

Concepts and Beliefs Zoroastrianism Shares with other Religions as a Guide to an Inter-religious Dialogue

Rationale for an Inter-religious Dialogue

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Religion is God's precious gift to all humanity. As Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, prophets come to this earth whenever mankind reaches its low ebb in righteousness. Different religions or prophets may emphasize different virtues in their messages to mankind depending on the needs of the particular time and clime, but there are many a common element among them which are often overlooked by us in our zeal for our own piety. However, never before in the history of mankind have different nations and races been so close to as well as so dependent upon each other and never before in the history of our planet have the fate of mankind depended on amity and harmony among different nations, peoples and religious denominations as right now in our own times. It was therefore never as imperative to have an inter-religious dialogue in the history of humanity as at present. As our faith in science and technological progress is fading fast, we need to restore our faith in the transcendental dimensions in life and history in order to avoid self-destruction. We have established a United Nations Organization to unite warring nations, but we have done little to establish a similar worldwide body for uniting all religious organizations for ensuring and promoting world peace.

As André Malraux once said: "If gods are dead, the devils are living more than ever." History of mankind is a sad testimonial to the naked truth that despite being endowed with so many prophets and religions that inspired man to turn to God and Heaven, man has set at naught all their efforts in turning the world into a haven and himself into a saint. André Malraux has warned us that "The Twenty-first Century will be religious or will not be." However, spiritual attainment cannot be conferred on man. It has to be sought and realized by man. Man has to work out his own salvation. Every man has to make his own world. Luther has advised us long ago that every man must do his own believing, as he must do his own dying. As we do our own believing, we should be able to rediscover beliefs of others and respect them.

It is only when we study and understand other people's faith, value systems, or religious rites and symbolism that we can truly understand them and their *modus operandi*. In turn, such an understanding of other faiths can enable us to have a closer look at examining our own religious system and understand its commonality or shared elements with other systems, which can only lead to

further understanding or reinforcement of our own religious heritage and restoration of our faith in faith itself. We shall then realize that however firmly we may hold on to our own religious systems, God reaches out to the adherent of all other systems in their own traditions as completely and benevolently as he does to us; we may too then discover that other traditions may not be so different from ours as we first presumed them to be.

Common Elements Among Zoroastrian and Judeo-Christian Traditions

I have had the privilege of living at close quarters with Christians, Moslems, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs, and have found myself at home with at least some of their beliefs and traditions. Although my ancient Zoroastrian faith can hardly claim more than one-hundred-and-thirty-thousand adherents today in the whole wide world for reasons beyond its control, as a priest and humble student of this religion I find its fundamental beliefs and features so firmly embedded in different faiths, that I do not feel a stranger to them but I am rather very much at home with them. Various scholars, mostly non-Zoroastrian, have even written scholarly treatises delineating the influence of Zoroastrian beliefs on other faiths, but such is not at all the purpose of this paper which tries merely to emphasize the common beliefs or concepts Zoroastrianism shares with other faiths. Moreover, direct influence or wholesale assimilation of alien ideas by any race is hardly possible since the foreign concepts, however noble or appealing, can at best germinate, activate, or refine the concepts already latent or nascent in the psyche or literature of another race. Any direct or complete identity of religious ideas is therefore hardly possible.

At the dawn of history, Prophet Zarathushtra (whom the Greeks called Zoroaster, a name by which he was mostly known in the West) preached his religion to the people of ancient Persia. Recent opinion by most scholars place him about 3700 B.C. He taught the belief in One Almighty God called Ahura Mazda (The Wise Lord) who had created the whole universe as also twin mentalities, one wholly good and one wholly evil, and gave the freedom of choice to man and woman to choose between the two. Women occupied an unusually exalted place in his system, a tradition that continues to this day. Zoroaster exhorted man to fight evil in every way he can and align himself totally with the forces of good in all his thoughts, words and deed. He promised paradise (which is derived from the actual word, *Pairi-deza*, Zoroaster himself used in this context) to those who will fulfill Ahuramazda's mission by joining forces of good and opposing the forces of evil in every way they can. Those who won't choose to do so will go to hell, he warned. He promised individual judgment, immortality of soul, last judgment, resurrection, and Saviors or Messiah's born of virgin mothers, beliefs which we find readily

