

Zoroaster

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In his book, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*,¹ Professor R. C. Zaehner gives as an appendix Professor W. B. Henning's critique of the work of E. E. Herzfeld and H. S. Nyberg, taken from Henning's *Zoroaster, Politician or Witch-doctor?* (Oxford, 1951). It is much to be regretted that this appendix did not include the whole of that valuable short work by Professor Henning; rather than comprising only the part of it which is least tasteful and of least interest to any but those few who are arrayed in the ranks of quarrelling Zoroastrianists. Because it is to Henning's lucid description of who Zoroaster was, where and when he lived and what he taught that the wearied and somewhat confused reader of this much larger work by Professor Zaehner wants gratefully to turn after the ordeal he has just undergone. However Professor Zaehner does satisfy the enquirer on the matter of when Zoroaster lived: he follows Henning and dates Zoroaster as Zoroastrians have traditionally done—'258 years before Alexander', i.e., Alexander's defeat of the Achaemenids in Iran in 330 B.C., so that Zoroaster's date may be taken as about 588 B.C. This is important because of theories which have been advanced, that Zoroaster lived much earlier; and that he lived at all has, also, I believe been put in doubt. Therefore it is refreshing to have a Henning and a Zaehner, who know the languages and the texts relative to Zoroastrianism and the prophet's original teaching, to tell us when he lived—not so long ago after all—and also where. Scholars used to associate the great Iranian teacher with the North West of Iran, the area covered by the province of Āzarbāy-jān. Henning contends, and Zaehner accepts, that he taught in the north-east—at Iran's opposite end, in the region of the Murghab Basin, one might say on an axis between Merv and Herat. Geographical references in the *Avesta*, which are used in an illuminating fashion by Dr Gershevitic in the Introduction to his *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* (Cambridge, 1959), seem conclusively to prove that this was the milieu in which Zoroaster preached and found a haven.

One of the difficulties facing the student of, and propagandist for, the numerous suggestive and beautiful things Persia has produced, is how

¹Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 42s. od.

to discover in Iran's history and its people the virtues a European might legitimately expect to be associated with sophistication capable of comprehending such exquisite poetry and so many delicate 'objets'. Broadly speaking, he finds on the contrary lying, subtle deceit, both of which could be acceptable as concomitants of sophistication; but also, and this is what gives him pause, he finds stupidity, political immaturity, a selfishness and an individuality that wrecks civic havoc. Further, there is apparently a tendency towards silliness in spiritual matters, too, if Professor Zaehner is to be believed, for he presents the history of systematic failure on the part of Iranians to understand the exalted doctrine of Zoroaster, and of a tragic process of lapse and decline.

Clearly, however, this kind of criticism of a nation, and the charge that it consistently spoils the good religion vouchsafed to it by a highly enlightened teacher, are presumptuous over-simplifications.

First of all, the question of the virtues that might be expected to accompany great art: obviously such an expectation is unjustified, for, whatever proximity to truth and goodness the poet's private vatic experience may confer on him, the sad fact is that some of the finest utterances have been made in the most evil times; art may be greatest when it is the assertion of truth and virtue in times and places where they are most lacking. This is certainly true of Persian literature, and the history of art in Iran provides evidence with what might be termed almost clinical clarity, of the ups and downs of artistic creativeness in relation to the vicissitudes suffered by society.

Secondly, the question of the apparent Persian ineptitude in matters political and judging by Professor Zaehner's book, religious, for in both spheres it could be argued that Persian history is one of folly. Politically, there is a tendency in both Hennig and Zaehner to adumbrate the existence of Halcyon Days of civic good sense in a happy confederation ruled over by the King Vishtāspa with whom we are told Zoroaster found refuge. This was in ancient Chorasmia, in 'what is now Persian Khorasan, Western Afghanistan, and the Turkmen Republic of the U.S.S.R.'²; it was the country called Aryana Vāējah, the Land of the Iranians which, in Gershevitch's words³ 'partly or wholly coincided with the Greater Chorasmian state abolished by Cyrus (559-530)'. Thus it follows that Cyrus the Achaemenid and his successors defeated, destroyed and absorbed this pleasant confederation not long after Zoroaster's mission.

