

I

Cosmogony and Dualism

THE WORLD of Late Antiquity, in the east as well as in the west (i.e., both in the Iranian and in the Greek-dominated world), was deeply concerned with the hereafter. The hereafter was a powerful presence in both its aspects: both as an expectation of a world-to-come that, lying as it were beyond the horizon of the future, could nevertheless be deduced from scriptures, and then described and studied; and as an awareness that there is something there even now, as we lead our lives on earth. That something may be hidden by a barrier of invisibility, something like a curtain, expressed in the Jewish tradition by the Iranian term *pargod*.¹ This curtain is capable of being lifted from time to time, at least by certain people endowed with special gifts. All this is true for the three major religions of the period with which we are concerned, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. It is also true for their several offshoots and the related faiths, such as Manichaeism and the Gnostic groups. We shall concentrate here on the Iranian world of the period, and more particularly on Western Iran, and shall try to understand its main characteristics.

It was this concern with the hereafter that gave life its religious sense; it also endowed the conceptions of the beginning of the world with their shape and meaning. This is very clearly the case in Iran. The

¹ The corresponding Middle Persian term for this religious notion may have been *parisp* 'wall' (cf. Shaked 1979:272, note 215.2; on the word, cf. Nyberg 1974:151). The Jewish term *pargod* is borrowed from the usage of the Sasanian, perhaps already the Parthian, court, where a curtain separated the monarch from his visitors. It is not clear what word was used to designate this feature of the royal audience hall in the Sasanian period. Its reflection in the Arabic tradition is in the Arabic word *ḥijāb* on which cf. Shaked 1986. For *pargod* see reference in Widengren 1960:91. Cf. Hofius 1982 for the history of this notion in Judaism.

descriptions of the creation of the world are tied up in a very close manner with the end; it is with the end in mind that the world came into being. Certain elements of those descriptions illustrate the point. The creation of the world is the result of a pact concluded between Ohrmazd, the God, and his adversary, the Evil Spirit. This pact was devised by the omniscient Ohrmazd as a trap for Ahreman, whose attributes include slowness of wit. This is a peculiar agreement, for it makes Ahreman, the Evil Spirit, in a way a partner in the act of creation. Although his cooperation is somewhat perverse, creation could not have taken place without the initial consent of Ahreman. The essential point in this agreement, however, is the time limit set for the existence of the world and the resulting timetable for eschatology: as a result, the world contains a timing-device that was placed in it from the moment of its inception. When the last moment comes, the world as we know it will be dissolved and will give place to a new creation. While many of the elements of the world may be unpredictable, this particular point, the moment of its dissolution, is fixed and immutable.

When was this conception of cosmic history first formulated in Iran? The question is not easy to answer. The creation story is only fully formulated in the Pahlavi books, which were put into writing in the Islamic period, around the ninth century C.E., but there can be no doubt that much of the material that they contain dates back to an earlier period.² The Pahlavi books present these conceptions as a *zand*, a commentary on the Avesta, as is explicitly stated in the *Bundahishn*.³ How much trust can we place in this assertion? We have come to distrust the *zand* as a reliable rendering of lost Avestan passages, as we know that in the extant texts the *zand* often diverges so much from the original as to make the relationship between them tenuous.⁴ There can,

² Thus e.g. Boyce 1968:32

³ Boyce 1968c:40 f.

⁴ On the reliability and coherence of *zand* see Bailey 1943 (=1971):149 ff.; as well as Boyce 1982:253 f., who, for reasons I cannot share, attributes the work of *zand* to Zurvanite priests. One may perhaps object to the current notion that these divergences are merely a reflection of the ignorance of the priests as to the correct meaning of the Avestan text. As often as not it seems that the divergence is due not to inadvertent error but to the process of free elaboration and interpretation, sometimes taking the form of allegory, as in the Jewish *midrash*. Cf. Shaked 1979:xxiii f., where brief reference is made to the etymological type of interpretation.

however, be little doubt that in the eyes of the Sasanian commentators these conceptions were part of their ancient sacred heritage.

We shall not concern ourselves here with the problem of the origins of these conceptions in Iran, a problem that is not capable of a clear and decisive solution in our present state of knowledge. Our main aim will rather be to elucidate the religious views of people during the Sasanian period. By that time, the religion that was reigning in Iran had long ceased to be Zarathushtrism, if this is our designation of the pure teachings of the Prophet Zarathushtra, following the terminology suggested by Ilya Gershevitch.⁵ Instead, there prevailed a form of the religion that had undergone a long period of growth and change, a period lasting probably more than a millennium. It should be emphasized, besides, that our understanding of the original teachings of Zarathushtra is quite imperfect. At any rate, no religion could exist for this length of time without developing and modifying some of its language and several aspects of its faith. If it had stayed without change, it would probably not have been a living social reality at all. Outside the Gathas we are dealing with Zoroastrianism, the late phase in the history of the Iranian religion.

