

ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF THE WEST

LECTURE I; INTRODUCTION

DEFINITIONS;

To many people today the word "heretic" has an almost noble sound. influenced, perhaps, by figures such as Galileo who suffered for teachings that now seem like self evident truths.

for example, a medical heretic might be a doctor who questions his or her peers and only after death, is proved right.

in the 19th century a typical view toward religion was expressed saying "religion is like a palm tree; it grows at the top. The dead leaves are all orthodox while the new ones are all heretics." The fact is, the idea of what is "orthodox" which means the right or correct teaching' has been defined in conflict with so called 'heretics'.

The fact is that only Christianity and Islam among the world's major religions, have contended with heretics to such an extent, because they are particularly concerned with what their followers BELIEVE rather than what they DO as in Judaism.

The fact also is that within Judaism only one person was actually excommunicated as a heretic and that is Baruch de Spinoza. However, many of the Jewish mystical tradition were on the fringe tho never persecuted. We will spend the second hour of this class on Jewish Heretics because there are so few (Its kind of an oxymoron like protetent mystics).

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Heresy did and does not exist in and of itself, but only in relation to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy cannot exist in turn w/o

authority, and it is the quality of authority in orthodoxy that defines and denounces heresy. The terms hairesis and its cognate term schisma, or schism, were familiar in the pagan world, but were given new meaning in a wholly new context.

the Greek word HAIRESEIN originally meant simply "to take," but its frequent occurrence in discussions of competing philosophical schools in a pluralistic culture soon gave it the more specific meaning of "choice" and later still the narrower meaning of a "choice" among different schools and movements in philosophy. It was not a pejorative word with one school claiming a monopoly on the truth.

however, by the late first and early 2nd century haeresis gradually acquired the meaning of a specific doctrine that was counter to Christian truth, and by the late 2nd century, it acquired the meaning it has today for both Christians and later, for Islam.

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In order to understand both heretics and their opponents it is necessary to recognize that both parties continually resorted to scripture (whether old test, new test, or Koran) and that the power of scripture extends down thro today as a means of defending ones position.

After scripiter itself, the most authoritative element in both the early church and the Islamic movement was TRADITION. This, of course, also applies to Judaism (remember the first song in "Fiddler on the Roof").

The word in Greek, paradosis, was used from earliest times of these movements. Any custom, rite or tradition was readily attributed to the "apostolic tradition" or to Mohammed if it couldn't be found in the respective scriptures.

This was so important to The catholic church that at the Council of Trent in the 16th century it was held that the scriputre and tradition were equal. This was over against the protestant reformation which claimed that scripture alone was valid.

Within Islam, the more conservative or fundamentalist groups claim that all traditons and scripture are completed so no more inovation can take place.(the door if Ithjihad is closed)

again, within Judaism, even among the Orthodox, the right of the Rabbis to constantly interpret or re-interpret the Torah means that the idea of heresy is almost non'existent.

no The story is told of some Rabbis in a concentration camp who put God on trial for the way the Jews were being treated and killed. The trial ended with God being counted as guilty of murder and of the worst ethical behaviour. After the trial one rabbi speaks up and says. "Oy Gaval, its time for prayer" The idea here is that there is freedom to judge and even condemn God but there is still a relationship. In fact, the one attitude God doesn't want is indiffernece.

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There are a few other definitions that need to be discussed. The opposite of Jew is Gentile, which basically means everyone who is not a Jew. It was in this way that the Jewish community

kept itself separate from the peoples around them. A person could become a "godfearer" that is, those Gentiles who believed in the ethical and moral teachings of the Jews. Some even converted to Judaism, which, meant (for men) circumcision and other proof of belief.

The word PAGANUS was a Latin word which originally meant a country dweller, but later came to mean those who did not accept Christianity for most the early converts were urban. Thus by the 4th century, with Christianity recognized as the only ^{legal} religion of the Empire by 380s, Pagan came to have a negative connotation as a non-Christian. Likewise the Celtic word HEATHEN had the same metamorphosis in meaning. Originally it simply meant those who dwell in the Heath, or in the country.

For the Muslim, the word INFIDEL means the same thing as Pagan and Heathen came to mean. I.e., a person who does not accept Islamic beliefs.

Both Christianity and Islam were originally seen as a Jewish sect. Christianity didn't split completely with the synagogue until around 90 CE and up till then was under the "legal" umbrella of Judaism.

