

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF ZOROASTRIANISM AND IT'S INFLUENCE ON OTHER RELIGIONS

Paper presented by Cawas Desai at
The NAMC Seminar on July 30, 2005

In order to fully appreciate the early development of Zoroastrianism, it is essential to understand the time, the place, and the social and political climate prevailing at the time of the religion's establishment. According to our oral and written traditions, the ancestors of the Indo-Iranian peoples lived in the far north at the dawn of history and were known as the "Aryas" meaning the Noble Ones. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in his book "Orion, the Arctic Homeland of the Aryans" contends that the homeland of the Aryans is where the north polar ice cap stands today. It is said that the Aryas believed in one Creator from who all else emanated and flowed. With the coming of the Ice Age, some 10,000 years ago, the Aryas began a migration to the south through the Russian Steppes.

During this migration, the ancient religion began to be corrupted by elements of nature worship. Stricken with natural calamities, the oncoming snow and blizzards from the north, violent earthquakes and storms, compounded by disease and pestilence, the migrants soon found themselves face to face with malevolent agencies, which, in their superstitious wisdom, required propitiation. The deification of the natural powers, both good and evil, followed and the religion of the Aryas degenerated into polytheism, idol worship and animal sacrifice. The law of the strongest and the most powerful soon became prevalent, leading to greater and greater hardship and misery for the common population. These times of turmoil, of continuous warfare and the evils of power hungry kings and war-lords have been described in both Iranian and Indian literature.

The Shah Nameh speaks about the times of Zohak, Azhi Dahaka in the Avesta, and the complete breakdown of social structure during his terror filled reign. It goes on to tell us of the enmity between the princes, the sons of Shah Faredoon, and the murder of Iraj by his brothers Salm and Tur, which lead to the continuous and centuries long wars and constant feuding between Iran and Turan.

According to our scriptures, during these turbulent and unsettled times, the soul of creation cried out to God, "Unto you the soul of mother earth complained "Me all around do passion and rapine and violence enmesh – reveal therefore to me a way out through a savior." And God replied "One such here is known to me, the only one who hath listened to our commands, Zarathushtra Spitama." We believe that Zarathushtra was born to return the religion to its uncorrupted state, to the "pauryo takeasha" - the religion of the ancients, and to fight the excesses of the "Daevayasnis." According to the late Jatindra Mohan Chatterjee, India's leading Vedic Sanskrit scholar, Zarathushtra is one and the same as Parsurama of the Vedas, who the Rig Veda tells us, is the sixth re-incarnation of Vishnu, and who was born to subdue the power of the warrior clans and curb their evil practices.

In the Vedas, specifically in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, these times are described as those when truth and righteousness began to decrease and be replaced by

falsehood and wrong doing. The Ramayana tells us of the wars between Ayodhya and Lanka resulting from the abduction of Sita, and the Mahabharata, graphically describes the covetousness of the Kauravas against their cousins the Pandavas, which ultimately lead to the cataclysmic battle of Kurukshetra, and the start of the “Kali Yug”.

The date when Zarathushtra lived is one of great speculation. The ancient Greek historians, Xanthus of Lydia, Plato, Pliny and Plutarch place Him in eras varying from 7,000 BC (6,000 years before the Trojan War) to 2,000 BC. Some 19th century scholars, contending that this would place Him in the Stone Age, assigned dates of between 1,000 BC and 600 BC. Most modern scholars now believe that Zarathushtra could not have lived any later than 1,800 BC. The Vedic Sanskrit scholars place Zarathushtra before 3,500 BC.

Some time after the advent of the prophet, the migration split into two groups, one moving westwards, a branch of which eventually settled on the Iranian Plateau, and the other traveling eastwards and settling on the Indian Sub-continent. It should be noted that the religion of the Aryas, and their language, form the basis of commonality between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, and the similarity between the language of the Rig Veda and the Gathas. Chatterjee, in comparing Gathic-Avesta to Vedic-Sanskrit, very succinctly points out that Ahura Mazda of the Avesta is the same as Asura Mahan or Hari Medhas of the Rig Veda.

The opening words of the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, are: “And God said “Let there be light”. We know these words as the “Ahunavar” and the Hindus as “Ohm”. However, before the spoken word translated itself into action, there was thought. These three concepts: thought, word and deed form the basis of the religion taught by Zarathushtra. Zarathushtra posits a single Creator God, who in His wisdom created the universe, which is governed by a set of universal and immutable laws. Zarathushtra named His God “Ahura Mazda” – the Lord of Wisdom, and declared that He alone is worthy of our adoration. “Reveal unto me” says Zarathushtra, “that name of thine that is the greatest, best, fairest, most effective, most evil smiting...”. “And Ahura replied: “My first name is I am”.