in Judaism, Christianity or Islam. Zoroaster called for close cooperation between man and God, a concept which St. Paul renewed when he addressed new Christians as “God’s co-worker’s.” For the Zoroastrian as for the Christian, Jew, or Moslem, there is but one life to live, one life to get to heaven, one life to qualify for eternal happiness. This may remind one of St. Francis of Assisi’s advice: “He only will earn the Divine Kingdom who will have first realized it on earth (that is, in his life).” Out of these Zoroastrian concepts came a normative western doctrine of man, namely, the individual soul was especially created for a single incarnate life in this world, which is regarded as a proving ground for eternity. Created by the omniscient Wise-Lord, this world has a beginning and end in divine purpose.

Even as early as in the third century A.D., such a similarity of ideas did not fail to attract attention from others. Thus in his “Evangelical Preparation” a Christian writer, Eusebis of Caesarea (265-340 A.D.) observed that the description of God by Zoroaster was the best one he knew of all ancient people. “He is the first incorruptible, everlasting, non created. Nothing is neither like or equal to him. He is the creator of all welfare, disinterested, the most excellent of all excellent beings, the wisest of all intelligence, the Father of Justice and Good laws, instructed by himself, self-sufficient and first producer of Nature.” (Ramsay, *Discours sur la Mythologie*, Amsterdam, 1728).

Various religious scholars in our own times, have not failed to notice such similarities between Zoroastrianism and Judeo-Christian traditions. For example, Professor Geo Widengren of Uppsala University states: “Every scholar devoting himself to the study of the classical religious literature of Judaism knows quite well that when he comes to the Book of Daniel (composed about 165 B.C.), he at once feels himself transferred to another world. And how much stronger is this impression when we come to certain apocalyptic writings (of apocryphal and pseudepigraphic character) and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The perspective is altogether changed. The course of the world is now seen as a dramatic fight between good and evil forces, a sharp dualism in the characteristic mark of the conception of the visible world, God and His Messiah, together with the angels, are standing against Satan or the Devil with his background of the sinners. The world stands against the world to come. Between them there is God’s final judgment, announced by signs in nature and the world of mankind, the resurrection of the dead, the entry of the righteous into eternal blessedness in paradise, the fall of the unrighteous and the evil powers into a burning hell. All this is preached in visions seen by a seer, one of the great figures of ancient times, a Henoah, or a Baruch, or one of the twelve patriarchs. Of fundamental importance of course is the dualistic conception and nothing can better illustrate this dualism than the famous section of the Manual of Discipline which speaks of “the two spirits.”

“Brownless in his translation of 1951 has already stressed the strong Iranian

character of this last section. Subsequently both Dupont-Sommer and Kuhn analyzed in more detail the Iranian ideas to be found here. These are indeed easily discernible: Two powers are facing each other, the world of light and the world of darkness. This cosmic opposition is also of an ethic nature: righteousness is opposed to evil, and righteousness may also be looked upon as an expression of truth. These two powers are made up of spiritual armies, the good one under the guidance of the Prince of light, the evil one under the command of the Angel of darkness. He and his followers try to make the Sons of Light stumble on their path; all sin and transgression committed are subject to the enmity of the Evil One.” (*Religious Syncretism in Antiquity, Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengran*, (Ed.) Birger A. Pearson, The American Academy of Religion and the Institute of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, 1975, pp. 97-99).

Zoroastrianism provides yet another background for inter-religious harmony and peace, namely, the exemplary tolerant conduct of its followers towards peoples of other religions even at a time when the world was not civilized yet. Thus in B.C. when the Jews were in Babylonian Captivity, the Zoroastrian King Cyrus of Persia not only freed them from the captivity, but helped them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.

