

CULT OF FRAVASHI

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

Ed Lehman also concurs that in Zoroastrianism, “according to its theoretical scheme, the ancestors, or the souls of the dead, play no part; but practically, in the popular customs and beliefs, the cult of the dead, still survives. Parsism not only permits this popular worship, but even finds room for it in, the popular customs and beliefs. --- But it must be observed that (they) are difficult to recognize in the shape that is given them in this Avestan composition (Yashts), being often placed in the epical evolution as heros or kings of old, as patrons or protectors of persons, families, or provinces or as heavenly angels or genii, fashioned after the national or religious ideas of the Iranians.” (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*, pp. 454-5). While what Lehman further observes has mostly been covered here, what he observes about the Armenians still practising this cult has not been known generally and proves that the ancient notions about the souls of the deceased are hard to change even when they run counter to the theology of the successive belief system: “In Armenia the Persian ideas on the Fravashis and their cult have continued into modern times. They are commemorated on the Saturdays before the five great festivals of the year, and upon the whole, every Saturday. They are imagined to dwell in the neighbourhood of the tombs and in the houses of their kinsmen, and the survivors burn incense and light candles in honour of them. At the tombs the Armenians celebrate a special commemoration of the dead, on which occasion they burn quantities of incense. The Manes dwell three days on earth; then they fly away to heaven, leaving behind their blessings to their descendants. Especially between fathers and sons there is a vivid communication at that time. The Armenians as well as the Persians imagine that souls are connected with the stars.”

The inclusion of Fravashis in Yasna 37.3 which is generally regarded as an extension of the Gathas and which immediately follows them may perhaps raise questions about their not pertaining to the Gathic lore, especially as it refers to the Fravashis of both men and women, and Yasna 41.2 even refers to women too as “good” rulers ruling over us in both existences since the Vedic cult of Petaras seems to refer only to men. Such an interpretation becomes viable if Fvashi is derived from Fravarti, “making forth a choice,” by us humans.

It seems the belief about the souls of the departed relatives is not only too deeply planted in the human psyche to make it amenable to change even when voluntarily adopting a new theological construct that obviously runs counter to it and has no logical place in it. Attempts are

often made to reconcile it the best it can to the new ideology and this is what the early Avestan theologians seem to have done as a compromise. It seems they tried, so to say, to Zoroastrianism it as best as they can without further compromising its other fundamental elements or principles. It seems to me they have made as good an attempt they could in this regard as the Zoroastrians are not known to have otherwise deviated significantly from the prophet's Gathic message. Many such parallels in other religions could be cited but one should suffice: When the Christian fathers could not convince the early Christians to give up celebrating the Mithraic (or Zoroastrian?) festival of winter solstice, they allowed the new adherents to celebrate it as the birth-day of Christ, though Christ was historically born on January 7th (which incidentally happens to be my birthday too), but it falls on different days per the Parsi calendar. Eastern Christians still celebrate January 7th as Christmas and this has hardly detracted these Christians from being faithful Christians and so have Zoroastrians hardly failed to adhere to the prophet's teachings as best as they can even when odds were against them. Similarly, despite the vigorous efforts to this day, the Muslim Iranians still celebrate the Zoroastrian tradition of celebrating the Vernal Equinox as their New Year with any less pomp or enthusiasm.