SUMMARY OF NOTES ON ZOROASTRIANISM

I. Zoroastrianism:

   A. Compared to other Near Eastern world religions, Zoroastrianism is little known among people today.

      1. Very little knowledge about its origins and growth.
      2. Zoroastrianism is the religion of ancient Persia.
      3. This religion received its name from the Greek form of the name of its founder, Zoroaster who lived sometime in 6th century B.C.
      4. Today is identified as the religion of the Gabars in Iran and Parsis in India and in various locations where Indian people have emigrated.
      5. Know periods of Zoroastrian History as charted for you on website.
      6. Prehistory. Roots go back 5,000 years... tribes holding this religion eventually settled in various locations of Europe and Asia. Zoroastrianism is a descendant of that ancient religion. A group of tribes, collectively called the Aryans, came from somewhere in southeastern Europe.

         a. Linguistics recognizes an Indo-European language family many words and grammatical functions we use in English are similar to words used in India (Sanskrit) 3,000 years ago or so.
         b. Aryans were nomads. Around 1,5000 mass migration that went as far as India. Other settled on the Iranian plateau (we get the name Iran-the land of the Aryans).

   B. Monotheism and the lesser gods:

      1. In both Indian and Iranian versions of Aryan religion, we discover two types of spiritual beings: Devas (Indian) or Daevas (Iranian); These beings were recipients of regular worship. Root word for the names of these gods is “div” which literally means “to shine.” Daevas are the “shining ones.” This is the same root preserved in English in the terms “divinities, deities and (paradoxically) devil.

      2. Some of the daevas worshiped included:

         a. Mithra = god of truth and light (Indian Mitra)
         b. Intar (Verethragna) = god of war and power (Indian Indra)
c. Arta (Asha) = god of truth, justice, and order (Indian Rita, compare our word “right”)
d. Vahu = god of wind

3. Competing with Daevas are another set of beings or spirits called “asuras” (Indian) or ahuras (Iranian). Asuras meant “lords” and its meaning is ambiguous. In one sense it refers to a second group of spirits, but Ahura was also an honorific titled applied to particularly great gods.

4. But behind this pantheon of gods are the remnants of an original monotheism. Same root, “div” which became the source of the word “daeva” originally served as the word of a single God which is known in Indian as “Dyaus Pitar” = literally “father god.” In fact, the stem of the word “pitar” survives in words such as “paternal.” In Greek mythology we have Zeus Pater or Jupiter (Latin form).

5. Dyaus Pitar: Lived in sky but by the time of Aryan invasions, his identity merged into sky itself. Thus, we have the sky god Varuna (India) or Ouranos in Greek mythology. In Iran we see Varuna under the name of Uruwana or also called “Ahura Mazda” (literally, “wise lord.” Ahura Mazda is the creator and preserver of the natural order.

6. The move back to monotheism was a return to what was already part of the culture.

C. Sacrifice:

1. Animal sacrifice was focal point of Aryan religion in both Iranian and Indian forms.
2. Aryan sacrifice became the exclusive province of professional priesthood. Animal sacrifice were burned on stone altars.
4. Aryan priests had several titles: “magi” and “karpons.” They were the only ones who knew the proper methods and formulas. They had the right to perform the sacrifices and to demand that the populace comply with their demands.
5. From about 1500 BC to 500 BC an exclusive priesthood held the position of prominence in just about every civilized culture around the world. But in sixth century we see a worldwide rebellion against this priestly aristocracy. And in Persia that we have the priest Zoroaster led the revolt in Persia
6. Worshipper provided the sacrifice (e.g., ox). As the priests uttered prescribed words, the priest sacrificed the animal.
7. Aryans considered fire as a divinity in its own right: the fire god Atar (Iranian) and in India fire god was known as “Agni” (English word “ignition.”)
8. Priests provided themselves with drink from a sacred plant called “haoma” (Iranian; Indian: Soma). This drink may have contained an intoxicating, perhaps psychedelic drug. Aryan thought it could bring about immortality. Haoma itself become personified as a deity.
9. By the time of Zoroaster, ancient Aryan religion was a complicated polytheistic religion involving many intricate rituals, concentrated in the hands of a professional priestly aristocracy.