Having arrived at the basic idea of the unity of God, Zarathushtra found himself confronted by the problem of the eternal conflict between good and evil since the dawn of creation. The Prophet speaks of two primeval forces, opposed to and at war with each other, “Spenta Mainyu”, the giver of life, and “Angra Mainyu”, the harbinger of non-life. These two forces, later described, in the Younger Avesta, as either principles, powers or spirits, do not emanate from Ahura Mazda and do not exist independently, but each in relation to the other, they meet in the higher unity of Ahura Mazda. These two forces existed before the beginning of the world as we know it and are eternally in conflict with each other. As the Prophet says, “Truly shall I speak of the Primal Spirits of the world, of whom the Very Holy thus said to the Hostile One – Neither our thoughts nor teaching nor wills, neither our choices nor words nor acts, not our consciences nor souls agree”. Today, science describes these forces as positive and negative energy, both equal and opposite, without which there can be no existence.

This concept of two opposing powers or forces has given rise to the premise that Zoroastrianism is not a monotheistic religion but is based on dualism. This same concept, later gave rise to Zurvanism, one of the so-called Zoroastrian heresies, which held sway during the Seleucid era in Iran's history.

In Zoroastrianism, man has been created to fight on the side of good and ultimately to vanquish evil. Man must make the choice between good and evil, and live with the consequences of his choice, both in this world and the next. The basic creed is summarized in the names and meanings of the six attributes of God, the "Amesha Spentas or the Beneficent Immortals" – God (Ahura Mazda) having given man the Good Mind (Vohu Mano) to travel the Path of Righteousness (Asha Vahishta) toward attaining the Divine Kingdom (Kshathra Vairya), will enable man through Devotion (Spenta Armaity) to reach Perfection (Haurvetat) and attain Immortality (Ameretat).

The religion of Zarathushtra has rightly, therefore, been called the Religion of the Good Life, which constantly reminds us that good thoughts are good, that good words are better and that good deeds are the best, and exhorts us to actively lead the good life and follow the path of righteousness.

The religion after Zarathushtra

When the religion of Zarathushtra was first revealed, Zarathushtra himself had to fight against the entrenched forces of the old polytheistic practices. In His Gathas, He constantly seeks help from the Creator against the "Kavis and the Karepans", and laments that His tribe and even His family have turned against Him. Tradition tells us that eventually, with King Vishtasp accepting Zarathushtra's teachings and Prince Aspandiar militarily defending the faith, hostilities continued between the followers of Zarathushtra and those who opted to remain adherents of the polytheistic and sacrificial practices of the past.

There is a very interesting parallel in the story of King Vishtasp to be found in the Mahabharata. According to the Din Kirt as quoted by A.V.W.Jackson, King Vishtasp had a chariot which could fly in the air. According to the Rig Veda, King Vasu of Cedi (a country noted for its golden colored camels) had a chariot in which he could fly at will. Narayan gave King Vasu a scripture inspired by the seven "Citra-Sikhandins", the Saints or Enlightened Ones, which was adopted by Vasu as the new "Veda", and consequently forbore the offering of flesh as an oblation during ritual sacrifice. Some time later there was a conflict between the Daeva worshipers and the Saints as to whether meat could be offered as an oblation. King Vasu gave his decision in favor of the Daeva worshipers, whereupon the Saints cursed him and Vasu lost the power of flight. Vasu soon repented and adopted the custom of praying five times a day and giving up meat in ritual sacrifice, and regained the power to fly. When Vasu next performed the great sacrifice, Brihaspati, the high priest of the Daeva worshipers flew into a rage, stood up with the ladle in his hands and declared that he was not going to tolerate that an "unseen God" would take the libation!

Although a large portion of Zarathushtra's own words have been lost to us and to history, Greek historians indicate that Zarathushtra composed some two million words of verse,

His uncompromising monotheism has very clearly come down to us in His Gathas, where again and again He exhorts us that only Ahura Mazda is worthy of our adoration.

Unfortunately, shortly after Zarathushtra's time, elements of the old polytheistic beliefs began to creep back into Zoroastrianism. This can be seen from the content of the Yashts.

