

REDISCOVERING ANCIENT BONDS BETWEEN CIVILISATIONS

It is important to understand the historic and cultural background of the three major religions 'of the Book' whose roots are sunk deep into the turf of polytheistic, Eurasian cosmologies. The differences between polytheism and monotheism are thus found to be less fundamental than is commonly held, in spite of their wide socio-political and cultural consequences.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern theories of world history admit, almost without exception, the traditional ethno-cultural divisions drawn by the great archeologists, philologists and religious historians of the last three centuries. The rediscovery of the common Indo-European heritage in the wake of the 'age of enlightenment' led Western scholars to conclude that four major civilisational families shared the stage of the 'old' 'Afro-Euro-Asiatic' world, to wit the Semitic, the Indo-Aryan or Caucasian, the Central Asian Sino-Mongol and the Chamitic African. This fourfold division offered the advantage of remaining compatible with the biblical account of postdiluvial history according to which the three sons of Noah, Sem, Japhet and Cham shared the world between their descendents, which included Magog, commonly regarded as the ancestor of the Turks and the Chinese (the land of Gog). The precolonial American peoples were and are still held to be the offspring of Asian settlers migrating across the vanished Behring landbridge. Some even

saw a correspondence between the *Old Testament* story and the threefold division of Indo-European society described by Dumézil, among 'oratores' (priests and teachers: the Semites), 'bellatores' (warriors and rulers: the Japhetites) and 'laboratores' (the proletarian Chamites).

From the eighteenth century, the universal supremacy of Western nations induced many of their subjects to assume that the European race was destined by providence to lord over the rest of mankind and usher in an age of material progress leading up to a state of physical, cultural and spiritual perfection amounting to an earthly prefiguration of the promised heavenly bliss. Such an idealistic vision was primarily nurtured by utopian reformers and economists but secular versions of that eschatological theory visibly inspired early liberal, socialist and racist-nationalist doctrines which shared its philosophical core belief.

An effect of the rediscovery of the so-called Indo-Germanic shared cultural legacy in the nineteenth century was to remind Europeans that they were the children of a cross between 'aryan' ethnic and cultural traditions (Indo-Persian, Graeco-Etrusco-Roman, Celtic, Germanic, Slavic et al.) and a Semitic biblical influence passed on through the Christian Revelation. The combination of Central Asian paganism and Judaic monotheism was seen by some of the leading minds of the time as a providential alchemy which only confirmed the special designs of God for his new chosen people: the (mainly Northern and mostly Protestant) Europeans. Some intellectuals however (such as Renan, Gobineau, Wagner and Nietzsche to mention only a few in a long line of putative 'neopagans' currently represented by the school of the 'Nouvelle Droite' in France) were of the opinion that the original strength and knowledge of the Aryan forebears had been diluted and otherwise negatively affected by the alien Judeo-Christian input. Europeans therefore had to restore the connection with their heroic 'Indo-Germanic' or Hyperborean origins. One may detect in that longing an echo of the inferiority complex long harboured by the Northern European 'barbarians', dominated and culturally colonised by the Roman conquerors and the oriental creeds the latter gradually adopted, but the atavistic fascination with the rediscovered glories of Vedic, Indo-Iranian protohistory was undoubtedly genuine and deeply felt. One finds evidence of that nostalgia in Colonel James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* and in the many books of the French diplomat and scholar Louis Jacolliot. Both men saw in India the mother or at least a blood-sister of ancient Europe and they sought

to support that belief with profuse if often disputed research. Even earlier, in 1774 the Scottish Lord Monboddo published his philological research articulating the conviction that Sanskrit was mankind's original language.

BIBLICAL COSMOGONY AND TRADITIONAL WESTERN CHRONOLOGY

For most of the first eighteen centuries of the Christian era, between the founding Church ecumenical councils and the 'age of enlightenment', Western nations accepted the authority of the biblical scriptures which asserted the spiritual and material precedence of Middle Eastern civilisation. The world

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was held to have been created 'ex nihilo' by a fatherly God (Yahveh-Jehovah-Adonai-Elohim) four thousand and four years before the birth of Jesus Christ. That single supreme God had formed and given life to the first human couple in the Mesopotamian region. Thus all humanity originated in Chaldea and no civilisation could claim to be older than six thousand years. If the Semites of the Near Eastern were the oldest people, their descendents the Jews were the chosen race within

which God's only son and Messiah had been born.

That theological frame of reference inevitably influenced all early Christian scholars of indology such as William Jones, Colebrooke, W W Hunter or Max Mueller in their attempt to establish a chronology for Vedic literature and history that would not contradict the hallowed biblical tenets. Since all peoples needs must have a Mesopotamian origin, the authors of the Vedas could not but have come into India from the West at a time considerably later than the Chaldean Genesis. Accordingly the date of 1500 BC for the Aryan invasion of India was ventured and adopted without any solid proof. Since the colonising Europeans did not really like to consider the possibility that the 'backward' land on which they had imperial designs might be a birthplace of civilisation, they found it convenient to believe that their own ancestors had come from

a mythical and misty Central Asian or Boreal home where the ruling brahminical and royal classes of India must also have originated. Thus Westerners could claim to have preserved the pristine racial and intellectual superiority of the common forefathers and thereby vindicate their conquest and domination of India and Asia. In that view they were merely writing a new chapter in the hoary saga of Aryan civilising invasions.

