General

Although the relevant literature will often classify the Yezidis as followers of polytheism, worshipping an array of gods having differing degrees of significance, a closer scrutiny will show this view to be in need of a radical review.

Using this type of approach, elements of polytheism can be identified in the unambiguously monotheistic religions as well. Thus, Muslims, for instance, see the concept of the Christian Trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as a manifestation of polytheism in Christianity. Meanwhile, in Islam itself, where monotheism is an undisputable basis, the alpha and omega of the entire theology, some heterodox sects (the extreme Shi'as, for example) deifying the fourth caliph, 'Ali ibn Abi-Talib, and other characters, like Fatima, also come in for criticism by orthodox Islamic theologians for their departure from the monolithic God, from the very idea of tauhid, monotheism.

The poly-variation, or rather, the dismembered representation of the Divine Entity, of God, is none other than the personification of the functional division of the Divine, which has nothing to do with polytheism in its pure form, whose essential nature does not change even in the presence of a manifestly principal divinity in the system of gods. This principal divinity, while endowed with a greater power (greater attributes, functions, and so on) compared to others, is, however, not the Absolute, which is the main characteristic of the One God. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly differentiate between the dismembered representations of the Divine (by different spheres of manifestation and even under differing names) reduced to the single initiation, and polytheism characterised by a dispersed representation of the Divine.

In monotheism the Divine Essence in its manifestations does not in any way lose even partially the role, functions or power of God, the sole source of divine emanation and of the Divine in its entirety, but rather manifests its qualities within different hyposta-
ses. From this viewpoint, even Zoroastrianism, often characterised as a dualistic religion, can be regarded as such, albeit with great reservations. Indeed, despite quite an impressive pantheon of gods as a whole, Ahura Mazda is featured generally as the supreme god, with the functions of the demiurge.1

In the Old Iranian religion god is designated by the term *bágā- (cf. Old Pers. baga “god”, Avestan baga- “lot, good fortune”, Sogd. bay) – One (Single) God (rather, supreme god), unlike the Yazats (Avestan yazata, Middle Pers. yazat, New Pers. šīd, literally meaning “one worthy of worship or of sacrifice”). As for *bágā-, this concept means “dispenser (of good fortune)”, cf. Skt. bhágā-. Another denotation of the supreme god in Old Iran was *dātār-, that is, “creator” (New Persian dādā). At the present time the general designation of god in New Persian and in most New Iranian dialects is xudā, from Old Iran. *xwātāwan-, lit. autokratīr, “autocrat”); the same term, Xwade, also designates One God among the Yezidis.

As for Angra Mainyu or Ahriman in the Zoroastrian religion he is only a manifestation of evil, a force of destruction, and to some degree is a parallel of Satan, although possessing more significant attributes than the devil in Christianity (for example, he is the author of part of creation and is hostile to Ahura Mazda and his creation).

Thus, the Old Iranian religion, while never having been unambiguously monotheistic, tends in its various manifestations towards monotheism, with one god, Ahura Mazda, dominating over a whole array of divinities. The situation does not change radically when the priority of Ahura Mazda is challenged by Zurvān or Mithra.

In consequence, a true dualism, with equally significant god and demon locked in unending combat with an unpredictable outcome, has never been known in Iran.2

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1 Cf. in Old Persian inscriptions: baga vazarka Auramazda haya imām būmim ādā haya āvām asmānām ādā haya marṭiyām ādā haya šīyātām ādā marṭiyahāyā, etc.—“A great god is Ahura Mazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man” (DNa, 16; see R.G. Kent, Old Persian Grammar, New Haven, Connecticut, 1953: 137-138). Also: Auramazda baga vazarka haya maštā baġānām—“Ahura Mazda, great god, who [is] the greatest of gods” (AsH, 5-7; Kent, op. cit.: 116).

2 Cf. “The Iranian religion has never been as aggressively monotheistic as are, for instance, Judaism and Islam. But it does represent, in some of its sources, an attempt at monotheism, with one god, Ahura Mazda (later Ŭrmazd) dominating a series of abstract entities. In other sources, other gods exist also, whose relationship with the main god is not always clearly defined. They can be equivalents of the saints in Roman Catholicism or in Islam; or they can, as in the case of Mithra or Zurvān, tend to rob Ahura Mazda of his supremacy; or