Although the content of the Yashts is clearly considered to be pre-Zoroastrian, the language of the Yashts, except for the Yasna Haptanghaiti, is post-gathic Avestan. Today, every scholar agrees that all of the Yashts, except for the Yasna Haptanghaiti, were composed and written centuries after the time of Zarathushtra.

The Yasna Haptanghaiti is composed in gathic-Avesta, the language of the Gathas. The striking difference between the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti is that the Gathas are composed in metrical verse form and are to be sung, whereas the Haptanghaiti is composed in prose. There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to the authorship of the Haptanghaiti. Mary Boyce contends that some parts of the Yasna appear to be composed by Zarathushtra himself, while Robert Zaehner unequivocally contends that the Yasna was composed by Zarathushtra's disciples shortly after His death and not by the Prophet himself.

The names of Indra, Varuna and Mithra are mentioned in the Haptanghaiti, and there is absolutely no question but that these are pre-Zoroastrian divinities, which continue to hold prominent positions in the Vedas. Indra evolved into Verethragna or Behram Yazata, Mithra evolved into Meher Yazata and Varuna, in the female form of Varunani evolved into Avan Ardivisur Yazad, more commonly known as Anahita. The names of these and other pre-Zoroastrian divinities subsequently evolved into the Yazatas whose names are incorporated as the days of the month in the Zoroastrian calendar.

The fact that these pre-Zoroastrian divinities now occupy and hold important positions in our liturgy, points to the fact that these are later additions to the religion introduced after Zarathushtra's life time. Clearly, these portions of the Avesta conflict with the strict and unambiguous monotheism preached by the Prophet Himself. Whether these changes were introduced to make the liturgy more acceptable to the general population, considering the polytheistic practices which were extremely prevalent at the time; or to appease the political powers that were, is difficult to determine.

Examples of both these instances are found aplenty millennia later during the Achaemenian Dynasty. Cyrus the Younger accepted all the Babylonian Gods after the conquest to forestall any opposition from the Babylonian priests and gain the acceptance of the conquered population. Cambyses did the same after his conquest of Egypt, when he was declared Pharaoh, and consequently became a living God. Darius the Great, in the rock edicts at Behistun and Persepolis, mentions: "Ahura Mazda bore me aid, and the other Gods who are, because I was not hostile...." Darius II actively supported the cult of Anahita, which was subsequently embraced by the Greeks as Artemis or Aphrodite and the Romans as Venus or Diana.

Even if the date of 1,800 BC is accepted as the Prophets time of birth, twelve centuries passed before Zoroastrianism first entered western recorded history. According to

other traditions, the time lapse is even more substantial. As the gospel of Zarathushtra traveled westward from its original homeland (the Airyan Vej of the Kayanian Dynasty), the language and practice of the religion was bound to change. Through the legendary Huafritan and Kudurvand Dynasties, of which all traces are lost, nothing is known about the then practice of Zoroastrianism. Our present knowledge starts when the Greek historians first came into contact with the followers of Zarathushtra during the Achaemenian Dynasty.

At that time, it seems that the Magi, a Medean tribe, were the hereditary guardians of the religion and were the tribe entrusted with the performance of all religious rituals and the safeguarding of all religious practices. These were the advisors to the Achaemenian Emperors and were in the forefront of the Iranian armies as they went into battle. After the defeat of Darius III by Alexander the Accursed, the Magi appear to have faded from history until they are seen again at the birth of Christ.

Throughout Zoroastrian history, the one principle that has remained constant and unchanged was that God is seen as eternal light, "Anaghra Raocha" and therefore, Zarathushtra had adopted fire as the outward symbol of His religion. The purest of the elements, incapable of being defiled, it symbolizes not only the energy of creation but also the divine spark within each of us.

The Cult of Fire

Arguably the greatest discovery of all time was that of fire and more importantly the capability of containing and transporting it. This discovery gave man the mobility to emerge from scattered cave dwellings and become hunter-gatherers and pastoralists, which eventually lead the nomads to the establishment of settled communities around a central fire. It is no wonder, therefore, that fire has been revered as a divine gift from time immemorial, with great reverence accorded to fire in the religion of Zarathushtra and in the Vedas. Let us briefly consider the central role of, and the reverence, accorded to fire in other religions.

Starting with Judaism, the Book of Exodus of the Old Testament, tells us that God first spoke to Moses through the medium of the "burning bush". When the Commandments were housed in the Arc of the Covenant, which in turn was housed in a Tabernacle, fire was always kept burning in the sanctum sanctorum. "And God said to Moses, the fire on the alter shall always burn and the priests shall feed it...."

