestial world in a cycle that is at the end destined to be reabsorbed into the celestial and invisible stage, once its ethical task has been fulfilled. Thus it seems that even the first dualism, that between Good and Evil, will become a monism again at the consummation of Time. Here we come to the idea of Time and Cycle as the instrument of a victorious struggle.

4. Time and Cycle

With regard to the question of Time also the Mazdaic thought shows an originality of conception that distinguishes it both from the Indian outlook assuming “flight from Time” as supreme salvation and beatitude, and from the classical Semitic forms of monotheism by which Time seems to be conceived as an irreversible “line.”

In order never to forget the peculiar “angelical” character of Mazdaism, the reader is reminded that in Bundahishn²⁶ Time is an angelic person, a youth of fifteen, “bright, with white eyes, tall and mighty, whose might is from valour, not from robbery and violence.”

In other words, the Mazdean, in order to understand Time, did not intellectually “discuss” it as we do (that is why European scholars rather anachronistically find so many “contradictions” in the Mazdaic texts referring to Time) but rather experimented with it in vision. And this vision shows them what is told in the first chapter of the same theological book.²⁷

“Thus it is revealed in the Good Religion. Ohrmazd was on high in omniscience and goodness: for Infinite Time He was ever in the Light. Omniscience and Light are the robes of Ohrmazd: some call them “religion” (den, see above)

The Time of the robes is infinite like Ohrmazd, and Goodness and Religion, during all the time of Ohrmazd, were, are and will be—Ahriman, slow in knowledge, whose will is to smite, was deep down in the darkness: (he was) and is, yet will not be. The will to smite is his robe, and darkness is his place: some call it the Endless Darkness.”

The cosmic drama unfolds itself in a Time and in a Space, but Ahrimanic time is composed of only two moments, past and present. Time and Space have also a transcendent aspect. Transcendent Time is the so-called “Boundless Time” (zaman-i akanarak) or “Time of the Long Dominion” (zaman-i derang - khvatai). Time (not of course our “serial” time) exists even in the heart of the Absolute. There is not, in Mazdaic thought, too simple a contrast between Time and Eternity. But let us continue our reading and see the “aim” of our serial time.

Ohrmazd creates first a purely transcendent prototypical creation. Ahriman rises from the depths, sees it, and rushes forward to smite and destroy it. When Ohrmazd sees that struggle is unavoidable, He says to Himself: “If I do not fix a time for battle against him, then Ahriman could do to my creation even as he threatened, and the struggle and the mixture will be ever lasting; and Ahriman could settle in the mixed state of creation and take it to himself. And “Ohrmazd said to the Destructive Spirit: `Fix a time, so that by this pace we may extend the battle for nine thousand years.’

For He knows that by fixing a time in this way the Destructive Spirit would be made powerless.

Then the Destructive Spirit, not seeing the end, agreed to that treaty, just as two men who fight a duel fix

a term saying: 'Let us on such a day do battle till night falls.' This too did Ohrmazd know in His omniscience that within these nine thousand years, three thousand would pass entirely according to the will of Ohrmazd, three thousand years in mixture would pass according to the will of both Ohrmazd and Ahriman, and that in the last battle the Destructive Spirit would be made powerless and that He Himself would save creation from aggression."

Limited time, i. e., serial time (during 9,000 years), is then conceived in an ethical light, just like the material world in which it is manifested. Serial time is something like a great detour, an ample digression from Infinite Time, but a substantially positive detour, because its aim is to render the battle against Evil possible and successful. Hence come some important consequences.

(a) Destiny – If Time is a "youth" and if, as it is said in another text,²⁸ "the creator Ohrmazd dyed Time with colour," Time cannot be an a priori form in the Kantian sense. Time is objectively coloured; it can be practically identified with "destiny" (bakht, assigned lot). Some Mazdaic texts as, for example, the beautiful myth of the choice of the fravashis already mentioned, seem favourable to free-will, some others²⁹ seem in favour of predestination. Apart from the problems connected with the historical formation of these ideas, we must say that Mazdaic theology solves the problem in a rather consequential way.