As an analogy for the kind of change that might have taken place in the Iranian religion during more than a millennium, a long period during which it slowly found its own style and way of life, we may mention the case of the religion of Israel. From the origins of that religion, which may be placed, as one chooses, in the nebulous period of Moses, or in the early prophetic era, to the final emergence of post-biblical Judaism,

⁵ Gershevitch 1959:8 ff.; 1964. I prefer to use a simplified form of this terminology, referring to anything that is not the original message of Zoroaster (for which we only have the evidence of the Gathas) as Zoroastrianism, whether rigorously based on the scriptures or more loosely associated with them. The forms of the religion that adhere to the scriptures are not necessarily pure 'Zarathushtrism', as the scriptures consist of a variety of texts, composed in different epochs and milieus. Thus the Achaemenian religion seems to belong to the same broad religious tradition as Zoroastrianism, and the same could possibly be said of the little we know of the religion of the Parthians or of the Sogdians. The Zoroastrian tradition is thus a multifaceted concept. In this it stands in contrast to the message of Zarathushtra (which can only be understood imperfectly), on the one hand, and to the priestly orthodoxy of the late Sasanian or early post-Sasanian period as formulated in the Pahlavi books, on the other. The Pahlavi books present a relatively uniform religion, where divergent approaches between schools of interpretation on secondary points are occasionally revealed, but only rarely profound differences over matters of doctrine.

several aspects of faith and practice underwent such deep transformation that the religious civilization of Judaism is hardly recognizable. And yet it may be claimed that a certain religious personality—if one may use such a term for a communal experience—remains constant through all these modifications. This personality may be described as consisting of a number of distinct features that do not seem to dissipate or melt away through all those stages of development that have caused the character of everything else to change almost beyond recognition. In the case of Judaism these features are perhaps the insistence on the idea of the unity of God, the bond between God and his people, the significance of bearing in mind the history of that bond, and the moral character of that bond. A similar model, I suggest, may apply *mutatis mutandis* to the Iranian religion as well.

One such constant factor in Iran seems to be the strong awareness of the moral split in the divine world, and consequently also of the created world, that which is known as the Iranian dualism. We shall try in the following to show that there are several permutations of this idea, not only in the diachronic axis from the Gathic period to the Sasanian era, but also synchronically within the broad limits of Sasanian religion.⁶

It is typical of Zoroastrian thinking of all periods that there was a strong link between the conception of the divine world, with cosmology and the structure of the universe, on the one hand, and the moral obligation of the individual, on the other. The ethical duty is perceived as deriving from the cosmic and divine split. Dualism cuts vertically through all the layers of existence. One classic formulation of this stance is the catechism that occurs in one of the Pahlavi texts. A man should ask himself three times every day: ‘Who am I? Whence do I come?’ etc., and the answers to be given to this series of questions set out the whole basic view of the world.⁷ The task of setting oneself this type of questions also occurs in gnostic texts,⁸ where they seem to be very much at home, and a similar set of questions is part of Jewish

⁶ Cosmogonical dualism is denied for the Gathas by several scholars, including Humbach 1959, and Kellens and Pirart 1988; 1990, but a strong dualistic tendency emerges even from their attenuated translations of such texts as Y 30:3 and the following verses. A broad characterization of Iranian dualism was undertaken by Menasce 1948.

⁷ *PhlT* 41. This catechism is translated in Shaked 1979:xxv f., where further references are given. See also further in Lecture 5.

⁸ Cf., for example, Jonas 1934; Stroumsa 1990:41.

literature, although with a different thrust.⁹ In other words, they are part of the give-and-take of the religious world of the period. We shall have occasion to refer to other such correspondences in the course of the following lectures.

Another one of the constant factors is the interdependence of the twin concepts of cosmogony and eschatology. This is one of the few clear features of the Gathas. Quite unusually, there seems to be little divergence as to the understanding of the relevant verses between the various modern interpreters of the text, despite the fact that relatively little attention seems to have been paid to this feature, and although some modern commentators wish to deny the very existence of eschatology in the Gathas. It is however difficult to deny the eschatological character of a verse such as Y 30:7, where there is reference to the molten metal of the Final Judgement.¹⁰

The tendency towards using abstract notions to play the part of divine entities, although it was present in the Indo-Iranian culture from remote antiquity,¹¹ seems to be not only more pronounced but also more productive in the religious development of the Iranian branch of that culture, so much so that one can try to use it in order to identify specific Iranian traits against their Indo-Iranian background.¹² This results in a certain poverty on the mythological part, a certain anemia in so far as the creation of dramatic, tragic, or erotic mythological stories is concerned. Such stories are however not entirely absent. At certain periods, and in certain layers of the Iranian culture, extremely vivid stories are created, which rank among the finest known anywhere, particularly in the field of heroic legends. Nevertheless there is an overall

⁹ See Mishna, Abhot 3:1, where the following questions occur, to which one should know the answers: 'Whence did you come? Where will you go? In front of whom will you stand for trial?' The answers given to these questions reveal a conception of the person as a single entity, without regard for, or even awareness of, the dualism of body and soul. See Urbach 1979:224.

¹⁰ Among the foremost representatives of the tendency to understand the Gathas as purely ritual in contents, Humbach 1959, 1:86 translates the crucial term as 'Ordalerz'; Kellens and Pirart 1988:111 refrain from translating this portion of the verse.

¹¹ See Geiger 1916:245 and elsewhere in his book.

¹² This is the type of argument that may be used to claim the Iranian origin of the deity Ahura Mazdā or a figure such as *Gaya-marotan*. See Shaked 1987c:238 f.

impression of soberness and restraint in the divine mythology of Iran when one compares it to that of India or Greece.

The view of the world as consisting essentially of two aspects, perhaps two modes of being, one that is mental and cannot be experienced by the senses, and the other material, or, as it was called in the ancient Iranian period, 'boney' or 'osseous', tangible and visible—in the Sasanian period this dichotomy was designated by the terms *mēnōg* and *gētīg*—seems to be another typical feature of the Iranian conception.¹³

This short list of characteristic points is by no means exhaustive; it nevertheless gives some of the flavour of the Iranian religion, a flavour that is there right from its start, and that has remained with it throughout its independent existence. Some of it must have struck to the Iranian varieties of Islam too, but any attempt to discuss these questions here may lead us to complex problems beyond the scope of our present theme. We shall try nevertheless to hint at some of these points further on in the course of these lectures.