The growing evidence of very ancient contacts between the Near Eastern fount of European civilisation and the 'East Indies' presented a peculiar problem because of the colonisers' reluctance to give too much credit to a region whose modern subjection required that Western claims to moral and material superiority be upheld. Yet, many of the fathers of Greek philosophy and science, like Pythagoras and Democritus, were credited with Indian influences by classical sources and Hellenistic neo-platonic mystical doctrines were known to have been inspired by concepts brought to Antioch and Alexandria by Buddhist and Hindu missionaries and returning travellers. Some oriental religions, widespread in the late Roman empire, particularly Neo-Pythagoreanism, Manicheism and Mithraism, bore the marks of Indian mythology, theosophy and soteriology. There was little doubt that Christian mythology and eschatology, in its essentially Zoroastrian-Mithraic allegories, rites and liturgical mysteries owed a great debt to India and Iran while post-exilic, hellenicised Judaism, under Seleucid and later Roman hegemony, had been transformed by Babylonian, Assyrian, Mazdean and later Alexandrian inputs, as is apparent in the writing of Philo of Alexandria and in the religious texts of mystical sects such as the Essenes.

Some eminent theologians, like Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius attempted to dispute or reduce the importance of the Indo-Iranian contribution to Christology by pointing out the heretical or gnostic character of the 'Eastern' ideas but, apart from the established fact that certain dogmas and rites of both the Roman and Oriental Churches still bear an 'Middle Eastern' seal, one must remember how many heresies and heterodox doctrines flourished in some cases survive to our day side by side with ecclesiastical orthodoxy. Some scholars have detected possible Buddhist influences in the four canonic gospels and believe for example that Luke's mention of the birth of Jesus in a cave is a case in point.

Indologists in the nineteenth century found themselves in the horns of a dilemma; either they acknowledged the decisive significance of the 'Indo-

Aryan' heritage for Western civilisation and accordingly reduced the impact of the Judeo-Christian factor or, if they wanted to remain faithful to their religion, they had to keep the Indian spiritual role peripheral to the biblical tradition leading up to the New Testament Revelation as the central fact of history. That choice separated the neo-pagans from the Christians and thus a question that should have remained the preserve of dispassionate scholarship became heavily tainted with religious, cultural and racial politics as inevitably happens in all matters of wide and deep significance.

Nevertheless the facts unearthed during the last hundred years by archeology, the study of ancient languages and of comparative mythology together with our growing understanding of the Vedic and other Indian scriptures do not allow us to retain the version of early

history provided in the Jewish *Torah*. A large body of circumstantial evidence indicates that a great Eurasian civilisation, extending from the Atlantic ocean to the Indo-Gangetic plains and beyond to Indochina and the Malayan archipelago, may have flourished far earlier than the better known Near Eastern cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt which appear to have been seminally influenced by it. Such a probably multi-ethnic civilisation (or commonwealth of kindred, interrelated cultures) displayed original, unmistakable Indo-European (for lack of a better definition) features and exercised a still poorly understood but critical nurturing role in the formation of the peripheral, 'junior' Semitic, Finno-ugrian, Sino-mongol and Egypto-Chamitic cultures. Furthermore, many basic characteristics of the religions and sciences of those peoples appear to have been derived from that central civilisation. The word 'Aryan' is a very convenient common denominator because we find it prevalent from the extreme west of Europe (where 'Aire' is the old name for Ireland) to Central Asia where the Iranian Medes according to Greek sources were called 'Arioi'. 'Arya' is also the root of the Greek 'aristos' defining a hierarchy based on excellence or merit.

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Before attempting to conclude whether we can still speak of 'Semitic monotheistic revelation/revolution' in the light of emerging scientific data, let us glance at the picture that is emerging of the postglacial, postdiluvial period of early history between c.10000 and 2000 BCE.

GLIMPSES OF AN EURASIAN CIVILISATION

Our notions of the dawn of human civilisation are sketchy at best. They are rapidly being revised in the light of momentous discoveries, some of which come from the seabeds. Those findings indicate that large, well-planned cities existed nearly ten thousand years ago in various regions of Asia. A similar antiquity is sometimes attributed to some South and Central American monuments although those estimates are controversial. Providing specific information on this very rich subject exceeds the scope and purpose of this article but we may confidently assert that the civilisation of which we find evidence from at least 6000 BC did not suddenly emerge from a vacuum.