Pahlavi Vendidad (5. 9. 33) maintains that "in the material world every thing happens according to destiny (pat bakht), whereas in the celestial world everything is according to free action (pat kunishn). This solution of the problem of time is indeed a consequence of the angelic, emblematical outlook of Mazdaism.

Destiny is no more than the visible, terrestrial, getik aspect of its truer transcendent, invisible, naenok prototype, which is freedom. More over, in all this a part is also played by the Ohrmazd-Ahriman dualism, in the sense that Ahriman, through the creation of the seven accursed planets (these are for Mazdaism evil entities, while the fixed stars, and especially the Zodiacal signs are good, and called "the generals of Ohrmazd"), inserts himself into the play, trying to change the temporal destinies of men and of the world.

In this he succeeds, however, only temporarily. And there is still another interesting concept, that of bagho-bakht or portion allotted by the gods (divine destiny),³⁰ a "supplement," as it were, of destiny, added to that initially established (or, to put it better, added to the terrestrial emblem of transcendent human freedom) in order to recompense specially meritorious actions. "But the gods, we read in the above-mentioned texts, rarely concede that supplement of destiny, and they manifest it only in the celestial world," in order to avoid a possible destruction of it by Ahrimanic forces, if it is manifested visibly in the getik.

We must never forget that transcendent entities can struggle, and win and lose, only through their incarnation in the visible world.

It is, however, obvious that such an approach to the problem of destiny and free-will results in a fatalism even more radical than that reproached by some in the classical monotheistic religions.

This is true especially when we think that some theological schools of Mazdaism, e. g., Zurvanism, maintain that both gods, Ohrmazd and Ahriman, are subject to Time's power of destiny. Time (Zurvan) is regarded as supreme God; and even Ohrmazd³¹ is taken to have created the world "with the approval of Infinite Time" (pat afrin-i zaman-i akanark).

(b) The Apocatastasis – When we consider limited Time to be a detour, a digression from transcendent Infinite Time, we are able to understand better the idea of the "cosmic cycle" typical of Mazdaism. Reading theological Mazdaic texts one is impressed by a tendency to connect the facts and happenings of the proto-history with those of the end of the world.

The Heroes who will contribute to the creation of the "Future Body" (tan-i pasen) are the same Heroes as, at the dawn of existence, were the protagonists of the myth of the Beginning.

The Saviour, or, better, the three eschatological Saviours are sons of the first Revealer of the Faith, Zarathustra. They are practically Zarathustra himself. To justify the enormous distance in time, there is the myth of Zarathustra's sperm miraculously preserved in a lake, protected by the fravashis.

The beginning is the end. There is, in the limited, serial time, a circle leading it fatally towards Infinite Time. Gayomart, the first Man, the Protoanthrope, will also be the first Resurrected man; the ancient hero Yamshet (Mod. Pers. Jamshid) has already prepared, at the beginnings of history, the mythical Ark (var) to save men from the terrible trials of the End.

Past and Future seem united in an eternal Present, if seen sub specie menok. The Apocatastasis is, transcendently (menokiha), happening already (and sometimes, we find in these theological texts future events told- by verbs in the past).

Serial time is like an immense "delay" from metaphysical Time, but there is in it a positive curving towards the Origin. All events of this period of "delay" are eschatologically justified. The ancient victory of Sahm, the Hero, on certain demonic monsters is explained as necessary, because, without it, "it would have been impossible to fulfil Resurrection and Future Life."³²

It is, however, interesting to remark that the tan-i pasen, the "Future Body" or Future Life, is, though in a transcendent form, a real body and—at least judging by some texts—the renewed world will not be a mere re-identification with the first stage of the prototypical menok creation, when it was "without thought, without touch, without movement in a moist stage like semen."³³

On the contrary, the idea of the positivity of time, and that of the presence of an "Infinite Time" even in Eternity, seems to confer a colour of novelty and true Life to the new world, prepared by the struggling experience of the embodied creatures.

