

Critique of Corduan on Zoroastrianism's Alleged Monotheism

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In this paper, I criticize Winfried Corduan's suggestion in *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* that Zoroastrianism is monotheistic.¹

Corduan argues that because in early Zoroastrianism, only the 'good' divinities were "worthy of worship," Zoroaster's teaching represented a "return to monotheism."² While it is true that Zoroastrianism was a significant step in the evolution of religion from the polytheism of the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians to the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity, it is squarely a dualistic religion.

In Judaism, the one god, *Yhwh*, is the source of all things: good and evil, day and night, love and hate, life and death. The primary divinity in Zoroastrianism, *Ahura Mazda*, is exclusively good and is directly opposed by the evil but lesser *Angra Mainyu*. The agents of *Ahura Mazda* (*yazatas*) and *Angra Mainyu* (*daevas*) are similar but not identical to the angels and demons of the Abrahamic religions.³

Judaism is a strict monotheism, wherein God controls all aspects of existence. Satan is a metaphor for evil inclination (*yetzer hara*) and merely an element, attribute, or agent of God.⁴

Corduan, quoting Taraporewala,⁵ proposes the same structure for Zoroastrianism, suggesting that its lesser deities are aspects of *Ahura Mazda*, which Corduan likens to the Christian Holy Trinity.⁶

First, such a conception of Zoroastrianism violates the Law of Parsimony (Occam's Razor): "The simplest explanation is usually the best one."⁷ If Zoroaster had believed that *Ahura Mazda* embodied both good and evil, such as the *Yhwh* of his Jewish peers, as Corduan suggests, that's presumably what Zoroaster would have written. However, as Judaism and Zoroastrianism were contemporaries, Zoroaster was more likely looking for ways to *distinguish* the two religions.

Furthermore, it is disingenuous for Corduan to use the Holy Trinity to argue for ambiguity in Zoroastrianism (that isn't there) because, unlike Zoroastrianism, the concept of the Holy Trinity was born of actual events, not just the mind of a founding prophet. More critically, the Holy Trinity is, well, *holy*. It has no evil component.

¹ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 189.

² *Ibid.*

³ "Zoroastrianism - Wikipedia," Wikipedia.org, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁴ "Satan - Wikipedia," Wikipedia.org, last modified 2020, accessed November 2, 2024.

⁵ Irach J. J. S. Taraporewala, "Zoroastrianism," in *Living Schools of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield-Adams, 1965), p. 23.

⁶ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 189.

⁷ "Occam's razor," Wikipedia.org (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., November 4, 2006), last modified November 4, 2006, accessed November 2, 2024.

Christians believe that God exists in three coeternal, consubstantial divine persons: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit.⁸ These three distinct persons (*hypostases*) share one essence/substance/nature (*homoousion*).⁹ The Trinity's coeternal and consubstantial nature transcends the physical and the temporal, so there are no logical problems, such as the one that I have argued exists in the idea of the dual nature of the earthly Jesus Christ as both human and divine.¹⁰

Most importantly, the Holy Trinity is perfectly, infinitely *good*. The Trinity says nothing to explain evil, which is pretty much the *whole point* of Zoroastrianism:

Cosmic dualism refers to the ongoing battle between Good (*Ahura Mazda*) and Evil (*Angra Mainyu*) within the universe. It is important to understand that *Angra Mainyu* is not God's equal opposite, rather that *Angra Mainyu* is the destructive energy that opposes God's creative energy. This creative energy is called *Spenta Mainyu*. God created a pure world through his creative energy, which *Angra Mainyu* continues to attack, making it impure. Aging, sickness, famine, natural disasters, death and so on are attributed to this. With cosmic dualism we have life and death, day and night, good and evil. One cannot be understood without the other. Life is a mixture of these two opposing forces.¹¹

Thus, Corduan is lost in the wilderness with his Holy Trinity analogy. As noted above, the best evidence for interpreting what Zoroaster believed about the religion he founded is Zoroaster's writings, of which Corduan states only the following.

