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The Persian Moment in Denis Veiras's *History of the Sevarambians*

Cyrus Masroori and John Christian Laursen

I should grow too prolix, were I to recite here all that is written of this great Man, whose wise Conduct, and worthy Actions, wou'd furnish Materials for many Volumes. I shall therefore pick out some of the most remarkable and essential Parts of the History of this happy People, who ascribe all their Felicity to the Care and Prudence of their incomparable Legislator.

He was Persian by Birth, and of a very ancient Family, being descended from the Parses, of whom there are still several branches in Persia, distinguish'd by this Name from the Tartars, who possess'd themselves of that ancient Kingdom. These Parses are the true Aborigines of the Country, and have retain'd many of the Customs of their Ancestors, of which, that of worshipping the Sun, and Fire, is one of the principal: For they are not Mahometans, as the Sophi, and the rest of his Subjects are. So that Sevarias, being born a Parsis, was brought up, from his very Infancy, in this Religion of his Fathers. He was called, in his own Country, Sevaris Ambarces, being the eldest Son of a Lord, whose Name was Alestan Hosser Ambarces, who, among those of his Religion, was acknowledged High Priest of the SUN. The Place of his Birth and Abode, was not far from that Part of Persia which stretches along by the Gulph; where his Family had maintain'd their Credit and Reputation during all the Wars, and notwithstanding the Persecutions of the Tartars, till the time of this Alestan; when it lost much of its ancient Splendor, by the malice of certain Powerful Enemies which Envy had rais'd up against them.¹

The founder of the ideal city in Denis Veiras's *L'Histoire des Sevarambes* of 1677–9 was a Persian Zoroastrian. Part Three (1677–8) tells the story of Sevarias, a Zoroastrian aristocrat who is subject to persecution in Persia and flees to the south, eventually conquering Sevarambia in what is now Australia, settling there, and building a civilization where he rules as the Viceroy of the Sun. The questions cry out: Why a Persian? Why a Zoroastrian? What did the seventeenth century know about them? Why would a European writer attribute his utopia to a Persian?

Given the turmoil of the Reformation and continued religious tension, it is not surprising that religion occupies a central part in early modern utopian discourse. Religious violence was going to have to be suppressed if a utopia was going to be possible. But where most utopian authors of the time took it for granted that a utopia could be constructed within Christianity, Veiras offers an alternative religion capable of promoting and sustaining social coherence instead of causing the conflicts and corruption frequently associated with Christianity. He seems to suggest that while religion cannot be entirely rationalized, an ideal society demands a less irrational religion than Christianity.

This chapter shows how Veiras used exoticism from Persia as a foil for a subversive undermining of Christianity. We start with a brief mention of the references to Persia in Thomas More's path-breaking *Utopia* (1516), which set the model for later writers. Then we explore the travel literature available to Veiras, and draw attention to elements of it from which he may have drawn. And finally we expand upon the ways in which Veiras drew ideas about Persian religion from the neo-Platonists which enabled him to undermine Christianity. We conclude that Veiras's ideas about religion were closest of all to deists such as Herbert of Cherbury, and that he disagreed with Spinoza in fundamental ways.

Unfortunately, we know very little about Denis Veiras.² He was a French Huguenot who spent a number of years in England, where he was evidently a member of the Duke of Buckingham's circle and may have been an acquaintance of John Locke. The first version of Veiras's utopia was published in English as *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi* in two parts appearing in 1675 and 1679 respectively. From 1677 to 1679 the French version of the book, *L'Histoire des Sevarambes*, was published in five parts. *The History of the Sevarambians* (hereafter *Sevarambians*) is the English translation of this French version, first printed in London in 1738. That Veiras's utopia was well received is evident from Dutch, German, Italian and English translations and the responses to it by dozens of European intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries including Bayle, Leibniz, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau and Kant.