The extensive ruins of Mehrgarh in present day Pakistan and of Mahanagar and Kotlihua in Central India stand witness to the existence of a 'proto-Indus valley culture' some five thousand years BC. The so-called Indus Valley or Harappa-Mohenjodaro culture is now found to deserve the more accurate name of Saraswati culture, which encompassed much of modern eastern Iran, Afghanistan, southern Central Asia, Pakistan and India down to the Godavari river basin in the Deccan. In that vast region, thousands of sites, many deserving to be called towns, have been found, often thanks to satellite photographic techniques. The most probable cradle and a motherlode of that sprawling civilisation which evinces a striking artistic, scientific and political homogeneity, was the Drisadvati region around the now vanished Saraswati river to which Dr Kalyanaraman has dedicated a major work (vide his article in *World Affairs* of January-March 2002, Vol 6, No 1). There is every likelihood, short of a final proof so far, that it was indeed the original Indo-Aryan home called in the Vedas 'the holiest place on earth' and the 'land of (the goddess) Ila', a daughter of the patriarch Manu of the period of the Great Flood. At least some of the dwellers of that 'Saptasindhu' (land of seven rivers or seven oceans) were culturally Vedic and proto-sanskritic. Thence also Iranian or Medo-Persian culture was born and eventually gave rise outside India to the Zoroastrian reform, a heterodox offshoot of the Vedic religious lore from

which it separated earlier than Buddhism and Jainism. Additionally, it appears from epigraphic, mythological and artistic data that the earliest known civilisation of Mesopotamia, the Sumerian, was powerfully influenced by its Indian sea-trading partners and may well have been a colony of that larger and more ancient confederation from which it derived many of its basic, religious, political and economic features.

In this regard, we may mention for curiosity's sake that Anu, the chief god of the Sumerians and the lord of the Anunaki (the celestial gods) shares his name with one of the five sons of the legendary Vedic monarch Yayati, who fathered one of the five peoples of the Aryan world, all members of the lunar dynasty. The Anus resided in Punjab and Kashmir in north western India while the Sumerians claimed to have come from a mountain land (Kura Anatta) in the north-east.

The Sumerians in turn exerted a defining influence on the earliest Semitic peoples known, i.e. the Akkadians and the later Amorrites, Assyrians and Babylonians, also shaped, to a degree not fully appreciated hitherto by their Indo-Aryan neighbours, the Elamites, Hurrites, Kassites, Hittites, Urartians and Mittanians who eventually conquered them. Those waves of Eastern invaders preceded, in some cases by at least twelve centuries the most renowned Indo-Aryan empire founded by the Medo-Persians and culminating with the Achaemenid dynasty.

The pattern of westward migration of Indo-Aryan peoples into Asia Minor and the Mediterranean area is paralleled by the penetration of their mythology, language and culture into the Finno-Ugrian, Turkic, Celtic, Slavic and Germano-Scandinavian areas comprised between Korea and the British islands. Thus Ghirshman has traced Indo-Aryans in the lower Volga around 4000 BC and Harmatta, who proposed that Balts and Slavs parted ways with the Indo-Iranians in the first half of the fifth millennium, detected words borrowed from old Indo-Aryan (OIA) language in the Ural region as far back as 5000 BC while in China and Korea loan words appear during the third millennium before our era. The 'Aryanisation' of Eurasia would thus have begun before 4000 BCE, the period when many of the hymns of the Rig Veda were being composed, in the light of recent and authoritative scholarship, according to astronomical, glottochronological and archeological studies (cf. Greenberg (2001) and S S Mishra). On the other hand, traces of cultural and commercial contacts between South Asia, the Far East and the Pacific coasts of the Americas

go back at least to 700 BCE if we take into account Jomon Japanese ceramics unearthed in Peru and Indian tetraploid cotton identified in Mexico has been dated to three thousand years earlier (circa 4000 BC).

The *Puranas*, which enshrine some of the most archaic texts of sacred Indian literature contain many allusions to the spreading out of the Vedic peoples from India. Among those who migrated or were expelled by other Indian kings such as Sagara and Sudas we find various mention of the Parsus (Persians), Parthus (Parthians), Magas (East Iranians), Yavanas (worshippers of Yahvah who may have been the forbears of Greek Ionians), Sakas (Scythians), Kinaras (Tibetans), Cinas (Chinese), Sirmysus (Albanian Sirmians), Alinas (Hellenes), Kambojas and Druhyus (believed by some to be the original Druid celtic tribe).