D. Zoroaster’s life:
1. Personal form of name is “Zarathurstra.
2. Approximate date “628 BC to 551 B.C. (cont. of Hebrew prophets Jeremiah, Daniel,, and other at the time of Jewish exile in Babylon).
3. 30 yrs old when had first vision of God. Archangel Vohu Manah (“good thought”) appeared to him as a human figure nine times bigger than normal person. Vohu Manah asked Zoroaster to lay aside his body and go up with him to heaven. There the prophet entered into the presence of Ahura Mazda who instructed him what to teach. Once he came back, he obeyed his vision. Over next 8 years he had 6 more visions.
4. First, Zoroaster experienced opposition. After King Hystapes (Vishtaspa) was converted, Zoroaster received a base of support that protected his message for the future.
5. Remaining 33 years of life is unclear. The empire never converted to his message event though many accepted his teachings.
6. According to tradition Zoroaster was killed during an invasion as he was kneeling before the fire altar.

E. Zoroaster’s Teachings:
2. Avesta is composed of many different writings that originated in various periods of time. Its main body is called the Yasna.
3. Yasna’s most ancient component is the Gathas which are suppose to contain hymns by Zoroaster himself. The very ancient form of its language demonstrates the antiquity of the Avesta.
4. The other components of the Avesta reflect different time periods and vies that sometimes conflict with the teachings of the Yasna, though they are put into the mouth of Zoroaster.
5. Also have later writings, particularly the Pahlavi scriptures which dates from the ninth century AD.
F. God:

1. Central to Zoroaster’s teaching was the return to monotheism. Ahura Mazda is thought to be supreme, the only god worthy of worship. By contrast, daevas are evil spirits and should not be worshipped.

2. God is working in the world through Spenta Mainyu, his “holy spirit.” In addition, he manifests himself through his Amesha Spentas, the holy immortals.”

3. These beings if that is what they are, have been subject of much debate. There are six of them and they seem to be accepted as angels or even deities in later developments. But there is good reason to believe that Zoroaster saw them as attributes of Ahura Mazda, not separate beings. Thus, they are divided into a father side and a mother side and their names reflect desirable qualities for proper devotion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amesha Spentas</th>
<th>Father Side</th>
<th>Mother Side</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vohu Manah (Good Thought)</td>
<td>Haurvata (Perfecton)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha (Righteousness)</td>
<td>Armaiti (Piety)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kshathra (power, dominion)</td>
<td>Ameretat (Immortality)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. In sum, these six attributes are aspects of Ahura Mazda, not separate beings.

5. Ahura Mazda has been considered analogous to Christianity's Trinity One God in three persons), consisting of one God in seven Amesha Spentas. To be sure, Amesha Spenta should not be interpreted in any way that compromises Zoroaster’s commitment to monotheism... though after his change this would change. Thus, Ahura Mazda has all the characteristics associated with the God of original monotheism. His name, Wise Lord” implies, Ahura Mazda, is both all-knowing and Creator. Moreover, He is also the moral standard of righteousness by which his creatures must live.

G. The Evil Spirit: Ahura Mazda is opposed by an evil spirit named Angra Mainyu,” who purposefully seeks to divert creatures from following the commands of Ahura Mazda.

1. Existence of Angra Mainyu has caused religion to be dualistic (the opposition of two spirits; one good, one evil) with the outcome of the conflict depending upon believer’s choices.
2. However, Zoroaster’s teachings are not dualistic because evil spirit is not equal to Ahura Mazda in any respect.
3. True dualism would state that the two spirits are of equal stature with the outcome of their cosmic struggle in doubt.
4. But Angru Mainyu is inferior to Ahura Mazda; he is stupid, not wise, and is going to lose the war.
5. Zoroaster’s belief about God and Angra Mainyu fits the pattern we see in the monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity with regard to the role of Satan.