It would be, however, too risky to proceed in these considerations further; for, as mentioned before, the Mazdaic texts too often leave the reader in the expectation of something that never comes. A really theological and philosophical development of their highly suggestive and interesting intuitions is absent.

(c) Ethics – We have not to fix our ideas on the chivalrous ethics of the struggle situated in Time. This struggle, like that of “two men who fight a duel,” is a free one, one in which man can always succumb; but just because Time is also an angel, the struggle is coloured with a metaphysical, supreme, “engagement.” It transcends everyday's secular ethics. The metaphysico – ethical responsibility of the Mazdean is such that he can pray in the words of the Gatha: “May we be such as those who will bring about the Transfiguration of the World.”³⁴

At the same time, however, and for the same reasons, Mazdaic ethics, rooted as it is in an objective Time, is a heavily heteronomous one. This causes it to be different not only from our modern autonomous ethics; but also from the purely theo–nomous ethics of the classical forms of monotheism. Mazdaic ethics is still strictly connected with semi–mythical realities and with a moral dualism always in danger of transforming itself into a cosmological dualism.

In other words, Good and Evil mean to the Mazdean something more than what they mean to us. There is an entire series of situations and objects (Time is dyed with colour) intrinsically evil, Ahrimanic. We deduce from various passages in Mazdaic Scriptures that not only the nomad is naturally evil, but also the non–Iranian (aneran) is something objectively evil in comparison with the Iranian; insects and snakes are evil and so on.

The idea that the natural essence (gohr) of certain given beings is radically and metaphysically diabolical is very clear from the texts, and even some characters of history,³⁵ such as Alexander the Greek and Frasiyak the Turanian are no more than devilish creatures of Ahriman. The problem of how much did Evil permeate the creation of Ahura Mazda during the period of “Mixture” has been solved by Mazdeans in a rather heavy, objective, classificatory way.

There have been, however, acute minds that started to meditate on the origin of that Evil which the traditional Mazdaic texts gave as an unexplained presupposition, or rather considered it a fact not needing any explanation. So was born Zurvanism, a theologico–philosophical school, that is considered by some European Orientalists to be a real autonomous religion.

To solve the problem of the origin of Evil, Mazdaic mind again created a myth: that of the primordial “doubt” of the Time–God (Zurvan), a doubt from which Ahriman was born, as a wicked “twin” of Ohrmazd. This school seems also to have shown a tendency, at least according to recent studies, to unify and symmetrize the two dualisms already mentioned, in the sense that the material world, the realm of the flesh, begins to be identified with the Ahrimanic creation.

This remained only a very vague tendency in Zurvanism, but the identification, quite in the spirit of Gnosticism, was totally accomplished by Manichaeism, in the Iranian texts in which Zurvan is the name

of the Supreme God, while Ohrmazd passes to the stage of Protoanthropos. But such identification completely breaks the frame and organism of Mazdaic thought, that has always considered Manichaeism to be the most dangerous and most Ahrimanic heresy.

5. Conclusion

We have studied in too rapid and perhaps too unphilosophical a way, the mythical logic, the dualistic and angelical metaphysics, the chivalrous and fatalistic ethics of Mazdaism. It is now necessary to say a word on the importance of this thought for the development of the subsequent phases of the philosophical history of Iran and Islam.

Those who know the strange and highly interesting world of Muslim “heresies” cannot deny that some features of their theological systems strongly remind us of the Mazdaic Weltanschauung. We mean, above all, their curious angelical approach to metaphysics, their tendency to recreate a purely “mental” mythology, identifying, e. g., the first intellect or Logos with this or that historical person, or telling, as the Nusairis do, that `Ali is the Ma`na (Supreme Meaning) and Muhammad is the Ism (Transcendent Name), etc.

Professor Corbin demonstrated in his remarkable essays the influence of pre-Islamic Iranian thought on Muslim thinkers like Suhrawardi Maqtul and on Ismailism, but his contempt of history and historical method seems rather exaggerated.