In this context we are not so much concerned with the general history of religious ideas in Iran, but specifically with the Sasanian period. The preoccupation with this period may be justified on several grounds. We may recall that this was the last period of Iranian sovereignty, the one in which most Zoroastrian conceptions received their final formulation. It was also the period, alone perhaps in Zoroastrian history before modern times, where we have a reasonable amount of evidence from various sources by means of which we can check our statements, and thus reach a balanced picture. In other periods, it may be recalled, our reconstruction of the situation is usually based on scanty reports, some of which occur in foreign sources. Here, for the first time, we can look at the reports from different angles. We do not have to rely only on official Zoroastrian literature, valuable though it certainly is; nor do we have to rely chiefly on foreign reports, which may be refreshingly free from partisan bias, but which also necessarily contain some distortion due either to the writers' inability to grasp the realities of an alien culture, or to their sensationalism, exaggerating exotic views or practices out of proportion. In the case of the Sasanian period we often have the possibility of correcting the weaknesses of these diverse sources by juxtaposing them against each other. The fact that this has not always been done in a satisfactory manner is a matter for regret.

¹³ On this see Shaked 1971.

The Sasanian period is significant for other reasons as well. It is the period in which various religious movements and faiths were current in Iran, and in which they may have received their definitive forms. This is certainly true of Judaism. The Sasanian period is in many ways the most important of several turning-points in Jewish history, since it was the time when rabbinic Judaism finally emerged in its fully developed form. This was the period of the Babylonian Talmud, without which normative Judaism is inconceivable.¹⁴

This is also the period during which Christianity struck roots in the East, largely under Sasanian domination, and in which some of the great literary monuments of Christianity were created: the works of Aphrahat, Aphrem, Narsai, and the great and moving martyr figures of the east.

This was also the period of the appearance of Mani with his new world religion, Manichaeism, which assumed enormous power and influence in the world for several centuries, and which has left a permanent mark on Christianity, Islam and perhaps also Judaism.

In the seething corners of the Sasanian empire several other religious movements came into being and held sway for some time. We hardly know their names, apart from one or two: Mazdakism, which had at least one preceding movement to herald its coming, associated with the name of a certain Zarādusht, towards the end of the Sasanian period, is perhaps the only well-documented religious movement inside Zoroastrianism precisely because it happened so late in Sasanian history that its repercussions were still vividly present deep into the Islamic period.

The Mandaean and several other baptist gnostic-type movements must also have been around much of the time, but we have practically no knowledge of their early history, apart from the group in which Mani grew up as a young man, who are recognized as an offshoot of the Elchasaites.¹⁵

¹⁴ For the religious world of Talmudic Judaism the best overall discussion is Urbach 1979. The numerous works of Jacob Neusner, though not devoid of some merit, are of far less value from this point of view.

¹⁵ Scholars have sought to discover a reference to the Mandaeans in the inscriptions of Kirdēr. Thus, in what looks like a double allusion to Christians, **klstydn** and **n'cl'y** (in KSM 14; KKZ 10), and in the mysterious term **mktky** (KKZ 10) scholars have sought to discover an appellation for the Mandaeans. In particular **n'cl'y** which is reminiscent of the term by which the Mandaeans often

Influences of Indian thinking were also present in the Iranian realm, with Buddhism being probably the most prominent force, especially in the eastern regions, and we have evidence of openness to Greek scientific and philosophical ideas.¹⁶ All of this makes for as lively and diversified a period of intellectual and religious activity as could ever be found in ancient Iran.

The eschatological conceptions in Iran were closely associated to those of creation. Attempts have been made to represent the Gathic religion as devoid of an eschatological dimension, explaining it predominantly in terms of ritual preoccupations,¹⁷ but I cannot help thinking that in this the desire to read the Gathas as cut off from the rest of the Iranian tradition goes one step too far. There are expressions in the Gathas for which, as we have seen, the most natural interpretation seems to be eschatological; the fact that the later tradition took them in a similar sense does not necessarily prove that this is wrong. In the later Avesta we have evidence of a well-developed eschatological view, and in the Pahlavi commentaries and elaborations the theme is central. Where the eschatological theme is perhaps most subdued is some portions of the Younger Avesta, notably the early Yashts, though they contain some very ancient material indeed. In these texts some mythological themes belonging to the remote Indo-Iranian past resurge, and much of the hoary old religious sentiment which preceded the prophecy of Zarathushtra is still to some extent alive. In these texts eschatology, as well as cosmogony, is much less prominent.

call themselves, *Nāṣōrā* (cf. Lidzbarski 1922; Rudolph 1960/61:113 ff.), was suggested as a reference to them (Widengren 1965:277; 1984:3; Gnoli 1984b: 35. See also Cerutti 1981:151 ff.). On the other hand, Brock 1975:91 ff. has plausibly shown that the double designation may allude to two groups of Christians, those of western origin as opposed to indigenous Persians. A survey of some attempted solutions to the problem of these designations is in Back 1978:509. Bailey 1983 suggested that the term **mktky** denotes 'baptist' and indicates one of the baptist sects that were current in Iran in the third century, which he tends to identify with the community in which Mani grew up. Sundermann 1977:241 however made what seems at the moment the most plausible suggestion that **mktky** is a reflection of Syriac **mnqd'**, the term by which Theodor Bar Konay designates the baptists (see also MacKenzie 1989: 64, n. 25). On the baptist sect in which Mani spent his childhood see Henrichs 1973; Koenen 1981.

¹⁶ A succinct discussion of this evidence is in Boyce 1968c:36 f.

¹⁷ See references in Lecture 2, note 1.