In the Greek pantheistic religion, fire was always present in all the "sanctuaries", and at the Alter of Pan at Olympia, fire was never allowed to be extinguished.

In Roman times, the tribe of the Flamines was appointed as the "fire-priests" and their sacred responsibility was to keep the fire on the Capitoline Hill always burning. Interestingly, reminiscent of Zoroastrianism and the dictates contained in the Vendidad, the Flamines were not allowed to touch anything unclean and their cut hair and nails had to be buried.

The Teutons always kept a lamp burning before the statue of Thor.

In Christianity, every church has candles eternally burning on the altar, the fire representing the sacramental presence of God.

Andrew Carnegie, in a voyage around the world, wrote: "This evening we were surprised to see, as we strolled along the beach, more Parsees than ever before, and more Parsee ladies, richly dressed, all wending their way towards the sea. Here on the shore of the ocean, as the sun was sinking in the sea, and the slender silver thread of the crescent moon was faintly shining on the horizon, they congregated to perform their religious rites. Fire was there in its grandest form, the setting sun, and water in the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean outstretched before them. The earth was under their feet, and, wafted across the sea, the air came laden with the perfumes of "Araby the Blest". Surely, no time or place could be more fitly chosen than this for lifting up the soul to the realms beyond seas. I could not but participate with these worshipers in what was so grandly beautiful. There was no music save the solemn moan of the waves as they broke into foam on the beach. But where shall we find so mighty an organ, or so grand an anthem? How inexpressibly sublime the scene appeared to me and how insignificant and unworthy of the unknown seemed even our cathedrals made with human hands, when compared with this looking up through nature unto nature's God! I stood and drank in the serene happiness, which seemed to fill the air. I have seen many modes and forms of worship – some disgusting, others saddening, a few elevating when the organ pealed forth its tones, but all poor in comparison with this. Nor do I expect in all my life to witness a religious ceremony which will so powerfully affect me as that of the Parsees on the beach of Bombay."

Zoroastrianism's influence on other religions

It is an accepted fact that the religion of Zarathushtra has had a profound impact and influence on every other major religion. Starting with the Cult of Fire and ending with individual accountability leading to the judgment of the soul and the after-life, Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Its influence on Buddhism and through Buddhism on Confucianism also cannot be ignored.

Prior to the Babylonian captivity, pre-Exilic Judaism had no concept of heaven or hell. According to the religion of Moses, souls stayed in a dreary place called "Sheol" for eternity. There are even questions about just how monotheistic Judaism really was. These concepts dramatically changed in post-Exilic Judaism.

The freeing of the Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity by the Edict of Cyrus in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to take the gold and silver vessels back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, is forever immortalized in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron, and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name." This freedom of the Jews from the Babylonian exile was the start of five centuries of close contact between Judaism and Zoroastrianism.

As Boyce puts it, "Isaiah celebrates Yahweh for the first time in Jewish literature as Creator, as Ahura Mazda had been celebrated by Zarathushtra: "I, Yahweh, who created all things...I made the earth and created man on it...Let the skies rain down justice...I Yahweh have created it." The parallels with Zoroastrian doctrine and scripture are so striking that these verses have been taken to represent the first imprint of that influence which Zoroastrianism was to exert so powerfully on post-Exilic Judaism."

Of the Hellenistic age, Boyce goes on to say, "Every inch of territory conquered by the Macedonian Alexander had been held before him by the Achaemenians, so that wherever Hellenistic culture established itself in his wake, it was on soil where Persians had been living, as members of the ruling people, for generations, and where accordingly their religion had long been represented." She further states that, "The respect felt for Zarathushtra by certain Greeks, notably those of the Platonic school, and the keen interest in the study of the heavens in Hellenistic times, combined to make Zarathushtra a much revered figure."

Let us consider the influence of Zoroastrianism on Christianity. In the words of John Hinnels, "In the decades immediately prior to the birth of Jesus, Zoroastrianism was not a distant or shadowy presence, but the world's most powerful religion." The Christian belief in the devil, heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment, are not just reminiscent of Zoroastrian beliefs, they have been taken directly from Zoroastrian scriptures. As Lawrence Mills puts it, "The now undoubted and long since suspected fact that it pleased the divine power to reveal some of the most important articles of our Catholic creed first to the Zoroastrians, and through their literature to the Jews and ourselves."