²Zaehner, p. 33, citing W. B. Henning, *Zoroaster, Politician or Witch-Doctor?* p. 42 ff.

³Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, p. 14.

This led rapidly to corruption of the teacher's faith because once there came into being a great empire like the Achaemenid (c. 546–330 B.C.), besides Aryana Vaējah's absorption into a world system with its capitals and cultural springs a distance away in the west, Aryana Vaējah's newly reformed religion became merely an ingredient in whatever syncretism welding together a large and heterogeneous empire made it expedient for the Kings of Kings in Western Iran to adopt. And the chief centre of power in the new dispensation was subject to Median-Magian influences because it was in the West, the part of Iran Zoroaster the reformer may have fled from to the Herat-Merv region and King Vishtāspa. Although his teaching and his name were not entirely forgotten, the former became absorbed in a welter of religious ideas, the latter ironically eventually becoming the name of a religion utterly debased and a medley of many old Near Eastern (and Greek) beliefs and practices. In substantiation of the implication arising here, that the Achaemenid Shahs might for political reasons have deliberately sought to effect a synthesis, the report quoted by Professor Zaehner on page 176, taken from the *Dēnkart*, that 'The king of kings, Shāpūr . . . collected those writings from the Religion which were dispersed throughout India, the Byzantine Empire and other lands, and which treated of medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, creation, becoming, passing away, qualitative change, logic and other arts and sciences', is significant. Shāpūr reigned from 241 to 272 A.D. But like his remote Achaemenid forbears, he was busy establishing a far-flung empire, comprehending a variety of peoples, lores and languages. His ordering the collection of the 'writings' looks like an attempt to effect another synthesis. The numerous subjects, scientific and philosophical, that are outlined, suggests also that religion was already being asked to bear a burden additional to that of affording spiritual guidance: it was to be the repository and exponent of all knowledge.

Thus if the Persians have been guilty at times of spoiling right religion and adopting seemingly absurd alternatives, blame should be placed on the exigencies of great despotisms and imperial ambitions: while Iran has produced some of the finest religious concepts and seldom been without men capable of moving and assured exposition of the spiritual aspirations of mankind, holders of temporal power there have meanwhile used religion as a tool in shaping their own political ends, and abused it accordingly. Below the level of the teachers trying to enunciate pure and just religion, and the autocrats trying to harness and pervert religion to their own aims, the people must have retained some

kind of faith of their own. It was untutored and superstition-ridden; but the complexity of Iranian folk-lore proves that indeed a whole range of beliefs and practices did (and do) survive among the masses. Finally, what may seem colossal folly can be explained in terms of history; so it is not so silly, after all, although tragic it must remain. The spectacle is better understood when related to Iran's geographical position. It is at four lane-ends—facing Central Asia and China, India and South-east Asia in the east, Anatolia, the Caucasus, Greece to the west and north, Arabia and Africa to the south-west. It was a caravanseraï through which, before the oceans became principal highways and a great New World was discovered, men of marked intellectual development and many different views were constantly passing, and merchandise with its accompaniment of ideas was being transmitted. In the circumstances it would have been odd if one preaching had been able immutably to hold sway there for long. The clash of ideas, as well as of arms, was such that the equanimity requisite for sagacity could seldom be realized. No wonder the poems of Hafiz present, by the time the fourteenth century was reached, such an interesting blend of religious concepts and seemingly unresolved dilemmas! The preoccupation of later Persian poets with religious questions indicates a nostalgia—for the Halcyon Days before, not only the disastrous invasion in which Alexander of Macedon destroyed, with a ruthlessness perhaps not sufficiently recognized, the Achaemenid state; but for some earlier era of goodness and truth, when demons were overcome and bound.

