

Persian Philosophy

Overview Religion and philosophy are hard to separate in early Persian experience. Religion is the mother, philosophy the child, taking its topics from the categories of the 'belief system.' One might say, in an effort to characterize this state of affairs, that classical Greek philosophy is sharply different from classical Persian. The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle deal with creation, origins, even with the notion of God, but expend their vitality on the discursive problems raised on the ground, by trying to think out the human condition. Persian philosophy starts from the given of a theological setting, and goes on to lay out the discursive consequences of this God-created condition of man.

Zoroastrianism Zoroaster (late 7th, early 6th century B.C.E.), like the Buddha, began life as a privileged aristocrat who left home in search of the meaning of life. The visions he benefitted from, en route, gave him confident belief in a monotheistic world system, ruled by a father god. This conviction shored up a bevy of convictions which formed the core of Zoroastrian theology, while at the same time serving as the trigger for a variety of religious-philosophical conclusions. The struggle of good and evil was central to Zoroaster's world picture, a belief in heaven and hell, and in the free will that qualifies us for one or the other of those two venues; the belief issue was ample evidence to qualify these positions for dispute, thus for philosophical argumentation--which as it turned out was abundant. Respect for God's creation--an admiring pleasure in the goods of the earth--and care for his environment were among other salient belief-principles on which Zoroaster established the basis of a distinctive issue-based philosophy.

Manichaeism Mani (216-274 A.D.) was a Persian visionary and philosopher, born in Parthian Babylonia, of whom we know that he was a believer in the message of Jesus Christ, that he studied Hinduism in India, and that upon return from travels to the East he settled in Persia and devoted himself to establishing his religion-philosophy of Manichaeism. The governing idea of this philosophy bears unmistakable resemblance to Zoroastrianism: for Mani the cosmos is an inextricable entanglement of good with evil, light marking the good, darkness the evil. The mixture itself had been formed by a cosmic accident, and it was mankind's duty to bring light and goodness to being. The basis is there, though we have almost no supporting texts, for a metaphysic and an ethic.

Zurvanism The historical origins of Zurvanism are obscure, and to some degree depend on how you see the religion's relation to Zoroastrianism; for on most accounts Zurvanism must be viewed as an heretical brand of Zoroaster's thought. While there seem to be three distinct versions of Zurvanism, they have in common a single God, transcendent, without passion, and infinite in space and time. By one account this god engendered opposing halves--one of them the god of good and light, Ahura Mazda, which--as in each of the other religion-philosophies above-- were in continual struggle with one another, as part of the definition of mankind.

Readings

Zaehner, Richard, *Zurvan, a Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford, 1955.

Zaehner, Richard, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, reprint, New York, 2005.

Discussion questions

Can you distinguish the philosophical from the theological elements in the views discussed above. Can you see the philosophical implications of the positions in cosmology, ethics, and logic implicit in Zoroastrianism and its fellow Persian religions?

How deeply have the above religious-philosophical movements penetrated into the thought of our day? How widely practiced is Zoroastrianism?

How would you account for the fierce emphasis on dualism--good versus evil--in the above philosophies? Is that emphasis equally strong in the Abrahamic religions of our day?