

The Need for a Generally Accepted Definition of Zoroastrianism and for a Permanent Religious Body to Resolve Religious Issues

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Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrians have survived since time immemorial thanks mainly to the fact that Zoroastrians faithfully followed their ancient traditions till the twentieth century. It was not the might of our empires or the greatness of our ancient civilization that was responsible for the continuation of Zoroastrianism throughout millennia. Rather, the main reason for its survival is the beauty and uniqueness of its philosophy that sets it apart from other religious systems, even though as generally acknowledged by scholars today, it has probably had more influence on other religions, directly or indirectly, than any other single faith.

However, the advent of modernity has led to dissensions and disagreement among us as to what Zoroastrianism means to different groups of Zoroastrians. As Sir Jivanji Mody noted in his biography of the pioneering Parsi reformist, Mr. K. R. Cama, there were no reformists in the Parsi community when Mr. Cama grew up as a young man in the 19th century. As all Parsis till then were uniformly orthodox. But the westernization of the community has changed that peaceful scenario not only in India but also in Iran. What Professor James E. Whitehurst observes in this regard (“The Zoroastrian Response to Westernization: A Case Study of the Parsis of Bombay,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1969, 37(3), pp. 231-6) is worth noting: “Perhaps the greatest threat to the Parsi community comes in the form of a frontal attack on much that Parsis have considered sacrosanct. Parsis may manage to stem the population decline, *but if the religious bond that has given them identity as a people crumbles, it is meaningless to talk about their survival as a historical community.* ... The advent of western education sowed the seeds of skepticism and radical questioning. . . . However much indebted the Parsis may be to the process of Westernization, industrialization and technology for their rise to prominence, they have become, in other respects, victims of that process. . . . *The full force of its disruptive power is perhaps more dramatically revealed in this tiny community than anywhere else in the world.*”

Ever since modernity has cut deeply into our community, there has hardly been any unanimity in our understanding and definition of Zoroastrianism which has led many a Zoroastrian to emphasize their cultural heritage rather than their great religious heritage, thus regarding themselves as “cultural Zoroastrians” only. While the rank of cultural Zoroastrians is swelling, that of

practising Zoroastrians is thinning to such an extent that a modern Zoroastrian is often a Zoroastrian in name and very little in practice. The grip of modernity is so strong on our ancient most religion that even those that remain true to the tradition would have been found wanting in their dedication and adherence by our forefathers just a century ago. This is not to suggest at all that our traditions need not be followed, etc. Rather, those who do follow them deserve our respect and admiration.

But what befalls those Zoroastrians who drift away for various reasons from the strongholds of Zoroastrianism and find adherence to various religious practices almost impossible in their new environment? Do they therefore cease to be Zoroastrians? Since more and more Zoroastrians even in the old Zoroastrian strongholds turn out to be no more than cultural Zoroastrians, the question of who is a practicing Zoroastrian demands our immediate attention if we are to remain a viable unit. (In order to avoid any unnecessary controversy and focus utmost attention on this burning issue facing us today, let me clarify here that in this context by Zoroastrians I only mean those that are Zoroastrians by birth.) What does a Zoroastrian in India, Iran or Pakistan have in common with Zoroastrians in Europe, Australia, Japan or North America? What is the common denominator or parameter of values, traditions or practices among these different groups of Zoroastrians in this world? What will the children of the Zoroastrians settled abroad find in common with the Zoroastrians elsewhere? Will they participate in the world Zoroastrian bodies and events? Could we come to terms as to who is a practicing Zoroastrian and what are the minimal expectations or indicators of being a Zoroastrian?