The other Younger Avestan texts, where references to cosmogony and eschatology are more visible, belong to an indeterminate period. They most probably received their final shape by early Parthian times. Since knowledge of the ancient languages was more or less extinct, as far as we can tell, already in the late Achaemenian period, it seems unlikely that any substantial new composition of texts could have taken place long after the conclusion of Achaemenian rule. We have no direct proof of these chronological suppositions. The linguistic fabric of the other major Old Iranian language, Old Persian, shows signs of crumbling by the later Achaemenian period: the grammatical structure of the language was giving way to that typical of Middle Persian. It is reasonable to assume that a similar fate befell the East Iranian language in which the Avestan texts were formulated, although it is possible that Avestan, a different language, developed and eventually lost its vitality at a different pace than Old Persian.

We have in the Pahlavi books an account of creation which can be summarized in brief terms as follows. There were two independent eternal powers at the beginning. These were separate from each other and represented the two extreme poles: goodness as opposed to evil, wisdom as opposed to after-knowledge, light as opposed to darkness, fragrance as opposed to bad smell. As long as they were separate no problem presented itself, but the trouble started when the evil entity, called Ahreman, discovered the light of the deity Ohrmazd.

Counting among his traits of character also envy and restlessness, Ahreman could not abide it when he saw the light and goodness of Ohrmazd and sought to get to it, appropriate it, and bring destruction on it. Here is the root of the conflict. Ohrmazd has to have recourse to a stratagem. He offers Ahreman a gentleman's agreement, according to which they would conduct a duel for a specified period of time. Ahreman accepts this, and once he does, he is already doomed in eternity, although he still has a long period of dominion in time. The rest of the history of the world is conducted according to a rigidly predetermined timetable to which the devil, no less than God, has to adhere without being able to escape from it. This is not entirely in character with Ahreman—for among his constant epithets there is also deceit and the breaking of oath—but it is nevertheless one of the features of the story. Without acknowledging this principle, the whole cosmogony would be meaningless.

The determination of the course of time is associated with a definition of a restricted space, which is the created cosmos. This eventually serves as a trap and prison for Ahreman, although within it he feels free

to wreak havoc and inflict pain and hardship. The outcome is, somewhat paradoxically, that humanity is entrapped together with Ahreman in the world, although the role of humanity is in a sense to represent the deity in the arena of the material world, while the fate of Ahreman is to be confined to this prison-like structure, where he conducts the battle, but from which he cannot escape.

This account, which is based on the two major accounts extant in Pahlavi,¹⁸ may be termed the 'classical' or 'orthodox' version of the Iranian cosmogony. These are mere epithets which I shall be using for convenience; they do not necessarily reflect any historical reality. We do not have any certainty that any of the conceptions to be discussed was more 'orthodox' than any other. The use of these epithets for the Sasanian period is merely a borrowing from later usage, from the Zoroastrian tradition of the medieval period. The fact that we are denying the legitimate notion of orthodoxy to any of the versions of the cosmogonical myth does not mean to say that no attempt was made to impose an orthodoxy on the Zoroastrian community. Quite to the contrary, there was during the Sasanian period some preoccupation with the problem of orthodoxy and heresy. The various authorities, religious and secular, strove to impose their form of faith as absolutely binding on all. And yet the situation was fluid. The number of variants recorded in the Islamic sources for the basic myths of creation is truly staggering. The definitive imposition of the mediaeval orthodoxy had not yet taken place in the Sasanian period. The differences do not concern merely minor details, but often have far-reaching theological consequences for the conception of the godhead and of the structure of the faith and touch on such central problems as monotheism or dualism, the origin and function of evil in the world, and other fundamental issues. Paradoxically perhaps, the very fact that heresy and orthodoxy are such obsessive terms for Sasanian writers may prove that the notion of orthodoxy was not yet an established idea with them. It is certainly not clearly focused: we are sometimes at a loss to make out a profile of a heretic from the various references to this hazy entity even in the Pahlavi writings.

¹⁸ The *Bundahishn* and the *Wizīdagihā ī Zādsparam*. A convenient, though not entirely reliable, transcription and translation of the relevant passages is in Zaehner 1955:276 ff. A selection from the former source is in Boyce 1984b:45 ff.

Let us come back to the 'orthodox' story of creation. The main elements of its implied theology are the following. There are two eternal powers or principles, independent of each other; their conflict constitutes the reason for the creation of the world by God; the world serves as a prison to the Evil Spirit; the conflict will only be resolved at the end of time.

Other Iranian statements concerning the creation of the world and the position of the two antagonistic spirits have different underlying conceptions. One such account, according to the great Islamic heresiographer, Shahrastānī,¹⁹ gives pre-existent eternity only to light, and denies it to darkness; the latter 'was brought into being' in time.²⁰ It was, so to speak, created. For the authors of the late orthodoxy, as expressed in the Pahlavi books, this is of course sheer heresy. According to one version of this doctrine, the origin of Ahreman (who is referred to also as 'darkness', as a kind of proper name) is from an improper thought that occurred to Yazdān, i.e. to Ohrmazd. This unworthy thought is formulated as a question that God addresses to himself: 'If I had an antagonist, how would he be?'²¹ For God to think of an entity is to bring it into being, and this is how Ahreman was forthwith created.²²

An interesting formulation of the doctrine that evil originally sprang out of good, a doctrine that stands in contrast to the classical Zoroastrian faith, makes darkness the outcome of a portion of the light by a process of metamorphosis.²³

One feature that comes up in various accounts of the story of creation is the presence of mediating angels, who step in to oversee the truce agreed upon between the two antagonists. They can be presumed to have had a measure of impartiality as required by their position. The existence of such a third party in the great dualistic conflict is striking,

¹⁹ A detailed discussion of Shahrastānī's account (with full translation) is in Shaked [forthcoming, a]. The paragraph numbers used in the following refer to my division of the text of Shahrastānī as used in that article.

²⁰ Shahrastānī §3.

