

Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: Zoroastrianism and the Environment

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'Four thousand years before the first Greens, the priest-prophet Zoroaster preached that humankind, as the seventh creation, must protect the other six and keep the earth fertile and unsullied.' So noted the *Independent* newspaper published in London on 15 May 1990.

The dates surrounding Zoroaster's (or Zarathustra's) life are contested but contemporary academic thinking, based on linguistic analysis of the oldest part of the religious texts (the *Gathas* which were embedded in the very centre of the major religious scriptures) suggests that he received his revelation from Ahura Mazda in the middle of the second millennium BC. It is suggested that he came from Azarbaijan although more credence is now being given to a birthplace in Eastern Tajikistan.

Although Nietzsche, Strauss and others (principally in the nineteenth century) used Zoroaster's name in their writings, reflecting a fascination with recently discovered Oriental philosophers, they revealed little understanding of the principles taught by the Iranian prophet.

Many people, while having vaguely heard of Zoroastrianism, associate it with fire-worship. In fact respect towards fire is akin to respect for the cross amongst Christians. By contemplating fire, Zoroastrians are reminded of the creative energy force which they call Ahura Mazda or Wise Lord, whose creation is so bounteous and perfect. The fire which radiates light also represents that perfection or purity of being and consciousness which Zoroastrians are exhorted to strive towards.

Some people may have encountered Zoroastrianism through Parsees. Parsees are those Zoroastrians who in the ninth century fled from Iran by boat to India in order to find a more tolerant ambience in which they could practise their religion without the harassment to which they were regularly subjected in Iran after the Arab/Islamic conquest. In India the Parsees (thus called as they came from Persia) flourished and were highly favoured by the British who groomed them to achieve exceptional social, political and economic successes.

The population of the community is minute in relation to other world religions. Around the world there are probably no more than a mere 150,000 Zoroastrians, of whom about 75,000 live in India, about 30,000 in Iran, and the rest have dispersed around the globe (particularly since the Islamic Revolution in 1979). The Parsee population has fallen rapidly from a peak of 125,000 a century ago, while the Iranian Zoroastrian population has grown from a mere 7,000 survivors at the end of the nineteenth century to 40,000 at the end of the twentieth century.

Often described as the first of the great world religions, Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion although those who have only a superficial understanding of it get bogged down by the idea of dualism. Some have called Zoroastrianism a system of ethical dualism. Certainly the importance of its teachings on the subject of right and wrong is known to many churchmen of the Orthodox tradition.

Closely associated with this ethical dualism and the stress upon conscious choice to choose the righteous path (or *asha*), is the concept of independent free will and choice. According to the religion, we are all born with a conscience and we make a choice to follow either good or evil, each of which will bring its own consequences at death. In Zoroastrian tradition our souls cross the bridge of judgement on the fourth day and those whose evil deeds outweigh their good deeds are condemned to an afterlife in an eternally unpleasant abode, while those with a credit of good deeds will pass to an abode of everlasting happiness. These eschatological ideas are of course also to be found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but few realise that they owe their origin to Zoroastrian concepts.

Although the pursuit of *asha* offers comforting prospects of the afterlife, the main tenets of the religion stress the here and now, for Zoroastrianism is a pragmatic teaching concerned with an improvement in the quality of life on earth. Thus to pursue *asha* brings its own immediate rewards in the form of friends, love,

food, security, health and harmony. The psychological benefit from an easy conscience at peace with itself is something to be desired and which can be achieved by all who strive towards it.

To understand what *asha* is, Zoroastrians are taught to contemplate or meditate upon nature, to observe its beauty, the order and regularity of the natural cycles, and the harmony and interdependence of its manifestations. Through such meditation one will arrive at an awareness of God's presence and in a peaceful and balanced state of mind one's thinking will be clear and the choices to be made will be apparent. Meditation does not necessarily have to be achieved through a state of inactivity; indeed Zoroastrians are exhorted to work hard and exert themselves physically on the land since a healthy body will aid balanced thinking.

We are taught that *asha* is practised by maintaining moral purity of thought and word as well as through some of the deeds discussed above - hence the Zoroastrian motto: 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds'. This translates into telling the truth and being honest in all dealings and transactions with others. While this may appear to be an essential aspiration of all religions, it is interesting that non-Zoroastrian writers, from Herodotus to French and British travellers in Iran and India from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries, make specific mention of the high degree of probity and integrity they encountered among Zoroastrians.