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There are few alternatives to the conclusion that a widespread and advanced culture, of whose ‘lingua franca’ Vedic Sanskrit is the closest known relative, flourished between the Atlantic (C Renfrew (1990) has proven that West European megalithic graves go back to 3800 BCE) and Pacific oceans even earlier than the traditionally ‘initial’ civilisations of Iraq and Egypt which seem to have developed in its shadow. According to P Foster and A Toth (2001) the common ancestor of Indo-European languages existed ten thousand years ago and not six thousand, as assumed hitherto. There are many doubts now regarding the origins of Semitic languages, many of whose root words can be assigned to Indo-European sources, just as the Dravidian tongues of peninsular India are no longer held by all scholars (vide R S Aiyar) to belong to a non-Indo-Aryan family. We should clarify again that we are looking at cultural-linguistic families and not at races since the ‘Indo-Aryan civilisation’ was certainly shared by nations of diverse ethnic origins and compositions. That situation seems to be expressed in the Rig Vedic call: *karnavamto visvamaraya*: “let us make the whole world aryan!”

The connection of the pre-Colombian societies of the Americas with their Eurasian contemporaries is a subject of investigation and controversy. Research

may still yield momentous surprises but the evidence of age-old interactions between South Asia, the Middle and Near East, Turkestan, Siberia, China, Indochina and the Malay region (P K Manansala has revealed the important genetic links between south-east Asia and the Indian population and domesticated animals such as cattle and horses, which point to very ancient relations), should lead us to admit the possibility that those contacts may go back several millenia.

Much information in this field is presented by K D Sethna, A Seidenberg, S Talageri, G Feuerstein, S Kak, D Frawley and N Rajaram and other scholars in a series of books published mostly during the last three decades. In his monumental research published in 2001, J Greenberg has sought to establish the relationship of the Indo-European linguistic family with the wider Eurasian group that includes the tongues native to the Ural and Siberian regions as well as Korean, Japanese, Ainu, Turko-Mongol and Eskimo languages and dialects which all seem to share a common origin.

In that very wide context, the rise of the Semitic monotheistic religious tradition is not the intellectual revolution that bibliocentric history represents. In fact the Jews appear, in the light of archeological evidence, to have been a part and parcel of the local Chananean population from which they separated gradually, possibly under Egyptian colonial influence, as a result of the adoption of various hygienic (circumcision), alimentary (abstaining from pork) and ritual customs, according to the major research conducted by I Finkelstein and N A Silberman (2002). The early Hebrews remained polytheistic, worshipping various 'Elohim' (a plural noun which seems to translate the Sumerian 'Anunaki') and Baalim (or 'mountain gods' such as El Shaddai, Abraham's tribal tutelary deity). They erected and adored standing stones ('luz' or 'bethel') the equivalent of which is found in most faiths of megalithic age Eurasia including India where the 'linga' is originally a menhir-like monument.

Later Babylonian and Persian influences led the Israelites to turn those clanic or nature deities into angels or 'princes' without changing their hebraic names. Despite the henotheistic reform carried out at the royal court of Judah in the seventh century BC, the worship of various gods continued to be practised under the protection of a predominant thunder god known by the magical power-name of 'Yahveh', of Rig Vedic origin according to S Kak. That name incidentally is homophonous with the ecstatic shout of the Thracian worshippers of the Asian (Indo-Iranian) god Dionysos-Zagreus : 'Evoe' equated

by some Greeks with Pan, the lord and the embodiment of untamed nature and of the boundless cosmos. In other works, we have analysed a number of symbols, allegories and 'logia' found in the *Old Testament* evincing a kinship with the mythologies of the near and Middle East, some of which can be traced to the Vedas and the older sections of the *Mahabharata*.

The indebtedness of the *Torah* and other books of the Jewish canon to the sacred literatures of older Asian and possibly African religions does not reduce the likelihood that the *Bible* also left traces in other faiths, even in pre-Christian ages but, considering the admittedly late period in which the *Old Testament* was assembled and compiled (seventh–sixth century BC), it is bound to be more often the recipient than the inspirer.

Out of the material of sundry origins assembled in the Chaldeo-Egyptian crucible the Jewish spiritual heritage was formed and originally intended solely for the tribes of Israel. Even the Decalogue, regarded as the fundamental message from God to his people, was only meant for the children of Jacob. The other nations of the world are supposed to seek guidance from the more ancient laws of Noah according to Talmudic tradition. Yet the dissemination of the Mosaic community within the religiously syncretistic Roman and Parthian dominions resulted in the universalisation of its spiritual legacy under the impetus of Christianity, spread by the likes of Paul of Tarsus, a remarkable interpreter of the prevailing mystical symbols and mystery teachings of his day to the masses.

THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE RISE OF ISLAM

The triumph of the Church in the Roman empire brought about in that part of the world the hegemony of what may be described as a culturally Semitic world view in which the Judaic revelation, blossoming in the Christian incarnation was central. Therefore other religions, outside the Mosaic covenant, were held to be pagan errors, products of sinful ignorance, after the fall and prior to salvation.

