



"The Zoroastrianism-Islamic rut": Reflections on the Scholarship of Zoroastrianism and Islam

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In his 1953 inaugural lecture as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, Robert Charles Zaehner, the Anglo-Swiss Iranist and scholar of comparative religion, noted the perils and promises in the study of eastern religions by western theologians. Among the criticisms was that the Christian theologians were often uninterested in the study of exotic and distant credos such as Hinduism, Confucianism or Buddhism. Zaehner, however, noted that the religious scholar: "could, perhaps, have paid a little more attention to the Zoroastrians, many of whose dogmas seem so strikingly to prefigure ideas that we have come to regard as specifically Christian, [including] the freedom of the human will, the reality of heaven and hell, the individual judgement of the soul at death, and a universal judgement on the last day, to mention only the most important."¹

Some six years later, Zaehner edited *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, and it remains one of the finest one-volume compilations of essays by leading specialists of their respective religions. Zaehner's contribution on Zoroastrianism is splendid in perspicuity and penetration. In the introduction, he notes: "The importance of Zoroastrianism, however, like that of Judaism, lies not in the number of those who profess it, but rather in the influence it has exercised on other religions, and particularly on Christianity, through the medium of the Jewish exiles in Babylon who seem to have been thoroughly impregnated with Zoroastrian ideas. Christianity claims to be the heir of the prophets of Israel. If there is any truth in this claim, it is no less heir to the Prophet of ancient Iran, little though most Christians are aware of this fact."² Zaehner further acknowledged that much of what the Zarathustra taught lives on in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. "Judaism had absorbed into its bloodstream more of the Iranian Prophet's teaching than it could well admit."³ Through its connection with Islam, Baha'ism, may also be the newest 'universalism'.

Although Zoroastrianism has now received greater recognition in Judaic and New Testament scholarship, Zoroastrianism's relationship with Islam remains relatively unexplored. Whereas some scholars of Islam have correctly underscored the socio-historical impact of Iranian culture on Islam, less is noted of actual Zoroastrian influences on Islam.⁴ Amidst Zaehner's own appeal for the study of comparative religion, in his Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Oxford between 1967 and 1969, Zaehner coined "the old Zoroastrian-Islamic rut" that bedevilled the scholarship.⁵

Whence and whither this rut? It is, literally, a rut depressing in scholarly recognition and deplorable in popular realization. The aversion has been frequently cool, occasionally cordial, and always mutual whether between Arabist and Iranist scholars or Zoroastrians and Muslims. The history between Zoroastrians and Muslims was summed up by Jamsheed Choksy as, "a legacy of who they had been and what they had experienced through conflict and cooperation."⁶ The modern historian of the Arabs, Bernard Lewis, however, noted that "Zoroastrianism suffered the most. The Persian state, unlike the Christian empire, was completely overcome and destroyed. The Zoroastrians, lacking either the stimulation of powerful friends beyond the border enjoyed by the Christians or the bitter skills in survival possessed by the Jews, fell into discouragement and decline."⁷

Notwithstanding the history described by Lewis, the relationship between Zoroastrianism and Islam remains compelling for some modern scholars. Zoroastrian ideas have percolated into early Islam. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), the father of modern Islamology, pioneering work still remains the departure point for all embarking on Islam's relationship with Zoroastrianism.⁸ Furthermore, Alessandro Bausani (1921-88), the accomplished scholar of Arabic and Persian noted the Iranian-influenced roots of Islam.⁹

Consider, for example, Goldziher's contention that the five, diurnal, mandatory prayers of Islam, part of the five pillars of the faith, can be plausibly attributed to direct Zoroastrian influences on the development of early Islam. Furthermore, the famous night journey of the Prophet Muhammad to Jerusalem and heavenly ascent from the holy city mount to paradise, noted in the hadith literature and written a century after Muhammad's death, might reasonably be said to have been influenced by Pahlavi Iranian lore. Such a heavenly sojourn is evident in the apocalyptic voyage of the righteous (arda) Wiraz. The Arda Wiraz Namag or "The Book of the Righteous Wiraz",¹⁰ written in Middle



Parliament Of The World's Religions

Persian, is little known to Islamic scholars; yet may well have influenced ideas from the Qur'an to Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*.

