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Clash of the Religions: a Reflection on the Legacy of Hellenism and Zoroastrianism

If you spend enough time in an English classroom it is almost inevitable that at some point will wind up reading, or at the very least studying, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Classic works of literature and history, they tell the story of a victorious Greek hero as he faces trials and tribulations sent by the gods of his universe. The Grecian war that inspired the tale of Odysseus has been told so many times that it has become something even a modest lover of myth can recognize. There was however, another conflict, one which held the fate of the legacy for two of the first Great Empires, Persia and Greece.

One side brought the power of a new concept known as “democracy,” and the other brought the strange idea that there was only one god to worship in the universe. Though the Greeks would ultimately “win” from a military perspective when the forces were engaged in direct conflict with each other, the embers of this conflict would continue to spark through the centuries, culminating in a modern society containing traces of both empires, and forever locked in a battle between government and religion.*

In order to understand the conflict that exists between the Persian and Greek legacies, it is first necessary to examine a different relationship: the relationship between the Babylonian and

* Due to limited resources on this topic this paper will rely on two comprehensive sources, a documentary on the history of Athens and a coursebook following the development of the major western religions.

the Israelite nations, which paved the way for the events to come. In 587 B.C.E. the Israelite kingdom fell to the invading Babylonians, who in addition to destroying their temple and leaving a large hole in the culture of their religion, also carried off their leaders into exile. The holes left behind by this tragedy for the culture of the Israelite community and the systematic abduction of their leaders set the stage for an interesting transformation (Ludwig).

Babylon was in turn conquered by King Cyrus of Persia, who allowed the Jewish refugees to return home in 538 B.C.E, however 50 years of exile had taken their toll on both those taken from the land and those who had been left behind. In addition to power struggles, the community faced the cultural reality of no longer having a homogeneous population. In the time since the fall of their kingdom they had intermarried with the native populations, and though such marriages were thrown aside by the priest Ezra, and “pure” practice was again established (Ludwig 104) the reality was that the religion had changed, and would continue to change with a few notable features. The first and arguably most important feature of this new religion of Judaism was the fact that it was portable, unlike most major religions (Ludwig 105) of the time (including Hellenism.) It did not depend on the existence of a temple or official holy centers, just the community of people around it, since religious learning was accomplished through study. The second important feature was that it had a certain amount of acceptance as a powerful unit by the larger government. Since the state religion of Persia was Zoroastrianism, which is monotheistic, it is a reasonable supposition that the two cultures would have been able to share ideas more readily between each other than they would have been able to had either of them been polytheistic. A third important feature of this religion was that while there were numerous attempts to crush it, it refused to die. Instead it seemed to grow stronger.

The Greeks were, in contrast, a thriving and independent state when they first had to deal

with Persia attack. The City of Athens was growing prosperous after its choice to become the world's first democratic state, and the Persians were concerned that it posed a threat to their Western territories. After loosing on foot at the battle of Marathon, the Persians attacked again a generation later with an even larger army, only to find that the Greeks were organized and had invested in a powerful navy which beat them at sea. Sullen and defeated, the Persians had to settle for taking their revenge later in supporting the Spartans in their war with Athens, which eventually crushed the city-state's dream of a empire spanning the Mediterranean. The city transformed into something else instead, concentrating on a new and important export: philosophy (The Greeks).

A significant amount of animosity was passed down through the generations on both sides of the Persian war. Persia was still around, no doubt suffering headaches from the fact that it did not control the whole of the Mediterranean as it faced growing pressure from the East. On the other side of the war, even though Athens had been humbled by their defeat, the state was still proud and carried some interesting ideas about how governments should run and how people should think. These ideas eventually caught the attention of a new player with its sights on world domination: Rome. Rome inherited much of Grecian culture, adapting much of the Grecian Pantheon, and basing its government off of democracy until being overwhelmed by Julius Caesar (Greeks).

Eventually Rome conquered much of the former Persian empire, including the homeland of the Jews. Here they took over the role as masters of the territory which included control over religion. Though Jews were technically allowed to practice their religion they were forced to submit to the authority of Hellenistic-leaning leaders (Ludwig). Hellenism's polytheism was a direct contradiction to the Jewish belief in one god, making Jewish culture in the Empire a

breeding ground for decent. It took the establishment of a new religion from a sect of Judaism for that conflict to boil over.