²¹ Shahrastānī §5, attributed to the 'Kayūmarthiyya'.

²² This conception of the myth of origins is reported, among other sources, also by Bīrūnī (*Āthār*, 99), a good connoisseur of Iranian beliefs, who says: 'They [scil. the Persians] have said many strange things concerning the origins of the world and the fact that Ahriman, i.e. the devil, was born from a thought of God and from his taking pleasure in the world'.

²³ Shahrastānī §14.

and when it is formulated so explicitly and unequivocally it goes against the classical accounts of the story of creation, although it cannot be denied that there are hints, expressed in undertones, to a similar conception even in Pahlavi literature.²⁴

Two telling details mark the deviation of the non-classical accounts from the 'orthodox' story. One is the talk of two moments in the history of the universe, not of three, as is stated quite dogmatically everywhere. Three stages in the history of the world is also the notion in the Manichaean sources, where it is a clear borrowing from Zoroastrianism. The three moments of Classical Zoroastrianism are the creation, the mixture, and the salvation. The two moments of these deviant accounts are 'mixture' and 'redemption'. The absence of the first element may indicate that the balanced existence of the two antagonists in the period before the mixture is denied in this deviant form of the myth.

The other detail is the number used for the duration of the world. According to the classical accounts the figure is a multiple of three, usually 9,000, but sometimes 12,000. In the accounts occurring in some Arabic sources a different number comes up: 7,000, a figure which may be associated with the number of the planets, but in any case does not lend itself to a division into three or four equal periods. In fact it seems that in contrast to the figures of nine or twelve thousand, the number seven thousand does not designate a compound time, made up of smaller units, but a single continuous period which marks the whole duration of the world's existence. This duration is defined in terms of the 'mixture', i.e. the world as consisting of good and evil inextricably mixed together and, in this rather pessimistic view, given over entirely to the dominion of Ahreman.

These two details, which may strike us at first as trifling, may thus be indicative of the more profound differences in conception between the upholders of what we have labelled the 'classical' account and those who adhere to other versions of the story of creation, which we shall call for the sake of convenience 'deviant'.

Where does Zurvan, the god of Time, who has drawn so much scholarly attention during the past decades, come in? Well, he occupies no place at all either in the 'classical' version of the creation myth or in

²⁴ The mediating or judicial position of Mithra may be one of these hints, amplified in foreign literature, although in the Pahlavi writings Mithra is not given explicitly the position of a judge between the two powers. Another prominent mediating figure is Wāy, the deity of wind or air. See Shaked 1980, especially the concluding remarks, pp. 17 ff.

the ‘deviant’ one we have just recounted. Not that time, with a small ‘t’ does not figure as an element in the stories; of course it does, and it is rather important. In Pahlavi it figures usually under the name *zamān*. Even the deity Zurvan is not entirely absent from the Pahlavi books; but he plays, as a deity, no role in this particular story. On the other hand, he does figure quite prominently in other versions of the creation myth, to which we shall turn our attention presently.

Shahrestānī introduces his section on what he terms ‘Zurwāniyya’, a term designating for him adherents of doctrines associated with Zurwān, with the following words: ‘Light brought forth persons of light, all of them spiritual, luminous and divine. But the greatest person, whose name was Zurwān, doubted in something, and from that doubt there came into being Ahreman the Satan’.²⁵ According to this, there is a certain lineage that goes down from ‘Light’, a term usually designating in Shahrestānī’s account Ohrmazd, to a group of persons of light, of which Zurwān was the greatest, to Ahreman, who sprang from a doubt occurring in the mind of Zurwān. This account seems to make Ahreman an offspring of Ohrmazd at one remove away, and it makes Zurwān a ‘person of light’, one of a group, all descendants of Ohrmazd. This is a variant on the story, already referred to above, according to which Ahreman is a direct descendant of Ohrmazd, and there too he came into being as a result of a question addressed by Ohrmazd to himself, that is to say, an expression of doubt.

According to another version of the story, again recounted by Shahrestānī as well as by several other sources—Armenian, Syriac and Arabic—both Ohrmazd and Ahreman were born from Zurwān: the former from the sacrifice of Zurwān, the latter from the doubt that occurred in his mind as to the efficacy of the sacrifice.²⁶ In another version of this Zurvanite myth Evil was always there with God, but at a given moment Evil separated from Zurwān;²⁷ the reason for that is not specified in the text.

It is interesting to note that the Zurvanite myth seems on the whole to conform more to the structure of the ‘classical’ myth of creation than to that of the ‘deviant’ myth. It will be remembered that we pointed out the existence of two seemingly minor details distinguishing the deviant myth from its classical counterpart: the use of the number 7,000 against

²⁵ Shahrestānī §7.

²⁶ *Ibid.* §8.

²⁷ *Ibid.* §10.

9,000 or 12,000; and the division of the time of the universe into two instead of three moments. The Zurvanite myth in Shahrastānī's version talks explicitly of nine thousand (and perhaps also of twelve thousand) years, and it seems to accept implicitly the notion of three cosmic moments. In one further detail it deviates from the classical account: it speaks of angels mediating between the two powers. It adds at this point a specific detail: when the treaty between the two antagonists was concluded, they handed over their swords to two reliable witnesses—their names and functions are not specified—who are depositories of the swords. If one of the parties is false to his word, he will be killed by these swords.²⁸

It may be in place to make a further point concerning the myth of Zurvan. It has been often said that Zurvanism marks an attenuation of the dualistic theology of Zoroastrianism, but this may not reflect the way in which those who upheld the myth of Zurvan viewed it. We thus have in an Armenian source a piece of 'Zurvanite' polemic against Christians, in which the dualistic point of view is vigorously stated, and the same is true of passages in Syriac literature where the Zurvan myth is represented.²⁹ This may show that the so-called Zurvanites were not monotheistically inclined Zoroastrians, but simply Zoroastrians, and perforce dualists, who handed down a different version of the creation story.

