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Laina Farhat-Holzman. *Strange Birds From Zoroaster's Nest*

Walter Benesch

Matthew Melko

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**Laina Farhat-Holzman. *Strange Birds From Zoroaster's Nest*.
Nonetheless Press, 2003 (reprinted from Oneonta NY, Oneonta
Philosophy Studies, 2000)**

Farhat-Holzman is deliciously blunt when she discusses her purpose in writing *Strange Birds from Zoroaster's Nest*: she wants to trace the ways in which this early religion, Zoroastrianism, affected the major religions that followed it. At the same time, she is clearly aware of the difficulties involved in such an undertaking. These range from questions of translation and interpretation of both written and oral traditions, to questions of dates, times, and events. She makes it clear in her introduction that there is considerable agreement as to the influence of Zoroastrianism and its heresies upon Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, she suggests that there is less agreement on the "how" and "how much" among theologians and historians of religion, who disagree on how to translate (what are believed to be) his prayers, on the meaning of his ideas, and on how much to rely on later documentation concerning Zoroaster.

The titles of the eleven chapters clearly indicate that Dr. Farhat-Holzman takes what one might call an evolutionary approach to "religion" as a spiritual aspect of human societies, and then within this context uses Zoroastrianism as an illustration of her "evolutionary thesis."

Chapter I, "The Mystery of Human Religion," and Chapter II, "The Common Stream of Human Religion," both explore the role of all religions in providing meaning and purpose to human existence. In the need to attribute meaning to human experience, Farhat-Holzman believes, there is enough commonality to consider religion as a characteristic of the species.

Chapter III, "Beyond Priests and Human Sacrifice—Human Responsibility," and Chapter IV, "Good and Evil: No Shades of Gray," focus upon the ethical functions of religions and the ways in which they emphasize social responsibility. Religion moves the human heart, alters behavior and changes minds; but eventually it provokes self-righteous cruelty. Religion relates action to the inexplicable, the most common action being somehow to propitiate supernatural powers, often with evil consequences, such as the sacrificing of people to prevent or terminate natural occurrences. Zoroaster, however, perceived human behavior as the principal source of human misery, and this view has been carried ever since by ethical prophets of various religions. But the majority of people in all religions seem to have been obsessed more by demons than

influenced by ethical prophets; most hope for justice in the hereafter rather than in the society in which they live.

Chapter V, "Unforeseen Consequences – The Transformed Message," and Chapter VI, "State Religion: The Kiss of Death," although focusing upon Zoroastrianism, expand beyond it in its analysis of the institutionalization of religions in political structures as a religion's prophet and founder is followed in time by others who are less concerned with the founder's message and more concerned with its application in a "transformed vision."

As for pattern, Farhat-Holzman perceives every subsequent religion to have followed the course of Zoroastrianism: a burst of insights from the founder, a struggle to collect followers, eventual absorption by the state leading to the antithesis of what the founder seemed to intend. All the ideas of Zoroaster and his creative successors were ultimately subverted by institutionalization, leading to ritual, rules, misogyny, propitiation. Moreover, Farhat-Holzman thinks, people are inherently conservative, comfortable with old habits, "no matter how stupid." For example, Zoroaster and his successors—Moses, Jesus and Mohammed—included women among their early followers—e.g. a Central Asian Queen, Miriam, Mary Magdalene, Khadija. But once the new religion gained acceptance, male domination returned and, though Zoroaster and his successors granted or assumed free will for women, they were recurrently deprived of their right to assert it. They were denied learning, perceived as polluting, and regarded as property.

Chapter VII, "The Role of Zoroastrian Heresies," Chapter VIII, "Zoroastrian Concepts in World Religions," provide an excellent discussion of the contributions of Zoroastrianism and the heresies that arise within it, e.g., she credits Zoroaster with introducing the concepts of the one God of the universe, the struggle between Good and Evil, (incidentally introducing Satan, devils, angels, paradise, hell and the millennium) along with ecological reverence and, most important, human responsibility.

While these influences may have universal application, Farhat-Holzman focuses on those of Western Asia and North Africa, particularly Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zoroaster said there was one God, Ahura Mazda, who created the universe and gave humans free will, hence introducing the concept of human responsibility. He saw human action as the source of most evil and human misery or contentment. For a minority, this insight transformed a protection racket into a process of self-awareness. Ever since, the warding off of evil through propitiation

has been balanced by the gradual development of self-awareness and conscious ethical behavior. And ever since, monotheism has been challenged

Chapter IX, "Zoroaster's Mark on the Secular World," Chapter X, "The Modern Dilemma – a World Religion," and the Epilogue, "The Future of Religion," provide a thoughtful attempt to see the influences of the Zoroastrian vision as it spreads beyond religion into all aspects of life in the modern world. Particularly interesting in this section of the book is the author's use of contemporary materials from newspapers and public events and speeches to demonstrate her points. These modern examples provide a fascinating sense of immediacy to the book!

Finally, according to Farhat-Holzman, one of the most interesting aspects of Zoroastrianism was its "millennial side." The day of judgment would come in 6,000 or 9,000 years, at any event, not for a long time. However, ever since, Farhat-Holzman says, groups have been in search of significant looking millennial dates.

Prof. Farhat-Holzman has certainly achieved the goals that she set for herself in the opening chapters, and in the process produced a most readable and valuable insight into many of the problems confronting religion in the 21st Century.

——Walter Benesch and Matthew Melko