An interesting parallel can be established between the traditional biblical teaching that all men spoke the same original language until they failed in the attempt to build the Babel tower, and the theological doctrine that Adam and Eve followed the true religion, if it was one, until they ate the forbidden fruit, thereby hurling themselves and their descendents into the abyss of sin from

which only the birth of Jesus rescued mankind, a redemption made manifest by his crucifixion and resurrection. Spiritual realisation finds its equivalent in the restoration of pristine linguistic unity demonstrated in a way by the apostles at the Pentecost when they were given the grace to 'speak in tongues'. From

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that perspective, the diversity of mankind must vanish into the primeval unity in the final process of return to the truth of the source.

Though the Christian soteriology and eschatology are essentially anagogical, tropological and mystical, they were and are generally given a historic, linear reading which leads to an interpretation of the human timeline that does not admit

relativism. In the Christian perspective the state of disgrace brought about the fall, the expulsion from Eden, deprived men, with the possible exception of the patriarchs in the line of Seth, to perceive and worship God in his completeness and perfection until the Eternal Father caused his only son to be born in the flesh on earth of a human mother, thereby revealing the perfection of the Trinity. Prior to that wondrous event, prophets and seers could only have discrete intimations, intuitions or foresights of the divine truth. The *Old Testament* tenet that "there is no salvation outside Israel" is echoed by the Christian statement: "Outside the Church, no salvation". As a result of the disciples of Jesus claiming to constitute the New Israel, the Jews were ostracised by the Church for refusing to recognise the Messiah that their very prophets had announced, and even more for causing the divine messenger's martyrdom. Most Bible-inspired cultures enshrine the ideological and material opposition between the followers of the two Testaments while fighting over a largely common heritage and thereby illustrating the well known fact that family feuds are always the bitterest even when the contenders are unequal. Jews and Christians could only agree on the belief that the other creeds are tainted with falsehood as they could not know of the true God. While Christians held, and are still supposed to believe, that they were imparted with the mission to save all men by converting them, Jews, assured of their special and separate place in the universe, were only told to expect the true messiah who would bring

his elected people together and presumably gather the rest of the world under his rule.

In the first six centuries following the advent of Christ, in a context dominated by syncretic judeo-hellenic messianism and during which elements derived from various spiritual doctrines were being gradually incorporated into the state-backed creed, the Imperial Roman Church was still struggling to impose the Nicene dogmas to many divergent heterodox theological schools that flourished at that time.

Inter-Christian rivalries and conflicts facilitated the rapid Islamic conquest of the Near East although socio-political and economic factors may have been even more significant in that process but there is no doubt that the new faith implied a rejection of many of the Indo-European 'Roman' ingredients in the synthetic environment of the empire's oriental half. Islam assimilated several elements derived from Hellenic and Iranian sources but they were thoroughly melded into the Semitic (Himyaritic and Judaic) tradition that underlies the *Quran* and the accompanying Hadiths and theological texts. Later attempts by the great Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic 'Falasifa' and 'Ishraqi' Arab and Iranian scholars (Al Kindi, Al Farabi, Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Sab'in) to endow the Islamic culture with a classical Greek foundation was not well accepted by the guardians of Muslim orthodoxy. A good instance of that hostility is provided by the eminent medieval theologian Muhammad Al Ghazali in his *Tahafut al Falasifa*, rebuked in turn by Averroes who was himself pronounced a heretic by the religious authorities of his day. The renowned French Islamic scholar Louis Massignon has described in various essays collected in his *Opera Minora* the periodic process of involution (back to its source) that Islam has gone through since its beginnings, mainly as a consequence of its imperative formulation and apophatic transcendence which brook little compromise or accommodation with history or geography.

Whereas Judaism seeks to survive and prevail until the expected victorious outcome, as a minority community in a relatively closed ethno-cultural system which utilises and interprets history in the perspective of its eschatological beliefs, Christianity endeavours to shape mankind according to a vision of social and technical progress leading up to universal salvation. Islam on the other hand points like a compass to the 'Qibla', the pole star of its revelation and sees ideological and social innovations as threats to the divine order it is sworn to uphold. The centripetal tropism of Islam may be rhetorically contrasted

with the centrifugal quest of Christian societies for what they believe is ever greater cultural and material well-being to help secure the gift of faith. Those two approaches may also be contrasted with the Israelite attempt to pierce the secret of the almighty maker by unlocking the treasure chest of material creation.

It is inevitably oversimplifying but revealing nonetheless to establish a parallel between the Judaic fascination with magical speculation and fundamental scientific research, the Christian penchant for technological progress, comforted by boundless confidence in God's kindness and the Moslem focus on defending monotheistic absolutism which incites its followers to uphold 'God's glory' above all and protect it from the encroachments of human scientific, artistic and industrial idolatry.

THE EXPANSION OF MONOTHEISM

Christianity and Islam are major offshoots of the Abrahamic Mosaic tree that have collected many leaves from the *Old Testament* and have spread, through their respective campaigns of conversion the fundamental concepts of Semitic cosmology and theology across the planet. Their competing universalist vocations have made them rivals throughout history. Both teach that, before the end of the world all men who don't embrace the true faith and cling instead to idolatry and heresy will be cast into hell. History, which began at a particular date with the creation of the world out of nothing by God, will likewise end at a given time on the final judgment. There are various versions of that panorama of the future but a common thread is quite visible, running from Genesis to Armageddon.