In the case of Mohammed, he had high hopes of being recognized as a true prophet by both Christians and Jews. In fact, Jewish/Christian relatives were among those who approved his teaching and helped him continue.

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PRE-JEWISH/CHRISTIAN/ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST

For our purposes, we will look at Babylon in ancient Persia for the roots of all three great western religions.

It is in the Tigres/Euphrates valley that civilization first developed, tho some would argue the Egypt was developing at the same time. First, Civilization is not a syhnonym for culture. A culture is the totality of learned, socially transmistted behaviour present in a human society, thus every society has a culture.

Civilization refers to a certain kind of social and cultural organization that emereged in the Near East around 3000 BC. Two basic characteristics of civilization are: the use of writing (making scripture possible), and a more complex social system, ie, beurocracy.

The development of cities, or urbanization as well as more refined metalurgy, that is, the beginning of the bronze age coincides with the rise of civilization.

thus from about 3000 BCE to 536 when Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babalyn there was a succession of great archaic civilizations in the Tigres/Euphrates valley--Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Chaldean.

Both here and in the Nile valley during the same period, there is a common religious form in which the political structure and the divine structure of the cosmos are considered as parts of an external sacred patdtern and process. IE, the human political world is viewed aas a microcosm of the divine macrocosm.

Both gods and goddesses were part of the pantheon of dieties in Babylon, only the names changed when the political rulers changed, the myth of the dying/ rising god and the goddess who loved him remained pretty much the same throughout this time.

New myths would be written to install the new gods whenever a people was conquered. The Story of Marduk slaying the dragon Tiamut and her consort Apsu, is one such myth. Even the Myth of Adam and Eve, in which the symbols sacred to the Caananites (the fig? tree, snake, etc.) are shown to be the cause of evil coming to the world.

I emphasized Babylon here because it is from there we get much of our western culture. It is here that the idea of 60 minute hours, 24 hour days, 365 days a year are found. The seven day week, probably goes back to the earliest level of civilization but it comes from Babylon. The Zodiac, astrology and astronomy also come from this area.

Most of the Biblical myths of pre-history are a re-working of then extant Babylonian myths of creation, flood, etc.

For the Biblical tradition, however, the most important influence comes from the time that Israel was in captivity in Babylon from 587 to about 536 BCE. It is here that the priestly writers compiled, edited and completed what we know as the pentateuch, as well as gathering other writings of prophets, etc.

ZOROASTRIANISM - Why is this important? Because about ⁶⁰⁰~~100~~ years previous a man named Zoroaster founded a new religion which

worshiped only one God, Ahura Mazda. This religion was dualistic in that Ahura Mazda had an evil counterpart who was co-equal and co-eternal named aheramin. These two were in a battle for the cosmos. Zoroaster believed Ahura Mazda would win if enough people chose to follow him.

Other parts of this ~~new~~ religion included the concept of an end of time (apocalypse), of a messiah who would come and vindicate the good, (Mithra) and all kinds of demons and angels.

Thus, from ^{the 6th Century BC} ~~this time~~ on, biblical writings included these concepts. It is widely accepted by biblical scholars that the later Jewish concepts of Satan, hell, an afterlife, resurrection of the dead, end of time, etc. were colored by Zoroastrianism and of Mithraism. This, of course affects the very foundation of both Jewish and Christian, and later, Islamic beliefs.

This dualistic theology will crop up again many times in the history of Christianity and Islam. The late middle ages in particular, will see this idea and be judged heretical. The Cathars of S. France and Northern Italy, the Bogomils of the Balkans, etc.

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THE ARYAN INVASIONS

Beginning around 3000 - 2500 BCE People from the steppes of Russia, mainly the Ukraine, began migrating south, probably due to climactic changes. These people were fair skinned, larger and much more violent. They already had chariots and better weapons than those they conquered. From 3000 on they spread out from the Iranian Plateau and by 1500, were in Northern India. They

brought with them their own priestly class, and were patriarchal, having nearly all male dieties.

There were many tribes, including the Hittites, amorites, and many others we know of from Biblical writings. Zoroaster was highly influenced by them, tho he rejected polytheism. In India, we can see their influence still today in the Brahmin priests and other castes. The shudras, or untouchables, in India are the people who were conquered.