Since the views of independent, non-Zoroastrian scholars of international repute can be regarded as more impartial and authentic than the views of someone who is a Zoroastrian himself, like myself, I deem it appropriate to quote the findings of such non-Zoroastrian scholars to ensure impartiality. However, the problem here is not the paucity but rather the plethora of such scholarly judgments which make it very difficult for one to make a selection, as each scholar seems to surpass the other in eulogizing the tolerant attitude of the Zoroastrian kings of Cyrus and Darius.

Professor Paul J. du Breuil of France has observed in our own times: “Cyrus’ virtues were so great, that the Bible regards him more than a prophet, and calls him the Messiah (Is. 41.1). Xenophon in his *Cyropedia* saw Cyrus as the perfect model of a wise king. Indeed the distance is great between the bloody cult of Assur and the barbarian cruelties of which the Babylonian kings boast themselves, compared to the general tolerant policy of the Achaemenids. Among the Oriental nations, from the Hittites to the Assyrians, even the Hebraic people with its law of Talion (retaliation), pity and tolerance were generally unknown and considered as weak attitudes. Then suddenly the Achaemenids appeared proud of noble virtues in their treatment of vanquished people and towards the creeds of their enemies. Instead of allowing his troops to loot the towns and temples of Persia’s enemies, Cyrus endeavored to reconcile peoples and to be friend towards every foreign cult. In fact, Cyrus considered the divine wisdom as more important than ethnical gods as Marduk, Zeus, or Yahveh, whom he however gladly protected in order to please their

followers. Such an attitude is sometimes regarded as purely political. Let us remember however that the only good policy of that time was to slaughter and to oppress the enemies, just like Alexander did again two centuries later. The best evidence stays in the fact that many Jews were disappointed when they learned that Cyrus refused to persecute their enemies, the Assyrians. But Cyrus showed that this ethic was higher than one of common revenge.... Just compare and see how the Assyrians imposed the cult of Assur in their own Temple! In fact, the Achaemenids never assigned to their subjects any other cult than their local one, just calling the people to a higher morality and great respect of the truth.” (*Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, No. 48, 1980, Bombay, pages 16-17).

He further comments: “Indeed, we would wish many of the first Christian kings to have had as much true Christ’s charity as Cyrus and Darius had Zoroaster’s ethic of justice and tolerance in their political deeds: The Book of Ezra shows many evidences of the Persian help to Israel The best proof is in the fact that the Jewish tradition tried by all means to incorporate Zoroaster in the Bible and many efforts were made at the dawn of Christianity (either by Jewish writers of Diaspora or by Christian apologists) to identify Zoroaster to prophet Ezekiel, Balaam, or to the legendary Nemrod, or to Baruch, Jeremiah’s secretary ... We feel that the whole Western World – and most of the Christian churches – could find in the example of the Zoroastrian faith the necessary courage and conception of the universe to fight, with more chance, every darkness that brings shadow on the coming of a new, bright and happy world,” (op. cit. pp. 21, 37, and 43).

Finally, let us see what Dr. Mary Boyce of London University, who is regarded as the living authority on Zoroastrianism in our times, has to say regarding King Cyrus freeing the Jews from the Babylonian captivity: “This was only one of many liberal acts recorded of Cyrus, but it was of particular moment for the religious history of mankind.” (*Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, ROUTLEDGE, 1984, p. 51).

Common Elements in Zoroastrianism and Islam

It should also be noted that one of the close associates of Prophet Mohammed was a Zoroastrian priest, Dastur Dinyar, later known as Salman-al- Farsee. He was regarded by the Prophet as Ahal-al-Bait, which means, “Of the Family of the Prophet,” that is, a member of his spiritual circle. He had traveled widely in his times and studied Judaism and Christianity in depth. He had accepted Islam as his faith, and it is therefore highly probable that his closeness with the Prophet may have led to the introduction of various Zoroastrian elements into Islam such as daily five-times prayer, resurrection, heaven and hell, last judgment, total absence of idolatry, etc.