It is indeed very difficult to identify the historical channels through which these influences may have penetrated Islam. Many seem, however, to forget that the most important Pahlavi theological texts were written in Muslim Persia in the most flourishing period of Islam and that discussions among Muslims, Christians, Manichaeans, and Mazdeans are documented in the third/ninth century at the Court of the Caliph al-Mamun.

The influences seem to have been mutual, for it has been shown that some Pahlavi texts contain quotations from the Qur'an and mention contemporary Muslim currents of thought such as that of the Mu'tazilah.³⁶

But apart from this direct influence, we could more surely admit another kind of indirect convergence. The late systematic Mazdaic thought was no doubt influenced by late Hellenism and Gnosticism, in the same way as the first Islamic thought was influenced by Hellenism, Sabaeism, and Gnosticism during the second and third/eighth and ninth centuries.

Hence there resulted, in both the spiritual worlds, a similar functioning that can give the illusion of direct influence, especially when similar languages, Pahlavi and modern Persian, are used.

If these considerations may seem to discourage the exaggerated enthusiasm of some pan-Iranianists (it is sufficiently known that even ancient Iran had been rather strongly “semitized” by Babylonian and old

Syrian influences) they also point to the fact that the organic thought of Mazdaism assumed its truer and deeper historical value just because it did not remain the heritage of a single race or a single people, but, being in itself historically a composite product, synthesized itself with the seeds of the extremely original and rich philosophico-theological value, Islam, that was destined in its turn to spread them in their most mature form throughout the entire civilized world.

Note – The quotations from Avesta and Pahlavic texts are given, modifying here and there some rather contradictory European versions, after comparing them with the original texts. The writer is fully aware of the fact that some of them remain personal and rather conjectural interpretations.

It would be useless to reproduce here a more or less complete bibliography of studies and essays related to Mazdaism. A sufficiently large and recent list of reference works is contained in J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster* (Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, 1956), Oxford, 1958.

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- [1.](#) Corbin, "Terre Celeste et Corps de Resurrection," Eranos Jahrbuch, Vol. XXII, p. 99.
- [2.](#) Yt., 5. 33 ff.
- [3.](#) Ibid., 13. 99–100.
- [4.](#) Ibid., 11. 23.
- [5.](#) Corbin, op. cit., p. 99.
- [6.](#) Yt., 19. 15=20.
- [7.](#) Bundahishn; I. 32.
- [8.](#) Cf. Bundahishn, I. 2.
- [9.](#) Ibid., III. 11.
- [10.](#) Cf. Yz., 12.
- [11.](#) Ibid., 24. 5.
- [12.](#) Bund.. III. 21–22.
- [13.](#) Yt., 31. 20.
- [14.](#) Ibid, 45. 2.
- [15.](#) Ibid., 46. 11.
- [16.](#) Ibid., 34. 13
- [17.](#) Ibid., 229.
- [18.](#) Ibid., 46.
- [19.](#) Bund.. 1. 2
- [20.](#) Ibid.
- [21.](#) Yt., 30. 5.
- [22.](#) Ibid., 30. 3 ff
- [23.](#) Bund., I. 22.
- [24.](#) P.J de Menasce, Ed., p. 92–94.
- [25.](#) Madan, Ed., Denkart, p. 271.
- [26.](#) Bund., III. 3.
- [27.](#) Ibid., I. 2 ff.
- [28.](#) Denkart, quoted in Zaehner, Zurvan, p. 381.
- [29.](#) For instance, Menok-i Khrat, Ch. VIII.
- [30.](#) Cf. ibid., Ch. XXIV.
- [31.](#) Ibid.. Ch. VIII.
- [32.](#) Ibid., Ch. XXVII.
- [33.](#) Bund., I.
- [34.](#) Ft., 30. 9.
- [35.](#) History, as it is obvious from the Mazdean's point of view, becomes the emblematical prelude to Apocatastasis and at the same time the symbol of a transcendent pugilistic prototype.
- [36.](#) Their name and their idea of the aslah are mentioned and criticized in Shikand Gumdnak Vichar, ed. Menasce, pp. 146–47.

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