The answers to these questions become all the more important as unlike in other faiths we do not have a central religious body to deliberate on these questions and come up with an answer. The question of what a Zoroastrian stands for is as ancient as Zoroastrianism itself. Attempts seem to have been made to answer this question soon after Asho Zarathushtra established his new faith. The Avestan word FRAVARANE, which literally means "I profess," represents such an attempt. The entire chapter 12 of our Yasna addresses itself to this question, and so does the prayer of *Jasa Me Awanghahe Mazda*, itself a part of Yasna 12, which every Zoroastrian prays after tying his Kusti. When our forefathers turned up at the shores of Sanjan after leaving Iran in quest of religious freedom, King Jadirana asked them the same question: Who are Zoroastrians? Presumably, the King received the reply from our pilgrim fathers in sixteen Sanskrit Slokas of AKA ANDHYARU, which are still extant. However, it is doubtful that our pilgrim fathers could start conversing in Sanskrit the moment they arrived in Sanjan. Perhaps these Slokas were written later on in response to the need of defining and explaining Zoroastrianism in a unified way when we multiplied and spread to other places in Gujarat. However, the same question invariably turns up today when Zoroastrians migrate to far off places and therefore we need to answer this fundamental

question as precisely and effectively as we can in the context of our own times. This problem, however, is very difficult to solve today because we lost the knowledge of our ancient scriptures and languages after the loss of our empire until the European scholars started studying them in the nineteenth century. Even a scholar such as Dr. Mary Boyce admits in the very opening sentence of her book, *Zoroastrians* (p. xiii), that “Zoroastrianism is the most difficult of living faiths to study, because of its antiquity, the vicissitudes which it has undergone, and the loss, through them, of many of its holy texts.” Even to this day, western scholars have not been able to unravel all the problems in this regard and we are so much dependent upon their understanding (or misunderstanding) of our ancient faith. For example, even to this day they are not in agreement about the most fundamental questions facing us, e.g., whether Zoroastrianism is monotheistic or dualistic or henotheistic, whether the later scriptures and traditions are in agreement or disagreement with the real teachings of our prophet Zarathushtra, whether he lived 600 B.C. or 2000 B.C., whether our later literature, rituals, and practices are rooted in the Gathas or are rather incompatible with the spirit of the Gathas, etc., etc.

Such being the case, it behooves us to study our religion ourselves as best as we can in order to come to some agreement amongst us about the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism and determine how can we continue to be good Zoroastrians while living either in Asia, Europe, Australia, Africa, or North America as well as how can we meet the challenge of our times by laying down what is the least expected of one to be a practicing Zoroastrian? Such a basic knowledge of our faith should inspire loyalty among our present as well as future generations. It seems so strange that our community has made its mark in almost every field known to humanity despite its unbelievably small size, but by and large has woefully failed in studying its own religious heritage for which it is still pathetically dependent on the western savants. One of the main reasons for our apathy to our rich religious heritage therefore is our ignorance about it. If we dispel this ignorance by dissemination of appropriate information about our religion and lay down guidelines for everyone to follow, we may very well witness a surge in their devotion to Zoroastrianism for the modern Zoroastrians hardly had an opportunity to satisfy their religious hunger. As Prof. William Oxtoby of the University of Toronto observed at a symposium held in Chicago on April 29, 1984, the principles of Zoroastrianism are so beautiful that one cannot help but like them if one gets to know them. Let us not deprive our youth any more of such a glorious religious heritage. Let us not fail to give at least an opportunity to the “cultural Zoroastrians” to become “ideological Zoroastrians” by practicing the principles of Zoroastrianism in their daily lives.

Mr. Neville Wadia’s observations on the occasion of the Cusrow Baug Golden Jubilee acquire special significance in this context. “Have you really stopped to think . . . what God did for you that was so important?”, Mr. Wadia

asked. His answer: “I firmly believe it is the Zoroastrian religion with its very positive approach to life instilled in you since childhood which is the basis of your good fortune. It is this which has given you the faith that you can achieve what you set out to do.... Let me confess openly that I am greatly attracted by the wonderful teachings of Zoroaster. His philosophy, his insight, his wisdom all appeal to my sense of logic.... I know that if it had been left to me I would have chosen to follow the shining truth of Zoroaster.... Now you might ask why am I harping on religion. Not only do I believe that it has been a great source of strength in the past but that it will be even more important in the future. With the rapid erosion of all moral values in this country and for that matter abroad, the Parsi community will be hard put to maintain its standards of integrity and honesty in such a world ... Only with moral strength based on the indestructible foundation of your religious beliefs can this community survive this very difficult era.... Without that inner strength a little community like ours could well disintegrate” (*Parsiana*, May 1984, p. 21).