Strictly speaking, Zoroaster's own teachings are not dualistic, since the evil spirit is not equal to Ahura Mazda in any respect. In true dualism the two spirits are of equal stature, and the outcome of their cosmic struggle is in doubt. But *Angra Mainyu* is inferior to Ahura Mazda; he is derived from God (as a creature, or in later descriptions as an offspring; much, much later the two are twins); he does not share Ahura Mazda's high attributes; for example, he is clever at times, but not wise, and he is going to lose the war.¹²

Corduan cites no authority for the proposition that in "true dualism...two spirits are of equal stature." Corduan may be thinking of duality in terms of physics (Newton's Third Law of Motion),¹³

⁸ "Trinity - Wikipedia," Wikipedia.org, last modified 2021, accessed November 2, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomas P. Connelly, Jr., "The Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies and the Faith Choice," Google Docs, last modified 2024, accessed November 2, 2024.

¹¹ "BBC - Religions - Zoroastrian: Dualism," Bbc.co.uk, last modified 2014, accessed November 2, 2024.

¹² Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 190.

¹³ The concept of the Holy Trinity is analogous or even identical to the concept of quantum superposition: a tiny particle in the quantum world can exist in multiple states at the same time, like a coin being both heads and tails simultaneously, until it is observed or measured, at which point it will settle into one definite state.

mathematics (base 2), logic (NOT), philosophy (binary opposition), or be confusing modern Zoroastrianism with the ancient:

In practice, modern Zoroastrianism has a positive outlook. It teaches that Mankind is ultimately good and that this goodness will finally triumph over evil. This could be seen as a retrenchment from the faith's original purity of dualism.¹⁴

But if the two forces are equal and opposite, why should the “cosmic struggle” be “in doubt,” as Corduan suggests? Why is there even a struggle? Would the universe not be at rest and in perfect static harmony when its opposing forces were genuinely equal and opposite?

In ancient polytheism (of which dualism is presumably a member), hierarchies of greater and lesser gods were the norm and not the exception, so Corduan’s “equal stature” argument cannot be rooted there,¹⁵ and the fact that *Angra Mainyu* does not share in *Ahura Mazda*’s “high attributes”¹⁶ is therefore of no moment.

Similarly, that *Angra Mainyu* “derived”¹⁷ from *Ahura Mazda* does not help Corduan draw Zoroastrianism out of polytheism. According to legend, the Greek god Athena was born fully armed from Zeus' forehead without a mother.¹⁸

Corduan correctly senses that religious dualism exhibits properties that distinguish it from the rest of polytheism. Corduan is instinctively drawn to these properties. But he doesn’t finish the job and risks confusing the reader about the distinctions between dualism and monotheism.

Monotheism is the “belief in the existence of one god, or...the oneness of God.”¹⁹ While the “monotheistic conception of Yahweh may have been quickened and strengthened by being opposed to the dualism or quasi-monotheism of the [Zoroastrians],”²⁰ and there is little doubt that Judaism (and thereby Christianity) was strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism in “views relating to angelology and demonology, and probably also in the doctrine of the resurrection, as well as in eschatological ideas [the part of theology concerned with death, judgment and destiny],”²¹

¹⁴ “BBC - Religions - Zoroastrian: Dualism,” Bbc.co.uk, last modified 2014, accessed November 2, 2024.

¹⁵ Greek gods were organized in a hierarchy, with *Zeus* at the top as the king of the gods. *An* led the divine council in archaic Sumeria, with *Ninhursag* and *Enlil* as prominent members. *Anu*, *Enlil*, and *Ninlil* led the Akkadian divine council. *Samas* (or *Shamash*) and *Adad* chaired the old Babylonian divine council. The leader of the Egyptian pantheon was either *Thoth* or *Ra*, who held meetings at Heliopolis (*On*). *Marduk* presided over the divine council in the Babylonian *Enûma Eliš*. For the Canaanites, the presiding gods of the holy council in Ugarit were *El* and *Ba'al*.

¹⁶ Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 190.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Athena - Wikipedia,” Wikipedia.org, last modified 2022, accessed November 2, 2024.

¹⁹ Theodorus P. van Baaren, “Monotheism | Definition, Types, Examples, & Facts,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified July 26, 1999, accessed November 2, 2024.

²⁰ “ZOROASTRIANISM,” *Jewishencyclopedia.com*, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Zoroastrianism simply does not belong in the same category as these revolutionary, truly monotheistic religions, and Corduan's arguments are not strong enough to put it there.