H. Free will and future rewards: It is up to each person to align his will with Ahura Mazda. Each person must be on the side of Truth (Asha) and must be opposed to the Lie (Druj). Humans are free to choose and each action furthers either Ahura Mazda’s truth or Angra Mainyu’s lie. All these deeds are accumulated over a lifetime. The person who has supported Truth will receive rewards on earth and in heaven, but the person who has supported the Lie will receive punishment.

I. Moral Dualism: While there is no metaphysical dualism, there is moral dualism in view of practical implications of his teachings. Each person’s life consists of an ongoing series of right and wrong choices. The opposition that occurs here is moral, involving right and wrong choices. Now in later Zoroastrianism this moral dualism was rivaled by ritual dualism that involved a conflict between spiritual cleanness and uncleanness.

J. Ritual Practice: Zoroaster opposed animal sacrifices because it was cruel to animals and part of the worship of the evil daevas. Use of haoma was corrupt and decadent; he banned this drink. But critical to Zoroaster was the continual use of fire as a representation of the truth and purity of Ahura Mazda and the practice of fire ritual was an act of worship of God alone.

K. The Achaemenid Period (558 to 330 BC):

1. No evidence that Zoroaster’s teaching was ever implemented on large scale.
2. Zoroaster’s monotheism was accommodated to the prevailing polytheism.
3. No good reason to believe that any of the great Persian kings were genuine followers of Zoroaster. For example, Cyrus the Great was a worshiper of Babylonian god Marduk, Xerxes worshipped god Arta (Asha). Artaxerxes praised Mithra and Anahita (a fertility goddess); Darius I thanked Ahura Mazda and other gods.
4. What we discover is that Ahura Mazda became the greatest of gods within a larger Persian pantheon.
5. The apparent custodians of Zoroaster’s teachings were the magi, the very group Zoroaster opposed. There was no willingness to give their position was ritual experts. Though they gave lip service to Zoroaster’s teachings, they brought Ahura Mazda into their larger heritage of polytheism and ritual.

6. Magi information:
   a. Information is little.
   b. We see magi coming to Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews (Mt. 2).
   c. They were priests, astrologers, world leaders in religious affairs, and magicians (they gave us the word magic).

L. The Greek Period (330 BC-AD 226):
   1. From Alexander the Great’s victory over the Persian Empire in 330 BC until a true Persian kingdom was reestablished in AD 226, Zoroastrianism was dormant.
   2. The only impact was that some Roman soldiers are found worshipping the god Mithra; they spread this notion throughout Roman Empire. Mithra was seen as the supreme god that all other gods worshipped, symbolized by the “invincible sun”, and associated with truth and light.

M. The Sassanid Dynasty (AD 226-637):
   1. New dynasty formed in AD 226 and survived until Muslim conquest in 637 AD.
   2. Zoroastrianism flourished for four centuries though not in the pure form Zoroaster intended.
   3. It was in this period that the collection of Scriptures known as the Avesta was completed.
   4. This was the golden years of this religion.
   5. Ahura Mazda was now called Ohrmazd.
   6. Worst polytheistic influences were purged though some older secondary gods remained (Mithra, Asha, Vayu, and Verethragna).
   7. Lesser spirits were also acknowledged: Angels, evil daevas, and a collection of ancestral guardian spirits called the fravashis.
   8. Ohrmazd’s supremacy was never questioned.
   9. Tendency toward dualism:
      a. Angra Mainyu, now called Ahriman, also developed. In this period he was given a lot more power.... The power to create. For each good things Ohrmazd made, Ahriman made something bad. So, dualism began to develop.
      b. On a practical level, the battle between good and evil enlarged from moral plane to a spiritual plane. Living the Truth and
avoiding the lie was not enough. It now becomes necessary to be protected from all potential evil influences in the world.
c. Thus, ceremonial purity and warding off evil spirits became necessary.