As we all know, and as one of the most prominent scholars of our religion, Dr. Mary Boyce too has not failed to note, “it is ruefully said nowadays by Zoroastrians themselves that where three of them are gathered together, there will be three different interpretations of their faith” (*A History of Zoroastrianism*, p. xiii). There is therefore no better way to resolve this problem than to urge this Congress to appoint a permanent religious body of Zoroastrian scholars, priests, and concerned laymen of every persuasion and every continent to study these problems, and present its recommendations at the next Congress. Such an action will be nothing new in our history but will really be in keeping with an ancient tradition started by the Parthian King Valakhsh (Vologesis) in the first century A.D. when, according to the *Dinkard*, he tried to collect whatever Avestan scriptures had survived after Alexander’s conquest of Persia (Madon’s *Dinkard*, 412.5-11, translation in ZZZ¹ 8). The first Sasanian King, Ardashir Papekan, gathered all scattered Zoroastrian teachings and traditions in the second century A.D. and with the help of his high priest Tansar “selected one tradition and left the rest out of the canon. And he issued this decree: The interpretation of all the teachings of the Mazda-worshipping religion is our responsibility, for now there is no lack of certain knowledge concerning them” (Madon’s *Dinkard*, 412.11-17, ZZZ 8). Such attempts were also made by various high priests in Iran after we lost our empire. But nothing has been done in this regard ever since. Time has come when we cannot afford to defer this important task any longer. As a matter of fact, we need to establish a permanent body to study and resolve various religious issues. Even the western scholars who have contributed to our problem in this regard have not failed to notice this problem. Thus, it is not surprising that Dr. Mary Boyce concludes her scholarly book, *Zoroastrians*, by

1 ZZZ: i.e. Zaehner, Robert C. *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955.

emphasizing nothing else but the seriousness of this problem (p. 255). While I do not agree with all her conclusions, I greatly admire her devotion to the study of our religion and fervently wish our community will soon produce a Mary Boyce of our own. After careful gleaning, I quote her following remarks as they strongly support my thesis: “Clearly whatever the doctrines were which their prophet taught over 3000 years ago, these need to be re-interpreted for his contemporary followers, as do the teachings of all other prophets for their own communities. What is unusual in the case of Zoroastrianism is the wide diversity of opinion as to what their prophet originally taught, let alone how this should be understood today; and the blame for this confusion lies largely with the West, and the ruthless self-confidence of nineteenth-century scholars and missionaries.... Matters have now been further complicated with the reversal by Western scholars of nineteenth-century assumptions. [I may add that the next century may very well witness the reversal of the assumptions of the present-day Western scholars, including Boyce’s. Inslar, for example, has already countered Boyce’s interpretation of the Gathas and vice versa. Since this is the very stuff on which the western academia thrives on, we cannot expect anything otherwise.] So the West has now destroyed the basis which it originally provided for Parsi reformists, although this has yet to be realized within the community itself. A few of the orthodox continue serenely untroubled by all this; but many Zoroastrians, in a literate age, long for a simple, noble, lucid scripture on which to base a unified faith, and this is a longing which seems doomed to remain unfulfilled, because of the immense antiquity of their tradition” (*Zoroastrians*, p. 225).

This Congress has on its agenda many pressing socioeconomic problems, but perhaps there is no other problem facing our community that ultimately threatens its very existence as the one of determining what our future generations should be expected to believe and practice as a good Zoroastrian and in keeping with the spirit of the Pahlavi tradition of *SHAYAST LA SHAYAST* (that is, “What Is Possible (to observe) and What Is Not”) or the *Zeitgeist*, what are the most fundamental characteristics and beliefs that bind us all as Zoroastrians, despite modernity making it impossible for us to observe all those practices that once made up Zoroastrianism. Our great prophet was the first one in the world to emphasize Vohu Mana, good mind and the power of the mind. As Descartes reminds us, “*Cogito ergo Sum*,” – “I think; therefore I exist.” If we cease to think as Zoroastrians, therefore, we will cease to exist as Zoroastrians. If we let our thinking and psyche be guided by the eternally inspiring philosophy and religion of Asho Zarathushtra, we will never cease to be Zoroastrian and Zoroastrianism will never cease to exist. Amen!