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Neo-Zoroastrian Hellenism in 15th Century Byzantine Empire: The Case of George Gemistos Plethon

by

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"Indo-Persian Cultures: Their Character and Impact on Civilisation", is a fascinating topic indeed. There are of course many historical interconnections between Indian and Iranian cultures, and the discovery of the linguistic kinship between certain Indian and Iranian languages in the frame of the so-called Indo-European family of languages was a major breakthrough in our understanding of the history of religions in that part of the world. However, the quest for similarities always goes hand in hand with the discovery of differences.

When looking for something that, without any hesitation, can be classified as "Iranian", the name 'Zarathushtra' seems to be one of the very few options indeed, and in that case, a name is more than just a name. In spite of Jatendra Chatterji’s ideas on Rama as some sort of an Indian duplicate of Zarathushtra, it seems quite safe to say that there is no figure which can be neatly compared to Zarathushtra on the Indian side of what the organisers of this conference call the "Indo-Persian cultures". On the other hand, the text where the name 'Zarathushtra' is appearing for the first time, the Gathas, as is well known, shows some striking similarities to Indian, that is Vedic, texts. 'Gatha' is a familiar literary genre in ancient Indian literature, and the language of the texts in a way seems linguistically closer to many Indian writings than to later Iranian literature. However, as is equally well-known, at the very same time the Gathas demarcate the separation of what later came to be classified as 'Indian' or 'Iranian' respectively. The most emblematic instance of this demarcation are the daevas: As recent research has shown, one does not need to recur to the old idea of a religious ‘revolution’ of sorts in order to explain the rejection of the daeva in the Gathas. It seems that the different or rather opposing evaluation of the daeva ultimately go back to the formation of separate religious identities in the 'Indian' and 'Iranian' branches: The devaluation of the daeva seems to be characteristic for the 'Iranian' side on the whole. With the Gathas, however, a new dominating deity is emerging, Ahura Mazda, and Zarathushtra is depicted as his close ally.

More than not having no counterpart on the Indian side, Zarathushtra seems to have been markedly ignored by later Indian writers. This was not so in the West. Under a number of Greek names, most well-known being 'Zoroaster', Zarathushtra became a familiar figure in Greek and, in a Latin version of his name, later also in Latin literature. As such he was even incorporated in the Medieval Christian world, and he appears in quite a number of texts written by Christians in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the Medieval Latin texts up to the 15th century the stereotype-image of 'Zoroaster' is constructed out of at the most 11 components which can be
varied or made use of in different ways: Zoroaster was identified with a progeny of Noah, he was perceived as a Bactrian king, who had fought a war against Ninos and who had lost his life in the course of this war. According to these texts, Zoroaster had invented magic and the cult of fire. Moreover, again according to these traditions, he had composed two million verses and written down the liberal arts on 14 columns. Presumably he had wanted to present himself as a deity and was burnt by a demon whom he had excessively consulted. At birth he was laughing, and the Christians perceived that as a bad omen.⁵

Most of these informations of course were remnants of traditions from antiquity. Some of them actually seem to be distant and to a larger or lesser extent polemically reworked echoes of earlier cultural encounters between Zoroastrians and members of other religious groups. However, not only the Latin Church was entering into the heritage of late antiquity but also the Greek Churches, Byzantium, the second Rome, in particular. In Byzantium, moreover, we come across a new interest in Zoroaster to which I would like to devote these pages. It is connected to the name of George Gemistos Plethon and shortly afterward it led to a ‘renaissance’ of Zoroaster in the West. Now, who was Gemistos?⁶

George Gemistos was born sometime between 1355 and 1360 in Constantinople which at that time still was one of the major cultural centres of the world and one of the most important transit points between Europe and Asia. Gemistos passed away almost a century later, in 1454, one year after the city of his birth had seen its last and unsuccessful defence against the Ottoman Turks. At that time George Gemistos was living at Mistras where he had settled as a teacher of philosophy and counsellor to the local ruler a couple of decades earlier. In 1438 George Gemistos was invited to attend the union council of the Western and Eastern Churches at Ferrara and Florence in Italy. There he seems to have adopted the name ‘Pletho’, signifying nothing else than ‘Gemistos’, that is ‘full’ or ‘complete’. The name ‘Pletho’, however, obviously is an allusion to the name of two famous philosophers whom he considered to be his predecessors: Plotinus and Plato. In a way, this choice of name illustrates his claim to ‘complete’ this philosophical tradition.

Pletho wrote a couple of treatises which established him as one of the most important philosophers of his age. More ill-reputed than reputed is one of his writings which he was working on for several decades but which was never spread in its entirety during his lifetime. However, obviously, certain rumours about that book were already spreading. Thus, Scholarios, one of Pletho’s adversaries, in a treatise directed against one of Pletho’s writings, states that several people had reported to him that Pletho was propagating new laws and that his unpublished work was impregnated with ‘Hellenic’, that is ‘pagan’, ideas.⁷

As a matter of fact, the work in question was entitled Book of Laws, in that way at the same time alluding to one of Plato’s most famous writings. Obviously, Scholarios found Pletho’s Book of Laws that ‘pagan’ in character that he, when asked his opinion by the wife of the
last reigning despot of Mistra, suggested that it be destroyed and, in order to prove that this
decision was well-founded, to preserve only some parts of the book, in particular the table of
contents, the beginning and the end.  