10. Ceremonial purity: Avoiding contamination from contact with an unclean object or person (e.g., touching a dead person).
11. The domain of daevas was particularly associated with corpses and with any part of a human body no longer connected to the living person (e.g., hair, nail clippings, etc).

N. Disposing of Corpses:
a. Mount corpses in a way that scavenger would dispose of them. In Iran they call them “towers of silence.” Walled open-air platforms of circular shape where vultures feed.

O. Warding off Daevas: The last component of the Avesta is the Vidvevat, a collection of spells intended to ward off the daevas and the defilement that they caused. The power of the spells lay in the proper recitation of them, and the spells became the content of their own ritual ceremonies. Chanting the phrase or sentence, called a manthra (Indian mantra) was considered a powerful weapon against Ahriman’s hordes.

P. Eschatology: (1) personal judgment after death; (2) coming of future prophets; (2) end of the world.

Q. Personal Judgment:
   a. When you die your soul spends 3 days sitting at the head of the body contemplating his or her deeds. This is a time of intense, agonized reflection.
   b. Soul of a good person is already being comforted by an angel while the soul of an evil person is already being tormented by demons.
   c. Then the soul must cross the Chivrat Bridge, which is essentially the blade of a sword. If the person was good, the blade flips onto its broad side and the soul crosses into paradise with ease; if the person was bad, the blade flips onto its sharp edge.
   d. The evil soul, already spooked by horrible apparitions, cannot keep its balance and falls into the torments of hell.

R. Eschatology: Zoroaster prophesied his coming:
   a. Coming would occur at beginning of final age of humanity which would last three thousand years.
   b. As each of the three remaining thousand-year periods closed, another prophet, Zoroaster's direct offspring, would make his
appearance. A legend developed that Zoroaster had deposited sperm into a lake, and in each of the predicted time periods, a pure virgin would bathe in the lake, become impregnated with Zoroaster’s sperm and give birth to his son, who would be the next prophet.

c. The three prophets, Ausheter, Aushetarmah and Saoshyant would lead the world in their age. Saoshyant would be presiding over the end of the world.

d. End of world will be a cosmic flood of hot molten metal. To righteous people it will feel like a bath of warm milk but for evil people, on earth and in hell, it will be absolute agony and torture. In the end all will be brought back to purity.

e. The wicked will survive, cleansed of all evil and retaining whatever good they possessed. Ahriman will be defeated for all time.

S. Two religious movements: Zoroastrianism had two offspring movements: Zurvanism and Manicheaism:

a. Zurvanism:
   i. Zurvanism sought to explain origin of evil.
   ii. Extreme dualism developed between Ohrmazd and Ahriman: equal in all respects (known as the twins) in origins and in power. This is genuine dualism.
   iii. Twins were offspring of god Zurvan. Zurvan, which originally meant, “time” came to mean the total space-time continuum.
   iv. Zurvanites worshiped Zurvan, the god of space-time, as their highest god, the father of Ohrmazd and Ahriman.
   v. Zurvanism Movement was eventually suppressed by orthodoxy.

b. Manicheaism:
   1. Began with prophet Mani.
   2. Mani lived in 3rd century BC.
   3. Persian Dualism developed into a dualism of spirit and matter.
   4. While traditional Zoroastrian dualism focused on distinction between good and evil in the realms of morality, spiritual forces, and ritual, Mani described the battle between spirit (good) and matter (evil).
   5. Spirit consists of light that is entrapped in the darkness of evil matter.
   6. God is the father of light.
   7. Soul yearns to be reunited with its source of light.
   8. It is related with Gnostic philosophy.
9. Augustine of Hippos was once a Manichaean.
10. Under Islamic rule, Manicheanism was given the official title, “Gabard” which means “infidels” or “unbelievers.

T. Zoroastrians self-designation is “Zardushtins or Iranis. It is estimated that they now number about 18,000. Most live outside of Iran and majority live in Bombay, India. In India they became known as the Parsis, the Persians. In America there are Parsi fire temples in Nairobi, Toronto, and Chicago.