According to the noted French scholar, J. Duchesne-Guillemin (*Religion of Ancient Iran*, Bombay, 1973, pp. 237-243), Zoroastrianism “survived in Islam in three ways,” namely, 1) Islam had certain basic characteristics in common with Zoroastrianism; 2) There was a period of assimilation and adjustment between these two faiths in post-Islamic Iran which led to various politico-religious movements; and 3) Zoroastrianism provided certain symbolic themes to the Sufis, poets, philosophers, and writers. For the sake of brevity, we shall examine here what he has to say as an impartial observer on the common elements in Islam and Zoroastrianism.

“Already in the Koran, Islam drew from Iranian sources, not directly, it is true, but through the medium of Judaism, Gnosticism, or Manichaeism. In certain cases, the borrowing may have been in the opposite direct; in fact the Koran was known to the author of the *Denkart*, as demonstrated by Bausani.”

“The same scholar has brought out the following concordances between the Koran and Iran. First, the episode of men’s primordial choice (Koran, 7.172) is comparable to the choice of the Fravashee.”

“The entities Haurvatat and Ameretat became the angels Harut and Marut, whose story recalls also the myth of the Nasatyas.”

“The shooting stars, launched against the demons seeking to invade the sky recall the functions of certain stars in Mazdeanism, especially according to Menok-i Xrat, 49.”

“One of the Koran’s favorite arguments against those denying the possibility of the resurrection, is that it is easier for God to recreate what he has already created rather than to start from nothing. Compare above, p. 235. Perhaps, in this case, borrowing took place in the opposite direction, and likewise in respect of the two following points.”

According to the Koran, 56.89 the blessed will enjoy in paradise *rauh* ‘perfumed breezes’ and the fragrance of *raihan* ‘basil’ which accords with Mazdean eschatology (Menok i Xrat, 7 and elsewhere).

“Koran, 6.38, states that each species of animal forms a separate community as do men; and in Mazdeanism each species has its *ratu* or patron.”

“It is in the eschatology that most similarities are found: the weighing, the angels clad in green; the leveling of the earth, the ‘fathers separated from their sons’, etc.”

“Finally, the Koran (7.44-47) speaks of a place called *al-A’raf*, whose inhabitants see those of Paradise and those of the Fire. The most current explanation given in the commentaries is that the *A’raf* is the intermediary state for those who have merited neither paradise nor hell, because their good deeds exactly balance their bad deeds. It corresponds to the *misvan gatu* of the *Avesta*.”

“The hadiths or non-Koranic traditions, contain other traits occurring also in

Mazdean literature, chiefly in the chapter on eschatology.”

“The first feature is the soul’s meeting with the maiden, the personification of his deeds, who appears shining, beautiful and perfumed if the deeds were good, but hideous, dark and foul smelling if they were bad. But with most commentators, this figure is of the male sex instead of the female sex as in Mazdeanism.”

The (Chinvat) Bridge in the individual eschatology of the Mazdeans was transposed in Islam to the end of time: on the day of the last Judgment, the Bridge (al-Sirat) will be thrown over the back of hell and all will be forced to cross it. The righteous will cross it with ease; the wicked will fall into hell. Other traditions add that, for the righteous it will be broad as a main road, but for the wicked it will be narrower than a hair and sharper than a sword blade.

"Bausani omits the two preceding traits but points out others: the restriction against wearing silk, the miraculous purificatory opening made by the angels in the breast of Mohammed, as in that of Zarathustra, according to the *Zardust-nama* (Rosenberg, p. 31); the restriction against urinating while standing, the torment inflicted by the angels in the grave and the mi'raj or ascension of Mohammed.