This does not exhaust the list of permutations of the myth of creation. One version of that myth makes Ahreman an independent eternal deity, who lived in darkness, in air, in empty space; this is the place to which he will be hurled back at the end of times. In this story the air is not the neutral no-man's-land that it is in the classical version, but the abode of evil. When we translate this into the language of Iranian mythology, we may infer from this detail that Wāy, the younger name of the Avestic deity Vayu, was considered in a certain version of the creation myth as a receptacle of evil. According to this version the evil spirit got into the domain of God before creation, a detail that clearly goes against the spirit and letter of the 'classical' version; only after that infiltration of God's domain by Ahreman did God create the world as a snare for him. Thus the story of the Evil Spirit in this version, although it resembles in

²⁸ *Ibid.* §11.

²⁹ *Elise Vasn vardanats'*, p.25 ff.; tr. Orbeli and Juzbashjan, p. 40 ff.; tr. Thomson, p. 78 ff. Cf. the corresponding version of Eznik, *De deo*, 460 f. (text), 597 f. (translation), where this point does not occur.

several points the classical cosmogony, contains certain divergent details that put it apart from the classical story.

We have not attempted to give here a complete presentation of all the minute differences that exist between the several versions of the stories of creation,³⁰ but what we have seen should give us a pretty good idea of the great diversity that existed. Most of this material is culled from Shahrastānī's account, and one could easily fill in further details from other sources. Arabic-language writers like Shahrastānī and 'Abd al-Jabbār did not invent these details. Nor can it be claimed that they were generally so ignorant, or so disdainful of the material they were reporting, as to have committed serious errors in their transmission. They were for the most part of Persian extraction. Shahrastānī, like several other Islamic writers, is obviously at pains to present all details in the most accurate manner possible, and he adds his own doubts and scruples about the material which he transmits. He presents one version after another, even where the differences between them are trifling, with the apparent desire to be as complete and true to his material as he possibly can. His criticism of views that must have sounded very offensive to the ears of a Muslim is expressed in brief words and does not overshadow the presentation. One may well assume that there were several further, unrecorded, varieties of these stories, and that those reported by the non-Zoroastrian writers are merely an accidental selection from the ideas current among Zoroastrians.

Some varieties of cosmogony are found even in the Pahlavi books, despite the general impression of uniformity that one gets from them, representing as they do just one strain of tradition. One peculiar version occurs in the *Pahlavi Rivayāt accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*. It tells of the world as being created from a 'body', which is not specified, and it has been argued that we have there a conception influenced by the Indian myth of Purusha. For this there is no evidence, and indeed it is not clear from that account that the world is created from the body of a primal man at all; it is quite as likely that there was some kind of form made in the beginning, from which the world was later created, or that the world was first created as an essential entity in Ohrmazd, and later transferred to its *gētīg*, or material, shape. This interpretation, if it is accepted, would make it very close to the *mēnōg-gētīg* version of the story of creation. The term *tan* 'body', at any rate, does not necessarily

³⁰ This was done in Shaked 1992b and in forthcoming, a.

denote a material entity. Be it as it may, we do have here a different conception of the process of creation.³¹

The conclusion from these diverse accounts seems straightforward. In the period under question, that is to say, towards the end of the Sasanian period and in the early centuries of Islam, there reigned considerable tolerance in the matter of how one should formulate the mythology of creation. We have no way of telling which version was accepted by the political establishment of the Empire (and indeed we do not know whether there was an officially endorsed version). We do know however that besides school variations within the religion, there was also considerable divergence among the different regions of the vast Iranian domain. We have clear evidence for that from the practice of the Manichaeans, who used different sets of divine names to render their own story of creation in the various Iranian languages spoken in different regions,³² but we shall not be concerned with this type of variation.

We have direct and sometimes indirect evidence for other divergencies in theogonical and cosmogonical views which can occasionally be deduced from the wording of Pahlavi passages.³³

The Zurvanite myth occurs very frequently in foreign accounts of religious debates in the Sasanian period, and it seems that it was the self-evident representation of the common Sasanian idea of the beginnings of the universe as most contemporary Christian polemicists and martyrs understood it. As many of them were of Iranian extraction who had been Zoroastrians before their conversion, they can very well be regarded as native informants for Sasanian Zoroastrianism. Given the near universal acceptance of Zurvanism, it would seem to be a contradiction in terms to speak of a Zurvanite heresy in the Sasanian period. If it was, at least some of the time, the dominant form of the religion, it was in effect the orthodoxy of the time, and could not be at the same time a heresy. Besides, it does not seem justified to call it a heretical sect if it had no organized existence which would set it apart

³¹ *PRiv* 46; cf. Williams 1985; 1990 II:72 ff., 202 ff., where the chapter is discussed in detail, and references to previous literature are given. For the notion of *tan* cf. Lecture 3.

³² On the Manichaean designations of the deities see the convenient brief summary in Tardieu 1981:103 ff. Cf. also Boyce 1975b:8 ff.

³³ See Cumont 1908:63 ff., where it is pointed out, among other things, that certain Zoroastrian texts seem to confuse between the figure of Gayomard, the Primal Man, and a solar figure such as Mithra.

from an established form of the religion. It would be wrong for scholars to declare one form of the faith orthodox, that is to say, the correct faith. All expressions of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian period seem to have referred back to the scriptures and their *zand*, while they belonged to a period and environment widely remote from that of Zoroaster; we are in no position to measure their proximity to the words of the founder. The claims made by various schools within Christianity, Judaism or Islam to constitute the most faithful reflection of the primitive religion have only subjective validity. There is no reason to suppose that in Zoroastrianism the situation could be different, and that there exists but one school where the thought of its founder is preserved in its pristine purity, while all others are mere deviations from that.