Such a timebound 'closed' perspective, first depicted in Zoroastrian eschatology, does not explicitly include the possibility that our world and our species may be only one out of many in time and space and in that way it is different from the world views familiar to most polytheistic traditions. The monotheistic linear cosmology is a direct source of inspiration for the Darwinian evolutionary theory which describes human beings gradually distancing themselves from their animal relatives and rising to increasingly advanced levels of social, intellectual and technological sophistication, up to the 'summum bonum' of redemption, as theorised by Teilhard de Chardin whose work reveals the hidden link between the apparently conflicting doctrines of monotheistic salvation and scientific evolution.

On political and cultural grounds it should be noted that the religion of Jesus cast its net and prospered at first within the Roman empire and later in the colonial lands conquered by the heirs of Cesar in the Americas and black Africa. The Muhammadan faith on the other hand expanded along the arc of land comprised in the Persian and Byzantine realms. Those two mighty polities, whose respective centres were Constantinople and Ctesiphon (present-day Baghdad) and whose cultures were essentially Indo-European, somehow seeded the terrain for the growth of the two predominant Semitic creeds.

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This review leads us to consider the fundamental question in inter-religious dialogue, the touchstone in the intercourse between civilisations, to wit what is the precise relationship between the monotheistic god: Adonai, Yahveh, Allah, 'Our Father' and the chief deities of the paleo and neolithic theogonies.

No objective scholar can deny the evidence that the Lord of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad wields the infinite and indefinite creative, nurturing and destructive powers designated through innumerable names such as Tien (heaven) in China or Brahman, Narayana, Shiva, Purusha and so on and so forth in India but the biblical God also has a specific identity which evokes the image of the "king and father of the gods" of ancient mythologies, figures like Indra or Prajapati in Vedic India, the Sumerian Enlil, the Egyptian Osiris, the Avestan Ahura Mazda, the Nordic Wotan or Zeus (Dyaus) and Jupiter of classical antiquity. In the Christian context the divine identity is assigned, in its filial theophany or hypostasis the attributes of the mystery gods of the Hellenic past, including Adonis, Orpheus, Dionysos-Apollo etc...By making the distinction between three persons in the divine entity, Christian theology managed to reconcile the age-old myth of the cyclically dead and reborn man-god with the icon of the eternal, immutable king of heaven which it connected through the hypostasis of the holy spirit, regarded by neoplatonists as the 'active intellect' and by certain gnostics as the female world soul.

Indeed the main difference between monotheistic and polytheistic creeds perhaps lies in that the former forbid the worship of anyone but God himself,

though they generally accept and even encourage the veneration of many other masculine and feminine personalities credited with varying degrees of saintliness or even divinity (as in the case of the Virgin Mary whose name interestingly is Indo-Aryan, 'Marya' meaning 'lord' in Sanskrit). To an attentive observer

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of religious phenomena, between the worship of a Hindu deva or rishi, Buddha or Bodhisattwa and the devotion to a madonna, archangel, prophet or saint there is a difference of degree and not of essence. The debt of the Semitic creeds towards their polytheistic predecessors is so extensive as to make it difficult to define, profound and multiple as the disagreements may be at the sociological and historic levels. We may observe that Semitic monotheistic religions seem to enshrine fragments picked up and

isolated from a wider 'Indo-Aryan' cosmo-mythological and eschatological context.

What then are the differences? Do they stem from the fact that Christianity and Islam, in the wake of Judaism are exclusive and strive to eradicate the other religions and their deities instead of co-mingling with the former and adding the latter to their own as non-revealed cults traditionally do?

On the surface that rift exists because even the Mazdean reform ushered in by Zarathustra, which shares at least some of the features of a revealed faith, is far more exclusive than its Indo-Iranian 'Vedic' motherlode. However the claim that only certain beliefs came through revelation is disputable because every known creed harks back to one or several 'revealers'. Thus the first emperors of China, Lao Tzu, the rishis and the *avatars* of India, Osiris, Ptah or Thoth of Egypt, Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan in pre-Columbian America may be compared to Abraham, Moses, Zarathustra, Christ and the Prophet of Islam because they all handed down a sacred knowledge or salvific mystery.

Christianity, born at the crossroads of post-exilic Judaism and Graeco-Syrian Hermetic esotericism consumed the fusion of Messianic eschatology

with the circadian mysteries of a seasonally dying and reborn son of the eternal virgin mother. Christ dispenses both the moral truth and a semantically 'magical' secret and gift: the power to personally save and redeem souls and bodies, demonstrated and activated in the eucharistic sacrifice of, and partaking in his flesh and blood. It should be kept in mind that the Mass is but a reenactment of the last supper which is symbolically and ontologically related to the 'theophagic' immolation ('purushamedha') illustrated in the Vedas and other archaic scriptures. Some elements of the christian liturgy seem related to the Vedic 'isti' (offering of barley cakes) while others evoke the Indo-Iranian pressing and consumption of the sacred juice of soma.