Common Elements in Buddhism and Zoroastrianism

The Buddhist belief in the Maitreya or future Buddha was developed only when Buddhism spread to Persia and scholars nowadays attribute it to the Zoroastrian teachings about the Messiah, as exemplified by Professor du Breuil’s observations: “The contact with Iran brought into the field of Buddhism the knowledge of many Persian religious concepts as well as that of the Greek art (Indo-Greek art) and of the Parthian one Thus came the ideal of the Bohisattva under the influence of the Iranian concept of the Zoroastrian saviour Saosyant, even if expressed in a different way. While the Buddhists looking for individual liberation only were called Hinayana (the small vehicle), the majority of those present at the Council of King Kaniska in the 2nd Century A.D., voted for the Mahayana ideas (the great vehicle), regarding the salvation of others as much as or more important than their personal salvation. Over the quarreling sects, it was the symbol for a new way of liberation no more anxiously concerned with one’s own salvation or the union of one’s own soul (atman) with the soul of the universe (braham) as in Hinduism, but of universal attitude (of the) Mahayana ideal, which knows no difference of sects, just as a Bodhisattva, who resolves to save all beings without distinction and who at the same time helps everyone according to his own needs, his own nature and his own way. Such an idea . . . (depends) only on its value for the present . . . and on creative influence of the future. Thus we see under the Zoroastrian influence of the Parthian empire, Buddhism changed its negative

attitude towards life, for a creative and active salvation of all for all through the individual decision and the new belief in a cosmic saviour, Bodhisattva/Saosyant. This explains why the Iranian-Buddhist cultural exchanges have been so important during nearly five centuries. Hence A. Foucher has used a very keen expression of the 'half-Magian Brahmins' of Gandhara, and Sylvain Levi said: 'as many ideas, beliefs and names that India does not explain, which are as much strangers to the ancient Brahmanism as to the ancient Buddhism; (are explained by) as many ideas, beliefs and names which are familiar to the Zoroastrian Iran from where they have already passed westwards into the Judaism of the Prophets and, from there, into the doctrine of Christianity'. This is how one of the highest and most spiritual concept ever edicted, that of the Saviour of Humanity, has been raised in the East as well as in the West of mystical Asia, from the Zoroastrian Saosyant to Christ and to Bodhisattva around the same ancient period." (Paul J. du Breuil, *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute*, Bombay, 1980, 48, pp. 40-42).

Zoroastrianism and Hinduism

When we take into account the profound and unique relationship that has existed between Zoroastrianism and Hinduism from the times immemorial, Zoroastrianism emerges as the only faith that has touched base with so many major religions of the world. Indeed the Hindus and Zoroastrians are of the same Aryan stock that had earlier lived together in Central Europe. They have common languages; they have common practices such as Janoi or Kusti, Soma or Homa, Yagna or Yasna; they have common beliefs in the Law of Asha or Ruta, the Law of Cosmic Consciousness which governs the entire universe; and their deities have common names, such as Asura, Varna, Indra, Agni, Mitra, Vayu, Apah and many others. Hinduism and Zoroastrianism have so much in common that all common beliefs and practices have not yet been fully explored. As one of the foremost Indo-Iranologist of our times, Professor H. P. Schmidt observes: "Several elements of the soul's journey to yonder world have their exact counterparts in the Veda, especially the concept of the bridge to be crossed and the reception of the departed soul by a maiden or maidens. A striking, hitherto unnoticed, parallel is furnished by the late Vedic Kaus-hitaki – Upanishad (14.) in the names of two of the heavenly nymphs, Apsaras, who receive the soul That the speculative trait shows such proximity to concepts of Zoroastrianism, is remarkable and should stimulate the search for further parallels to Zoroastrian ideas in the Upanishads" (*Zarathushtra's Religion and His Pastoral Imagery*, Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1975, p. 22). Jatindra Mohon Chatterjee, a Hindu scholar, observes: "Hinduism and Parsi-ism are the convex and the concave of the same curve. Mazda-Yasna and Vishnu-Yajna are the two eyes of the Aryan Culture – no one of them being more important than the other, and both of them being equally useful to the whole Their business is

