

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I'd like to offer my warmest congratulations to the Directors of the Soudavar Memorial Foundation on having done such a superb job supporting, nurturing and stimulating Iranian Studies, both Islamic and pre-Islamic, in the UK and Europe for the past ten years.

I'd like to express my personal gratitude to the Foundation, which has enabled a steady stream of doctoral students from Iran to come to Goettingen, to learn more about the pre-Islamic parts of their cultural heritage. In this way, a handpicked elite of excellent Iranian candidates has received what I hope is a thorough grounding in Western methodology and approaches to Iranian Studies, and in many cases they have already made important contributions to these studies themselves. I hope that this means that, whatever happens to Ancient Iranian Studies in the current climate of academic impoverishment in Europe, a group of well-trained specialists will be able to carry the torch in Iran itself in the foreseeable future.

The academic output of our Institute in Goettingen, and indeed the academic output in Iranian Studies in the Western world, would have been very much poorer without the support of this impressive Foundation. I am very grateful to the Directors, and of course of the Testator, for that.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I am well aware that the one combination of words you may least wish to hear this afternoon is 'Iran' and 'Religion'. Unfortunately, I have been asked to speak on 'Contributions of pre-Islamic Iranian Culture to World Culture', and the greatest contributions ancient Iran made to Western Culture were undoubtedly related to religion.

Did you realise, for instance, that it is only an accident of history that European culture is not based upon a religion whose origins can now be shown to be Iranian? In the early centuries of our era two religions struggled for supremacy in Rome: Christianity and Mithraism. We find Mithraea, the 'churches' of Mithraism, throughout the regions where the Romans held sway, from eastern Turkey to Britain, and it is only because of the Christians'

intense hatred of Mithraism that most Mithraic monuments have been destroyed or defaced to so thoroughly that only trained archaeologists can still find traces of them. There is a great deal of debate, of course as to the extent to which Roman Mithraism can be said to be of Iranian origin. In the early 20th century it was widely believed to be a corrupt form of Zoroastrianism, and when that turned out to be untrue, there was a reaction which led many classical scholars to regard Mithraism as a wholly Roman phenomenon with some vague references to Iranian cults. My own work shows that this is very unlikely, and that Mithraism, though not a form of Zoroastrianism, was a Western Iranian religious system in its own right, which was probably exported to Rome by soldiers who may have come into contact with the regiments of Curtii, or Kurds who served the Roman Empire in the borderlands between 'Rome' and Iran. I am very pleased to say that the academic pendulum is now swinging back, and several of those who rejected an Iranian origin only a decade ago, now admit that it is the likelier explanation.

So, Mithraism narrowly missed becoming the dominant religion in Europe. 'So what', you may ask. After all, if the Ottoman Turks had not been vanquished at Vienna in 1683, we might all have been Muslims, but we're not. Neither are we secret Mithraists, of course, but it is surprising how many elements of that religion were apparently borrowed by Christianity. Two years ago, my wife and I were privileged to attend a *jam* ceremony of the Ahl-e Haqq in a village near Kermanshah. (Like the Yezidis, the Ahl-e Haqq are the heirs of the pre-Islamic Mithra cult in which Mithra played a prominent role.) During the ceremony, a little food and water are ritually partaken of by the believers. My wife whispered, "What does that mean?" and I unthinkingly answered, "think Eucharist." On our return home I thought I'd look into the possible connection between the two, and was astonished to find quite a bit of evidence that the Christians had in fact had to fight hard against a common belief that they had in fact borrowed the Eucharist from the Mithraists. Although the sacred meal can be shown to have

been an age-old Indo-Iranian tradition, the Christians stood the argument on its head, and claimed the Mithraists had got it from them. St. Justin (103-165 CE) writes:

... for the apostles, in the Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body;" and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, "This is My blood;" and gave it to them alone. *Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.*

According to the Christian convert Tertullian (ca. 150-230 CE), the meal in the Mithras cult was a 'devilish imitation of the Eucharist', and he adds that the initiates of Mithras believed that by eating the bull's flesh and drinking its blood they would be born again just as life itself had once been created anew from the bull's blood. This food and drink were supposed not only to give physical strength but also to bring salvation to the soul which would in time achieve rebirth and eternal light.

As you may know, some scholars also believe that Christmas goes back to a Mithraist celebration of Mithras' birth at the time of the Winter solstice. This would seem to be corroborated by the fact that both Yezidis and Ahl-e Haqq celebrate the appearance of the founder of their religion around the same time in mid Winter, but as the theory is rejected by many who know more about Roman culture than I do, I won't go into it more deeply

Another point: did you know that the very concept of 'Religion' we are used to, namely 'an organised way of worshipping a divine Being or Beings that is fundamentally based on individual choice', has its origin in Iranian culture, namely in Zoroastrian thinking? Possibly for the first time in the history of human culture, the Prophet Zarathustra offered his people an

alternative to the tribal cults they were familiar with, namely a religious affiliation that had to be ‘chosen’ on the basis of personal belief. In other words, Zarathustra offered his people a different worldview – Av. *Daēnā*, which later became *dēn* and then *Dīn* – a worldview based upon the concept of human freedom to choose. For the first time in their history, and possibly in the history of religions, then, this *Dīn* of Zarathustra gave rise to the idea that ‘religion’ had to do – not just with traditional practices such as priestly rituals – but with personal, individual belief, and the consequences this belief had for the individual’s choices in life.