The link connecting these different cosmogonical conceptions is dualism,³⁴ which for our practical purposes means the idea that there are two cosmic powers that are separate from an early stage in the existence of the universe.³⁵ We have seen three basic models in Iran for accounting for the existence of the power of evil: it is regarded as a completely separate principle, independent of the deity, from the origins; it occurs, alternatively, as parallel to the good deity, the differentiation between them taking place within a pre-existent and neutral deity of time, thus creating a triangular model of the divine world; or it is deemed to be secondary to God, even explicitly as derived from him, by way of transformation from or corruption of the Entity of Light. The first and the third alternatives use a model of a neat contrast between the two powers, though they are differently conceived. The second, 'Zurvanite', model uses a conception of three divine figures. This would seem to be a significant difference, but a much more important distinction can be made between the first two conceptions on the one

³⁴ On the notion and forms of dualism cf. the numerous studies of Bianchi, in particular 1958a; 1958b; 1961; 1971; 1973. Cf. also Pètremont 1946; 1947.

³⁵ I am using a rough-and-ready definition of dualism. As with most problems of religious typology, it is not easy to give a tight and methodically satisfactory definition that would be universally applicable. The reasons for this are, as I shall try to show, that dualism is so closely tied to monotheism that the two are practically inextricable, and the difference between them is essentially one of degree, rather than of quality. It would not do to employ a definition such as that used by Kellens 1990:14, who puts two conditions for a religious system to be called dualistic: that the dualism be of a cosmic order; and that the evil element should be directly opposed to the good. This would rule out practically all dualistic systems known to us.

hand and the third one on the other: the first two views are based on a neat contrast between good and evil, and on the impossibility of deriving the one from the other; the third differs from them in that it allows evil to be derived from good, and in this sense it is more radically at variance with the other two than they are from each other. All three had their Sasanian adherents. Each was regarded as orthodox by some Zoroastrians, who would have defended it as the most satisfactory solution to the problem of evil.

I should like to conclude with three brief observations on the typology and phenomenology of dualism. It has already been observed that a religion that is based on ethical dualism cannot really uphold a symmetry of the two powers.³⁶ They may be parallel up to a point for the purposes of the narrative, but the difference between good and evil, between God and the devil, is too profound to allow them to be on the same plane of existence. Thus we have various expressions for their lack of symmetry. In the Pahlavi books this is expressed by the frequent formula that Ohrmazd exists, while Ahreman is non-existent;³⁷ by the inequality of their knowledge and wisdom, which denotes their inequality of power;³⁸ as well as by the difference between them as to space and time. Theoretically both are considered to be unlimited as to the dimensions of space and time, but when we come to details we see that they are not. In space Ohrmazd spreads over all directions with the exception of downwards, while Ahreman occupies only that one direction; in time they may be both eternally pre-existent, but this is not true with regard to their end, where one, Ohrmazd, will continue eternally to exist and to reign, while the other will be either annihilated or put away: the expressions as to the fate of Ahreman at the end of times are embarrassingly ambiguous and even contradictory.

The second point is the following. We find in these Iranian texts very often an intrusion of a third principle that seems to disturb the harmony of dualism. I believe that this is not a logical flaw or an oversight on the part of the Zoroastrian believers, but a widespread feature of a dualistic type of thinking. There are several mediating figures in Sasanian

³⁶ Henning 1951:47 ff.; Shaked 1967.

³⁷ Shaked 1967. Recently Gnoli has shown that the same conception applies also to the Younger Avesta, and that a premonition of it may already exist in the Gathas (in a yet unpublished communication to the second conference of the *Societas Iranologica Europaea* in Bamberg, October 1991).

³⁸ See an analysis of this point in Cerutti 1990:33 f.

Zoroastrianism, beginning with the figure of Mithra (Mihr) as a mediator judge; the mediating angels mentioned in the Arabic sources,³⁹ who may or may not be identical with Mihr and his associates; the deity Wāy as a middle principle between the two powers in the Bundahishn account; and the deity Zurvan in the Zurvanite version of the story, who stands above, and in a certain sense between, the two powers.⁴⁰ The structural function of such figures who stand in-between is to mitigate the stark harshness of the dualistic system, to lend to it a certain roundness, and perhaps to make the theoretical model of the divine world conform a little more to the reality of the world we live in, which is not just a world of black-and-white, of light-and-darkness.

The third point is that despite the effort at making a neat distinction between good and evil, a certain ambiguity in the character and function of the chief protagonists cannot entirely be avoided. We have a number of indications for ethical and ontological ambiguities that spoil the absolute separation of good and evil. To give just a few examples. Death is a creation of Ahreman, but it is said to carry advantages within it.⁴¹ Sexual desire is instilled in men as a sinister corruption devised by Ahreman, but the whole scheme of the world is based on the benefits accruing from that to mankind and to the creation of Ohrmazd.⁴² The myth of creation is based on an implicit assumption that the devil, Ahreman, is true to his word: once he has concluded an agreement with

³⁹ See above and Shaked 1992b.

⁴⁰ See Shaked 1980:19 f., where the point is worked out in more detail.

⁴¹ Cf *PRiv* chapter 13.

⁴² The Primal Whore, Jeh, requests of Ahreman the desire for men, which Ahreman is unable to withhold from her, although he knows full well that this means the perpetuation of mankind, to which he is opposed. Cf. *GBd* 41:5 ff.; Anklesaria 1956:46 ff. The text is transcribed and translated in Zaehner 1955: 355 ff.