Without the sacrifice of the Saviour, Christianity would be merely an ethical doctrine of Hebraic inspiration. The revolutionary character of that religion lies not in its cultural essence which is shared by several other Eastern traditions but rather in its ambition, perceived as a mission, to spiritually and materially conquer humanity — despite the fact that "the Lord's kingdom is not of this world" — by replacing all other creeds. Its claim to enshrine the sole absolute truth is co-relative to the dogma of Jesus's divinity, not as A god or even as the second god in a supreme triad but rather as one of the indissociable aspects (hypostases) of the trinitarian Divine Being (ousia).

Though in its metaphysical dimensions, the trinitarian doctrine has several parallels in other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (cf. The Trimurti and The Trikaya), its literal, chronologically factual formulation sets it apart while remaining consistent with the linear, finite and deterministic world view of the *Old Testament*, subsequently inherited by Islam. Christianity has thus oscillated between the two poles of its intellectual sphere, between the iconoclastic, apophatic, transcendent monotheism of the latter Jews and the cyclical, symbolic, immanent theism of the pagans.

The theologian Van de Pol has pointed out in his book *The End of Conventional Christianity* that "the first contact with non-Christian religions can provoke in the believing Christian such a shock that it may lead him to indifference, relativism or insecurity". He further explains that this trauma is of two kinds, that which is caused by the discovery of similarities between his faith and others and that caused by the divergences between them and he warns: "this commotion awaits every Christian in the future since encounters and dialogue are unavoidable in the long run". Similar problems confront the followers of the other two religions of the 'book' unless they admit that the

revelations with which they were blessed are not as exclusive as they have been made to believe. Historically it is more than probable that these now demographically and politically predominant faiths were in existence, at least in a hazy and latent form, much before their formal appearance. Thus, much of the Christian doctrine is perceptible in the apocalyptic and ascetic forms of Judaism which blossomed in the various communities of Palestine, Syria and Egypt under the Seleucid, Lagid and Roman dynasties. Likewise Islam was foreshadowed by certain doctrines practised in Pre-Muhammadan Arabia and influenced by Hebrew, Mazdean and gnostic Christian teachings.

THE EVOLVING RELIGIOUS SCENE

From the seventeenth century AD at least, the Christian societies asserted their predominance all over the world while the great empires of the Orient, China, Iran, India and the Turkish realm entered a long period of decline. Since all Western powers shared religions based on the Mosaic revelation as interpreted in the new Testament and since their only rivals for global

The debt of the Semitic creeds towards their polytheistic predecessors is so extensive as to make it difficult to define, profound and multiple as the disagreements may be at the sociological and historic levels. We may observe that Semitic monotheistic religions seem to enshrine fragments picked up and isolated from a wider 'Indo-Aryan' cosmo-mythological and eschatological context.

supremacy were Muslims who also held an Abrahamic creed, the claim to moral and spiritual superiority of the biblical heritage found unprecedented historic justification and it in turn supported the Jews' conviction of playing a central and providential role in the divine plan for mankind. The foretold Apocalyptic descent of the celestial Jerusalem amounted to a prefiguration of Zionism. The '*End of Time*' which closes the linear Semitic chronology seals the abolition of the cyclical cosmogonies of polytheistic civilisations and holds the key to the Judeo-Christian

interpretation of history. Since all prophesies can become self-fulfilling when

enough people put faith in them, it should not come as a surprise that the recent past and present are studded with signs announcing the expected Doomsday which some of the decision-makers of the world's sole superpower seem bent on ushering in by actions reflecting their deep beliefs.

The twentieth century was the theatre of tragic happenings which have also become a part of the new allegorical mythology now being built, mostly based on the successive Semitic revelations. The detention and killing of large number of Jews by the Nazis in Germany, the foundation and trials of the State of Israel and more recently the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 in America are being gradually invested with a semi-theological status. While the vast majority of the Jews and Christians do not share those apocalyptic convictions, held silently or openly by a relatively large number of biblical fundamentalists, it is very possible that these beliefs will influence decisively the evolution of mankind in years to come. The

central conflict of our age is clearly the one which opposes Christians, Muslims and Jews and casts its widening shadow over the other, non-Abrahamic civilisations that often appear to be observers or 'supporting cast' rather than play lead roles in that major confrontation which has been taking place in various stages at least since the period of the European Middle Ages.