It was this novel element of choice that enabled Zoroastrianism to spread throughout Iran and to become a ‘religion’ in our sense. The worship of the Gods, which until then had been largely the affair of local priests who followed a local tradition, was transformed into a bond between men based on the acceptance of an explicit system of teachings, which anyone could choose or reject. In other words, while religion had always been a traditional, local phenomenon best understood by priests, now it could be understood by anyone. This concept of ‘religion’ shaped the way in which first the Middle East, and later the West came to understand the concept of ‘religion’. Zarathustra’s *Daēnā* or ‘worldview’ did indeed give us *Dīn* or ‘Religion’.

Zarathustra believed that there was Evil as well as Good in our world, and could not promise his followers that their good behaviour on earth would be rewarded with an easy life.

However, he did promise them recompense after death: the soul of those who chose rightly would enter the Best Existence, *Vahištām Ahu*, now known in Persian as *Behešt* ‘Paradise’ (Paradise itself is an Iranian word, as you probably know). Those who had made the wrong choice would be relegated to the Worst Existence, or Hell, which for Zarathustra partly meant that the food would be awful. In Y.31.20 he promises them: ‘A long existence in the Realms of Darkness, where the food is bad and the utterance is ‘Woe’.’”

But, on a more serious note, this is the first time that the concepts of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ as a result of our actions on earth – which we now almost take for granted and on which much of our system of morality is based – were formulated. Furthermore, Zoroastrianism appears to have been the first religion to postulate that the world had a Beginning – Creation – and that the world as we know it will have an end. All these beliefs entered Judaism as a result of the close contacts between that religion and Zoroastrianism from the time of Cyrus the Great onwards, and as you know they were more fully or clearly adopted in Christianity and later in Islam.

Zoroastrianism appears to have been the first religious system to come to grips with the concept of ‘evil’ in a fundamental way. It came to regard the world as a key element in the universal battle between those two powers, and was perhaps the first religion to postulate that humanity had a key role in the process. While, in the Beginning, the principles of Good and Evil were just that – principles or spirits without the physical ability to do anything more than coexist– Zoroastrianism believed that the Good Principle created the world as a battlefield, limited as to time and place, which would enable the two forces to fight to a conclusion. In this way, the physical world was created, and populated by physical good and wicked creatures, who have the capacity to fight. Of these creatures only Man, though essentially a good creation, has the ability to choose between Good and Evil, and as we saw earlier he will be rewarded or punished for his choice after death.

In the end the essential human goodness (well, Zoroastrians were optimists after all), combined with the inherent superiority of the good god Ohrmazd over the wicked Ahriman, will overcome all evil in this world, and thus reduce the cosmic Force of Evil, Ahriman first to an almost impotent force in the universe.

In order to render this victory complete, Zoroastrianism believes in the coming of a Saviour, who will bring to fruition the work begun by Zarathustra, and it was believed that the Saviour must be closely related to him. Since Zoroastrianism does not believe in reincarnation

a myth evolved which may seem familiar. It is told that Zarathustra's 'essence', i.e. his seed, is preserved in Lake Kansaoya (now Lake Helmand). In the fullness of time a virgin will go swimming in that lake, and her father's worst nightmares come true: she comes back, still a virgin, but pregnant, and will give birth to the Saviour.

Another problem for earlier Zoroastrian thinkers was the problem of death. Death was seen as a fully Ahrimanic phenomenon, and was known to have lasting effects. And there was the rub! Zoroastrianism, after all, tells us that all traces of evil will disappear at the end of time. The solution, it seems, was soon found – at least it had been found by the time of the fixation of the Young Avesta, which I think took place in the Achaemenid period (ca. 550 - 330 BCE): after the Coming of the Saviour, there will be a resurrection of all the dead. Most of these will by this time already have expiated their sins in hell or purgatory, but some have not, and thus there will be a final Judgement; it is also said that a tsunami of molten metal will roll over the world, which will be like a pleasant bath to those who are free of sin, but will literally burn all remaining sins away. The all will exist happily ever after, in a timeless universe filled with joy. (The boredom that to my mind is bound to ensue was not seen as a problem in Zoroastrian thinking.) However that may be, you will have recognised such beliefs as the judgement of the soul after death, heaven and hell, the Saviour born of a virgin; the Last Judgement, the Resurrection and the Final Battle as accepted parts of Christian teaching. This incidentally suggests that Zoroastrianism may have been the first religion ever to postulate that this world is not as God wants it to be – a startlingly novel view of the role of the world, which was adopted by many later religions, not least Christianity. Whereas ancient religions simply regarded the world as the result of the Will of the Gods, which man could at most seek to influence by making sacrifices so that the Gods might be inclined to be benevolent, Zoroastrianism differentiates sharply between God's fundamental purpose and the realities of terrestrial existence. This allows man a fully new freedom and independence, without which modern European culture could hardly have come into existence.

Perhaps you'll agree with me that it all seems to make better sense in the archaic, dualist context of Zoroastrian eschatology than in modern, monotheistic Christianity. It was probably because of the very fact that a 'worldview' of such astounding coherence was developed in ancient Iranian culture, that many of its components travelled so far and lasted so long as parts of human belief.