Ohrmazd, he is incapable of breaking it.⁴³ This is a necessary element of the story, but is out of character. There is a range of ambivalent figures in Zoroastrian mythology which break the clear-cut division between the two camps. It appears that some prominent members of the pantheon have a sinister aspect to their person. This is apparent for example in the figures of Yima (Jamshēd),⁴⁴ or Keresāspa,⁴⁵ not to speak of a divine figure like Vayu (Wāy) which occupies an ambiguous position between the two powers, and had to be split into two in order to preserve the dualistic structure without allowing it to be strained beyond what it can take.⁴⁶

One further point is of a historical nature. At what period of time in the history of Zoroastrianism did the theologians feel themselves consciously and proudly the upholders of a dualistic point of view, against most of the rest of the world? It does not seem at all certain that Zoroaster regarded himself as a dualist, not only because the word, or any equivalent to it, does not occur in the Gathas or elsewhere in the Avesta, but also because the conflict of two divine figures is not very prominent in the Gathas or in much of the Younger Avesta, with the clear exception of the *Vendidad*. The question as to the dualistic consciousness of the Zoroastrians is not identical with the question as to how we ought to describe the religion of Zoroaster. The religious message of Zoroaster is without hesitation a dualism, for it is founded on the existence of two antagonistic powers. It may however be argued that there is no attestation of a declared dualistic stand before the Sasanian period. Even in the inscriptions of the early Sasanians we have no clear reference to a definition of the religion of the king and the state as a system of faith which is based on the clash between two cosmic powers. Only in the *Vidēvdāt* and in the Pahlavi writings is a clear dualist ideology expressed, with the Mazdean religion defined as standing against that of the *dēws*. Yet even in the Pahlavi books it is not

⁴³ This comes about more than once in the story of creation. Consider, for example, the scene in which Ahreman falls in stupefaction having realized that he has signed his own doom by agreeing to a time-limit set on his fight with Ohrmazd (*GBd* 7:11; Anklesaria 1956:10 f.); or the scene in which Ahreman is bound to grant Jeh her wish, since he has promised it to her, although he knows the disastrous effects of that for him (*GBd* 41; Anklesaria 1956:48 f.).

⁴⁴ Cf. Shaked 1987c.

⁴⁵ Cf. *PRiv* 18f:3 ff.

⁴⁶ Shaked 1980:20.

always predominant.⁴⁷ It is possible to assume that the proud declaration of Zoroastrianism as a dualistic faith, and the assertion that dualism is the only satisfactory form of religion, may have come about at the end of a long period of contacts and polemics with Jews and later with Christians, and under the impetus of rivalry with other dualistic ideologies, such as Manichaeism.⁴⁸

W.B.Henning described the dualism of Zoroaster as the only logical answer to the problems of the universe, 'more satisfying to the thinking mind than the one given by the author of the Book of Job'.⁴⁹ Without wishing to take sides in the debate whether dualism or monotheism (or any other type of religion) provides the best solution to the religious needs of man, I hope to have shown that as a living historical entity Zoroastrian dualism in the Sasanian period does not exactly present a straightforward logical answer. Henning himself helped us realize that dualism is by no means a conception of a symmetrical opposition of two powers. Our investigation has shown that the problem of evil, to which dualism should provide the answer, is capable of several different modes of solution within a dualistic system, and that this may by itself indicate a certain *malaise* with the reply provided by the dualistic faith.

⁴⁷ Not all the Zoroastrian creeds have seen fit to include a reference to the dualism of the faith. Thus, when one ties the *kustīg*, one is supposed to tie four knots that correspond to the four basic tenets of the faith. These are the existence of God, the acknowledgement of the Zoroastrian religion, the prophecy of Zoroaster, and one's intention of using the threefold mode of good behaviour, viz. good thought, good speech and good deeds (cf. *SD* 10:9). The choice of these points in the declaration of faith, with no reference to the repudiation of the demons, seems significant in showing that this is not central in all expressions of the faith. This observation stands in contrast to the fact that the *kustīg* is closely tied to the idea of the fight against the demons (for this see Spiegel 1860:327 ff.; Christensen 1934:65 ff.). It may indicate that this ritual declaration belongs to an earlier period, despite the very late date of the book in which it occurs. On the other hand, in the modern period there is a trend to ignore the dualistic character of the religion or to play it down. Thus, in the creed written by Modi (1961), there is no reference at all to the dualistic elements of the faith.

⁴⁸ The suggestion that disputes with Judaism may have helped to develop the dualistic awareness of Zoroastrians is made in Shaked 1990b. The dualistic point comes out forcefully in Plutarch's description of the Iranian religion, *de Iside* 46 f., but it is not clear whether this is based on Zoroastrian self-awareness, or on Greek doxology.

⁴⁹ Henning 1951:46.

Typologically, dualism can hardly be considered a separate category of religion. Its kinship with monotheism is so close as to make it necessary to assume that dualism comes into existence only as an intensification of a trait inherent in every monotheism. Monotheism, by its concentration of the cosmic power in the figure of a single divine entity, has to grapple with the problem of evil much more acutely than a polytheistic system, and it must provide an answer which places evil somewhere along the line that leads from God to the cosmos. Every monotheism is, in this sense, a dualism. Every dualism, by the fact that it tends to place evil on a somewhat lower level than God, is, in reality, a monotheism. The difference between them is one of degree, of intensity, of emphasis, not of substance.

Dualism in its historical manifestation appears to be a complex phenomenon, not merely a juxtaposition of two powers set in opposition to each other. It may come as a disappointment to notice that it contains some ambiguities, but on the other hand it may give us satisfaction to understand it not as an abstract philosophical system, but as a three-dimensional historical reality, with all the inconsistencies and uncertainties that this may be expected to entail.

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