The first English version claims that the utopia is a part of Paradise transported 'upon the shoulders of Angels', but in *Sevarambians* the utopia is established by a Persian as a successor to a dystopia.³ Its religion centres on worship of the sun; there is a Hymn to the Sun (225 f.), and the ruler rules as Viceroy of the Sun. And this Persian's utopia bears little resemblance to the real Persia at the time. It is more technologically advanced, such that this work has been taken as an early piece of science fiction. Aerial tramways cross the mountains and the author shows a special interest in irrigation, hydraulics and fountains. It is also a highly regulated society, with special attention to marriage and the regulation of sex; clothing that indicates rank; and equal

living arrangements for everyone. Dispersed throughout the narrative are washbuckling adventures and stories of romance and human passion.

There are only a few references to Persia in More's *Utopia*. In Book I his main character, Raphael Hythloday, says that he has travelled in Persia and praises some policies of the Polylerits, a 'well-governed nation' that paid tribute to the king of Persia in return for protection.⁴ In Book II, he reports that the Utopians' language 'resembles Persian' (125) and that their supreme deity is 'known by all as Mithra', which many readers would have recognized as a Persian god (145). The association between Persians, sun worship and Mithra (or Mithras) was established as early as Herodotus (c.490 BC–425 BC), who wrote that the Persians 'worship the sun, moon, and earth, fire, water, and winds, which are their only original deities'.⁵ Later, the Greek geographer Strabo (64 BC–c.24 AD) refers to Persian worship of the sun, 'whom they call Mithras'.⁶ Greek and Roman understandings of Persian religion often associated it with fire and sun worship.⁷

Note that the Greek and Roman understanding was probably not very close to reality. The ancient Zoroastrians believed in Ahura Mazda as the Supreme God, and their texts are clear about the superiority of Ahura Mazda over Mithra.⁸ What probably misled the Greeks was that there was often an association of Mithra with the Sun.⁹ Also, worshipping the Sun was common among various ancient Middle Eastern people.

Christians admired Cyrus the Great of Persia for allowing the Jews in captivity in Babylon to return to Jerusalem.¹⁰ However, Christians were naturally more hostile to Zoroastrianism and its legacy, and More must have known this. Justin (103–165 AD) labelled followers of Mithras 'wicked devils', accusing them of imitating Christians 'in the mysteries of Mithras'.¹¹ Archelaus (third century AD) added: 'Barbarian priest and crafty coadjutor of Mithras, you will only be a worshipper of the sun-god Mithras'.¹² Perhaps More did not elaborate on his utopia's Mithraic cult because he did not really mean to promote it as a religion: it was only a mirror.

Later sources available to More include the pioneering work of the neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), who surveyed the ancient sources and asserted that Zoroaster was the first of six great theologians of which Plato was the last and greatest.¹³ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) developed some of Ficino's ideas, using the divine inspiration of Zoroaster as a way of proving that pagan philosophy is a way to true wisdom.¹⁴ More was undoubtedly influenced by the neo-Platonists, but his few and superficial references to Persia and Mithra make it unlikely that he was doing anything more than adding a touch of exoticism to the idealized mirror in which his contemporaries could recognize their weaknesses and his call for reform.

There were at least two bodies of literature on Persia and Zoroastrianism from after More's time that were available to Veiras. One was the travel literature, and this seems a likely source for some of his ideas. The second was

the philosophical and theological work of erudite scholars such as Herbert of Cherbury's *De religione gentilium* (1663).¹⁵

The travel literature bloomed in the decades before Veiras. A French translation of a Spanish ambassador's report, *L'Ambassade de D. Garcias de Silva Figueroa en Perssee* of 1667, observed that

there have remained a number of those ancient and true Persians who ... have ... not ceased to hold steadfastly to their original way of life, their customs and their religion. Thus they venerate to this day the sun, as did the Persians of old when their empire was the greatest in the world, and, following their example, they keep a fire always burning in their homes.¹⁶

Veiras may also have borrowed from *L'Ambassade de D. Garcias* the narratives of hunts and animal fights as entertainment in both versions of his book (84, 97, 174f.).¹⁷