It is very possible the Levites, the priestly group of the Jews, were one such tribe who subdued the Habiru and justified their place with scripture as heading the 12 tribes of Israel.

a temple of the Luvites, or Luvians, an Indo European tribe has been uncovered and as the texts are translated, there is an astonishing number of parallels with the Jewish religion.

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GREEK RELIGION

Greek religion is the product of a fusion of the cults of the native population, the Pelasgians, with those of the northeren invaders, the aryan.

What we know as the Classical period of Mt. Olympus is a fusion of these invading gods including Zeus, Ares (god of war), Hephasestus, god of fire and smithy, and Apollo the sun god and god of music, as well as exemplar of calm, clear reason and light

These gods were brought in by the Aryan invaders and the pantheon has equivalents in India. How do you handle the already present dieties when conquering a people? you can't just make them go away. One way is to marry off, in myth, the reigning

female goddesses to the incoming males. Thus, Hera, one of the old goddesses is married, unhappily, to Zeus.

These are also kept alive by the various cults of CHTHONOI, spirits who live in the dark recesses of the earth and are connected to fertility and death. These have the qualities of demons, hobgoblins, gods of the night, darkness, terror and death.

They are not evil in the absolute sense but represent the darker passions and fears of humans contrasted with the human aspiration after light, clarity and freedom.

THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

these are another of the non-olympian, non-aryan elements in Greek religion. We don't know if they are indigenous to Greece or brought in from Asia Minor;. The three most important ones are the cults of ORPHISM, THE DIONYSIAN CULT, AND THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES.

These still exist in one form or another even today. For example, the cult of Dionysius is still alive in the Mardi Gras.

THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES was the thing to do in the ancient world if you were anyone. It had to be kept secret once done.

It celebrates the story of Demeter and her daughter Kore, ^{Persephone} who was abducted by Hades, god of the dead, and taken to his realm. Demeter, one form of the great mother of fertility, mourned and did not allow the agricultural realm to rejuvenate itself.

Zeus finally convinced Hades to give up Kore but while there she had eaten six pomegranate seeds and thus had to return to

Hades six months each year (fall and winter). The rites of this cult enabled members to feel they were participating in the divine events proclaimed in the myth. This was a nine day ceremony and on the last day the priests gave a drink which allowed expanded consciousness and people believed in eternal life after going thru it. - *argot from rye = LSD?*

THE CULT OF DIONYSIUS cultivated frenzied and orgiastic emotions and dances and is often contrasted with the calm and clarity of Apollo. He was the son of Zeus, born from his father's body when his mother died before giving birth. The ORPHIC CULT has a similar story to tell about Orpheus but is mainly concerned with Orpheus search for his love (Euridicy) in the land of the dead.

These mystery cults promised the initiate access to a kind of immortality not available to the outsider.

The important feature of these cults is they reveal a growing independence from thier original culture. Most of the mystery cults are not tied to a specific tribe or nation, but form universal societies composed of members from a variety of places, a forcast of Christianity and Islam.

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ROMAN RELIGION

The religious practices of the ancient romans centered around the family and civic life. Thru symbol and rite a respect was paid to the numinous powers and forces believed to be present in natural phenomena and in hearth and home.

Later the "numina", which at first were felt as vague forces in archaic symbols and rituals, took on more specific forms in the familiar pantheon of Roman gods which were in most instances patterned after Greek models.

As the Roman empire emerged in the first century its approach to religion changed. It created a cosmopolitan approach as philosophers noted similarities between the gods of different religions and cultures.

Two attitudes existed among educated Romans. One was skepticism about the truth of any religious system. Thus many Romans of the period treated the gods as poetical expressions not as matters of conviction.

The other attitude was the attempt of some philosophers to create a syncretistic comprehensive religious system in which gods from a number of different cultures are included. The Emperor Julian^{@360 CE} attempted, w/o success, to impose such a system as the official religion of the empire as a whole. - We will deal with him in this course.

One Roman philosopher, Varro, summarized the forms under 3 headings: MYTHOLOGICAL RELIGION represented by the gods referred to in the writings of poets and sometimes worshiped by the numerous groups of the populace.

CIVIC RELIGION, represented by those rites that maintained loyalty to the Roman state, and

NATURAL RELIGION, represented by the speculations of philosophers like the Platonists and the Stoics.