U. Contemporary Zoroastrianism:

1. Survival of community and the propagation of its beliefs. It is a closed religion for it is tied to one particular ethnic group. Outsiders contaminate their faith.

2. Contemporary Zoroastrianism approximates ideas of the prophets:
   a. Ohrmazd is the only God
   b. All inferior deities are designed as archangels (yazdat) or angels.
   c. Ahriman is evil counterpart but not dualistic. He is not as powerful as Ohrmazd.
   d. Daevas are nothing more than low-level spirits.
   e. Rituals and worship services abound with symbolism.

3. Life cycle:
   a. Birth, puberty, marriage and death.
   b. When child is born a lamp is lit for light and fire is associated as a symbol for God.
   c. Lamp is traditionally fueled by butter which is suppose to last for three days.
   d. Thanksgiving ceremony s performed at child’s first birthday.

4. Navjot ceremony is performed at puberty whereby young people are initiated into Zoroastrian faith. Ceremony reaches its high point as child is invested with the sacred shirt (sudra) and the sacred belt (kusti); these are articles word throughout life.

5. Parsis are monogamous:
   a. Marriage is a religious rite and a social institution.
b. Weddings have both prayers and exorcisms.

6. In modern societies towers of silence are replaced with cremation.

7. Death marks the soul's entrance into the next life where it is judged on the basis of good and evil deeds performed in this life.

8. Daily Practice:
   a. Devotion to Ahura Mazda around the clock each day.
   b. Day is divided into five watches which constitute prayer periods.
   c. Prayers involve purification, untying and tying kusti belt and reciting certain passages from Avesta.
   d. Prayer is helpful when said in vicinity of water, perhaps facing the rising sun over the ocean.
   e. Evening prayers are traditionally said in front of the fire altar in home.
   f. Fire altar at home is a tiny sandalwood fire lit in honor of God.
   g. Follow Ahura Mazda’s commands with a high regard of moral standards.
   h. Abide by demands of ritual purity.
   i. No elaborate dietary standards.
   j. Contamination with ritually unclean substances is not terribly serious except for contact with corpses or carrion.

9. Temple Ceremonies: Known as Fire Temples which are extremely sacred with most of them completely closed to outsiders.
   a. Interior of temple is bare except for sacred precinct.
   b. Worshipers should attend every day though four times a month is an accepted minimum.
   c. Worship services consists of ceremonies performed by priests for benefit of whoever may be present.
   d. Routine temple attendance consists of entering, performing ablutions, approaching the threshold of sacred precinct barefoot, receiving ashes from the sacred fire on the eyelids and forehead, reciting a prayer and leaving.
   e. Two major ceremonies, Yasna and Videvdat, are performed in fire temples on a regular basis: Rituals can only be done by priests since they are extremely complex and demand perfection—the smallest deviation from the prescribed practice nullifies the ceremony.
   f. Priesthood is hereditary, descendants of the original magi. Only males in the line of succession are eligible for priesthood. Thus, priesthood is not celibate.
g. Yasna ceremony is a dedicatory service. Priests recite Avestan manthras. Priests consume haoma and certain bread. The elements are passed to the worshipers, who partake of them as a kind of communion service.

h. Videvat is part of the Avesta that consists primarily of instructions on how to guard against the daevas. A mistake in performing ceremony could have disastrous consequences because it is used in order to ward off evil spirits.

i. They follow 365 days, divided into 12 months of 30 days and a special five-day period before each new year.

j. Several feasts occur in the first month of the year (Farvardin).

k. New Year’s Day (No Ruz) is a major feast with solemn reflection and ends with joyful celebration.

l. Zoroaster’s birth is commemorated on the sixth day.

m. The nineteenth day is dedicated to the angel Farvardin, from whom the month is named (he is in charge of departed spirits). It is believed that ancestors return to their homes during this festival and special offerings are laid out for them.