This new religion: Christianity, was formed at a very critical moment in theological and philosophical history. Because of its liturgical connection to Judaism it inherited many Zoroastrian views (in addition to the belief in one god.) Some of these views include: dualism between good and evil, and the work of the one god occurring through other divine powers (a Zoroastrian idea that shows a striking resemblance to certain understandings of how God works in the human world.) (Ludwig) In addition to this, Christianity also incorporated principles of Hellenistic philosophy, taking the dualism concept to include a dualism between material and spirit, as well as emphasizing the power of individuals in accomplishing deeds of faith in an almost Greek and Roman way, the stories of the early saints and martyrs almost heroic in the classical sense. In some cases it melded principles of both cultures, as was the case with the ultimate form the Roman Catholic church chose for organizing power. At the top of church hierarchy was one man appointed for life by a counsel of cardinals. Here we can see elements of both cultures: election from the Greeks, with one dominate leader for life from Persia.

The early church did however reject some interesting ideas from both the Zoroastrian legacy and the Greek legacy that paved the way for later conflict. From the Zoroastrian legacy it rejected the strict sense of purity from life to death in favor of a stronger focus on missionary work, which instead emphasized “living the good life” after conversion. This strong missionary value was likely a necessity for the survival of the church in hostile lands. As a minority, and a particularly popular scape-goat for the Roman Caesars, they would not have been able to rely on reproduction alone to extend their numbers enough to reach critical mass, as the Jewish people had been able to do. Instead they focused on conversion, which is ironically more Hellenistic

than Zoroastrian. This plan worked, and it worked so well that eventually Christians were able to convert a Roman Emperor and inherit the very institution which had tried to annihilate them (Ludwig). From the Greek legacy, the Christians also leaned away from the Greek *philosophical* emphasis of questioning the world, and the people, around them. As time wore on this led to power abuses within the institution and eventually caused a major split the church, and along with liturgical disputes, has helped to feed the creation of new sects in the religion.

While the lineage of Christian viewpoint contained roots of both Greek and Persian thinking, there was still a serious power imbalance brought on by the ideals that were rejected, namely a structure that encompassed checks for bias, and a systematic way for ideas to spread with as little bloodshed as possible.

It is arguable that this check has come in the form of modern democracy. While even the name “democracy” screams its roots in Athenian culture, as do the practices it encompasses whereby an individual citizen can have indirect say in the laws that govern them, the reality is that this governmental form is far different than its original incarnation in the Greek life. Consider certain famous phrases from the founding documents of the United States: “We hold these truths to be self-evident” “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union” these statements echo three of the seven Amesha Spentas of Zoroastrian faith: Truth, Good Purpose, and Perfection (Ludwig 85). These documents go on to list several additional values which they view to be essential for effective government. While Greeks no doubt saw value in tying themselves to good principles their government was also rooted first and foremost to the task of pleasing their gods. To Athenians the most dangerous sin a person could commit to was hubris, thinking that you were equal to or above the gods. Another phrase from the Declaration of Independence makes it quite clear that early Americans were not bound by this same submission:

“to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of Nature's God entitle them.” In Athenian society there were definite rules about what you could and could not do, but you were never “entitled” to anything from their higher powers, and you most certainly could not assume the powers of the earth.

The theological question of how much religion should be a force in politics is a question with as many answers as there are people alive. However, beliefs on what religion and politics should accomplish often overlap, creating situations where ideas float between them. This has been seen in the legacies of Persia and Greece. That long ago war which held the fate of control over Mediterranean was hardly the last battlefield for their two ways of thinking. The two empires' contrasting ideas have shown a propensity for evolution and a strong prevalence to emerging in cultures where the opposite view is dominate. While much meaningful progress has been lost due to fighting over these viewpoints, this cyclical reemergence makes one wonder if the two warring forces are the way things are meant to be, whether they provide the best battle grounds for understanding in a world that is far from the purity of purpose and action admired in both cultures. One thing is certain, the countless re-framing of ideas has provided people of every era and identity a context for improvement and while these lenses may show flaws to an outside observer, they are constantly adjusting, showing a collective human desire to be better and to grow. This is a worthy purpose for us all.

Sources

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