Asha, which means purity, may be pursued at many different levels. On a physical level, we may strive to be pure or clean in the surroundings of the house and home, in our clothing, and in our body. The air we breathe, the water we drink and the land we cultivate have to be kept pure and clean in the pursuit of *asha*. It is taught that if we act as responsible stewards of the natural elements, we will reap the rewards of plentiful food, absence of illness and pleasant surroundings. The neglect of the environment will amount to turning our back on the pursuit of *asha*, resulting in a capitulation to the forces of darkness and evil in contrast to light and goodness/virtue.

In practical terms, Zoroastrians plant a tree to celebrate the birth of a new family member and do not place the dead in the ground - this would be seen as polluting the nourishing earth. Zoroastrians regard it as a sin to wash in running water, but instead draw the water off to perform ablutions and clothes washing. Their ability to harness water to irrigate the earth goes back to ancient times when the famous underground water channels, *qanats*, were constructed to avoid evaporation and contamination and to bring fresh water to settlements. The wedding liturgy specifically reminds newly weds that they carry a duty to maintain the purity of running water and to bring under cultivation any abandoned land, while if there is marsh land nearby they should drain it and make it salubrious.

Because of their understanding of the relationship of human kind with earth and water, Zoroastrians became renowned gardeners and farmers, the famous gardens of Darius at Pasargadae being the best example of such skills in antiquity. In more recent times both the Safavid and Qajar kings in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively created new capitals first in Isfahan and then in Tehran. To provide gardens fit for a king, both dynasties employed Zoroastrian gardeners to create them.

The result of successful husbandry, which includes the care and protection of animals, is a surplus of food produce. As another dimension of *asha*, Zoroastrians are expected to share the benefit of their success and prosperity within the community. Hence great importance is attached to charitable acts which may take the form of communal feasts, foundation and endowments of schools, orphanages and hospitals and other beneficial deeds.

The significance of the natural world pervades all aspects of Zoroastrian culture, so that all rituals and practices reflect this. For example each of the twelve months of the year carries the name of one of God's creations such as the earth, the water, the sun, the wind, the animals, and the plants and each of the thirty days within each month also carry the names of one aspect of God's creation. When the name of the month and the name of the day coincide, it is considered a holy day and feasting and prayers take place. On four days each month there are meat fasting days, *nabor* (lit: no cutting), which are particularly associated with animals.

Nowruz, the Iranian national New Year on the first day of spring is celebrated by all people of Zoroastrian origin, in Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and in Iran. Significantly it is the only Zoroastrian festival to

survive Islamisation and the traditional ceremonial table of *haft s(h)in* on which seven of God's nourishing creations are displayed is still faithfully maintained in every household throughout the Persian speaking world.

The festival of water, *Tirgan*, is a joyous celebration of water in the height of summer, while the fire festival, *Sadeh*, in the middle of winter, is a thanksgiving for the discovery of fire and for the approaching new year at spring. The festival of *Mehr* or *Mithra* in autumn consists of communal eating and praise, while the six annual festivals known as *gahambar* are five day-long occasions when feasts are held in memory of deceased people who have endowed land and its produce to benefit the community. The whole community is expected to partake of such feasts.

At these *gahambar*, at weddings, initiations and at the death anniversary memorial (*sal*), a fire urn burns fragrances such as sandalwood, incense and myrrh. A cloth is set out, decked with evergreens, a collection of dried fruits and nuts, fresh green sprouting grain or lentils and opened fruits. Often the cloth will be green, the cover of the book of prayers, the *Avesta*, will be green. Green is the colour favoured alongside red for the traditional female costumes and certainly for bridal costumes; emeralds as a dowry have been popular for some time. Green, the symbol of abundance, is thus represented through many dimensions of cultural practice.

The importance of abundance and fertility is reflected in a section within the *Avesta* (Vendidad 3:32 & 3:4): 'agriculture is one of the noblest of all employments because he who sows grain, sows righteousness', and 'one of the most joyous spots on earth is the place where one of the faithful sows grain and grass and fruit bearing trees, or where he waters ground that is too dry and dries ground that is too wet' (quoted in Williams Jackson 1906: 373-4).

The practice and teachings of Zoroaster place the respect for and stewardship of the environment in a central position. It has thus been culturally absorbed and is deeply embedded in all aspects of life. The ritual practices, the prayers and the festivals which members of the Zoroastrian community share, all reflect and give thanks for the creation of the natural elements on which life depends. The ideology is passed down through parental practice and is reinforced by community values and formal education. It is indeed as much a religion that is practised as it is one that is professed.