In 1671 Jean Chardin referred in passing to the 'Guebres', or infidels – which is what the Muslims called the Zoroastrians – as 'the ancient Persians or Fire Worshippers', observing that 'they were a miserable sort of People, and under great distress'.¹⁸ Chardin's book, *Le couronnement de Soleimaan, troisième Roy de Perse de cette nomme*, may have provided a model for other things in Veiras's book. The better part of the work is a description of court intrigue very much in a Tacitean or Machiavellian mode. Every person's decisions are made with self-interest in mind, and no-one's word is trustworthy. This is a feature of many of the vignettes in Veiras's work, ranging from the intrigues Sevarias uses to gain power (212ff.) to the very realistic and unromantic considerations a woman takes into account in choosing to be one of the wives of the Viceroy instead of remaining faithful to her betrothed (296ff.).

Other details also could have been lifted from Chardin. For example, the idea that in utopia sexual infidelity would be reflected in a person's face (60, 68) could have been taken from Chardin's description of venereal disease as that 'nauseous Distemper ... [that] displays itself in the Faces of the Diseased, and publishes with Ignominy their frequent Converse with lewd Women' (2). Veiras's Viceroy chooses the most beautiful women for his wives (294–9), just as the King of Persia 'caus'd all the handsom women to be taken up, and brought to his Haram' (114). The Persian King was styled 'the Lieutenant of the true Sovereign [God]' (34, 66), just as Sevarias does not call himself a king but the Viceroy of the Sun (229, 237, 252, etc.). In their inauguration, the Persians demand that 'his Majesty may always appear surrounded with glory like the Sun' (47). The late king of Persia is credited with respecting 'the Liberty of mens Consciences' (48), just as the Sevarambians do (301). Finally, the coronation speeches and descriptions of coronation and wedding ceremonies in Veiras echo the many such descriptions in Chardin's work.

At times, the Safavid kings imposed compulsory migration policies on minorities, including the Zoroastrians. This and other sorts of persecution led

some Zoroastrians to flee to Surat and Gujarat in India, where they prospered. Henry Lord wrote about them in *A Display of Two Forraign Sects in the East Indies ... Part II, The Religion of the Parsees* (1630), which was also available in French in Veiras's day as *Histoire de la religion ... avec un traité de la Religion des anciens Persans ou Parsis* (1667). Here we have the spelling of the word that Veiras used to describe his Zoroastrians: Parsis (plural: Parsees) (203, 205, etc.). Those who settled in Surat and Gujarat found more wealth and power than those who stayed home in Persia. The experience of these exiles is such a close parallel to Veiras's account that it may have been his source.

The other main body of work on Zoroastrianism available to Veiras was the scholarly neo-Platonism after Thomas More, which also drew on Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Some of it remained Christian, like the Cambridge Platonists, but some of it eventually became what we now refer to as 'deism'. One of the key early figures in the latter movement was Edward Herbert of Cherbury, whose book, *De religione gentilium* (1663), might well be a source for Veiras. Chapter 4 is a survey of peoples who worshipped the sun, with substantial attention to Zoroastrians.¹⁹ Herbert drew on G.J. Vossius's *De theologia gentilium* (1642), which argued that sun worship was the oldest form of religion.²⁰ Herbert also suggested his own minimum core of a universal religion, just as Veiras reported of both the public religion of the Sevarambians and of the intellectual, Scromenas (301–13, 353–8). The Platonic heritage is clear: Scromenas draws on Plato, but also on Pythagoras and other Greek, Arabian and Indian philosophers (353). For Herbert, the core beliefs are: there is a supreme God; this God should be worshipped; virtue and piety are the principal elements of that worship; we should repent of our sins; and we will be rewarded or punished in the next life. The core of the Sevarambians' religion is similar (301–13). Richard Baxter observed of Herbert what could also be observed of Veiras: there was no place for Christ in these accounts.²¹ But things get worse for Christians: Scromenas's core beliefs include only the first four of Herbert's: there is no next life in his account (355).

It is worth observing that the tradition of sun-worshipping utopias also had an anti-Christian background: Julian the Apostate tried to make the sun the supreme god in order to undermine Christianity.²² In any case, Herbert is credited with being the founder of English deism, and it is clear that Veiras follows him closely, if not exactly.