At the beginning of the book, Plethon is concerned with the divergences in opinions about
the most important things among mankind. Thus, the problem arises as how to find an universally
accepted path to truth. For Plethon, used to thinking in terms of philosophical systems attributed
to certain master-philosophers, this question amounts to finding the leaders to the best teachings.
Plethon himself opts to choose a number of leaders. Among them one finds no one from the
Judaean-Christian tradition, but rather a whole bunch of ancient Greek philosophers and a couple
of non-Greek sages, such as the Brahmins. The ideas of all these teachers are in harmony with
each other, and according to Plethon it stands as a hallmark of wise men, contrary to the Sophists,
always to emulate the ancient teachings instead of running after the latest fashions. First in
Plethon’s list of wise men stands “the most ancient of the lawgivers and wise men who is known
to us”, Zoroaster, who, according to Plethon, in a supreme way, had emerged as the interpreter
of the gods and most other things among the Medes, the Persians and other ancient nations
of Asia. 

The appendix to the Book of Laws which obviously was copied independently from the
other chapters, presents a kind of a summary of its main theological, cosmological and
anthropological ideas. Many of Plethon’s teachings such as on the eternity of the world, the
pre-existence of the souls and the participation of minor deities in the act of creation are rather
non-Christian or even outright anti-Christian in character. This corresponds to the non-Christian
genealogy of the supreme teachers. Plethon looks upon Zoroaster as the oldest of these teachers.
Accordingly, all these teachers are ultimately to be traced back to Zoroaster. This is not because
Zoroaster had personally introduced all these teachings, but since they are as old as creation
they had been preserved by all those who had acted according to those general principles which
God himself had planted into the human souls. According to Plethon, Zoroaster’s teachings
were more accurate that any other’s and at the same time correspond to the ‘national tradition’,
thus implying that Zoroaster ultimately was of Greek nationality. In his appendix, Plethon
explicitly states that one should follow Zoroaster’s teachings because they alone hold out the
prospect of purest blissful happiness due to every human being. All the other teachings, on the
contrary, that deviate from the teachings of Zoroaster and his followers from Plato down to
Plethon, also swerve from blissful happiness, and the more they deviate from it the more they
approach unhappiness, ignorance and deepest darkness. 

In a way, Plethon is to be considered as the founder of a neo-Zoroastrian, Hellenic religion
consisting even of a new calendar and new rituals. However, this religion was quite a private
affair. Apart from his Book of Laws, there are no traces of any attempts on Plethon’s side to
spread his religion. However, if one of his worst enemies is to be believed, Plethon had prophesied

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that the whole world would adopt one religion in the future. Asked if this would be Christianity or Islam, Plethon is reported to have replied: "None of them, but one which is not diverging from paganism." Moreover, again according this enemy, before his death Plethon in public had announced that both Christ and Mohammed would fall into oblivion and the 'whole truth' would appear on earth.\textsuperscript{11}

Probably during the last years of his life, Plethon wrote a profession of faith in twelve articles. Possibly that text served as sort of a summary of his \textit{Book of Laws}. The text is entitled \textit{Condensation of the Teachings of Zoroaster and Plato}. Plethon claims that everybody who wants to be as wise as possible and who wants to deserve the title of a wise man must believe in these twelve articles. Again, the content of these teachings is far away from a traditional Christian confession. Thus, for instance, consistently he is talking about 'gods’ in the plural. Moreover, destiny is perceived as a powerful agency instituted by Zeus and guaranteeing his conviction that the gods can never be the originators of evil. The universe is thought of as being eternal, like the human soul which at the same time is perceived as immortal and similar to the gods. In short, no traces of Christian 'monotheism' of 'trinitarianism', no allusion to Christian ideas of salvation and cosmological history.\textsuperscript{12}

Plethon’s neo-Zoroastrian and at the same time neo-pagan or neo-Hellenic programme has not had any real consequences, even if it left some traces. Plethon, however, contributed to the renewal of Zoroaster in European history in that he attributed an obscure text from late antiquity to Zoroaster’s successors, the Magi. The text in question are the so-called Chaldean Oracles which were quoted by some philosophers from the 3rd to the 5th centuries CE as a revelation of the highest sort. They seem to be part of the same religious and intellectual world as the Gnostic and Hermetic texts and the so-called Middle-Platonic authors. In Byzantium, later on, the Chaldean Oracles were gaining a new importance. That is illustrated by the fact that Michael Psellus, the most important Byzantine thinker of the 11th century, was dealing with these Oracles in three of his writings, among these an extensive commentary.\textsuperscript{13}

It has been discussed if the Chaldean Oracles were containing Zoroastrian ‘traces’ or even ‘influences’. After an initial enthusiasm a more sceptical attitude has rightly been assumed in the last ten years or so: similarities seem to be more apparent than real.\textsuperscript{14} However, the very fact that the connection to Iran has been made, is more than the usual pan-Iranian passion of certain scholars, but might ultimately lead back to Plethon who had prepared an edition of the Chaldean Oracles, entitled \textit{Magical Logia of Zoroaster's Magi}. Here the connection to Zoroaster and the Magi was made for the very first time. Moreover, Plethon wrote both a commentary and a brief explanation to these Oracle, and it seems that he articulated his philosophy as it later was explained in his \textit{Book of Laws} initially as a commentary to these \textit{Magical Logia}. For instance, in the initial paragraphs of his commentary to the \textit{Magical Logia} he states that it had been the teaching of Zoroaster’s Magi and many others that the souls in certain cycles were
migrated from Shiraz to India in the 16th or 17th century. The popularity of Azar Keivan and his group among the Parsis in the 19th century together with the activities of the Theosophical Society seem, to a certain extent, to have stimulated the origin of a new form of Zoroastrian mysticism which is linked to the name of Ustad Saheb Behramshah Shroff.¹⁹ However, that is a different story.
Notes

10. Alexandre, Pléthon, pp. 240-256; Stausberg, Faszination Zarathushtra, vol. 1, pp. 73-75.
19. The connection between Khshnoomi ideas with the writings of the Azar Keivan-group merit further research.

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