The lack of knowledge on the ties between Zoroastrianism and Islam forms a lack of comparative scholarship, and a faulty or scant comprehension of even the basics of the Irano-Islamic religious situation. Other misunderstandings are a result of biased views; the latter, admittedly, routine among adherents of any confessional system. The 'Zoroastrian case for Islam' and the former's influences on the latter, was problematic given the doctrine's of Islam. Unlike the case of Judaism and Christianity, whose followers were (ahl al-kitab) "people of the book", Zoroastrianism as Islam's 'spiritual forebears', was impossible.

The inter-faith movement in recent years has witnessed the establishment of "a common word" ecumenical declaration by a grouping of 138 Muslim scholars and theologians and the Holy See. An initiative of this nature, albeit on a far modest scale, between Zoroastrian representatives and Muslims of all branches might not be undesirable

Notes

- 1 "Foolishness to the Greeks" (an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 2 November 1953). Reprinted in R. C. Zaehner, *Concordant Discord: the interdependence of faiths* being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at St. Andrews in 1967-69 (Oxford 1970), p. 431.
- 2 R.C. Zaehner, "Zoroastrianism" in *The Hutchinson Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths* (Oxford 1959, revised reprint 1994), p. 200.
- 3 Ibid., p. 213.
- 4 Shaul Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam: studies in religious history and inter-cultural contacts* (Aldershot, 1995) available in a Persian edition as *Az Iran-e zardoshti ta Islam: mota'alat-e darbareh-e tarikh-e din va tamasha-ye miyan farhangi*, trans. M Sabqib Far (Tehran, 1381/2002); B.K. Waghmar, 'A Note on Parsi Islamology', Third International Congress Proceedings: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, ed. H. Modi (Bombay, 2001), p. 258, n. 3. See especially the papers by E. Yarshater, H. Kennedy and C. E. Bosworth in *The Rise of Islam: the Idea of Iran IV*, eds. V. Curtis and S. Stewart (London, 2009) delivered as part of the The Idea of Iran symposia annually sponsored since 2004 by the Soudavar Memorial Foundation at the London Middle East Institute, SOAS.
- 5 Zaehner, 1970, p. 8.
- 6 J.K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society* (New York, 1997), p. 143.
- 7 B. Lewis, "The Middle East and the West" (London, 1964), p. 20, repr. in *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York, 1994), p. 15; also reiterated in his *The Middle East: a brief history of the last 2,000 years* (New York, 1995), p. 218.
- 8 I. Goldziher, "Islamisme et Parsisme" in *Actes du 1er Congrès International d'Histoire des Religions* (Paris, 1900), pp. 119-147; repr. in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, ed. J. Desomogyi (Hildesheim, 1970), pp. 232-260. Translated by G.K. Nariman with an afterword as "The Influence of Parsism on Islam" in C.P. Tiele, *The Religion of the Iranian Peoples, part I*, (Bombay, 1912), pp. 162-186. Repr. in G.K. Nariman, *Persia and Parsis*, part I (Bombay, 1925), pp. 39-74. A recent study by an Iranist is P. O. Skjærvø, "Goldziher and Iranian elements in Islam" in Goldziher Memorial Conference June 21-22, 2000, Budapest. Oriental Collection: Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, eds. A. Éva and O. István (Budapest, 2005 [2006]), pp. 245-250.
- 9 A. Bausani, "The Problem of Iranian Islam" in *Religion in Iran: from Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, tr. J. Marchesi (New York, 2005), pp. 111-145.
- 10 E. Blochet, "Études sur l'histoire religieuse de l'Iran II: l'ascension au ciel du prophète Muhammad" *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 40 (1899), pp. 1-25. F. Vahman, *Arda Wiraz Namag: The Iranian 'Divine Commedia'* (Copenhagen, 1986).

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