

ZOROASTRIANISM'S INFLUENCE **ON THE** **OFFSHOOTS OF 3 MAJOR RELIGIONS**

- The Essenes of Judaism;
- The Gnostics and Nestorians of Christianity
- The Sufis of Islam

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The Seminal influence of Zoroastrianism on the world's major religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism is well known. But its contribution to the offshoots – some say heresies – of Judaism, Christianity and Islam escape the scrutiny of even scholars. This paper shows the considerable impact Zoroastrianism and its doctrines had on these important offshoots of these 3 religions.

1. Influence on Judaism

During the Roman occupation of Palestine at the start of the Common Era, one of the major groups among the Jews were the Essenes. Jesus was the leader of this group, which was mystic yet violent, opposed to the Roman occupation. They had a long association with Zoroastrianism, which guided and counseled them in their religious pursuits.

But it was only in 1947 when the Dead Sea Scrolls, buried for nearly 2000 years, uncovered the theological impact of Zoroastrianism on the Essenes. In fact, it can be said that the Essenes faith was “Zoroastrian Judaism” interchangeably with “Jewish Zoroastrianism”. In that 1st century A.D., both Zoroastrianism and the Essenes felt that the end of the world was coming, with the forces of darkness gaining ascendancy over the forces of light and goodness. The Essenes sought the help of Zoroastrian theologians.

The Shared Principles:

- A sturdy monotheism, but with the Essene concept embracing both cosmic and ethical dualism.
- Light symbolizing goodness and darkness symbolizing evil.
- Strong ethics, justice and world order with an emphasis on truth.
- Freedom of choice, but guided by God's gift of wisdom to man.
- Reverence for the sun as a symbol of energy in the Universe.
- A common eschatology with the coming of a Messiah/Soshyant.

In these shared beliefs, Zoroastrianism – historically and theologically – was the “elder brother” to the Essenes.

2. Influence on the Gnostics of Christianity

As with the explosive Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes, a priceless collection of 12 Gnostic texts was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. Scholars placed them as preceding Christianity, and just as the world awakened to Zoroastrianism's contribution to the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is awakening to Zoroastrianism's influence in the Gnostic faith. This Included:

- The emphasis on knowledge (Gnosis), not blind faith that each person should acquire to steer him through life and to eventual salvation.
- A definite dualism, characteristic of later Zoroastrianism.
- A belief in a transcendent God – a departure from the divinity of Christ and from Mary “as the mother of God”.
- A distinction between the heaven of the spirit and a transient material world.

However, in a departure from Zoroastrian precepts, and a bow to Christianity, Gnostics believe that God sends down to earth a redeemer to facilitate the release of the spirit of man from the prison of his body.

3. Influence on the Nestorians of Christianity

Even as early as the 1st century A.D., doctrinal disputes arose within the nascent Christian Church. The school of Alexandria interpreted Christ as the eternal, divine logos – the source of world order and intelligibility – and incarnate as a human being. The school of Antioch, with Nestorius as its bishop and the founder of Nestorianism, stressed that Christ was human. God had “revealed” himself to Jesus, as he had to Zarathushtra and to the Hebrew prophets. Nestorius stated that “he could not imagine God as a little boy.” As for Mary, she was just the natural mother of Jesus, not the mother of God!

These heretical views of the Nestorians were given encouragement, support and protection in a predominantly Zoroastrian milieu of the early Sassanian empire, which acted as a shield for the nascent Nestorian Christians against the excommunication ordered by the historic council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. In fact, the early Sassanian emperors allowed Nestorianism to spread to Syria and Central Asia, and even beyond their borders to China.

There was another quasi-Zoroastrian influence on Nestorianism in the syncretic faith of the Iranian “prophet”, Mani, who weaved together theological strands of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity to form Manichaeism. Mani's message swept not only Iran, Central Asia and China but also reached into much of Europe. For a thousand years and more Nestorianism and neo-Zoroastrian Manichaeism lived peacefully together, enriching the lives of millions.

4. Influence on the Sufis of Islam

Sufism was born in the 7th century in Iran out of the extreme distaste felt by devout Zoroastrians, forced by the hated Muslim Arabs – at the point of a sword – to give up their beloved religion. So the Zoroastrians of Iran fled under the radar of the unsuspecting Muslim clergy to secretly form the new faith of Sufism, nominally Muslim, but with Zoroastrian antecedents and totally opposed to orthodox Islam and the Koran.

On of the most mystic faiths in the world, one of Sufism's cardinal principles is to "experience" God, rather than on intellectual paths. This is in keeping with the early mysticism of Zarathushtra as he sought to capture God's message in the lofty mountains of the Pamir Mountains. To the Sufi, love is the key to life, a love of God equal in fervor to the love a married couple would have for each other. Sufism believes in the brotherhood of all mankind, not the narrow Muslim concept of brotherhood confined solely to its believers. Sufism is about each individual seeking his or her own path to experience God, contemplatively not prescriptively, quietistically not moralistically, devotionally not ritualistically. We Zoroastrians should be proud of how much of our theology has permeated to not only the major religions, which it did in ample measure, but also to the offshoots of these religions

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