In this respect, it is revealing that nowadays merely quoting certain chapters or verses of the *Old Testament* is punishable by law on charges of incitation to violence and racial hatred, as a well publicised case in Canada has recently shown. The perceived incompatibility between certain fundamental aspects of the Semitic religions and modern secular values has the potential of generating an acute crisis of identity, not only among Muslims or Jews because the warlike statements of the biblical Lord of Hosts may be used as justifications for or calls to the religious wars that periodically involve members of the three

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faiths. We only have to quote a few of the many admonitions handed down to Israel by Jehovah in the Deuteronomy. Thus “On that day I shall put the fear of thy name upon nations... Thou shalt smite them and destroy them... Thou shalt make no alliance with them nor shalt thou have mercy on them. For the Lord thy God has chosen thee to be a special people above all people on the face of the earth” (2,25) or “... It is by and by that Yahveh thy God shall destroy those nations before thee: thou shalt not be able to exterminate them forthwith but Yahveh thy God shall deliver them thee and they shall remain exposed to great calamities until they be destroyed... No one shall stand before thee until thou hast eradicated them” (7,22-24). Somewhere else Yahveh is described in those pithy terms: “It is he who sayeth ‘Destroy!’”

A significant judaisation of Christianity is the inevitable result of the study of the *Old Testament* which is extensively practised, mostly in Protestant communities, with the Catholic Church tending to follow that trend under the pressure of ‘born again’ theological influence. The return to the Hebrew sources is revealed by certain suggestive statistics, such as the recent survey showing that 60 per cent of all North American males are circumcised within a few days from birth. A powerful Judeo-Christian fundamentalist constituency in the United States, well represented at the highest level of the Republican Party, embraces a ‘Zionist’ eschatological doctrine, going so far as to advocate the replacement of the Constitution by the *Old Testament*. President Bush himself is regarded as sympathetic to those beliefs which correspond to the agenda of the Israeli religious right when it proclaims that the *Torah* is the only possible legislative foundation for the Jewish state.

More than the other Western nations, the United States is torn between two opposite tendencies, the neo-pagan, environmentally conscious, morally permissive, pleasure-seeking school of thought originally derived from the Beatnik revolution of the sixties on the one hand and the neo-puritanical conservative reaction on the other. One can cautiously try to discern atavistic Indo-European undercurrents in the pagan-secular family of thought (represented on both the left and right of the political spectrum) in a variety of popular beliefs like astrology, reincarnation, ecological pantheism or polytheism, scientific and moral relativism as well as in certain forms of sexual religiousness. It is much easier to identify a legacy of the Judeo-Calvinist monotheistic tradition in the call for patriarchal authority, the veneration of wealth and economic success leading to the supremacy of the financial-monetary

sector, the near-obsessive priority given to work and business and the aversion to sloth or 'unproductive activities'. Puritanism often entails a fearful suspicion of sex and other instincts which tends to foster a morbid fascination for pornography and deviant practices in reaction. The consumerism that informs contemporary industrial societies may be described as the outcome of a crossing between scientific materialism and biblical anthropocentrism which rests on the belief that the supernatural creator gave Adam and his progeny the power to rule nature.

The doctrine of man's innate right over the rest of the universe is found in other traditions, especially the teachings of Confucius but in China it is mitigated by the naturalist Taoist wisdom which often derides the naïve hubris of the utilitarian theories.

The famed dialectical opposition between the teachings of Lao Tzu and those of Confucius is somewhat analogous to the divergence that separates the Semitic from the 'pagan' schools of thought. In the process of separating themselves from the surrounding polytheists the 'chosen people' rejected or frowned upon much of what was taught in ancient spiritual tests. No better example of the evolution of Semitic religious thought can be found than the simple fact of the mysterious number 666, a symbol of the "universal monarch who conquers time" and of cosmic wholeness (tied to the 360 degrees of the circle) in the Rig Veda turning into the number of the Beast ('Hayoh') in the Judeo-Christian Apocalypses. The word 'hayy' itself, originally meaning 'living' and applying to all creatures came to allude to the embodiment of evil. Thus nature is seen as separate and distinct from the deity and can even acquire a dark and diabolical character as in the belief system of the Manicheans.

Are the monotheistic Semitic religions fated to turn the tribal conflicts that have divided and decimated mankind since time immemorial into eschatological wars that could bring about the extinction of human life, after spurring a frantic race for material progress with some of the characteristics of a cancerous growth? If so, the ultimate reason seems to be that the spiritual descendents of Abraham have developed the age-old perception of cosmic ontological duality into systems predicating moral dualism, thus allowing no compromise between the bright and dark poles of existence. Therein lies perhaps the root of fanaticism. The Vedic *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads* teach that the correct or divine (*daivika*) interpretation of cosmic reality transcends dichotomies while the literal interpretation is divisive because it belongs to a

lower, darker (*asuri*) level of consciousness. Truth is paradoxical (paroksha) like the non-dualistic quantic vision of matter and energy which results from the modern discoveries of physics. By restoring a holistic vision, mankind will find it intellectually and practically easier to reintegrate the eco-sphere after abolishing the subjective border between the one personalised Creator and his creation.