The greatest dilemma of all was the question of free will *versus* predestination. Hafiz is mercurial, but in him freedom of will does triumph. For example in one poem he says in the penultimate verse,

Speak of minstrel and wine, and seek less Time's secret
Because nobody guessed or will guess this riddle through
philosophy.

This looks like complete acceptance of Time's inscrutability. But the next and concluding verse is different:

You have composed a lyric and bored a pearl, come and sing
well Hafiz!
Because the Firmament will scatter the knot of the Pleiades
on your verse.

Suffice it to say that the word used for Firmament is one that could be a synonym for the word translated Time in the preceding couplet, while in the Persian the thought of guessing the riddle, for which the verb meaning 'to unlock' is used, is carried on in the word used for

'knot'; the fatal sphere whose decrees cannot be foreknown is defeated—the power of the lyric does what organized knowledge or 'philosophy' cannot achieve.

This kind of oscillation occurs also in Firdausi at an earlier date. Professor Zaehner makes this poet a thorough-going fatalist: 'he shows us a universe inexorably ruled by an ineluctable fate, subject to the revolving heavens and a pitiless Time in which all man's striving and all his heroism crumble away to dust'. The much more moderate view of Helmer Ringgren in his *Fatalism in Persian Epics*⁴ seems preferable: it indicates belief that Iranian poets are less willing to adopt a rigorous position that Professor Zaehner would suggest. Ringgren concludes his convincing argument, with the remark that in the poems he has dealt with 'There is a tension between fatalism in the real sense of the word and belief in a personal God as the Master of man's destiny, and this tension is never entirely removed'. In any event, it seems likely that Professor Zaehner also would concede that sufficient of the pristine Zoroastrian position survived for belief in a God who could ultimately overrule the 'ineluctable' forces of destiny constantly to be cropping up. Nezāmi (d. c. 1203), with his long and loving emphases on the Prophet Muhammad's ascent into Heaven and those pointed relations of the orders that ascendant spirit received, to trample the stars underfoot, riding over and beyond the sphere, bursting through to the proximity of the All Highest, in the region of directionlessness, would seem further to be anti-fatalism propaganda (in a world where Sultans would not move till their astrologers had declared the moment propitious) of the clearest kind.

The problems briefly being touched on here are the sort which make the appearance of a book like Professor Zaehner's an important event: so little can be made out of Iran's remarkable canon of poetry without as much more knowledge as possible of the pre-Islamic religious situation in Iran. A writer like Professor Zaehner has command of the scant texts remaining from those remoter times; and how at home he is in these works, in languages so few have mastered, is astonishing. Yet one is left with the feeling that he gives a very personal interpretation of what he finds in the texts: there is, notably in the present work, so much over emphasis—at times almost strident—so much repetition of points already clearly made, and, furthermore, some distastefully harsh handling of other workers in the field, that the suspicion just alluded to becomes, though always far from welcome, strengthened. Ultimately

⁴Papers of the University of Uppsala, 1952, 13.

it is realized that, alas, Professor Zaehner's is not the book hoped for: but there is Henning's little work on Zoroaster, and there are some quite helpful passages in the works of others who, like Professor Zaehner, have the clue to some of those enigmatic texts the Priest-Ministers of ambitious Shahs collated and, no doubt, corrupted.

Chant to be used in Processions around a site with Furnaces

How he made them sleep and purified them
How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater
I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed
system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained
decent

How I commanded
I made cleaning appointments and then I made the travellers sleep and
after that I made soap

I was born into a Catholic family but as these people were not going
to need a priest I did not become a priest. I installed a perfectly good
machine it gave satisfaction to many

When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for
fun in the bathroom they did not guess

It was a very big bathroom for two thousand people it awaited arrival
and they arrived safely

There would be an orchestra of merry widows not all the time much art
If they arrived at all they would be given a greeting card to send home
taken care of with good jobs wishing you would come to our joke

Another improvement I made was I built the chambers for two
thousand invitations at a time the naked votaries were disinfected
with Zyklon B

Children of tender age were always invited by reason of their youth
they were unable to work they were marked out for play