The question that the utopian authors of Veiras's era faced is this: given that modernity has unleashed unprecedented forces and opportunities with potential to build a substantially better life for Europeans, why is Europe experiencing turbulence unseen since the fall of Rome? It is in response to this question that Veiras, like a number of other utopian authors, finds himself compelled to turn to experiences other than those of modern Europe. In other words, if Europe, ravaged by war and persecution, is the dystopia, utopia can only be in faraway lands and rooted in other cultures.

At least in part, it is to find an alternative to this European dystopia that Veiras turns to Persia. The choice of a non-Christian and non-European to be the founder of the 'paradise on Earth' is apparently a vote of no confidence in modern Europeans. Further, the story is a daring rejection of the potential of Christianity to establish the ideal city. In More's *Utopia*, there is a mass conversion to Christianity upon introduction of that religion, and Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a Christian community. In Sevarambia, however, the population has been exposed to Christianity since the time of Giovanni but very few have converted to it (307–9). In fact, some shipwrecked Europeans choose to convert to the Sevarambian religion (358).

Our most ambitious claim is that Veiras may be using a Zoroastrian to criticize Christianity as a whole. Stroukaras, the ruler of Veiras's dystopia, for example, claims to be the Son of the Sun, the supreme deity of the land. Stroukaras and his priests commit acts of deception, debauchery and cruelty similar to those that some Popes and Cardinals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were accused of by Protestants. But if the analogy of Stroukaras as Son of the Sun to the Christian Son of God is intentional (and it is hard to imagine otherwise), Veiras's criticism is directed at Christianity as a whole and not just at one or another Christian sect. Also, similar to the way that the injustice and intolerance of the Muslim Persians against the Zoroastrian minority deprived Persia of a rare talent like Sevarias, persecution in Christian Europe had deprived it of many talented individuals like Veiras. In fact, Veiras could be comparing Christianity (the religion of Stroukaras) to Persian Mithraism (the religion of Sevarias).

Neo-Platonism includes Christian Platonism, but that is clearly not what Veiras has in mind. Cambridge Platonist Henry More's *An Antidote Against Atheism* (1651) cited apparitions of men fighting on the ground and in the sky as proof of a supernatural spirit world, drawing on Maccabees, Josephus, English chronicles and contemporary sources.²³ When these 'reports cannot be suspected to be in subserviency to any Politick design, [they] ought in reason to be held true, when there have been many profest Eye-witnesses', he wrote (244). Veiras's narrator reports that the Sevarambians figured out that such apparitions were optical illusions, reflections from the clouds of distant events, and thus not proof of any spirit world (310–11). This sort of observation positions Veiras not as a Christian, but as a deist Platonist.

Neo-Platonic deism is not the same as Spinozism. Jonathan Israel has asserted that Veiras's story is 'a Spinozist utopia'.²⁴ There are elements of agreement, such as the critique of miracles and priestcraft. But Veiras is certainly not fully Spinozist: Spinoza would presumably not approve of his endorsement of censorship, communism, political absolutism and political Platonism. That makes it more likely that he is best understood as a neo-Platonist deist, not a Spinozist.

Denis Veiras's *The History of Sevarambians* is not only one of the longest, most innovative and most articulated utopian accounts of early modernity, it

is arguably the boldest account of that genre in the seventeenth century. Veiras reconstructs Persians and Zoroastrianism not to justify European superiority or pave the way for colonialism, but to suggest that non-Europeans are as capable as Europeans of creating an ideal society. In doing so, he overcomes Eurocentric prejudice.

At the same time, as a neo-Platonist Veiras demands that Christianity be subject to the tests of reasonableness that were the intellectual spirit of his time. While most of his contemporaries either rather unsuccessfully attempted to demonstrate the reasonableness of various Christian principles or excused Christianity from the test of reason, Veiras implied that in fact Christianity was not capable of passing such a test, and therefore was unfit to be the religion of a society where reason rules.