to sub-serve and not sub-verse each other – to supplement and not to supplant As a matter of fact Zarathushtra stands nearer to the Vedic religion than Gautama Buddha does So that the difference between Hindu and a Parsi (Indian Zoroastrian) was not greater, than what we now find, between a Sanatanist and an Arya-Samajist Like Kapila, Zarathushtra tries to solve the riddles of Ontology by his principles of Spenta and Angra Manyu (the Good and Evil forces). Like Gautama, Zarathushtra makes rectitude the gateway to Religion. Like that of Ramachandra, the central fact of Zarathushtra's life, is complete surrender to the Will of God The importance of the Gatha, both to the Hindu and the Musalman, as forming the bond that may link them together, is not negligible. May the Hindu and the Musalman be united in the name of Mazda". (*The Ethical Conceptions of the Gatha*, J.B. Karani & Sons, Bombay, 1934, pp. 3, 5, 7, and 9).

Universal Symbolisms of Fire and Light

When we realize what an important place the symbol of fire occupies in both Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, and what part the symbolism of fire has played in sacred literature of other nations also, we can come close to the appreciation of the eternal flame or eternal light as the universal symbol for the mankind's quest for spiritual truth and enlightenment. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus regarded primordial Fire as gifted with wisdom. The ancient Stoecians identified the thunderbolts of Zeus as the Creator-Fire. The Book of Enoch speaks of light as streaming and blazing fire. Streams of fire proceed from the throne of God. Enoch says, for example, in the first section: "And from underneath the throne came streams of flaming fire so that I could not look at them." Enoch sees the angels stepping on flames of fire (14:19) and two streams of fire (71:1-2). The end of the world will be brought about by fire which will at the same time destroy all evil and purify the sinners as per various Zoroastrian texts, e.g. Bundahishn and Zatsparam, XXXIV 50. We find an echo of this belief in IV Ezra 13 and the Manual of Discipline. Thus, the symbols centering around the concept of fire signify mankind's quest for cosmic consciousness, spiritual enlightenment or divine essence within each soul. The Jews celebrate religious events by lighting lamps or candles and the use of incense on religious occasions in common among various peoples of the world. Because of their common religious heritage, fire or light assume the same significance in Hinduism as in Zoroastrianism as symbols of inner light, divine spark, cosmic energy or the like.

A Concluding Prayer

As interpreted by the early Christian Father Lactance (*Institutiones Divinae*, VII, 17, 9.11) the Zoroastrian Apocalypse, known as 'Hystaspe's Oracles' in

Greece in the second Century B.C., foresaw the end of the world with as many troubles as we witness in our own times. Let us pray with Zoroaster that “Satan will not destroy the world a second time” (Yasna 45.1). Rather, as Zoroaster exhorted man at least four millennia ago “May we be those that renovate the world.” (Yasna 30.9).

To work towards such a goal Zoroaster envisioned the participation of whole mankind — Yasna 31.2, 33.2, and 47.6. Zoroastrian prayers (e.g. Yasna 16, Yasht 68.4, Vendidad 5.20, and Patet) include prayers not merely for Zoroastrians but for the “Prosperity and welfare of all peoples of the country and of all mankind, of human species, and even of all species.” To Zoroaster those who are good in thought, word, and deed form a community of their own no matter where or when they lived as he regarded all good people of all times and climes as those that fulfill the mission of God on this earth. In order to inspire us to see the good in every religious system, let us end by meditating on the following Zoroastrian prayer which has such a significance in Zoroastrianism that it is repeated ten times in a single liturgy:

“We praise good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, whether they are performed here or elsewhere, whether they have already been performed or will be performed in future, since we are the admirer and adorer of all that is good (in this world)” (Yasna 35.2). Amen!