From the time of Jesus' birth, when the Magi visited the Christ child, there are direct links between Christianity and Zoroastrianism. It is now commonly agreed that the Magi were Zoroastrian, and one of the Magi, Casper or Gasper, has been identified as Gandopharnes, King of Gandhara.

The fact that Easter Sunday, the holiest day of the Christian faith, commemorates the resurrection of Christ, and that too on the dawn of the third day after the crucifixion, is directly reminiscent of our own scriptural teachings.

In the year 245 AD, the Emperor Diocletian proclaimed that henceforth Mithra would be the guardian of the Roman Empire. For the next nine decades, until Constantine received baptism shortly before his death in 337 AD, Mithraism was by far the most prevalent religious belief in the world. It is said that Constantine very seriously considered conversion to Mithraism and the adoption of Zoroastrianism as the state religion of the Byzantine Empire. Unfortunately, however, Constantine was not prepared to accept the Zoroastrian tenet that every individual is responsible for his own actions and will meet his corresponding reward in the hereafter. Having lived a sinful and evil life, he wanted full pardon and forgiveness for his sins, which he could get by accepting baptism and the last rites, and therefore he chose Christianity over Zoroastrianism.

However, Zoroastrianism, through Mithraism, left its final impact on Christianity. December 25th, was the day celebrated in Mithraism as the day of the winter solstice and the day of the rebirth of the sun. In the fifth century, the Council of Nicaea, in an act

reminiscent of the religious and political accommodation of the Achaemenians, decreed this day to be celebrated as the birth day of Jesus. And so, truly, Christmas Day is a Zoroastrian celebration!

From then on, Zoroastrianism entered into its waning years, its adherents being persecuted by the descendants of Constantine and finally entered its twilight, when the Sassanian Empire fell to the forces of Omar in the seventh century.

That, however, was not the end of Zoroastrian influence. Mithraism continued to flourish in Italy, Germany and England, before militant Christian converts forced it into obscurity.

Medieval Christianity, as practiced in the Balkans, and from there moved to France and Spain, is full of instances where the Catholic Church suppressed Zoroastrian beliefs which had crept into the practice of Christianity. The Magyars of Hungary (the Sakas of the Persepolis inscriptions) were believed to practice a form of Zoroastrianism. The Bogomils of Yugoslavia and the Cathars of Central France believed, among other things, that God was not omnipotent and that there was an equal power of evil which God would eventually defeat and make the world good again. These beliefs, which were considered heretical by the Catholic Church, were finally stamped out when the Albigensian Crusades put an end to the very existence of the Cathars.

Coming to Islam, there has always been a long Iranian tradition and belief that the Zoroastrian priest, Dastur Dinyar, who was exiled by Yazdegird, adopted the name of Salman-e-Pars, and came into close contact with Mohammed. The Iranian tradition goes so far as to say that it was Salman-e-Pars who was the true author of the Quran. It should be noted that the original Quran started with the words: "Allah is great and Mohammed is his Prophet. I Mohammed am Salman and Salman is Mohammed". Note the word "Musulman" which translates as I, Salman.

The Sufi school of Islam is so close to Zoroastrianism that Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, the foremost Sufi of his day, openly said that Islam should bow to the shining sun (a veiled reference to Zoroastrianism) rather than to the crescent moon, a sentiment for which he was tortured and eventually executed.

Hinnels, in his treatise on Zoroastrianism, says "To Hinduism and Buddhism it is said to have given the belief of a savior to come. But it is Judaism, Christianity and Islam which owe the most to Zoroastrianism. Beliefs in a devil, heaven, hell, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment, all these are thought to have developed in Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought as a result of Zoroastrian influence. Perhaps no other religion has influenced so many people in so many continents over so many centuries."

We have come a long way since James Darmesteter wrote over a century ago that "As the Parsis are the ruins of a people, so are their sacred books the ruins of a religion." Western scholars continue to shed light on the religion of Zarathushtra and acknowledge the debt owed to Zoroastrianism by every other major religion. Unfortunately, our own community perversely continues to languish in ignorance of our own religion. I would say in conclusion, therefore, that it is up to us to ensure that our own co-religionists, especially the younger generation, get to know the glory, and truly appreciate the

grandeur, of our religion. We must strive and endeavor to enlighten the western societies in which we have made our homes, about who and what we are, so that the religion of Zarathushtra can become better known and take its rightful place as the earliest of the revealed religions of the world.