The Romans had to develop a sense of loyalty to Roman authority to control its empire. Thus rites of obeisance to the emperor as a divine personage were instituted as a supplement to other existing religious practices. This resulted from a pragmatic desire to achieve political unity.

ATTIS AND CYBELE - Came to Rome from Pyrgia in 202 BC but really found favor in 51 AD when the Emperor Claudius made this cult the only legal religion of the Roman Empire, chasing the Jews out of Rome "because of Chrestus". (Xians were still a sect of Judaism)

There are several versions of the story but basically Attis dies (either killed by Cybele, or by castrating himself) because he has been unfaithful to her. She is sorry and restores him to life on the third day (or makes him into a pine tree). On the 3rd day the priests carry his effigy tied to a pine tree thru the streets of Rome. Those wishing to become priests, castrate themselves, go thru the town begging women's clothing, and are brought into her priesthood.

In 312, the Edict of Milan, which made all religions legal, including Christianity for the first time, was adopted by Constantine. In the 380's, Theodosius made Christianity the ONLY Legal religion in the Empire. It was after this time that the church had the power to punish heretics, and began to do so.

I will say a little more about Mithraism because of its influence on Christianity. (date of Christmas, for instance) and since he is still an important deity for Zoroastrians.

Mithraism

Mithra was originally an Aryan god and was worshipped in Iran as the god of contracts. He preserves truth and order, destroying the disruptive forces of evil, anger, greed, pride and procrastination, all evil gods and men.

as guardian of contracts, he determines when the period of the devil's rule will end and as guardian of truth, is the judge of the soul at death. His coming 'amid the homage of the meek and lowly' in days of victory is awaited.

some christian writers mention an Oracle which foretells the god's coming at the end of the world to destroy the wicked with fire and to save the righteous. many Roman monuments depict his birth and some 5th cent. Christian texts imply there was a Mithraic myth foretelling the appearance of a star which would lead magi to the birthplace of Jesus.

Mithra is an important and popular diety and still occupies an important place in Zoroastrian ritual.

His cult was popular east to India and west to Asia Minor.

Mithraism first entered Rome in 60 B.C and in the 2nd cent A.D it spread as far as northern Briton. It was exculsively a male cult carried by soldiers.

Baptism was the sacrament for entrance and the initiate had to submit to both physical and spiritual tests. He was expected to adhere to a strict moral code. in return he was

promised a share in the resurrection.

The central belief of the cult was the sacrifice of a bull by Mithras. This act was both creative and redemptive. The worshipper looked back to a sacrifice at the beginning, when life had come out of death, and forward to the final sacrifice by Mithras when the last animal to die would give men the elixir of immortality. A foretaste of this gift could be savored in the regular communion meal of bread and wine in which the priest represented Mithra.

The Mandeans

or Nazoreans, are a small sect still in existence in southern Iraq and neighbouring Iran. claim descent from John the Baptist and believe their ancestors fled with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 ~~CE~~ ^{CE}

they are a mixture of Semitic, Iranian elements and much Gnostic content.

They use no anthropomorphic language but call God things like 'king of light' 'Lord of greatness'. the world is created by emanations from the King of light, one of the most important of these being the saviour, Manda d'Hayye (the knowledge of Life, whence the name of the sect.

Everything in the material world has its heavenly counterpart... ^{Plato} the light is trapped in people and in matter at the end of the world, the soul of the pious will be liberated. feel Judaism and Christianity are false religions which inhibit the release of the soul along with

the planets, stars and material world.

Baptism wards off evil spirits and is essential to salvation. a ritual meal is associated with it and ritual is very important and must be done properly or dire consequences ensue. Asceticism is not practiced and is not considered a way to free the soul.

plague in the 19th cent. killed virtually all the priests so, tho a new heirarchy was formed, no new replacements seem to be coming.

Influence of Iranian religion

the influence on Islam has been such as to help it develop from an Arabian into an international religion; the growth of the mystical movement, the Sufis, and the saviour concept may owe something to Iranian influence.

Iran's greatest influence has been on the development of Judaeo-Christian belief. It is widely accepted by biblical scholars that the later Jewish concepts of the devil, hell, an afterlife, the resurrection, and the end of the world and the saviour imagery were all coloured by Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. These beliefs have affected the very foundations of Judaism and particularly Christianity.

If have 45 min - show
Enterprise, Season 3 # 12 - "Chosen Realm"